



Executive
13th September 2006

**Report from the Director of
Housing and Community Care**

For Action

Wards Affected:
ALL

Brent Refugee Strategy

Forward Plan Ref: H&CC-06/07-03

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks members' endorsement of the draft Refugee Strategy for Brent and provides an overview of the background to and objectives of the strategy.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to approve the draft recommendations of the Refugee Strategy as set out in paragraph 4.3 and Appendix 1.
- 2.2 To delegate to the Director of Housing and Community Care the launching of the new strategy in consultation with the Refugee Champion.
- 2.3 To recommend that the Executive agree that Cllr Allie should be the Refugee Champion in line with recommendation 8 in Appendix 1.
- 2.4 To instruct officers to explore all means of securing additional external funding to support the implementation of the strategy.

3. Background

- 3.1 Best estimates indicate that there are between 16,000 and 20,000 refugees and asylum seekers resident in Brent (of which around 1,400 are asylum seekers). It is impossible to obtain a completely accurate picture in the absence of reliable national data, and this lack of reliable information about the numbers of households and their needs is one

issue the strategy seeks to address. It should also be stressed that the strategy focuses on refugees: given the restrictions in terms of access to services and the special arrangements in place through the National Asylum Seekers Service (NASS), the council has more limited ability to work with asylum seekers.

3.2 Refugees in Brent represent a highly diverse range of communities from different ethnic, national, cultural and religious backgrounds. Some of these are large and relatively long-established, with effective internal support networks and high-profile representation in the voluntary sector. Others are much smaller, more recently settled and less well organised. This diversity adds to the complexity involved in understanding and meeting needs.

3.3 There is considerable evidence, at the national, regional and local levels, indicating the high levels of need among refugee groups. They are likely to have lower incomes, more health problems, more difficulty accessing and using services such as education, more likely to be homeless or badly housed, more likely to face barriers in terms of language and understanding of the UK political and social systems. Of course, these problems are not unique to refugees, but there are particular factors that require a considered response from the council and its partners. Key among these is the need to facilitate the integration of refugees and support them in achieving their potential for themselves and for the wider community.

3.4 The key drivers for the development of a specific strategy for refugees include:

- The high levels of demand and need from refugee households for services in housing, social care, education and health.
- The desirability of ensuring that, as far as possible, refugees are able to access mainstream services
- The need to ensure effective coordination of services to refugee across the public, private and voluntary sectors, avoiding duplication and unnecessary costs while reducing gaps in provision.
- The need to provide the necessary support to ensure that refugees are able to integrate into the wider community of Brent.

4. Detail

4.1 The draft strategy has been subject to extensive consultation and its production has been overseen by a steering group comprising officers from the council and its main partners (e.g. health) as well as community groups. The steering group will also lead on monitoring delivery of the strategy over the next 12 months.

4.2 In summary, the strategy seeks to set the policy context at the national, regional and local levels, map Brent's refugee communities, assess their needs, assess current and potential service provision and, from this evidence base, to provide an action plan. The key objectives identified in the strategy are to:

- Outline the Council's strategic approach to the integration of refugees through partnership working.
- Develop an approach which enables refugees to achieve their personal aspirations, develop their full potential and contribute to their local communities.
- Engage refugees and Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) with other stakeholders to ensure that mainstream services deliver for refugee communities.
- Establish a clear picture of the refugee population of Brent and its needs
- Make services more accessible by improving information and access to translation and interpretation services.
- Establish and widen the membership of the Refugee Integration Forum and promote umbrella groups among RCOs.
- Provide refugees with an initial assessment of needs before signposting them on to appropriate health, employment, housing or other services.

4.3 A summary of the main recommendations from the strategy is set out in Appendix 1. Members are asked to note the following proposals in particular.

- *Provide a combination of specific training and e-learning to staff across the organisation to educate them about the specific needs of refugees and the distinction between refugees and asylum seekers.*

A key finding from consultation was that refugees frequently encountered a lack of understanding of issues and needs among staff across all main service providers.

- *Review the use of resources for services for refugees and remodel for 2007 where necessary to offer specific services where needs dictate.*

The aim of the strategy is to ensure that, wherever possible, refugees are able to access mainstream services, but it is acknowledged that a need for some specialised provision will remain. At present, services are provided by the statutory and voluntary sectors but are not always well coordinated, leaving room for duplication as well as gaps in provision. To ensure the most effective use of resources, it is recommended that a review of provision be undertaken during 2006/07 and any resulting proposals for change will be submitted to the Executive as appropriate.

- *Identify a Councillor as a refugee champion*
Giving an elected member specific lead responsibility for refugee issues would demonstrate the Council's commitment and provide a focal point through which the strategy can be driven forward.
- *Encourage the establishment of umbrella groups for RCOs*
There are a very wide range of voluntary and community organisations working with or representing refugees. While this is helpful in many ways, the number of such groups – there are estimated to be around 700 different such organisations within the Somali community alone – can mean that statutory organisations can be unclear about who they should be talking to and the groups themselves are often small and isolated with very limited access to support networks. It is therefore proposed that support should be given to the establishment of umbrella groups that can develop a truly representative role and effective working relationships with service providers.

- *Promote the Council as a refugee employer.*

Another key finding from consultation and research is that many refugees have skills, knowledge and professional qualifications that are in high demand from employers. Nevertheless, unemployment among refugees is significantly higher than the average. The strategy acknowledges the important work done by agencies such as Refugees Into Work but accepts that more can be done to encourage refugees into employment and employers to hire refugees. The Council, as a key local employer, can play a key role here.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are cost implications in relation to some of the recommendations, for example the proposal to provide training for front line officers. Other recommendations can be implemented at no cost, while others may result in cost savings to the council and its partners, for example proposals around pooled budgets and the encouragement of the establishment of RCO umbrella organisations. At this stage, no detailed proposals have been worked up and members are not asked to make any specific financial commitment. If costs cannot be met through existing budgets, detailed proposals will be submitted to the Executive for approval as required.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 People who have refugee status are eligible for assistance under the housing legislation, are entitled to work and have access to state benefits. They also have equal access to all services provided for by the Local Authority. Asylum seekers whose applications have not been determined have more limited rights to such services, the primary responsibility for provision falling to NASS. The pooling of budgets is permitted provided it falls within the specified circumstances as set out in the Health Act 1999 and related Regulations and complies with the

requirements set out in that legislation. Further advice will be provided if the option of pooling budgets is pursued.

7. Diversity Implications

7.1 The Strategy is specifically focused on integration and effective service delivery to refugees. It therefore has the intention on ensuring positive outcomes for this group, who comprise a broad range of ethnic, cultural, national and religious backgrounds. It is therefore anticipated that the impact of the strategy is likely to be broadly positive for the main target equality groups. An INRA will be carried out once the strategy has been endorsed by members.

8. Staffing/Accommodation Implications

8.1 There are no immediate staffing or accommodation implications arising from this report.

Background Papers

None

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APPENDIX 1 – REFUGEE STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Establish corporate ownership of the strategy.
2	Establish a strategy steering group to guide the implementation of the strategy.
3	Establish a robust methodology and co-ordinated system for gathering data about refugees in Brent.
4	Establish a robust system of needs mapping across services.
5	Provide a combination of specific training and e-learning to staff across the organisation to educate them about the specific needs of refugees and the distinction between refugees and asylum seekers.
6	Review the use of resources for services for refugees and remodel for 2007 where necessary to offer specific services where needs dictate.
7	Support a review of the accountability, membership and function of the Refugee Forum.
8	Identify a Councillor as a refugee champion.
9	Encourage the establishment of umbrella groups for RCOs
10	Consider innovative ways to address language barriers experienced by both refugees and services.
11	Investigate pooling resources or the Home Office's Sunrise scheme in order to provide initial single assessments for all refugees that address health, housing, education, social care and employment needs.
12	Progress activities relating to refugee housing issues in respect of managing expectations, use of Choice Based Lettings and the link between housing and school places.
13	Adopt the Supporting People recommendations as mainstream objectives of the strategy to ensure that they are delivered.
14	Progress activities relating to health issues for refugees, particularly access to GPs, the role of GPs as gatekeepers and specific mental health provision.
15	Progress activities to address education gaps, including lack of access to ESOL and ways of enhancing the RASP and Refugee Education Worker initiatives.

16	Promote the Council as a refugee employer.
17	Include specific actions around service improvement for refugees in the new Race Equality Scheme and change INRA guidance to specify that refugee groups should be specifically considered when drafting a new policy.
18	Challenge public prejudices and perceptions by featuring good news stories in the Brent magazine, and using Refugee Week to celebrate refugees' contribution to Brent.
19	Continue to consult with refugees throughout the development and implementation of the strategy.