

The importance of giving good advice

*"Advice involves providing guidance on the options open to service users and sometimes taking action on their behalf."*¹

Refugees and asylum seekers may need advice on a wide range of issues, related to both their asylum claim and immigration status, but also on the basic necessities of life. These might include: employment issues; registering with a GP; opening a bank account; finding a school for their child and welfare benefits advice. Receiving support at an early stage in the asylum process can help significantly towards addressing these issues.

Like many people from other communities, refugees and asylum seekers often prefer to seek advice from an organisation based in their own community, particularly as community organisations tend to provide a comprehensive service that offers cultural activities, English language classes, skills development and social opportunities.

In the UK, we have systems which often require us to write formal letters or complete forms in order to access our rights and basic services, for example, applying for welfare benefits. For refugees and asylum seekers, this is often a huge challenge, which might be due to inexperience of such documented systems in their home country, language barriers and lack of confidence. Refugee community organisations (RCOs) can make this process easier by helping clients to understand and complete these forms.

RCOs often form long-term relationships with their clients as their organisation will often be the first place that their client comes to with any query or problem. Even when clients accept a referral to another specialist agency, they may return to an RCO for interpretation and explanation of that agency's advice and actions. This is often due to community based centres being close to their homes, confidence in an adviser's linguistic and cultural understanding, and other services such as information on acclimatising to British systems and culture that help to enable clients, rather than encourage a dependency on legal advice.

Advice can have a positive impact on crucial aspects of people's lives, including: fairness and community cohesion; health; economic benefits; social inclusion; and improving public services.

With regard to fairness and community cohesion, advice agencies and Law Centres provide important access to legal advice for the most disadvantaged people. An analysis by the Advice Services Alliance in 2005 found that advice agencies help a high number of disabled people and people from a minority ethnic background. In terms of health, research published in 2006² demonstrated the strong link between civil law problems and ill health. The research found that 40% of civil law issues were so serious that people spent "all or most of their time" worrying about them.



Client receiving advice at IMECE (see page 3)

If RCOs want to provide a good advice service, they need to ensure they have a well-managed organisation with suitably skilled and supported staff and volunteers. They must have good quality systems, policies and procedures to ensure that the advice given is of a high quality. Policies for conflict of interest, client confidentiality, equality and diversity, and client feedback are essential.

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¹ Quality Assurance System for Refugee Organisations (QASRO), second edition, Refugee Council, 2006.

² Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice, p 60, 2nd edition, March 2006.

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There are a variety of quality standards that RCOs can access to set up or develop their advice services. These include: the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC³) regulated provision of immigration advice; the Community Legal Service Quality Mark, the Investors In People (IIP); PQASSO and the Refugee Council's, Quality Assurance System for Refugee Organisations (QASRO).

If you are providing advice to asylum seekers and refugees and want to learn more about the quality and legal frameworks that apply to your work, please email sas&cdt@refugeecouncil.org.uk or download a leaflet at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/eventsandtraining/ to reserve a place at our free event for RCOs in the London region: **Giving good advice to asylum seekers and refugees on Wednesday 25 April 2007.**

What is the Independent Asylum Commission?

Asylum is one of the most contentious issues in contemporary politics. It is consistently at the top of the public's list of political concerns. Never far from the headlines, there is a widespread belief that the system is "not fit for purpose."

Meanwhile, there are many reports of asylum seekers facing unfair treatment, destitution and a loss of dignity. At a recent citizens' commission into conditions at Lunar House, the headquarters of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate called for an independent review of asylum policies.

Concerned citizens across the country have asked the Independent Asylum Commission to conduct a truly independent review of the UK asylum system, from beginning to end. After 18 months we will produce a report making recommendations for reform that are fair as well as forceful, and realistic as well as humane.

We will be investigating the asylum system on behalf of a whole range of citizens - from those who believe that asylum seekers are not being treated humanely to those who believe our asylum system is too generous.

We want to hear from everyone who is concerned by this issue and we urge you to engage with our work as RCOs and as individuals. This Commission is accountable to citizens, and indeed, to you.

Find out more at www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk/ or contact the Co-ordinator at jonathan.cox@cof.org.uk.

Consultation on services for unaccompanied asylum seeking children

The Home Office has published its consultation paper outlining plans to reform all services for unaccompanied children seeking asylum. In **Planning Better outcomes and Support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children**, the Government seeks views on its proposals, which include moving children to be cared for by local authorities outside of London and the South East. Respondents are also asked to consider whether or not children in foster care should be allowed to stay after they turn 16 and in what ways children can be 'assisted' to consider voluntary return.

The fundamental message is that for most of these children, their stay in the UK will be temporary as they will be expected to leave the country when they turn 18. This will concern many people who understand that not only do these children need help to understand systems and processes and with huge loss, but many of them have serious international protection needs that the Government has failed to fully meet up until now.

Please take as much time as you can to read the proposals and respond in some way, sharing the knowledge and experience you have in your communities. You can read the report at www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/6353/6356/17715/uasc.pdf and email responses to UASC.Reform@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk by **31 May 2007.**

Have you an event, campaign or training course that you would like to advertise? You can put it on the Refugee Council online diary. Just go to www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/eventsandtraining/submit.htm.

³ OISC regulation is a legal requirement if your organisation is providing immigration advice.



Sharing Experience

IMECE – Turkish speaking women’s group

Nezahat Cihan, Director of IMECE talks to RCO News about their services and their views on giving good advice to refugees and asylum seekers.

IMECE is a women only charity organisation, which was established in 1982. We employ two full-time, and nine part-time paid staff and four volunteers. IMECE is a word that signifies solidarity and coming together to help one another.

Since its foundation, IMECE has focused on domestic violence issues within Turkish, Kurdish, and Turkish Cypriot communities and has developed projects to tackle violence against women. We aim to empower Turkish-speaking women who are unemployed and looking for work, by providing them with a safe and confidential environment in which to gain work experience. Our staff and volunteers also provide practical support to the survivors of domestic violence.

‘Word of mouth’ is very strong in refugee communities and many refugee women will go to RCOs for advice as they trust them and feel comfortable. 94% of our clients don’t speak English and so feel more confident talking to an adviser who speaks their language and understands their culture. When we advise our clients, we sit side by side as we like them to feel physically and emotionally empowered.

The definition of ‘advice’ for our organisation is to empower clients to access their rights and entitlements by providing them with information, assisting with form-filling and referring to other relevant agencies when appropriate. We provide advice and information on: domestic violence; housing; immigration; welfare benefits; education and employment. We have two advisers who do

follow-up and casework; two drop-in advisers; and two advisers for women aged 55 plus. Approximately 30-40 women a day use our advice and other services.

In 2001 we received the Quality Mark and OISC regulation. It was a difficult process as we had to meet the demanding requirements of the Quality Mark. This took up a lot of our advice time that could have been spent talking to clients instead. We had to introduce an appointment system, which also created barriers, as we had to turn people away who hadn’t booked, except for emergency cases. As time progressed however, we started to see an improvement in our advice services. It’s now much easier and quicker to keep track of the services we have provided to clients and to monitor any changes in client cases over a long period of time.

I would strongly recommend that RCOs follow some kind of quality assurance system because funders trust an organisation more and it’s beneficial to both the clients and the organisation. We received a lot of support from Advice UK when we applied for the Quality Mark. I would advise RCOs to go to second tier organisations like Advice UK and the Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) for information and training on quality assurance systems and developing advice services.

For more information about IMECE, email imece@dial.pipex.com or call **020 7354 1359** or visit www.imece.org.uk.



Funding News

Camelot foundation - Transforming Lives (UK)

The Transforming Lives programme spends £1.5 million each year on developing new approaches and creative ideas for re-connecting marginalised young people (aged 11 - 25) to the mainstream of UK life. Funding is available to registered charities working with young people that fall within the following groups: young parents or those at risk of becoming young parents; young exiles newly arrived in the UK; young people with mental health problems; and young disabled people. Each funding round focuses on a different theme. The current theme is working to reduce sexually transmitted infections in young people. For more information, call **James Middleton** on **020 7828 6085**, email info@camelotfoundation.org.uk or visit www.camelotfoundation.org.uk/tl.asp

Would you like to understand how your governance practice compares with other community organisations? The Governance Hub is offering a grant of £140 + VAT as contribution to take part in the Boards Count scheme. To register for the service, go to www.BoardsCount.com before **20 April 2007**.

Older Refugees Programme update

The Older Refugees Programme is a partnership led by Refugee Council and Age Concern England. Its aims are to help alleviate the social exclusion experienced by older refugees and to raise awareness among service providers and the voluntary and community sector. Launched in February 2006, the initial research phase⁴ is now complete and includes: individual interviews with older refugees; a survey report of Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs); and a literature review.

A high number of older refugees and asylum seekers attended a listening event in London, on 15 November 2006. Further consultations are planned for the West Midlands, in Birmingham on **26 April 2007** and for the Yorkshire & Humberside region, in Leeds on **22 May 2007** culminating in a national conference in **July 2007**. The regional consultations aim to:

- Listen to refugee elders and ensure their voices are heard;
- Improve the lives of older refugees by working together on solutions and engaging directly with policy-makers and service providers;
- Consolidate contacts and networking among older refugees.

If you are an older refugee, or work with older refugees, why not come along and have your say? For information about London events, email Jorge.Sanchez-chiara@ace.org.uk or call **020 8765 7714**. For regional events, email hilary.thorndike@refugeecouncil.org.uk or call **0121 622 0911**.

Sleepout highlights asylum destitution

On the night of the 19 – 20 February, Refugee Council held a sleepout in Parliament Square to highlight to the public, politicians and the media the fact that destitute asylum seekers have no home and that destitution is not working as a policy. We were joined by over 30 sleepers and many more volunteers, some of whom have experienced destitution themselves. By demonstrating right outside the House of Commons we got a message directly to MPs, many of whom came out to Parliament Square to find out about the **Just.Fair.** campaign. You can see what happened at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/sleepout.

The Refugee Council has joined many other charities and faith groups in a coalition called **Still Human - Still Here** to oppose the withdrawal of support for refused asylum seekers. An amendment to the UK Borders Bill going through parliament is being supported by this campaign. The effect of the amendment if passed would be to change the definition of asylum seeker in the legislation so as to include people whose claims have been refused. They would be liable to receive support under section 95. Please join us in lobbying your MP to support this amendment now.

For more information about this amendment and other actions we are taking in the campaign, email justfair@refugeecouncil.org.uk or visit www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/justfair.

Who's who at the Refugee Council?

Vanessa Hill – Volunteer Development Assistant



Has your refugee community organisation (RCO) ever thought about working more closely with volunteers? At the Refugee Council, we work with over 300 volunteers and without their invaluable help, we would not be able to offer such a diverse range of services to our clients.

However, we cannot provide volunteering opportunities for everyone who is interested in supporting our work. I currently refer potential volunteers to a number of different agencies but I would love to be able to recommend more RCOs.

If you need volunteers, please contact me with more information about the required role and your organisation so that we can signpost any prospective volunteers to you. Email me at Vanessa.hill@refugeecouncil.org.uk or call **020 7346 6727**.

⁴ The latest research can be found at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/position/2006/olderrefugees.htm