

Response to government consultation on '*Building a stronger civil society*'

January, 2010

Introduction

Who we are

1. [Refugee Council](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)¹ and [Refugee Action](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk)² 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.
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 Project](http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk)³ 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. We have conducted interviews with five RCOs about their views on this consultation (Bolton Solidarity Community Organisation, Ensemble Manchester, Family Restoration Forum, Haringey Somali Community and Cultural Association and the Sudanese Women's Association). Our submission also draws upon discussions during seminars and conferences held across the country in 2010, where issues around infrastructure support were raised with RCOs and recent research by Refugee Council about the impact of spending cuts on RCOs⁴

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.'⁵ 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

¹ <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>

² <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk>

³ <http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk> The Basis Project is funded for five years by the Big Lottery Fund.

⁴ <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/Resources/Refugee%20Council/downloads/briefings/Briefing%20-%20impact%20of%20spending%20cuts%20on%20RCOs%2022%201010.pdf>.

⁵ Home Office, Integration Matters, 2005

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.⁶ 63% of these organisations had an annual income of less than £50,000 per annum and 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 Africa⁷ (52%) and Asia⁸ (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.

RCOs and the Big Society

12. 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,⁹ training programmes for young people,¹⁰ community outreach services,¹¹ English language classes,¹² community cohesion activities,¹³ allotment projects¹⁴ and health projects.¹⁵ 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 communities and service providers.
13. However, as explored in this response, the essential tension of the Big Society, namely that the voluntary and community sector is being asked to do more while facing unprecedented threats to its funding, will have a particular impact on RCOs.

⁶ 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

⁷ 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

⁸ Defined in the Home Office study as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma/Myanmar, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam

⁹ Basis Project, Working with Refugee Community Organisations (2010) Dover Detainee Visitors Group p.6; NILE African Development Organisation p. 8

¹⁰ Ibid - Leeds Afro-Latino Group p.7

¹¹ Ibid - Peterborough African Community Organisation p.10

¹² Ibid - Leicester Congolese Community p.9; Sudan Women's Association p.11

¹³ Ibid - Liver World Community Sports p.12

¹⁴ Ibid - The Discovery of the Talents p. 13

¹⁵ Ibid - Refugee Women of Bristol p. 14

Response to proposals outlined in the 'Supporting a Stronger Civil Society' consultation document

Summary

Refugee Council and Refugee Action welcome many of the proposed changes, and recognise the importance of increasing the efficiency of support to civil society organisations in the current economic climate. However, we are concerned that some of the measures could impact negatively on marginalised groups, particularly grassroots organisations formed by people with limited knowledge of UK systems and in some cases language.

We consider that the structure of the consultation document, and the questions posed, do not encourage adequate debate on the proposals. Specifically, the questions primarily ask how to implement proposed changes, and do not address whether the proposed changes are in themselves desirable. In this response we provide comments on key proposals as well as suggestions. We have not prepared responses to the Equality Impact Assessment as these were not in the original consultation document. We feel that presenting these questions without preparation and not presented in the consultation document is an opportunity missed and the information gathered may therefore be incomplete.

1. To put more support online as part of a drive to save money and rationalise what exists in many places at the moment (Question 1: How can online services for frontline groups be improved?)

Comments

- Online resources are important but not everyone has access to them- people who don't have English as a first language may find it hard to access, the language used in documents (without a guiding hand to talk them through) often isn't accessible. Even if there are computer facilities locally many people (particularly the most marginalised refugees or asylum seekers) don't know about them or lack confidence to access them.
- We know that at Refugee Council our multilingual website (which offers information in a range of languages) attracted 22,840 visitors in 2010. To us this highlights the fact that there is a need for clear accessible information in a range of languages and that this must be backed up by face to face or telephone support for organisations to make good choices.
- Certain groups (e.g. women from certain cultures where there are lower education opportunities, older people) may find it particularly difficult to access online materials due to educational level, language and confidence.
- RCOs we interviewed commented that there are a large number of resources, and it is difficult to know which of these are most relevant, particularly for groups with limited English and knowledge of UK systems.
- Support organisations, including the Basis project, have played a role in encouraging people to access relevant online resources and to apply the resources to their work- it will be hard, particularly for newly formed organisations and people with limited English, to access online information as a first step.

Suggestions

- Information should be clear and jargon free.
- There should be some rationalisation of online resources to make it simpler to find the most relevant resources, at an appropriate level, particularly for new and / or marginalised groups.
- Several RCOs have commented that they find video an accessible and interesting medium for resources.
- It would be useful for online work to relate to mechanisms to help groups to share information and collaborate online, such as social networking. However,

- is must be recognised that not all RCO leaders and members understand social networking and as such this should be accompanied by support.
- Several RCOs commented that targeted e-newsletters (such as Refugee council's RCO e-news) are useful in keeping them up to date with new developments and resources.
 - Online resources should be complimented by development work to help groups to access the most relevant resources, and to help them to apply them fully to their work (for example developing policies based on a model policy, rather than copying the policy directly). This helps ensure policies are actively used as well as improving understanding.
 - There should be training and support to help marginalised groups (for example older people, people with limited English, women) to access, and learn to use, online resources. RCOs would be very well placed to help deliver this.
 - Supporting RCOs to become UK online centres could be a useful way to enable more refugees and leaders of other small RCOs to access online resources.
2. To increase access to volunteer, pro bono, volunteering between business and large charities to smaller civil society organisations (Question 2: What can Government do to forge more effective links and transfer skills between small civil society organisations and businesses or larger charities?, Question 3: How could brokerage of pro bono support be improved)
- All the RCOs we interviewed feel that this could be very useful but should be a compliment to, not a replacement for, professional development support.
 - It will need significant capacity to broker support, particularly for more marginalised groups. The Basis Project has experience of administering a similar scheme which was found to be time consuming, with a lot more support being needed on both sides for a successful match, than we had envisaged. This should include training and development for corporate volunteers around relevant skills, civil society structures and specialist areas. For example private sector employees are unlikely to have been trained in participatory methodologies, and capacity building skills. Many of these are cultural norms for the voluntary sector, and investment needs to be made in those coming into the sector to develop this understanding. Changing the culture is of course also an option, but would also be very time consuming and not action-focused.
 - There should be resources to ensure that the body brokering relationships is able to actively reach out to harder to reach groups such as RCOs, and has an in depth understanding of the context and specific issues that these groups face.
 - Small organisations should be supported to enable them to make the most of corporate volunteers, for example by identifying the skills that will be most useful to them and developing work plans.
 - Transfer of skills may be difficult, for example an accountant in a large corporate firm may find it difficult to apply her knowledge in a small, grassroots organisation, and may not propose the most appropriate solutions. The power those from large organisations hold is often not recognised by either party as is well documented in NCVO's 1 + 1 = 3 research¹⁶.
 - Events could be a useful way to bring prospective volunteers and community organisations together.
 - It is important to ensure a consistent service can be offered. For example, incentives to businesses to offer volunteers should be offered to a national standard. This may become more difficult in a recession. Larger charities are

¹⁶ <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/1-1-3-does-size-really-matter>

- likely to be under increasing financial pressure and will find it harder to donate pro-bono time.
- There should be structures in place to ensure the pro-bono work isn't 'dropped' when work priorities come up, as this could leave civil society organisations in a vulnerable position.
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 - Some RCOs reported concerns that in relationships between larger charities and small community organisations, the smaller organisation could risk being 'swallowed' by the larger one.
3. Question 3: What support might your organisation need to become more resilient?
- These responses come from RCOs, and suggest ways to make RCOs more resilient, rather than large organisations such as Refugee Council and Refugee Action.
 - Whilst Social Enterprises fulfil useful functions in society, it is not desirable to expect all charities and community organisations to run on a business model. It is important that funding (such as local authority funding) continues to be available to enable organisations to work with vulnerable people.
 - Some RCOs commented that more Social Enterprise training and ongoing support would be useful.
 - There is a need for increased capacity building around volunteer management to enable RCOs to improve services delivered by volunteers. However, there is a concern that volunteers should not be expected to replace professional staff in delivery of services.
 - There is a need for capacity building support around long term planning, fundraising options and building partnerships and collaboration.
4. To use a 'bursary' approach to fund frontline organisations directly so that they can choose who they get support from and manage this themselves (Question 5: What do you think should be the priorities for a bursary fund?, Question 6: How could any bursary fund be delivered simply and fairly?)
- **Quality control and accountability.**
 - Providers are likely to have an incentive to complete specific pieces of work as quickly as possible, rather than focusing on the long term capacity building of the organisation.
 - It would be useful to have a mechanism for organisations who receive bursaries to share experiences of working with particular providers. Client organisations could post reviews of their work with that organisation or individual.
 - There must be systems in place to monitor and evaluate the quality of work delivered, and to enable organisations to complain if they feel a provider doesn't provide value for money. This should include looking at the longer term outcomes of the work, as well as outputs (such as number of business plans produced). Systems should be appropriate to the size of the contract or the work completed
 - Grassroots organisations can usefully be involved in the monitoring and evaluation process. Again this needs to be proportionate to scale, and mindful of an organisation's capacity to engage.
 - **Decision making**
 - Grassroots community organisations, including RCOs, can also usefully be involved in the decision making process for bursaries. Processes should be designed to consider how to engage small organisations effectively, whilst being sensitive of the time being asked from them.
 - The decision making process should acknowledge the role that small organisations such as RCOs often play in supporting vulnerable people who struggle to access mainstream services.
 - **Priorities**

- Most RCOs we interviewed said that business / strategic planning, fundraising and partnership development are priorities for support.
 - The application process should be as straightforward and jargon-free as possible.
 - The body administering the bursary scheme would need to have very good links with marginalised communities, including refugee communities.
 - Specialist organisations with reach into different sectors (such as the refugee sector) could act as a 'clearing house' for this money to help improve the reach to vulnerable groups.
- **Concerns**
 - If the bursary is an alternative to development workers, it is likely that the role development workers play in bringing groups together to learn from each other and work collaboratively will be lost. There is a risk that it will increase competition between groups, and that the innovation and oversight role, and the free-sharing of ideas currently played by infrastructure providers will be lost leaving a more fragmented, and less forward-focused voluntary sector.
 - There is a risk that administering the bursaries will be bureaucratic, and thus not result in the intended efficiency savings. It may also take beneficiary organisations a lot of time to apply for the bursary and analyse which provider to spend the bursary money on, which could detract from the grassroots work they are doing in their community.
 - Several RCOs commented that they do like the emphasis on organisations having control over the support offered to them, and that targeted help with specific pieces of work can be very useful. However they reported that they value building a longer term relationship with support providers, which they fear that bursary system would not allow for.
 - Small, emerging organisations may struggle to find out about the bursary scheme in the first place, and to make an application without some support and guidance, which several RCOs fear will mean that larger mainstream organisations will be more likely to be able to benefit from the money available. A comparison offered by one organisation is the 'personalisation' agenda, where people have a social worker who can help guide them through the options available.

The proposal is made to 'open up' more government contracts to a wider range of organisations (including charities) 'so that the most effective and efficient charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives have much greater involvement in the running of public services'.

- We are also concerned that private sector organisations may be able to provide a lower 'per unit- price' but not have the same set of core values and accountability to a community that an established community organisation may have resulting in good 'upwards' accountability, but potentially much less impact on the ground.
- It is important to be careful with definitions of 'effective' and 'efficient' as providers may appear to be more efficient if they are not working with the most marginalised groups who are hard to reach and / or need in depth support. There must be checks and balances to ensure that these groups are adequately served.
- We call for the Government to include refugees and asylum seekers as vulnerable groups in the next review of National Performance Indicators (NPIs) for 2011. These indicators should become part of the Local Strategic Plan (LSP) for designing services for refugees and asylum seekers according to their needs in the area, and these indicators would be part of the Local

- Area Agreement (LAA). As the Government reviews both LSPs and LAAs, it is vital that refugees and asylum seekers are considered a vulnerable group.
- There is a need to recognise the depth of work that specialist organisations (e.g. RCOs) do with clients who suffer multiple barriers to participation and integration.
 - Encouraging partnership or consortia to develop to jointly tender for contracts is one possible way to encourage the involvement of smaller, specialist organisations. An example highlighted as good practice by one RCO was the delivery of 'Refugee Integration and Employment Support' by RCOs with Manchester Refugee Support Network as lead provider.
 - However there are concerns that small organisations subcontracting, particularly to private sector providers, will be expected to deliver the majority of services with inadequate resources.
 - There is a risk of encouraging 'mission drift' as organisations compete for public service contracts, as often occurs with Trust's tightly-defined grant criteria. This may, ironically, detract from their role in inspiring local action based on local priorities.
 - There must be adequate funding to enable quality delivery of public services whichever organisation is delivering that service.

There is a further proposal to 'modernise' commissioning processes

- It is essential to encourage involvement at all stages of commissioning processes including identifying needs. This will need resources particularly to involve marginalised groups.
 - Some larger RCOs commented that in their experience commissioning processes have often been very bureaucratic and time consuming, which they consider makes them inefficient both for the body administering them and the organisations tendering to deliver them.
 - It is essential to have a range of funding opportunities- not just commissioning. Small grants often offer excellent value for money for the taxpayer and are an important way of implementing the principles of promoting social action and empowering local communities. For the Big Society to genuinely empower community action and enable innovative (and potentially cost-saving) solutions to develop in the community, it is essential that grassroots groups can develop their own initiatives based on local priorities rather than all the emphasis being on tendering to deliver public services.
 - Evidence to support this point can be found in the recent research by Refugee Council about the impact of the spending cuts on RCOs
5. To rationalise (reduce in number, promote mergers and collaboration and reduce local and central government funding to) infrastructure support organisations and to link their work into a 'Big Society' programme. (Question 7: How could consolidation grants help ensure the sustainability and efficiency of infrastructure services?)
- It is important that rationalisation of and collaboration between infrastructure providers doesn't lead to a loss of specialist knowledge and links that providers have built up with RCOs.
 - People who come from other countries who don't know the UK system benefit from specialist organisations to explain the system. RCOs have fed back that they value infrastructure services with specific knowledge of the complexity refugee issues, such as Evelyn Oldfield Unit and the Basis Project. Some have commented that this is more important to them than the geographical area where they are based.
 - Several RCOs voiced concern that a rationalisation of infrastructure services will lead to a reduced overall level of capacity, and that more marginalised or 'hard to reach' groups such as women's RCOs will miss out. This is likely to lead to lower representation of these groups in decision making, and to the

loss of the important 'bridging' function that grassroots play with other communities.

- There should be some rationalisation of national organisations that support infrastructure providers. It is important that any rationalisation prioritises knowledge of and support to specialist groups such as RCOs, disabled people's organisations and BME groups.
 - Several RCOs commented that they are not clear what the Big Society means on a practical level. They are concerned that the Big Society vision must be bottom up in order to be effective, and must incorporate the views of all members of society, including those who are often excluded from decision making processes (for example refugees). There must also be clear communication with grassroots organisations as Big Society programmes are developed.
6. Infrastructure organisations would only be funded under a 'strategic partner' arrangement by central government if they 'represent a part of the sector or the sector as a whole in helping to shape government policy or help to deliver the vision for the Big Society'. Question 8: Are there ways that expert intervention can support areas which are lacking social capital to improve local relationships and develop a stronger civil society?
- RCOs should be considered a specific part of the civil society sector as they have specific characteristics and needs.
 - In order to be effective in achieving the Big Society vision, local people and grassroots organisations must play a role in articulating what the Big Society means to them, and should play a central role in proposing and implementing decisions. Within this, marginalised groups who have traditionally been excluded from decision making, such as refugees, must be actively included.
 - It is important to recognise and learn from the excellent work of many organisations, including RCOs, in working towards Big Society concepts rather than attempting to 'start afresh' as if this work had not happened.
 - We recommend that Government representatives and officials take the time to spend meaningful periods of time with grassroots organisations such as RCOs to fully understand what they do and their perspectives on key issues.
 - There is a need for ongoing community development interventions to bring groups and individuals together.
 - If groups are receiving money from government in order to help them develop Government policy, they will not be able to hold government to account unless the right to critically appraise government is upheld in a strong Compact agreement. There should be a clear understanding that being in receipt of government funding should still allow a full and frank dialogue with government on behalf of the sector. This does need to be explicitly stated by government to partners.
 - The participation of grassroots organisations such as RCOs should be actively sought for decision making.
 - Several RCOs suggested that it would be useful to have events bringing grassroots organisations and government officials and MPs together to learn from each other, and create a direct link between government and the grassroots in developing Big Society ideas and programmes.

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