training module 5: housing

What this module includes:

- why housing is important
- the range of housing needs
- refugee housing needs at the 'point of decision'
- longer-term refugee housing needs
- housing needs for new migrants
- assessing needs among all migrant groups
- further resources

[Refer to chapter 4 of the CIH/JRF guide]

Why housing is important

Obviously, good housing is important to anyone, but for migrant households it is often especially important because they may well have gone through a period – perhaps a long period – of living in temporary accommodation or very insecure conditions. Having a proper place to live and a fixed address means that people can start to integrate properly and get access to benefits and services.

asylum seekers and housing

Most asylum seekers are not eligible for local authority accommodation or nominations, are not allowed to work and are not able to claim DWP benefits and so are not potential customers of housing associations. The CIH/JRF guide gives examples (page 23) of when this might nevertheless be the case. The guide goes on to outline the system of public support for asylum seekers through the Borders and Immigration Agency (previously known as IND or NASS).

refugees

Refugees are eligible for accommodation in the ways that apply to UK citizens. A particularly critical period is that immediately following a positive decision on their refugee status, when they might need to leave NASS accommodation with very little notice. This and other issues about refugee housing are covered in this module.

new migrants

As we saw in module 3, the rules relating to housing assistance for new migrants generally are complex. Many will not be eligible for housing help, and will be living in accommodation arranged by employers. However, issues may arise about the quality and management of the accommodation, or the arrangements may break down, eg if people lose their jobs.
The range of housing needs

This module concentrates on housing issues for refugees and for new migrants. It is more detailed on issues about new migrant housing as the CIH/JRF guide covers refugee housing in some detail (and references will be given). The issues to be covered will therefore be:

- refugee housing needs at the ‘point of decision’ when their status is decided.
- longer-term refugee housing issues.
- housing issues for other new migrants.

Issues about destitution are covered in module 6 and about accommodation for Gateway refugees in module 10.

Refugee housing needs at the ‘point of decision’

Several studies have identified the ‘point of decision’ – the time when asylum seekers receive the decision on their case – as the most critical from the point of view of resolving housing needs and (if possible) avoiding homelessness. If the decision is negative (or a negative decision is confirmed on appeal), as we saw in module 2, an asylum seeker loses the right to any support in most circumstances. If he/she decides to stay in the UK they risk becoming destitute.

If the decision is positive, the (now accepted) refugee has 28 days in which to find alternative accommodation, obtain HB, get furniture and perhaps apply for other benefits. However, in practice, administrative delays may mean that housing providers have an even shorter time in which to assist. So only good coordination and rapid action by housing providers can prevent many accepted refugees from being made homeless (see example on p41 of the CIH/JRF guide).

Since the CIH/JRF guide was published, the situation has changed in that many recent asylum seekers are receiving immigration decisions much more quickly. While this is welcome, other elements of the process have not necessarily improved or speeded up.

It also means that they have had much less time to learn English and find out 'how the system works': they may be even more vulnerable at the ‘point of decision’.

Preventing homelessness

Because accepted refugees are eligible for local authority housing and nominations, and for help under homelessness legislation, they should be covered by local authority and housing association strategies to prevent homelessness.

Two aspects are particularly relevant to housing associations:

- The government has urged housing providers to be particularly responsive to BME homelessness, as it is higher than for the indigenous population. CLG guidance on this includes refugees but not new migrants (see resource list at end of module).
Preventing homelessness is part of housing associations’ ‘efficiency agenda’ and there is CIH/Housing Corporation guidance on this. The Housing Corporation homelessness strategy seeks to embed prevention of homelessness and sustaining tenancies as strategic priorities for associations (see resource list).

**Discussion: How do we fit into local strategies to prevent homelessness?**

- do the local authorities we work with have such strategies?
- do they have a special focus on BME groups, including refugees/migrants?
- do we have our own strategy or action plan to prevent homelessness?
- do we have the right partnerships in place to deliver it?
- have we looked at this from the ‘efficiency’ perspective?

**Refugees’ longer-term housing needs**

The CIH/JRF guide (pp 37-45) gives examples of different approaches to accommodating refugees in the longer-term and has (p29) a ‘map’ of the routes into housing in one local authority area.

**Discussion: How do we help meet refugee housing needs?**

- what is the ‘map’ for refugee routes into housing in areas where we work?
- what part do we play in this?
- what can we learn from examples like those in the guide?
- do our lettings and other policies properly recognise refugee housing needs?

**Housing needs of new migrants**

As we discussed in module 1, there are many different categories of migrant apart from asylum seekers and refugees, although some (such as au pairs) are not likely to have a significant impact on local social housing providers. Many new migrants are also from the Indian sub-continent (Sri Lanka, Pakistan & India) and tend to join their established communities.

Here we focus on the housing needs of two groups: migrants from long-established (pre-2004) EU states, and those from the new EU accession states (A8 or A2 countries – see modules 1 and 3).

**Migrants from long-established EU states**

Because of the long-standing freedom of movement within the EU before 2004, there has always been migration between EU countries, including to and from the UK. Many people from EU countries probably occupy social housing or have received help under homelessness legislation, but are unlikely to be particularly evident to their social landlords.
One category of people – although not separately identified in any statistics – that does pose significant housing issues is the secondary migration to the UK of people accepted as refugees in other EU countries. In England, the main group in this category has been Somali people moving from countries such as Holland to cities such as Leicester, Sheffield and Bolton, in some cases in significant numbers over a fairly short time period (in the case of Leicester, around 8,000 people). Often these cities already had established, but smaller, Somali refugee or migrant communities.

**Somali/EU people – housing needs**

A particular issue with Somali/EU migrants has been their desire to live in communities, which public authorities made it difficult for them to do in Holland (where there is a very active dispersal policy). By settling in areas in the UK that were already ethnically-mixed, they put pressure on the social housing stock and as a result there has often been tension between ethnic groups (eg Somalis and Afro-Caribbean people).

Also, Somali Muslims have not necessarily felt welcome in existing mosques and meeting places and have wanted to establish their own community facilities. (In the case of Birmingham, Somali businesses have revived the city’s Stratford Road area.)

Councils like Leicester have therefore worked (often in partnership with housing associations and local tenants’ associations) to encourage and support moves by Somali families into new areas – even ones which previously have been hostile to new migrants. This has been particularly necessary to meet the increased demand for large family accommodation.

**Migrants from EU accession states**

After May 2004, migration from the countries which became the new EU states increased markedly. Up to September 2006, over 500,000 people from those countries registered to work in the UK (although the number here at any one time is probably much less than that). Numbers will continue to remain high, with people arriving weekly from the accession states, often on official work schemes (eg for low-paid farm work).

Because they are often not a priority for local authority nominations or help under homelessness legislation, the main housing impact of these migrants is in the private sector. There are three main areas of need.

**people in tied accommodation**

Many of the work schemes require accommodation to be arranged in advance. However, this may be very basic accommodation (especially in rural areas) with poor conditions, high numbers of people sharing facilities, and dormitory arrangements for sleeping.

Apart from the issue of the quality of the accommodation, employers or the intermediary gang masters may take advantage of migrants by deducting at source a higher ‘board and lodging’ payment than is reasonable. Migrants may also be at risk of destitution if they lose their job for some reason and do not go back to their home country.
people in the private rented sector

If people arrive without having arranged work/accommodation in advance, they may end up in poor private sector conditions, perhaps even in illegal lettings (e.g. people sleeping in roof spaces) that may be hazardous both for the migrants and for other people in the building (e.g. through fire risk).

In spite of the enhanced powers to deal with houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) provided in the Housing Act 2004, many authorities claim they do not have the resources to act. It has been especially difficult to cope in areas with increased numbers of HMOs that are accommodating migrant workers and where conditions may be particularly poor.

destitution

Although not yet thought to be as significant an issue as destitution among asylum seekers, migrants from EU accession states have started to be found ‘sleeping rough’ in London and elsewhere. Some people may be doing this even if they are still working, others may have lost all means of support and be dependent on charitable help. Homeless Link has published an informative guide to working with homeless or destitute A8 nationals (whose principles would apply also to A2 nationals - see resource list at end of module).

Assessing housing needs of all migrants

Assessing housing needs among migrant groups of all kinds is not an easy task as census information is often out of date, does not give the information needed and may well not cover the groups in question in any event. Local authorities and housing associations are often in the position of having to piece together information from different sources which almost inevitably gives an incomplete picture.

Here are some possible sources of information:

asylum seekers

Numbers of asylum seekers dispersed to an area, or supported on a subsistence-only basis are provided by NASS and are available at regional level. NASS figures do not cover asylum seekers who do not claim support or who become destitute.

refugees

Numbers are only known at the ‘point of decision’ (except in the case of special schemes like Gateway), and LAs are supposed to monitor refugee homelessness and include it in their prevention strategies (see CLG ‘health check’ guide in resource list).

Because there is no accepted period over which someone remains a ‘refugee’, housing needs thereafter tend not to be identified separately from those of the population generally. But of course this does not mean that refugees do not have separate support needs in many cases (see later modules).

migrants from long-established EU states

Groups such as the Somali communities mentioned above do not ‘show up’ in regular statistics and may not be evident from census figures.

Special surveys are likely to be needed (see below).
migrants from EU accession states

Again, sources are limited. Some available sources cited in the Audit Commission report (see resource list below) include:

- DWP records of national insurance numbers given to foreign nationals.
- Home Office worker registration scheme.
- DfES data on languages spoken in schools.

The Audit Commission also suggests making links with known local employers of EU workers and contacts with frontline agencies such as the police.

Local surveys and links with local groups and agencies

Ideally, local housing needs surveys will be extended so as to cover migrant groups. But they are expensive and not likely to take place frequently, so more ad hoc methods may be required.

Establishing a relationship with local migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) or with local advice agencies and faith groups can provide invaluable, if impressionistic, information. This approach is an essential starting point in finding out where to look. Sustaining the relationship can support a constant flow of community intelligence as the picture can change quickly.

Some MRCOs (like has already happened with a range of Somali groups in Sheffield) have carried out (or may be willing to carry out) local surveys to establish numbers and types of local housing and support needs. In the Sheffield case, the groups received a grant which enabled them to train local people to do the survey work.

The Audit Commission report has references to examples of local needs surveys.

Resources on homelessness prevention

The resources referred to earlier in this module are:

- the ‘development guide’ Tackling Homelessness amongst Ethnic Minority Households (available at www.communities.gov.uk)
- the CIH/Housing Corporation briefing paper Homelessness Prevention and Housing Associations – Contributing to Efficiency (available at www.cih.org/policy).
- the Housing Corporation homelessness strategy (available at www.housingcorp.gov.uk/server/show/nav.2135).

Resources on new migrant housing issues

The CIH/JRF guide provides further resources on asylum seeker and refugee housing needs, but does not cover new migrant needs in any depth.
Three recent, useful sources of information are:

- the Audit Commission report *Crossing Borders – Responding to the Challenge of Migrant Workers* is available from the Commission’s website (www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

- the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is sponsoring a range of studies on new migrant issues: one important forthcoming report is *Life Beyond the Workplace: the experiences of East European migrants in the UK* (see www.jrf.org.uk for availability of this and other studies)

- Homeless Link’s good practice guide *Sharing Solutions: Working with A8 nationals in homelessness services* is available from their website (www.homeless.org.uk).

In addition, *Inside Housing* has carried various articles about new migration and its effect on housing - see, for example, its issue of 12 January 2007.

Follow up to training module 5

- √ do we have a picture of migrant housing needs in the areas where we work?
- √ who do we work with to try to establish and maintain such a picture?
- √ is there already information available?
- √ as a social housing agency, how can we help with needs in the private sector
- √ or with people becoming homeless or destitute?

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