

# Refugee Engagement With Regional Structures

A Report for the Yorkshire & Humberside Refugee  
Community Development Workers' Network

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the  
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# 1. Executive Summary

1.1 The aim of this study was to examine Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) and Refugee Community Foras' (RCF) participation in, and influence on, regional decision making structures in Yorkshire and Humberside, and how they can influence these more effectively.

1.2 Yorkshire and Humberside has been supporting asylum seekers as a dispersal region since 2000 under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

1.3 Although no exact figures are available, it is clear that under the dispersal programme numbers of refugees and asylum seekers have grown substantially since 2000. In turn, the number of Refugee Community Organisations in the region has grown from fewer than 20 in 2000 to more than 80 by 2005 <sup>(1)</sup>. Refugee Community Fora have been established in Leeds and South Yorkshire, and are emerging in Bradford and Kirklees. In Hull a forum exists which is open to all voluntary and community groups working with refugees and asylum seekers.

1.4 Support services to RCOs & RCF are provided by Northern Refugee Centre, Refugee Action and The Refugee Council.

1.5 Local agencies and structures which plan and deliver services and implement strategy on refugee and asylum issues include Local Strategic Partnerships and District Multi-Agency Groups, which are intended to have links with the Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

1.6 Four sub regional networks of agencies that work with refugees and asylum seekers exist, in Humberside and in North, South and West Yorkshire.

1.7 At a regional level, the Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, the Black & Minority Ethnic Regional Panel, The Yorkshire & Humber Faith Forum, and the Regional Forum are also involved in refugee and asylum issues to various extents.

1.8 The National Refugee Integration Forum is the national Home Office led body which is responsible for developing and monitoring implementation of the national strategy for refugee integration.

1.9 The key bodies in terms of effectively influencing decision making as it affects refugees and asylum seekers in the region are the Regional Strategic Co-ordination Group of the Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, and the National Refugee Integration Forum. Although the latter is a national body, its work has a direct bearing on policy and strategy in the region, and as such should be influenced by regional structures.

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(1) *Asylum*, Asylum Newsletter Group, Issue 29 January/February 2006

1.10 The study collected and summarised the views of 22 participants from across Yorkshire and Humberside through interviews. Provisional recommendations were presented to a conference “Refugee Voices For Change” and discussed at a workshop at this event.

1.11 The main findings of this study are set out under the following headings:

- Developing the Ability of RCOs/RCF to Affect Policy;
- Development Issues for Other Organisations;
- Consultation with RCOs/RCF;
- Links Between Organisations.

1.12 “Developing the Ability of Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Fora to Affect Policy ” looks at the situation in relation to these organisations and how they can be assisted to meet the needs placed upon them in terms of services and effective representation.

1.13 “Development Issues for Other Organisations” looks at service provision by other organisations in relation to refugees and asylum seekers and at how it could be developed to be more reflective, and to integrate refugee issues into mainstream service delivery.

1.14 In looking at “Consultation with RCOs/RCF”, issues around participation in decision making are examined. Many of these issues also relate to the need for capacity building, and underline the importance of capacity building in order to have a successful refugee integration programme in the region. Included in this section are findings in relation to regional bodies such as the BME Regional Panel and the Regional Faith Forum.

1.15 Links between other organisations are examined in order to complete the picture with regard to organisations working for and with refugees, and the bridges that could be built between them to deliver a seamless, strategic programme.

1.16 The recommendations of this study focus on the need to design and implement a strategic training package for RCOs and RCF to develop their capacity to deliver expanded services and engage effectively with other organisations and structures, understanding the demands and limitations these organisations work under.

1.17 Further recommendations propose the clarification of roles, and possible streamlining or rationalisation of the refugee voluntary sector organisations in the region, and clarification on recruitment from refugee communities, alongside improved consultation and reporting procedures between the sector and RCOs/RCF.

1.18 Improved joint working between the mainstream and refugee voluntary sectors is seen as necessary to make best use of the voluntary sector resources available in the region.

1.19 Improved joint working between Local Strategic Partnerships and District Multi Agency Groups, and between The Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (The Consortium) can help to close the communication gaps between agencies who are all devising and delivering strategy and services at various levels for refugees and asylum seekers.

1.20 In general, the main statutory agencies in the region regard The Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees as the most appropriate forum for dealing with refugee and asylum seeker issues, and for engagement with RCOs/RCF to take place.

1.21 A pro-active, committed and inclusive membership of various organisations and structures is recommended as a way of working towards informed and reflective strategies and service delivery.

## 2. Study Aims and Objectives

2.1 The aim of the study was to examine Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) and Refugee Community Fora's participation in, and influence on, regional decision making structures.

2.2 The objectives of the project were to:

- Review existing information about regional structures , and assess the most appropriate structures/other forms of influence that RCO Fora could engage with regionally;
- Identify best practice of Fora who have been successful in influencing policy, regionally and nationally;
- Compile recommendations as to how RCOs in Yorkshire & Humberside can affect policy.

2.3 Across the region, RCOs provide a range of services and activities including:

- Advice and signposting;
- Interpreting and translating;
- Social activities;
- Language classes
- Women's groups;
- Newsletters;
- Awareness raising activities
- Advocacy and media work
- Contributing to relevant local, regional and national strategies
- Participation in refugee forums and other relevant networks
- Emergency support for those made destitute.

2.4 In some areas RCOs have formed themselves into Refugee Community Fora (RCF) in order to support each other, share experiences, and to form and present a strategic response to local issues.

2.5 This piece of work was commissioned by the Yorkshire & Humberside Refugee Community Development Workers' Network.

### **3. Background: The Picture in Yorkshire and Humberside**

3.1 Yorkshire and Humberside has been supporting asylum seekers as a dispersal area since 2000 under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Home Office statistics suggest that around 35% of asylum seekers receive permission to stay <sup>(2)</sup>, either as refugees, or with exceptional leave to remain, or humanitarian protection, or discretionary leave to remain.

3.2 There are organisations and structures that deal with issues and policy relating to asylum seekers and refugees at all levels in the region and these are examined below.

3.3 Although no exact figures are available, it is clear that under the dispersal programme numbers of refugees and asylum seekers have grown substantially since 2000. In turn, the number of Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) in the region has grown from fewer than 20 in 2000 to more than 80 by 2005. Refugee Community Fora have been established in Leeds and South Yorkshire, and are emerging in Hull, Bradford and Kirklees.

3.4 Support services to RCOs & RCF are provided by Northern Refugee Centre, Refugee Action and The Refugee Council, as part of a range of activities which they carry out including advice services to refugees and asylum seekers, volunteer programmes, a capacity building/consultancy service, and a voluntary return service. These agencies are collectively referred to below as the refugee voluntary sector.

3.5 In each local dispersal area (known as a “cluster area”) across the region District Multi-Agency Groups are convened by the relevant local authority asylum team. Their function is to provide a strategic lead on asylum and refugee issues in the area, to share information and to co-ordinate services. Local agencies who provide services including health, housing, police, etc are members of the groups as are RCOs and RCF.

3.6 Local Strategic Partnerships exist in every local authority area. They are a partnership between the public, private, business, and voluntary and community sectors. The LSP works to strategically plan, co-ordinate and implement local services and initiatives. The voluntary and community sector is represented through a Community Empowerment Network, which works to increase community involvement in neighbourhood initiatives.

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*(1) Regional Integration Strategy 2003-2006, Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, November 2003*

3.7 Four sub regional networks exist, in the Humber area and in North, South and West Yorkshire. These networks are primarily a way of bringing together the agencies that work with refugees and asylum seekers, again to share experiences and respond to new initiatives and emerging issues.

3.8 The Refugee Community Development Workers' Network is made up of workers supporting or working with refugee communities and RCOs across the region which meets regularly to share experiences and support.

3.9 At a regional level, the Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees is structured around a Regional Strategic Co-ordination Group (RSCG) and forums which look at health, community legal services, employment and community development. A representative from each forum sits on the RSCG, as well as representatives from Local Authorities, the Yorkshire & Humber Assembly, the Regional Housing & Planning Board, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), the Refugee Integration Group, Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber, Health Authorities, RCOs, the refugee voluntary sector, the Refugee Community Development Workers' Network, delivery organisations, housing & community cohesion personnel and district multi-agency groups.

3.10 The RSCG role includes monitoring implementation of the Government's dispersal policy in the region; taking strategic decisions on cluster areas, overall numbers and languages of dispersed asylum seekers; considering the impact on the region of Home Office policy on immigration; responding on behalf of the region to new policy initiatives; linking with regional strategies and initiatives particularly relating to housing and planning, community cohesion, employment and health issues; informing and advising regional strategic bodies, NASS and key regional stakeholders in order to provide sustainable support for asylum seekers and encourage settlement of new refugees; considering any issues relating to support of dispersed asylum seekers which cannot be resolved at local level; taking a leadership role in informing regional strategies which have an impact on asylum seekers and refugees; promoting a positive vision of the cultural and economic benefits to the region of dispersal and the settlement of new refugees.

3.11 The role of the Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees is to provide a lead strategic and advisory body for the region on all matters relating to asylum seekers and new refugees; consider the impact and implication of asylum seekers into the region; facilitate refugee integration in the region; to share and disseminate information; to co-ordinate operational activities; and to develop joint projects to support access to services for asylum seekers and refugees.

3.12 In general, the main statutory agencies in the region regard The Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees as the most appropriate forum for dealing with refugee and asylum seeker issues, and for engagement with RCOs/RCF to take place.

3.13 The National Refugee Integration Forum is the national Home Office led body which aims to develop and monitor implementation of the national refugee integration strategy. It has five sub groups: children and young people; accommodation and community safety; community and media; health; and employment and training. The NRIF does not have a regional arm, but it does have some representation from Yorkshire and Humberside and other regions involved in the dispersal programme.

3.14 Other regional structures that may be seen to have overlapping interests with refugee and asylum seeker communities and issues are the Black and Minority Ethnic Regional Panel and the Yorkshire & Humber Faith Forum.

3.15 The BME Regional Panel was formed in 2005 to support the black and minority ethnic voluntary and community sector, and to enable the sector to work more effectively at a regional level to represent the interests of the communities. There are no members of the panel who specifically represent the views of refugees and asylum seekers, though there are members who raise refugee issues when appropriate.

3.16 The Yorkshire & Humber Faith Forum was formed in December 2005 and has members from the 9 major faiths which are represented in Britain and the region. It has set out its role as being to represent faith communities at a regional level; to develop the capacity of faith communities to make Yorkshire & Humber a better region; and to encourage faith communities to work in partnership to benefit local communities. Refugee and asylum seeker issues have not been identified as a specific area of work, and any related issues that might be raised with the Forum would be dealt with on an ad-hoc basis.

3.17 The Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum is the strategic organisation working for the voluntary and community sector in the region. It works to link the local voluntary and community experiences with regional decision making structures, and as an advocate for the sector with key regional agencies.

## **4. Methodology**

4.1 The study collected and summarised the views of 22 participants from across Yorkshire and Humber through interviews.

4.2 Interviews were held with people from RCOs and RCF, regional refugee voluntary sector organisations, sub regional networks, Community Empowerment Networks, the BME Panel, the Faith Forum, the Regional Forum, Yorkshire Forward, the Yorkshire & Humber Assembly, Government Office Yorkshire & The Humber, and the Yorkshire & Humber Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. A full list of interviewees is attached at Appendix 1.

4.3 The number of interviews conducted was constrained by the timescales involved in the preparation of this study. It is considered that a representative selection of key agencies and organisations are included to confirm the validity of the study, and apologies are offered to any organisations who were not directly consulted.

4.4 Provisional recommendations were presented to a conference “Refugee Voices For Change” and discussed at a workshop at this event. Appropriate adjustments were then fed into the report.

4.5 A draft of the report was circulated and comments from Northern Refugee Centre, Refugee Action and The Refugee Council were incorporated where appropriate.

## 5. Study Findings

5.1 The main findings of this study are set out under the following headings:

- Developing the Ability of RCOs/RCF to Affect Policy;
- Development Issues for Other Organisations;
- Consultation with RCOs/RCF;
- Links Between Organisations.

5.1.1 “Developing the Ability of Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Fora to Affect Policy ” looks at the situation in relation to these organisations and how they can be assisted to meet the needs placed upon them in terms of services and effective representation.

5.1.2 “Development Issues for Other Organisations” looks at service provision by other organisations in relation to refugees and asylum seekers and at how it could be developed to be more reflective, and to integrate refugee issues into mainstream service delivery.

5.1.3 In looking at “Consultation with RCOs/RCF”, issues around participation in decision making are examined. Many of these issues also relate to the need for capacity building, and underline the importance of capacity building in order to have a successful refugee integration programme in the region. Included in this section are findings in relation to regional bodies such as the BME Regional Panel and the Regional Faith Forum.

5.1.4 Links between other organisations are examined in order to complete the picture with regard to organisations working for and with refugees, and the bridges that could be built between them to deliver a seamless, strategic programme.

## **5.2 Developing the Ability of Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Fora to Affect Policy**

5.2.1 There are a number of structures and organisations in Yorkshire & Humberside working for and with refugees and asylum seekers, as well as others which exist to oversee delivery of the Government's dispersal programme. Grassroots representation is built into some of these, in theory. In reality a number of barriers exist which can make it difficult for Refugee Community Organisations, Refugee Community Fora, and the people they speak on behalf of, to influence the policies and strategies which impact upon their lives. Yet the services and activities carried out by RCOs are vital if the dispersal programme is to be a success and refugees integrated into wider society. The Home Office, in setting out its strategy on refugee integration, recognised that RCOs "are a crucial resource where they exist especially in bridging links with the wider public"<sup>(3)</sup>.

5.2.2 Both RCOs and RCF are hampered by various factors in their attempts to meet the many demands placed upon them. Sometimes people lack the skills, language skills, and confidence to take advantage of seats they may be given at the decision making table. Sometimes groups, particularly outside the main towns and cities, are poorly supported and may rely mainly on the efforts of one or two volunteers. Volunteers typically have paid work of their own; some hold down more than one job, and the time and resources they have available is limited. In other instances, people do have the skills to participate but a lack of funding and time limits their capacity to do so.

5.2.3 A programme of region wide strategic support and training if developed and implemented by the refugee voluntary sector for these organisations would help them to develop their capacity to deliver services and to influence decision making. Any such programme would have to take account of what support is currently available. At present, support is considered to be patchy outside the main towns and cities and this is an issue which needs to be addressed. Again, the refugee voluntary sector itself is often hampered by limited resources and the many demands made upon it.

5.2.4 Support in the form of capacity building and training should be given to RCF to help them to effectively work as a bridge between RCOs and other organisations and sectors. RCF are the best placed organisations to play a vital role both supporting RCOs and reflecting their views and concerns to decision making bodies but cannot do this effectively without a tangible commitment from both the voluntary and statutory sectors.

5.2.5 Northern Refugee Centre currently employ a full time member of staff from a refugee background to support the South Yorkshire Communities Forum, including helping to link the Forum to decision making structures. Similarly Refugee Action have a Refugee Community Development Worker, also from a refugee background, who works to support the Leeds Refugee Communities Forum. Work to date on linking RCF representatives to bodies such as LSPs and District Multi-Agency Groups and the Regional Strategic

Co-ordinating Group has been facilitated by these roles, but there is a lack of resources to develop this work, and to replicate it in other parts of the region.

5.2.6 There is a lack of knowledge amongst some RCOs about the organisations and structures that exist in the region and nationally, their remit and responsibilities, and how links can be made with them to influence their policies, where appropriate.

5.2.7 It seems clear that the expectations people from refugee and asylum seeker organisations have about change and how to achieve it need to be matched up with an understanding of the issues that other organisations deal with, such as the need to manage competing agendas. Managing competing agendas can mean that consultation takes place but the views of RCOs then become part of a much bigger picture. This can lead to feelings of disappointment and that consultation was tokenistic. This issue needs to be tackled as part of a training and support package. Similarly, RCOs need to become aware of the limited resources available to the organisations that support them, namely Northern Refugee Centre, Refugee Action and The Refugee Council, and the impact this has on the services they are able to offer.

5.2.8 It was noted by some interviewees that the refugee voluntary sector could sometimes be seen as a gatekeeper as well as an enabler for grassroots organisations. Some felt that a strategy should be put in place to devolve delivery of some services down to RCF, and that in the future consideration should be given to developing and training refugee community fora to deliver services such as community development to refugee community organisations. This would increase the skills base of RCF and help to ensure their sustainability.

## 5.3 Development Issues for Other Organisations

5.3.1 Whilst the work of the refugee voluntary sector was commended by grassroots organisations, it was also felt that if the sector wishes to become a tool which is both **of** refugee communities rather than just **for** them, staff teams must continue to work towards becoming more reflective of the communities they represent.

5.3.2 Organisations at all levels in the region are not clear about the remits and roles of the 3 main refugee voluntary sector organisations, Northern Refugee Centre, Refugee Action and The Refugee Council, and how they fit together. Concerns were raised about duplication and confusion, and a lack of accountability because of this. Urgent attention needs to be given to what needs to be done in the region, who is best placed to do it, and how this work can best be funded. This could lead to strategic decisions being made about possibly rationalising or co-ordinating better or streamlining the services that each organisation offers. Given that this approach reflects current Home Office thinking, undertaking the process voluntarily could leave the sector better placed to defend itself against possible accusations of not making best use of resources, and to demonstrate streamlined, strategic service delivery which supports Government policy on dispersal and integration.

5.3.3 The Regional Forum supports the refugee voluntary sector as it supports its other member organisations, and commissioned a recent ChangeUp funded piece of work of which this study is part. Overall, however, it was felt by some that there is limited joint working between the refugee voluntary sector and The Regional Forum. Developing a closer working relationship could be a way of allowing the refugee voluntary sector to integrate its work into the mainstream voluntary sector and develop voluntary sector solidarity to help ensure the survival of refugee and asylum seeker services.

5.3.5 A pilot project has been developed by Northern Refugee Centre and Doncaster CVS to encourage refugees and asylum seekers to access Doncaster CVS and its services. This project should be evaluated and used to develop a strategy to allow mainstream voluntary sector support agencies to work with the refugee voluntary sector to help each other to improve services and access.

## 5.4 Consultation with Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Fora

5.4.1 RCOs and RCF feel that they are sometimes consulted in a way that is “tokenistic”, and done so that agencies can tick a box rather than taking their issues and views on board. Establishing trust between grassroots organisations and mainstream agencies and structures is vital if effective participation in decision making processes is to take place. However, as mentioned at 5.2.7 consultation by statutory agencies can take in a wide range of views and these have to be balanced when policy and strategy are being developed.

5.4.2 When people from RCOs and RCF do attend decision making structures they are often the only people present who are not being paid to be there. It was suggested that, where necessary, using an existing model developed for the Regional Strategic Co-ordinating Group could be a way forward on this issue, and would signal a real commitment to valuing the contribution that RCO representatives are making to the process.

5.4.2 Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are key planning and delivery forums in local areas. A recent report by The Community Development Foundation highlights the need to support refugees and asylum seekers to speak for themselves in arenas such as LSPs (4).

5.4.3 RCOs and RCF have the potential to become involved through the Community Empowerment Network of each LSP. Again, lack of time, funding, and appropriate skills are barriers to being involved with decisions that are being taken at a local level. However meaningful involvement should be a two way process, and the point was made that in some areas the Community Empowerment Networks of the LSPs need to be more proactive in encouraging and supporting refugee communities to become involved.

5.4.4 The Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees includes representatives from RCOs in the structure of its Regional Strategic Co-ordinating Group. The RSCG is structured in such a way as to offer a way in to regional decision making for frontline organisations if there is commitment from its membership, including RCOs, to be responsive to issues and opinions raised. There is concern amongst RCOs, RCF and refugee voluntary sector support organisations that some agencies involved may wish to deliver a “top-down” approach rather than an inclusive one, and the Consortium would then be less successful in achieving its aims than it might otherwise be. The view was strongly expressed that the focus of the Consortium should be defined by its whole membership, and it should not become a vehicle that simply imposes national policy without taking account of regional and grassroots input.

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(4) *Refugee Integration and Cohesive Communities: Community Development in Practice*, The Community Development Foundation and Navarro Training & Consultancy, August 2005

5.4.5 Interviewees from various agencies strongly expressed a hope that those attending RSCG meetings should have the authority to make decisions so that it does not become a “talking shop” without any real power.

5.4.6 Work is currently underway to allow the refugee voluntary sector and RCOs to develop structures that allow them to develop and agree their strategy in relation to the RSCG and other developments in the region. If engagement by refugee organisations is to be effective, the structures that exist need to work in such a way as to allow people’s voices to feed in through them and up to the top table in the region – the Regional Strategic Co-ordination Group of the Consortium. In this way, an issue that is raised by, for example, an RCO in Kirklees could be taken up at a pre-meeting and if appropriate then raised at the next meeting of the RSCG. Making best use of the opportunities that membership of the RSCG offers is vital if RCOs and RCF are to effectively influence regional decision making structures.

5.4.7 Feedback and communication between the refugee voluntary sector, RCOs and RCF would also be improved if this were to happen, and it would help to reduce the feelings of isolation experienced by smaller groups in outlying areas of the region.

5.4.8 There are very different views held within RCOs and other voluntary sector bodies about developing closer links with the BME Regional Panel. Some feel that refugee and asylum seeker issues and concerns are often distinct from those of the wider bme sector and need to be addressed separately. For others, what refugees and longer established ethnic minority communities have in common outweighs the differences. Issues such as discrimination in the job market and housing, racism, and racist attacks impact upon both groups and, it is felt, need to be tackled together.

5.4.9 However, given that the most pressing concerns raised during the course of this study were of an immediate nature, particularly destitution and the difficulties in accessing services such as schools and housing, tackling these seems likely to continue to be the priority for RCOs, at least in the short term.

5.4.10 RCOs and the refugee voluntary sector need to continue to make strategic decisions about the extent of their engagement with the BME Regional Panel and the bme voluntary sector. To do so may be a way of beginning to tackle the tensions that reportedly exist between refugee and asylum seeker communities and longer established ethnic minority communities. It may be the case that engagement with bme forums is more relevant for communities such as those from African countries who may feel they suffer more in terms of racial discrimination than some other refugee communities.

5.4.11 The Yorkshire & Humber Faith Forum is considered to have the potential to play a role in both tackling tensions between communities and in helping to generate more positive images of refugees and asylum seekers. It was suggested that by devising a programme of visits to mosques, churches

and other faith buildings by refugees to talk about why and how they became an asylum seeker, and what life is like for them in the region, greater links could be forged between communities and practical steps taken to dispel some of the myths that attach themselves to refugees and asylum seekers. Developing links with the Faith Forum could also, in time, offer RCOs and RCF a further opportunity to make their voices heard in decision making forums by feeding their views and concerns through the structures of the Faith Forum.

## **5.5 Links Between Agencies**

5.5.1 District Multi-Agency Groups (DMAG) are a key local body, alongside Local Strategic Partnerships, although there is little evidence of co-working between them and LSPs. Given the Government's emphasis on dispersal and integration as the way forward in relation to refugees and asylum seekers, it makes strategic sense for the DMAG integration strategies to be part of the relevant LSPs plans, which does not appear to be the case at present.

5.5.2 The four Sub Regional Networks are at different stages of development as they work towards supporting the Regional Integration Strategy.

5.5.3 The National Refugee Integration Forum (NRIF) is considered by some regional organisations to be dominated by London based organisations and by London's experience of refugee and asylum seeker issues. The experience in dispersal areas is seen as quite different to that of London but it is felt that policy making at a national level, influenced by the NRIF, fails to take account of this. The membership of the NRIF is not felt to reflect the role of dispersal areas in national refugee and asylum seeker policy. This applies to both statutory organisations and representation from RCOs and RCF, and it is felt that this limits its effectiveness in pursuing the dispersal policy in a positive and sustainable way.

5.5.4 The links between the NRIF and the RSCG, and the sub groups and fora of each, are felt to be unclear and in some cases non-existent. These should be formalised and agreement reached as to how regional views can be fed into the national structure.

## 6. Case Study

6.1 Refugee Voices, the Forum of RCOs in the North East of England, was established to unite the region's RCOs, and to ensure that by acting collectively they can increase their influence.

6.2 The member organisations of Refugee Voices elect 7 individuals to form an Executive Committee to work for the good of all the region's refugees rather than their own RCO. It oversees the implementation of the Forum's action plan but important decisions are decided on or ratified by the general membership.

6.3 The Forum aims to influence the development of policy and services, to broker more supportive and genuine partnerships, and to secure development and capacity building support for its member organisations.

6.4 It offers an opportunity for RCOs to contribute skills and experiences in delivering solutions to the challenges of integrating refugees and asylum seekers, and supporting them in living meaningful lives as part of wider society in the North East.

6.5 The Forum faces similar challenges to those faced in Yorkshire & Humberside in terms of the number of consultative processes it could or should be involved in, weighed against limited resources to become engaged.

6.6 Three options for development of the Forum and engagement with decision making bodies were identified and examined:

- Any RCO can attend any consultative meeting. This approach could be seen to empower grassroots organisations but does not deliver a strategic voice for the sector or take into account the ability of organisations to engage effectively.
- All RCOs meet with a service provider or consultative meeting. This throws up difficulties about the impossibility of all RCOs being able to attend at any one time, and does not allow those who do attend the time to put forward a developed and sophisticated viewpoint because of inevitable time constraints.
- Bring RCOs into a forum to share their knowledge, where it can be collected, refined and become a strategic voice in the region. This allows the Forum to make strategic decisions about where to focus its time and efforts, and to speak authoritatively and with a mandate from its wider membership.

6.7 The final option was the model adopted and the Forum is now seen as a model of collective action and has attracted the attention of RCOs across the UK and in Ireland. Its strategic and collective approach could be used to influence the development of RCOs input into the Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees and in particular its Regional Strategic Co-ordination Group.

# Recommendations

1. The Regional Refugee Community Development Workers' Network, Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Fora (henceforth referred to as The Working Group) to oversee the implementation of the recommendations set out below.
2. The Working Group to set a time limit for implementation of each of the following recommendations. These time limits will reflect the limited resources available to the organisations involved and the competing demands made upon them.
3. The Working Group to look at how it can work with the ChangeUp programme to build the capacity of Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Fora across the region to deliver services and to help them to participate in meetings and engage effectively with other agencies and structures.
4. The Working Group to commission or provide training for Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Fora about the relevant structures and organisations in the region, such as GOYH and The Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. This should cover the work the organisations do, how to work with them, and how change can be achieved. Managing refugee organisations' expectations about how quickly change can be achieved, and about the availability of mainstream services should be an element of this work.
5. The Working Group to consider training and funding Refugee Community Fora to deliver services such as community development to Refugee Community Organisations.
6. Northern Refugee Centre, Refugee Action and The Refugee Council to discuss with refugee organisations their strategies to increase the number of people from a refugee background working within their organisations.
7. Northern Refugee Centre, Refugee Action and The Refugee Council to actively explore the rationalisation, co-ordination and streamlining of their services to develop a clearer remit for who does what, where and how.
8. The Working Group to continue to seek funding for increased joint working and service delivery with the mainstream voluntary sector, including the Regional Forum.
9. The current system of payment and induction support for RCO representatives on the RSCG to be promoted as a model of good

practice by the Consortium at regional and local level and incorporated into regional and local refugee integration strategies.

10. The Working Group to set out a strategy for engagement with Local Strategic Partnerships.
11. The Working Group to continue to work on strategic structures to ensure that refugee voluntary sector and RCO/RCF representation at meetings of the RSCG reflects the views and concerns of organisations and fora across the region and is strategic.
12. The Working Group to set out a strategy for reporting back to RCOs and RCF about what is happening, and what comes out of meetings with various agencies and groups.
13. The Working Group to take a strategic decision about the extent of engagement with The Yorkshire & Humber BME Panel. If appropriate, the Panel should allocate one or two places to representatives from Refugee Community Fora and Organisations.
14. The Yorkshire & Humber Faith Forum and the Working Group to work together to develop an information sharing programme to help to break down the barriers between refugee and faith communities.
15. District Multi-Agency Groups and LSPs to develop a strategy to ensure that integration strategies are incorporated into wider local strategies and planning.
16. The National Refugee Integration Forum to review its membership to ensure that the experiences of dispersal regions are strongly represented in its structures, and to allocate a place on its main body and each sub group to a representative from a refugee community organisation or forum from each dispersal region.
17. The RSCG to work with the National Refugee Integration Forum to establish clear lines of communication and to set out how regional issues and views can be raised at a national level.
18. The RSCG to work with the National Refugee Integration Forum to review the relationship between the sub groups of the RSCG and those of the NRIF, and to create formal links between the two.

## 8. Conclusion

8.1 This study has found that many of the conditions and structures to allow effective involvement in policy and strategy making already exist within the region. To complete the picture and allow this to happen does not require any new structures to be developed. What is required is strategic investment in RCOs and RCF and a more strategic approach to communication between local, regional and national bodies involved in developing and delivering policy and strategy around refugees and asylum seekers.

8.2 The growing number of refugees and asylum seekers in the region, and the commensurate growth in the number of Refugee Community Organisations working with them, has represented a challenge to the agencies and structures in the region.

8.3 Nonetheless, enormous dedication has been shown in tackling the needs and issues of refugee and asylum seeker communities. However, if the refugee voluntary sector were to develop a more strategic approach to service delivery to RCOs and RCF, this would allow better use of the resources, financial and otherwise, that are available to them.

8.4 At a local and regional level, structures such as LSPs, District Multi-Agency Groups, and the Regional Consortium are set up in such a way as to offer an inclusive approach to decision making. Better communication between local agencies, and a proactive commitment to making sure that refugee voices are listened to could lead to the development of services that help to make the Government's dispersal programme a success. Success can be measured by the number of refugees who choose to stay in the region and contribute their skills and energies to the development of Yorkshire and Humberside.

8.5 The development of support, communication, and meaningful inclusion in the region can only go so far towards influencing policy and strategy. Ultimately many of the policy decisions that impact most strongly on asylum seekers and refugees are made at a national level, and it is for this reason that this study has included the National Refugee Integration Forum within its scope. Effective communication and representation between the region, and in particular the Yorkshire & Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees and the NRIF, is a vital step in allowing RCOs and RCF to influence policy, and the recommendations made in relation to all other organisations, agencies and structures at all levels can only have limited impact if the voices of those at the grassroots have no way of being heard by those who make the decisions that have the biggest impact upon their lives.

## 9. Appendix 1

<b>Name</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Jim Johnson	Project Manager	Bradford Action For Refugees
Sarah Earnshaw	Project Manager	Fairplay Partnership/West Yorkshire Regional Refugee Network
Neil Bennett	ChangeUp Co-ordinator	GOYH
Dave Norman	Head of Cohesion & Faith	GOYH
Dieudonne Manirakiza	Chair	Kirklees Refugee Forum
Archana Choksi		LASSN
Gill Gibson	Manager	LASSN
Claris Spence	Chair	Leeds Refugee Forum
Marzieh Berenjian	Treasurer	Leeds Refugee Forum
Marva Pryce	STEP Co-ordinator	Leeds Voice (CEN)
Hannah Sowerbutts	Community Participation Co-ordinator	Leeds Voice (CEN)
Naila Shaukat	Community Co-ordinator	Leeds Voice (CEN)
Muhammad Gaas	Refugee Communities Forum Co-ordinator	Northern Refugee Centre
Ian Martin	Community Services Manager	Northern Refugee Centre
Jim Steinke	Chief Executive	Northern Refugee Centre
Shazia Rehman	Network Development Officer	OFFER (Sheffield CEN)
Sara Saxon	Project Manager	SAVTE/ Yorkshire & Humber BME Panel
Cathy Miller	Regional Development Worker	The Refugee Council/Hull RCF
Alan Matthews	Inclusion Manager	Yorkshire Forward
Rob Warm	Head of Housing & Communities	Yorkshire & Humber Assembly
Naheed Arshad-Mather	Chair	Yorkshire & Humber BME Panel
Gopal Lama	Development Officer	Yorkshire & Humber BME Panel
Liz Westmorland	Regional Manager	Yorkshire & Humber Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees
Sajida Shah	Vice Chair	Yorkshire & Humber Faith Forum
Peter Richardson	Acting Deputy Director	Yorkshire & The Humber Regional Forum