

Reflection on 3 years as Chief Executive of the Refugee Council

As we enter a period of unprecedented electoral and economic uncertainty I have been reflecting on some of the key issues facing the refugee sector in what are likely to be very challenging times.

Since I became Chief Executive of the Refugee Council almost 3 years ago, I have been constantly humbled by the incredible commitment and talent I see, both among the Refugee Council's own staff and volunteers and within our partner organisations. It continues to be a huge privilege to work within the refugee sector. There isn't a day that goes by, however challenging, where I am not inspired by the tireless commitment, passion and expertise of those who work in the refugee sector and the dignity and determination of the thousands of asylum seekers and refugees that together we support.

Most refugees come to the UK with nothing other than a determination to flee from persecution, conflict and torture. They have been forced to flee their homes, usually under terrible circumstances. And, yet, almost sixty years after we signed the UN Refugee Convention, too often Britain is not a welcoming country. Detention, destitution and disbelief remain imbedded in our asylum system, causing enormous suffering and injustice. Without the staff, volunteers and supporters of refugee charities across the country who play such a crucial role in providing friendship, advice and support this suffering and injustice would be greater still.

One of the things that we have tried hard to do at the Refugee Council in recent years is to reach out to the sector, and develop models of leadership that are enabling, empowering and have an emphasis on partnership. More than anything, that is the work that will stand us in good stead as we enter these difficult times.

Sometimes this is about service delivery. Even though we are a big national organisation, the Refugee Council does not think we can do everything ourselves. I was in Birmingham recently, and listening to the fantastic local organisations who are our delivery partners in RIES really brought home to me that when partnership works as well as this it brings real advantages to our clients – marrying the flexibility and local knowledge of refugee and migrant support organisations with the national profile and infrastructure of the Refugee Council.

And we are working increasingly closely with the North of England Refugee Service (NERS) , where we can see the real value of a strong regional charity working with a national partner.

But it's also about listening to local and regional leaders so our work reflects their concerns. This is absolutely crucial so that what I say to ministers and civil servants does not just reflect the excellent analysis provided by the Refugee Council's policy and public affairs team and my discussions with

other chief executives of national organisations, but also the realities of supporting asylum seekers in local communities. Policies written in Whitehall need to work in communities. Over the coming months, the Refugee Council is well placed to try and make that happen, due in no small part to the hard work we have put in over the last few years in building relationships with policymakers and politicians across the political spectrum.

One of the real strengths of the Refugee Sector is its diversity. As times get tough and we face unprecedented cuts in public spending, the challenge for us is to find ways of working together to weather the storm whilst not losing that richness of experience. And the challenge specifically for the Refugee Council is to find ways to enable that which are not threatening, overly centralised or overbearing. The RIES work in the West Midlands is a good example of that. So too is the job club run by RCOs as part of the London RIES.

Our campaigning work, including through the Refugee Empowerment Project with its emphasis on RCOs and other locally based organisations is another really good example of our partnership work, as is the great success of the asylum election pledge, jointly with Liberty and the Scottish Refugee Council. It has been really heartening that so many of our supporters, over 1,000 parliamentary candidates including the main party leaders signed the pledge and promised to remember the importance of refugee protection. I was especially pleased that we were able to empower so many of our supporters - the Refugee Council provided the material and the mechanism, and local groups took it up and made it their own. And we got a result that largely kept inflammatory language about asylum out of the election campaign.

And going into uncharted electoral waters, our closer working relationships with the Scottish and Welsh Refugee Councils is a big plus. Whether it's our shared Westminster lobbying work, or our joint work on a new client database, this work has gone from strength to strength in recent years.

A lot of our work in recent times has been about facilitating a joint sector response to the UKBA on those issues we genuinely agree about – recognising that whilst at the Refugee Council we are not always the experts in the sector on an issue – we probably are the charity that has the capacity to administer and collate joint responses. This has been crucial as we have challenged a series of ill judged operational decisions by UKBA on a range of issues such as further representations. But being big enough to know when to throw your weight behind someone else's leadership is also important, and I was delighted to be asked by Asylum Aid to accompany them to meetings with senior border agency officials to discuss their excellent women's charter.

There is one other recent development that really strengthens us going forward. In recent years, we have really reached out to form broad alliances with organisations outside of the refugee sector. The "Let them work" campaign with the TUC has untapped a renewed enthusiasm for campaigning

on refugee issues amongst trades unionists. And the CBI spoke at our Lords reception on this last year. I was also really taken with the way the Regional Refugee Forum North east has taken this campaign and made it their own in partnership with the Regional TUC.

We have worked with Age Concern on the needs of older refugees. And jointly with the Equality and Diversity Forum we brought refugee organisations and broader equality organisations together, to find common cause. I am also really proud of the way we have worked both with our partners within the refugee sector and a wide range of other organisations to together make Refugee Week the success it is today.

We face tremendous challenges over the coming months and years. If passion and commitment alone could make the world a better place - the UK would be the most refugee friendly country in the world. The challenge for us is how we harness that commitment and passion at a time when we are all facing financial pressures and the public mood continues to be against the things we hold most dear. I hope the work that we have done in recent years both in engaging more with local and regional organisations, and building more partnerships outside the sector, will help.

At a time of uncertainty, it has never been more important to work together. Our shared commitment and passion for the right to asylum give us a shared certainty of purpose. And that can only benefit everyone who comes to the UK seeking protection and the opportunity to rebuild their life in safety.