

Unit 8

How do we communicate effectively?

Being confident and clear when working with RCOs

What will this unit help you do and why?

What?

This unit will help you:

- communicate more effectively with refugee community organisations (RCOs)
- gain confidence in approaching RCOs.

Why?

- If you don't communicate effectively with RCOs, they won't listen to you or talk to you.
- If you are not confident about communicating with RCOs, you may not feel able to reach out to them.

Example

'We didn't want to go with a begging bowl. All we wanted was some help in getting £500, but in the end we decided that dealing with the bureaucracy involved was just too much bother so we did it ourselves.'

Key issues

Linking communication and publicity work

This unit looks at what you need to know about communicating effectively with refugees. Many of the issues in this unit have already been mentioned (in particular see Unit 5 *How do we build a relationship?*), but it is useful to draw all the issues together for those developing communication and publicity work in your local infrastructure organisation (LIO).

The main issues to consider are very similar to those on working with any group, particularly groups where the main language is not English. They are:

- cultural sensitivity
- dealing well with interpreting and translation
- helping organisations to communicate effectively, and
- making sure that the way that you communicate does not exclude certain groups.

Cultural sensitivity

People working in the voluntary sector generally accept that people have different ways of living their lives and that mutual respect is a fundamental basis for co-existence and working together.

When working with RCOs, don't expect to know exactly what to do in every situation. Being overly concerned about being appropriately sensitive can cause apprehension. Don't let this become a barrier. Instead, we suggest that you are honest about your limits and expectations. This approach will put you on the same footing as the refugees you are dealing with: you can ask them about things you don't know about, and they can ask about

the 'unwritten rules' that may cause them problems in their interactions with UK society.

Culture raises some complex issues. People's views may be determined by many factors, including personal experience and beliefs (religious or otherwise). People with the same background often have very different views on cultural mores and what is, or is not, acceptable. Discussing issues and differing viewpoints enables you to establish similarities and differences.

Languages, and interpreting and translation

Even within quite a small refugee community there may be four or five languages, and possibly also a lingua franca (a common language used in a country that has several linguistic traditions). Within communities there will often also be wide variations in language use.

Example

English is the official language in Liberia, but most people also use one of over 25 mother tongues spoken in the country. Some of those who have arrived in the UK speak, read and write standard English, but about half the Liberian population speak 'Liberian English' which is derived from American Black English. Many Liberians may be unable to read or write in Liberian English and/or their mother tongue.

The website www.ethnologue.com provides a comprehensive list of languages in use in each country. This, coupled with local information about which of these

'I'm nervous of causing offence – I know they have been through a lot already, and I don't want to be the straw that breaks the camel's back by breaking some taboo or other.'

CVS worker

'We've got a number of Iraqis in our area. I can't imagine what they have been through in recent times... You see the news, but it's impossible to put yourself in their shoes. Sometimes I feel like I'm treading on eggshells. I don't want to say anything which may upset them.'

CVS worker

languages are spoken by the people who have arrived in your area, will enable you to identify the key languages used by refugees in your area.

Once you know which languages are used, it is worth considering:

- the degree of literacy in those languages
- what sort of people will be excluded if material is not translated or interpreted, or if communication is in writing rather than verbal.

For example, in many communities, women may have lower literacy levels than men.

Age differences may also be important: older people may not have had access to schooling, or young people may have missed out on education because of war.

All organisations – including LIOs and RCOs – need to take decisions about how they communicate with users, including deciding which language (or languages) they will use. Most LIOs in the UK use English to communicate with RCOs and refugees, and in practice most organisations will not have the resources to produce materials that have been translated into different languages.

The government has recently produced guidance to local authorities in England about translating materials. This states that:

'a. There is no legal reason for all materials to be translated. The Race Relations Act simply says that all parts of the community should have access to services, and although that might involve translation, it does not always have to. The Human Rights Act only requires translation if someone is arrested or charged with a criminal offence.

b. Translation can never be a substitute for learning English. Whatever the considerations when translating printed materials, the whole issue needs to be seen in the context of a wider drive to improve English skills in all communities. And that means a greater focus on ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] and English language provision.

c. Translation should be reduced except where it builds integration and cohesion. Opinion is divided as to whether translation is a barrier to integration, or whether it is a stepping stone to better language skills. Local authorities will judge what is best – but our working assumption is that heading for the translators should not be an automatic first step in all cases.

d. Translation should be considered in the context of communications to all communities....It is important to keep communications channels open between community groups living in the same area. Local partners should therefore consider ways to use translated materials to underline their even-handed approach to all communities.'

For LIOs, the issues are rather different. While you may have no statutory obligations, the key priority will often be to ensure that services are accessible, especially to more excluded groups. Language may be a barrier to fully achieving this.

Professional interpreters or trained bilingual staff from specialist refugee infrastructure organisations are the ideal solution, but these may not be available or the cost may be prohibitive. As an alternative, you may need to find people from the refugee community who are willing to interpret

for some meetings. This brings its own challenges (and also rewards if it is done as part of expanding a pool of community volunteers). Below are some of the challenges to consider.

- Interpreting requires specialist skills and a high degree of linguistic competence. Apart from judging their competence in English, you will not be able to assess community interpreters. A good solution is to ask for two or more people to take turns at interpreting. They can then help each other and act as quality control for each other. Having more than one interpreter has other advantages too. Interpreting can be very tiring, so having a second interpreter available reduces the pressure. It also means that the interpreters themselves can participate more in the meetings. (This is not good practice for professional interpreters, but community interpreters will usually want to take part.)
- Is the interpreter ‘screening’ what is said? Again, having more than one interpreter will usually sort this out. Establishing ground rules with the interpreters will also help. Consult some of the resources on community interpretation for suggestions on how to do this. (See *Further resources*, on page 59.)
- How can we ensure that there is a plan to move on from interpreting to direct communication, which in turn will provide an incentive to community leaders to learn more English?

Children are often the best speakers of English in a family and are sometimes used as interpreters, especially where there is inadequate provision. However, this is not recommended practice for two reasons: firstly, because children may find themselves in all sorts of inappropriate situations, and secondly, the interpreting itself may be influenced by the child’s own needs or level of understanding.

Example

The newsletter of one CVS usually includes items of great interest to refugees and their organisations, such as news of the ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] rule changes and the campaigns around them. This ensures that refugee organisations not only read the newsletter, but also feel included and feel that they get value from their membership. When CVS workers accompany them to meetings, or help them write petitions, their feeling of solidarity and support is strengthened.

Helping RCOs to communicate effectively and facilitating their inclusion

In order for RCOs to play a role in the wider community, they will also need to communicate, often in public forums. To develop in this area they will need support, and LIOs are in a good position to offer this.

A good approach is to offer coaching in different areas, such as speaking at meetings, writing for a newsletter, taking minutes or writing annual reports – all of which may help them participate in wider meetings and contribute towards building their confidence. These coaching sessions can be used to make sure that concepts are properly translated and the ‘unwritten rules’ about meetings are understood, as well as offering a one-to-one situation in which RCO staff and volunteers can ask questions, test ideas and even role-play situations that may cause them difficulty. One CVS interviewed in the course of the research for this guide offered coaching sessions like those described above, but structured in the format of English conversation lessons.

Offering coaching sessions to RCOs has benefits for LIO staff. When planning the sessions, you will need to think carefully

about how to present material to RCO workers, and this will help develop your skills in communicating with other RCOs too. Also, the sessions provide opportunities for LIO staff to learn more about RCOs and RCO workers. Often the best approach is to hold a simple pre-meeting, where LIO staff and RCOs can discuss what they want out of the meeting and how to get it.

Learning from RCOs

Refugees are likely to arrive with all sorts of knowledge that may be of interest to others. LIOs may be able to provide opportunities for this to contribute to local cohesion and understanding, as well as the LIOs benefiting from opportunities to learn themselves. Seminars or less formal meetings on areas of interest could be offered to staff working in the LIO, other voluntary organisations in the area, public sector staff or indeed anyone else who is interested.

If you are lucky enough to have people in refugee communities with relevant experience, you could also organise discussions to compare how charities (or non-governmental organisations in an international context) organise in different countries. Other interesting discussions can be held on social issues such as the structure and concerns of local government, regeneration, inclusion or education.

Communications policy

When developing a general communications policy, LIOs need to ensure that the policy works across cultures and languages. It is recommended that LIOs include and consider:

- the languages in which you routinely produce core information and the reasons why those languages are used
- the way in which you review which languages you use
- your policy in relation to interpreting and translation, and payment for it (or payment of volunteer expenses for it)

- the ways in which you make sure your services are accessible to people with lower levels of literacy.

The communications policy needs to be regularly reviewed. Communities change, new communities arrive, and refugees themselves may change their views and needs.

How to address cultural differences and inclusivity

There are some core cultural issues which you may need to seek agreement on when you work with RCOs. These are fundamental issues which cannot be ignored. Examples of these issues include the role and involvement of women, and attitudes towards children and child protection.

The role and involvement of women

Some cultures separate the genders, either formally or informally. Looking beyond this to the roles that women are playing in the community, and ensuring that 'being separate' does not mean being excluded, can require clear communication and agreement. If women are not involved in the organisations you are working with, you need to ask why, and to find ways to secure that involvement. This may mean organising separate meetings with women, or raising issues that women may be particularly interested in – for example, their own or their children's health, or access to education.

Asking about the different experiences of women is a good way to open up the issue of their participation and to ask about their inclusion in community organisations. Exchanging ideas about how this has changed in the UK over the last few decades, and how it may have changed in other countries and why, is a sensitive way of raising the issue. How funders and potential partners will view an organisation that cannot show evidence of the active involvement of particular groups such as women, the young, disabled people, or people from ethnic minorities can also be discussed. Equally, refugee communities may be able to provide new and interesting ways of encouraging participation and voice.

Attitudes towards children and child protection

This includes issues of child safety and protection. A good way to start this discussion is by explaining that most organisations that work with children need to have a child protection policy. Refugee

families may have come from situations where children work from an early age, and so may be surprised to find that there are rules (some informal, but some based in law) against leaving children alone or in the care of young siblings.

Tips for effective communication

- When working with new communities, allow enough time to communicate and check understanding on both sides.
- Remember that some people may be able to understand spoken or written English well, even though they have difficulty speaking or writing in English.
- In delivering training or discussing specialist subjects, don't assume that limited English means little understanding of the subject.
- Acknowledge that any level of competence in English represents a considerable linguistic achievement, and be aware that refugees are often multi-lingual in other languages as well.
- Develop a policy on interpreting and translating and payment for it (or payment of volunteer expenses for it); consult to ensure the policy is fair, publicise it, and stick to it.
- Make sure that LIO staff have access to appropriate guidelines on interpreting and translations, and training on how to work with interpreters and translators⁶.
- At your first contact with an RCO, have a checklist of things you might want to ask the person, such as:
 - What is your full name?
 - How does the naming system work? Which part of the name is your family name? Which part is the individual name?
 - Are you happy with being the contact person, or should it be someone else?
 - Are you happy to be asked questions about the best way to communicate with the community? Are there other people who can help with that as well?
 - What languages are in use in the community in this area? How many people in the community can read and write in these languages? Is that different for older people, or women, or any other people?
 - Are there people within the community with particular areas of knowledge, or experience, or interest – for example, people who have led NGOs, been in government, or run trade unions or faith communities?
 - What rules do you think should be observed in interactions with people from your community? Do these rules apply to women and men, and to older and younger people?

⁶ The Refugee Council delivers a training course on how to work with interpreters

Tips for effective communication (continued)

- Ask practical questions too:
 - Is it OK to shake hands?
 - Is it OK to be alone in the same room?
 - Is it OK to use family or personal names?
- Only use business language or jargon when it is absolutely essential. If you do use it, make sure that you explain the terminology.
- Discuss with RCOs the expected outcomes of any joint working (for example, on a consultation). This will help you to get a commitment from the RCO and reduce any drop-out.
- RCOs can feel overwhelmed by extensive consultation, particularly when they are contacted by a variety of different initiatives. One-to-one communication and informal contact can be helpful ways to identify RCO needs, whilst providing them with support to encourage more formal engagement.
- Ask as much as you tell. Make it an equal exchange of views and information.
- Be prepared to listen and learn.
- Find out what people's interests are and address them as a way of generating interest.
- Challenge issues of equality sensitively. For example, if delivering governance training to a culture that is 'male dominated' consider giving tips on how to involve women in the decisions taken by the board.