



# CONNECTING WITH THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

**Building integrated housing services for refugees**

Chris Wadhams

January 2011

## Acknowledgements

HACT exists to improve the well being and housing conditions of poor and marginalised people. HACT's projects deliver lasting change by harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of local people, housing providers and other organisations. HACT provides the expertise, know-how and the resources to make a change a reality.

This report on the second phase of HACT's Accommodate Project complements the work of the five projects supported by HACT in the first phase. The work of the three projects that form the foundation of the study are focused particularly on the extent to which the housing needs of refugees can be met through the engagement of the private sector.

In London, the project traced the housing histories of refugees from their arrival in the capital. Our special thanks go to Vaughan Jones and Berhanu Kassayie from Praxis, whose research and the narratives arising from it highlighted the problems the refugees faced and, in some cases, the fact that the eventual improvement of their housing situation could take a decade or more.

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## 1. The scope of the private rented sector in housing

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For more than half of the last century, most people rented a house from a private landlord. “Homes for heroes” after WW1 gave Local Authorities responsibility for building homes for rent. More significant building by local Councils for rent took place after WW2. But it was only from the mid-sixties onwards that the growth of owner occupation, eventually assisted in the 1980’s by the Right to Buy legislation, became sufficient to push the private rented sector (PRS) into third place in the provision of housing.

The PRS was also reduced in size as housing associations, supported by legislation in 1974 that provided a substantial subsidy to boost their activities, bought up and improved existing property from private landlords in terraces up and down the country.

Until the early years of this century, the PRS sustained itself at a low level. But over the past five years, the demand for social housing for rent has greatly outstripped supply. The UK has also experienced significant inward migration from the European accession countries and from refugees and asylum seekers from across the globe seeking safety from persecution and looking to establish a new life in this country. In these circumstances, the PRS has reversed its long decline and has begun to increase, both in absolute size and in terms of the proportion of households it accommodates.

The PRS remains a small but extremely important part of the housing market in the UK. Most people will have had some experience of renting privately at some point in their lives. In theory at least, the PRS is capable of matching the housing needs of a diverse group of the population, a need that can vary substantially from area to area.

“Communities R Us”, HACT’s study of the interaction of established and new communities, highlighted this flexibility. The size of the PRS varied widely in the three areas in which the project was piloted. In the Lower Dean area of Bolton, social housing accounted for over half of the tenancies, with just 5% being privately rented. In Wakefield, in the wards of Agbrigg and Belle Vue, 15% of the property in the neighbourhood was owned by private landlords. But in Manchester’s New Moss Brook, a much smaller area of just 173 terraced houses, over half were still rented privately.

The PRS aims to meet a wide number of housing needs. It can be a first point of call for new households, a “transit tenancy” as people change jobs and move house and, for many households, a long term home.

Whilst it is true that the PRS caters for short term lettings, with around 40% of tenants having lived in their accommodation for less than twelve months at any one time, there are also tenants, around one in five of any sample, who have lived in the PRS for five or more years.

This HACT study concentrates on the housing experiences of refugee families and asylum seekers, where the competition to gain access to decent accommodation in the PRS is intense and the most vulnerable are often at the back of this queue. To underline these difficulties, it is worth recognising the different groups of people who may be seeking a tenancy in the PRS.

## **Who is housed in the private rented sector?**

The private rented sector can provide accommodation over a wide sector of housing need and a similarly wide range of tenants. Young mobile professionals may find the top end of the PRS appropriate, with some high income renters taking advantage of corporate lettings.

At the other end of the spectrum, the most vulnerable with the least choice can find themselves in “slum landlord” property where landlords take advantage of the demand by letting poor quality housing at rents that reflect this shortage rather than the poor conditions. People who are near homeless but do not qualify for assistance can also find themselves living in this sector. There are also a significant number of tenants in the PRS who depend on Housing Benefit to pay their rent and these form a distinct strata of the market with private landlords who are well versed in the legislation.

Between these extremes come students who share housing or live in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) in areas near to Universities that may also be accommodation sought by single refugees. The PRS also offers accommodation to meet the needs of “intermediate” households, those who cannot afford owner occupation but who are not a priority for social housing.

In considering the future of the PRS, it is useful to consider a number of issues that it is claimed would need to be resolved if the sector is to flourish. These include achieving a wider spread of landlords by making investment in the sector more attractive to financial institutions, achieving a higher level of professionalism in managing the property, improving its quality, providing sustainable and safe tenancies, ensuring that any homeless families are fairly treated and considering how best to tackle the small number of private landlords who deliberately and systematically exploit their tenants.

The PRS is therefore often under scrutiny both from those who see it as an essential housing resource and seek its expansion and those who consider it at best a necessary evil that requires significant regulation and enforcement of housing standards.

## The HACT study: “Accommodate 2”

The study of the PRS arises from the recommendations made in the Accommodate One programme. This explored the housing situation of refugees in so far as integration and equitable access to accommodation was concerned. Five partnerships between housing associations, refugee community organisations (RCOs) and statutory agencies were established. Each partnership researched the local issues, established an action programme and contributed their experiences to a report to disseminate the findings of the project as a whole.

The issues under the spotlight in Accommodate One were:

- Encouraging RCOs to contribute to neighbourhood renewal programmes through the development of a Resource Centre that provided training and a secure base from which to work.
- Demonstrating, through bringing empty properties back into use, how both housing for young refugees and refugee families could be provided and community cohesion can be enhanced.
- Exploring how best to meet the housing needs of emerging refugee communities.
- Examining methods of linking refugee housing and community mental health support.
- Researching how best to assist new refugees access mainstream housing.

Concentrating on these five targets proved successful and the HACT Accommodate One partnerships are now widely regarded as having made a significant contribution to the well being of refugee communities. However, the evaluation report, produced by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham, noted one considerable omission.

*“Surprisingly, the active strategies adopted by HACT and the partnerships generally failed to engage directly with private landlords, who are the largest providers of housing for asylum seekers and refugees. In some cases, indirect engagement was achieved through housing advice agencies and planned contact with landlord forums and common housing registers, but overall engagement was minimal.”*

This gap in the evidence prompted HACT to establish three “successor” projects, through which the situation relating to the private sector could be explored. It was agreed that activity would be divided into three linked programmes. This report identifies the learning points from the three initiatives, each dealing with a sequential series of activities, from arrival in London, followed by the experience of the housing market and the role of the PRS in cities and towns outside London and finally, in some cases, the resolution of housing problems.

Our study seeks to track the housing pathways of more vulnerable families “from arrival to accommodation”. Most studies of the experience of refugee families concentrate on describing the housing circumstances in which they currently find themselves. Studies such as this, which seek to track the housing pathways that refugee families follow to create and sustain their livelihoods in a new country, are much less common. But a review of these pathways, in some cases covering

periods of up to ten years, offers an important insight into housing circumstances that are too often a barrier to integration and to stability.

In the first section, the report highlights the particular housing problems faced by refugees arriving and settling in Tower Hamlets and Hackney. The narrative identifies some refugees whose housing situation remains tenuous even 14 years after their arrival in London and the role played by the PRS in their housing “journeys”.

In the second, the housing situation facing refugees in out of London locations involving private landlords is explored by reference to the role of the PRS in the housing market in Newport, in South Wales.

Finally, in the West Midlands, the study explores the situation in which secure second tier voluntary organisations provide advice and support for refugees and asylum seekers. It seeks to explore the potential of an integrated housing service for such families, based around a Private Sector Leasing (PSL) programme involving input from housing associations and from Local Authorities.

The study reviews both the successes of the research and action undertaken through the PRS projects and the difficulties that attended them. In its final summary and recommendations it highlights the potential for further work to explore how such an integrated housing service for refugees might be achieved.

## **Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES)**

RIES was introduced in October 2008 when the three Accommodate 2 projects were in their third year. As such, the programmes in London and in the West Midlands were practically completed prior to its introduction, though the programme did have some impact on the final stages of the Newport project as described in the Appendix 2.

REIS was available to people aged over 18 who had been granted refugee status following a claim approved through one of the regional asylum teams. It did not impact upon legacy cases. RIES aimed to provide a standard level of service to refugees throughout the United Kingdom, wherever they were living when their status was granted.

RIES offered a 12 month service with three complementary elements.

- An advice and support service
- An employment advice service
- A mentoring service giving the person an opportunity to be matched with a mentor from the receiving community

After receiving refugee status, the person was referred to a personal case manager who helped produce an individual integration plan, identifying and helping to tackle urgent immediate needs. The British Refugee Council was awarded RIES contracts for London and the West Midlands and the Welsh Refugee Council were the contracted body in Wales.

## 2. London

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Reports about the experiences of refugee families in the UK have generally concentrated on describing their current housing circumstances and few have tried to analyse the strategies they follow to recreate and sustain their livelihoods in a new country. This section is focused on the 'livelihoods strategies' of refugees, taking particular account of how they were affected by, and sought to influence, their housing circumstances.

HACT's principal concerns were drawn from the evidence of earlier studies that emphasised the level of vulnerability of single refugees, childless couples and refugee families, especially women with children. Hact considered that important information that might be gained from an exploration of the housing pathways that refugees follow after their arrival and wanted, as far as possible, to involve refugees themselves in the gathering of information across the project as a whole.

Praxis is a social change organisation with a strong community development approach. It uses participatory research to produce strategies based on dialogue aimed at enhancing community commitment and building social capital.

This approach aims to ensure that action is based on information, reflects needs accurately and offers solutions which communities themselves can engage with and seek to implement. Praxis is concerned not just with understanding the situations faced by refugees but in using this understanding to effect practical positive changes in the circumstances of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups within the community.

Praxis investigated four main questions. First, their dialogue sought to assess the impact of regulatory and public policies and their bearing on housing outcomes.

A second outcome was to review the resources of refugees themselves, this involved not just material items but personal issues such as optimism and resourcefulness. The interviews also sought to record any connections with Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), the risks and vulnerabilities faced by refugees and the housing outcomes that emerged.

As Praxis is based in Tower Hamlets, it was felt that the project would be undertaken in the south of Hackney and the north of Tower Hamlets which is home to a sizeable and varied refugee population.

The aim of the project was finally described as seeking to:

*"Gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and livelihood strategies of new refugees, particularly families, in the north of Tower Hamlets and south of Hackney in relation to their housing need and to explore with them the underlying causes of and possible solutions to the difficulties which they face."*

Limited resources meant that the initial project had to be scaled down, but it was agreed that doing a smaller number of in depth interviews with refugee families would provide an adequate research base. 11 interviews were eventually undertaken.

The families participating in the study were drawn from ten different communities. This spread was important so that any relative strengths and weaknesses in community support could be assessed.

The individual families were from Bosnia, Kosovo, Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kurdistan, Iraq, Turkey, Colombia, Rwanda, a Tamil family from Sri Lanka and two families from Somalia.

The length of time spent in the UK varied, but was substantial in all cases, ranging from 14 to seven years. Family size varied from one childless couple to families with six children, some of whom were born here. The current housing situations of the 11 families were:

A flat rented on a temporary basis:	3
Accommodation in the PRS – rented flat:	2
Accommodation in the PRS – rented house:	1
Permanent accommodation with a housing association – rented flat:	2
Permanent accommodation with a housing association – rented house:	1
Permanent accommodation with the Council – rented flat:	2

The 11 stories provide a moving and, in some cases, a shaming account of the struggles of the refugees.

Here is a flavour of two journeys – one deeply troubled and the other more optimistic

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#### A) SIMIONOVA'S STORY

Simionova is from Bosnia and is a university graduate in law. When she came to the UK she took courses to improve her English, but because of the long drawn-out asylum process she has been unable to work and still depends on jobseekers' allowance. Her husband was in the same position but has now also been granted indefinite leave to remain and is obtaining a license to become a cab driver. They have two children.

The family doesn't have close family members here, or live in an area with people from the same country. Because of its relative newness, size and scattered nature, the Bosnian-Croat community appears to have little organised presence in east London. Support tends to be based on friendships rather than community networks.

Britain and other countries were sympathetic to asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia when violent conflict was taking place there. However, many asylum seekers suffered considerable delays in resolving their status in their new countries.

The situation now has become more complicated through the perception in official circles that the original problems have been solved, enabling people to go home, even though they may now have spent ten years or more in this country.

Simionova and her family have had a prolonged and unsettling period 'in limbo' during their ten years in the asylum process. Simionova summarises the later stages:

*'On 20 May 2006, the Home Office sent a questionnaire for my family to complete and send back. Instead of sending a reply, they detained my whole family at the detention centre in Luton on 25 June 2005 and we stayed there for 11 days. In September 2006 we received discretionary leave to remain in the court, but again we have never been issued with any status by the Secretary of State. Just before we should have had a second court case for indefinite leave to remain, scheduled for May 2007, the Secretary of State avoided the court proceedings and decided to grant us indefinite leave to remain.'*

Simionova's family have been living in temporary accommodation, none of which could be considered fit for a family with children. These ranged from a temporary hostel place to flats with insufficient bedrooms, far away from the children's school and disrupting their education.

*'That flat was awful but we couldn't complain to anybody about it. We were told, once we get our status papers, they would move us out... We didn't have a choice than to accept ... It was at Kings Cross hostel, which was the most terrible place we have ever seen. We stayed there for three weeks. My youngest didn't go to school because it was too far and expensive. Only when the children became seriously ill, they bothered to find us a flat ....'*

The family changed accommodation six times in ten years including the spell in the detention centre. The reasons included moving out of a friend's flat, eviction by a private landlord wanting to renovate the property, and altered asylum support arrangements. The family is now hoping for permanent accommodation, but:

*'...because we were homeless we were put in the second category of getting a permanent flat, so we are now bidding for that. We don't know how long it will take us and nobody is giving us any advice.'*

Their ten years with no right to work mean that, while they now have leave to remain, they feel that they haven't been able to build up the resources to do anything other than waiting on the list for social housing.

Here is how Simionova summarises her experience:

*'Words cannot describe what I and my family have been through all these years. I think my children shouldn't have been left for ten years living in such uncertainty. They have always been good students and very good people. My youngest is a very good footballer who represents and captains his borough on numerous occasions. He has also been on national TV twice due to his excellent football skills. Their childhood was ruined and impaired by events which they couldn't be blamed for.'*

Not all the stories are so harrowing as Simionova's. And in the second story at least, the support systems do work.

## B) THERESA'S STORY

Therese speaks four languages - French, Swahili, Lingala and English. She did not speak English on arrival in the UK but has developed it through language courses.

She fled the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with her two children and has had four more in the UK, three of whom are now in secondary school and the younger three are in primary school. Once the children started to go to school on their own, Therese began a job as a part-time care worker. She is also about to complete a NVQ level 2 course in social care.

Therese does not have any family members in this country and has relied on the support of her friends who in her words "have been like a family throughout". There is no Congolese community organisation where she lives, neither are there many people from DRC.

However, this does not seem to have caused her any difficulties:

*'There are not many Congolese where I live, however there are many people from Africa with whom I go to church and socialise. ... I am also a member of the Roman Catholic Church in East Ham and I go there once a week to pray. I socialise with people who attend the service.'*

Therese also has access to the African Women's Association in Plaistow and it has been helpful especially when she was applying for citizenship.

Despite lack of support from any established refugee group, Therese has managed because of her learned language skills and because she has had support from the agencies working on her case.

This kept Therese well-informed about the system, her rights and responsibilities; she was signposted to relevant services, the family's needs were considered in finding accommodation and Therese was supported in thinking through and deciding career development routes:

*'When I moved to my first bed and breakfast hostel near Victoria, someone from the asylum unit of the Home Office introduced himself to me and came along to direct us to the accommodation. He gave me a phone number to call if I have any problems.'*

*'The asylum unit arranged for a person and she helped us to register with the GP, took us to health centre for the children to check their health. She also showed me a centre for asylum seekers in Victoria, where the adult got ESOL classes, while children can play and are looked after by others.'*

*'The homeless persons' unit then moved me to another two-bedroom temporary accommodation in Stratford. I liked the area it was multicultural, but the house was small. I was provided with the contact details of my housing officer and the interpreter explained to me that if I have problems I can call him.'*

*'My English teacher was my support as well and he helped me to make the right choice of courses.'*

As indicated above, Therese now has six children. This may have delayed her entry into the labour market, but her story nevertheless bears out the point that with access to the right services and a supportive environment, refugee mothers can still attain an independent life.

Therese and her family do share the repeated stories of being moved around in temporary accommodation and it has taken them six years to find a permanent home. Nevertheless, despite staying with friends on arrival, and then living in five different places, most of the changes went smoothly because of the support she received from the different services.

The two year asylum process for Therese and family was relatively short. She had felt uncertain about their long-term settlement and this was eventually resolved when she was granted full leave to remain.

She's now content with the new life she is building for her family. Permanently housed in Hackney in housing association accommodation that is suitable for her large family, she has taken steps to

develop her skills and as her children become older and more independent, she is now looking for a career in the health service:

There is no space in this very brief report to summarise all the housing “journeys” the families took, nor to report on other aspects of their lives such as education where six of the 11 families have a member who had been to University before coming to the UK. Lack of facility with the language, unemployment, no informal networks and negative experiences of the state bureaucracy can also present significant barriers. The full report, to be published early in 2010 on the completion of all three elements of the Accommodate Two programme, will provide more detail.

## Learning points

These learning points have been drawn from the experiences of all the 11 families interviewed, some learning points will not be evident from the two cases described in this section of the report.

- 1 A number of the families have housing “journeys” that encompass six distinct stages. These are:

**Informal and unsupported** – families have to manage on their own and try to find friends or make community contacts;

**Informal supported** – friends when found may offer short stays on floors and sofas, and help with finding and using community links;

**Informal temporary** – this may be private rented obtained through word of mouth or, in some communities, accommodation is provided through in owner occupied property owned by community members;

**Formal temporary** – in some cases this phase is as a result of official action, being moved around by NASS, accommodated in hostels and other temporary flats and rooms;

**Private rented (PRS)** – if the accommodation, a house or a flat, is in reasonable repair, not overcrowded and relatively secure this may be a final stage in a housing “journey”;

**Secure public sector** – Local Authority or housing association property accessed by homeless families or through systems such as choice based lettings.

In some cases, for example in dealings with NASS on arrival, families may not immediately find themselves in the informal sector. However, if NASS placements break down, families may move into the informal sector in neighbourhoods that they consider safe and familiar, whilst seeking to improve their housing circumstances.

The PRS may provide an appropriate housing solution in some cases. Three of the 11 families were housed on a long term basis in the sector and three others were currently in less secure private accommodation.

- 2 Specific Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) are of variable help in terms of advice on housing problems, their activities are often cultural rather than offering practical and informed advice. In some cases the RCOs themselves were fragile organisations, and some encouraged a dependency rather than stress the importance of independence. Some refugee families lack job skills and seem to be trapped in welfare dependency often supplemented by unskilled, informal or part-time work, with limited opportunity to improve their skills and get better jobs.
- 3 Some individual “angels” made a big difference in giving advice. In two cases the refugee families obtained invaluable help from solicitors on a “pro bono” basis, professionals who were willing to spend time in helping out, often at the behest of a local voluntary organisation with a mission to support refugees rather than an RCO itself.
- 4 Despite the connection in the second case study, overall the faith groups were not well represented in terms of community support
- 5 For most asylum seekers the process has been lengthy in the past, and many old cases remain unresolved. Decisions may fail to recognise diverse and long-term implications of political upheavals in refugee countries of origin, leaving refugee families in a prolonged state of ‘limbo’. Temporary accommodation – particularly provided through NASS – can be a nightmare with frequent moves in insanitary conditions
- 6 Some refugees may prioritise language and “becoming more integrated” above housing needs and so are prepared to move out of their own communities in order to avoid being insular. For others the community ties mean that housing choices are limited to areas of existing settlement. Inadequate language skills affect families’ ability to navigate through UK systems and services, their entry into the labour market, and their ability to develop an independent life, as well as to participate in wider public affairs. Both the other ‘risk factors’ to which they are subject and problems with support services mean that adult family members can miss out on ESOL training.
- 7 Whilst social workers and the “caring professionals” were appreciated, professionals operating the statutory responses to refugees more often came over as brusque and insensitive. Support services in the public sector often tend to ‘process’ cases rather than aim to pro-actively support refugees and their families in their processes of integration.

- 8 The private rented sector offers often the most accessible source of accommodation. Whilst it may be less secure, conditions are often quite tolerable. But where the accommodation is offered as a favour to friends of the refugees or is involved as tied accommodation the lack of security matters more.
  
- 9 Whilst one might assume that gaining secure accommodation in the public sector solves the problems, the accommodation offered to refugees by housing associations or local authorities may itself be in poor condition.

This important insight is paralleled by the finding of a study conducted in Sheffield which also interviewed a number of refugee families:

*“One striking finding was that housing problems often continued after refugees had moved into more secure, long-term accommodation, for example a social housing tenancy. Refugees reported problems of insecurity and poor living conditions. Basic management needs were not met and security proved to be an illusion with refugees struggling to maintain, and in some cases losing, their place in the housing system and becoming homeless”.*

### 3. Newport

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London is a particularly over heated housing market with considerable pressure on Local Authorities and housing associations to respond to the needs generated by a situation where housing demand greatly outstrips supply.

In these circumstances, the situation faced by refugees in gaining access to a social housing tenancy can be, as the previous chapter shows, a long and tortuous process. But how typical is London? This section studies the position of the PRS in smaller towns that may represent a situation that is more representative of the UK as a whole.

Newport, in Gwent, has a population of around 145,000. There is a lively market in rented accommodation with over 30 lettings agencies representing approximately 800 private landlords with a range of properties to let.

Newport City Council operates a “bond scheme” with around 160 landlords who are prepared to accept tenants who may not be able to find an initial deposit. The “bond”, which is a paper certificate, is a guarantee that promises payment to a landlord for damage to the property or rent arrears when the tenancy ends. The “bond” is principally aimed at helping people who are homeless or on benefit or low incomes.

Beyond the “bond scheme” are a number of private landlords who have larger properties that are divided into bedsits for multi-occupation with shared cooking and lavatory facilities.

The Accommodate Two project was aimed at this more turbulent and less regulated housing market. It focuses primarily on improving access for refugees to this element of the PRS. The aims of the project were:

- To provide refugees with better access to good standard private sector accommodation along with any necessary packages of support and advice needed to sustain their tenancies;
- To encourage private sector landlords to take a more positive attitude towards the housing needs of refugees;
- To ensure that Refugee Community Organisations (RCO's) in Newport used their language skills, recruited volunteers and sought other resources to provide help and support to newly housed refugees or those seeking housing;
- To increase awareness in social housing organisations of refugees' religious and cultural issues;
- To impact upon and influence the policy and strategic decisions of local services and public authorities in respect of the welfare of refugees.

Whilst the project has been challenging, its key achievements have been:

- To achieve an increased awareness of refugee housing issues amongst relevant stakeholders including private landlords, local authority staff and refugees. This is evidenced by an increased use of the Newport Bond Scheme by refugees and by an increased number of landlords willing to offer accommodation for refugees.
- To raise the profile of refugee housing issues in Newport. As a result the working relationship between the City Council and the Accommodate partnership has strengthened.
- The achievement of better coordination and contact with refugee support organisations and services and the development of a better understanding of the housing perceptions and aspirations of refugee communities.
- The provision of training for refugees and refugee individuals and groups on housing issues.

As in London, the project tracked the housing pathways of 11 refugees, six of whom had lived in Newport for five years or more, the other five having been more recent arrivals. 10 of the interviewees were from the Sudan and one was a Palestinian.

The current housing situations of the group were:

A flat rented on a temporary basis:	0
Accommodation in the PRS – renting in a shared house:	3
Accommodation in the PRS – self contained:	3
Permanent accommodation with a housing association:	2
Permanent accommodation with the Council:	3

Two of the three council lettings were arranged from NASS accommodation. The PRS played a significant role in the housing “journeys”, there being only 1 of the other 9 refugees who had not lived in the PRS for some period of time.

*“I’ve always lived in private rented, a year in London in shared accommodation and then four years in two different properties here in Newport. Both were self contained, the first was good but this current property is not as comfortable. The Council directed me to the private market and I was able to get a place by using the “bond”.*

*“After I got status as a refugee, I was homeless and living on a friend’s sofas. I didn’t want to move into private, but after eight months I did move into a shared private house. I got information about the real housing situation from the City Council and the Welsh Refugee Council”.*

The housing histories of the refugees emphasised the degree of uncertainty and dislocation faced by refugees. Whilst the situation is not as desperate as in London, the experiences included sleeping on sofas and floors, living in hostels, putting up with shared accommodation of very poor quality,

moving in with another member of the family on a temporary basis and being placed with a foster family as an unaccompanied minor.

## Learning points

As in London, these learning points have been drawn from both the experiences of the refugees themselves and the reviews of the progress of the project and the challenges it continues to present.

- 1 Building a partnership took a long time to form and achieve a common vision. The partnership also suffered from inconsistency of representation at meetings, too often having to re-introduce the work of the partnership to new members. It is important not to underestimate the time that might be needed to create effective joint working and also to develop an effective method of resolving differences of opinion.
- 2 The lack of effective RCO infrastructure in Newport was identified by HACT and the lead agency as a key risk at the beginning. Involving Refugee Voice Wales as a key partner aimed to address this. However, there have been significant difficulties within RVW in the past year which has hampered their and other RCO's engagement. There may also be competition between the umbrella groups to maximise their influence in the refugee "arena", partly because funding tends to follow the organisation perceived as the leader.
- 3 By the spring of 2009, the partnership had secured 45 multi-occupied shared housing units (HMOs) in the PRS and made 43 referrals. However, none has been taken up by refugees. Most refugees wanted to secure social housing and believed that taking up PRS housing would reduce their chances of doing so. Refugees may be isolated individuals, but they will have some connection with members of their own community, or family coming to join and these pressures, together with the community leaders advising that a Council house is what they should have, leads to refusals of adequate accommodation.
- 4 The full involvement of the members of the refugee communities themselves is needed to promote more realistic expectations from refugees. In some cases, these members of the refugee community can provide the spark and the chemistry to get things moving. Ex-refugees, feisty women, can overcome cultural barriers, tell it like it is and stand no nonsense. They can say their piece straight away. Getting trust is hard – where the workers have the scope in their job to offer small kindnesses, travel tokens, help with collecting children from school and the like, then this helps. But it still takes time.
- 5 Refugees were also reporting that they didn't want to share accommodation with strangers. The project needs to combat this, first by encouraging a "matching service" that would lead to groups of friends accepting tenancies in HMOs and secondly by pressing upon landlords the critical importance of ensuring that shared kitchens and lavatories are kept clean, even employing a specific cleaner for these areas would be cost-effective if it increased the attractiveness of the accommodation. HMOs within the PRS are not necessarily unpopular,

but their benefits of relatively cheapness and the company that a group provides in avoiding isolation need to be emphasised.

- 6 Circumstances may change and the project needs to demonstrate flexibility to take advantage of opportunities. For example, the Newport Environmental Health team has ruled that just two families living in one property makes it liable for HMO regulation. This puts greater pressure on the landlords, but timely advice from the project on regulations should lead to more rapid improvement of their properties.
- 7 The different communities move at different speeds. The Eritreans, for example, operate in a more co-operative way than, say, Somalis at present. So they are getting further economically. The way groups are organised varies and this affects outcomes.
- 8 Some members of the refugee communities have stabilised their circumstances, obtained housing and a few are now landlords themselves. They may operate in a traditional way to tenants from their own community, feeling that their enhanced status provides a justification for minor harassment and flouting regulations.
- 9 Unless the private landlords and the support agencies can very quickly forge an effective partnership, there won't be the full structural, cultural and organisational change that the project has been established to bring about, and Accommodate Newport will struggle to achieve its exit route. The increased engagement from private landlords in the project Steering Group is to be welcomed.

## 4. West Midlands

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The Accommodate West Midlands project developed by Birmingham Community Housing Services (bchs) differs from the London and Newport projects in that it is not principally concerned with tracking the housing pathways of refugees. Its purpose has been to test out ideas and models for establishing housing projects that would increase the supply of decent accommodation for refugees and other new migrants working with the partner Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs).

Initially, bchs intended to work with 10 RCOs offering each a similar degree of support. This quickly proved unworkable, and the project was restructured to enable bchs to work with three principal partners who, in turn, would offer support and training to two or three small RCOs to ensure a sufficient transfer of information and skills.

These three principal partners each operate in one of the main three participating Local Authorities.

The Refugee and Migrants Council (RMC) was formerly the Wolverhampton Asylum and Refugee Service (WARS). It is a well established advice and support service for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Wolverhampton which was founded in 1999. RMC provides a comprehensive service to over 5000 clients including advice on a wide range of housing issues. RMC was initially uncertain of the value of connecting with Accommodate West Midlands, though the partnership is now firmly based.

Brushstrokes is a Sandwell based voluntary organisation that operates as part of the Father Hudson's charity. The organisation was established to provide help and assistance to vulnerable people in the area of Smethwick in which it is based. Whilst its work is not specifically targeted on refugees and asylum seekers, Brushstrokes has developed a number of support services for these groups in recent years. With a well organised Management Committee and a clear sense of purpose, Brushstrokes was comfortable in bringing its work with refugees and asylum seekers within the Accommodate West Midlands framework.

The Asylum and Refugee Council (ARC) is based in Birmingham and has developed following the closure of the Midlands Refugee Council. ARC provides specific services for refugees including education and training services and services relating to housing issues. Membership of Accommodate West Midlands has provided a valuable framework for the development of ARC which is now developing as a more confident and effective organisation.

All three service partners differ in their approaches to the issues, with some operating more closely to the refugee and asylum seeker community and others being more involved in the support of specific smaller RCO organisations working more directly with individuals.

As the programme developed it became clear that seeking to establish a Private Leasing Scheme (PLS) would be a principal and important outcome of the West Midlands Accommodate programme. This builds on sequentially from the London and Newport projects, which have been concerned with the first challenges of arrival and settlement and with seeking to facilitate access to accommodation for refugees from private landlords.

A PLS develops the programme further by negotiating a formal lease with the private landlord that involves the Accommodate project, through bchs, in assuming responsibility for the letting, management and maintenance of the property.

The overall aim of the project is to establish a PLS in Birmingham, Sandwell and Wolverhampton with an initial target of 40 houses leased from the private sector.

The capacity building of the RCOs in preparation for their management of the PLS property was supported by funding from CapacityBuilders, which allowed a more detailed training programme to be established.

Bchs developed an RCO training programme involving seven elements:

- An overview of the local housing issues
- The identification of the neighbourhood housing options including the particular benefits of a PSL scheme
- Managing PSL property, allocation, rent control, arrears etc
- Project and business planning
- How organisations are effectively governed
- Managing and supervising staff and volunteers
- Raising and managing funds

This training has led to the production of a “Guide to the PRS” (Appendix One) for other interested organisations, with individual sections covering:

- Housing in the private rented sector
- The Accommodate Programme: hact and bchs
- Building partnerships with Refugee Community Organisations
- Developing a Private Sector Leasing scheme; examples of positive outcomes
- Sources of finance
- Legal considerations
- Allocations, management and maintenance
- Frequently Asked Questions

Bchs is in touch with other organisations such as the national Empty Homes Agency to ensure that the lessons being learned in the project can be disseminated more widely.

## Learning points

- 1 Successful working with RCOs will involve housing associations in learning new skills and expertise. There are pressures on community leaders within refugee and migrant communities of which housing associations need to be aware. There are also pressures on individuals, the expectation, for example, that money will be sent “home” and the shame that can arise from a community view that this is not being undertaken adequately. In working with RCOs, it’s also important to recognise that the circumstances that have led to their being a refugee can result in severe and sustained personal trauma. Housing Association staff who are involved in projects of this sort need to be open to the need to learn.
- 2 Anecdotally, over half of the tenancies in the private sector that are taken up by refugees and new migrants without the type of support provided by Accommodate West Midlands in its PLS fail. The reasons are inappropriate and unpopular locations, often residents may seek to return to the areas of main settlement despite overcrowding and poor conditions. Other reasons are non payment of bills, unfamiliarity with accessing such services as there are and poor quality accommodation. Accommodate West Midlands provides a regular support service, visits, advice, intervention, brokering disputes which greatly reduces the level of such tenancy failure.
- 3 Accommodate West Midlands has, like the Newport project, found that the housing expectations of a number of refugee groups have exceeded the quality of property offered, despite it being in adequate condition. Some NASS properties have been located on the outer mono-cultural estates in predominantly Council property and these have generally been unsafe and unsuitable.
- 4 A number of arrivals in the UK are legal migrants and are accepting PRS property after obtaining part time or, more usually, full time work. Where the economic situation, earning money, is the driver, the condition of the PRS property is of lesser concern as there is an expectation that, in time, people in PRS property will be going back to their own country. Arrivals from Eastern Europe are well represented in this category.
- 5 The aim of many refugees seeking accommodate is to find accommodation in the PRS which is either self contained or has at least a shower and a cooker that is not shared with others if it in multiple occupation. HMOs where kitchens and bathrooms are shared are far less popular. For those seeking accommodation in the PRS for a longer period, the quality of decoration and fittings matters more. If those in the PRS initially on a temporary basis recognise that their stay in the UK may be extended, they, too, seek higher quality accommodation in the PRS.

- 6 These difficulties in the traditional private rented sector makes finding more effective means of safeguarding and improving the housing situation of refugees more urgent. PLS schemes that use private sector property to meet social housing needs have the same advantage of flexibility and immediacy, plus effective and skilled management underpinned by the support of a housing association. Market conditions are currently quite favourable, with private landlords recognising the value of a secure tenancy over three years, with no agent letting fees or significant void losses and safeguarded income in the event of maintenance/damage attributable to the tenant.
- 7 One possible shortcoming is the difficulty in negotiating a rent reduction in consideration of these advantages. The project is gradually demonstrating that negotiations with private sector landlords can be positive. The local housing allowance is generally workable. The extent to which Accommodate West Midlands can push rents downwards is an important point to measure in the evaluation of the project.
- 8 Conditions in the less organised areas of the private market can be characterised as “chaotic”. Here property is in very poor condition and is tenanted by people whose lifestyle or resources mean that this accommodation is all that they can generally obtain. Tenancies tend to be short and “churning” means that tenants may simply move from one unsatisfactory room or rooms to another. Local Authorities have a responsibility to use enforcement powers to attempt to bring about improvements in the conditions of these properties. A PLS offers a systematic response to these difficulties as a means of improving conditions for those more vulnerable and marginalised groups such as the refugees that HACT’s Accommodate projects attempt to assist.
- 9 The project will be able to assess the outcomes of moving small groups of refugees and new migrants into PLS property into neighbourhoods that, whilst suitable for the purpose, are not in areas of previous significant settlement. The project’s efforts in contacting local voluntary and community groups, faith groups and other sources of advice and support may be an important factor in sustaining these tenancies. Evidence to date is positive, despite the poor housing conditions in the deprived neighbourhoods facing the greatest stress, the rents demanded there are higher than in the middle ring suburbs. Property conditions outside these “hot spots” are better and the first settled refugees don’t seem to be encountering any hostility.
- 10 Departmental connections within Local Authorities remain a matter of chance or, where positive co-ordination is taking place, it is still more often the initiative and energy of individual officers rather than the outcome of strategy and structure.
- 11 More recently, the numbers seeking asylum have been reducing and some migrants from the new accession countries within the European Community have been returning to their country of origin. Also the decision making process is now markedly quicker. The Refugee

Information and Employment Service (RIES) now provides a clearer route for support for those granted leave to remain, although housing was omitted from its initial remit.

## 5. Learning point summary

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The three Accommodate Two projects have explored a sequence of housing pathways from initial arrival to final housing outcomes. The extreme pressure on housing in London means that for some refugees in the capital, finally stabilising their housing conditions is a long drawn out process which some are still looking to achieve.

Major cities face the same shortages, but to a lesser degree. In smaller towns it can be the quality of private rented accommodation that is of concern rather than the supply.

In summary, four main themes emerge:

- The role and potential of Refugee Community Organisations
- The housing expectations of refugees
- Housing for refugees in the public sector
- Housing for refugees in the private sector

In principal, Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) should play an important part in supporting refugees in achieving appropriate housing. But it is clear from the Accommodate Two projects that this outcome is not entirely being achieved. In Tower Hamlets and Hackney, the RCOs concentrate more directly on social and cultural issues and maintaining community connections than they do on providing support and advice aimed at improving housing conditions. The experience of the Accommodate Two projects outside London suggests that the majority of RCOs are fragile, often depending on one or two active members of the community to maintain their organisation. Building and sustaining partnerships between these RCOs, the umbrella organisations that claim to support them and the wider voluntary and community sector is a laborious process that has not yet been fully completed in either Newport or the West Midlands.

Umbrella groups, such as the Welsh Refugee Council and the Refugee Voice Wales have a national reach, but the Accommodate projects found that this often distracted them from the task of playing an active part in more local partnerships. Neither organisation was able to provide the necessary level of consistent support to smaller RCOs that HACT required. As their funding was often tied to satisfying numerical targets across Wales as a whole, in practice there appeared to be a degree of competition between them. In the West Midlands, disagreements about the pace at which RCOs might develop property for their own management led to one RCO effectively withdrawing from the programme.

Secondly, despite these difficulties, RCOs remain a vital part of the housing jigsaw. The work in Newport suggests that training for individual refugees to enable them to advise members of their own communities can be effective. Refugees, women in particular, who have had direct experience of the problems in achieving satisfactory housing, can explain to those searching for accommodation what realistic expectations they need to have. After this, informed groups of refugees will be in a

better position to offer information and advice than some community elders and some solicitors whose advice appears to be to refuse all offers of accommodation in the private sector and simply telling refugees, incorrectly, that they are entitled to a Council house. After training, these refugees also demonstrated a capacity to research housing conditions and to become a potential point of consultation for service providers seeking to engage with refugee communities.

A third finding involved the quality of social housing in the public sector. Whilst obtaining such accommodation was an aspiration of most of the refugees interviewed, in practice, refugees often found that they had simply exchanged one set of problems for another. Housing offers on unpopular estates left refugees vulnerable and isolated. The quality of the social housing offer was too often poor and its management inadequate. In many cases, accommodation obtained through NASS was deserted as refugees looked to return to the overcrowded neighbourhoods in those cities where the main refugee communities have settled.

Finally, whilst Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) are generally the least popular accommodation in the private sector, the Accommodate projects indicated that it is possible for this property to be better managed, thus increasing its ability to cater for single refugees. Accommodate West Midlands has already flagged up the fact that the prime need for refugees coming through the RIES programme is accommodation for single people. Both Newport and the West Midlands have found that if the tenants of an HMO are known to each other, ideally being friends, shared accommodation can be acceptable. This is particularly the case if some small scale additional management support is provided to ensure shared kitchens and bathrooms are kept clean.

## Recommendation

It is clear from the Accommodate Two programmes that many of the elements of a more integrated housing service for refugees exist, but are disconnected one from another.

Accommodate West Midlands has demonstrated that a Private Leasing Scheme (PRS) can be an important and effective means of developing satisfactory accommodation for single refugees, for childless couples and for families. The evidence from the project is that there are private landlords who are satisfied with somewhat lower rental returns in return for income guarantees, professional management from a housing association and an indemnity against damage and rent arrears.

The West Midlands project has also discovered that there are landlords for whom this service is attractive, whose properties lie in what are described as interim neighbourhoods. These are the ring of reasonably well appointed mixed tenure suburbs that lie between the overcrowded areas more traditionally associated with refugee settlement and the more affluent areas of owner occupied property that they adjoin.

In England, a PLS would be more attractive still if the Accommodate project were to take advantage of the hitherto little used Temporary Social Housing Grant (TSHG) available from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to upgrade private property where the landlord is prepared to offer a lease of between 2 and 30 years. Grants depend on the length of the lease and such property is intended to provide accommodation for homeless non priority cases and groups such as refugees.

A further element of support might be achieved by closer contact with English Local Authorities to enable them to release hard to let property in appropriate areas that could also qualify for TSHG.

Finally, housing associations themselves might contribute harder to let property to a developed project. This might be particularly the case for larger houses sub-divided into self-contained smaller flats and bedsits that present problems without the more intense housing management that a lease arrangement might allow. While TSHG is not available for housing association owned property, leasing to a specialist agency might be attractive.

The Accommodate Two programme has demonstrated that a PLS can form the core programme for achieving a more systematic approach to the housing needs of refugees, including those threatened with homelessness who are not in priority groups.

But this report suggests that the prize of an integrated housing service for refugees is there to be grasped, provided all the currently disconnected elements are brought together.

The report recommends that HACT takes the learning from the Accommodate Two programme further to a third stage and pilots the potential of achieving an integrated service bringing together property leased from private landlords, property leased from Local Authorities, both of whom qualify for investment under the TSHG. In addition, such an integrated programme could also involve leases offered on housing association property.

Such a pilot project could usefully be based in the West Midlands. Previous work in the region by bchs would provide a foundation for such an extension and where the existing properties already managed under the first PLS could be augmented to offer the potential for such a project to be self-sustaining financially at the end of any pilot programme.

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