PROVIDING A SAFE HAVEN
– HOUSING ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

A CIH Policy Paper
How to deal with asylum seekers and refugees is a major political issue, especially following the news that numbers of asylum applications reached 110,000 last year. The numbers themselves have been contentious – but almost equally controversial has been the issue of where asylum seekers should live, and whether and how they should have access to local services.

This policy paper looks at accommodation and related issues, especially from the viewpoint of how we achieve greater community cohesion – or avoid loss of cohesion where it already exists. It draws from CIH work for the Housing Practitioner Group established by the Community Cohesion Unit in the Home Office, but represents CIH – not Government – policy.

The purpose of the paper is both to influence Government policy on asylum seekers and refugees, and to influence housing practice. It is based on discussions with and information from a number of local authorities and housing associations working in this field.

What is community cohesion?
Community cohesion incorporates and goes beyond the concept of race equality and social inclusion. The broad working definition (from the Guidance on Community Cohesion\(^1\)) is that a cohesive community is one where:

- There is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- The diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities;
- Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

Asylum seekers and refugees in perspective

How did we get to the present position? Numbers of asylum seekers coming to European countries have grown considerably. Those coming to the UK numbered 20-40,000 per year for most of the 1990s, then numbers suddenly grew to 70-80,000 per year from 1999 onwards and are now running at even higher levels – although there is already evidence that these are likely to be exceptional.

But even though the UK is one of the larger recipients of asylum seekers in Europe, in proportion to population size seven European countries receive more asylum seekers. Some developing countries adjacent to states that are in conflict also – of course – receive massively higher numbers of refugees than does the UK.

The main reason for the growth in numbers is conflict or human rights problems in different countries.\(^2\) The main growth in numbers in 2002 was from Iraq and Zimbabwe – both countries at the forefront of the news for human rights problems – and China and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which have, respectively, major human rights problems and a civil war. Countries where problems are reducing – such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Turkey – saw big falls in numbers of asylum applications last year.

The growth in numbers coming here has led to tighter controls on entry, so that many asylum seekers now arrive illegally or on a false pretext (e.g. as visitors). It has also led to restrictions on the help available (e.g. the short-lived voucher system). Most recently, the Government has introduced rules preventing asylum seekers who fail to make their claims ‘as soon as reasonably practicable’ from receiving basic assistance, despite the fact that, proportionally, such claims come from people whose cases are more likely to be accepted. The Government has also said recently that it wants to focus policy on reducing illegal entry, and has promised to halve applications by September 2003.

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The growth in numbers overwhelmed both the processing system (leading to long delays whilst applicants’ status was resolved) and the systems for housing and caring for the people themselves. This led to a drastic revision of procedures and to the setting up of NASS and the scheme for dispersing asylum seekers to various parts of the country.

Asylum seekers (people whose status has not yet been decided) now receive only certain kinds of help from public authorities – temporary housing, very limited financial assistance – and are prevented from working, because of their transitional status. Refugees (successful asylum seekers) have more permanent status and greater freedoms, but – especially to begin with – they are bound to be affected by what has happened to them as asylum seekers (in terms of where they live, their experience of the indigenous community, their opportunities to start to learn English and make their own way in the country).

**Definitions**
- **Asylum-seeker**: a person claiming to be a refugee and seeking recognition of refugee status.
- **Refugee**: a person recognised as being entitled to refugee status under UN Convention

**How have housing agencies responded?**

Housing agencies have a mixed track record in dealing with asylum seekers. Many local authorities responded to the dispersal demands from the Home Office, but with varying degrees of sensitivity. There are some notable examples of housing associations working with asylum seekers, but equally many examples of poor co-operation. There are inconsistent practices between different areas in how refugees are treated under homelessness legislation, and whether and to what extent the needs of asylum seekers and refugees are considered in local policies on race and equality.

The private rented sector is used directly by NASS, leading in a minority of cases to problems of exploitation, poor conditions and little attention to the wider support that clients often require. NASS has sometimes awarded block contracts to the private sector at ‘rent’ levels in excess of the average; this has caused problems in the private letting market where landlords now expect higher rents, often in return for poor quality accommodation. This also causes problems with local people who view this as Government help for asylum seekers to pay rents that residents themselves could not afford.

Some dispersal has been successful, leading to good practice in places like Yorkshire which can now be followed. Other cases were unsuccessful, most dramatically with the murder of the Kurdish asylum seeker Firsat Dag in Sighthill, Glasgow, the use of poor quality private accommodation in places like North West England, and difficulty in securing sufficient ‘dispersal’, so that places like Dover still suffer considerable pressures.

**The challenge**

The challenge for housing practitioners arises at two levels. First, how to provide fairly for people coming into their communities. Second, how to do so in ways which strengthen – or at least do not worsen – prospects for community cohesion.

Fair provision is partly about promoting good practice – we give examples later. But it also raises policy issues:
- Limitations placed by Government on the help available to asylum seekers – made to reduce the attractiveness of the UK as a destination.
- Restrictions on asylum seekers’ own ability to help themselves.
- Dispersal of asylum seekers to inappropriate locations in some cases – to accommodate large numbers – creating community tensions.

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• Asylum seekers and refugees gravitating to ‘safe’ locations, especially London, exacerbating housing and other pressures there.
• Failure to recognise fully the help needed by asylum seekers as ‘new arrivals’, the more so if they are escaping traumatic experiences in their country of origin.
• Asylum seekers needing greater levels of services than the average for the indigenous population (for example, mental health problems and translation services in both health and education). Not only does this place a strain on local services, they also tend to be services which are already severely rationed (mental health being a good example).
• Problems about providing support may be exacerbated by decisions taken at short notice to locate asylum seekers in large numbers in specific places.

Tackling wider issues of community cohesion also depends partly on how asylum seekers and refugees gain access to accommodation and services. But it also raises issues which are much wider and more intractable:
• Media portrayal of asylum seekers is often highly negative – as ‘illegal immigrants,’ ‘scroungers’ dependent on hand-outs, as criminals breaking into transport facilities like the channel tunnel, or even – most recently – as terrorists or carriers of disease (see box).
• Numbers are portrayed as overwhelming or out of control, and legal immigration is often conflated with asylum, as in media reporting last year of the assertion that 200,000 migrants are arriving annually or that one in ten Londoners are asylum seekers or refugees (see box).
• These problems are important in themselves, but also because it is impossible to separate the images of asylum seekers from perceptions of refugees, other immigrants, or even the British-born BME community.
• Asylum seekers whose cases are accepted – especially if they have experienced racism or lack of community acceptance – may find difficulty in overcoming this and contributing to community cohesion in the areas where they settle.

Asylum seekers and the media
Earlier this year The Sun ran a campaign against asylum seekers ‘End the asylum madness’. It argued ‘this sea of humanity is polluted with terrorism and disease and threatens our way of life ... Blair must say no more now, revoke the human rights law and lock up all the illegals now until they can be checked.’ Hundreds of thousands of Sun readers signed up to its campaign.

Numbers in perspective
Even at current exceptionally high levels of 110,000 per annum (including dependents), asylum applicants represent only one in every thousand people coming into the UK each year as visitors, on business or as migrants. It would be naïve to suppose that risks associated with visitors from abroad – whether terrorism, disease or drugs – are confined to or mainly associated with asylum seekers. Even if they were, a more rational response would be to open more regulated routes to seeking asylum, where applicants can be better monitored, rather than forcing people to enter illegally.

What needs to be put right?

The Housing Corporation’s study concluded that much housing practice three years ago was either mediocre or bad. It attributed this in part to government policy, legislation and financial restrictions, but also to organisational inefficiency, poor policy, and inadequate training and resources at local level. The report argued that there were instances of institutional racism with assumptions made about asylum seekers’ needs or behaviour that were not evidence-based.

We have looked again at the Housing Corporation research but have also obtained views and information from contacts with a number of agencies involved in helping asylum seekers and refugees, including regions such as the North-West, Yorkshire and Humberside and the East Midlands where there have both been problems in meeting accommodation needs satisfactorily – and innovative action to resolve these problems.
This paper deals mainly with the situation in England, Wales and Scotland. There are some similar issues in Northern Ireland although there are far fewer asylum cases and the Housing Executive has a contractual role to provide accommodation and support. Because of the land border with the Republic, smuggling is a bigger problem than elsewhere in the UK, and recent legislation denying support to those who fail to make immediate applications is even more problematic. Asylum seekers are also initially detained in prison as a matter of course.

The public image of asylum seekers

How the public sees asylum seekers has a major impact on their integration and also affects people from BME communities who are not asylum seekers. The problems are:

• Negative press treatment of asylum seekers, nationally and locally.
• Difficulties caused by high-profile government action to apprehend asylum seekers, making it more difficult to persuade communities to accept them.
• Low levels of material and financial support – asylum seekers may appear destitute, or cannot use local facilities, or have little to do during the day, which affects the way local people see them.
• Failure by housing agencies to prepare ‘host’ communities in some cases.
• Dispersal to very deprived areas because of pressure to accommodate large numbers (Home Office cluster areas overlap closely with the 88 LA areas identified by the NRU as having the highest levels of social exclusion).

Support for asylum seekers

Whether housing and other agencies can offer the right levels of support to asylum seekers is affected by:

• Whether funding is available at all – current legislation withdraws basic support in asylum cases where the person fails to apply immediately on arrival.
• Availability of funding for wider support services.
• The state of the local housing market and whether there are sufficient dwellings available to meet the needs.
• The extent to which agencies such as the Housing Corporation recognise the importance of providing accommodation to asylum seekers.
• LAs and other agencies (police, health, etc) not recompensed for the full impact of extra demands placed upon them.
• Asylum seekers’ community care needs (e.g. adapted housing) – difficult to meet at short notice.
• Slow awareness of/lack of skills in housing agencies to deal with a multiplicity of needs (eg. language needs – 52 languages spoken by asylum seekers in Leicester).
• In some areas (eg Dover) numbers impose a severe strain on services, probably affecting services for local residents.
• Poor access to health and other services in some areas; additional health needs not acknowledged.
• Lack of other vital services: leisure (boredom is a real problem), local transport (expensive) adult education and good legal services (otherwise must travel).

From asylum seeker to accepted refugee

Asylum seekers whose cases are accepted may have problems making the transition, or finding their way as refugees, because of:

• Delays in dealing with cases (although these are improving) – which delay assimilation of the families/individuals involved.
• Restrictions on the extent to which asylum seekers can be integrated, given restrictions on employment, limited access to benefits, etc.
• The short time between decisions on cases and refugees being ‘on their own’ (in theory 28 days, in practice often less than this).
• Delays in notifying local authorities about decisions.
• Pressure on permanent accommodation in many areas (and competition with the needs of the indigenous community).
• Authorities using accommodation in other areas to place refugees, without informing the ‘receiving’ local authority.
• Cluster areas may coincide with other migration, e.g., Leicester has had migration from the EU. There can also be secondary migration from other parts of the UK.
• Possible tensions between refugee groups, and with established BME groups (in addition to more obvious white/black tensions), e.g., when refugees arrive from both sides of a conflict, or when resources are scarce.
• The need for more widespread support services and promotion of good practice; lack of skilled staff.
• The need for promotion of good practice in ‘preparing’ communities to receive/integrate refugees (e.g., ‘hosting’ schemes, etc).
• Inconsistent treatment of refugees by different local authorities in terms of homelessness legislation and acceptance on housing registers.
• The need for National Insurance numbers to be allocated more quickly to aid integration and help people find work.

How housing agencies are already responding

But the picture is by no means universally gloomy, and there are already many examples of innovatory schemes from which lessons can be drawn for change at both national and local levels.

Here are some examples of constructive approaches by housing agencies in assimilating asylum seekers and refugees, and which are likely to help in promoting community cohesion.4

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<tr>
<th>Practical examples – asylum seekers</th>
<th>Example organisation(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specialist service providing accommodation and support (including staff with relevant language skills)</td>
<td>Safe Haven Yorkshire; Mosscare HA; Stonham HA and Home HA, Newcastle; LB of Barking and Dagenham; Bournemouth Churches HA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hostel accommodation for single asylum seekers</td>
<td>LB Lambeth/English Churches HA; Ipswich Borough Homes</td>
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<td>Support worker, plus dedicated units in normal housing stock</td>
<td>Ealing Family HA</td>
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<td>Specialist ‘asylum seeker coordinator’ employed</td>
<td>Leicester City Council; Glasgow City Council</td>
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<td>Coordination between agencies and/or adjoining authorities</td>
<td>Oxford Multi-Agency Forum; North West Consortium</td>
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<td>Employing ex-asylum seekers as support workers for current asylum seekers</td>
<td>Safe Haven Yorkshire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepare communities for receipt of asylum seekers</td>
<td>Nottingham City Council (with Bosnian asylum seekers)</td>
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<td>Action to ensure asylum seekers’ ongoing needs are dealt with in the 28 day period following a decision on their cases</td>
<td>Liverpool City Council</td>
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<tr>
<th>Practical examples – refugees</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accept refugees for rehousing in normal stock</td>
<td>Arawak/Walton HA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Material support for refugees moving into permanent accommodation, eg furniture</td>
<td>Focus HA; Safe Haven Yorkshire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal support for refugees</td>
<td>Arawak/Walton HA; Tees Valley Housing Group; Ujima HA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specific support for single male refugees</td>
<td>Atlantic Housing Group; Adelphi Hotels Ltd (a private contractor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using ‘supporting people’ for short-term and long-term support schemes</td>
<td>Safe Haven Yorkshire (short-term); Refugee Housing Association (long-term)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accommodation for specific ethnic groups</td>
<td>Places for People (for Somali refugees, with Somali support staff)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Links with training, employment opportunities</td>
<td>Cardiff City Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explicit commitment to asylum seekers/refugees (eg. expressed at board level and emphasised to all staff)</td>
<td>Leicester City Council; Mosscare HA; Focus HA</td>
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4. Many are taken from Zetter, R and Pearl, M (1999) Managing to Survive – Asylum seekers, refugees and access to social housing. This report is being updated for the Housing Corporation and the examples have been checked with the report author; the final version will contain many more examples. Other examples here are taken from CIH Good Practice Unit material and other up-to-date sources.
Practical examples – refugees | Example organisation(s)
---|---
Council has a ‘refugee housing strategy’ and/or procedure document | Leicester City Council; Cardiff City Council
Mainstream HA has partnership links with specialist refugee HAs or support groups | East Thames Housing Group; Wandle HA
Positive efforts to integrate refugees into existing communities | Leicester City Council; Safe Haven Yorkshire’s ‘Community Housing Inclusion Project’; Providence Row HA (Tower Hamlets)
‘Hosting’ asylum seekers/refugees by families in existing communities | Leicester City Council

Proposals for change

The Chartered Institute of Housing wants to see a more constructive Government policy towards asylum seekers and refugees, positive action to change their public image, and the development of good practice by all housing agencies, not just those who are so far committed to positive action. Here are our proposals.

Asylum seekers – the overall message

1. Adopt ‘community cohesion’ as a key aim of government policy on asylum – check all new proposals from a ‘community cohesion’ perspective as well as whether they reduce/control numbers.
2. Change the political message – stop referring to asylum seekers mainly as a problem to be controlled.
3. Encourage positive media treatment of asylum seekers/refugees, e.g. successful examples of integration, host communities welcoming newcomers, etc. – which would assist in assimilation and preparing host communities.
4. Reverse recent measures which deny even basic support to asylum seekers who do not apply immediately on entry.
5. Avoid national dispersal arrangements which exacerbate integration problems and/or labelling of asylum seekers – for example, placing asylum seekers in very deprived areas, or locating accommodation centres in rural areas with few facilities, or having insufficient regard to the local impact of dispersal.
6. Continue efforts to speed decision-making on asylum cases.

Asylum seekers – housing issues

1. Ensure that NASS develops a housing-based dispersal system, which provides good quality accommodation and support services in appropriate areas – not just coping with the numbers of people dispersed.
2. Provide advice to housing agencies on how to prepare ‘host’ communities; promote good practice more widely (e.g. through the CIH Good Practice Unit).
3. Require LA housing and homelessness strategies, and BME housing strategies and needs assessments, to deal with asylum seekers/refugees, including their support needs; ensure that these deal with wider service needs/impacts, not just housing needs.
4. Have a clearer strategy for the use of private sector accommodation, with minimum standards, provided in appropriate areas where support is available, with rents that relate to local rents, and with notification and fallback arrangements with the local authority (to ensure services are available and that the LA can act if the accommodation arrangement breaks down).
5. Only make new contracts with private landlords after consultation with the LA concerned.
6. Make available basic housing advice (in appropriate languages) to refugees whilst they are still asylum seekers and in NASS accommodation.
7. Clarify the responsibilities of housing and advice agencies for advice to those moving on from NASS accommodation.
8. Ensure that the immigration service has a defined role in dealing with asylum cases which are refused, so that the responsibility does not rest mainly with accommodation providers and that they are recompensed whilst refused applicants continue to occupy accommodation.
9. Encourage housing associations to provide accommodation for asylum seekers in appropriate areas – and not only where properties would otherwise be difficult to let.

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**Asylum seekers – wider support issues**

1. Ensure adequate, clear, translated information to asylum seekers about the asylum process, accommodation arrangements and their local area.
2. Review skills needed and actually available to provide support – consider how to develop skills more widely.
3. Ensure that Race Equality Schemes produced by LAs and other relevant public bodies cover asylum/refugee needs alongside those of existing BME populations.
4. Aim to ensure that areas receiving asylum seekers gain some wider community advantage (eg new facilities) to avoid the impression that only asylum seekers are being helped.
5. Carefully monitor success of dispersal in alleviating local pressures and in encouraging (or not detracting from) community cohesion. Implement proposals to give all asylum seekers short induction courses on arrival.
6. Allow asylum seekers to work while their claims are being assessed.
7. Promote schemes to make use of language and other skills of asylum seekers themselves.
8. Review arrangements for co-ordinating services that provide health and welfare support to asylum seekers, to ensure more adequate support, particularly for victims of torture or other trauma.

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**Refugees**

Lack of choice about housing, identified as a key issue in the reports on community cohesion, applies even more sharply to refugees than other BME groups. Many of the key issues in addressing this have already been raised through the National Refugee Integration Forum – Accommodation Sub Group. This list draws from their proposals:

1. Establish the principle that accommodation for refugees should be in secure, integrated communities which (where appropriate) have been informed and prepared for their acceptance.
2. Even if treatment for asylum seekers is governed by ‘deterrence’, make sure that this changes for refugees (e.g. send them a ‘Welcome to Britain’ leaflet with their decision letter).
3. Recognise that refugees will be eligible for help under homelessness legislation and are covered by the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000.
4. Review ‘local connection’ provisions to ensure that refugees are eligible for rehousing in dispersal areas.
5. Aim to ensure that successful asylum seekers and their housing providers have the full 28 day period available to find alternative accommodation and make other arrangements.
6. Consider allowing refugees to retain their NASS accommodation if they want to, and where practicable – particularly where the LA would have a duty under homelessness legislation – if possible with NASS support continuing until refugees have made a permanent move.
7. Encourage accepted refugees to stay in the same areas as new arrivals to help in assimilation.
8. Ensure immediate access to benefits and help with jobs, training, etc. to aid integration. Agree a joint NASS/Benefits Agency protocol on how this show be done.
9. Urge LAs and HAs to include refugee housing needs as part of their wider assessments of BME housing needs and development of BME housing strategies, and include refugee groups in arrangements such as Local Strategic Partnerships.
10. Encourage involvement of asylum seekers and refugees, as service users, in decision-making on services.
11. Provide adequate capital and revenue funding for refugee housing and support, based on needs assessments by the regional consortia in conjunction with housing agencies.
12. Recognise the capital investment needs of cluster areas in Government decisions on resources.
13. Provide funding for refugee resettlement workers in cluster areas to aid the transition process (e.g. through ‘supporting people’ funding).
14. Recognise that tackling ASB and racial harassment are particularly important in successful integration of refugees.
15. Examine why some housing agencies are unwilling/unable to provide accommodation, what the barriers are and how they should be tackled. Establish a challenge fund to promote new and innovatory approaches to provision.