

Guide to housing and support services for asylum seekers and refugees

Securing accommodation and support services for asylum seekers and refugees, and aiding their integration through community-based initiatives, are key elements of the Government's refugee integration strategy. Yet outside the larger cities, many local authorities are not engaged with this area of need, and housing associations have also been criticised for the limited contribution which many are making. A new guide, by John Perry of the Chartered Institute of Housing, brings together policy and practical experience in this field, highlighting good practice, to assist housing organisations across the UK to develop housing and support services. The guide focuses on five major themes.

- **Accommodation:** Despite some difficulties presented by the policy context (such as the short period allowed for people to find housing once an asylum decision comes through), a few housing organisations are developing innovative solutions. These include putting liaison measures in place to minimise the risk of homelessness, making constructive use of private sector accommodation, and self-build (or renovation) projects involving refugees.
- **Support services:** Even in some larger cities where there are well-developed support services for accepted refugees, practitioners acknowledge that they are often far from meeting all needs. Also, many support services are voluntary projects which survive on short-term funding. While this may be appropriate when services start, it is important that local authorities and government departments look to 'mainstream' services and funding to allow them to be more widely and more permanently available.
- **Community integration:** Mechanisms are needed to link 'personal integration' with measures to promote wider 'community cohesion'. An example of this could be involving both long-term residents and newcomers in drawing together and implementing a 'community support plan'.
- **Partnerships:** Refugee community organisations (RCOs) are keen to be involved in influencing and in some cases providing support services. Stronger partnership working between housing organisations and RCOs could lead to more culturally-sensitive services, related more closely to people's needs.
- **Strategies:** Few housing organisations have refugee housing strategies. However, the researcher judges these to be essential in areas which have significant refugee populations, if the disparate public and voluntary services that together support refugees in different ways are to be co-ordinated and gaps in services filled.



Context

Housing agencies across the UK are under increasing pressure to support and help integrate new migrants, of whom asylum seekers and refugees are key groups. Yet until now there has been little practical guidance aimed at housing practitioners on how to do this. A new guide aims to fill that gap, by explaining policy, legal issues and current practice in a way that will be accessible to housing staff, and bringing together practical examples which illustrate interesting new approaches or provide ideas on how services might be developed. The work focused on five main areas – accommodation, support services, community integration, partnership working to deliver services, and refugee housing strategies.

Accommodation

In principle, much accommodation for asylum seekers (those applying for refugee status) is arranged on a ‘no choice’ basis through National Asylum Support Service (NASS) contracts, whereas accepted refugees are in most cases eligible for social housing and for housing and other benefits.

The researcher identifies the ‘point of decision’, when an asylum seeker becomes an accepted refugee, as the critical stage at which housing and support options need to be available and the different local agencies need to be in effective liaison with each other. Many of the innovative examples which illustrate the guide are about helping people through this stage into secure accommodation, thus providing the basis for so many other aspects of establishing a new life. Some of the ideas being tested in practice are summarised below.

Leicester’s RASAP Project has helped 1,200 refugees apply for benefits and look for accommodation, focusing on people at the point of decision. In 2004 it obtained over £3,500 on average for each client in new benefits.

New Leaf Housing Association responded to a campaign by Somali people in Sheffield for more effective support for Somali refugees by using a block of six flats in a new development to provide housing and a support service. It also provides ongoing support when residents move out of the scheme into general purpose accommodation.

Access Apna Ghar, a non-registered black and multi-ethnic housing association, is developing a foyer project to accommodate and offer training in the construction industry to 20 young refugees in Glasgow. Properties have been acquired on the open market using Housing Association Grant from the city council.

Canopy Housing Project in Leeds is leasing and renovating empty properties on a self-build basis. The aim is to provide accommodation, develop skills among the refugee population and other disadvantaged young people locally, and promote good relationships within the Beeston Hill area.

Midland Refugee Council (MRC) has a pool of 400 managed, private sector properties in or near Birmingham. Birmingham Co-operative Housing Services, a specialist housing association with experience of providing management services to community-based housing organisations, manages the properties, and Midland Refugee Council provides support services. Most of the front-line work is undertaken by refugee housing workers – training programmes give them the opportunity to gain qualifications and pursue a housing career.

Support services

Asylum seekers and refugees have a wide range of support needs. Some need little support, speak good English and can readily adapt to life in the UK, but many have considerable support needs, especially if they have been traumatised by their experiences in their first country or in leaving it to come here. Providers of support services are concerned about the ‘patchy’ nature of provision, lack of integration of or competition between providers (in some cases), and the uncertainty of funding. Some local authorities are developing support strategies which aim to ‘mainstream’ the funding of such services, and this is encouraged in the Government’s refugee integration strategy. One difficulty in doing so is the limited growth of Supporting People funding, and the fact that the needs of refugees have to compete for resources with other groups whose needs are longer established.

Housing is often a key link in giving access to, and enabling refugees to take advantage of, support services. Settled accommodation provides an address from which to apply for benefits, training or a job, and establishes entitlement to a school place. Housing-related support workers act as key links with health, education, training and other services. Yet many of those interviewed identified groups such as women refugees, unaccompanied children, disabled people and people with mental health problems as having particular support needs which are often unmet (although examples of appropriate services do exist in some places).

The Government has partly recognised the importance of support services, especially in the period immediately after an applicant's refugee status is approved, in the introduction of the *Sunrise* programme – this is to be piloted in several areas shortly. However, many people interviewed pointed to what they saw as the limited scope and very short timescale of the support to be provided under *Sunrise*. Many support services suggest that people may need help for several months, perhaps even a couple of years, to make an effective transition to settled life in the UK.

Community integration

The Government's integration strategy defines integration essentially in terms of the individual, whereas the guide aims to link personal integration with measures to promote wider community cohesion in areas where refugees and other new migrant groups are living or to which they are moving. The researcher suggests preparing a 'community support plan' in these cases, involving both long-term residents and newcomers in the process.

The key elements of such a support plan are suggested as:

- improving personal understanding between people;
- providing information and 'myth busting';
- devising ways of bringing people together;
- creating local networks of service providers, potentially with community involvement;
- helping people feel secure by tackling issues like racist attacks;
- changing perceptions more widely.

The last is difficult in the present climate of media hostility towards immigration. Examples of ways to promote wider acceptance of new migrants include challenging inaccurate media representations, making positive links with local media, and securing the broadest possible political commitment at local level.

Partnerships

The researcher argues that housing bodies are often well-placed to take the lead in developing support services but are unlikely to have the ability to provide the full range of support needed. Nevertheless, there are examples of housing bodies being actively engaged in or initiating partnerships to develop both support services and wider refugee integration strategies.

For example, housing departments in Sheffield, Glasgow and Leicester have been lead actors in bringing together a wide range of agencies in each city to co-ordinate and identify gaps in service provision and to develop integration strategies. Housing associations such as Knightstone in Bristol and Bournemouth Churches have identified local support needs among refugees and developed new services in those areas in response.

The researcher focuses on two particular elements of partnerships to provide services. First, he suggests that refugee community organisations (RCOs) should be closely involved, and should be promoted and helped to grow by housing organisations where they do not exist or are just starting. There are examples of housing bodies assisting RCOs in this way – but so far they are few and far between. Stronger refugee community organisations may be able to become service providers themselves – or even manage stock on behalf of social landlords. Although only some will be able to develop the capacity to do this, it can be an excellent way of delivering culturally-sensitive services and also of helping RCOs to become more viable organisations.

A second opportunity to provide culturally sensitive services is through the more active involvement in this field of black and multi-ethnic housing associations (those recognised as having a majority of board members from black and multi-ethnic groups). Already there are examples of such associations developing asylum or refugee-related services (including the Scottish one above), but the number of organisations doing so is relatively small. The researcher suggests that more of the 64 registered black and multi-ethnic housing associations could recognise this as an area warranting further development, given that the provision of more culturally-sensitive services has previously been found to be one of their distinguishing features.

Strategies

Refugee housing strategies have only been developed by a very few housing organisations. The researcher argues that they can be a very useful complement to other local strategies (such as for homelessness or black and multi-ethnic housing needs), particularly in areas with a growing population of new migrants and unrecognised needs for support services. The researcher recommends an approach to developing such strategies and explain how they should relate to other strategic instruments. There is particular concern (in England) that only some of the regional housing strategies (which the Government now requires) properly reflect the needs of new migrant groups. One reason for this is lack of local information or inappropriate categories in the 2001 census – the researcher suggests ways of filling these gaps.

About the project

The guide is partly based on published sources such as research reports or detailed good practice guidance on particular services for new migrants (such as interpreter services). Other advice has come from discussions with practitioners who are already providing services and from researchers who have examined these issues in more detail than has been possible in the guide. Structured or individual discussions also took place with refugees and refugee organisations.

Almost 50 practical examples have been included to show how housing and other organisations have responded to the needs of new migrants in different parts of the UK.

Although the guide does not identify the practical examples as ‘good practice’, because of the limited validation that was possible, it *does* recommend or set out ‘good practice’ in a broader sense in the main body of the text. These ‘good practice’ points are derived either from the established literature on the subject or by reference to other guidance (such as on local housing strategies) which can be applied to the subject of asylum seekers and refugees.

For further information

The full report, **Housing and support services for asylum seekers and refugees: A good practice guide** by John Perry, is published for the Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (ISBN 1 903208 98 X, price £25.00). It is available from the Chartered Institute of Housing, Octavia House, Westwood Way, Coventry CV4 8JP, Tel: 024 7685 1752/64, Fax: 024 7642 2022, email: pubs@cih.org. (Please add £1.50 p&p.) The author John Perry is CIH Policy Adviser (john.perry@cih.org).

You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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