

Refugees and asylum seekers in the Big Society

Back in July the Prime Minister gave his first major speech on his idea of the 'Big Society.' It is tempting to dismiss this initiative, especially coming as it does in the wake of swingeing spending cuts, but we are interested to see where refugees fit into this 'Big Society'?

In his speech David Cameron spoke of "The Big Society is that something different and bold. It's about saying if we want real change for the long-term, we need people to come together and work together – because we're all in this together."

Are we all in this together? Is the 'Big Society' big enough to include new members of our society such as asylum seekers and refugees?

If the 'Big Society' is to mean anything it surely must include asylum seekers, refugees and indeed all migrants. For me this will be the crucial test of how big it really is.

I am proud in this country that we support the 1951 Refugee Convention, and that people do come to the UK seeking safety from tyranny and persecution – although it is increasingly difficult to do so.

We know how hard it is for asylum seekers once they get to the UK and the current political and media environment only compounds that difficulty.

We also know that one crucial element in helping asylum seekers both to be welcomed in the UK and to integrate into the established community is the presence across the country of refugee community organisations (RCOs). There is a rich tapestry of RCOs across the UK and they play such an important part in both helping asylum seekers as they first arrive and then helping them to play a role in the wider community. They are the unseen heroes making integration work in this country. Yet RCOs also engage the host community in their activities and services – it is a two-way process that strengthens our society.

I urge the Prime Minister to consider whether current policies and funding streams are unleashing refugee community engagement or

crushing it. And RCO engagement is not about these communities existing in splendid isolation; the RCOs that I meet are playing vibrant and active roles in their wider community.

For the past three years we have seen a funding environment increasingly wary of the contribution made by RCOs. And this is only getting worse as funders choose to go with 'mainstream' organisations.



Jonathan Ellis

At the Refugee Council we are receiving almost daily reports of RCOs' problems with funding. We have heard, for example, that the Iranian Association stands to lose 90% of its statutory funding in 2010-11. And 40% of Action for Refugees in Lewisham's supplementary school's budget was

under threat before the success of their petitioning and campaigning. What is happening to your RCO? – we are pulling together a national picture for our lobbying on this vital issue¹.

If we are serious about creating a 'Big Society' then it does need to be big, inclusive and involve all the elements of our society. The Regional Refugee Forum North East, for example, have told me in such a 'Big Society' RCOs should be seen in terms of Best Value and not merely added value and to realise this potential adequate funding should be provided.

The 'Big Society' needs to nurture and encourage RCOs because at a local level they will be the way that asylum seekers and refugees are empowered, their engagement is unleashed and our society enriched. And we need a government and local authorities that cherishes refugee communities as a core part of our society.

Jonathan Ellis
Director of Policy and Development
Refugee Council

¹ Please take ten minutes to complete our online survey about your experiences and views of the current government cuts at: <https://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/refugeecouncil/rcosept2010/>

Policy and campaigns update

Settlement protection: five-year reviews and indefinite leave to remain

In August 2005, UKBA began a new policy of granting people who had been given refugee status or humanitarian protection only limited leave to remain for five years. These people are required to apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR) at the end of the five years. The first cases will come to the end of their leave on 30 August 2010.

It is extremely important that people apply for ILR before their existing leave expires. If they do not then they become overstayers and will lose entitlement to benefits and the right to work. The Refugee Council is seeking clarification from the UKBA in respect of people who do not apply in time.

For more information see Refugee Council briefing and translated leaflets at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/archive/news/2010/august/20100806

Report on new Azure payment card

In September 2010, the Asylum Support Partnership will be launching a major new report on the impact of the new Azure payment card for asylum seekers at the end of the process.

The Refugee Council with many partners had been active campaigning against the use of supermarket vouchers to support such asylum seekers. We felt and still do that all asylum seekers should either be able to work or receive benefits in cash – there is no need for a parallel system of vouchers or payment cards.

This new report will show that there are considerable problems with this new card as people cannot get specialist food for their cultural or dietary needs and people using the card continue to be stigmatised. More information will follow on our campaign against this unnecessary card.

Tell your MP that asylum seekers must be allowed to work

This government has a chance to do things differently on asylum. At the Refugee Council, we want a fair, humane and effective asylum system that provides protection and enables refugees to rebuild their lives in safety. We're highlighting to key ministers and all MPs the urgent need for positive, swift action on a range of issues.

One of the key things we're calling for is that asylum seekers are allowed to work. When government spending is being cut, it doesn't make sense to force people who could work to live on benefits. We want to build support in parliament, to put pressure on the government to let asylum seekers work. We are doing this by asking all MPs to sign a declaration to show their support.

Ask your MP to sign the declaration at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/work. It takes just two minutes!

News

COMPASS update

In the June/July issue of RCO News we wrote about COMPASS, the UK Border Agency's (UKBA) process of tendering UKBA contracts and grant agreements for most of the services to asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. We also informed you that these contracts would terminate at the end of March 2011.

Following the General Election, the Refugee Council has been informed that UKBA's original tendering process timetable (commencing July 2010) has been delayed. The latest update from UKBA is that the decision on COMPASS cannot be confirmed until after the Comprehensive Spending Review announcement on 20 October 2010.

However, UKBA has committed to a dialogue between now and October 2010 to ensure that once decisions are made, the needs of refugees and asylum seekers can be supported within the budgetary constraints set by the spending review. For more information email ezechias.ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

Sharing experience

Refugee and Migrant Forum of East London (RAMFEL)

"Everything all of a sudden has got very BIG. The Big Society is all that anyone seems to be talking about," says Rita Chada, Director of Refugee and Migrant Forum of East London (RAMFEL).

Yet there is really nothing new in this, it's just like shuffling the chairs on the Titanic. Yes we at RAMFEL may well be taking an all too cynical view, but tell me what does the BIG society offer asylum seekers and refugees? What's most

notable is the absence of any mention of cohesion or equality, we all know that community cohesion is no longer flavour of the month and its now survival of the fittest. So how do RCOs like RAMFEL survive?



The BIG Lunch – organised by RAMFEL and Eastside Community Heritage (copyright 2010 RAMFEL and Eastside Community Heritage)

As RCOs we need to be better integrated into the mainstream of the voluntary sector locally. We need to stop saying we don't have enough time to engage in the strategic and policy aspects of our work as that is exactly where all the decisions will be made. We need to create our own individual agencies response to the BIG society. In truth there is nothing new or original in any of what has been written in the document.

As both a front line provider of advice and support services and second tier umbrella body we had already spent much of the last two years repositioning ourselves to be seen as not just an organisation that works with asylum seekers and refugees, but one that works for all communities for the betterment of asylum seekers and refugees.

The Big Society offers us the BIG Bank, presumably to take out loans from, to help community organising. It's already clear that organisations like London Citizens have cornered the market on community organising.

Despite the rhetoric of such organisations, community organising is one place where RCOs can really make their mark. It's about the mobilisation of support for the cause of asylum seekers and refugees.

For RAMFEL there is no such thing as the

BIG Society, there is a society, communities, and individuals, structures, systems and prejudice. Size is of little consequence. It's political prostrating to say that everything is all of a sudden BIG, big does not mean inclusive, does not equate with fair treatment. The true value in challenging prejudice in areas like Barking and Dagenham comes from the day-to-day interactions, which requires a small society, which really demands community. Initiatives like Living Libraries, like coffee mornings, public and community education is what allows for the development of a campaigning pressure for change.

Read more at RAMFEL Speaks Out at <http://ramfelspeaksout.blogspot.com/> For more information about RAMFEL go to www.ramfel.org.uk, email info@ramfel.org.uk or call 020 8478 4513.

Funding news

The Basis Project responds to Lottery funding consultation

As outlined in the last issue of *RCO News*, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has proposed to reduce the amount of funding directed from lottery proceeds to the Big Lottery Fund (BIG). The Basis Project² has responded to this consultation, which closed on 21 August 2010. In its response, the Basis Project has raised concerns about the potential implications for RCOs of the proposals. Reports from their Organisational Development Officers across England suggest that RCOs are being squeezed from two sides: while there is an increasing need for the services they provide, the funding to resource the provision of these services is being curtailed. To read the response visit www.thebasisproject.org.uk

² An England-wide partnership project led by Refugee Council and Refugee Action Basis is the only national specialist project to support refugee community organisations (RCOs) in the nine English regions.

What's new at the Basis Project?

In July 2010 a conference in Manchester organised by the Basis Project, Manchester Refugee Support Network, Greater Manchester BME Network and the TRIO Policy and Information Network looked at refugee communities and participation. Keynote speaker Jonathan Ellis, Director of Policy and Development at the Refugee Council emphasised the need for "voices of asylum seekers and refugees to be heard through organisations led by asylum seekers and refugees." You can see video reports from the event on the Basis Project website: www.thebasisproject.org.uk/events/manchester-representation



Upcoming events from the Basis Project include

- The Big Conversation: Event for RCOs and development workers in the North East - 9 September 2010
- The Role Of RCOs in UK Civil Society - Birmingham, 23 September 2010
- Supporting Refugee Community Organisations' (RCOs) role in integration in London - 27 September 2010
- Building Capacity of RCOs to generate income – Bristol, 29 September 2010

Full details, including application forms, can be found on the Basis Project website www.thebasisproject.org.uk/events

Training

Free monitoring and evaluation training for London RCOs

Charities Evaluation Services are delivering a free, two-day training course for London based RCOs on 5 and 6 October 2010. Refreshments and a hot halal meal will be provided.

This course is very practical and will help you and your organisation to plan more strategically, make your services more effective and to show your achievements more effectively to others, including your funders. To book a place email training@ces-vol.org.uk or call **020 7713 5722**

'I am very happy to have learnt practical skills for funding applications... this is essential knowledge.' Feedback from an RCO.

Free training on refugee children law

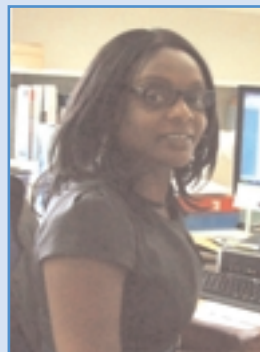
The Immigration Law Practitioners' Association is pleased to announce the beginning of their Refugee Children project, funded by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund. The project aims to raise the quality of legal representation of refugee children and will provide free training sessions relating to all aspects of refugee children law across the UK. Training will be targeted at all legal practitioners, including non-immigration practitioners, with both entry level and advanced specialist courses on offer.



Training sessions will start in November 2010. For more information visit www.ilpa.org.uk, email Natasha.Tsangarides@ilpa.org.uk or call **020 7490 1553**

To be eligible for the free training, individuals must be OISC accredited advisors. A limited number of places will also be made available to people from member organisations of the Refugee Children's Consortium. For a list of these organisations, please see www.tinyurls.co.uk/H11278.

Who's who at the Refugee Council?



Susan Bryan – National Guidance Worker (Refugees into Teaching)

My role supports and guides refugee teachers as they negotiate the complexities of accessing teacher training and employment within schools. The majority of our clients are skilled

professionals, often in shortage subjects, but require help in understanding the English educational system.

Previously I worked as a functional skills lecturer in Further Education and then as a trainer/employability advisor to young adults. RiT offers me a great opportunity to help empower disenfranchised adults to manage their career development. The most satisfying aspect of my job is witnessing people as they progress, gain confidence and make informed choices about their future.

In my spare time I am a freelance art worker for my local history museum and a face painter at community/music festivals and the occasional fashion show. For more information visit www.refugeesintoteaching.org.uk.