

## Unit 6

# How do we build RCO issues into our work?

Making sure that your planning and operations benefit from a sharpened focus on refugee issues

### What will this unit help you do and why?

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#### What?

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This unit will:

- help you review work throughout your local infrastructure organisation (LIO) to ensure that refugee community organisation (RCO) issues are included at every possible opportunity
- help workers throughout the LIO, from chief executive to receptionist, understand the contribution they can make to furthering the refugee agenda in your area.

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#### Why?

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- Ensuring that all staff are aware of refugee issues enables your LIO to plan, fundraise and provide relevant information more effectively.
- LIOs take relevant issues to strategic and policy planning meetings. Having additional information on refugee issues will help LIOs develop this role.

#### Example

‘If we get a refugee group coming to us, we tend to refer them to the refugee forum.’

This may seem a logical way to proceed. However, this same CVS worker said that they did not know whether the forum was still going, or what the quality of its services was. Also, the forum had not been invited to participate in the ChangeUp consortium in the area although this would have been a useful way to develop joint working with them. Although there were many asylum-seekers and refugees in the area, the strategic work was perceived as having ‘no special slant needed for refugees – they are just part of the voluntary sector generally.’ When the CVS held an event for the voluntary sector, no RCOs came.

## Key issues

### Being creative

LIOs are experienced in doing joined-up thinking when considering how to reach out to small voluntary organisations and how to support them, refer them, identify their issues and invite their strategic participation. This kind of creative approach is also crucial if an LIO is to actively include the RCOs in their area in strategic and operational planning. Engaging with and demonstrating a commitment to understanding refugee issues, by using a varied approach to gain information and knowledge, will help to promote trust and engagement by RCOs. This is the best way to ensure that RCOs attend general strategic discussions and to allay any fears that they will not be listened to.

### Raising awareness

Raising awareness of refugees in the local area can bring benefits to both the LIO itself and to those in the wider area that the LIO works in. Core benefits include the following:

- Enhancing existing strategic and policy work can strengthen the voice of the LIO in their area.
- Fundraising work can be more informed and more effective as a result.
- LIO receptionists may be more confident if they feel they understand the communities in the area.
- The LIO's publicity and promotional work can reach a wider audience. Information such as newsletters and bulletins can include items relevant to

refugee communities, serving to raise awareness of key issues and possibly also increasing the pool of people interested in accessing these materials.

- Community and social inclusion work may benefit from forming relationships with all communities in the area, including refugees.

### Review capacity-building work

Your LIO can also benefit from reviewing its capacity-building work in the light of the specific needs of RCOs. (For more on this issue, see Unit 7 *Is a specialist approach needed?*) This unit highlights areas other than capacity building, and gives examples of how an LIO can seek to further review and integrate refugee issues throughout its operations.

### Involvement in local strategic initiatives

As an LIO you will be involved in a number of local strategic initiatives. While you may feel that there is already enough to do attending all of these meetings, it can be helpful to focus on the core questions to consider when representing your communities. For refugees, the key questions for your organisation to reflect on are:

- Do the existing initiatives and groupings include representation from refugee communities?
- How do refugee issues, as opposed to more general BME issues, get reflected at any of these forums?

‘We’ve invited RCOs along to various sessions we have had on procurement and commissioning, but not had much success. I think they are missing out in terms of getting partnership bids in.’

CVS worker

- If your local area is assessing the needs of disadvantaged communities, are refugees involved in the community research?
- Do you feel that the specific concerns of refugees in your area are clearly identified? Are there issues of race and social inclusion (for example, the hate crime agenda) which they could feed into more effectively?
- If there is a refugee forum in your area, is it actively representing refugee views at the appropriate events? Are you working well with your local refugee forum, or could you liaise more closely with it to ensure that issues are raised more effectively and consistently? This approach is particularly helpful for over-stretched organisations that may not have the time or resources to send a representative to all events.

### Identifying the strategic and policy forums relevant for refugee issues

Among the plethora of initiatives that an LIO has to keep track of, it can be particularly difficult to keep track of those that are most appropriate for refugees. In order to ensure that refugee issues are considered at every opportunity, it is suggested that you consider the following questions at your LIO:

- When new funding programmes for refugee work are announced, are they publicised to local groups?
- Are there any existing initiatives or forums that do not have RCO representation? If they don’t have representation, should they? If so, how could this be facilitated?
- If any local RCOs are not already engaged in policy or strategic forums, would it be helpful to have a brainstorming session with the RCOs to see which forums they could usefully be engaged with? What support would they need to participate?

- Are refugee issues being researched in your area? If they are, can you influence how these are conducted and, if refugees are not already involved in the work, can you get them involved?

If you find that RCOs are not participating in all the relevant strategic groupings, it may be helpful to consider ways to support the groups, while they build confidence. For example, offer to talk with them at a pre-meeting and at debriefings afterwards.

### Example

A CVS had met with a range of local RCOs and outlined what the Local Strategic Partnership was and how various strategic forums fed into it. As a result of this, several forums had been identified as relevant. However, in order to participate fully, further work was needed, including a briefing session on local government, public accountability and policy work within the UK. The Director of the CVS then accompanied the RCO representatives to their first meeting and debriefed afterwards on any difficulties or problems. Such strategic work may feel labour-intensive, but the rewards reaped in terms of getting refugees involved with local strategic work can be great.

### Involving RCOs in delivery partnerships

Now that local area agreements (LAAs) are becoming more established and starting to develop services, it is a good time to consider how far refugee groups are being encouraged to join and even lead partnerships for delivery. RCOs can provide a fresh perspective on issues that are important to them and, if they are involved in addressing these needs, the

RCOs themselves could form part of the solution to delivery. While the appropriate areas of engagement will vary, many RCOs do actively engage with youth issues (for example, with sports clubs, supplementary schools teaching, after-hours support and care, and anti-bullying initiatives) and their involvement could help projects to improve and build relationships across the voluntary and community sector.

Refugees may also have skills that they could bring to your board, and could directly feed into the governance of your LIO. Identifying individuals in your area whom you could approach to join your board is an interesting way of keeping refugee issues firmly on the agenda.

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### Accessing funding streams

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If your fundraising workers are aware of the new communities in your area and their needs, this can reap dividends when developing a programme of work and submitting suitable bids.

### Example

One CVS organises meetings of its fundraising and communication officers and the local refugee forum worker in order to brief them on new developments in the communities. 'It's an opportunity to question, and find out about real stories,' reported the forum worker. It makes the LIO workers feel involved, and more passionate, and opens up connections in their minds which to date have yielded more than £100,000 in successful funding bids. 'When the fundraising worker spots a new opportunity, now they come and find me and we see if RCOs can benefit from submitting a bid.'

### Tips for building RCO issues into your work

- Review your involvement in local strategic work (a useful exercise anyway) to see if there are forums where refugee issues should be better represented. If there is a large migrant population locally, check to make sure you are raising issues of relevance to them at relevant Local Strategic Partnership meetings – for example, within the employment and children and families strategy.
- Consider if RCOs are represented in your local Community Empowerment Network and ChangeUp forums. If there is a refugee forum, is it involved? If not, why not? Can you do anything to facilitate further engagement?
- Try to keep up to date with the refugee forum so that you are aware of what it is doing and how it is working.
- When considering strategic issues, try to find ways to make sure that RCOs are not overlooked.
- Consulting with RCOs is a useful way to get information about RCO needs and interests. However, make sure that consultation will have a real impact on RCO concerns, and be aware that RCOs can find extensive consultation overwhelming. (For more on this, see Unit 8 *How do we communicate effectively?*)
- Try and get all LIO staff and volunteers involved in communication with RCOs. There are many ways to do this, including organising briefings for LIO fundraising, communication and administrative staff, and receptionists.
- RCOs may need to be supported if they are to get more involved in local strategic groupings. Providing a briefing to RCOs on public accountability and the importance of influencing policy in the UK will help to set the context for these meetings.
- Offer RCOs pre-meetings and debriefings as practical ways to help them to engage more effectively. Ask what other practical support needs they have.