

HOUSING AND THE REFUGEE COMMUNITY CONFERENCE 2009



WORKING WITH







What is Integrated in Brent? IIB is a project run by Inquilab & Innisfree Housing Associations, sponsored by the Tenants Services Authority to work with and forge better links with refugee communities in the London Borough of Brent.

The Conference's aims were to:

Provide links & networking opportunities as well as assist in increasing the understanding of housing related issues facing refugee communities in Brent.

The conference was opened with encouraging and inspiring words from:

- **Cllr Allie**, Champion for Refugees & Lead Member on Housing and Customer Services.
- **Martin Cheeseman** O.B.E - Brent Council Director of Housing and Community Care,
- **Falastin Yassin**, Coordinator of Brent Refugee and Migrant Forum
- **Dawn Butler** MP also spoke.

All highlighted the diverse make up of Brent which enriches the community and brings challenges which working together can be resolved. The two main issues facing refugee communities in relation to housing were identified by the key note speakers as size and condition. It was acknowledged that the key to solving these issues were recognising language and cultural barriers and embracing similarities as well as differences between refugee groups.

This could only be achieved by refugee community organisations, other voluntary organisations and the statutory and public bodies including housing associations and the Council working jointly.

The main part of the day was made up of workshops and the key note speakers encouraged all present to speak their minds and contribute. The synopsis for each workshop given in this report shows that this message was heard loud and clear!

The aim of the workshops was to identify solutions or potential areas where further work was required.



Workshop Summaries

Unaccompanied Minors and People under 25

Challenges

- RCOs' lack of information on statutory organisations' responsibilities for children and younger people.
- Data Protection prevents 'joined up' working
- RCO links to social services not fully developed

Solutions

- Information Sharing Protocols

Racial Harassment

Challenges

- Anecdotally high number of cases
- Very few racial harassment issues reported

Solutions

- Assess the situation through statistics and consultation with refugee groups.
- Better training for front line staff.
- Make reporting more accessible

Mental Health

Challenges

- People with mental health needs require services to come to them, especially concerning refugees with language difficulties and a lack of understanding of housing/financial support structure
- Understanding the trauma, a refugee may have experienced should be priority

Solutions

- Improve liaison between refugee organisations to aid the process of supporting refugees with mental health needs;
- Improve communication between agencies so that an awareness of Brent's limited housing and lack of resources is recognised.

Women and Domestic Violence

Challenges

- Cultural barriers and ability to report DV
- Community cohesion and lack of co-ordinated approach from Borough

Solutions

- Borough to map resources available (locally, London wide and nationally)
- Explore options to provide a solution for those without recourse to public funds

Older Refugees

Challenges

- Where there is support for older people it is not always used, as older refugees tend to rely on their children or grandchildren for translating/ form-filling etc

Solutions

- Increase awareness of the services available for older refugees
- Dependency on families could be lessened by encouraging older refugees to learn basic English and how to complete forms.

Refugees with Disabilities

Challenges

- Number of refugees with disabilities is unknown
- Statutory / Voluntary Mainstream organisations often unable to support asylum seekers with no Status
- Lack of translators and translated material often means refugees don't know that voluntary services for those with disabilities exist.

Solutions

- Working with RCOs for cost effective interpreting and support for Refugees with disabilities
- Network with community organisations to provide this support

General Housing Workshop

Challenges

- Clients need generic support/advocacy (not just housing issues) i.e. INTEGRATED
- Advocacy at present is dependent on staff skills and accessibility.

Solutions

- Training needed for RCO workers on housing and related subjects.
- Umbrella group incorporating RCOs and Housing Dept with main landlords would assist.



Overall Themes

Throughout the workshops and plenary sessions there were some key themes that arose. These were Communication; Information; Partnership Working and Empowering Refugees and the Community Organisations that assist them.

Did the Conference meet its objectives:

	Very Poor-Poor	Ok	Good-Excellent
Creating links between RCO's and Mainstream and Statutory Agencies	25%	35%	40%
Providing networking opportunities	17.5%	20%	62.5%
Improving attendees knowledge of refugee housing issues	12.5%	25%	62.5%
Identifying where to gather further information about the Issues raised	13.1%	39.5%	47.4%

Brent Refugee Strategy

The Conference was also an opportunity for those present to influence Brent Council Policy and Strategy. Brent Council are currently revising their Refugee Strategy and all present had an opportunity to supply to Brent their thoughts on two main questions. Below is just a snapshot of the answers given. Brent Council have told IIB that they have taken on board the comments made and these will be reflected in the second draft to be put out for consultation shortly. IIB will ensure all attendees to the Conference are notified that the second draft has been released.

What objectives and priorities do you want to see in the strategy?

- Brent should consider joint funding of projects to increase their success and to consider cross boundary approach as other boroughs will have similar issues.
- Key priority is to work on knowing the number and make up of refugees in Brent - only then can resources be accurately and effectively allocated and developed.
- Local Strategic Partnership should have a full time rep from the Refugee Community Organisations (RCO's) as, at the moment, they are invited on an ad-hoc basis. This will ensure that they have a voice at an important forum within the borough.
- Training for RCO's to be able to prepare and submit bids for funding opportunities to become sustainable.
- Training for front line staff to deal with issues that refugees come to them with.
- Clear communication between council departments on who is developing what, for whom and how to access this service.

What are the needs, what are the gaps and what actions are needed?

Needs and Gaps

- Trafficked people - statement recognising this group and offering a willingness to explore solutions to help support this group.
- No disability groups represented in the Action Plan.
- Equality impact assessment.
- Facilities for language (e.g. translators/ education to speak English).
- Recognition of the influence of the perception of refugees among the public domain, such as media.

Actions needed

- Building the capability of refugee groups
- Set up a mentoring role - people who have been through the system which adds credibility. RCO's could help to identify mentors
- Identify a process for reporting & monitoring racial harassment issues across the Borough and by refugee status as well as ethnic group

Way Forward

The key message from all attending irrespective of the topics being discussed within the workshop, was that many were surprised at the services they discovered existed as they had not known about them before. All agreed that combining efforts and sharing knowledge could save time, money and effort.

IIB will be working with Brent Refugee and Migrant Forum (BRMF) on ways to share information.

The Steering Group for IIB will also be working on ways to engage further with refugees and other RCO's in Brent so they too can benefit from the information learnt and shared at the Conference.

Watch out for a further event in March 2010 on the Integrated in Brent project, to be organised by Inquilab and Innisfree Housing Associations with the Steering Group.



Attendance list

Over 80 people from the following organisations attended:

- Age Concern Brent
- An-Nisa Society
- ARHAG
- Asha Ege
- BrAVA
- Brent Citizens Advice Bureau
- Brent Connexions
- Brent Disability Forum
- Brent Housing Partnership
- Brent Mind
- Brent Refugee and Migrant Forum (BRMF)
- Chartered Institute of Housing
- Cricklewood Homeless Concern
- HACT
- Help Somalia Foundation
- Hodan Alodi
- Horn of Africa Welfare Refugee Group
- Housing for Women
- Innisfree Housing Association
- Inquilab Housing Association
- Iraqi Centre for Integration and Cohesion
- London Cyrenians Housing
- Brent Council including: Brent Supporting People Team, Brent Affordable Housing Development Unit, Brent Housing Resource Centre, Brent Housing & Community Care, Brent Private Housing Solutions, Occupational Therapy Service, Housing Strategy Team
- Paiwand
- Somali Cultural Centre
- Start Plus
- Stop the Traffik
- Tenant Services Authority
- The African Child
- West London Refugee Women's Forum
- Westway Housing Association
- Willow Housing
- Women of the Horn



If you require this in an alternative language; Braille or Large Print or want to know more about the project then please contact the Project Coordinator via Brent Refugee and Migrant Forum on **020 8459 9093** or **info@brentrefugeeforum.org.uk**