

Report on the outcomes of the Enriching Communities Conference

1st December 2009



Hosted by: **Islington Improving Reach
Islington Refugee Forum
Hackney Refugee Forum**

Introduction

The Enriching Communities Conference, held at the North London Central Mosque on the 1st of December 2009, was jointly organised by Improving Reach at Voluntary Action Islington, the Islington Refugee Forum and the Hackney Refugee Forum.

The aims of the conference were to:

- Facilitate partnership working between Islington & Hackney Refugee Forums.
- Look at some of the barriers facing refugee and migrant communities in the areas of equalities, partnerships, health, integration and community cohesion.
- Facilitate networking and partnership development across the two boroughs generally.
- Look at how we can work together collaboratively to enrich all our communities.

This report provides an overview of the conference, outlining the issues that arose in the workshops and identifying how that information can be developed into outcomes for the two borough's refugee and migrant communities.

Improving Reach

Improving Reach is a partnership programme formed by Voluntary Action Islington, the Islington Refugee Forum, Islington BME Forum and the Islington Faiths Forum. The programme is funded by Capacity Builders until March 2011 with the aim of supporting capacity building in partner organisations, providing training and networking opportunities, and influencing local policy.

Islington Refugee Forum

The forum is a refugee-led independent organisation aiming to improve the quality of life of Islington refugees by bringing together refugee community organisations (RCOs), service providers and statutory bodies into a network. The forum provides a common voice for Islington's refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, and a platform for promoting positive images celebrating achievement, culture and diversity.

Hackney Refugee Forum

Hackney Refugee Forum is an umbrella organisation which was founded in April 2000 as a need of the refugee organisations in the London Borough of

Hackney. The Hackney Refugee Forum aims to strengthen refugee communities and represent their joint interests in the borough of Hackney. As a network of organisation, the Hackney Refugee Forum seeks to influence statutory and voluntary organisations, providing services and advocating for refugees in the borough.

Feedback from the Workshops

Partnerships – facilitated by Ian Lewis, Director of Partnerships, London Borough of Hackney.

The aim of this workshop was to identify the barriers faced by refugee and migrant organisations engaging in partnership working with each other and with the statutory sector. This workshop also aimed to highlight positive ways in which partnership working can be enhanced.

Barriers

- Funding and financial resources.
- Restricted by staffing, resources and training, e.g. being unable to dedicate staff to specific project work.
- Community languages – can be a barrier for some organisations who don't have relevant language skills.
- Education – qualifications in home country aren't recognised in the UK.
- Cultural clashes and misunderstandings in the community or partnership.
- The attitude of the statutory sector toward refugee and migrant organisations and the voluntary sector in general.

Positive approaches to enhancing partnerships

- Use politicians in a positive and meaningful way, and trying to gain meaningful engagement with the statutory sector.
- Learn and share good practice between all community groups.
- Smaller community organisations could integrate more with larger groups.
- Invest in staff quality to raise standards.
- Actively seek to do partnership work together.
- Increase the representation of these groups in relevant forums.
- Identify existing resources available for refugees and asylum seekers, and aiming for more dedicated resources.

Integration and Community Cohesion – facilitated by Amna Mahmoud, Project and Policy Officer, Diversity and Social Policy Team, Greater London Authority.

The aim of this workshop was to discuss the barriers which continue to affect integration and community cohesion for refugees and migrants.

The group agreed that the overarching barrier to both integration and cohesion is the lack of access to services faced by refugee and migrant communities. It was agreed that discrimination is a cross-cutting issue. They also acknowledged that the needs of communities including the host community are diverse.

In order to improve integration and cohesion policy makers, service providers and the society as a whole need to work together based on the individual rights and responsibilities. They agreed that the migrant and refugee community organisations have a role to play to connect their communities to third sector mainstream organisations and the decision makers and service providers at all levels.

Through this discussion the group identified practical solutions that could improve integration and community cohesion for refugees and migrants.

At statutory level

- Dedicated workers to lead on an agreed change programme.
- Identify individual community needs and tailor services to address these.
- Need to integrate initiatives into people's day-to-day practice.
- Increase the understanding of the plight and issues of asylum seekers.
- Improve and encourage partnership working across all sectors.
- Enable people at all levels in communities to access events and services, including creative events.
- Measure and evaluate the success and/or failure. What do successful programmes and projects look like?
- Support the migrant and refugee organisations at borough level to be able to reach out to communities.

At organisational level

- Understand the implications of cultural change and adopt these changes within the organisation in order to integrate diversity.
- Implement the Single Equalities Act and related legislation in all their activities.
- Keep up strong diversity training.

- Challenge and confront prejudice and discrimination on an organisational level and embed cultural change in daily practice.
- Incorporate the experiences of service users into lobbying, and reflect the core values of your organisation.

At personal level

- Seek information beyond basic services to understand the system, structures and British culture using the local libraries, adult education facilities, internet café for bilingual services, schools, advice bureaux etc.
- Improve language skills and overcome language barriers, using the available audio, electronic and outreach services.
- Seek access to emotional support, identify formal services / networks and utilise social and informal ones.
- Focus on health and wellbeing, seek out leisure and cultural activities and opportunities.
- Find out about childcare access.
- Question, challenge and object to the status quo where appropriate.
- Actively seek out the company of different cultures, expand your cultural experience and share yours.
- Look for or aim to be a role model.

Equalities – facilitated by Olvia Fellas, Head of Equalities, London Borough of Islington.

This workshop aimed to address the ‘six strands of equality’ and cross strand issues. It looked into equality impact assessments and the implications for RCOs, as well as identifying equality issues not being met.

Implications of equality impact assessments (EqIAs)

- Awareness of EqIAs and equality issues in general, is not necessarily translating into practice.
- Possibility of better partnership working through using the EqIA as a tool for engagement between the statutory and voluntary sectors.
- Case studies and practical examples of EqIAs would be helpful.
- Lead to changing attitudes and valuing of different backgrounds / cultures.

Equalities not being met

- Socio-economic status, and the impact of that on service users in the education, health and immigration systems, is under-represented within equalities.

- Lack of awareness of rights and entitlements may mean equalities are not being achieved in certain communities.

Health (Social and Economic) – facilitated by Emma Whitby, Head of LINK Services, Voluntary Action Islington.

This workshop looked at the barriers to service access and what service providers could do to reduce these. The group also addressed the barriers individuals face in keeping themselves healthy. The aim of the workshop was to highlight key improvements that can be made to improve the health and access to health service for refugee and migrant communities.

Barriers to service access

- Negative attitudes of staff especially in GP receptions.
- Professionals often lack cultural understanding or empathy.
- A lack of advocacy services for refugees and migrants.
- Services are not targeted enough at specific communities.
- Lack of interpreters and the interpreting of health information.
- Privacy and family dynamics affected by use of family members for interpreting. Children are often used as interpreters and this can have a psychological impact.
- Inconsistency of information.
- People don't understand the complaints system (PALS) and how to use it. PALS has a low profile.
- Lack of healthy eating and home heating advice for older people experiencing poverty.
- People are not aware of their benefit entitlements, how to complete forms and their rights regarding applications.

Options to reduce barriers

- Use the language skills of community members to address a lack in interpreting services.
- Professionals should refuse to see patients without a third party interpreter, and not rely on family to interpret.
- Provide wider array of interpreted information. For example with Swine Flu more information in different languages should have been available rather than relying on community leaders to have to advise on this medical issue.
- Recruit more bilingual / multilingual staff in health services.
- Welcome classes which introduce the NHS and GP system should be provided to new arrivals.
- Encourage users to learn English and use their initiative where possible.
- Organise more community activities, e.g. health walks.

- More NHS led sessions in community settings focussing on local systems, significant health issues and healthy living.
- Provide more Link workers.
- Provide greater education on benefit applications and rights.
- Increase the use of open spaces by encouraging people to grow their own food – e.g. Groundwork Grants, Edible Islington.

Conclusion

The Enriching Communities conference was the first joint conference organised with the support of Islington Improving Reach which brought refugee forums of both Hackney and Islington boroughs together. Since the conference there has been positive feedback from the representatives of voluntary and community organisations, statutory bodies and panel members about the level of discussion, interactivity of the attendees at the workshops and the quality of organisation before and during the event. Improving Reach, IRF and HRF have been approached by a number of organisations and individuals, as well as statutory sector staff asking if a follow-up conference could be organised in future to evaluate if the findings from the conference would be taken under serious consideration by service providers. More collaborative working across the boroughs was also a recurring theme from participants' feedback.

One of the most important outcomes of the conference was the ways to engage the host community organisations and service providers in the work of refugee and migrant organisations. The main understanding is that the enrichment of refugee communities in both boroughs is very difficult to gain without the support of host communities. Their support and understanding is important for the enrichment of refugee communities.

The discussions focused on four key areas of enrichment: partnership, equalities, health and integration. The conference did not only talk of the barriers that the refugee communities face in terms of enrichment in depth but also invited suggestions on how to overcome these barriers. During the discussions one of the main suggestions was to focus on education and training issues in our communities so to reduce barriers and promote positive integration. Working in partnership to create resources and facilities to train leading members of our communities (e.g. facilitators programme, courses for management committee members, training for front line workers etc) would be a good way forward to enrich our refugee and migrant communities.

Overall the Enriching Communities conference was a great success and provided the voluntary sector and the statutory services with invaluable experience on how to tackle the issues that arise and what services are required to enhance the enrichment of these communities, as well as developing partnership working.

The way forward

- Improving Reach at Voluntary Action Islington, the Islington Refugee Forum and the Hackney Refugee Forum to advocate this approach in working with their counterparts organisations.
- Negotiate with London Borough of Hackney and London Borough of Islington to share their experience working across the two boroughs with other London boroughs.
- Negotiate with the funders on how to promote this approach across different organisations and boroughs.
- Open dialogue with pan-London second tier organisations to explore the possibility of widening up this approach.

Enriching Communities Conference

Tuesday 1st December 2009

Improving Reach in partnership with Islington Refugee Forum & Hackney Refugee Forum are organising a conference on Enriching Communities Conference.

Programme

9:30	Registration & Networking	
10:00	Opening remarks by Improving Reach, Islington & Hackney Refugee Forums.	
10.10	Jeremy Corbyn MP	
10:15	Olvia Fellas , Head of Equalities, London Borough of Islington <i>Enriching Communities through Equalities</i>	
10:30	Ian Lewis , Director of Partnership, London Borough of Hackney <i>Enriching Communities through Partnerships</i>	
10:45	Zrinka Bralo , Executive Director, Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum <i>Enriching communities through Integration & Community Cohesion</i>	
11:00	Amna Mahmoud , Project & Policy Officer, Diversity & Social Policy Team, GLA <i>Refugee Integration Strategy</i>	
11:15	Questions for speakers	
11:30	Break	
11:40	Workshops	
	Health (social and Economic)	Facilitator: Emma Whitby, Islington Link
	Equalities	Facilitator: Olvia Fellas, Islington Council
	Partnership	Facilitator: Ian Lewis, Hackney Council
	Integration and community cohesion	Facilitator: Amna Mahmoud, GLA
12:10	Feedback from workshops	
12:50	Way Forward & Summary	
13:00	Lunch	

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