

Unit 5

How do we build a relationship?

Reaching out to RCOs and establishing mutual trust and confidence

What will this unit help you do and why?

What?

This unit will help you:

- identify some of the common reasons why refugee community organisations (RCOs) do not approach local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) and use their services
- think through how and why you should differentiate strategies for refugees from strategies for other BME groups
- consider the best ways to build relationships with RCOs in your area
- to be perceived as a welcoming and proactive organisation.

Why?

- Refugees may be more reluctant to ask for help than other small organisations that you have experience of working with.
- As an LIO, you need to reach out to all disadvantaged communities in your area, including refugees.
- Building a relationship with refugee communities requires more than offering services – it is also about demonstrating that you understand and are interested.

Example

‘Anybody can access our current outreach and capacity-building programme – our doors are open to all. Refugees get included in our general BME work and that seems to work.’

This was the view of the local CVS. However, an RCO in the same area working to deliver advice, education and lobbying work had never heard of the CVS and did not know that they could access any support at all: ‘We’ve just tried to do it ourselves.’

Key issues

‘We keep getting asked if we want X training or Y training ... All we know is that we are just getting on with it and that, on a day-to-day basis, half the people I am working with are destitute. I don’t know what kind of training I want – I need funding, I know, but I haven’t got time to help [the LIO] think through what they should be doing for me and my community.’

Worker at an RCO working mainly with destitute asylum-seekers

Communication – common concerns

Refugees may be reluctant to approach agencies for support, particularly if they regard the agency as an official organisation. Communication failures can occur and RCOs may misunderstand the nature of their LIO if the LIO does not proactively reach out and clearly communicate to refugee communities in its area, in order to overcome any possible suspicion or perceived officialdom. (For example, one RCO told us they thought the local CVS was part of the Council.) LIOs that are often under-resourced and over-stretched may feel that they are open and accessible and that no specific outreach work is required to target RCO engagement. While this will work to some extent, it can also result in some RCOs in the area being unaware of the services and support available.

LIO workers will be aware that refugees have often been through relatively recent experiences of flight, trauma and survival. Workers may not know how to acknowledge this.

The key to working with RCOs is to ensure that this does not become a barrier, but instead offers an opportunity to learn and develop mutual understanding.

Languages, interpreting and translation

Language is an obvious barrier to communication, particularly for newer arrivals. There are usually some individuals who can interpret or translate, but be aware that in some cases impartiality may be required. In working with new groups who are still learning English, an interpreter or translator may be needed, but some

CVS have come up with inventive ways of avoiding the cost of this, such as creating a pool of volunteer ‘community interpreters’, who get support from the LIO and who can use the experience on their CV. At one CVS we interviewed, RCOs offer voluntary translation work in return for use of IT facilities and support in creating a CV. (See Unit 8 for more on languages, interpreting and translation.)

How can LIOs effectively promote their services to RCOs?

Find out more about the main priorities of the RCOs

If RCOs are to be successfully engaged, specific and targeted initiatives need to be planned to consider how RCOs operate. LIOs need to find out what are the main priorities of the RCO (see Unit 4 for more on this), because RCOs will not respond unless they can see a reason for doing so.

Explain to RCOs how they can benefit from LIO support

When promoting the services available from your LIO, highlight what the concrete benefits will be for the RCO. Like other small voluntary and community organisations RCOs are often unable to identify the type of help and support that they need. Instead they tend to focus on the needs of their community, and may not appreciate that the support available could help them to do this more effectively. (See page 48 for more information on this issue.)

Example

'There are highly visible refugee communities around here, but very few of them have organisations with any substantial funding at all. Part of the reason for this I think is that people just don't come forward for funding. Maybe they mistrust the system, or maybe they are just used to getting on without. They contact the CVS when they reach some kind of physical limit to what they are doing – maybe they've been running a community transport service but have run out of spaces in their car for instance.'

You may also need to explain terms and concepts such as 'constitution' and 'governance' in detail. We explain more about this in Unit 7 (see page 48).

Information provided, either verbally or in written form, needs to take account of the fact that refugees may often need to have the question 'Why?' answered before the question 'What?' For example, setting up a training course around good governance may not attract any refugees if the importance of governance has not been explained to them in the first place – that a particular form of governance is the defining characteristic of the voluntary sector, that it is the key method by which organisations demonstrate accountability, and that without it virtually no funders will consider giving them funding.

[The CVS] needs to be clear with us – no false hopes. We have many false hopes, like the amnesty [for rejected asylum-seekers]. People don't know where they are in terms of local support – everyone needs to be straight with us and help us.'

RCO worker

Explain the context of the voluntary sector in the UK

In order for refugees to understand the support available from LIOs, they first need to know about the context of the voluntary sector in general in the UK. Consider questions such as:

- What is the UK voluntary sector?
- What are its values and history, and who does it include?
- Why does a community organisation need to demonstrate that there is a need for its services?
- What is governance and why is there such an emphasis on it?
- Why do you need to prove a need when it may seem obvious to you that there is one?
- How does the UK voluntary sector compare to that of the country of origin of the refugees?
- Once you have identified similarities and differences, are there any implications for building a relationship with the RCO?

Acknowledge the importance of RCOs

To further encourage engagement and understanding, try to identify ways to acknowledge the importance your organisation places on RCOs and on the issues that are important to them. One CVS we spoke with had put out a statement to the effect that refugees and their organisations belong within the voluntary and community sector, and are viewed by the CVS as essential to the regeneration of their area. It's a small but important step to making RCOs feel included and valued. Other CVS include, in their newsletters, issues of relevance to refugees – for example, the recent cuts in ESOL teaching. Another publicised the progress of the *Still Human, Still Here* campaign on destitution among asylum-seekers. It all goes towards demonstrating commitment.

Be straightforward with RCOs

Be straight with RCOs about what you can and can't do.

‘We are all human, and not exempt from at least wariness of the new and unknown.’

CVS worker

Gaining confidence in communicating with RCOs

Our research shows that LIO workers are aware that refugees may have experienced a great deal of trauma, and the workers can feel nervous or uncertain about how to engage with RCOs to ensure that they do not cause offence.

Although it is right to be concerned about being appropriate and sensitive, the recommended approach is to acknowledge honestly those areas you may not understand or may not have adequate information on – such as cultural, historical or political issues.

Building confidence among LIO workers is key, and can often be achieved through small things. With some groups, particularly those new to the UK and still learning English, LIO workers who learn greetings in relevant languages may break down barriers and enable them to show they are interested and care (but be aware that some people may find this patronising). For example, one CVS learns a greeting a week at its staff meeting.

Methods of communication

When considering your method of communication, be vigilant about getting in touch and staying in touch. Linguistic and cultural barriers may be of particular significance to refugees. Email and automated telephone answering systems may impede communication, and questionnaires are unlikely to be returned unless it is very clear how they are relevant.

Examples

‘We thought that we would like to improve our capacity-building services, so I sent a questionnaire round to all the refugee groups we knew and then followed it up with a phone call... We offered them a range of training and support but they really weren’t interested’

‘We had a big consultation meeting on ‘Stronger, Prosperous Communities’. We invited loads of people, but out of nearly 100 participants only two were from refugee groups. I don’t think they are that interested in being seen as part of the voluntary sector.’

Both of these examples highlight how important the mode of communication is when engaging with RCOs. (See Unit 8 for more information and tips on effective communication.)

Getting RCOs through the door and building trust

Many small organisations may lack the confidence to directly access support, and an RCO may be very easily put off engaging with LIOs. Concentrating on building trust with the RCOs will give them confidence.

Show your interest and commitment

Attending meetings and gatherings which demonstrate your interest in and commitment to refugee issues is worth the time investment. (See Unit 3 for tips on how to locate refugees in your area, and Unit 4 for more information on RCOs.)

Offer use of a meeting room, IT facilities, or desk space

Paying particular attention to refugee forums can reap real benefits. Bringing a refugee forum in-house has yielded excellent results for some CVS.

Providing use of a meeting room, IT facilities or desk space for RCOs (hot-desking) is another good way of getting people through the door and building relationships. This approach will help you to develop a closer relationship which benefits both the LIO and the forum, with both sides learning much about the best ways of developing RCOs in the area.

Building relationships with key individuals

Building a relationship with key individuals who are trusted by a variety of organisations can prove one of the most effective ways of promoting understanding and trust. For example, the key individual may be a refugee champion, probably someone from an RCO but with a vision of promoting RCOs and their work in an area. Such an individual may act as an intermediary, bringing in other groups which may otherwise be unknown to the LIO.

Organising meetings of RCOs

Organising meetings of RCOs to keep up to date with what their issues are is another good way to demonstrate your commitment. You can also use it as an opportunity to acknowledge the contribution that RCOs make. Individuals will come together to respond to a need, often a refugee-specific one, such as supplementary schools teaching, women's health issues, issues around children and integrating them into communities, language support, or advice and guidance on immigration. Setting up a project in one of these areas, led by refugees themselves, can be a good way to get to know people and gain trust.

Offer jobsearch facilities⁵

Employment is often another major issue for refugees, so offering jobsearch facilities within your CVS, or providing training for community entrepreneurs, can be good ways to encourage RCOs to come to you.

Breaking down barriers

Example

A CVS organised for a local volunteer ESOL teacher to give conversation lessons for a six-week trial period in its office. They advertised this widely within the local migrant communities. Importantly, the lessons were billed as a chance to improve conversational English, but they also covered a variety of topics of relevance to RCOs, such as organising groups and making funding applications. 'People came because they wanted to improve their English, but once they had walked through the door they could see that we were friendly and accessible, and barriers were broken down.'

Set up small-scale projects

Setting up small-scale projects with local RCOs is a good way to build relationships. For example, an RCO and the LIO sharing a worker who conducts research, or who oversees a volunteer placement scheme, can be a good way to build bridges and learn about each other.

Example

One CVS found that a local group of refugee women were interested in developing a network on women's health issues. The LIO gave them desk space and a small budget for travel and expenses, and contracted them to do a small feasibility study and develop a plan.

'We need to get clear about who does what with who and we need to tell people what information they need, and learn about their plans... People keep going to meetings and nothing happens. We need to know what is happening and who will do it...'

Worker at a specialist infrastructure organisation working with RCOs

⁵ See Unit 2 for more information on the right to work

‘We need to raise money to get people into school. We need a dialogue. We need to know where we can operate. People in this community are hiding people but then they will surface. If we offered education or work, people would reappear. Then people would see that [LIOs] work in their interest.’

RCO worker

Respond to all contacts from RCOs

If an RCO approaches you, it is essential that you respond even if you are unable to help with the request. For example, RCOs may approach LIOs for funding, but few LIOs will be able to give direct financial support. In this situation, it is important where possible to signpost to other possible sources of support and use the request as a means of engaging with the RCO. If there is nowhere to signpost the RCO to, acknowledging the contact is an important step in ensuring that the RCOs are not put off contacting the LIO again to access other types of support that are available.

Example

One unconstituted group had organised trips for children in the community, to get them out of the inner city environment in which they were living, which was pretty much all they knew of the UK. ‘They [the RCO] didn’t ask us [the local CVS] for anything until they ran out of places in their car, and then it was only for a small contribution towards petrol.’

Working with existing RCOs

Working with existing RCOs can be a good way to build capacity and to help with the formation of new RCOs.

Example

One RCO was initially set up in the 1990s by people who had arrived as students or with previous refugee arrivals. A CVS had helped them by giving them advice about a constitution and other issues. Now long established, when a new and different community arrived in the area, the RCO was able to help them set up their own organisation and to devise their constitution. Members of the RCO have also chaired the local specialist refugee agency and the regional refugee forum.

Tips for building relationships with RCOs

- Identify key individuals. Bring them in-house, if possible, to act as a bridge to expand contacts between your LIO and the refugee communities in your area.
- Premises for meetings and work are often at a premium for RCOs, so providing RCOs with the use of work stations or a meeting room can help to establish a relationship.
- Establish a project which offers a service of relevance to refugees – for example, around ESOL or employment.
- Bring RCOs together to consider projects and issues of relevance to them. Set up issue-based meetings – for example, on supplementary schools provision, childcare or women’s health – and invite representatives of a handful of RCOs to attend.
- Provide information on the UK voluntary sector, and how RCOs form a part of this. This may be a critical step in getting them to feel involved and valued.

Tips for building relationships with RCOs (continued)

- When explaining concepts such as ‘governance’, remember to explain why they are important as well as what they are.
- Explain how RCOs can benefit from LIO support.
- Keep in touch with RCOs. Even if they cannot use you now, keep inviting them. This is key, since RCOs are often reticent about initiating contact.
- Always try to respond to contacts, even if it is just to acknowledge them. If you leave a telephone message remember to speak slowly and clearly, spelling names and other key information. When an LIO is over-stretched, it is possible that some contacts may get overlooked, especially if the RCO is requesting support that is not available. However, a non-response can deter RCOs from contacting you for support later on.
- Offer RCOs incentives to get in contact with the LIO – financial if necessary or if possible – but also by providing support, IT facilities, or an offer to help with employment-related work such as jobsearch.
- Take time to acknowledge RCOs’ achievements. It helps to develop trust and make RCOs feel confident.
- Review your publicity to see if you can include more issues of relevance to refugees – for example, including information on ESOL classes in your newsletter.
- Attend meetings of the local refugee forum, if one exists. Invite local RCOs to attend the Community Empowerment Network (if they do not already attend), with support from you.
- Paying attention to small things that are meaningful for the refugee communities will be really appreciated. For example, when organising events, carefully consider the catering and provide foods that refugees are familiar with. This will help RCOs to feel welcome and shared meals can also be a real aid in solidifying relationships.
- Don’t be overly cautious of causing offence. If you don’t know something, ask. If you do think you have caused offence, apologise.
- Arrange your own small in-house cultural training events such as learning greetings in other languages. These can result in big gains in LIO worker confidence and relationship building.
- Find out about the issues that are important to refugees, and see if you can engage with these as an LIO. If they are already organising around campaigns, join in.
- Be straight with RCOs about what you can and can’t do.