

Refugee Council AGM: working in partnership

This is the time of the year when we find out what our stakeholders feel about the work of the Refugee Council – and so on 2 December 2009, we held our Annual General Meeting (AGM) to do just that. The AGM was well attended and participants were overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the work that we have done for refugees and asylum seekers over the last year. At a time when refugee community organisations and other charities are under so much pressure, it was great to see so many of them take the time to come to the AGM.

The theme of the AGM was "working in partnership" and Donna Covey, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council introduced the morning with a thought provoking speech looking back over the last year. Touching on partnerships she said: "Partnership work is at the heart of everything we do, and some of our most important partners are refugee community organisations (RCOs), who are the unsung heroes of the refugee sector. They provide a lifeline to thousands of people trying to build a new life."

Kaveh Kalantari, Funding and Development Manager at the Iranian Association spoke about his RCO's experience. Like many other RCOs, Kaveh has seen a radical drop in their income. He said: "The recession has had something to do with this - cuts in government funding, and increased competition between RCOs for trust funding." He added: "Partnership work is another way of sustaining services; we have benefited greatly from networking with other organisations in the voluntary and private sector, including an 11 year franchise with the Hammersmith and West London College, providing IT and ESOL courses."

Mubin Haq, Director of Policy and Grants at City Parochial Foundation and Trust for London spoke about the reality of entering into partnerships, and stressed the need for more connectedness and less duplication among organisations if sustainable funding was to be achieved.

"It is critical to work together but all partnerships need to be well thought through." He advised that in any partnership: you need to know who is doing what; to expect a loss of independence; that partnerships need to be "organic" and to have developed from somewhere – and not just set up in pursuit of funding. He ended on a positive but realistic note: "Partnerships can and can't be beneficial."

Yvonne Cass, RCO leader and trustee of the Northern Refugee Centre (NRC) echoed the sentiment of previous speakers. She stressed the crucial roles of healthy partnerships as a way to enhance RCOs' sustainability in the current economic climate: "We're going to see a lot of RCOs who need more support in this economic and political situation...so we have to work together as best we can."



Refugee Council volunteer, Sarah Bradley receives "national winner" Marsh 2009 Refugee Volunteer Awards from Brian Marsh

Louise Zanré, Director of Jesuit Refugee Service UK emphasised that partnership working did not necessarily have to involve money and that small charities could make great use of committed and eager volunteers.

Before the morning was brought to a close, Brian Marsh, Chair of the Marsh Christian Trust helped Refugee Council to celebrate the huge contribution of our volunteers by presenting the "national winner" Marsh 2009 Refugee Volunteer Awards to Sarah Bradley – for her proposal to run a homework club for children staying in Stone Road Hostel, the Initial Accommodation in Birmingham.

Douglas Board, Chair of the Refugee Council closed the AGM by giving words of assurance: "You can be confident that we'll work with RCOs, the media and other agencies – to ensure that refugees' voices are heard."

For an enjoyable and thought-provoking look at our work and the impact it has on those we help, you can download the most recent Refugee Council Impact Report at:

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/about/impact.htm

Policy and campaigns update

Mayor of London's Strategy for Refugee Integration is launched

The Mayor of London's Strategy for Refugee Integration, *London Enriched*, was launched on 10 December 2009. We are really pleased that the Mayor of London is committed to ensuring that refugees can contribute fully to a safe, diverse and equal London. We are also delighted that the strategy recognises that real integration starts at day one, including access to English language.

The Refugee Council has been working with other organisations so that refugees have access to ESOL from the first day of claiming asylum and onwards. Following previous articles in RCO news on changes [Issue 44, May-June 2009] to ESOL, we would also like to hear about your experiences of ESOL provision in London and other regions in England.

Is your Local Authority including refugees as priority learners for ESOL? Do you rely on voluntary ESOL provision or can you get onto courses at local colleges? Is there a lack of ESOL at certain levels – pre-Entry, Entry level or Levels 1 and 2? You can email your experiences to James Lee at james.lee@refugeecouncil.org.uk

Refugee Council produces briefing on Draft Immigration Bill (2009)

On 12 November 2009 the UK Border Agency (UKBA) published a Draft Immigration Bill, seeking to simplify and consolidate asylum law into one single piece of legislation. As the Draft Bill represents a significant overhaul of the UK's immigration and asylum laws, the Refugee Council has published a summary of an initial analysis of the proposals. For more information visit www.refugeecouncil-intranet.org.uk/news/2009/december/01122009.htm

Children seeking asylum to benefit from new safeguarding rights

On 2 November 2009, the Refugee Council welcomed new legislation that will finally ensure all immigration staff are responsible for the safety and welfare of children in the asylum system in the UK. However, this new duty is just a start, and government policies do not align with the new legislation, including the detention of children for immigration purposes, which must now also be urgently revised.

From 2 November 2009, after a sustained period of lobbying by the Refugee Council and other asylum and children's charities, Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act will come into force, requiring all UK Border Agency (UKBA) staff to safeguard and promote the welfare of children seeking asylum.

Despite this being a positive step to improving the safeguarding of children in the asylum system, the Refugee Council is now calling for further policy changes and developments to reflect this duty. We are urging the Government to introduce an asylum process that recognises children's needs, to end child detention, and to provide childcare in all UKBA centres to enable parents seeking asylum to discuss traumatic experiences with officials without their children being present in order to protect the children themselves. Donna Covey, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council said: "We welcome this acknowledgement from the UK Border Agency."

Asylum Aid launches Every Single Woman campaign

This new campaign, launched under the Women's Asylum Charter, focuses on the disparity in the treatment of women who are seeking asylum compared with women settled in the UK. The campaign advocates a change of culture designed to produce a genuinely gender sensitive asylum system. For more information and to join the campaign visit www.asylumaid.org.uk/charter. To watch the campaign film visit www.vimeo.com/7837560

News

Legal Services Commission requests client feedback

If you have received legal advice, been to court, or received information about your legal rights from organisations like the Citizens Advice Bureaux, the Legal Services Commission wants to hear about your experiences, good or bad. The Commission hopes to use this feedback to help shape and improve legal services for everyone. For more information and to share your story visit www.legalserviceshaveyoursay.org.uk

Sharing experience

UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG)

UKLGIG talks to RCO News about the services and support they provide to lesbian and gay refugees and asylum seekers.

UKLGIG promotes equality and dignity for asylum seekers and refugees who are Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT). We see a lot more men than women and we also work with a small number of transgender people. We have engaged with over 400 clients in the last three years and now work with approximately 200 people a year.



Support staff at UKLGIG

We support asylum seekers in many ways some of these include:

- Linking them with legal representatives experienced in LGBT issues.
- Helping them to write support statements, which can also help them come to terms with their sexuality/gender identity and build confidence.
- Supporting people making fresh asylum claims on the basis of sexuality/gender identity if people have previously claimed on other grounds through fear.
- Holding monthly support and advice meetings.
- Training for refugee organisations, immigration judges and UKBA case owners on LGBT issues
- Undertaking research and policy work – including working with the Advisory Panel on Country Information to improve information and understanding of the issues people face in their countries of origin.

Numerous challenges face LGBT refugees and asylum seekers. Imagine you are coming from a place where you have had to lie and be ashamed of your sexuality and then to arrive in the UK and have to say to a uniformed officer, “I am gay” immediately. If you do not claim asylum straight away on the basis of persecution for being LGBT, then this can be a problem when submitting a fresh claim.

People can feel isolated and may not feel comfortable approaching RCOs as they may be subjected to similar experiences as they were at home, or feel they need to hide their identity. In order to effectively raise awareness of LGBT issues among

RCOs, there needs to be an awareness of the different types of persecution that people can experience and the impact that it can have.

When setting up an organisation to support LGBT refugees and asylum seekers it is important to first find a safe space to meet (probably not in RCO premises) and to start making links with local LGBT groups. You can start small and build the service up in consultation with clients, so that you are developing the type of service that is needed.

It is also important to make spaces more gay/transgender friendly. For example by putting up a few posters, displaying books and magazines wherever you are meeting clients. To find out more, you can visit our website at www.uklgig.org.uk/.

Funding news

Office of the Third Sector withdraws campaigning fund

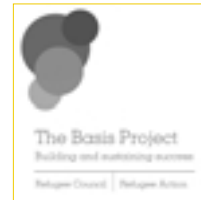
The Office for the Third Sector (OTS) recently announced that it had cut the funding for the Capacitybuilders’ Campaigning Research Programme, after offering grants to 32 small organisations. The Reading Refugee Support Group, which has been working with the Refugee Council’s Basis Project, is one of these 32 organisations to have had funding withdrawn in this way.

RRSG feels particularly aggrieved as the grant was to be used to fund a project aimed at training asylum seekers and refugees to deliver presentations and run campaigns – activities, which would certainly enhance the personal confidence of individuals from this marginalised group, and also aid the process of integration into local communities.

Voluntary sector leaders have condemned the move as it is against the rules of the Compact. It is also possible that the decision was illegal, although Third Sector magazine reports that a legal remedy could still be difficult. See http://refugeecouncil.typepad.com/basis_project_blog/2009/11/reading-refugee-support-group-has-promised-funding-withdrawn.htm

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations has organised an online petition against the withdrawal of funding for the 32 organisations affected. To sign the petition go to www.louder.org.uk/OTScampaign/

What's new on the Basis Project?



Working with RCOs event

On 26 November 2009, *Working with RCOs*, organised by the Refugee Council's Basis Project, the Evelyn Oldfield Unit (EOU) and the Second Tier Advisor's Network (STAN), brought development workers together with RCO representatives. The seminar sparked discussions about challenges faced when working with RCOs, and tools that development workers could use to overcome them.

Presentations were made by Elizabeth Ajith, Sudan Women's Association; Ahamet Hassan, Chadian Community; and Kaveh Kalantari, Iranian Association; as well as Tony Nickson from EOU, Stefanie Borkum from LVSC and Fazil Kawani from the Refugee Council.

Workshop participants discussed ideas like using creative presentation methods to overcome language barriers. Attendees praised the event for helping them to build networks, reflect on models of good and bad practice, and offer support for thinking more creatively.

Questions tackled included: "Should development workers 'blow the whistle' or 'turn a blind eye' to bad practice or not-so-legal activity?" and "Why do 2nd-tier organisations work in isolation instead of collaborating efforts?" Give your opinions on these and more at www.thebasisproject.org.uk (the Blog section).

Looking forward, a jointly organised event, focussing on two-way discussions between RCOs and second-tier advisors to improve development work will be scheduled for early 2010.

A full report of the event will be available on the Basis Project website at www.thebasisproject.org.uk in the coming weeks. Thank you to our partner RCOs and organisers for their contributions to this event.

Free monitoring and evaluation training

Charities Evaluation Services are running a free two-day training course on **30 and 31 March 2010** in London. This two-day monitoring and evaluation training course for London based RCOs is being delivered by Charities Evaluation Services and will help you to make your services more effective and show your achievements to others. For more details about this course or to book your place, please contact training@ces-vol.org.uk or tel **020 7713 5722**.

New publications

Rights of Women recently launched: *Seeking Refuge? A handbook for asylum-seeking women*. This incredibly clear and comprehensive guide explains the law that determines who is entitled to protection in the UK and how the asylum system works. It is available free of charge to asylum seeking women and refugee community organisations. Visit www.rightsofwomen.org.uk to request a hard copy or to download the guide for free.

The Children's Legal Centre has published a new guide: *Seeking Support: the Rights and Entitlements of Separated Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children*. It can be downloaded free at www.childrenslegalcentre.com/

Who's who at the Refugee Council?



Alem A Belayeneh - Operations Manager (Children's Section)

"My first contact with the Refugee Council was in 1993 as a client. I later joined the staff of the Children's Panel and I am now an Operations Manager there."

My current responsibility is to manage the daily operation of the children's service and to develop volunteering opportunities for people who want to support this service and gain invaluable experience. We also work closely with RCOs, creating opportunities to enable them to contribute towards the development of services to integrate refugees and asylum seekers in UK. This is a realisation of my dream for RCOs.

The Children's Section has good experience of working in partnership with RCOs. We are currently in the process of developing this working relationship by expanding our surgery model and outreach services at RCOs' premises in order to support young refugees' and asylum seekers' integration. If your RCO works with young refugees and you would like to work with us, please email me at alem.belayeneh@refugeecouncil.org.uk.