

## Is Parliament relevant to me?

Parliament has recently faced profound challenges in public trust and confidence, leading to higher levels of public disengagement with the institution. However, even before the events of last year, the Parliamentary Outreach<sup>1</sup> service had been established.

This service has been up and running for two years, with officers across the UK. Its main aim is to strengthen the connection between the public and the House of Commons and House of Lords by promoting awareness of their work, processes and relevance. Through doing so, it aims to increase levels of engagement.

The Outreach service does this in four key ways:

1. Delivering tailored information sessions outlining how Bills become law, how Select Committees work and how to find information on the Parliament website.
2. Developing cultural programmes and exhibitions in partnership with local museums, archives and libraries.
3. Helping and promoting the work of Select Committees, including public meetings in the regions.
4. Highlighting the relevance of Parliament in the regions of the UK and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The great majority of refugee community organisations (RCOs) are already pushed to the limit, with scarce resources and high service demand from their communities. But voluntary groups like these need to know how to connect with Parliament in order to support their services and community members more effectively.

Alasdair Mackenzie, a Parliamentary Outreach officer, says, "I travel to all corners of the UK to deliver a range of training and information sessions to all sizes and varieties of community groups. We want to make sure that people in these groups come away with a better idea of how they can connect with Parliament and have a voice."

Shpetim Alimeta, an RCO development adviser at the Refugee Council is working with the Outreach service in the East of England to organise a visit to the House of Commons with a group of RCO community

activists who want to learn more about the UK parliamentary system. In collaboration with Minority Community Ethnic Action Network he moderated a pre-election Question Time Suffolk event with the three main party candidates<sup>2</sup>. This was very empowering for the BME Suffolk community.



*Alasdair Mackenzie training at New Citizens Voice event – London*

The Outreach service is keen to work with more RCOs and to explore the political engagement issues facing refugee communities. Some people may not even know that they can vote<sup>3</sup>; others may not understand the role of their MP, or how their MP can help them. As Alasdair points out, even if individuals (such as asylum seekers) are ineligible to vote, this should not stop them contacting their MP. There are also other avenues to explore in Parliament, such as Select Committees.

Select Committees often look to large organisations for input into their public enquiries, and are not always aware of smaller grassroots organisations which could provide valuable, informative evidence. RCOs could play a crucial role by providing evidence to these Committees and presenting the voice from the grassroots. The Outreach service can facilitate this by putting RCOs in touch with relevant select committees. RCOs may want to engage with All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs). Although they are not official parliamentary bodies: they can be a useful way to identify MPs who are interested in specific issues.

If some of these political terms are not familiar to you, or you would like to find out how the service could support your organisation, contact Alasdair Mackenzie at [mackenzie@parliament.uk](mailto:mackenzie@parliament.uk) or visit <http://tiny.cc/l3x84>

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/>

<sup>2</sup> See films from the event at [www.iscre.org.uk/Husting%20streaming%20test.asp?nid=256&pid=248](http://www.iscre.org.uk/Husting%20streaming%20test.asp?nid=256&pid=248)

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/voter-registration](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/voter-registration)

## Policy and campaigns update

### Urgent asylum issues for the new government

The Refugee Council wants to see a fair, humane and effective asylum system that provides protection and enables refugees to rebuild their lives in safety. As we approach the sixtieth anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention next year, we are asking the new government to seize the opportunity to create such a system.

We will build on the success of the asylum election pledge<sup>4</sup> signed by 1,031 parliamentary candidates, 219 of whom were successfully elected to parliament, including nine members of the cabinet. We are highlighting to key ministers and all MPs the urgent need for positive, swift action across government. To read about our calls for action visit

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/archive/news/2010/may/20100518](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/archive/news/2010/may/20100518)

### The Refugee Empowerment Project (REP)

From April 2009 until March 2010, the Refugee Council ran the REP, which set out to illustrate how RCOs could be supported by a larger organisation to pursue shared campaign goals in the longer term. The REP worked with 17 individuals who were based in 8 organisations, located in the three neighbouring London boroughs of Barnet, Brent and Camden,

The project evaluation report showed that the campaigners involved in the REP felt they gained something from the experience. As a result of the training and support they received, participants felt better equipped to plan and run campaigns, and most appear committed to doing so. Campaigners suggested that fundraising support for campaigning work would have been useful, as well as access to additional organisational development support to improve their capacity to be able to deliver campaigning activities. To read the project evaluation in full, please visit

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/rep](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/rep)

## News

### The Refugee Council's SCORES Project

Funded by the Football Foundation, the Supporting Community Organisations Refugees Engage in Sports (SCORES) is a new project which aims to increase participation of refugees in sports, particularly football by:

- Building the capacity of RCOs to develop sports projects by providing them with advice, information and support on ways of identifying and evidencing need and delivering sport projects for their community;
- Securing more support and funding for refugee-led sports projects by drawing more attention from funding bodies, sports agencies, and local strategic planners, to the role played by RCOs and challenges that refugees face in accessing sport services.
- Working towards the transformation of disparate refugee groups of casual footballer playing "jumpers for goalposts" football into properly constituted clubs.

During its first year, the project will work only with RCOs based London. To find out more contact

[Ezechias Ngendahayo](mailto:Ezechias.Ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk) on **020 7346 1163** or [ezechias.ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:ezechias.ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk)

### Stonewall research uncovers institutional homophobia in asylum system

Groundbreaking new research published by gay equality group Stonewall finds that lesbian and gay asylum-seekers face systemic discrimination throughout the UK asylum system.

*No Going Back* reveals that asylum-seekers who have been raped, tortured and threatened with death because of their sexual orientation in their home country are being routinely deported.

The report includes detailed evidence not just from lesbian and gay asylum-seekers but also UK Border Agency staff. They acknowledge that they receive no guidance on interviewing gay applicants from countries such as Uganda, Jamaica and Malawi. As a result determinations are often made on the basis of outdated perceptions about gay people and inaccurate country of origin information. Visit [www.stonewall.org.uk/nogoingback](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/nogoingback)

<sup>4</sup> See [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/campaigning/electionaction/](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/campaigning/electionaction/)

## Sharing experience

### Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA) - London

*Justin Bahunga and Sarah O’Gorman talk to RCO News about AFRUCA’s work to raise awareness of witchcraft child abuse and their efforts to criminalise the branding of individuals as witches.*

AFRUCA was set up in 2001, following the high profile deaths of a number of African children in the UK, in order to raise the profile of African children and advocate for their welfare. We believe that African children in the UK face specific problems which require specific responses. We work in four main areas: child abuse, female genital mutilation, child trafficking and witchcraft abuse, however the latter is a concern which is probably least understood.



*Justin Bahunga and Sarah O’Gorman -AFRUCA*

Witchcraft abuse occurs when someone (often a child) is branded a witch, blamed for misfortune and then harmed in order to punish or to exorcise the evil spirit believed to be within them. Though awareness of this issue is growing, there is still very little known about it in the UK, which means that professionals find it difficult to recognise and address. Such abuse is inevitably very difficult to record, although Eleanor Stobart’s research<sup>5</sup> identified 74 cases occurring in the UK between 2000 and 2006. Through our *Safeguarding African Children in London Policy Project*, funded by City Parochial Foundation, AFRUCA aims to advise and train practitioners, raise awareness in African communities and affect policy.

Many traditional belief systems include a belief in witchcraft and this on its own is not dangerous. However, we believe that accusations of witchcraft are incredibly damaging and regularly result in

physical and emotional abuse. Africans arriving in the UK are often put under immense strain as they deal with complex and stringent asylum and immigration policies, suffer low paid employment – or none at all, and cope with great changes to cultural and family structures. Individuals search for reasons for these difficulties and, unfortunately, can turn to witchcraft as an explanation.

Pastors who brand a child as possessed and encourage exorcism via

emotional or physical abuse are in the minority. We work with community and faith leaders – the vast majority of whom do not sanction child abuse – to encourage the implementation of child protection policies in their organisations. We also run training courses for practitioners in order to educate them about cultural norms and religious practices. We hope this will contribute to policy change and support our lobbying to criminalise the branding of an individual as a witch.

Any form of child abuse – witchcraft related or otherwise – is illegal in the UK. If you suspect a child is at risk you should report it to social services immediately. AFRUCA can provide advice and training to organisations, in communities and supply a range of information booklets (free to voluntary organisations). For more information please contact us on **0844 660 8607** or visit our website [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org).

## Funding news

### Lottery funding consultation

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has launched a consultation on proposed reductions in the share of National Lottery funding directed to the Big Lottery Fund for voluntary and community organisations. Under the proposals, the proportion of overall lottery cash paid to the Big Lottery Fund would be reduced to 40% (currently 80%) whilst the proportion allocated to arts, sports and heritage would rise to 20% by 2012. The deadline for responses is 21 August 2010.

For more information visit:

[www.culture.gov.uk/consultations/7070.aspx?dm\\_i=6I8,6OL4,QNWNC,GIM7,1](http://www.culture.gov.uk/consultations/7070.aspx?dm_i=6I8,6OL4,QNWNC,GIM7,1)

<sup>5</sup> *Child Abuse Linked to Accusations of "Possession" and "Witchcraft"* see <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/rr750.pdf>

## What's new at the Basis Project?

### The Basis national conference – Camden, London

On 11 June 2010, the Basis Project held its national mid-project conference. There were 143 participants from over 40 countries including refugee community organisations, second-tier organisations and funders with whom the Basis Project works to improve mutual understanding.

The key speakers included Donna Covey, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council, Sanjay Dighe England Chair of the Big Lottery Fund, Richard piper of NCVO and David Ndiwanyu of the Nile African Development Organisation. They all emphasised the crucial role played by RCOs in supporting vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers. One of the highlights of the conference was a speech made by Sanjay Dighe, who spoke of his respect for the work of RCOs and the positive difference which the Basis Project has made to them and the lives of their clients. Workshops provided RCOs with opportunities to equip themselves for the challenges of the emerging economic climate. Participant feedback was very positive and we are looking forward to our next conference in 2011.

The Basis Project has produced a booklet of RCO case studies and information from across the project celebrating RCOs, see <http://tinyurl.com/37lxxb2>

To view a short video of the Basis national conference see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KS3w0dLQRyM&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KS3w0dLQRyM&feature=player_embedded)



## Training

### Free financial management

9 July 2010

The Basis Project is organising free training, open to all RCOs in London. The next training session will cover financial controls and procedures. To reserve a place, contact Sharmarke at [Sharmarke.diriye@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:Sharmarke.diriye@refugeecouncil.org.uk) or call **020 7346 1290** or **07949 631820**. Also see [www.thebasisproject.org.uk/training/Open+training](http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk/training/Open+training) .

## Events

### The African MDG Achievers International Awards

By David Ndiwanyu (Director of the NILE)

Extreme poverty in its many dimensions: hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, exclusion - while promoting gender equality, universal education and environmental sustainability are some of the basic human rights of each person on the planet.

Unfortunately, those rights are taken away from the most vulnerable members of our human family... children and women.

The NILE African Development Organisation organises the African Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Achievers International Awards with its partners every year on 25 of May. This year's awards took place at the University of Bradford where a cross section of people from across Europe, Africa, USA, and 10 honourees received awards.

In his key note speech, our guest of honour, Jonathan Ellis - Director of Policy and Development at the Refugee Council stressed the need to address the MDGs in order to support those in need. We urge the world to nominate as many people and organisations for next year's awards by visiting the award website at [www.africanachievers.org](http://www.africanachievers.org).

### Who's who at the Refugee Council?



*Helen with indigenous leader, Ana Hualinga Sandy*

#### Helen Todd – Project Initiatives Manager (the Basis Project)

I manage various initiatives in the Basis Project, which works to support RCOs across England. I have worked with refugees and RCOs for several years, and believe that

RCOs are really important in helping their members to achieve their ambitions in Britain, whilst promoting and valuing their cultures.

I have recently returned from Peru, where I was working with indigenous communities in the Amazon basin, who had suffered contamination at the hands of petrol companies. The common thread linking that job with this one is having the privilege to work alongside inspiring people who are determined to defend the rights of their people.

Email: [Helen.todd@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:Helen.todd@refugeecouncil.org.uk), or call **020 7346 1084**.