

The Basis Project response to 'Smaller Government: "Bigger Society"?' Issues and Questions Paper', The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC)

18 March 2011

Executive Summary

- This submission is made by Refugee Council¹ and Refugee Action² who are two of the largest organisations in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. We have links to hundreds of refugee community organisations (RCOs) across England.
- We recognise the fundamental importance of and rights to community level action, particularly by refugees and asylum seekers themselves, to create a welcoming, thriving and healthy society.
- For the Big Society vision to be achieved our communities need to be big, inclusive and involve all the elements of our society, including refugees and migrants. This vision may be undermined in light of recent comments around the 'end of multiculturalism'.
- Reductions in statutory services, or publically funded services delivered by larger VCS organisations such as Refugee Action, Refugee Council and CABx will place pressure on grassroots organisations (such as RCOs) to respond to the urgent needs of their beneficiaries.
- This in turn will make it harder for grassroots organisations to focus on their longer-term aims and objectives, which in many cases are likely to be in line with the Government's vision for the Big Society. We are beginning to see groups which have been active for many years stop or significantly reduce work.
- Procurement and commissioning processes as they stand are not accessible to the vast majority of RCOs and this is a major barrier to their participation in service delivery.
- The needs of refugees and asylum seekers are at risk of being squeezed out in the localism agenda. As a group they are poorly understood and represented in local decision-making, and efforts would need to be made to ensure their participation at a local level.

Introduction

Who we are

1. Refugee Council³ and Refugee Action⁴ are two of the largest organisations in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees.
2. Refugee Council is a human rights charity, independent of government, which works to ensure that refugees are given the protection they need, that they are treated with respect and understanding, and that they have the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other members of our society.

¹ <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>

² <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk>

³ <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>

⁴ <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk>

3. Refugee Action is an independent national charity working with refugees to build new lives in the UK by providing practical advice and assistance for newly arrived asylum seekers and long term commitment to their settlement through community development work.
4. The Basis Project⁵ is an England-wide partnership project led by Refugee Council and Refugee Action. Basis is a unique national project to support refugee community organisations (RCOs) in all the English regions. Our Organisational Development Officers give one-to-one support to over two hundred RCOs to help them manage, develop and sustain their work. In particular we support RCOs in four key areas: fundraising, financial management, project development and organisational governance.
5. We also work closely with funders and mainstream support providers, such as the Councils for Voluntary Service, to help increase their understanding of RCOs and improve RCOs' access to funding opportunities and sources of mainstream support.
6. This submission is drawn from our experience through the Basis Project of supporting RCOs throughout England.

Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs)

7. The UK has a proud history of providing protection to people seeking sanctuary from persecution overseas. There have been refugee communities in the UK for hundreds of years and refugees have made an immense contribution, culturally and financially, to society.
8. In turn refugee communities themselves have a long track record of establishing community organisations or RCOs. The Home Office describes RCOs as 'organisations run by and for refugees [...which] provide advice and support, often informally, and act as bridges to mainstream services and other local groups.'⁶ The work of RCOs is testament to the resilience and strength of their members, many of whom have used their own experiences of persecution and exile to develop services to support others.
9. The government's dispersal of asylum seekers out of London, introduced under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, marked a significant change in how refugee communities live and work together. Such changes have inevitably impacted on the development of RCOs. Historically concentrated in London and small number of other metropolitan centres, RCOs have now been established in all the regions of England and face the challenge of meeting a wide range of needs in areas where other support for refugee communities is underdeveloped.
10. In December 2006, primary research was completed to inform the development of the Basis Project. This established a database of 668 known and established RCOs operating throughout England.⁷ 63% of these organisations had an annual income of less than £50,000 per annum and

⁵ <http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk> The Basis Project is funded for five years by the Big Lottery Fund.

⁶ Home Office, Integration Matters, 2005

⁷ Refugee Council and Refugee Action, Refugee Community Organisations in England – Realising Potential, July 2007
http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk/Resources/The%20Basis%20Project/Documents/PDF/BASIS_Report_RCOs_in_England_Realising_Potential.pdf

most relied heavily on the work of volunteers. Our research also highlighted the diverse nature of RCOs and the wide range of critical, frontline services they provide to people across the country who are often excluded, marginalised and vulnerable.

11. This diversity of needs, and the importance of RCOs in meeting them, was recently reconfirmed by a July 2010 Home Office study on refugee integration. It found that over half of people granted refugee status from Turkey (57%), DRC/Congo (64%), Ethiopia (77%), Somalia (55%), Sudan (60%), Zimbabwe (74%), the rest of Africa⁸ (52%) and Asia⁹ (60%) had made contact with an organisation set up for their national or ethnic community. According to the study, refugees reported approaching such organisations with a wide range of needs, including support to access information (27%), legal advice (26%), interpretation or translation (24%), work or housing (23%), financial help (21%) and emotional help (18%). The study further found that 20% of refugees were in contact with a national or ethnic community organisation at least once a week, underlining the extent to which RCOs provide essential services. They also play a role in bridging between community members and mainstream services for the wider UK population and act as an essential support to many individuals.

1. A definition of what the 'Big Society' is or should be.

12. The Big Society should be a society where people of all backgrounds are able and encouraged to contribute to wider society and have a voice in decision-making processes. For this to be meaningful, it needs to be big, inclusive and involve all the elements of our society, including refugees and migrants. The needs of the most marginalised members of society need to be met, and they must have opportunities to access education and employment to enable them to contribute.

13. The Big Society should build on the proud heritage of grassroots community organisations and initiatives that exists in the UK, including the work of Refugee Community Organisations, and the role that second tier organizations play in supporting this work. Many aspects of community activism described in recent debates about the Big Society are demonstrated in RCO work taking place across England. Examples include providing specialist services to refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants,¹⁰ training programmes for young people,¹¹ community outreach services,¹² English language classes,¹³ community cohesion activities,¹⁴ allotment projects¹⁵ and health projects.¹⁶ RCOs offer a diverse range of services rooted in local communities, responding to local community needs, finding innovative solutions from within communities, and acting as a bridge between different established and new communities and service providers.

⁸ Defined in the Home Office study as Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote D'Ivoire, Djibouti, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea- Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zambia

⁹ Defined in the Home Office study as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma/Myanmar, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam

¹⁰ Basis Project, Working with Refugee Community Organisations (2010) Dover Detainee Visitors Group p.6; NILE African Development Organisation p. 8

¹¹ Ibid - Leeds Afro-Latino Group p.7

¹² Ibid - Peterborough African Community Organisation p.10

¹³ Ibid - Leicester Congolese Community p.9; Sudan Women's Association p.11

¹⁴ Ibid - Liver World Community Sports p.12

¹⁵ Ibid - The Discovery of the Talents p. 13

¹⁶ Ibid - Refugee Women of Bristol p. 14

14. The role of refugees, RCOs and migrant organizations in the Big Society was emphasized by Deputy Mayor of London Richard Barnes at the Basis Project's London Conference last year.¹⁷

15. There is a lack of understanding in society at large, and particularly amongst refugee communities about what the 'Big Society' really means, and whether they are part of it, particularly in light of the Prime Minister's recent speech about multiculturalism.¹⁸

2. The impact and consequences of reductions in public expenditure on the Government's ambitions to deliver its vision for the Big Society.

16. The impact of reductions in public expenditure will be incredibly far reaching on the government's ambitions to deliver its vision for the Big Society:

- 16.1 The impact of public spending cuts on RCOs was researched by Refugee Council in September 2010. Key findings were:
- 52% of RCOs surveyed reported providing services to five hundred or more clients per year.
 - 24% of RCO respondents have more than twenty active volunteers.
 - 30% of RCOs are funded by local government/local councils.
 - 39% of RCOs surveyed reported a decrease in their funding during the last financial year and 58% predicted a decrease in funding over the next twelve months.
 - 77% of RCOs surveyed are concerned that their capacity to deliver services will worsen during the next financial year.
 - Some RCOs are resorting to small contributions from clients to save most needed services.
 - RCOs are concerned that local government funding cuts will have a drastic impact on their communities - some of the most vulnerable in UK society. RCOs are concerned that with the current funding cuts, RCOs and other small voluntary organisations risk being viewed as a means to fill in gaps that are caused by funding cuts.¹⁹
- 16.2 Reductions in statutory services, or publicly funded services delivered by larger VCS organisations such as Refugee Action, Refugee Council and CABx will place pressure on grassroots organisations (such as RCOs) to respond to urgent needs of their beneficiaries (see research findings outlined above).
- 16.3 This in turn will make it harder for grassroots organisations to focus on their longer-term aims and objectives, which in many cases are likely to be in line with the Government's vision for the Big Society. For example, the aims and objectives of many RCOs we work with are around integration, enabling their members to contribute to the wider community and working jointly with other local groups to the benefit of wider society.

¹⁷ <http://thebasisproject.org.uk/events/rcos-integration-london>

¹⁸ <http://www.migrantsrights.org.uk/blog/2011/02/camerons-attack-multiculturalism-we-need-more-british-story-sustain-new-type-citizenship>

¹⁹ <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/Resources/Refugee%20Council/downloads/briefings/Briefing%20-%20impact%20of%20spending%20cuts%20on%20RCOs%202010.pdf>

- 16.4 This, combined with a reduction in funding that grassroots organisations can access to deliver services, is likely to result in basic and urgent needs of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society not being met.
- 16.5 This will make it more difficult for vulnerable and marginalised people, including some refugees, to integrate into, and actively contribute to wider society, thus further undermining the 'Big Society' vision.

3. The role of and capacity for the voluntary and community sector to deliver local public services including the appropriateness of using charitable income or volunteer labour to subsidise costs.

17. Many voluntary and community sector organisations are able to deliver some public services. The involvement of smaller organisations, such as RCOs, in public service delivery can be very beneficial in ensuring that the needs of vulnerable and hard to reach people are met appropriately. This is often best achieved through consortium, partnership or subcontracting arrangements.

18. Many of the most 'grassroots' VCS organisations, such as some RCOs, need significant capacity building support to develop to a point where they are able to deliver public services.

19. It is not appropriate for charitable income or volunteer labour to subsidise the costs of public service delivery. The use of volunteers can 'add value' to public services, but core roles should be delivered by paid staff, who should receive pay and conditions equivalent to public sector employees at the same grade.

4. Possible problems and challenges from increased commissioning of public service provision from the voluntary and community sector as envisaged by the Government.

20. It will be very difficult for VCS organisations, particularly smaller organisations such as many RCOs, to invest the time needed to go through complex commissioning processes. Such processes must be as accessible and jargon-free as possible to ensure equal opportunities. 'Payment by results' funding, such as that used in the 'Work Programme' is a further barrier to VCS organisations, particularly small VCS organisations with little working capital, tendering to deliver services, and may mean that VCS organisations who could offer excellent services are unable to tender for or win contracts against large private sector organisations.

21. If public services are commissioned with narrow targets or focused on very specific results, it will be difficult for VCS organisations to offer the holistic and client-focused services that the vast majority of them aspire to. It may also incentivise avoiding work with the most vulnerable and hard to reach clients, who need a greater investment of time and resources to achieve a particular outcome. Where large suppliers sub-contract smaller suppliers such as RCOs to work with particular 'hard to reach' groups or deliver specific work it is important that the smaller suppliers get a fair proportion of the payment for this work.

22. A move to all, or the vast majority, of government funding being in the form of public service commissioning risks incentivising 'mission drift' by VCS organisations to

focus on delivering on government priorities rather than the identified needs of their members and beneficiaries. This may ultimately lead to the voluntary sector playing a weaker role in working towards the vision of the Big Society. Grants, particularly small grants often enable grassroots organisations such as RCOs to deliver innovative projects for excellent value for money, and will be essential in enabling such organisations to work towards the Big Society vision.

23. There is a risk that VCS organisations will be forced to offer poor pay and conditions to employees in order to compete for public service contracts, and offer 'value for money'. It is important that commissioning processes do not allow this to happen.

5. The right to form employee-owned public service co-operatives including the resources available to co-operatives, proposed powers, and rules governing their operation.

6. Governance and accountability issues arising out of different organisational forms of social enterprises and co-operatives; and the participation of voluntary sector and community groups in greater public service provision.

24. There is a risk that in areas where there has been poor practice on recruiting diverse workforces (including refugees) empowering employees to form employee-owned public service co-operatives will put responsibility for decision-making in public services' delivery in the hands of an unrepresentative group of people.

7. The implications for central government and for the civil service of policies which require them to promote and to enable, rather than to manage and to direct, public services.

8. The place of local authorities in the transfer of power from Whitehall to communities and the role democratically elected local councillors should play.

9. Potential conflicts with other aspects of public service delivery, such as individual focus of personalised public services or universal provision and uniform standards of public services (i.e. avoiding postcode lotteries).