



# briefing no 20

## London Enriched: a Draft Refugee Integration strategy

August 2007

# policy briefing

### INTRODUCTION

By February 2008, the Mayor of London intends to produce a four year Refugee Integration Strategy for the city. It will be a voluntary plan for action by various London bodies and sectors. In July 2007 a set of three documents was published for consultation. These are London Enriched: The Mayor's Draft Strategy for Refugee Integration in London; a reference document giving supporting evidence for the strategy, and a summary. The deadline for responding is 29 October 2007. Whilst the lead role will be for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations from refugee and asylum seeker (RAS) communities, it is also important that everyone engage and so this briefing outlines some of the key issues for London's broader VCS.

### BACKGROUND

Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London set up a Board for Refugee Integration in London (BRIL). Alongside the statutory sector partners the VCS membership includes Dinah Cox as the elected representative of Third Sector Alliance, Donna Covey of the Refugee Council and four delegates from the Mayor's Refugee Advisory Panel.

The Mayor sees a move towards equality of opportunity as the way to integrate refugees, rather than an attempt to get conformity. It is '...about respect for diversity, enabling refugees to be themselves in freedom under the law.' (p12). He defines it as a two way process, that will continue after refugees have become settled and one that recognises the diversity within refugee communities, including in terms of gender, age and sexual orientation. In London Enriched, the role for the VCS, in delivering some of this work is explicit.

Although the strategy was written with refugees in mind, central Government has now agreed the Mayor should also include asylum seekers. So their needs and aspirations will need considering in consultation responses. I will use the term RAS in this document where appropriate. It is important to understand that people are given different entitlements depending on the status they are granted.

Asylum seekers have access to very limited public funds and basic provision of healthcare and education. Refugee people with discretionary leave have some access to public funds, housing, health and welfare services, education and employment. With refugee status or humanitarian protection people have the same entitlements with the addition of the right to family reunion. Refugees may have to wait for up to six years to be granted permission to settle permanently.

As no official data is collected on RAS, the only figures available for London's population are guesses. The consultation papers give a figure of 0.5 million people, which forms 6 – 7% of the city's population. About half are thought to have refugee status. As with other migrants, more are young adults than in London's settled communities. The number of people granted safety in the United Kingdom is controlled to a degree by central Government, but I feel it is important to remember that the number of people in need of safety, and their countries of origin are ever changing as it reflects the level of war, oppression and now also climate change around the world.

There are many reasons why this strategy is crucial. From a VCS, especially RAS sector perspective the need to provide support to, and equality of opportunity for, people forced to leave their original homes due to violence and persecution is probably most important. London with its history of offering sanctuary can be a place where individuals and communities start to overcome their pain and loss and enrich London's culture. For example, settled communities can learn from new arrivals and therefore increase not only their knowledge but their ability to learn. If the needs of the most excluded such as RAS's are met, then the improvements made will benefit other communities at risk of exclusion who often live in the same areas. This in turn benefits everyone by providing a more cohesive, stable and safer society. There is also the fact that London's economic prosperity depends on migration.

London Enriched states that refugees face many barriers in achieving equality in London. There are for instance the issues of language; limited educational opportunities before arrival; and mental and physical ill health related to persecution, flight and status in London. Then there are difficulties in dealing with the asylum regime; the problems of having an initial five-year limit on leave to remain and lack of information and guidance on entitlements. The hostility and discrimination that refugees face from some parts of the media and as victims of hate crime is also horrendous. These have an impact on all areas of a RAS person's life and should be borne in mind when reading this briefing and if responding to the consultation. As should the fact that no new money is available to carry out work, so bending mainstream funds will be necessary.

After initial consultation and having looked at the barriers with BRIL it was decided London Enriched should address six inter-related initial key themes or areas and three cross-cutting themes. These are addressed below. It is suggested further areas will need to be explored in future and these will include culture, advice services, the media and the environment.

## **CROSS CUTTING THEMES**

The first of the cross cutting themes is **data collection and monitoring**. As mentioned earlier there is little official data available. I could see the VCS having a role in helping gather data from the diverse range of RAS people, in particular those who have a natural mistrust of authority following their treatment in their countries of origin and within the asylum system in the UK or face multiple inequalities as detailed below.

The second theme is **community cohesion**. The Mayor defines this as 'celebrating diversity, promoting equality and tackling disadvantage and exclusion. It involves actively encouraging interaction between communities and building up the capacity of all communities to take part in public life.' (p17). This I would suggest is central to all the work of the VCS.

The final theme is **equalities**. As the strategy notes there is diversity within RAS communities. People may face discrimination due to their race or gender for example as well as their status as a refugee. VCS equalities groups could assist in tackling this multiple discrimination and also supporting individuals who may face discrimination or exclusion within their own RAS communities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

## **HOUSING**

The first theme or area covered is housing. As the draft strategy says, for many refugees it is their top priority. A stable home improves chances in other areas such as gaining employment, staying healthy and getting an education. Asylum seekers have no right to a home. Barriers to achieving decent housing for refugees include lack of information and understanding both for RASs and providers. I believe there is a role for VCS organisations working in advice and information, as well as around housing, in providing this. The strategy notes that some groups face further inequality in provision: for instance disabled refugees, including those with mental health issues, who have needs similar to other Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups that are not being addressed.

The proposals for action in housing that are particularly pertinent to the VCS include looking for support for a pilot of a model housing settlement the VCS has been engaged in developing; setting up a co-ordinating group on refugee housing including VCS groups; encouraging engagement of the RAS VCS in strategic local government initiatives such as on Local Area Agreements; and linking statutory and VCS organisations (including equalities bodies from the RAS but also women's disabled and elders sector) to provide better services.

## **EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING AND ENTERPRISE**

The strategy suggests that although the official data is weak, refugees have exceptionally low employment rates; employment in posts they are overqualified for, for some and lack of qualifications for others. With leave to remain at a maximum of five years for many refugees some employers are unwilling to employ them and they may feel discouraged from taking on training, employment or setting up businesses. It is believed that some, especially

asylum seekers, living in poverty, are more likely to be attracted to the informal employment sector with its low pay and poor working conditions. Women have some help from initiatives such as the Refugee Women's Association but there is little support for refugees facing multiple disadvantages.

The proposals around employment training and enterprise (ETE) that are relevant to the VCS again include the provision of information and expertise to RAS people and the statutory sector; working at a sub-regional level (as the councils for voluntary service in London do); offering work to refugee employees and running ETE programmes. It is suggested a VCS group is set up to look at the issues and a pilot is also proposed that would test pathways for refugees from irregular employment into the mainstream economy.

## **HEALTH**

In regard to health, the draft strategy explains that RAS have some of the worse access to health-related services and are therefore at high risk of poor health outcomes. For those with long term physical and mental health issues experience of torture and a difficult flight may be of particular significance, as can be poverty, a lack of decent housing and employment. The high mobility of RAS can lead to real challenges in treating illnesses such as TB, HIV and AIDS. Culturally sensitive services with language support need to be made available, taking into account specific issues for women, older, disabled and LGBT refugees, such as female genital mutilation and increased isolation.

Many of the issues outlined will be addressed in the forthcoming Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy. This will be monitored by the London Health Commission, which has VCS representation. However, London Enriched states that the VCS should be made full use of in health service provision. Again, there is a role in providing information and expertise to individuals and the statutory sector, but also in promoting well-being for instance through the provision of cultural events and initiatives to reduce isolation.

## **COMMUNITY SAFETY**

The draft strategy notes that the situation for RAS in regard to community safety is most similar to that of settled BAME communities. There are also challenges in relation to a fear of the UK criminal justice system based on the oppressive experiences from countries of origin; worry regarding their status and police links to immigration control; and hate crime against them aggravated by negative media portrayals. Refugee women facing domestic violence often only have recourse to public funds through their abuser. There is no evidence that RASs engage in more crime than other communities but poverty, low self esteem and isolation are known to lead to criminal behaviour.

There is the role for the VCS in bringing communities together, which leads to improved cohesion and community safety. As part of local, crime and disorder partnerships they can make sure RAS needs are included and share best practice. They can also act as a broker between police and RAS people including setting up centres for third party reporting of crime so individual don't have to contact the police directly. The strategy also suggests we work together

with statutory sector regarding use of public space for all; develop methods for recording and tackling hate crime; and provide perpetrators with education on domestic violence. Work with the London Resettlement Board, which has VCS representation, could help in taking into account refugee offenders.

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

This chapter is different as it looks at a particular group rather than an issue. It covers children and young adults up to the age of 24, who came to London alone or with their families. Many of the challenges are touched on in earlier sections of London Enriched but there are specific concerns. For instance, lack of a stable home can mean frequent changes of schools and nowhere to do homework. Restrictions on entitlements finance and leave to remain can prevent people taking on further and higher education. Interpreting for older members of the family can be difficult, especially on medical issues, or can give children power over adults and lead to tensions. These intergenerational tensions may also surface in a clash between the homeland culture and that of the UK when the latter is chosen over parent's preference for the former. RAS children and young people may face increased social isolation and bullying.

Many of the potential solutions mentioned earlier will need to include an element of looking at the needs of children and young people. More specifically, the VCS could work to ensure refugee issues are included in the Every Child Matters framework in London; enable young refugee voices (from all equalities groups) to be heard in policy debates at a local, regional and national level; support young mothers in parenting; and highlight and tackle exploitation and trafficking. Third Sector Alliance is mentioned explicitly on page 57 in regard to the development of mentoring and volunteering schemes.

## **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND FUNDING (INCLUDING REFUGEE PARTICIPATION AND VOICE)**

Unlike the other chapters the section on refugee community development has a list of options rather than proposals for action, as there is more contention on what the next steps should be. There is a description of the type of organisations involved and the role they play with community development described as 'the process by which these communities build up the relationships, resources and confidence they need to play their full part in collective action to secure equality of opportunity for the city's refugees.' (p 59).

A key challenge is that the RAS VCS lacks secure funding on the right terms to deliver outcomes. The draft strategy also mentions remoteness of some funders; the fragmentation of the RAS sector; the lack of match funding for EU money and the inability of smaller groups to engage with procurement and commissioning. The need for a strong RAS voice is made clear as when there is so little official information, new communities arriving as new crises occur in the world, and changes in barriers, only those who have experience can describe the issues accurately.

It is recommended that the RAS VCS needs to link up to existing VCS structures and build on them. I would turn this round perhaps and say we in the

wider VCS, including equalities groups, need to reach out to RAS groups, support their development and work in partnership where appropriate. RAS sub-regional hubs are again mentioned as a potential structure to support the sector, as are local fora; co-ordination of the roles of the RAS London-wide infrastructure bodies; establishment of a small grants programme; and a more stable approach to EU match funding. Training on participation in governance and the need for the principles of anti-discrimination and human rights to be acted on within RAS groups are also seen as key areas where VCS groups, especially those already involved in equalities could offer support and share best practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

I believe the Mayor is right in his decision to develop a RAS strategy for London. The lead must be from within the RAS VCS with all voices such as women and young people included. However, the rest of the VCS has a role to play, for example many BAME organisations have a history of working alongside RAS groups, and this should be recognised and developed. I would encourage everyone to feed into this consultation and offer their knowledge, experience and solutions. Whether your ideas are around service delivery; providing information and developing the understanding of the statutory sector; or supporting the voice role of RAS organisations there is much the VCS has to offer.

## RESPONSE

Third Sector Alliance will be submitting a response coordinated with LVSC and ROTA. Dinah Cox will be attending the Third Sector Alliance steering group meeting on 26 September 2007 to facilitate discussions. If you are not a steering group member but would like to take part in this discussion contact [corinne@lvsc.org.uk](mailto:corinne@lvsc.org.uk). Alternatively, you can send written comments, to be included in the Third Sector Alliance response, to [dinah@rota.org.uk](mailto:dinah@rota.org.uk) by 15 October 2007.

The full BRIL consultation documents are available at:

<http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/equalities/immigration/index.jsp>

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