



## URBAN FORUM CASE STUDY

# Involving refugees through volunteering at Leicester Libraries

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The views and findings in this article of work do not necessarily represent the views of the Commission.

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## **This case study is based on interviews with Leicester City Council's Senior Community Librarian and a refugee who volunteers for Leicester Libraries.**

### **1. Summary**

Leicester Libraries has been working to involve refugees and asylum seekers in service development since 2001. Starting from a consultation exercise with asylum seekers about their information and stock requirements, the work took shape with the creation of a post in 2005 dedicated to service development and community involvement. Time was invested into relationship-building with refugee organisations, and developing a refugee volunteer programme. This has led to a range of initiatives to involve the community, based at the library, including a partnership from 2008 with a community media social enterprise, Citizens' Eye, and Hatnews, an associated news agency dedicated to refugee and asylum issues.

### **2. Background**

Leicester has large and well-established ethnic minority communities, comprising 36% of the population. By 2011 is predicted to be the first European city to have a majority ethnic minority population. In 2000/01 there was an additional impact on the demographic of the city as an increased number of people seeking asylum in the UK were placed in Leicester through the government's dispersal programme.

At this time, the Library Service adopted 'achieving inclusion' as one of their strategic priorities. This included developing the service to meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as other sections of the community for whom English was not the first language, and encouraging these groups to use the libraries.

As part of a small, arts-funded project, in 2001 the Library Service consulted with asylum seekers on what they wanted from the library. Prior to the consultation the service had assumed that books in customers' own languages were a priority for this client group. The consultation showed that instead materials to support learning English was the priority. The stock ordered as a result of the consultation proved far more popular than the books it had been assumed people wanted.

*'We basically asked people what they actually want. We learnt from the early consultation with asylum seekers that many of our preconceptions about what people wanted and needed were wrong. It was an eye opener for many people.'*

Senior Community Librarian

The Library Service redirected resources in response to the changing demographic of the city. A new post (Developing Communities Librarian) was created in January 2005 to create opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to have a voice in service development.

A successful bid to the Home Office Refugee Integration Challenge Fund brought additional funding to develop a one-year Refugees into Libraries volunteering programme from January 2006. The project supported Leicester's Cultural Service for Beacon status in working with hard-to-reach groups, and received a 'Libraries Change Lives Award' in 2007.

Upon the completion of the original project, a further six months funding was attained through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to include volunteers from migrant communities. Since the project funding ended, work has been undertaken to include volunteering as a key feature of community engagement in the new Library Service strategy 'Better Libraries Better Lives'.

### **3. Planning and preparation**

In the first phase of the project, priority was given to building relationships with refugee organisations. Expertise about possible routes into refugee communities was essential to the project, as the Library Service did not have this.

The Library Service became an active partner in the Multi-Agency Forum, attended by representatives of the main voluntary and community sector agencies working with refugees, statutory bodies and Council departments. This was a key channel for the Library Service to inform partners about their objectives in involving the refugee community, and to establish the partnerships it would rely on to do this. Refugee organisations were offered library space for the promotion of their services, and the Library Service took an active role in Refugee Week. The steps taken demonstrated that investing the time to be active partners, and showing a keenness for libraries to be useful to refugee organisations (in particular, the provision of space) were critical in building up trust and working partnerships.

In the Refugees into Libraries project, the Library sought to involve people through the volunteering scheme as a direct means of getting information about the needs of this client group.

*'We're a library and information service and we have a duty to meet the needs of all sections of the community. Who better to understand these needs than people themselves?'*

Senior Community Librarian

The service development aspect of the volunteer programme needed to be understood by different parts of the Library Service, the volunteers and by refugee organisations. Clear communication of aims from the outset was essential to achieving this.

Refugee organisations were critical to identifying the right volunteers to make the programme work, and they signposted all of the recruits. The volunteer group that was recruited was diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender and language. As they would be working with a particularly vulnerable client group, including many individuals with varying degrees of post traumatic stress, the Library Service took advice from refugee organisations on the importance of identifying volunteers who were suitable to be involved.

### **4. Evidence of influence**

The refugee volunteer group was successful in influencing the library service in a number of areas. Examples include designing new publicity materials and information about joining the library; the development of new services in the library, such as study groups for English language practice, citizenship courses, and IT skills; influencing stock and software; and delivering community advice sessions.

Other initiatives resulted from starting the volunteer programme, opening the library and developing partnership work with key organisations. These initiatives included a new mother and toddler group set up by Refugee Action and NHS Assist (called Babies of the World) and a partnership of the library with a community media social enterprise, Citizens' Eye. The latter initiative resulted in the launch of Hatnews, a news agency run by refugees and asylum seekers, believed by its organisers to be the first of its kind.

## 5. Involvement methods used – key features; how barriers were overcome

Following feedback from the volunteers, the decision was taken for the scheme to be based in the central library, rather than volunteers separately based in local libraries. The experience of those involved suggests that, although unplanned, this way of organising was critical to the success of the programme in influencing decision-making. It allowed a cohesive group to form, giving individual members of the group more power and confidence to propose changes. It also meant that it was possible for suggestions to come through informal discussions as well as formal meetings. It was noted by those involved that the volunteers were motivated to meet the needs of all refugee and asylum seeker communities, and not just for their own community. This may also have been encouraged by the opportunity to work as a unit from the start.

Volunteers had both formal and informal routes through which they could make proposals for service development. Formal routes included team meetings. High value was also placed on informal routes, and these were encouraged. This combination appears to have succeeded in encouraging a culture of involvement, maximising participation by recognising that some people are more confident in groups, while others prefer an informal one-to-one setting.

Service developments progressed as a result of the volunteer proposals were carried out within a short space of time. Through this, volunteers were encouraged to be involved, and could feel confident that their involvement did make a difference.

*'I always say we'll say yes if we can, and if we can't do it we'll tell you, and explain why.'*  
Senior Community Librarian

Evidence of strong organisational commitment over several years has been present in the different phases of the involvement of refugee and asylum seeker communities in the Library Service. This commitment is shown by the lead role provided by the Head of Service, the allocation of resources, and the speed at which new ideas were acted upon. The commitment at senior management level has also influenced the culture of the Library Service. Its staff already attended asylum-seeker awareness courses, and there was a long history of the Library Service being proactive in meeting diverse needs, and of working alongside volunteers.

## 6. Outcomes

There were clear benefits derived from using volunteering as a way of involving members of the refugee community:

### ***Benefits to the Library Service***

- Intelligence about customer needs has enabled the effective targeting of resources and avoided wasting resources.
- The Library saw an increase in membership from target communities identified as being 'harder to reach'.
- The partnership with Citizens' Eye and relationship with Hatnews and other community news agencies that are part of this are now available for all parts of the council to use to help put into practice their duties to inform and consult communities.
- Volunteers gave hours to develop and deliver new services available in libraries, and the volunteers and the partner agencies have brought new skills and fresh ideas.
- The development of the service showed that the libraries could play an increased role in providing informal educational services, to support formal learning.

*'...we are embracing different ways of doing things, but will only do this by getting involved with different groups, different communities, getting new ideas – it's not just about developing new ideas internally. We're stronger and more effective when working together meaningfully.'*  
Senior Community Librarian

### **Benefits to the community**

- The Library Service in Leicester now provides, and houses, more services and products to meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers than would have been provided had it not been for the input of refugee volunteers and refugee organisations.
- The citizenship study group, and citizenship software, has helped hundreds of refugees, and other sections of the ethnic minority community to pass the compulsory Citizenship Test.
- Staffing at the Library Service is more ethnically diverse as a result of having volunteers, and of volunteers succeeding in getting paid positions at the library, both motivating and encouraging refugees and asylum seekers and other excluded sections of the ethnic minority community.
- Hatnews provides free news, information and culture for asylum and refugee communities, as well as opportunities to contribute and become trained to become 'citizen reporters'.
- Involving volunteers in the library, and the platform provided by Hatnews, highlights to council staff and the wider community the skills that asylum seekers bring, coming from varied backgrounds, including nurses, doctors, filmmakers, artists, and journalists.
- The Library Service has become more of a community resource, and community organisations have been empowered to use it. A Kurdish community group now uses library space to hold IT lessons, and a Zimbabwean human rights campaign group uses it for meetings.

### **Benefits to the volunteers**

- Through volunteering, individuals cultivated their skills, built their confidence, and gained experience working in a mainstream public service. This in turn helped employment prospects, overcoming isolation and aiding integration.
- Incorporating service development opportunities for the volunteers from the outset enhanced the positive outcomes for volunteers as they saw tangible evidence of their influence.

*'Having been a student of journalism back home, I spent six years in the asylum system here and my skills were rotting. I tried to get on to journalism courses, but couldn't because of restrictions. I was so reserved, so stressed out, feeling like the world is enclosed, that nothing positive could come out of it. I had suffered quite a lot physically and a lot of stress from the trauma ... So this [opportunity to work with Citizens' Eye and the Library Service to set up Hatnews] came as a godsend to me ... For me it wasn't the opportunity for me to learn, but for me to use the skills and experience I had to benefit the service and the wider community, to help involve more refugees and asylum seekers in balanced news delivery.'*

Refugee, library volunteer, and editor of Hatnews.

## **7. Lessons**

- Senior management leadership and support was important in directing resources, creating a supportive internal culture, prepared to try new things, and enabling change to happen quickly.
- Developing functioning partnerships was key to the success of the project – providing expertise, selecting volunteers, enabling links to be made with refugee communities, delivering new services, and supporting the continuation of widening involvement through volunteering at the library.
- Having a dedicated resource was a decisive factor in allowing the Library Service to move from a one-off piece of consultation to the ongoing involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in the Library Service, and for this work to become mainstreamed.
- Volunteering as a method of involvement worked because the involvement was direct and

ongoing, and because volunteers gained from the opportunity to volunteer as well as the opportunity to influence service development.

- Volunteers gained confidence through being part of a group, having both formal and informal opportunities to influence, and the self-help ethos of the programme.
- The Library responding positively and speedily to proposals motivated the volunteers and partners to continue to be involved, and kept momentum going.
- The importance of commitment to ongoing involvement.

*'It's not about ticking the boxes, I hate that. It's about the desire to actually involve those communities in the service and the way to do this isn't just to talk to them about this, but is to actually do it.'*

Senior Community Librarian

## **8. How lessons are being applied**

- The post of Senior Community Librarian for Developing Communities was mainstreamed and made full time.
- Volunteering and community involvement is a key feature of the Library Service's library strategy 'Better Libraries Better Lives'.
- Plans are being developed by the Developing Communities Librarian to use volunteering, the experience of Hatnews, and the partnership with Citizens' Eye to involve older people, young people, ex-offenders and people with learning difficulties in the further development of the Library Service.
- The Library Service has now built up channels of communication that can continue to be used by all parts of the local authority to inform and consult different communities.