



Home Office

Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration

A draft for consultation

July 2004



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FOREWORD BY DES BROWNE MP, MINISTER OF STATE FOR IMMIGRATION

It is our duty to ensure that the process of asylum and refugee status determination is fair and efficient, and that the process is not subject to undue delay or disruption. We want to find practical ways to overcome these challenges, building on the considerable progress that has been made.

This is the second national strategy for refugee integration for England. It will take over from *Fair and Equal Citizens*, which was published in 2000, and complements the wider strategy on community cohesion and race equality that we are also developing. It offers a fuller analysis of the concept of integration and the ways in which central and local government, the voluntary sector and the private sector can promote it. It brings together major developments over the intervening period: the publication of the report of the *Let's do it UK* Advisory Group, the development of the National Asylum Support Service's new accommodation strategy for asylum seekers.

- How can we ensure the system is fair and efficient?
- How can we help the integration of refugee children in schools?
- What can be done to help refugees find work or training opportunities?
- What can be done to ensure that refugees with particular needs, such as those with mental health problems, can get the help they need?
- How can we build up the role of refugee associations, organisations?
- How can we help the readiness of people to work with refugees in schools?
- What can be done to help refugees find work or training opportunities?

An invitation to contribute

The world is changing faster than ever before. Globalisation, increased longevity, technical progress and mass migration are among the major phenomena of our time and will affect all our futures. As a government, we are committed to changing Britain for the better – while at the same time preserving the best of the old. And the welcome that Britain has always extended to refugees from persecution around the world is one of the proudest elements of our tradition.

But the new blood represented by refugees can be a real source of strength to Britain in our changing world. Many refugees have skills, talents and enthusiasm that can be real assets to Britain if we can help them make the most use of them. But to give of their best, they have to be able to integrate with the host society as quickly and smoothly as possible.

The government has a vision of a successful, integrated society that recognises and celebrates the strength in our diversity. In May we launched a wide-ranging consultation exercise which will lead to a cross-government community cohesion and race equality strategy that will help us to achieve that vision. We recognise that there are challenges that we have to overcome to make this a reality: the impact of exclusion and racism, the rise in political and religious extremism and segregation that can divide our communities. We want to find practical ways to overcome these challenges, building on the considerable progress that has been made.

This is the second national strategy for refugee integration for England. It will take over from *Full and Equal Citizens*, which we published in 2000, and complements the wider strategy on community cohesion and race equality that we are also developing. It offers a fuller analysis of the concept of integration and the ways in which central and local government, the voluntary sector and the private sector can promote it. It brings together major developments over the intervening period: the publication of the report of the *Life in the UK* Advisory Group, the development of the National Asylum Support Service's new accommodation strategy for asylum seekers,

and our new proposals for a tailored programme to help new refugees produce Personal Integration Plans.

This strategy has largely been shaped by the National Refugee Integration Forum, which brings together a wide range of people from all over the country who have in common a professional concern with the welfare of refugees. But now we want wider comments. Naturally, we think that the strategy is right in its basic essentials. But we want to expose it to a broader audience so that we can take on board as wide a range of comments and suggestions as possible when we come to produce the final version.

Many questions will suggest themselves to readers of this strategy. To suggest just a few, these will include:

- How can the new Sunrise caseworking programme best be co-ordinated with existing work, ensuring that we build on it rather than duplicate it?
- What will be the best way of ensuring that the new Refugee Integration Loans genuinely meet refugees' long-term integration needs?
- When piloting the Sunrise programme, which areas would be most suitable to choose?
- Are we suggesting the right indicators to measure the success of our integration policies?
- How can we improve the integration of refugee children in school?
- What else can be done to make refugees feel safe in their communities?
- What more can be done to ensure that refugees with professional qualifications can find employment that makes the best use of their skills?
- How can we build up the role of refugee community organisations?
- How can we improve the readiness of people to work with refugees as mentors?
- What more needs to be done to make public services accessible to refugees?

Foreword

INTEGRATION MATTERS: A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR REFUGEE INTEGRATION

We will welcome your views on these or any other relevant questions that you wish to raise. We are making three months available for this, after which we will publish the final version of this strategy. Please, therefore, send any comments you may have to Cilla Pegg at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, 6th Floor, Apollo House, 36 Wellesley Road, Croydon CR9 3RR, or to Priscilla.Pegg@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

I look forward to learning your reactions to the strategy and to the opportunity to work with you to make it even stronger.

Des Browne MP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

provision, good and bad. The Welsh Language Act 1992 is a landmark specifically in English circumstances there is already a Welsh strategy for which we have done, and there will be a Welsh strategy in the future.

Chapter 2: Defining the challenge

Refugees have very specific needs as a result of their experiences and circumstances, and service providers have already done much and develop ways of meeting them. The most pressing problems that must be addressed typically relate to:

- the provision of information, and knowing where to get it from;
- the ability of service providers;
- collecting accurate data and;
- keeping in contact with refugees.

In addition to these issues, in order to achieve their full potential, refugees face the

and voluntary services. The main responsibility is taken by the Home Office's Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), while the government departments responsible for social benefits, employment, health, housing and education are all fully involved with it. At the regional level, the 14 Charities for Asylum Seekers and Refugee Support, all of which either have or are working towards their own refugee integration strategies, provide the necessary links between central government, local government and voluntary sector services that are of vital importance to refugees.

Crucial work on behalf of refugees is carried out by the voluntary sector. Many of the national voluntary sector organisations working in this field are co-funded by the Home Office, while RCUK and other community-based support groups, often relying entirely on volunteer effort, are

Executive summary

Chapter 1: Introduction: What is integration?

The UK has a heritage of welcoming refugees in which it can take pride. And refugees can make a huge contribution to the enrichment of our national life. A genuinely strategic approach to the integration of refugees is in the interests of the host population and of refugees themselves. This is a strategy for the integration of refugees, and both terms require some explanation. By 'refugees', we mean people who have been recognised as such (as opposed to asylum seekers, whose claims are still under consideration) together with those who have been granted discretionary leave or humanitarian protection. By 'integration', we mean the process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute fully to the community, and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents. This strategy takes forward and amplifies the policies set out in *Full and Equal Citizens*, which was published in 2000, and it should be seen in the context of, and as an important contribution to, the work of the Government and other public bodies in promoting good race relations under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2002. It is tailored specifically to English circumstances: there is already a Scottish strategy, on which we have drawn, and there will be a Welsh strategy in due course.

Chapter 2: Defining the challenge

Refugees have very specific needs as a result of their experiences and circumstances, and service providers must identify these needs and develop ways of meeting them. The cross-cutting problems that must be addressed typically relate to:

- the provision of information, and knowing where to get it from;
- the stability of service provision;
- collecting accurate data; and
- keeping in contact with refugees.

In addition to these issues, in order to **achieve their full potential**, refugees face the

challenges of communicating effectively in the host community's language and of gaining employment appropriate to their abilities and skills. The solutions lie in the provision of opportunities for language training, early contact with Jobcentre Plus, acquisition of work experience, retraining and re-accreditation where necessary, and commitment and openness from employers.

To **contribute to the community** as fully as possible, personal safety is a prerequisite, while negative stereotypes can create artificial barriers between refugees and host populations. Refugee community organisations (RCOs) can play a pivotal role in bridge-building, but too often lack resources. Unaccompanied refugee children need special support.

In gaining **access to public services**, early contact is essential where it has not already been made before refugee status is gained. The issues that need to be addressed here include shortages of appropriate housing and the need for medical assessments where there is no previous NHS record, and we need to ensure that schools are equipped to meet refugee children's needs.

Chapter 3: Mobilising our resources

Many organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors play crucial roles in refugee integration. The lead in government is taken by the Home Office's Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), while the government departments responsible for social benefits, employment, health, housing and education are all fully associated with it. At the regional level, the 13 Consortia for Asylum Seeker and Refugee Support, all of which either have or are working towards their own refugee integration strategies, provide the necessary links between central government, local government and voluntary sector services that are of vital importance to refugees.

Crucial work on behalf of refugees is carried out by the voluntary sector. Many of the national voluntary sector organisations working in this field are core-funded by the Home Office, while RCOs and other community-based support groups, often relying entirely on volunteer effort, are

uniquely well placed to build the confidence of their own community. There are also many foster links with the wider community, and there are many examples of private sector contributions to refugee integration achieved through adherence to good practice, particularly in the employment and housing sectors.

The Cabinet Committee on the social and economic aspects of migration ensures co-ordination of all these contributions at the highest level of government. Closer to working level, the National Refugee Integration Forum (NRIF), chaired by the Minister of State for Immigration, brings together representatives of central and local government, and the voluntary sector, to discuss the direction of policy; its nine sub-groups provide a unique practical perspective on the most important aspects of the integration process, contributing to the strategic planning and delivery of services to refugees.

Three funding programmes administered by the Home Office provide vital resources for the work of the voluntary sector in particular. The Refugee Community Development Fund, the Challenge Fund and the European Refugee Fund totalled £11 million in 2003/04 and between them contributed to nearly 90 projects. The evaluations of these projects will in turn help to build up our knowledge of cost-effective approaches to refugee integration.

Chapter 4: Progress so far

Much has already been achieved under the aegis of the 2000 strategy *Full and Equal Citizens*, both in terms of improved knowledge of the problem and of specific actions taken. In terms of **achieving full potential**, important initiatives have included the development of the Department for Work and Pensions' refugee employment strategy, improved documentation which makes it easier for refugees to find employment, work to make it easier for medically qualified refugees to find employment in the health field, the production of a *Refugee Handbook* for English-language teachers working with refugees, and numerous voluntary sector initiatives.

On **contributing to communities**, the main developments have included improvements to arrangements for reporting racist attacks, the production of fact sheets and media packs to promote balanced coverage of refugee issues, capacity-building for refugee community organisations, and the introduction of citizenship ceremonies. In **accessing public services**, the key initiatives have included the provision of advice services offering support to refugees through the move-on period, improvements in healthcare information available to doctors working with refugees, and the provision of support services to meet the needs of refugee children in schools.

On all sides of the strategy, practical work has been underpinned by research, whether conducted by the Government, the academic community, or the voluntary sector: their findings and recommendations have been crucial in taking the policy agenda forward.

Chapter 5: Delivering new solutions

Although much has already been achieved, further improvements to the strategy can be made. The Government has proposed legislation which will create a 'local connection' under housing law so that new refugees who have been supported by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) will remain in their dispersal areas if they need homelessness assistance, thus improving the planning of services.

A major new initiative will be to pilot a Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services (Sunrise), which will test an approach under which each new refugee who chooses to participate will work with a caseworker to produce a Personal Integration Plan. The plan will be produced during the 28-day period following receipt of refugee status and will include referral to employment help, housing needs, access to other public services, English-language tuition where needed, opportunities for volunteering and for being mentored, and contacts with cultural or faith communities if sought.

The Personal Integration Plan will also set out the use to be made of the Refugee Integration Loan, if the refugee wishes to use this opportunity. The loan will be financed from the abolition of back-payments of Income Support to those granted refugee status, and will be available for use in ways that promote long-term integration.

The Sunrise programme will be delivered by the voluntary sector, working under contract to the Government. It will be piloted in one region in the course of 2005, with national roll-out scheduled to follow if the approach proves its value.

At the same time, the Government intends to provide a further push towards integration of all permanent migrants to the UK, not just refugees, by implementing the citizenship provisions of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. Based on the principles laid down in the report of the *Life in the UK* Advisory Group, chaired by Professor Sir Bernard Crick, the new system will ensure

that people applying for British citizenship are developing their knowledge of English and of what it means to be a citizen of Britain today.

Chapter 6: Taking integration forward

Integration is a complex process and its achievement can be measured in many different ways, but for the purposes of this strategy eight indicators have been selected as being of the most importance, covering each of the three themes: achieving full potential; contributing to communities; and accessing public services. The indicators relate to employment, English-language attainment, volunteering, contact with community organisations, take-up of British citizenship, the proportion of refugees reporting racial, cultural or religious harassment, housing standards, and educational success. Progress against these indicators will be measured through a longitudinal survey of refugees and other migrants conducted by the Home Office, and reports will be published periodically, the first in about 18 months time.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS INTEGRATION?

1.7 Now does the *Chrysomelidae* subfamily *Chrysomelinae* contain more species than the subfamily *Chrysomelinae* in *Chrysomelidae*? The classification and composition of subfamilies are discussed. Well, just as I thought there would be some controversy, they are likely to have just everything in their hands, even though they are not sure what they are doing in this field and suggest several arguments for them to study, or to believe.

Chapter 1: Introduction: What is integration?

INTEGRATION MATTERS: A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR REFUGEE INTEGRATION

1.1 For many centuries, Britain has had a proud reputation as a country where people fleeing harsh treatment for their political or religious views can find safe refuge and build a new life. British jurists took a leading role in drawing up the 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of refugees, which still sets out the legal principles to which we, and virtually all other democracies, undertake to adhere.

1.2 Today, our commitment to that heritage is as strong as ever. Between 1992 and 2002, just under 238,000 people (including dependent children) were granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain in the UK. Most of them were from countries that saw terrible violence and suffering during that period: Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

1.3 Refugees in this country face real problems, and they pose real challenges for public services. But it would be wrong to think of them as a problem in themselves. They bring a wide range of experience and skills, many of which are much needed, and the process of integration will enable them to use these to benefit themselves and our communities.

1.4 This strategy, which supersedes and amplifies the 2000 policy document *Full and Equal Citizens*, sets out the actions the Government is taking and will take to help drive the process of integration forward. It has been written in the light of the duty on the Government, and on all public bodies, to work for the promotion of good race relations, which was introduced by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2002. Indeed, it seeks to provide a major contribution to the fulfilment of that duty. The strategy formally applies in England only. Scotland already has its own refugee integration strategy, tailored to its own circumstances, which has been of great value in drawing up this one. Work is going ahead on a Welsh strategy. The devolved administrations and the Whitehall departments have a great deal to learn from each other in this field and meet frequently to ensure that policies and programmes are fully co-ordinated.

Who is the strategy for?

1.5 First, it is important to define the people who come within the scope of this strategy. It covers the integration of refugees. By this we mean people who have been recognised as refugees and those who have been granted discretionary leave or humanitarian protection. That definition in turn depends on the terms of the 1951 United Nations Convention on the status of refugees, which is the basis of British law on this subject and defines a refugee as someone who has 'a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it'.

1.6 It follows that this integration strategy does not cover asylum seekers whose applications are either still being considered or have been rejected. While the Government does accept that the experiences of asylum seekers before they are recognised as refugees will affect their later integration in a number of ways, it believes that integration in the full sense of the word can take place only when a person has been confirmed as a refugee and can make plans on the basis of a long-term future in the UK.

1.7 Nor does the strategy cover other migrants who are either long-term or permanent residents in the UK. The circumstances and experiences of refugees are distinctive. Refugees by definition have suffered or have feared persecution; they are likely to have lost everything in their home countries; and they are less likely than other migrants to have jobs and support services arranged for them by employers or relatives.

What is integration?

1.8 There is a wide range of academic literature on integration, much of which has contributed to the thinking behind this strategy (the bibliography sets out some of the most important contributions). Our definition of integration for refugees is, however, a simple one.

1.9 Integration takes place when refugees are empowered to:

- achieve their full potential as members of British society;
- contribute fully to the community; and
- access the public services to which they are entitled.

1.10 These three themes – achieving potential, contributing to the community and accessing services – are fundamental to the delivery of this strategy, and they will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections.

1.11 This strategy does not assume that refugees are a homogeneous group. Refugees are, above all, individuals, with complex and diverse backgrounds, skills and qualities. The strategy is relevant to all refugees, but particularly to those who have arrived in this country relatively recently and are at the beginning of the process of social integration.

Aims of the strategy

1.12 The aim of this strategy is to support and enable refugees to integrate swiftly. Ultimately, the strategy seeks to help as many refugees as possible take up citizenship of the UK if they wish, while recognising that some will be able to return to their countries of origin if circumstances change. Durable solutions will be an important measure of the success of our integration policies in the long term.

1.13 The key challenges have not changed since publication of *Full and Equal Citizens* in November 2000, but, largely thanks to the work of the NRIF, our understanding of the barriers faced by refugees and service providers is now deeper and more comprehensive, and our knowledge of what works in addressing those barriers is now much better developed.

1.14 Mainstreaming the support provided to refugees, as set out in *Full and Equal Citizens*, remains at the heart of our approach. This means providing the necessary support to refugees within services designed for everyone,

like the NHS or the schools system, rather than setting up separate services or structures to meet their needs. Those services must, therefore, be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of individual refugees, as they must for any other eligible member of the community.

1.15 But we need to move further forward. Individual, local and national solutions are still needed to address some issues, and regional strategic planning is needed to take into account circumstances specific to different parts of the country.

1.16 This strategy sets out the action that the Government will take to make further progress. It sits squarely within the framework created by the 2003 White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven*, which explained how we are reforming the asylum system to bring about a swifter and more effective process to identify genuine refugees and remove others. It also announced plans for accommodation centres, which have the potential to provide a head start in the integration of residents who gain refugee status.

1.17 And further reforms are also being made to the services provided to asylum seekers by NASS. Most of NASS's accommodation contracts expire in 2005 and are currently being renegotiated. At the same time, NASS is reorganising itself to deliver more of its services through regional offices. These changes offer important opportunities to get the integration of successful asylum seekers under way.

1.18 So this strategy should not be seen in isolation. It seeks to work alongside the wider reforms that the Government is making, both in the immigration field and in other key public services, and to show how the same determination to deliver positive outcomes can meet the needs of refugees.

Chapter 2
DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

2.1 The first step towards the integration of refugees must be to identify and help with their most pressing needs. Finding and settling them into safe and appropriate housing, accessing employment or social security support, addressing any health concerns, and getting children settled in school are crucial to enabling refugees to focus on the longer-term aspects of integration.

2.2 Some refugees may arrive in poor health, and some health conditions may not become apparent until after they have been in the UK for a period of time – not least because some refugees may be apprehensive about discussing their health while their status in the UK is uncertain. And refugees who have experienced trauma and suffering before their arrival in the UK will require long-term support.

2.3 Again, if the education of refugee children has been disrupted, their support needs in school will differ from those of other children, especially where the educational system of their home country was very different from that in Britain (as is usually the case).

2.4 The experiences of refugees during their stay in the UK as asylum seekers will also have a significant bearing on the type of support that is needed. A large number of refugees will have received NASS support, which provides a structured and supported environment with ready access to advice and services, but others will have received subsistence-only support and some may not have qualified for NASS support. Some, in the future, will be housed in accommodation centres while their asylum applications are being considered, while others will come to the UK direct from their home regions through the Gateway Protection Programme.

2.5 Many challenges to the delivery of this strategy apply to all three themes identified in chapter 1: achieving full potential, contributing to communities, and accessing public services. These cross-cutting challenges include the need for:

- easy access to up-to-date information about what services are available, and how to contact them;

The Gateway Protection Programme

Most refugees reach the United Kingdom after difficult and arduous journeys from their countries of origin. But for many refugees, often caught up in some of the world's worst conflicts, the possibility of fleeing to the UK never arises because they simply do not have the resources to pay for the journey.

As the number of asylum seekers reaching the UK by illegal means steadily declines in response to the firm action taken by the Government, a new programme – the Gateway Protection Programme – has been set up to bring modest numbers of refugees who urgently need help to the UK to start a new life. The UK therefore joins a number of other Western countries who have for some years run similar programmes under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The first group of 69 refugees arrived in Sheffield in spring 2004, fleeing from conflicts in West Africa, and often having lived in makeshift refugee camps for many years. They are already beginning to adjust well to life in the UK.

The Gateway Protection Programme is run as a partnership between the Home Office, the host local authorities, the voluntary sector agencies who co-ordinate the programme, and Jobcentre Plus. The programme is testimony to the UK's continuing commitment to the protection of the most vulnerable refugees in the modern world.

- stability of service delivery, in the interests both of refugees themselves and of other service users; and
- comprehensive and accurate data in order to assess and plan the provision of services, including ways of preventing people from falling through the safety net after confirmation of their refugee status, perhaps because they have not been living in managed accommodation.

2.6 Valuable as it is to analyse the problem in terms of the three themes, it is equally important to bear the existence of these cross-cutting challenges in mind.

Achieving full potential

2.7 Refugees, like other individuals, have a diversity of talents, and therefore a wide range of ways to achieve their full potential. But two factors are overwhelmingly important: the ability to communicate effectively in English and gaining employment appropriate to their abilities and skills.

2.8 Since the publication of *Full and Equal Citizens*, extensive research has been conducted into barriers faced by refugees in acquiring language skills and job experience. The two issues are closely related: for many, the inability to speak English is the main obstacle to taking up a job or finding employment that engages their skills fully.

2.9 Unemployment among refugees is about six times the national average, despite the fact that refugees have on average higher levels of qualifications. They need to seek advice from Jobcentre Plus offices quickly after receipt of their asylum determination in order to access systematic support, training, advice and guidance in making informed choices.

2.10 But that is only a first step. A wide range of organisations have developed expertise in helping refugees to find work: their contribution needs to be maximised and refugees themselves need help to understand the complex and changing landscape of the UK labour market.

Current challenges

2.11 On this analysis, the key needs facing most refugees in the employment and training fields are:

- clear documentation of their status, provided quickly after their asylum determination, and for that documentation to be clear and widely recognised by employers, Jobcentre Plus offices and banks;
- information about programmes and training available through Jobcentre Plus offices and elsewhere;
- the availability of English-language classes and flexibility of class times;

Department for Work and Pensions' strategy for refugee employment

The *Refugee Employment Strategy*, which is to be published shortly, will set out the approach that the Department for Work and Pensions, with government and voluntary sector partners, will take to increase refugee employment.

The Sunrise caseworker pilot set out in chapter 5 will test a complementary approach that Jobcentre Plus is piloting for refugees. Jobcentre Plus is developing an operational framework that, among other things, will help front-line advisers to respond more appropriately to the needs of their refugee customers. They are piloting specialist refugee employment provision to help customers tackle a range of employment barriers. In the pilot areas, the Sunrise caseworkers will ensure that refugees attend their local Jobcentre Plus office as soon as possible, and they will work closely with Jobcentre Plus staff to understand what support they can give and will reflect this in the Personal Integration Plan.

We expect that refugees will become ready for work sooner as a result of the caseworker approach. By resolving potentially problematic issues, such as housing, soon after receipt of a positive asylum decision, we will enable refugees to focus on moving on with their lives.

- relevant or UK-based work experience (which could be gained through volunteering);
- a knowledge of specific working cultures (latest trends in education or the NHS, for example) as well as more general guidance on preparing a CV and interview techniques; and
- the need for structured routes for retraining and re-accreditation for those with professional skills, together with information about those options.

Contributing to the community

2.12 The dispersal of asylum seekers throughout the UK has created new communities of refugees and has made many communities more diverse. While this brings challenges to local areas, particularly because of a lack of familiarity and understanding between new and existing communities, it can also bring real social, cultural and economic benefits.

2.13 In order for refugees to contribute to all aspects of community life, they must feel safe and secure, particularly against racial harassment and racially motivated violence. Experiences of insecurity or victimisation can make it virtually impossible for people to play an active part in the community.

2.14 Host communities also need support: they are entitled to receive fair and accurate information about refugees from government and the media. To ensure that refugees are able to integrate, steps must be taken to maximise the potential for new and positive relationships between refugees and members of the settled population, which will work to everyone's benefit.

2.15 The media can be a powerful force for understanding. But too often people hear of refugees only when some problem comes to light. Efforts are needed for a more balanced coverage by encouraging journalists to look for ways of presenting the many positives about the presence of refugees to the wider public.

But those efforts must not be made in a way that seeks to dictate to the media about their handling of these issues.

2.16 The development of inter-community relationships is a driving force for integration. There are many opportunities to strengthen participation and involvement of refugees and RCOs in their local communities, with their local authorities and in community partnerships and initiatives. RCOs are a crucial resource where they exist, especially in bridging links with the wider public, deriving their strength not only from refugees' strong impulse to self-help, independence and the desire to make a positive contribution to the society that has provided refuge, but also from the unique resources of their members, such as language skills and understanding of community needs. While they are typically run on a low budget, many have developed a high level of professional competence.

2.17 The key challenges in this part of the strategy are therefore:

- to prevent racial harassment faced by some refugees through better public awareness and community relations, and, when it does occur, to encourage victims to report it, provide support and deal effectively with the alleged perpetrators;
- to encourage alternative approaches to stereotyped and over-simplified portrayals of refugees, and better understanding of the issues they face;
- to build the capacity of RCOs, most of which depend on volunteer effort and other resources of their members;
- to improve the ability of RCOs to move towards sustainability by accessing funding and support, not least by ensuring that application procedures are accessible; and
- to support unaccompanied refugee children (see boxed text next page) in building links with members of their national or ethnic community, and with the wider local community, in order to prevent isolation and social exclusion.

Unaccompanied refugee children

Unaccompanied refugee children are often called the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. In having been separated from their parents and wider family, they have been cut adrift from all support: emotional, practical and financial. Many unaccompanied refugee children arrive in the UK as a result of their families having extricated them from dangerous situations in their country of origin. Their first objective in this country must therefore be to recover both physically and emotionally.

But for these children to reach a point where they feel accepted as an equal part of British society, they face not only the hurdles other refugees experience, but also the daunting challenge of growing up without their parents.

For unaccompanied refugee children, the statutory sector takes on the role of their primary carer, responsible for their welfare, safety and education, and so the support structures that have been designed primarily to meet their needs as children need also to meet their needs as unaccompanied refugees and address the intense isolation and social exclusion that they can face.

Unaccompanied refugee children can and do succeed, but to do so they need a stable base from which to integrate, and for this a living environment that offers support, stability and encouragement is essential.

Access to services

2.18 Virtually all refugees are likely to need some help in enabling them to contact and use the services to which they are entitled. That help must be provided in a timely way, particularly during the critical period after receipt of a positive decision on asylum.

2.19 A primary aim must be to prevent homelessness among refugees, to ensure that they have access to suitable housing, dealing with any problems caused by the move from NASS or other accommodation to mainstream support, and to sustain refugee households in their homes in the longer term.

2.20 Refugees should have access to mainstream health and social care, and health professionals require support to understand and respond to the needs of refugees and their families.

2.21 A key challenge in education is to ensure that schools can provide the education that refugee children need in order to succeed, including English-language support in ways that correspond to their special circumstances.

2.22 The main challenges for this strand of the strategy are, therefore, to:

- help refugees find suitable accommodation, particularly if they are moving from NASS accommodation, which normally needs to be vacated within 28 days;
- ensure that refugees are in contact with the health services they need;
- ensure that professionals working with refugees have access to the necessary information about them;
- enable schools to meet the support needs of individual refugee children;
- provide those entrusted with the care of unaccompanied refugee children with the support necessary to meet the children's needs;
- help unaccompanied refugee children in particular to develop skills for living in the UK while maintaining links with their own national or ethnic communities; and
- enable refugee children to meet their long-term potential by participating in wider school life.