



with thanks to

**Hillingdon Refugee Children's Network (HRCN)
Conference and Workshops:
"What do Our Refugee Children Need?"
(4th March 2011)**

HRCN conference and workshops aimed to:

1. identify specific issues and available support for Hillingdon's refugee children;
2. create and strengthen contacts between practitioners who do not specialise in supporting refugees and those practitioners and services in and around Hillingdon who do;
3. broaden discussion about enabling refugee children in Hillingdon to build fulfilling futures;
4. gather knowledge to feed into strategic planning for future support and services (e.g. current consultation on Children and Families Plan in Hillingdon).

Summary of conclusions:

- Hillingdon is rapidly losing expertise in working with refugee children, across both voluntary and statutory sector, because of overall cuts in funding and lower numbers of new arrivals reducing the financial feasibility of commissioning specialist services. It must be a high priority to retain that expertise and access to the knowledge and experience built up by Hillingdon professionals over the decade and longer.
- In working with refugee children it is essential to consider the issues parents are facing that can and do impact on their ability to cope and to nurture and support their children. Struggles with identity and self-esteem are significant for refugee children, and where parents are struggling to cope, communication can break down between generations, with serious consequences e.g. exclusion from school.
- Refugee children and their families in Hillingdon face some appalling conditions, stress, and uncertainty. They are living with complex and deep, long-lasting issues which professionals can only tackle effectively when working flexibly, intelligently and closely together across multiple agencies over long periods of time. Schools are critical in this coordination: Children's Centres are extremely well placed to contribute for the youngest: Primary Care teams e.g. Health visiting, are also invaluable across the Borough. Professionals who are not refugee, migrant or BME specialists, who find themselves working with refugee children, must have an appreciation of the complex and serious issues they must deal with. They must have adequate support from specialist services. Because statistics on refugees can not be collected accurately, many non-specialists e.g. school staff vastly underestimate the number of refugee children in their care and the complexity of issues they and their families are facing.
- Despite lower total numbers, unaccompanied children reaching transition age (17-25) will always be a group about which Hillingdon's professionals and policy makers need to be

highly concerned; private fostering should also be a keen concern. Their experiences of stigma, hostility, uncertainty, their feelings of being criminalised, of isolation are concerns and have impact on wellbeing and aspirations.

- There is little support available to young people of the transition age and the support which is available now is decreasing in the current financial context. Strong communication and support links between professionals are essential in ensuring that young people of the secondary and transition age being supported.
- As existing expertise is being lost in Hillingdon, it is essential to strengthen communication between professionals in order to offer advice knowledge and information sharing and any other support with regard to working with refugee children in Hillingdon. Thus, it was agreed at the HRCN Conference and workshops that further funding should be sought for the Hillingdon Refugee Children Network.

Notes and Recommendations

- 1. Speakers**
- 2. Discussion**
- 3. Workshop 1**
- 4. Workshop 2**
- 5. HRCN planning meeting**

Speakers:

Ambi Selvaraj (Hillingdon NHS Community Engagement Team)

Highlighted two things:

- In spite of today's cuts, grass roots practitioners can still deliver quality services' if we network and communicate'. People doing a great job in little corners and often not communicating, so work is wasted, opportunities missed, frustration for services and clients. We need to work together, and find out with greater understanding of the background and we will still be able to deliver good services.
- A case of great complexity and the benefits of working together: A family in Hayes, referred to Ambi by the children's school and then worked very closely together CET and school. Ambi was able to fix their allowance so they received a small amount of money from NASS, other family support and education support coming via the school, school even helped them to obtain food but seeing opportunities. The children were very keen on school. The school had a student social worker attached at that time who was fantastic. Now you should see how this family is moving on because everyone is working together. "We can deliver the best of care to everybody in spite of cuts if everybody will come together and talk together".

Beth Hearst, LBHillingdon Asylum Team

The great challenge faced now is that the needs of unaccompanied children are as serious as ever, but there are far fewer of them from a peak of 1400 to under 500 now which makes it much hard to maintain specialist teams and staff who have the full knowledge, and also to commission specialist

services at a scale that is financially viable. The challenge is to respond to this change. Units are being integrated into mainstream services so there will no longer be bespoke services. A huge amount of work, experience, expertise, partnership history and bespoke activities over the past several years will be merged into generalist provision. How to keep the services quality, the priority is to still be able to deal with the same depth of issues, even if there are fewer in total.

E.g. case of partnership work with Asphaleia who provided outreach services and education work but with numbers far lower and referrals down the services dropped below what was financially feasible therefore Asphaleia had to expand its activities to other areas and the education and outreach services couldn't be maintained.

In addition there is the challenge of the cuts generally. "How to keep it a priority" how to maintain good staff – not just an issue in Hillingdon, but across the nation. Valuable experienced people are moving out of work with asylum seekers and refugees because they have to. Skills, knowledge, are being lost.

Hillingdon Refugee Support Group (HRSRG) Taz Virdee (also works for DASH) and Carolyn Appleby – HRSRG Trustee

HRSRG established 1996, and its very important group BHUMP – Befriending Hillingdon's Unaccompanied Minors Project – in 2004. BHUMP was set up for young people to develop supportive networks, new skills and friendships to help overcome isolation and other barriers. Involvement of Brunel students, Red Cross.

Carolyn Appleby: "my father was Jewish and a refugee to Britain in the late 30's and always appreciated that Britain took him in and also aware of the complications it brought to him for his whole life – it was very hard for him to settle and this had a strong impression on me and my siblings. I arrived in Hillingdon in 1998 and after my father's death I found becoming part of HRSRG a way of expressing solidarity. Recently have attended Refugee Council training but the Hounslow office has now closed, and starting to feel very strongly what can I do to develop my role in this area."

Taz Virdee: Young people need to be heard and although they didn't come today, HRSRG asked them their views on services, what they think, how they feel, how they are treated – this is one of the most important parts of our work, 2 focus groups gave the following:
The groups were 16-21 year olds, who came alone to Britain, seeking refuge, without parents. Dealing with pre-exile experiences, separation from families, a significant number are dealing with childhood traumas in war torn areas. The experience of the journey can be traumatic as well, they have witnessed events we cannot imagine, witness deaths of their own families. Put yourself in their shoes. You have to imagine where they are coming from.

Key points:

- Isolation, especially during transition at 18
- Lack of knowledge: often don't recognise what is offered to them
- Racism and discrimination: it is still there, subtly – but about skin and accent, they feel every time they talk people look at them and say they are uneducated.
- Communication: speaking English of course, it is difficult to learn a language, but also to learn a culture.

- Immigration: fear of detention, if 1 small thing wrong, they fear they will be straight into detention, detained where another young person might not. And then they will not be taken care of at all.
- Education
- Transition at 18: normally 18 is a celebration of the path to adulthood, but refugee young people are not prepared to deal with the change, the loss of rights, of entitlements to stay in the UK, even more uncertainty and fears
- Identity: losing your national and cultural links. Fear leads to some sticking to groups where they know and not expanding.
- it takes a long time to shift mindsets. Freda/HRSG plan to outreach to schools, primary especially, awareness about refugees, lots of young children don't know, they grow up learning from parents. We need to work to teach at that young age. Also working on a documentary, a message to shift attitudes, make young people who come feel welcome.

Adrian Ingham, former Primary Head Teacher in Hillingdon

Primary head teachers feel ignorant, because they are. If you asked them how many ASR children in their school how could they say? EAL numbers? Intake forms don't show it even if they ask, many families are unknown, don't declare, aren't asked. Generally if people are not from EU or commonwealth countries, it is assumed they are refugee.

Case of Kurdish/Iraqi family, imagine the clichés, but wonderful achievers, Experience of British Council arranging trip for AI to the part of Kurdistan where they lived, their village – so easy to only have – views, but to see the real place, changes your perception of people and makes you see their whole story.

It is difficult for head teachers to know what to want: for refugee children to stay, to contribute to this hybrid culture we are creating or for them to return to the fatherland? If we can get people more interested in the people we are working with, we can change minds, create better context. 'So we can do a better job, because we aren't doing well enough'.

Discussion

- School budget for extra support no longer ring-fenced, school often use TAs but they need real and specific skills, EAL / learn English to superficial level quite quickly, but up to 5 years with help to achieve high level language – how do schools do that?
- Need to educate and spread information within school.
- Lack of communication among community groups and statutory workers.
- Voluntary sector will have to take on the role of those statutory workers whose posts are being cut.
- E.g. of the DASH disability awareness training delivered at school assemblies. Had to work hard at it, email, friends, lobby inside schools, cold email etc., people do respond – free disability workshops, to inspire, role models, disability assume wheelchair but schools themselves to realise e.g. Autism. Since starting c. 2-3k children have attended assembly. Children go up to the presenters months later at the shops – say it really impressed them. Work like that volunteers but does need 1 paid worker to set up.
- Knowing the language allows to build closer relationships and e.g. encourage families to participate in what we do. And become part of this society.

- E.g. of a new child at school who had bullying of more recent arrival by other Somali children/
- Most heads will welcome an assembly – one less for them to do, especially free, but that educates school students, we also need to educate the staff.
- Huge reorganisation of Children’s Services will lead to losing people passionate about working with asylum seeking children.
- Many don’t want to go to support groups by that community, fear of being picked on by their own ethnic group, often running away from that.
- Mainstream will gain specialist knowledge, more shared bring and share expertise skill up others, challenge is renewing that
- School staff are not clear on immigration distinction, they must update themselves on refugee producing countries.
- Some refugee children have witnessed rape, torture. It is difficult to find appropriate support for them, not just counselling. It is almost impossible for them to settle, be at peace, be a part of our community. Need specialist workers and training to help them.
- When attending English language classes some women fear their children will be separated from them. This adds extra stress and strain. We need to try to make it easier in some way for them to attend classes and try and integrate.

A lot of those present at the HRCN Conference and Workshops attended the HRCN meeting for the first time and found it very helpful, saying that they will take it back to their teams.

Workshops

The **workshops**, which focused on Primary School/Early Years and Secondary School / Transition Age attempted to address following questions:

- *What are current problems faced by refugee children in Hillingdon?*
- *What services and resources are available at present?*
- *Where are the gaps in service provision and how can this be improved?*

Workshop 1 (Early Years and Primary Age)

One topic discussed by the group in some depth was the experiences children and their parents may have gone through in the time before they fled their countries as these (along with experiences during the journey to safety, during the stage of waiting for a decision on asylum, and also experiences of settlement and integration) would have a direct impact on the child who went through them. It was agreed that the parents would be affected by these experiences in ways that could have an indirect impact on the child.

The group listed many significant experiences ‘pre-flight’ which could take place progressively over many years, including:

- war, violence, physical aggression and attacks, abuse, torture, deaths
- witness to violence and abuse
- separation, bereavement, loss of people, of identity

- vulnerability to discrimination, to violence, to abuse of power
- child soldiers
- precarious existence, reliance on criminals
- political insecurity, instability, uncertainty, persecution
- exclusion, exclusion e.g. from education, from society
- financial loss, loss of property, progressive impoverishment, restriction and exclusion from employment, from ownership,
- undermining identity, self-esteem, prolonged negativity, hostility, cultural denial

At the point of claiming asylum in a safe country, distress, uncertainty and stress were highlighted, as well as temporary loss of freedom if detained and separation plus poverty and being prevented from working.

For those given leave (permission) to remain, further issues may affect the child directly or the ability of the adults to nurture and support as parents: identity and the child's sense of identity at odds with the parents were mentioned again. Also a number of issues related to having moved country and shared therefore with many other migrants e.g. language, cultural understanding, inter-generational conflicts, aspirations and ambitions. 'Dr.s driving minicabs.' The issue of whether refugees children (or parents) can or do feel they belong was raised, and how that might affect their ability to give and make the most of British society as they grow up within it. The case of the 9 year old Afghan boy was raised, who, by 13, had 'dropped out' and was and continues to be in trouble with the police.

Direct impact on a child:

- Education
- Gap parent child
- Confidence
- Health
- Trust in authority/uniform
- Immunisation, previous treatments, mental health, emotional health,
- Physical needs, e.g. treatments unmet, nutrition
- Sexual health

Indirect impact on a child (i.e. because of impact on adults and their ability to nurture and support)

- Intergenerational loss of communication
- Identity
- Low achievement
- School recognise / responsible
- How parents function
- Low self esteem
- Stigma > disrespect parents
- Language learning
- Loss of culture
- Sexual health

Further issues:

- GAPS in services and support
- How to contact the children / families
- Counselling in appropriate language / place (1st language)
- Communication / opportunities to exchange info, knowledge, contacts
- Opportunities for children from 6-11
- Trust

Workshop 2 (Secondary School / Transition Age)

Workshop 2 focused on refugee children of the secondary school and transition age. The group concluded that there are a number of burning issues which this age group is faced with.

One of such issues was mental health of young people, in particular, wide-spread depression. Asphaleia has just started a new project to work with young people and their families, focusing on mental health issues. For more info on the project contact Asphaleia: Jurgita Sereikate, 01895 272 478).

One of the suggestions to help deal with mental health issues and isolation of the refugee children in the borough was offered by Hillingdon Play who stressed that they offer activities for ALL ages. (For more info, contact Hillingdon Play hillingdonplay@hotmail.com). Also, another suggestion to help deal with mental health issues was offered by the PCT's new project called WING which is focusing on wellbeing of Hillingdon population. They will be talking to communities/groups about what 'wellbeing' means to them. (For more information contact: Oluwafunmilayo Vaughn funmilayo.vaughn@hillingdon.nhs.uk).

Another issue which was discussed at the workshop was the lack of pastoral care in secondary schools. The group agreed that teaching assistants will have to pick up the roles of those specialist workers whose funding is being cut. But will they be able to influence learning and teaching systems? Thus, the group concluded that there must be better communication between professionals working with refugee children in order to share knowledge and good practice, especially in the context of severe cuts and lobby for better provisions for refugee children and young people in Hillingdon.

The group suggested that current secondary education system is not geared to take in newly arrived refugee children of the secondary school age. One of the drawbacks of the system is that it does not offer adequate help with academic English. The group agreed that contemporary secondary schools are large institutions in which a child can be completely lost and anonymous. Although this system enables refugee child to maintain 'anonymous' and not disclose his/her immigration status, it also means that refugee children are likely to be missed by school staff and help will not be offered to them. It was stressed that refugee children need a specialist workers helping them get used to the system. Such workers, however, will not be employed any longer due to significant cuts.

The discussion about refugee children of a transition age concluded that there is very little support for this age group and it is this group of young people who are most vulnerable and in need of specialist workers who have appropriate training and knowledge. The workshop 2 group agreed

that approaching 18 affects education and plans for further education as well as housing and making life choices in general. Statutory support is only available until the age of 21 (or 24 if in full-time education). This brought the group back to the discussion of mental health issues, which are often caused or aggravated by uncertainty.

Thus, the group agreed that the secondary school (and especially transition age) group is highly vulnerable and requires a lot of support and attention. Young people of this age are also likely to be unnoticed by the system and become destitute and/or homeless. It was agreed that there is little support available to young people of this age and even that support which is available now is decreasing in the current financial context. The group thus concluded that strong communication and support links between professionals are essential in ensuring that young people of the secondary and transition age being supported.

HRCN planning meeting

What should HRCN be?

1. An accessible point to find out about:

organisations,
services / change so fast
specific case support
know you can find others
professionals use, volunteers use too
signposting point
schools to use Network
quality of info, up to date

Methods

E-listing, schools and other statutory and non statutory individuals and groups
Web-based resources
Publicise the web
Need funds to make it accessible so people can add and update
Calendar
Events for different target groups / interests
Like schools, moderated learning environment with password
LBH communications
HAVS web portal will develop, free

2. A connecting point to wider communications

Hillingdon Networks

CYPFF (HAVS)
Looked After Children Steering Group
Hillingdon Inter-Faith Network – includes schools project

London Networks

HEAR – pan London, cross-equalities and rights network

MiNET – pan London network of ethnic minority organisations

National Networks

Migrant Rights Network

Ref Ed

ICAR

National Equalities Partnership

3. A mechanism for lobbying, raising awareness through coordinating knowledge and efforts of members
 - Lobbying to get issues on the agenda
 - Keep refugees and asylum seekers specific needs on the agenda, especially in time of mainstreaming
 - Take on a responsibility for putting refugees and asylum seekers at the top of agendas because of their great and complex needs
 - Lobbying to get organisations to take up information, e.g. subscribe to E-listing
 - Connecting with people who may lack even basic knowledge
 - Educate and raise awareness in Borough
 - GPs, Libraries, Schools,
 - Network to develop (to coordinate members developing) and provide access to products that members can use directly

Methods

Promote HRCN E-listing more widely

15-20 minute slots in teacher training days

Assemblies

Work with libraries, e.g. making contacts via Yeading where there is already keen activity.

Know and use members' existing contacts e.g. Asphaleia's contacts with 12 schools already, Taz bring knowledge from DASH work into HRSG.

Marketing / sales techniques, campaigns, e.g. email followed up by letter, phone call, find a 'friend within', from cold sales onwards

School assemblies

Virtual links

4. A way of sustaining the expertise
 - Situation everywhere, especially Hillingdon, Croydon (retains more because of UKBA centralising services in Croydon), Dover.
 - Expertise of volunteers too, including those who have left specialist posts through redundancies, cuts, mainstreaming.
 - The needs are just as critical even if there are fewer people

- Think of why people join – insights and feedback to members
- Link people up so they gain, protect, share knowledge and information
- Experts and newer contacts both. No one made to feel silly because they don't know
- No gap between those who do and don't know, about awareness and supporting people who are concerned, at whatever level their knowledge.

5. A network that shows universality,

- So that we are not always reinventing the wheel that refugees etc can tell us how to build.
- Lessons stories we, British can learn from
- Learn from refugees,
- Lessons / stories to learn from
- Both hearer and speaker
- E.g. Acts for Change
- Learn universal lessons from unique experiences
- Pull together to build a coherent story
- Older and younger refugees
- E.g. JCORE Past and Present

6. An opportunity for collaboration between and amongst HRCN membership

Not that HRCN does the work, but that it is a coordinating mechanism for bodies, individuals who can do the work, e.g. produce materials, visit schools
Create opportunities for partnerships between members

7. A channel or loudspeaker for the voices of refugee children, young refugees

Loudspeaker for the work done by members who are getting the voices issues needs aspirations of young refugees heard
E.g. every looked after child has a PEP

8. A place to support individuals, where they can turn when they want or need to work in this area,

Interface of volunteers, trainees, individual professionals and refugees
Peer support and contacts for individuals
Place of support for those who work with refugee children, because this work can be draining and difficult.

**The need to sustain the expertise is greater than ever.
Comment from participant: “It is absolutely essential that we continue.”**