

Better  
Housing  
Briefing

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**Refugee  
community  
organisations:  
working in  
partnership to  
improve access  
to housing  
services**

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## Key messages

- 1 Housing services for refugees are better targeted and delivered when refugee community organisations (RCOs) are involved as partners in knowledge sharing and co-production: this means involving them at an early stage
- 2 RCOs vary in size, resources and experience and all have a part to play, but in order to participate fully, voluntary representatives need ongoing support
- 3 'Network management' is required to ensure that all partners learn from one another and synergies are maximised
- 4 Recruiting and training refugee community researchers empowers community members to take ownership of the research agenda
- 5 Partnership initiatives that impact locally can also influence national policy.

## Introduction

Meeting refugee housing need is not simply a supply issue, but is also affected by political will and requires cohesive integration strategies at neighbourhood level. The housing needs of refugees in the UK have been affected by wider housing shortages - partly the consequence of long-term national and local housing policies. They have also been affected by political sensitivities of meeting refugee needs alongside those of other poorly housed or homeless people, which potentially can be exploited by right-wing politicians. In the early 2000s, house building in England was at its lowest since the Second World War ([Barker, 2003](#)). Before the credit crisis, house prices had risen to levels well above those in most of Europe. Furthermore, 1.4 million additional households had registered for social housing, and new evidence from choice-based lettings systems (which became the main way of applying for social housing) indicated a greater demand for social renting than had previously been assumed ([DCLG, 2007](#)). Refugees were housed predominantly in the poorest parts of the private rented sector. While Government set itself the challenging target of building two million new homes by 2016 and three million by 2020, market conditions made this difficult to deliver using conventional mixed funding and cross-subsidy models in a *'testing economic context'* ([House of Commons, 2008, p. 6](#)).

Under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, the National Asylum Support Services (NASS) was established. This new Home Office directorate implemented the regional dispersal of asylum seekers to relieve pressure on services in London and Kent as processing of the backlog of claims for asylum failed to keep pace with demand. Eight Asylum Seekers Regional Consortia were established to develop and monitor regional housing strategies, co-ordinate local agencies, promote positive media relations and tackle gaps in service delivery ([Audit Commission, 2007](#)). Under the NASS dispersal system, the intention was to house people in language-based clusters within existing multi-ethnic communities, but the availability of accommodation determined location and there were tensions in some places. Mechanisms used to procure this accommodation under contract with private and non-profit providers precluded such fine-tuning ([Audit Commission, 2000](#)). By 2000, more than half of the asylum seekers (at the time over 50,000) had been dispersed throughout the country, principally in areas where low demand for housing was coupled with socio-economic problems ([Carter and El-Hassan, 2003](#);

[Peach, 2005](#)). A 28-day Notice to Quit often accompanied a positive Home Office decision about refugee status as NASS-funded accommodation was withdrawn, at which point refugees were expected to organise their own housing arrangements, and they rarely had sufficient information on their options. Research suggests that, in the first instance, most refugees turned to their own communities for information about local services ([Phillimore et al., 2007](#)).

There is little reliable data on the UK refugee population in total, neither are there dependable records on those claimants who settle in the UK once status has been granted ([Lewis et al., 2008](#)). Local knowledge held by statutory agencies about refugees and their families' housing needs and aspirations is often deficient. The Home Office estimates those who overstay or who remain when asylum has been refused at between 310,000 and 570,000 ([Amas, 2008](#)). The early 1980s witnessed the emergence of refugee community organisations (RCOs) in London in response to the lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity on the part of statutory authorities with responsibility for the settlement of refugees ([Ashami, 2001](#)). Further development of RCOs in the regions accompanied NASS dispersal strategy and secondary migration. While formal participation structures are used to engage tenants and community organisations within the social housing sector, RCOs commonly remain outside of these participation arrangements and are generally overlooked in debates about community cohesion ([Griffiths et al., 2005, 2006](#)). RCOs are often unfunded and struggle to provide appropriate help to the communities they serve.

The Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact), a national body committed to working with those on the margins of society, realised that knowledge could be shared and services improved if community organisations were empowered through partnerships with statutory agencies. Hact's Accommodate programme, the refugee housing partnerships project, was designed to improve housing and integration outcomes, recognising the importance of involving local authorities and local housing providers alongside RCOs in implementing local initiatives. The programme therefore set out to explore how effective partnership working could provide solutions. It involved five partnerships comprising housing associations, RCOs, local authorities and statutory agencies. Each was based in a different area of recent refugee migration and each had a different practical idea to improve refugee housing. All five partnerships aimed to improve housing and support for refugees, build partnership relations, pioneer housing solutions, empower RCOs and influence policy and practice. These partnerships were managed by hact, drawing implicitly on a form of steering known as 'network management'. Network management is useful in situations when partners cannot be forced or financially incentivised to act in particular ways, and where joint outcomes must be worked out through dialogue and agreed rules and common aims.

Accommodate was evaluated throughout by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) evaluation team at the University of Birmingham. This

## Resources 1

### Canopy Housing Project

[www.canopyhousingproject.org](http://www.canopyhousingproject.org)

This self-help housing project is based in inner-city Leeds. It renovates derelict houses to create decent homes for people who are homeless. Its diverse volunteering programme, bringing different strands of the community together to overcome ignorance and prejudice, is a working example of community cohesion in action.

### Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact)

[www.hact.org.uk](http://www.hact.org.uk)

Hact is a national body committed to working with those on the margins of society. As well as offering links to Accommodate, the Refugee Housing Partnership Project and information on hact's wider refugee housing integration programme, the unpublished paper *Choice Based Lettings Schemes and Refugee Communities* is also available via the hact website.

included working with partners in developing a self-assessment framework, training and supporting twenty-four refugee community researchers (Goodson and Phillimore, 2008), organising visits and national workshops and producing annual evaluation reports (Mullins and Goodson, 2005, 2006, 2007).<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on lessons from the Accommodate programme.

## 1 The benefits of active inclusion of RCOs in partnerships

Despite managers being expected to show evidence that they have consulted with black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, pressures may mean that *'however community-minded professionals are, they often have only time to tick boxes with the co-operation of "above radar" groups'* (programme participant). Engaging with RCOs enabled the partnerships to go beyond box-ticking to harness the knowledge held by these groups and to involve them in co-production of research and services. This was epitomised by the cases of Bolton and Sheffield where well-established RCOs took leading roles. In Accommodate Bolton the New Bolton Somali Community Association was enabled to lead a community research study. With the trust of a network of community members, their study revealed trends in community composition and housing needs in the private sector, of which the statutory agencies had been unaware. The study highlighted the arrival of secondary migrants in the growing Somali community, as well as refugee families. Secondary refugee migrants generally achieve status in another European Union country, so their refugee identity is sometimes socially and statistically concealed. Researchers make a distinction between *international transit migration*, involving stop-overs of varying length with the intention of reaching another country, and *international onward migration*, migrating to another country with the intention of staying in the medium or long term. It is estimated that there are 40,000 Somalis in the UK who are onward migrants (Rutter, 2008).

A second Accommodate partnership in Sheffield was led by MAAN,<sup>2</sup> an RCO that had been supporting smaller RCOs and providing supported tenancies for refugees suffering from trauma-related mental health illness. MAAN was able to influence local mental health strategies and improve monitoring and referral by local health agencies. Towards the end of the project, partners responded to the growing crisis of destitution and its links with mental health. The lasting heritage of Accommodate Sheffield is the wider understanding of mental health and housing needs of refugees by agencies in the city, and the wider recognition of the role that an RCO like MAAN can play in co-producing services for all refugee communities.

## 2 Ongoing support

Most RCOs are largely volunteer based. One refugee volunteer in Bradford stated: *'I am responsible for running the organisation, but I am employed as a full-time worker, so it's hard to work with my organisation and my full-time employment ... My clients come to my home (we don't have premises yet) in the evening and at weekends when I am home. After I have finished my work, my organisation is open!'* All the partnerships set up Refugee Forums as a device to support individual volunteer-run RCOs. Accommodate Bradford Forum helped to develop regeneration plans for an estate where many refugees lived and where the Forum met. Definitions of

what respondents termed 'capacity building' differed on the basis of the type of capacity-building activity, where it took place, how it was conceptualised and how it linked with representation and resources. Some saw it as the development of organisational capacity to generate community achievement, the recognition of which came via funding streams and training routes. Others thought that it came through involvement in process. Many references were made to the challenges and disempowering consequences of the lack of capacity building. RCOs and their members were hampered by language barriers, lack of information communication technology and limited knowledge of the British welfare system. They also reported lack of time to forward plan, facilitate referrals and engage in training opportunities.

The pressure that many RCOs are under produces what one respondent identified as '*a catch-22 situation, where we have no time for development because we are the first port of call*'. Small RCOs are also hampered by a turnover of members and associated problems of succession in leadership roles. Hact consciously addressed this shortfall by early consultation and training as well as awareness raising of other partners. They were responsive to practical resource needs and created network opportunities and experiences whereby RCOs could locate their own specialist knowledge within the bigger picture of housing and related services. This empowerment approach to RCO support was adopted by Accommodate Birmingham where a well-located resource centre was set up as a base for twenty-two RCOs, with accessible office accommodation and facilities. Co-location enabled fledgling organisations to be supported by more established RCOs.

### A network management approach

3

The Accommodate programme involved hact in working with a large number of partners with different aims, capacities and experiences. It aimed to build trust and understanding between actors from different backgrounds. To do this, the evaluation found that hact had adopted an implicit 'network management' approach. This form of management applies to partnerships that are '*horizontal, complex, involve several actors from different disciplines and sectors and are concerned with solving composite policy issues ... as opposed to "controlled" social and environmental problems*' (Klijn, 2008, p. 8). The organisational cultures, reference points and outlook of housing providers, local authorities and the voluntary sector are often worlds apart and thus without some form of relationship management they will not work effectively together.

Hact recognised that the key to successful partnerships is to ensure that there is 'something for everyone' and that this will be discovered by encouraging partners to learn from one another rather than by setting very specific goals

## Resources 2

### Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR)

[www.icar.org.uk](http://www.icar.org.uk)

ICAR is an academic research and information organisation located at the School of Social Sciences at City University, London. ICAR enables the exploration, either by theme or location, of independent information on asylum and refugees.

### Goodson, L. and Phillimore, J. (2008)

#### *Accommodate: Report of accredited community research training, Birmingham: University of Birmingham.*

This report gives an in-depth description of the 'learning by doing' approach taken by twenty-four refugee community researchers in influencing the Accommodate research agenda.

### Koppenjan, J.F.M. and Klijn, E.H. (2004) *Managing Uncertainties in Networks*, London: Routledge.

The case for network management in overcoming the inevitable uncertainties involved in tackling complex public problems is well made in this book, which offers numerous examples of such problem solving and practical steps that will help managers achieve effective solutions.

and targets at the outset. They helped to reframe ideas by inviting an external facilitator (the Twist Partnership) to set up inter-partnership visits. During these visits partners were encouraged to challenge each other's assumptions and share learning. At times, Hact itself played the role of mediator and arbitrator, mediating conflicts between partners, but recognising that it did not have the power to force compliance. Hact was aware that Accommodate was not the only project in which some of the larger partners were involved. As a result, it looked for new ways to maintain interest and realise the potential of the partnership as a whole. For example, Accommodate Bradford was re-energised by focusing on the redevelopment of a major housing estate owned by one of the partners while at the same time involving the RCO Forum.

## 4 Community researchers

Community research is a method of engaging members of communities to research and consult within their own communities in order to access insider knowledge about social life that is often untapped by 'outsider' researchers. It also offers new skills and learning opportunities for the community researchers. CURS Accommodate evaluation team offered a three-stage interactive Open College Network course to any of the refugees involved in Accommodate who were interested in gaining the qualification.<sup>3</sup>

Accommodate Leeds partnership initiative enabled the lead partner, Canopy Housing, successfully to extend its community-based approach to create quality homes from disused properties while empowering refugees and local volunteers in the process. Community researchers in Leeds asked some of the volunteers involved in the Accommodate programme about its benefits. One female respondent said: *'In my country, women don't do men's work, they have a duty to look after children at home, but here I became different, I have learnt men's work, like making doors, fitting carpets and painting. I have learnt many new things.'* Renovated properties were allocated to those volunteers in housing need who had been working on them. Another respondent shared his feelings with the community researchers about being involved in a self-help project: *'I get courage from the house as I contributed a lot. I am part of that house. It makes me feel good and I can always look at something I helped build.'*

## 5 From local practice to national policy influence

To capitalise fully on programmes such as Accommodate, it is important that effective local solutions are learned from and that the potential is grasped to improve national policy. Hact has used the evaluation reports and learning in a variety of policy-influencing activities, including input to:

- the Home Office's model for refugee integration services;
- the Communities and Local Government Commission on Integration and Community Cohesion;
- the Housing Corporation's<sup>4</sup> BME National Advisory Board and Action Plan;
- a submission to the National Integration Forum Housing and Community Safety sub-group on choice-based lettings;
- the Housing Corporation's national Affordable Housing Programme and arrangements to build bridges between RCOs and large investment partners who can access this funding.

## Conclusion

It is clear from this study that, across the country, partnerships benefit from valuing the insider knowledge, the alternative perspective and the cultural expertise that RCOs and other grassroots community groups can bring to the table. To take best advantage of volunteer organisations willing to share their time in this way, it is necessary to actively empower the voluntary sector to engage in partnerships. Sometimes the barriers to involvement can seem daunting. However, it is important to remember that barriers can exist between all sectors and learning has to be two-way. Another important lesson is the need to manage the overall relationships between partners so that their perceptions of what is possible can be transformed and positive joint actions can follow. This is what we refer to as 'network management'. The success of hact's network management approach with the five partnerships is remarkable: nurturing, steering, mediating, reframing perceptions and building mutual trust between partners. This should encourage other change agents, service providers and voluntary groups trying to resolve complex social problems, to recognise the potential of community-based organisations such as RCOs as a crucial asset in reaching those on the margins of society. There is scope for further research on the role that RCOs may play in neighbourhood cohesion and in sustaining diverse, integrated and rich urban communities.

## Resources 3

**Mullins, D. (2008)**  
***Accommodate – Better Together. The final Accommodate evaluation report,***  
**London: Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact).**

This is the final report of the Accommodate programme, incorporating three years' findings and learning. A full summary of the report can be downloaded as a pdf from:

[www.download.bham.ac.uk/curs/pdf/accommodate\\_summ.pdf](http://www.download.bham.ac.uk/curs/pdf/accommodate_summ.pdf)

## Notes

- 1 We gratefully acknowledge the support of hact and partners in the five local partnerships for the evaluation on which this briefing draws. The evaluation team comprised David Mullins, Lisa Goodson, Harris Beider, Jenny Phillimore and Patricia A. Jones. Patricia A. Jones is completing an ESRC/CASE PhD linked to the evaluation.
- 2 'MAAN' means 'mind' in Somali.
- 3 This work was led by Lisa Goodson and Jenny Phillimore. A report of the community research is available: see Goodson and Phillimore (2008).
- 4 The former funding and regulatory body for social housing in England, which was replaced in December 2008 by the Homes and Communities Agency and Tenant Services Authority.

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We welcome feedback on this paper and on all aspects of our work. Please email [briefings@racefound.org.uk](mailto:briefings@racefound.org.uk)

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