



Working with the arts and refugees



working with refugees to build new lives

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Introduction - making the case for the arts

The following is a guide for local authorities, particularly arts officers, and mainstream arts organisations wishing to engage with the refugee sector through the arts. This engagement can take many forms from increasing audience diversity through to the running of specialised workshops for/with/by refugees. The guide will cover topics such as outreach, publicity, project planning and good practice, facilitating the success of any involvement with the refugee sector.

The last ten years has seen a significant increase in the number of initiatives involving arts and refugees in the UK. These initiatives were once considered as a 'soft touch' approach to the issues faced by this sector, a luxury to be added on after the essential services of housing and legal advice were provided. There is increasing evidence to show that arts-based projects/events can have a significant impact on:

- increasing social skills and confidence
- breaking down negative stereotypes and allowing true interaction
- promoting well-being and health
- contributing to community cohesion

Most of all, arts events allow refugees to contribute to and enrich the culture of the UK. These kinds of initiatives are in fact an essential part of a meaningful process of integration. Local authorities and arts organisations which engage with the refugee sector are therefore playing a significant role in the process of building a strong community and a more diverse cultural landscape in the UK.

Working with the arts and refugees

As mentioned in the introduction, there are many forms of engagement that can take place under the heading of refugees and the arts. All of these have concrete benefits for local authorities and arts organisations.

They include:

Including refugees in the audience

Many arts organisations in the UK have recognised the need to increase audience diversity, particularly those which are regularly funded by the Arts Council England. This is not only essential for satisfying funding bodies but also increases the richness of cultural exchange and dialogue possible. Although this aim is more clearly targeted at arts organisations, local authorities may also seek to increase the client figures for library services.

Programming artists of a refugee background, or including art pieces about and for refugees

This allows for refugees to share the richness of their cultural heritage with their new host country. By programming exciting and perhaps unknown artists at their venues, arts organisations are able to draw in new audiences and create a vibrant, exciting and inspiring atmosphere for new art forms to thrive.

Programming a specialised event or series of workshops around Refugee Week

This important national week of events runs in mid-June and sees hundreds of events take place around the UK with an audience of over 200,000 (see resources page for full details of the Refugee Week website). It seeks to celebrate the achievements and contributions of refugees in this country, offering positive images to offset negative stereotypes normally offered in the media. In doing so, it plays an important part in increasing the possibilities for full and successful integration of this group, increases community cohesion and helps build bridges within the community. It involves all sectors of the community, from statutory bodies, educational bodies, voluntary organisations and small grassroots BME groups (black and minority ethnic) and refugee groups. An increasing number of arts organisations are recognising Refugee Week as something that should be part of their programming and many local authorities have put significant effort into celebrations of the week. Notable examples include Brighton and Hove local authority which plays a key role in the steering group for Refugee Week events in the area.

Outreach/education art workshops or events with the refugee sector

These may take the form of workshops or an event which takes place on site at an arts organisation, or in a community setting. For example, several large museums and galleries have had special days for minority groups to come and visit the exhibitions with workshops built around them to include creative writing or English language components (ESOL). In some cases, this has taken the form of more long-term workshops to build ESOL skills. Alternatively, workshops/events may take the form of tutors going into the community to run specialised sessions. For example, community music organisations might run sessions with musicians of a refugee background, enabling participants to celebrate and re-create the music of their own countries, perhaps leading to a public performance.

Reaching the refugee sector

Outreach and consultation

Whether the aim is to encourage a new audience to come to an arts event, to find new artists of a refugee background or to set up arts workshops involving refugees, the first step will be to find ways to access this sector of society. Refugees and asylum seekers are often grouped under the heading of 'hard to reach', due to the barriers of language and location and cultural differences, perceived as further barriers.

Before looking at ways of reaching refugees and asylum seekers it is worth examining what we mean by these terms:

Refugee

Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention defines a refugee as 'A person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.'

Asylum seeker

In the UK, an asylum seeker is someone who has made a formal application for asylum and is waiting for a decision on their claim. The Home Office must decide whether or not that person qualifies for protection under the 1951 UN Convention on refugees.

As will be discussed in further detail, the population of refugees and asylum seekers in any town is made up of people from many linguistic, social and ethnic backgrounds from established members of the local BME population who may have arrived a decade ago and now hold British citizenship, through to recent arrivals who have claimed asylum and have very insecure immigration status and future in the UK. This latter group is particularly difficult to 'reach' for local authorities as there is a great deal of distrust of authority.

In spite of the differences within this group, there are many methods of finding refugees and asylum seekers in your local community.

- Consult Refugee Action's Directory for Arts and Refugees in the South East (see Resources for details). This lists those refugee community organisations which have run arts-based activities in the past, or have expressed an interest in doing so. It will also list which art form is of interest to them. The list of arts organisations may also provide useful information as it offers information about projects that have been run in the past by music, theatre and other groups.
- Consult with regional community development workers from Refugee Action, Refugee Council and the Council for Voluntary organisations who will have an in-depth knowledge of those refugee community groups in their area which they are working with, and may well know of other smaller groups.
- Check with your local Arts Council England, South East diversity officer who may well be able to provide you with information about other mainstream arts organisations working with refugees, particularly within their regularly funded organisations.
- Refugee Week – this website lists information about those groups which have run events each year. Check events in your area, or in your art form, to find similar projects which have been run with your target audience.
- Some BME groups work closely with the refugee sector, particularly in areas where there are no strong refugee community groups to cater to this sector. A list of these can be found at the National Council for Voluntary organisations (see Resources) or local Voluntary Action organisations/councils.
- If you are looking for musicians, artists or writers of a refugee background it is a good idea to put a call out on the arts jobs listings which can be joined for free at the Arts Council England website (see Resources)

For writers of a refugee background it is worth contacting the national organisation, Exiled Writers Ink (see Resources list).

- If after all your searches you have discovered that there are no refugee community groups or BME groups with refugee links in your area, it may be worth re-considering your project focus. For example, if you were considering running a film project for young refugees and there are none within a 100 mile radius you may want to consider screening a series of films about refugees and inviting young refugees from another area to present them to the local community instead, presenting an excellent awareness-raising opportunity and increasing the confidence of the young people involved.

Consultation

Why consult and what does this mean?

Carrying out consultations, simply means identifying your client group and opening a dialogue with them, preferably in a face-to-face and informal manner, so that their opinions are taken into account. During these discussions it will be possible for the client group to clearly state their needs, issues and objectives for an arts initiative and to establish a relationship of trust and mutual exchange with the arts provider. It may seem like an unnecessary step to have this kind of outreach before commencing an arts project/event. In the case of this sector of the community, however, and any others which are excluded from mainstream provisions, it is essential. The fact that this group is traditionally not included indicates that the usual methods of reaching an audience/client group and anticipating their needs are not working. In order to give this sector of the community a voice and ensure that any arts initiative delivers something that is needed, in the form that is needed, it is essential to allow the voice of the client group an opportunity to be expressed and shape decisions.

It is always worth remembering that this is an extremely heterogeneous group and it may be necessary to consult with different groups/individuals. For example, if you want to run a project with/by/for African women and your only consultation is with a Kurdish men's group, this is unlikely to be of much help. In order for an initiative to be a success and play an empowering role for the refugees/asylum seekers, an on-going and appropriate dialogue must be part of the planning stage. This is not only good practice but is the only way of ensuring success. In planning any kind of arts initiative with this sector it is important to build in extra time for this consultation period.

How to do it

When you have located the refugee community or BME community group with refugee members in your area, it is a good idea to try to attend a local community event which is held by the group. This will give you a much better understanding of how this group works, what their goals are and how you might be able to work together. It also helps to establish trust and confidence.

When you make initial direct contact, tell the group/individual how you got hold of their contact details and who you are. This is basically common sense, and nothing less than what you would expect if you were approached by an outside agency. Offer a brief outline of what you may have to offer: for example, you want to increase the number of refugees/asylum seekers in your audience and are willing to offer free/reduced tickets or special evenings; or you are thinking of running some kind of arts and crafts workshop at your site by/for/with the refugee community. Explain how this group will benefit from this service – improved language skills, a chance to share their culture, a social networking opportunity, an opportunity to sell their craft/food at an organised event – and what is expected of them in terms of time and commitment.

If the group shows some interest then you will probably want to have an informal meeting in the place of their choosing to discuss the details more fully. They may

feel more comfortable in a local café they know, or in a community building they are familiar with, rather than coming to a large art building they have never been to. Ask if there is a need for community interpreters and/or if there are any special needs. For example, if you are trying to access a women's group they may have childcare needs. It is good practice and will establish trust, if you offer to pay any travel costs incurred in attending a meeting and contribute towards childcare costs as appropriate. After all, the refugees/asylum seekers are giving up their free time to offer you their expertise and help to make your project a success.

Golden rules

A few useful tips for meetings:

- In some circumstances it may be better to keep it informal. Refugees/asylum seekers are likely to have negative associations of interviews and official meetings from both the UK and their native country.
- If you are dealing with the official elected members of a refugee community group a certain degree of formality is both expected and appropriate. Be flexible and ready to adapt to the situation.
- Make sure that refugees/asylum seekers feel comfortable by being attentive to any special medical needs. Many members of this group may be suffering from depression and mental health issues brought on by the situation in their country and uncertainty about the future – the latter two may be on-going since their arrival. They may also have suffered physical injuries in their country or during the journey to the UK and in the UK.
- Suggest that they are welcome to bring members of their families/friends social workers along if you sense that they lack confidence.
- Suggest that they are welcome to bring along an interpreter if they are not confident in their language skills for which you are prepared to pay if appropriate.
- Be flexible in what you offer and be prepared to listen.
- Be open to other cultures' forms of time-keeping and ways of having meetings. You may find that the group in question do not have the same rigid ideas of time-keeping as you are used to. Learn from this and use this knowledge in the planning of your project/event.
- Do ask about what the community would be interested in taking part in and what services they would like from you. Do not make assumptions – there is no way of predicting whether your group would be more interested in Shakespeare or arts and crafts until you ask them.
- Be prepared to explain what you are offering and how it might be beneficial to this group – ie be an enjoyable, fun activity; offer opportunities to improve English language skills or understanding of British culture; offer an opportunity for this group to showcase their culture to a local group.
- Be prepared for the group to have little understanding of what you as local authority/mainstream arts organisation do and how you work. Don't forget that in

many other countries artists and arts organisations are structured very differently, often in a more informal way with artists being seen as community leaders.

- Recognise that arts activities in some cultures may have negative associations; in some cultures it is inappropriate for women to dance in public, others do not encourage people to write fiction as this is seen as bending the truth. If the refugees/asylum seekers say something you don't understand, whether it is a language/cultural issue, do ask them to explain. You will usually find that people are delighted to find someone who actually wants to gain from their knowledge and experience. Similarly, if you don't know what kinds of music/language/dance activity are common in their native country and who takes part, do ask.
- It is a good idea to try to find out something about the countries from which your target audience is coming and their experiences in the UK. For example, if you are talking to a Latin American refugee and keep referring to your interest in Spain this is unlikely to build trust as many Latin American countries were colonised by Spain and some still have a troubled relationship.
- Do not under-estimate the range of expertise and knowledge of your client group; many refugees/asylum seekers come from a professional background and some will have been well-respected artists in their own countries. You may find that your client group knows more about your art form than you do.

To sum up:

if in doubt, ASK ... politely

do not make assumptions

Publicity

When preparing printed publicity material:

- Make sure that the language used is simple and easy to understand. Have you explained what you are offering and what is expected? If necessary, ensure that any publicity is presented in the languages of the client group using community interpreters/translators if possible (see p.14). These may be available from a local community interpreting agency which has a contract with various statutory providers.
- In your initial consultations with the client group, ask them what kind of information they would like to see on publicity information, and get someone from this group to check it before you send it out.
- Make sure that you are putting publicity in places where your client group will actually see it; this may be local churches, mosques, local newspapers, public libraries, community centres/cafes or the town hall. Once again ask during your consultation.
- However glossy and well presented your publicity is, if there is no personal contact it is unlikely to be successful. It is a good idea to pay members of the local community to distribute the flyers for you and to answer any questions (they will require a full briefing beforehand). This is the quickest way to establish trust, and you will often find that word-of-mouth is the most effective means of communication in this sector.
- Try to attend events where members of the community are likely to be and take your flyers along. This might be a cultural/religious event or a meeting in the town hall. If the group has committee meetings, ask if you can give a brief presentation of your project. When possible make sure that people can associate a face and a person with the publicity material.
- You may want to run a taster workshop in a local centre where you know many of your client group will drop in. They will be drawn to the arts and crafts/music or other workshop and you can use this opportunity to explain the workshops/event/project and how they can be involved.

To sum up, however good your publicity is it is unlikely to draw in the client group unless it is backed up by personal contact and communication.

Project Planning

When you have established through consultation what kind of project you would like to run, you can consider these questions.

- **What**

Hopefully your consultations will have given you a much clearer idea about the content of your event/project or audience development. It should be something which has obvious benefits for the target group and which you can deliver successfully within your existing infrastructure. There is no point offering to run film courses, if you are a literature development organisation. There is also little point offering to run classes teaching traditional English music forms if your participants want a chance to play their own traditional forms. Even though you will start your project with a clear idea of what area you wish to work in, be prepared to be flexible about the content. You may start on a piece about 'journeys' and realise along the way that the participants actually want to focus on something else, perhaps due to a crucial event in their own community at that time.

- **Where to hold the project/event**

It may be that this is an event/project which is designed to be part of the on-site programme of your art organisation. If this is the case, make sure the refugees/asylum seekers feel welcome by organising transport and/or holding some kind of welcoming event before it begins so that they can get to know the location. If you are selecting a location the main thing to consider is if it is safe. If asylum seekers/refugees have to pass by an area known to have gang members, for example, they are highly unlikely to come and it is unfair to ask them to do so. Make sure that the location is easy for them to get to and close to public transport. It is also a good idea to avoid any building with obvious religious or organisational associations if you wish to attract a mixed group. For example, holding your event in a church or mosque may cause problems for some attendees. Similarly holding the event in a Somali community centre may feel strange for some other community members. If possible, select a location that is neutral.

- **When**

One of the questions you should go over in consultations before beginning your project/holding your event is when it should take place. Getting the timing wrong will mean that you will have little success. Think about issues such as whether or not your participants will need to be looking after families or children (particularly applicable if you want women to attend), or whether there are special religious or cultural festivals which clash with the time chosen. You may also want to consider how often or how long your event should be. It is unlikely that refugees will be able to attend workshops/events more than once a week unless there is special training involved.

- **How**

Interpreters: your early consultation should have allowed you to establish whether or not interpreters are required. These will cost about £25/hr depending on the language, and can be sourced through the refugee community group or the local council.

Tutors: try to find tutors who are experienced at working with your client group. If they can speak the same language, or are even of a refugee background themselves this could be helpful.

- **Fundraising**

A list of funding bodies working in the sector of refugees and the arts and information about them can be found in Refugee Action's Directory of Arts and Refugees, South East (see Resources).

- **Evaluation**

For evaluation to be successful it should be an integral part of the project and something that benefits both participants and arts provider. This can be done by encouraging participatory evaluation in the form of video diaries or photographic montage taken by the participants themselves, with suitable training if necessary. This allows evaluation to become an empowering process for participants and encourages them to take ownership of the initiative, taking more control of the form it takes. Film or photo evidence can be used in the future as well for fundraising or awareness-raising purposes as long as proper consent has been obtained at the time of photography/filming (see *Planning an arts event in the refugee sector* for Guidelines to photography and a sample consent form).

- **Exit strategy**

During the evaluation it will usually be a goal to demonstrate evidence that the project/event has had positive outcomes and that there is a suitable exit strategy. It may initially seem difficult to provide this kind of evidence in the case of an arts initiative. However, there is no reason that various components can be built in to facilitate this. For example, it may be possible to invite a professional artist to come in to a group and talk about possibilities for further training/job opportunities in a particular art form. It may also be possible to set up voluntary internships around the project. Any participant who takes up further training or takes up a position paid/unpaid is showing hard evidence of a successful outcome. Similarly if part of the initiative involves refugees/asylum seekers taking part in an art event for the general public it is possible to show evidence of increased confidence and also to measure the impact on the audience, demonstrating a challenge to negative stereotypes. The key factor with evaluation is to consider strategies from the early planning stage and discuss them with participants.

Good practice

As outlined throughout this guide, refugees and asylum seekers are a sector of the community facing particular challenges and difficulties including:

- mental/physical health problems caused by events in their own countries before they fled, or since arrival in the UK.
- poverty, homelessness in some cases and great uncertainty about their futures.
- on-going situations of turmoil and war in their own countries which may still be affecting their friends and family so that recent bereavement is frequent within this sector.
- feelings of cultural dislocation or bereavement as they no longer have access to their own culture/language.
- difficulties finding any work, particularly appropriate work that is suited to their skills.
- physical and verbal abuse and racial harassment from members of the host community.

For these reasons, it is particularly important to focus on good practice markers when engaging with refugees and asylum seekers. Some issues to consider include:

- **Choose content wisely** Make sure that any content/topics are selected with the client group and are not exploitative or an example of 'mining for stories'. For example, if the refugees/asylum seekers want to write about surviving torture or war then they should be supported in doing so. Running workshops, however, with the deliberate intention of eliciting painful memories and emotive images/texts is not good practice, unless it is done in the context of art therapy with highly qualified practitioners.
- **Handling difficult issues that may come up** However carefully the topics are chosen, it is possible that some troubling aspects will come up. For the well-being of the client group and the tutor, it is advisable to arrange for the support a qualified social worker/counsellor to be available if and as needed.
- **Training the tutor** The tutor should be trained in working with this client group and offered advice on how to recognise signs of mental/physical health distress which require outside intervention. It is not the role of the art tutor to become a counsellor/legal advisor but it is good practice for the tutor to be able to signpost suitable legal/housing/health advisors for the most pressing concerns.
- **Support for the tutor** The arts tutor should be offered counselling support if the sessions prove to be overwhelming.
- **Working with young people** In working with young people, very special care must be taken and it is advisable to consult with the guidelines by ArtsPlan (see Resources).

- **Exit Strategy** It is important to arrange a suitable exit strategy so that the client group do not feel that they have been part of something very intensive for several weeks and are then left with nothing. The first thing to do is to manage expectations – make it clear from the beginning what can and cannot be offered.
- **Follow up training** If possible, offer further training opportunities or other sessions in the art form. It may be that after taking a specialised session in creative writing, the participants are ready to move on to more mainstream courses in adult education venues. Partnerships with larger charities/education organisations may also provide a way of continuing to offer resources to the participants. It is good practice to find out about other such options and investigate whether special bursaries are available for refugees in education/training.
- **Consultation** Have on-going consultation with the group and follow the advice given. If the client group is not happy with one aspect of the course/project then it should be changed.
- **Childcare/travel costs** Make suitable arrangements for childcare and travel costs to be covered. If it is not possible under your budget to pay all costs, then offer to pay a certain amount. It will establish trust and show an awareness of the reality of the situation of the refugee/asylum seeker.
- **Refreshments** Offer refreshments. This is not just polite but an essential part of building trust and the informality of the coffee break is likely to yield the most productive networking and communication. Many of your refugees/asylum seekers are likely to be on a very tight budget and struggling to find the time or resources to attend arts projects. It is your job to make it as safe and enjoyable as possible.
- **Community interpreters** Make sure you provide community interpreters if needed and ensure that tutors are well trained in how to work with them. For example, the extra time for translation means that instructions will have to be given more slowly or perhaps more than once.
- **Be flexible and be aware of the changing needs of your clients** when running an arts project/initiative for most groups the chances of your participants all suffering a mass bereavement, finding out that war is threatening their families is fairly small. In the case, of the refugee sector, however, such occurrences are sadly all too common. In such circumstances, it may be necessary to change the parameters of the project to allow for a suitable space of reflection/grieving if the participants choose to continue.
- **Problematic attendance** Changing socio-economic conditions and the particular difficulties faced by refugees/asylum seekers in terms of low income, failure to find secure housing, mental health/physical health issues, bereavement/war in family members in their own country means that it may not be possible to guarantee regular attendance.

Sources of information

Resources

Refugee Action

www.refugee-action.org.uk

Includes *Directory for Refugees and the Arts, South East*, updated 2008 and *Planning an Arts Event in the Refugee Sector*, 2008.

Refugee Week

www.refugeeweek.org.uk

Refugee Week's website has several information guides that are particularly helpful if you are planning an event around Refugee Week. These include:

- Ideas for events
- Examples of events (listing successful past events held during Refugee Week)
- Refugee Week toolkit – a guide to organising events
- Ideas for Young People
- How to Promote Your Event

Arts Council England

www.artscouncil.org.uk

Consult the diversity/social inclusion officer in your region or the officer for your particular art form, eg literature, dance

Full contact details can be found on their website

Arts Council England also has a wide range of information sheets on subjects including:

- Organising an event
- How to pay artists
- Example budgets
- Other sources of funding
- Insurance
- How to write a press release

The Future of the Arts and Refugees

Hybrid report

www.baringfoundation.org.uk

Comprehensive report commissioned by Arts Council England, Baring Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Trust on the future of the arts and refugees. It outlines the history of development in this area and offers recommendations for future work for different sectors.

Sense of Belonging

Creative Exchange

www.creativexchange.org

Publication that offers sound arguments in favour of working in the field of refugees and the arts, outlining the European and UK policy context for this work. It also has a number of case studies and is accompanied by a video.

Using the Arts to Work with Young Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Stella Barnes

www.artswork.org.uk

Extensive guidelines available from Artswork. It is accompanied by a resource pack outlining specific tasks centred around drama.

Exiled Writers Ink

www.exiledwriters.org.uk

National literature development organisation run by and for refugees, able to offer advice on hiring creative writing tutors/writers of a refugee background with training in working in the community/in schools.

1 See Hybrid report on *The Future of Arts and Refugees* for an excellent breakdown of the background of this field of work and many initiatives in the UK.

2 See Creative Exchange's *Sense of Belonging* for details of European and UK policy and how refugees and the arts relate to this as well as markers that can be used to indicate evidence of outcomes.

Notes

Working with the arts and refugees is a practical guide for local authorities – particularly arts officers and mainstream arts organisations wishing to engage with the refugee sector through the arts. Covering topics such as outreach, publicity, project planning and good practice, it is an invaluable guide for anyone setting up an arts project with refugees or asylum seekers.

Refugee Action is an independent, national charity working to enable refugees to build new lives in the UK. We provide practical emergency support for newly arrived asylum seekers and long-term commitment to their settlement, and we deal with some 40,000 enquiries from refugees and asylum seekers each year. As one of the country's leading agencies in the field, Refugee Action has more than 25 years' experience in pioneering innovative work in partnership with refugees.

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