

Unit 1

Why work with refugee community organisations (RCOs)?

Introducing a rationale for working with RCOs

What will this unit help you do and why?

What?

This unit will help you:

- enhance your understanding of how working with refugee community organisations (RCOs) can bring benefits both to the RCOs and to your local infrastructure organisation (LIO).

Why?

- LIOs are often under-resourced and over-worked and have to cope with short-term funding issues. In spite of a strong desire within the organisation to adapt and expand services that engage with RCOs, some encouragement may be needed to highlight the benefits of doing so.
- Working with RCOs brings mutual benefits for RCOs and LIOs.

Example

‘We talked to a variety of RCOs in our area. Several of them are delivering out-of-hours support at supplementary schools. So we brought them in for a meeting and have organised a network to support them. It doesn’t take much effort – they use our office space for a meeting where they discuss what they need and we help them follow up on any issues of relevance. We’ve learnt a lot about what goes on in refugee communities.’

Key issues

Benefits to LIOs

LIOs who work successfully with RCOs can look forward to the following benefits.

They will:

- further their work to help disadvantaged communities
- expand into new areas of strategy and policy
- have more influence with statutory commissioners
- develop new partnerships
- learn more about diversity and mutual understanding
- advance the social cohesion and integration agendas.

Helping disadvantaged communities to engage in planning and strategy work

LIOs play crucial social and practical roles by helping the voluntary and community sector to reach individuals and communities which may be particularly disadvantaged. Both refugees and asylum-seekers fall into this category. (See Unit 2 for information on the difference between refugees and asylum-seekers.)

Working with RCOs can help to engage RCOs in planning and strategy work. There is evidence to show that RCOs can get left out of strategies to support the voluntary and community sector in general, or the black and minority ethnic (BME) sector in particular. The refugee sector is one of the least understood sectors within the voluntary and community sector. Recent work undertaken by Capacitybuilders¹

revealed that refugee and migrant communities are often under-represented in terms of involvement in planning and strategic work. For example, ChangeUp consortia do not always succeed in involving them, and local strategic partnerships may engage representatives from the BME community but may not always consider that newly-arrived communities have different needs.

Example

A local authority has reserved a place for RCOs at sub-committees taking forward the local area agreement. This commitment was nurtured by the CVS and the umbrella refugee organisation in the area in recognition of the fact that RCOs found it particularly difficult to get accepted into the mainstream of strategic and policy work. It guarantees that the voice of refugees in the area is reflected at all levels of strategic work, and also that the particular issues of newly arrived communities get an adequate strategic airing.

Some LIOs report that they find working with RCOs particularly challenging. Where the LIO's capacity is already stretched, this can mean that RCOs have a low profile in LIO support strategies. However, those LIOs which have made efforts to listen to RCOs report considerable benefits in terms of reviewing their ways of working, both concerning the practical support the LIO offers to all groups and the relevance and inclusivity of their strategic work.

¹ See *Priority Sub-sectors for Infrastructure Support*, published by LVSC (see page 59 for details)

Expansion into new areas of strategy and policy

Some LIOs report that as a result of working with refugees they have expanded into areas of strategy and policy which they had not previously worked in. The presence of refugees or indeed migrant communities in an area can provide the LIO with the opportunity to review its local strategy, and the strategy may well benefit as a result. Areas which commonly emerge during such a review include education (see the example below), employment, children and families strategies, crime and disorder, and health – particularly women’s health.

Example

‘We hadn’t done anything with the education department before then, but it was clear that we needed to get involved, and develop a way of supporting refugees to get involved, in the education strands of the local strategic partnership programme. The major issue for the refugees we were talking with was that their children were not gaining access to schools, or not being taught properly, or meeting opposition and mistrust, or not getting proper language teaching. So we started to help refugees develop initiatives and we took this issue to the strategic groups within the council. As a result we have developed a much greater understanding about education issues generally, which has benefited a number of our members who were working with children and young people, not just the refugee groups.’

Increased influence with statutory commissioners

Some LIOs have experienced increased influence with commissioners as a result of thinking through issues from a refugee perspective, opening out their strategic programme to include new areas of relevance to refugees (such as education), and supporting refugees themselves in representing their issues at local strategic level.

New partnerships

Innovative working with RCOs can lead to the formation of new partnerships, and an ability to find funding for delivering new strands of work.

Example

One CVS heard from refugee women in its area that they were very concerned about the behaviour of their children. They feared that they were ‘going off the rails’, and not being served well by the local education system. The CVS organised an event to bring together women from a range of children’s and parenting groups (not just refugees) to discuss the issues. The event was social, and held over tea and supper one evening. Parents – both refugee parents and others – were asked to voice their concerns. During the discussion and the tea breaks it emerged that the problems were in fact common to all parents in the area and to do with a range of problems including lack of facilities. Refugees felt reassured that they were not the only people experiencing these problems. Generally parents bonded over the problems of having wayward teenagers! Projects were formed, which included refugees – such as projects to create out-of-hours activities for young people. And new relationships were formed which went on to help in future work planning.

Example

A consultation on a local employment strategy brought together refugee groups to comment. The passion and commitment in the room was inspiring to all those who attended, and resulted in the formation of new, funded programmes to take forward refugee work in the area.

Learning about diversity and mutual understanding

Some LIOs report that working with RCOs can help them learn much about diversity and mutual understanding. Several workers reported that they had set up projects which brought RCOs ‘in-house’ to deliver services (such as providing a desk for the local refugee forum worker, who will have contacts with a range of RCOs). This approach facilitates interaction between LIOs and RCOs and can be a good way for LIOs gradually to learn about the concerns of RCOs, break down any barriers that may exist and inspire and reinvigorate staff teams.

Example

One CVS organised a small but successful project in which it shares, with a local RCO, a worker who promotes volunteering within refugee communities. This has proved instructive for both organisations: the CVS has learnt more about refugee issues through the presence of the worker, and the RCO feels more connected with the work of the CVS.

Advancing the social cohesion and integration agendas

LIOs promote community cohesion which benefits the wider community as part of their broader strategic agenda. By responding to the needs of all communities, including newly arrived communities, it is possible to achieve benefit for the whole of an LIO’s area. Doing this may help your organisation to engage more productively and knowledgeably with the government’s social cohesion and integration agenda.

Some LIOs report a need to ensure that RCOs are included at all levels when developing LIO services. They see this as part of their commitment to furthering a social cohesion agenda locally, and also to ensuring that RCOs are not excluded at a strategic level. The LIO may need to take active steps to promote the inclusion of RCOs within local ChangeUp, Compact or local area agreement working. (See also Unit 6 *How do we build RCO issues into our work?*)

Some LIOs develop social initiatives which promote joint working between a range of local groups to foster understanding between communities – both established and newly-arrived. Examples of such initiatives include sports events, Peace Weeks and cultural fairs. Involving RCOs in social or community-focused events can help tackle prejudice, which in turn can lead to social and cultural benefits for all. Such work can also help promote understanding between new and more established refugee or migrant communities. New projects can also be used as a way of building relationships between RCOs, as well as among the sector more widely. (See Unit 5 *How do we build a relationship?*)

Examples

One CVS organises a Peace Week in which all communities, including refugee communities, are invited to have stalls and participate.

Another CVS has set up a Kashmiri Cricket Club to play the local cricket team. (Kashmiris are a particularly numerous migrant community in the local area.)

Another CVS organised disaster relief events (following hurricanes, cyclones or earthquakes) where it was clear that the families or friends of refugee communities in their area were being affected by events in the country of origin.

Example

Many mainstream organisations support Refugee Week – an annual national programme of local events held in June. The week offers an excellent opportunity for LIOs to engage with RCOs².

While work concerning social cohesion principles may be a lower priority for LIOs than capacity building, LIOs may usefully encourage and organise more social and cultural events such as those described above to support the government's social cohesion policy.

Additional benefits

LIO workers at all levels can gain much from the process of engagement with RCOs. RCOs are often on the margins of the voluntary and community sector, possibly unconstituted, unfunded and without obvious access to any support. In spite of this they deliver much, often working with communities experiencing ongoing upheaval. For infrastructure workers, this is interesting learning which can also be inspiring.

Many refugees have a way of thinking creatively about how to get things done. RCOs can often contribute much in terms of an 'ideas swap shop' on 'how to get things done without asking for money'. You can find some of the projects they have developed in the *Ideas Annual* produced by Community Links called *Small Places, Close to Home: Community Projects Led by or Working with Refugees and Asylum Seekers* (see *Further resources*, on page 59).

Several CVS workers we spoke to during the research for this guide mentioned how eager RCOs are to engage and make progress. This level of motivation had proved inspiring to the CVS workers and also to workers in other community organisations who had met RCO workers, for example, at training courses. In trying to understand why this may be, one RCO worker suggested that many refugees can feel at least two things that established communities do not: relief and even gratitude at having been given refuge, and the ability to bring a fresh pair of eyes to look at strategies and systems from an outside perspective.

Some LIOs report that, in trying to make their capacity-building programmes more direct, friendly and clear for RCOs, a wide range of other small community organisations have also benefited.