

# Refugee Council conference report



## Integration: Building a life in the UK

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## About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is a human rights charity, independent of government. We work to ensure that refugees are given the protection they need, that they are treated with respect and understanding, and that they have the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other members of our society. To find out more about what we do please visit [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk).

## Aims and objectives of the conference

The economic recession is putting extra pressure on community relations. Now, more than ever, it is vital that the UK gets the right policies – and implements them – to ensure that communities flourish and that refugees don't find themselves scapegoated as unwanted migrants.

The conference provided an opportunity for discussion of effective integration policy and practice, focusing on four critical areas: housing, volunteering, education and employment, and children and families. Conference delegates heard from experts from leading organisations in these fields, and worked together to frame recommendations.

The Home Office retains responsibility for refugee integration through to 2011. The Government has been reviewing its strategy, and in March 2009 the UK Border Agency (UKBA) published *Moving on Together: Government's recommitment to supporting refugees*

(<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/workingwithus/workingwithasylum/integration/refugeestrategy/>). At the conference Phil Woolas MP, Minister for Borders and Immigration, spoke for the first time about the review. He reiterated UKBA's commitment to respond to key points and recommendations emerging from the conference, including any ideas about how practitioners can be involved in ensuring effective refugee integration.

The conference was chaired by **Gemma Juma**, Head of Policy at the Refugee Council. About 250 delegates from voluntary organisations, refugee community organisations, schools, faith groups and statutory agencies heard three speakers in the morning session and two in the afternoon. The morning session also included workshops for delegates. In the afternoon the workshop leaders provided feedback to the conference as a whole. Later, a panel of experts discussed further issues, and responded to questions from delegates.

The speakers in the morning session were **Donna Covey**, **Akoi Bazzie** and **Phil Woolas MP**. In the afternoon session the speakers were **John Wilkes** and **Trevor Phillips**. The four workshops were led by **Caroline Davey**, **Sian Greenhead** and **Chris Badman**, **Chris Taylor** and **Kate Gledhill**. The participants in the panel discussion were **Donna Covey**, **Adam Sampson**, **Alan Tuckett**, **Helen Walker** and **Julian Walker**.

The Refugee Council would like to express thanks to all speakers, workshop leaders, panel members and delegates, and to the volunteers who helped to ensure the smooth

running of the conference. Thanks are due also to the Refugee Council's conference partners: Barnardo's, NIACE, Shelter and TimeBank.

While the Refugee Council welcomes a diverse range of speakers and panel members, the views and opinions expressed by them in the conference are not necessarily those of the Refugee Council.

The conference was opened by **Gemma Juma**, Head of Policy, Refugee Council. She welcomed delegates and stressed the importance of the work that would be done during the day, reminding them that recommendations resulting from their discussions would be sent to UKBA. (Please note the detailed recommendations are included as an appendix to this report).

### **Morning session: speakers**

The first speaker was **Donna Covey**, who has been Chief Executive of the Refugee Council since May 2007. In this role she chairs the Asylum Support Partnership, co-chairs the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum and sits on the Board for Refugee Integration in London and the Migration Impacts Forum. Before coming to the Refugee Council she was Chief Executive of Asthma UK for five years, having previously been Director of the Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales. These posts followed a long career as an official with the GMB union, where her duties included being the National Officer responsible for equal rights; for ten years during her time at the GMB she was a member of the TUC General Council.

Donna Covey spoke on **Integration for refugees: challenges we face and key routes to a better future**. She began by stressing that in the current harsh economic and social climate it is more important than ever that people who care about refugees should come together to discuss how to ensure that refugees can live their lives freely and to their full potential. She was particularly pleased that UKBA had agreed that the outcomes of the conference would feed into policy development on integration, and noted that as well as the Minister (who would be speaking later in the morning) a number of civil servants working on integration matters were attending the conference.

She pointed out that when people flee persecution, the flight to safety is only the first part of their journey. The second stage - rebuilding life in a strange land – is equally important. Sometimes settling here can be as hard or harder than the original flight from tyranny. Integration is not about 'fitting in', or about refugees becoming 'more like us'. It is, rather, about equality and inclusion, and ensuring that refugees have equal chances to live full, safe and productive lives.

All too often, she said, we hear people complain that strangers don't learn to speak English. Yet every refugee or asylum seeker she has met has been desperate to learn English. Without this, people can't rebuild their lives. It isn't just a matter of being able to understand forms and other practical things. It is also about building links in a new community and making friends. She drew attention to *Refugees' Experiences of Integration*, published in 2007 by the Refugee Council and the University of Birmingham.

This looked in depth at the experiences of refugees in Haringey, North London, and Dudley, West Midlands. Two-thirds of those interviewed in Dudley had never spoken to their neighbours, either because they couldn't understand them, or because they felt their spoken English would embarrass them and leave them open to ridicule. 'If we cannot give people the tools to talk to their neighbours over the garden fence, then we have no chance of achieving community cohesion in this country.' It is vital for asylum seekers to have access to ESOL classes as early as possible after arrival in the UK, and for English language courses to be easily accessible to all.

She said that refugees and asylum seekers want to work, to provide for themselves and their families. They want to contribute to their new country, and they crave the contact with other people that a workplace provides. By denying asylum seekers the right to work we make it harder for them to get employment when they receive refugee status, as they lack experience and their skills may have become rusty. The Refugee Council has responded to this situation through two initiatives. The first, in partnership with the TUC and others, is 'Let Them Work' ([www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/letthemwork](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/letthemwork)), a campaign for asylum seekers' to be entitled to work once they have been here six months, and also after refusal if, through no fault of their own, they cannot return to their country of origin. The second initiative is the launch, jointly with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), of a guide for employers to help them identify the documents that refugees present in order to prove they are allowed to work in the UK ([www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/practice/employersguides](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/practice/employersguides)). In addition, because employment is so important, the Refugee Council has welcomed the Government's UK-wide Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) and is delivering that service in many areas ([www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/workingwithus/workingwithasylum/integration/ries](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/workingwithus/workingwithasylum/integration/ries)).

Donna Covey described refugee community organisations (RCOs) as a lifeline for many refugees, providing links with home, and support and advice on rebuilding lives in the UK. The security and confidence RCOs provide empower refugees to engage with their neighbours, workmates and new communities. Despite this, even before the credit crunch RCOs were facing the harshest funding climate in 20 years. They have been badly affected by the shift from grant giving to commissioning in local government, and the backlash against single community groups. However, Communities Minister Sadiq Khan has agreed to a series of meetings with his officials to look at how the role of RCOs can be recognised and supported in community cohesion.

Donna Covey drew attention to the need for Government to recognise that integration starts from day one, as negative experiences during the early part of a stay in the UK sometimes prevent or delay subsequent integration. She noted that the move in August 2005 to granting refugees only five-year limited leave to remain means that refugees are in an uncertain situation even after they are granted status.

She stressed that equality measures in local government, schools and the health service need to take specific account of the refugee experience. The citizenship agenda, too, must recognise why refugees are in the UK and not their home country. Refugees who choose to become British citizens should be supported in this, but if someone has

protection needs, citizenship should never become a condition of being allowed to stay in the UK.

In conclusion, Donna Covey said she was inspired by refugees' stories, and humbled by their commitment to make a new life in the UK. It was a privilege to work with them every day.

The conference was then shown a Refugee Council film in which refugees talk about barriers to integration, what has helped them to integrate, and whether they feel they are now integrated.

The next speaker was **Akoi Bazzie**, Community Development Worker for the Refugee Council's Gateway resettlement team in Sheffield. He was born in Liberia and was 14 when the civil war began in 1989. After two years in the jungle, he lived for 12 years in a refugee camp in Guinea managed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). For part of that time he worked for the camp management team. In 2004 he was resettled in Sheffield as part of the first Gateway Protection Programme group of Liberians. After studying full time during 2004, he did voluntary work with refugees, and established the Liberian Community Organisation of Sheffield. He has also been a church pastor for 10 years.

In his talk, **Integration: A personal perspective**, Akoi Bazzie described his life at home in Liberia before the civil war, and his experiences after the war started and in the refugee camp. He went on to talk about coming to live in the UK, the barriers he met and the support that made it possible to overcome these.

After a peaceful, stable childhood, the civil war 'unfolded into an unbelievable nightmare'. Rebels killed Akoi Bazzie's father, and he was separated from his family, whom he has not seen since. He spent two years on the run in the jungle, to avoid being forced to become a child soldier. He then sought refuge in a refugee camp in Guinea which housed up to 30,000 people from Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. He lived there in difficult conditions for 12 years, until he was resettled in Sheffield through Gateway.

He listed the challenges he faced on arrival as including the weather, language barrier, cultural dissimilarity, education, food, flashbacks, isolation, worry about family and friends, high expectations, prejudice, fear, and the sense of belonging to a very new society. Initial steps to integration came from studying English at Sheffield College, and through support from the Refugee Council in relation to the benefits system, education, health, housing, employment, financial information and advice, child care, legal advice, volunteering opportunities, a befriending scheme and community engagement.

During the period he was receiving support from the Refugee Council he began to think about what he wanted to achieve in the UK. His aim was 'full integration' and he knew that the main barrier would be the language. He also thought about long-term employment goals so that he would stay focused and motivated. He thought that initially he would feel more confident working with refugees, so he volunteered with Refugee

Action in Bolton and the Refugee Council Gateway resettlement team in Sheffield. As a volunteer at the Northern Refugee Centre he became a befriender to newly arrived refugees, and he went to colleges, schools and community centres talking about the difficulties that refugees face and raising awareness of refugee issues. He also established the first resettled refugees' community organisation in Sheffield.

Akoi Bazzie said that his first paid employment was in 2005 with Sheffield City Council, working on a satisfaction survey among people from ethnic minorities using council services. His present post with the Refugee Council began in 2006, initially on a part-time basis but since 2007 a full-time post although he is also studying Community Development at the University of Sheffield.

He suggested that successful integration requires recognition that 'integration is a give and take game'. His own integration had benefited from the initial support from Refugee Council staff who encouraged him 'to take small actions that have together created such a big change in my life', and who introduced him to NGOs, individuals and community groups 'which created in me a sense of belonging to my new home'.

Now Akoi Bazzie is helping other people to integrate – 'a perfect illustration of how people given help can contribute in return to the societies that protect them'. He travels across England giving presentations on community development and integration, and has travelled to Geneva, Paris and the USA to speak about resettlement and integration. In Sheffield he liaises between newly arrived refugees, local communities and local authorities and NGOs to promote integration as a shared responsibility. He concluded by urging delegates 'never stop learning: when you stop learning you stop growing and when you stop growing you start dying'.

The third speaker in the morning session was **Phil Woolas MP, Minister of State for Borders and Immigration**. Before taking on his current responsibilities he was Minister of State for the Environment and Minister for Local Government. He has been Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, a Government whip, and parliamentary private secretary at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. He has been MP for Oldham East and Saddleworth since May 1997. Before that he was Head of Communications at the GMB union and a television producer.

Phil Woolas began his talk on **Moving On Together** by apologising for the absence of Meg Hillier MP, who has done much hard work on refugee integration but is currently on maternity leave. He said that our immigration system is going through a period of major change, the biggest in a generation. He is confident that 'we are well on the way to transforming it to one of which we can be proud'. The public must have confidence that we have firm control of the immigration system, so that we can robustly defend the position of refugees and other migrants who are in the UK legitimately, and who are accessing public services and/or are in employment.

He hoped that delegates could see significant improvement in the way applications for asylum are dealt with: there is now much better management of applications, the majority of cases are concluded within six months, and 'we are much more receptive to

the circumstances of individuals passing through the system'. Regional case ownership brings those considering applications much closer to the individual applicants. He said that despite welcoming people in genuine need of our protection, we have the right, and a duty to the rest of the population, to take a firm line with those who wish to abuse our systems and have no basis on which to remain. They must be encouraged to leave as soon as possible, either voluntarily with our support, or enforced. A fair and balanced approach to immigration and asylum can help avoid public confusion between asylum seekers (including those whose claims have failed) and those recognised as refugees.

Turning to integration, the Minister noted that refugees get more than their share of hostile rhetoric. As people who have fled persecution and found sanctuary, it is right that we should help them integrate, benefiting not only them but also the communities in which they live. Effective integration, including a common language and an understanding of life in the UK, is important to the individuals themselves and to community cohesion. He stressed that we want people to be able to speak to their neighbours in English, to be able to help their children with their homework and to have the language skills to find employment. We want people to obey the law, and to play an active part in their communities. Such requirements apply to those in need of protection, and those coming to the UK through other migration channels. What this means in practice was set out in 2008 in *The Path to Citizenship*, now incorporated in the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill.

Phil Woolas noted that the strategy for helping refugees has changed rapidly over recent years. In *Full and Equal Citizens* (2002), for the first time the Government accepted responsibility for helping refugees reach their potential. Following *Integration Matters* (2005), a number of key programmes were delivered. *Moving On Together* (2009) celebrates achievements thus far while underlining a commitment to be fair to refugees and to support their integration and resettlement; it also sets out activity across Government in relation to this agenda, indicating the Government's joined-up approach to supporting refugees.

The Home Office cannot deliver effective refugee integration in isolation. It relies on partners within central and local government, and in the voluntary sector. This has been demonstrated in a practical way by strategic partnership with the Refugee Council, which has exercised leadership and a coordinating role in securing voluntary sector input to the new strategy. UKBA is also working with others on the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES). This UK-wide service started on 1 October 2008, providing new refugees with a standard level of transition support. Thus far over 1600 refugees have been helped. Phil Woolas stressed that sustained employment for those able to work is a crucial step to becoming fully integrated; RIES has therefore been set a challenging target of getting 30 per cent of users of the service into employment.

Another initiative, the Gateway Protection Programme, involves working with UNHCR, local authorities and the voluntary sector. In the five years since this started it has provided permanent protection to nearly 1800 refugees, with a commitment to resettle 750 refugees a year. The Home Office is pressing states worldwide to establish their own resettlement programmes.

An area of potential development is making best use of RCOs, and the Minister said that the Home Office is committed to working with the Refugee Council and across Government to identify ways of empowering those RCOs which can demonstrate their positive contribution to integration.

In conclusion, Phil Woolas urged conference participants, when putting forward recommendations, to set challenging but realistic objectives, and to bear in mind the pressure on UKBA to secure value for money. He said that without the input of all UKBA's partners, particularly in the voluntary sector, there would not have been nearly so much progress as there has been.

In the question period following the Minister's talk, delegates raised a wide range of issues. Before his first response, Phil Woolas said that conferences like this were useful because ministers had an opportunity to explain Government thinking. Even if people weren't satisfied, at least they gained more understanding of the policy direction.

In response to questions about numbers involved in the Gateway Protection Programme and the criteria for selection, Phil Woolas explained that despite some security concerns, selection of participants was left to UNHCR; although an annual target of 750 might seem few in relation to overall numbers, he was proud of the role the UK has played in contributing to the programme, and the leadership the UK is giving internationally. He said that he doesn't see a clear-cut distinction between genuine asylum seekers – people fleeing persecution – and economic migrants, as in people's real lives, persecution and oppression can take many forms. There is widespread global movement, often for economic reasons, and there is a responsibility under the Convention to provide an asylum system which can determine fairly. The Government has an obligation to address the root causes of the problem, and that is what the focus, rightly, is upon.

In response to a question about the current asylum backlog, he said that the number was about 300,000, but these are cases, not people. Of the 55,000 cases which have been cleared so far, about a third have proved to be duplicates, already dealt with elsewhere in the immigration system, or people have moved on. The question about the backlog had been coupled with a question about the opportunity to work, but the Minister argued that the current policy of attempting to process cases effectively and more quickly is the right approach. It is in UKBA's own interest to improve the quality of decision-making, and to do so as early as possible in the process. The dilemma is how to get the balance right between, on the one hand, getting proper care for those who are claiming and those who fail in their application but can't, through no fault of their own, return to their countries, and, on the other hand, 'the pull factor'. He said 'I reject any proposition which says that the Government uses destitution as an instrument of policy. That is not the case. It isn't our intention. But the pull factor is a real issue'. He referred delegates back to his earlier point about global migration.

One delegate drew attention to refugee policy from earlier periods. In his response, the Minister noted that the 1961 Commonwealth Immigration Act, which set quotas, had been a Conservative measure; setting quotas for refugees was not Labour policy.

A delegate pointed to the role which RCOs can play in helping refugees into employment, and urged that funding to provide appropriate support should not be confined to large organisations. In relation to English language teaching, a delegate asked why funding for this was being cut back. Phil Woolas said he thought there was some confusion. When changes were made to the funding of NVQ Level 2 and above, some English language provision ended, but that was only part of the picture, not the whole picture. Government policy is to increase availability of English language provision. However, he noted that central Government necessarily devolves many aspects of implementation to local authorities, and these increasingly work closely with other bodies; if, as a result, provision has been reduced, he would be interested to learn about this. *[After this session Alan Tuckett and Chris Taylor from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) brought to the Minister's attention the policy change in 2007 which withdrew the right of asylum seekers to attend funded English language courses from day one.]*

A delegate pointed out that the Government is putting considerable effort into ending rough sleeping, but 'normal routes' out of homelessness aren't available for some people because of their refugee status or their migration status within Europe. A survey among those leaving cold weather shelters in London found that a quarter of them had no route out of homelessness on the street. Phil Woolas said he recognised that housing was key: people should have a roof over their head while other issues were sorted out. The law says that the Government should provide support where otherwise people would be destitute, so the Government needs to address that in the area of rough sleeping. His own view is that there can be other problems affecting homelessness, such as mental health or other health problems. However, current strategies seem the best available.

The morning session continued with workshops on housing, volunteering, education and employment, and children and families. Each workshop was asked to prepare three recommendations.

### **Afternoon session: Workshop feedback and summary**

In the afternoon the workshop leaders set out the recommendations resulting from the delegates' discussions. This was followed by an opportunity for delegates to make additional points. The detailed recommendations are included as an appendix to this document.

The first report was from **Caroline Davey**, Shelter's Deputy Director of Communications, Policy & Campaigns. She said that **Devan Kanthasamy** and **Azim El-Hassan**, from Housing Associations Charitable Trust (hact), had contributed their practical experience to the workshop. The three recommendations reflect the different stages in the journey to appropriate housing and long-term settlement and integration, starting from an understanding that housing is absolutely fundamental to everyone's life. This is especially so for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, who need a base from which to rebuild their lives, and need that from day one.

*Recommendation 1: Safety net.* There are still too many gaps: a safety net is required. Destitution is here, and will continue, unless there is action to deal with the situation of refused asylum seekers not able to obtain S.4 support, those who have received a positive decision but must leave their accommodation, and migrants not eligible for public funds.

*Recommendation 2: Enable smooth transition from UKBA accommodation for those given a positive decision.* Those who receive status get 28 days to move out of UKBA housing, yet there are many barriers to finding alternative accommodation within such a brief period. In addition to the general difficulties which anyone might face, there can be problems such as not having the right documentation from NASS, or delay in receiving NI numbers or benefits. However, there are some examples of people being allowed to stay more than 28 days in UKBA accommodation, or to stay on as a private let. National guidance and requirements which encourage a smoother transition are needed.

*Recommendation 3: Provide resources for training and development.* There is a lot of good will in local authorities, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and other housing organisations, but not necessarily the information, experience, skills and knowledge required to give refugees the support they need. What is required is commitment to training and development for this support role from the Homes & Communities Agency (HCA) and the Tenant Services Authority (TSA).

**Sian Greenhead** and **Chris Badman** then reported on the volunteering workshop. Sian Greenhead is Project Manager, TimeBank, and Chris Badman is the Refugee Council's Volunteer Development Manager. The workshop had discussed mentoring and volunteering, seeing integration as very much a two-way process.

*Recommendation 1: Widen mentoring provision to currently excluded groups such as asylum seekers and those not included in RIES.* Integration should start from day one, but it should also be recognised that refugees might benefit from mentoring support over many years.

*Recommendation 2: Recognise the value of volunteering and allocate resources to allow formal accreditation for all groups (including asylum seekers), as well as opportunities for sharing best practice within the voluntary sector, particularly RCOs.*

*Recommendation 3: Create clear and accessible definition of volunteering entitlements, including clarifying the position for refused asylum seekers, and provide information regarding volunteering and mentoring in briefings for asylum applicants.* There is confusion about what volunteering is, and who is allowed to volunteer; clarification is required, especially to ensure consensus among government departments. It would also be helpful if case owners had better information about the benefit to be gained from mentoring and volunteering.

The next report was from **Chris Taylor**, Development Officer, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). She said that much of the workshop discussion had been about the campaign by NIACE and others for English language provision for asylum seekers ([www.niace.org.uk/righttoavoice](http://www.niace.org.uk/righttoavoice)). She set out three recommendations, but

commented that lively discussion in small groups (some of which had concentrated on employment issues) had actually resulted in a number of recommendations. She mentioned later that she had not had sufficient time to take all these fully into account when preparing the three recommendations.

*Recommendation 1: Government departments should work together to fund and support ESOL for asylum seekers from day one.* Given the reduction in the number of asylum seekers, this should be possible. Although UKBA might lead, the Department for Communities & Local Government and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills should also be involved.

*Recommendation 2: Research should be undertaken to compare and contrast the different policies on ESOL for asylum seekers in Scotland and England, with a cost-benefit analysis.* Such research could highlight implications for the economy and society as well as the individual.

*Recommendation 3: Public awareness should be raised, for example through Refugee Week and Adult Learners Week, regarding the issues around ESOL for asylum seekers from day one.* We need to ensure that the public and the media understand that asylum is a human right, but so is education for all.

The final report, on the children and families workshop, was from **Kate Gledhill**, Manager, Children's Rights Service, London Borough of Waltham Forest. She explained that the workshop had been run largely by children from the Children's Rights Service, who described what travelling through the system was like for young people, and the impact their experiences had on their integration.

*Recommendation 1: Every Child Matters.* This should be the policy, irrespective of immigration status. Of particular concern is that protection does not seem as paramount in the treatment of asylum-seeking children as it is for British-born children.

*Recommendation 2: The need for consistent support across the country.* There is too much variation in the amount of support children receive as they go through the system. Sometimes this is due to funding problems but sometimes to lack of information. There should be a guaranteed level of services from UKBA, social services etc. underpinned by adequate resources and by training. Immigration solicitors could benefit from training on rights for children and young people.

*Recommendation 3: One point of contact with accessible information.* At present, children aren't provided with sufficient child-friendly information, in appropriate languages, about immigration, education, social services and their rights. What is needed is a comprehensive guide to the situation in which they find themselves.

Kate Gledhill said that great concern had been expressed in the workshop about the prevailing culture of hostility and disbelief, especially in relation to age-determination; there seems to be 'an agenda to see them as older than they are', with repeated questioning.

Following the presentations, delegates made many additional points. Some of these were about housing. Concern was expressed about the way the local connection rules (defined in terms of biological family) restrict housing choice after status has been gained; would it be possible to consider a close-knit refugee community in a particular area as an alternative? Another delegate urged that the recommendations include greater emphasis on the role of RCOs as contributing to housing solutions, with the necessary funding.

Delegates drew attention to various situations in which lack of policy clarity, or lack of consistency in implementation, causes difficulties. For example, the IS 96 form says that asylum seekers are not allowed to work voluntarily or in paid positions. In England, education maintenance allowances are supposedly available to every child 16-18 in local authority care and in full-time education, yet this does not seem to apply in the case of asylum seekers. One delegate expressed concern about the position of unaccompanied children who arrive at 12 or 13 but live in a state of uncertainty about their status until they are 18. Another problem noted was the variation in the amount of support young people receive to ease their progress to higher education.

A delegate suggested that in addition to a recommendation about ESOL from day one, the conference recommendations should stress the great need refused asylum seekers have for sufficient English to negotiate their way through the appeal process and with diverse agencies. Another pointed out that allocation of funding is not sufficiently tailored to particular courses and individual refugees' qualification needs. Four hundred pounds may be allocated although the charge for the appropriate course is considerably more; as a result, there is a waste of public funds as students go from one course to another. Another delegate pointed out that several years' refugee status is required before people become eligible for funding for NVQs; this is acting as a significant barrier to employment opportunities. Chris Badman said it was important to pursue this issue, which could also be a problem for volunteers.

### **Afternoon session: speaker**

The first speaker in the afternoon session was **John Wilkes**, Chief Executive, Scottish Refugee Council. He took up this post in March 2008 after long experience in the voluntary, statutory and private sectors. He was Chief Executive of Scotland's leading HIV and AIDS organisation before joining Carers UK as Scotland Director. From 2001 he was Director of the Equal Opportunities Commission Scotland, until the commission's remit was taken over by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. He has also been involved in volunteering, including chairing the Glasgow Lesbian and Gay Centre and the Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector.

John Wilkes spoke on **Scottish Initiatives on Integration: How integration starts on day one**. He began by saying that 'refugee integration is an equalities, human rights and humanitarian issue' and went on to outline the work of the Scottish Refugee Council, the devolution context, and the approach to integration which has been adopted by Scottish political parties, and by the Scottish Executive and Parliament.

The Scottish Refugee Council is Scotland's leading independent refugee charity. It provides services and advocates on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers; it piloted Sunrise, and is now delivering RIES in Scotland. The Council is UKBA's key strategic partner on refugee issues in Scotland, and works with the Scottish Government and Parliament, the UK Government and Westminster, and at the European level. It broadly welcomes the new strategy document, *Moving On Together*.

He pointed out that primary legislative powers for many services supporting the integration of refugees and asylum seekers are devolved to the Scottish Government. Included are housing, volunteering, criminal justice, education and training, health, ESOL, legal aid provision, children's services and rights, and the promotion of equal opportunities. Devolution has provided an opportunity to look at doing things in a different way. It has provided an opportunity to demonstrate that some principles and approaches which, in England, are still matters of difference between Government and other stakeholders, can be made to work to the benefit of refugees and society.

One of the Scottish Parliament's four founding principles is equality of opportunity, and since devolution there have been a general political approach and cross party consensus around many issues of social justice and fairness. Supporting refugees and asylum seekers has been seen as a human rights and humanitarian responsibility. In addition, Scotland faces an overall declining but ageing population, and a priority of both the previous Government and the present one has been to attract inward migration. For refugees, asylum seekers and migrants this has been translated into a broadly positive commitment, seeing refugees as part of the solution to Scotland's challenges but also part of an international humanitarian commitment.

The development of the Scottish Refugee Integration Forum Action Plan in 2002 involved key stakeholders. It was chaired by Iain Gray, then the Communities Minister and now leader of the Labour Party in the Scottish Parliament. The plan set out a range of 'measurable actions' in relation to housing, health, positive images and media, employment and training, access to justice, community preparation and community development, and children's issues. It also noted issues to be raised with the UK Government.

John Wilkes said that the underlying principle of this strategic approach is that integration, to be successful, must start on the day of arrival, not when someone is awarded status. He quoted a June 2006 speech by Malcolm Chisholm, Communities Minister, in which he stressed that 'effective integration is beneficial not only for refugees, asylum seekers and their immediate communities, but for Scotland as a whole. Refugees and asylum seekers bring useful and sometimes rare skills and knowledge to Scotland. If they integrate successfully they can bring huge benefits to the whole of society'. The Welsh Assembly Government's Refugee Inclusion Strategy (2008) is based on the same principle of integration starting at the point of arrival.

The Action Plan has resulted in many benefits in terms of access to education and training, health and housing, and free ESOL provision. Positive images have been promoted and negative stereotypes combated through Government-led campaigns such as 'One Nation Many Cultures'; significant resources have been invested in community

cohesion through the Framework for Dialogue initiative, designed to build support for RCOs and to help local communities.

The Action Plan was refreshed in 2005 and has now been incorporated into the Scottish National Party (SNP) Scottish Government's Race Equality Statement. One of the first things that the SNP Government did was to publish a cabinet memo on asylum, stating that 'Asylum seekers must be treated fairly and humanely, particularly when children are involved' and 'The welfare and rights of all children in Scotland are paramount and must be treated as such'. The Scottish Government is against the detention of children under any circumstances, and it is in favour of the right to work for asylum seekers; these are not, however, devolved responsibilities.

Despite the positive approach, and Scotland's achievements on integration, the country is faced with many challenges. For example, although the Scottish Parliament has significant legislation on combating homelessness, and Scotland still has proportionately more social housing than England, the quality and availability of housing remain serious issues. Language and a lack of interpreters remain problems, as Scotland has no control over which asylum seekers will be dispersed to the country. As in England and Wales, the slow process of recognition and accreditation of skills and qualifications reduces the employment choices for refugees when they enter the job market. Scotland is not immune to prejudice, with the 2006 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey showing an increase in negative attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. Tensions can arise with the UK Government when policy and legislation devised at Westminster do not take sufficiently into account Scotland's devolved responsibilities.

On a more positive note, Scotland has some good examples of participation in the Gateway initiative, although the Scottish Refugee Council believes that more local authorities could take part. The regionalisation of UKBA has meant greater opportunities to address issues in a Scottish context, and to work strategically towards better solutions. The development of NAM and the speeding-up of the asylum process have been broadly welcomed, with some positive decisions made within a month of application. However, shorter timeframes bring challenges for integration, particularly in relation to housing and employment. Temporary leave to remain may bring problems as the five year review periods approach, and there will be fresh challenges in helping new refugees to integrate more swiftly. The current economic situation may mean an increase in negative attitudes towards refugees, affecting community cohesion and poverty. 'We need to redouble and co-ordinate our efforts to ensure that this does not happen.'

John Wilkes concluded by saying that Scotland and Wales have demonstrated some different approaches, and political leadership, in relation to integration of refugees into community and society. Integration from the point of arrival is better for the individual and community. He hopes that this learning can be transferred to other parts of the UK and elsewhere. 'It is the right and humane approach and to be welcomed.'

In response to a question, John Wilkes said that there are a number of forums for discussion of Scottish migration and refugee issues. Scotland has one of UKBA's

strategic migration partnerships, with a variety of subgroups; there is also a recently-created Scottish Asylum Stakeholders Forum. Thus, there are national bodies which bring together Government, Parliament and others with UKBA. UKBA policies are, of course, UK-wide. Sometimes these have to be adapted, though, where they interact with Scottish policy in devolved policy areas; for example, legal aid is a devolved power, and an important difference from England is that there isn't a merits test. Tensions can arise because of this.

In answer to another question, John Wilkes said that the Scottish Refugee Council worked jointly with the Refugee Council and with many other organisations, both to make the Scottish experience known and to lobby on a range of issues. He said he had been struck by the suggestion earlier in the afternoon that comparative research should be done in order to see what the positive benefits – and downsides, if any – are to integration from day one. Finally, a delegate asked about using the June European elections as an opportunity to influence politicians to make clear statements about integration. John Wilkes agreed that persuading politicians is very important, but stressed how different the Scottish context is: its size (1/3 that of England), its population (only five million), and its less combative parliamentary system. Fortunately, in Scotland politicians from a variety of parties have reached a consensus on integration issues.

### **Afternoon session: panel discussion**

The panel members were **Donna Covey**, **Adam Sampson** (Chief Executive, Shelter), **Alan Tuckett** (Director, NIACE), **Helen Walker** (Chief Executive Officer, TimeBank) and **Julian Walker** (UK Director of Policy & Research, Barnardo's). Gemma Juma, the conference chair, asked each panel member to suggest one thing which could be done to improve the process of integration. Following this, there were questions and comments from delegates.

Adam Sampson said that after nearly a decade of dispersal a strategic review of the policy is required. Dispersal has created new communities of asylum seekers and refugees around the country, so the profile of refugee communities has changed. Although dispersal may have provided some people with reasonable accommodation while applying for asylum, it has some longer-term problems which militate against adequate integration of refugees.

Alan Tuckett argued that just as Every Child Matters, every adult matters. He pointed to the critical importance of English language learning from day one, but also stressed the importance of accreditation of professional competence. The failure to do so 'beggars the UK economy as well as depriving people of proper chances in their own life'. Priority needs to be given, too, to a more dynamic and confident education of the wider community about the riches to be gained from a more open and plural society.

Helen Walker explained that TimeBank is a national volunteering charity which for some years has been focusing on mentoring. She emphasised two of the recommendations from the workshop: the value of widening provision of mentoring, and the importance of greater clarity about who can volunteer, and when.

Julian Walker expressed concern about child poverty, and noted several issues relating to this. She reminded delegates of Phil Woolas' response in the morning to a question about the right for asylum seekers to work after six months. He had said that it would be impossible, as such a policy change would be too much of a pull factor. She suggested research into pull factors: whether arrival is more about what is going on in countries of origin than in countries of destination. She also suggested cost-benefit analysis of what might be gained and what might be lost if the right to work were granted. She drew attention to the importance of education maintenance grants; and she expressed concern about refugee families with disabled children who were not eligible for the full range of disability benefits.

In response to Julian Walker's point about pull factors, Gemma Juma said that the Refugee Council has recently commissioned research about why asylum seekers flee to the UK rather than to another country. The research findings will be published later this year.

The discussion which followed included issues of housing quality and availability, the right to work, ESOL, political rhetoric, and proposals about volunteering in the current Citizenship bill. Many delegates emphasised the need for integration from day one, and for asylum seekers to be treated with dignity.

A delegate spoke about the findings from a large-scale study in Birmingham in 2006-7: the condition of S.4 accommodation was so bad that 'even rats would not like to stay'. Donna Covey said that increasingly people were coming to the Refugee Council's One Stop Service because of inadequate or inappropriate accommodation. The Asylum Support Partnership (the agencies providing One Stop services) had prepared a report on asylum seekers' accommodation. As a result of that, a pilot study in Scotland has been carried out jointly with UKBA; it is hoped that the results can soon be shared and that the study will be extended to the rest of the UK.

Adam Sampson commented that issues about accommodation are extremely important, but 'the politics of this situation are not running in our favour'. He noted that council house waiting lists have gone up in the last ten years from just under one million to 1.8 million. That enables the far right to cause trouble (and BNP leaflets now focus on newcomers depriving local people of access to housing). We need to enable asylum seekers and refugees to gain decent accommodation in places they want to live, while finding ways of explaining that to local populations without inflaming racism. He said that poor, badly-housed people with limited access to work, living in places where they are competing with others for resources, are bound to feel resentful. We need to find solutions for all those in need so that they aren't competing for scarce resources. Shelter is proud to be part of an alliance aiming to improve conditions for asylum seekers and refugees, but the organisation has to be clear that it is not prioritising one group over another, but working towards everyone getting access to expanded resources.

Julian Walker said that the needs of children should be recognised from day one. When unaccompanied children or families with children are dispersed or moved around from

one accommodation to another, and children then have to change schools, it is difficult for children to become part of a community and make a contribution to the community.

A delegate drew attention to the December 2008 Tekle decision about the right to work [[www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2008/3064.html](http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2008/3064.html)], and asked whether the Let Them Work campaign was following this up. She said that depriving someone of the right to work after a certain period of time, without justification, was depriving him or her of integration, and of human rights. Donna Covey noted that the Home Office was appealing the decision, but the subject was on the agenda of a meeting she would be having soon with the Minister of State for Employment and Welfare Reform, Tony McNulty.

Alan Tuckett reminded delegates that, contrary to what Phil Woolas had said about the importance the Government places on English language teaching, 18 months ago ESOL policy changed. He described the price of not teaching English as 'astonishingly high': if people aren't given the opportunity to learn English in their first six months, they learn to live alongside but not integrated into the local community, and power relations are seriously affected. Given the reduction in the number of asylum seekers, the cost of reversing the 2007 decision would be minimal. He noted that the lowest level of participation in local learning opportunities is among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Somali women; he described this as an illustration of what happens over 20-30 years if ESOL is not available from the beginning. A delegate pointed out that the main tool of integration is employment, but English language is needed for that; the financial costs of unemployment in terms of family support etc. must be far greater for the Government than the likely costs of ESOL from day one. Donna Covey noted that as voluntary organisations are delivering RIES, they will be accumulating relevant evidence to present to Government.

Political rhetoric was of concern to many of those present: why are politicians so fearful of speaking positively about asylum and refugees? Julian Walker said we needed to 'create the space for politicians to be braver'. She noted that the Let Them Work campaign is supported by both the CBI and the TUC, as well as others, and suggested that the more such wide alliances can be built, the easier it will be for politicians to feel there is safe ground on which to stand. We must also stress the positive contribution which asylum seekers and refugees have made and continue to make to our society. Donna Covey pointed out how valuable it is when organisations such as the conference partners, which don't have 'refugee' in their name, take a public stand on asylum and refugee issues; this, too, can help politicians become braver.

The delegate from Volunteering England drew attention to the proposal in the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill that those who show 'active citizenship', including volunteering, may be able to speed up their eventual citizenship or residence by two years. She suggested that this might have both positive and less positive implications, and urged delegates to keep an eye on developments. Helen Walker said that volunteering is valuable and important, but it shouldn't be used as a catch-all solution for all problems; she doubted that the sector has the capacity to accept large numbers of people using volunteering as a step to something else. Donna Covey said that the Refugee Council couldn't function without volunteers, but the organisation is opposed to

compulsory volunteering. There is a problem in any case with the definition of volunteering. There is a tendency in Government to think in terms of structured volunteering in large organisations, yet many people volunteer informally in their communities. There is also the matter of who can volunteer, and at what stage; at present the Citizenship proposals set many hurdles for asylum seekers. More generally, the Refugee Council considers that the assumption in the proposals of a pathway from arrival through to citizenship doesn't reflect the complexity of reality.

The final matter raised was by a delegate who had lived on vouchers, and described the humiliation he had felt. He urged that the issue of vouchers be included in the conference recommendations.

### **Afternoon session: final speaker**

The final speaker of the day was **Trevor Phillips**, Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), whose talk was on **Refugees in the UK – what does equality involve?** Before becoming the first chair of the new commission, he was chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, one of the bodies which merged to form EHRC. In May 2000 he was elected as a member of the Greater London Authority, and chaired the Assembly from later that month. Previously he was a broadcaster, and Head of Current Affairs at London Weekend Television from 1992. Among other activities he has been chair of the Runnymede Trust, and is currently a board member of the Bernie Grant Centre and a patron of the Sickle Cell Society. In addition to many newspaper articles, he has co-authored two books.

Trevor Phillips began by stressing the importance of conferences such as this one, where there could be 'frank, open and sensible discussions about issues that are certainly not straightforward and often clouded by controversy'. For too long, as a nation, we have been unable to speak frankly and constructively about immigration and asylum, to talk without embarrassment or fear of being labelled closet racists or open-border fantasists. That is starting to change at a national level.

He said that the Commission is committed to partnership working with all the agencies involved in the asylum process, to ensure that the path to settlement and integration is as smooth as possible. But it is not just a matter of looking at individual cases and individual distress: these have to be located in a much bigger context. EHRC has 'a little mantra that says there are two major problems facing us all today: how we live with the planet, and how we live with each other'; there is no hope of solving the challenges of climate change if we don't have communities that work together, respect each other and embrace our common humanity. Britain may escape the worst effects of climate change, but as the world heats up more people are likely to seek refuge here, so we need to build the right framework to handle this reality decently and fairly. Of course, refugees have been coming to this country for centuries.

Throughout the 1990s, asylum applications grew steadily, peaking in 2002. The number of successful applications peaked in 2005. Since then, applications have fallen by about 70 per cent. This decline in part reflects a decrease in refugee numbers globally, but it is also to do with the expansion of the so-called 'safe' countries list, and the increasingly

strict asylum policies adopted since 2002 (detention, fast-tracking and reduced legal assistance for asylum applicants) combined with measures to prevent individuals entering UK territory. But the numbers claiming asylum will not necessarily continue to fall - they will be dictated by need.

Trevor Phillips noted that the 1951 Refugee Convention was drafted by British lawyers in response to one of history's greatest ethical failings, the failure of states to offer protection to Jews fleeing the Holocaust. The Convention's framers placed their faith in a system of legal obligations, because reliance on the humanity of states is not enough. We need to find a way of managing asylum that respects international convention, encourages good relations between refugees and local communities, and integrates asylum into the wider process of global migration.

He stressed that asylum cannot now be separated from issues of migration around the world. In 1960 there were an estimated 76 million international migrants, today there are 200 million who live and work outside their country of birth. Unregulated migration can place serious strains on host communities and asylum systems, and it can provoke public hostility towards all foreign nationals. Managed economic migration benefits everyone, including those in need of refugee protection.

However, he said that we urgently need to take the political and popular heat off asylum. The language of asylum is still characterised by grumbling about numbers, and by hysteria about 'bogus' foreigners wanting a share of our hard-earned wealth and offering nothing in return. Once, granting asylum was an issue of Britain's self-respect, a symbol of national pride: the pride of a nation with a centuries-old tradition of personal liberty, fair play and fighting for the underdog. As we work together to find new, effective ways of integrating refugees into our society, we need to do so in ways that uphold such long traditions.

Those traditions are enshrined in law, and Trevor Phillips pointed out that there are currently a number of legislative opportunities to address crucial issues of integration. The Equality Bill provides for a wide public duty to promote good relations across all groups in society; the Commission will want to ensure that this is used to put more resources into helping communities deal with difference. The Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill provides some opportunity to replace an outdated system, 'built up piecemeal from an unplanned disengagement with empire', with a system in which asylum can be given due attention within a conscious, planned and integrated approach to migration. The EHRC has a role in ensuring the right questions are asked, and the needs and rights of asylum seekers given due regard, in new legislation. Where access to services, benefits or facilities is limited by the Government, such restrictions must not breach rights under the Human Rights Act.

Trevor Phillips said that we need to get the legal machinery right, but we also need to work on practical integration policy. Integration is a two-way process. 'For the refugee, it requires a willingness to adapt to the lifestyle of the host society without having to lose his or her own cultural identity. And in return, the host society must be prepared to accept refugees as equals and work to ensure they have the same access to resources and decision-making processes as the native population.'

To prepare communities adequately, all those involved need to work together strategically, and they need to do so at the start of the process as it can take months, if not years, for an asylum application to be fully resolved. Deferring integration measures until leave to remain has been granted can reinforce exclusion. Refugee professionals, for example, may have become deskilled and demoralised by the time they receive permission to work. Trevor Phillips pointed out that refugees earn only 2/3 of the average UK hourly rate; fewer than half are entitled to holiday pay. The reasons are complex, but the outcome is a group of residents excluded from the mainstream.

Because of their status, asylum seekers are bound to be treated differently from refugees in some ways. However, a substantial number of them will be allowed to remain, and 'The fact that some will not succeed does not mean that all should be treated as if they will not succeed.'

He said it is important to counter the myths about asylum seekers. The recession is likely to fuel hostility from those who resent the benefits asylum seekers receive, yet seek to forbid them to support themselves. A key element of the Commission's statutory role is to encourage good relations between groups, whatever their citizenship status. 'It's a part of our mandate that's becoming increasingly pertinent, and urgent.' That is why the EHRC briefing to the House of Lords on the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill urges consideration of possible detrimental impacts which the proposals might have on good relations. That is why, too, the EHRC grants programme has supported organisations that bring groups together, and pioneers projects that celebrate diversity and promote understanding of language, faith, community and inclusion.

Trevor Phillips said we have to redouble efforts to ensure we have effective integration policies. That means leadership at the national and local levels, and resources. Living together decently is the greatest challenge of the century.

In questions to Trevor Phillips one delegate, who had been an asylum seeker for eight years, asked for guidance on integration: 'What must I do in the future? What level must I go to?'. Trevor Phillips said he sees integration as a two-way process. How can we make individuals' experiences, ambitions and attachment to communities of different groups of people more similar? Integration is not a test to be passed, a test to become like someone else. We need to ask how we can help those already settled adjust to those who arrive, and those who arrive able to hold on to the good things they bring with them, but make these compatible with what they find here. Integration is a difficult process, but we've done it for centuries. People have to talk to each other, get to know each other, and they have to understand that - almost universally - what binds us together as human beings is more important than what separates us.

John Wilkes asked about the EHRC's role in helping UKBA fulfil its public sector duties in relation to race etc. Trevor Phillips said that there were certain restrictions on how the duties applied to UKBA, but the Home Office and UKBA had 'not been backward in coming forward' to work with the Commission on this - for example, they now want to apply the tools of the public sector duty to make sure they are not locating people in

places where they are vulnerable to discrimination or harassment. However, the EHRC is hoping that the Equalities Bill will shift to outcome-focused duties in order to answer such questions as 'Have we changed people's experiences? Have we made their lives better?'

A delegate welcomed Trevor Phillips' positioning the UK in the world, and suggested that perhaps there were some lessons we could learn from other countries. She said that in France there is case law or legislation which requires that when deciding whether to allow eventual residence, judges must take into consideration people's willingness to take steps to integrate. They look at it in a broader way than is done in the UK. Trevor Phillips said that he'd like to give some thought to this idea, and its possible application in the rather different British setting.

The final questioner stressed the role of employment in integration, and asked how the Commission and the Government could work with employers to get more refugees into employment, to overcome barriers such as lack of references or a bank account, or the unwillingness of employers to accept Home Office documentation. Trevor Phillips said a major problem was employers' anxiety that they might be doing the wrong thing. He hoped that guidance which the Commission and the Refugee Council would be publishing shortly would provide the necessary clarity and improve the situation.

Bringing the conference to a close, Gemma Juma expressed her appreciation and thanks to all speakers, panel members, delegates and conference partners for their lively and useful participation in the day. The Refugee Council will inform delegates when the conference report and the recommendations to UKBA are posted on the web, and also when a response is received from UKBA.

*The Refugee Council is very grateful to Naomi Connelly, Refugee Council volunteer, for her help in creating this report.*

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Refugee Council