

Shared Futures

in a Vibrant Glasgow

Refugee Week
June 2008

This is a short report on the *Shared Futures* seminar: a Refugee Week event in Glasgow that brought together housing providers, planners, funders, support agencies, refugee residents and community organisations for a 'housing conversation'.

The Shared Futures seminar was organised by Community InfoSource and Govan Housing Association's Community Inclusion Coordinator. The aims were to contribute to the local and national housing debate from a refugee perspective, and to update partners on the development of the Door Step project.

The Home Office *dispersal* scheme began in 2000, and there are now around 2,000 asylum seeking households living in the city - just under 3,500 individuals including children - accommodated by the council (in GHA flats), a private landlord and YMCA Glasgow. There are no reliable data on numbers of refugees settled in the city, but it is estimated at around 5,000.

The Scottish policy response to dispersal has been relatively positive, but adapting to constant revisions of increasingly restrictive UK policy and legislation has been a struggle. Local policy has been described as 'disjointed...characterized by contradictions between Scottish and UK policy goals' (Scottish Centre for Research on Social Justice, 2004).

Dispersal in Glasgow was housing-led – with asylum seekers initially housed mostly in hard-to-let council flats - and refugee settlement has to a great extent followed that pattern; but over this period there have been radical changes in the city's housing environment, starting with the Council housing stock transfer.

The Shared Futures event aimed to facilitate a conversation on housing and the wider community issues concerning refugees in this changing landscape. As a starting point, a question was drawn from the *Vibrant City* aim of Glasgow's Community Plan:

Are refugees included in the plans to "create a transformed and vibrant Glasgow where people choose to live, and where Glaswegians are fully involved in the life of the whole city"?

DOOR STEP
EQUAL ACCESS



First Step: Paula's Story

To set the scene, Innocent Jakisa and Samiha Iman gave some background to the Door Step project, and it's First Step pilot, before introducing the films, *Paula's Story*, and the accompanying *Making of Paula's Story*.

Door Step is an initiative of two not-for-profit organisations, Community InfoSource and mediaco-op, developed with an advisory group of housing and support agencies and refugee and migrant organisations. An innovative and participative information and training project, Door Step involves refugees and migrants in finding ways to overcome the barriers to decent, safe, affordable housing.

Funded by the Scottish Government and Glasgow Anti Racist Alliance, *First Step: Paula's Story* is a DVD information and training tool, using a mini docu-drama format to explore the challenges facing a refugee family moving on from asylum support to find mainstream housing in Glasgow.

Innocent and Samiha reflected on their community research, training and work placements on the programme, and their experiences in front of and behind the cameras in making *Paula's Story*.

www.door-step.net

Some of the housing, regeneration and integration developments since 2000:

- asylum seeker dispersal beginning April 2000
- major housing and homelessness Acts of Scottish Parliament;
- stock transfer, GHA 're-provisioning', and the long-awaited second stage transfer;
- formation of Glasgow Community Planning Partnership;
- a new housing strategy and an £83 million Housing and Development Funding Programme for the city;
- publication of Firm Foundations, the Scottish Government's paper on the future of housing;
- reform of the Housing Association Grant subsidy;
- new asylum seeker housing contracts, now including private landlords and the voluntary sector;
- an overhaul of Scottish Government and Glasgow Community Planning integration funding;
- the Single Outcome Agreement framework.

Housing conversation panel:

John Wilkes, Chief Executive, Scottish Refugee Council

Twimukye Mushaka, Poverty Alliance and Karibu

David Webster, Housing Strategy Manager, Glasgow City Council

Anne Lear, Director, Govanhill Housing Association

Chair: Michael Collins, Community InfoSource



Housing options

One of the key issues of the conversation was around the available options in Glasgow for refugees when granted leave to remain.

Long periods in temporary homeless accommodation, particularly for households in need of larger family homes, was of particular concern.

Twimukye Mushaka noted various reasons for leaving Glasgow, but stressed that overcrowding while awaiting family housing is a big factor. There are many families stuck in unsuitable temporary homeless accommodation, often for years after grant of status. This not only affects feelings of security, but the high furniture and service charge can also prevent people taking jobs.

From the audience, Henriette of Karibu women's refugee community organisation talked of the home as the centre of life on which education, work and family choices are all reliant. Without a decent secure home, these things will suffer.

David Webster agreed that supply of suitable larger housing must be a factor in families decisions to leave or stay in Glasgow, but we still know little about the other push and pull factors. David gave a commitment to meet with John Wilkes to discuss funding research in this area.

From the audience, Duncan Sim of University of West of Scotland gave a brief outline of ongoing community action research (due to be published this autumn). The researchers are finding that the main factors contributing to refugees wishing to leave their accommodation are: overcrowding, disrepair and feeling unsafe in the area.

Anne Lear argued that lack of larger homes was nothing new for minority ethnic families in Glasgow, but that the current national housing strategy and funding regime will if anything make the situation worse. With cuts in grant funding, housing associations will not be able to build enough larger homes, and refugee families will have to rely on the private sector, as BME families have for years.

Anne added that this squeeze on housing association funding is not just risking a reduction in supply of affordable larger homes, but also impacting on community-based associations wider role community and regeneration activities that could play a vital role in supporting new refugees to settle in Glasgow.

Information, advice and support

In addition to housing supply, access to good information and help with housing rights and options was a key theme of the day.

John Wilkes opened by stressing that to encourage people to stay, the transition from asylum seeker to refugee must be as smooth as possible, adding that consultation of service users is vital to develop effective services. In addition to specialist services, mainstream agencies need to be geared up to provide services to refugees, and public bodies need to be aware their duties. John added that Scottish Refugee Council is soon to publish research on refugees' experiences of services in Glasgow.

Twimukye Mushaka raised the issue that many refugees, in addition to information on their rights, need to know more about the housing shortages in Glasgow, to understand how long it may take before suitable housing can be found, and to be kept informed and supported during this period.

John Donaldson, head of the Council's immigration services, noted that the new asylum model is processing asylum claims much more quickly, leading to refugees moving on to mainstream housing and services with less local knowledge. John added that there are gaps in services, particularly since the end of the SUNRISE project piloted by Scottish Refugee Council. A recent good example of partnership working was the extra Scottish Government funding and Jobcentre Plus project in response to the Home Office legacy review which saw a sudden increase in families granted leave to remain.

John identified a need for more joined-up thinking between local authorities, Scottish and central government, and for a joined-up support package for new refugees that just doesn't exist at the moment.

Mick Doyle of SRC reminded participants that the discourse on asylum seekers and refugees is generally more positive in Scotland, but to make it easier for people to stay we need better communication and better-informed service providers, and we need to create forums where the views of refugees can be expressed and acted upon.

Michael Collins noted that these participative and community-based responses were at the heart of the Door Step project, before thanking the speakers and audience for an interesting and insightful debate, and drawing the conversation - for now - to a close.