

Refugee Council policy statement

Moving on Together: Government's Recommitment to Supporting Refugees

Introduction

The UK Borders Agency (UKBA) will publish the Government's renewed commitment to refugee integration this month, 'Moving on Together: Government's recommitment to supporting refugees. This follows on from the 'Integration Matters' strategy published in 2005 and the launch of the first national set of integration services for refugees last year.

UKBA approached the Refugee Council last year for our support in the development of this new strategy to ensure that the important role of the voluntary sector was highlighted in this report. We held a discussion with many of our partners in the voluntary sector and are grateful for their contributions. We submitted our response to the UKBA with the key principles and actions that we would like to see in a new integration strategy.

We were very interested to contribute to this new strategy because each day we see the challenges that refugees face in seeking to integrate into UK society, and we saw this new strategy as an excellent way to ensure that other government departments, in addition to UKBA, were involved in this vital work.

Right from the outset of our involvement in this report, while we were interested to support the development of this new strategy, we were keen to express our differences of opinion with UKBA. Indeed in the opening joint introduction of this report Refugee Council and UKBA state:

'The closer working on refugees does not of course mean that Refugee Council and UK Border Agency agree on all aspects of wider asylum matters. There remain strong differences of opinion on a number of issues not least when the work of integration should start but we are committed to continue working together to assist refugees to achieve their full potential.'

We were also very keen to use this opportunity of working with UKBA to emphasise the crucial role of Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) in supporting the integration of refugees. Over the next few months we will be developing our work to promote the role of RCOs and the successful track record of many RCOs working on integration, all achieved with very limited resources.

Furthermore we saw this new strategy as an excellent mechanism to promote the wider role of government departments in promoting integration. We do not believe that it is just the function of

the Home Office and we will be focussed over the next few years on the impact that other government departments such as Communities and Local Government, Work and Pensions, Health and Children, Schools & Families can potentially have on refugee integration.

We also wanted to promote the important role of the voluntary sector in refugee integration, but together with our partners we were keen to ensure that the values and the principles of the Compact, governing relations between the government and the voluntary sector, were embedded in this strategy.

This paper sets out the Refugee Council's key policy positions on refugee integration and outlines the key actions that we will want to see following on from the launch of the new UKBA strategy.

The Refugee Council policy positions on integration:

- Integration starts from day one when a person first makes a claim for asylum. Whether their claim takes weeks, months or years to receive a decision, this time is critical to their longer term integration in the UK.
- The initial reception of asylum seekers in the UK is critical for the success of their integration. Access to key support, such as learning English, decent housing and healthcare need to be available early.
- Integration cannot be separated from social and economic inclusion, a point partially captured by the new working definition of integration and community cohesion adopted by government. However, there needs to be an assumption that refugees are law abiding and supportive of values that are associated with being British. The focus should be on supporting refugees to take full advantage of their rights in the UK.
- Integration is best served through refugees receiving indefinite leave to remain in the UK as soon as possible. The current policy of granting a limited period of five years only serves to restrict opportunities in employment and training for refugees. It also continues the period of instability where refugees are unable to plan ahead with confidence.
- Integration is a two way and an evolving process over time. The key value is equality: ensuring that refugees have equal chances to live full, safe and productive lives in the UK.
- There needs to be a clear separation of asylum from wider migration, particularly in public information. The right to protection and the value of providing asylum must be publicly defended by Government and not undermined.
- The personal and community safety of refugees in the UK should be a paramount factor underpinning any integration strategy. This includes challenging negative press and public attitudes, establishing refugees within local area agreements and strengthening the educational work in schools around asylum.
- There should be greater recognition of and support for the role for Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) in promoting integration. In particular, the importance of RCOs in providing a sense of belonging and personal confidence, acting as bridges to the mainstream.

Key actions:

- Refugees should be granted indefinite leave to remain (ILR) when they receive their status. ILR should be granted automatically to those with Humanitarian Protection and Discretionary Leave after five years if protection needs remain.
- There are key structural barriers restricting access to employment for refugees that need to be addressed. These include engaging employers on the documents refugees will have to demonstrate entitlement to work, supporting refugees to gain UK work experience and providing better accreditation of their skills and previous learning. Asylum seekers should be able to work after six months.
- Refugees should be automatically eligible for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision, regardless of their employment status, up to level 2.
- Local Authorities should ensure that refugees and their communities are recognised within service provision and decision making, including Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Local Area Agreements (LAAs)
- There should be greater recognition of the difficult funding environment for Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) by government with encouragement given to funding bodies to support the broader integration work of RCOs. Government departments, particularly the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions, should adopt more flexible funding and partnership arrangements to encourage the delivery role of RCOs.
- Refugees should be considered as distinct groups within Equality Impact Assessments, particularly in service provision around housing, education, health and employment.
- Financial exclusion needs to be addressed by Government to ensure that refugees are able to open bank accounts and have access to low interest credit beyond the current integration loan limits when granted leave to remain.

Conclusion

Working as do with refugees from day one of their time in the UK, we are passionately committed to working with all sectors to ensure that we develop the best strategy for refugee integration in this country.

We believe that everyone has a part to play to ensure refugees play an active and vibrant role in British life, and live up to our tradition of providing sanctuary. There are still limitations with the national policy, which we will continue to press the government to address. For now though, we look forward to a renewed energy throughout government to ensure we welcome refugees and support them in their new life in the UK.

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