



SUPPORTING AND
EMPOWERING
REFUGEES

A strategy for refugee involvement in the Refugee Council 2022-2025

Foreword

At the Refugee Council we are firmly committed to ensuring both lived and learned experience are given equal weight, respect, value and importance. Our value of inclusion states that ‘we work with – not for – refugees and people seeking asylum, so they have an equal voice, co-producing projects and ensuring their expertise and experience are at the heart of what we do’. We know that we have yet to get this right and are only at the start of the journey. This refugee involvement strategy and the associated delivery plan will ensure we start to move forward.

We have chosen to call it a Refugee Involvement Strategy so that it clearly indicates what we mean and are seeking to do. The staff and people with lived experience involved in developing the strategy felt that the term refugee involvement was clearer and avoided the risk of different interpretations or understandings. We are very clear what we mean by it:

Refugees work in partnership with staff in all parts of the organisation, to shape and influence decision-making at all levels, from strategic management through to frontline service delivery. The knowledge and lived experience of refugees is valued and respected, and combined with staff expertise to make well-informed decisions. Staff and involved refugees share power and responsibility for the decisions that are made.

To achieve this will require us to work differently. We are realistic, however, that it will take time and can't be rushed. We also know we must allocate resources and enable to staff to have the capacity if we are to make it happen. It also requires us to have an organisational culture and working practices that support meaningful and effective refugee involvement across the organisation. We must also work with, learn from and share best practice with the wider refugee and asylum sector.

We have purposefully been ambitious in our intentions but we know it will be a long and challenging road ahead. For us quality will matter more than speed. We won't get everything right, but we will seek to continuously learn and hold ourselves to account on progress.

Enver Solomon, CEO, Refugee Council

Introduction

In previous years, the Refugee Council has involved refugees in some parts of the organisation, but to date this practice has not been consistent or supported by a coherent plan. This document sets out a strategy for expanding and improving the involvement of refugees in all aspects of the Refugee Council's work over the next three years. It is an integral part of the Refugee Council's Strategic Plan to 2025 and aligns with one of their core values of inclusion of refugees. It has been informed by an internal Participation Review which asked staff and refugees about their views on the current status of involvement in the organisation, and what steps should be taken to achieve its goal of ensuring people with lived experience are at the heart of what it does. The strategy has been co-produced with staff and refugees and the process was supported by consultants from TwoCan Associates¹.

What is Refugee Involvement?

Involving refugees in the work of the Refugee Council means that the work is done **with** or **by** refugees, rather than being done **to** or **for** them. It means that refugees work in partnership with staff in all parts of the organisation, to shape and influence decision-making at all levels, from strategic management through to frontline service delivery. The knowledge and lived experience of refugees is valued and respected, and combined with staff expertise to make well-informed decisions. Staff and involved refugees share power and responsibility for the decisions that are made.

Refugees are people with relevant, first-hand experience and knowledge to contribute to the work of the Refugee Council and include people who use, have used or could use Refugee Council services. They include adults, families and separated children who:

- Seek asylum
- Are recognised as refugees under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention
- Are granted protection or leave to remain
- Are resettled refugees
- Are programme evacuees
- Are appeal rights exhausted

The Refugee's Council's vision and purpose

The vision guiding the 'Strategic Plan to 2025' is that:

Refugees are welcome to live safe and fulfilling lives contributing to the UK.

To achieve this vision, the Refugee Council describes its purpose as:

To work with refugees to transform their experience of seeking protection in the UK.

¹ See: <https://www.twocanassociates.co.uk/about/>

Involving refugees is one of the key mechanisms by which the Refugee Council intends to achieve these wider strategic goals. Its aim for involvement is that by 2025:

We will have resourced and implemented a powerful whole organisation approach to the equitable engagement and involvement of refugees that is embedded across all our activities.

Embedding refugee involvement throughout the organisation will ensure that refugees can influence decisions that affect them. It will give the Refugee Council legitimacy and authority in its work and ensure its services genuinely benefit the people who use them. In practical terms, refugees will help staff to make better decisions. By sharing their knowledge and lived experience of refugee protection, refugees can challenge staff assumptions, offer new ideas, anticipate problems and find solutions, ultimately giving staff greater confidence and motivation in all the work they do.

Strategic aims

The strategy draws on the experience of other voluntary sector organisations in developing involvement strategies and the findings of the mapping exercise. An Advisory Group of Refugee Council staff developed this strategy and a wider engagement with staff and refugees informed it.

The strategy has six strategic aims that will enable the Refugee Council to achieve its goals for refugee involvement. These aims are interlinked, and some progress on all of them is required to enhance and improve refugee involvement over the next three years.

Aim 1: To be clear about the purpose each time refugees are involved, so staff know where this needs to happen, how this will bring added value to their work, and how it is helping to achieve the Refugee Council's broader strategic goals.

Aim 2: To increase the scope for refugees to influence decisions at all levels and in all parts of the Refugee Council.

Aim 3: To encourage and enable staff at all levels across the Refugee Council to expand and improve their practice of involvement and to work with a diverse group of people with relevant lived experience.

Aim 4: To encourage and enable refugees to become effective partners in the work of the Refugee Council.

Aim 5: To allocate resources and develop robust systems and processes for governance and leadership which can support co-ordinated, efficient and successful refugee involvement.

Aim 6: To develop the organisational culture and working practices that support meaningful and effective refugee involvement across the organisation.

Strategic objectives

The steps required to achieve each of the strategic aims are listed below.

Aim 1: To be clear about the purpose each time refugees are involved, so staff know where this needs to happen, how this will bring added value to their work, and how it is helping to achieve the Refugee Council's broader strategic goals.

1a. all staff, volunteers, interpreters and Trustees in the Refugee Council are aware of what refugee involvement is, what it is not, and how it could potentially benefit them in their work

1b. staff with responsibility for refugee involvement know how to judge when and where it is meaningful and relevant to involve refugees in their work

1c. all refugee involvement is clearly linked to, and supports the implementation of the wider organisational strategy

Aim 2: To increase the scope for refugees to influence decisions at all levels and in all parts of the Refugee Council.

2a. refugee involvement is strategic, routine and systematic to support continuous dialogue and a broad scope for influence

2b. refugees are involved as early as possible and at multiple levels to ensure joined-up decision-making

2c. staff at all levels recognise the need to share power and control with involved refugees and are committed to doing this

2d. staff are aware of the importance of building high quality working relationships with involved refugees and are skilled in its practice

2e. involved refugees are aware of the importance of acting as critical friends to the Refugee Council and are skilled in its practice

Aim 3: To encourage and enable staff at all levels across the Refugee Council to expand and improve their practice of involvement and to work with a diverse group of people with relevant lived experience.

3a. staff are trained and supported to carry out refugee involvement to a high standard and are aware of the principles of best practice and the need to minimise potential distress for those involved

3b. a diverse group of people are recruited for involvement to reflect the need to involve people with a wide range of relevant lived experience of refugee protection

3c. the process for applying for involvement roles is fair and transparent, and selects people with the right combination of skills and experience

3d. a range of approaches, both formal and informal, are used to involve refugees which allow for flexible ways to be involved and create open and safe spaces for sharing views and experiences without judgement

3e. people from communities that may be seldom heard are involved in ways that are tailored to the needs of those communities

3f. support is available for staff to cope with the emotional impacts of involvement

3g. staff demonstrate through their practice, policies and behaviour that refugee involvement is highly valued

Aim 4: To encourage and enable refugees to become effective partners in the work of the Refugee Council.

4a. refugees are supported and trained *before* getting involved, to build their confidence and skills and to empower them for a new kind of working relationship with the Refugee Council

4b. all refugees are provided emotional support to prepare for involvement and whenever required if they re-experience any trauma through involvement

4c. refugees involved in the Refugee Council are aware of what the organisation does and how it works, of its strategic priorities for future work, and the different ways that their lived-experience can usefully contribute to decision-making

4d. all involvement roles have a clear description and person specification so that refugees have clear expectations of what they are being asked to contribute and know if they are the right people to apply to be involved, and can be given feedback if they are not selected

4e. refugees are briefed before being involved so they are clear about the task and what is required of them

4f. refugees are given incentives and motivation to get involved and stay involved e.g. through payment for their time and expenses or through other ways that are helpful or meaningful for the individual

4g. refugees are offered opportunities to network and share learning with their peers and the staff who involve them, to continue to develop their confidence and skills in involvement

Aim 5: To allocate resources and develop robust systems and processes for governance and leadership which can support co-ordinated, efficient and successful refugee involvement.

5a. the senior leadership team, CEO and Board of Trustees communicate their commitment to embedding refugee involvement in the work of The Refugee Council in public statements and help to communicate the learning and impact from involvement

5b. existing infrastructure is developed and new infrastructure introduced which is fit for purpose and cost-effective, for example to develop the Refugee Advisory Group or new databases of potential refugees to recruit for involvement roles

5c. new policies and guidance are developed that are tailored to the development of refugee involvement (for example, policies for recruiting refugees, role descriptions and payment policies)

5d. a group of refugee involvement champions (staff and refugees) from across The Refugee Council motivate and inspire others, raising the profile of involvement and giving momentum to further change

5e. senior managers include responsibility and accountability for involvement in their own job descriptions and those of the staff they manage

5f. refugee involvement is evaluated routinely to improve practice, collect stories of impact for sharing widely and to give feedback to all involved

5g. refugee involvement is adequately resourced across the organisation, allowing sufficient time and budget for meaningful involvement

5h. the Refugee Council collaborates with other organisations in the sector, to share learning and improve the practice of refugee involvement

Aim 6: To develop the organisational culture and working practices that support meaningful and effective refugee involvement across the organisation

6a. a community of practice is established - a group of staff and refugees who are doing involvement, to share learning and support each other, and to support and motivate others to involve refugees

6b. staff and involved refugees are supported to develop a continuous learning approach to involvement

6c. refugee involvement is highly visible in the organisation and its successes and lessons learned are widely shared

6d. staff recruitment is reviewed to bring in new staff with relevant skills for refugee involvement

6e. refugee involvement is an integral part of the work taken forward to create culture change within the organisation

Outline delivery plan

Implementing an involvement strategy is multi-layered and needs to be staged. The delivery plan therefore has three phases as outlined below (please see separate document for the detailed delivery plan). It aims to build on the Refugee Council's existing enthusiasm and experience of involvement, in order to extend and deepen best practice:

1. Building the foundation – Year 1

- establishing leadership for involvement
- raising awareness of what involvement is and is not
- developing systems and policies, including identifying budgets and other resources

2. Developing expertise – Years 2-3

- 2- 4 pioneer projects: pieces of involvement work which are important to the Refugee Council and which can be used to identify and share the 'learning from doing'
- a community of practice for involvement is supported to share learning
- systems and policies are tested and refined
- experienced involvement mentors are created to support future involvement

3. Review and next steps – End of Year 3

- a formal review evaluates the involvement to date and reflects on lessons learnt
- priorities for the next phase of involvement are agreed

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation: all phases need to be designed to capture learning and impact on an ongoing basis. Learning and successes are shared internally and externally on a routine basis through existing internal and external communication channels.

Intended outcomes from implementing the strategy

By 2025 the Refugee Council will have:

- improved staff and refugees' understanding of involvement and how it adds value to the work of the organisation
- started to develop its own policies and standards of practice tailored to the needs of the organisation, staff and involved refugees
- created a source of experience and expertise amongst staff and refugees to support ongoing learning and practice development

- enabled staff to learn from involvement in the pioneer projects and experience sharing power
- enabled refugees to influence decisions in the pioneer projects and to understand their role as critical friends
- created leadership for involvement both from the top of the organisation and within different parts of the organisation via the pioneer projects
- cross-organisational support for involvement by sharing the learning, the stories of impact as well as celebrating its successes
- created an organisational culture that celebrates involvement and demonstrates the wider organisational commitment to inclusion

Conclusion

Implementing the Refugee Involvement strategy over the first three years will require the Refugee Council to invest time and resources to build the foundations to support meaningful involvement, as well as establishing a learning culture that will allow practice to expand and improve over a much longer period of time. This is an ambitious proposal that requires small steps to start, and a focus on quality rather than speed.