

# Regional Refugee Forum North East

## Reflections and lessons learned 2003 to 2023

[Regional Refugee Forum North East](#) (RRFNE) was established in 2003 (under the umbrella of North East Refugee Service (NERS) to provide a collective voice for refugee-led community organisations (RCOs). It brings together refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) who take the lead in bringing change to their communities. Its members are RCOs set up and run by RAS to support other RAS who live across the North East. 114 RCOs have joined the Forum since 2003, the majority of which started with RRFNE support. Since RRFNE became independent of NERS in 2004, it has had two pillars of activity: capacity building and support for individual RCOs; policy work to amplify the collective voice of RAS to bring about change at a local, regional and national level. Millfield House Foundation (MHF) has funded RRFNE since 2007; in 2015 it became one of our first [Strategic Partners](#) in recognition of its policy work. However, funding for capacity building has been harder to find recently and in 2023 RRFNE trustees carried out a consultation with its member RCOs about future priorities. Members were clear RRFNE's focus now should be supporting RCOs and their communities through current challenges (including recovery from the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and changes in government policy toward RAS). Members did not have the 'bandwidth' for policy work at present and so RRFNE has chosen not to continue as an MHF Strategic Partner.

RRFNE is an unusual organisation, with only one similar body elsewhere in the UK. That it has survived and thrived over two decades is testament to a strong, shared ethos and thoughtful, committed staff and trustees. MHF trustees have valued the expertise and creativity that RRFNE, through its member RCOs, has brought to its work and asked retiring CEO Georgina Fletcher to reflect on Forum learning over the past 20 years. What follows is a summary of a series of papers she produced, highlighting key elements of the RRFNE approach and drawing out lessons from both the organisation's successes and its challenges. It is not a comprehensive description of the huge amount of work undertaken and impact achieved by RRFNE over this period.

**The importance of community development work to support influencing activity** Amplifying the collective voice of its members has been RRFNE's core purpose. This collective voice can only come from a strong membership i.e. RCOs who are 'active, confident, resourced and connected'. Finding what works best in supporting RAS to turn their ideas into action has required 'constant trial and evolution', as has identifying and amplifying members' collective voice whilst ensuring they remain at the heart of that process. This has meant RRFNE has needed to balance its focus and resources to deliver both core functions, of community development and influencing work. Strong, reciprocal relationships with and between RRFNE's members is all important. The organisation asserts these must always be relational and never transactional, with time and resource dedicated to supporting RAS to speak for themselves, rather than have workers speak on their behalf. This ethos has underpinned all its decisions, strategies and wider messaging. RRFNE has consistently made the case for community asset building as an integral part of local RAS integration strategies, calling for more recognition of and support for RCOs. It cites Refugee Council research (2018) which found that RCOs are particularly effective in supporting RAS because of three key assets:

1. They have the ability to **reach** refugee communities as they have contacts, share languages and cultural affinity, and they are trusted.
2. Their **insight** often comes from the personal experiences of refugees running the services
3. This improves their ability to find **solutions** to the barriers and challenges facing refugees

*RRFNE's work to support RAS families exemplifies the value of this approach. Listening to families about their experiences of poverty and exclusion, it became apparent that social workers were more feared than the police and families believed a disproportionate number of RAS children were being taken into care. Members designed and delivered a programme of workshops for front-line workers to build insight, empathetic understanding, knowledge and competence and promoting a whole-family approach. This was delivered to hundreds of social workers and is now part of the social work syllabus at Sunderland University. This initiative complemented the information developed for newly arrived RAS (see below), supporting them to adapt to UK laws and expectations around parenting.*

*As with other aspects of RRFNE's activities, capacity has been a limiting factor. If it had dedicated capacity it could have marketed this training offer more systematically and reached more teams.*

**Taking a collaborative approach to relationships with external agencies** RRFNE adopted a collaborative approach in its relationships with agencies such as the Home Office (HO) and North East Migration Partnership (NEMP), positioning itself as a key partner in developing and implementing change. It had witnessed the disruptive impact of adversarial approaches used by others, where target agencies retreated and disengaged. RRFNE believes some of its most impactful work was achieved through relationships with agencies as partners and collaborators in change – giving it a pathway to influence (for example) HO policy and practice without the need to mobilise a campaign. Partner agencies have described this style of engagement as one of 'constructive dialogue' and 'effective partnership working'; it has enabled RRFNE to engage directly with agencies throughout all sectors, to mediate for others when useful and, importantly, to avoid putting individuals at risk. The Forum always tries to propose a practical solution for any barrier identified, understanding that agencies may know what needs to be changed, but not how to change it.

*This approach is exemplified in RRFNE's work around health and well-being, promoting collaborative working with RCOs as an effective way of reducing health inequalities. Members did this by: working with local and regional commissioning and planning to help them understand the specific and additional needs of RAS so they are treated as a community with distinct needs and not subsumed within a more generic Migrant or BME category that misses their unique experiences; delivering awareness sessions to thousands of health workers to promote better understanding of those distinct needs; brokering direct links between RCOs and local health services and agencies, such as Healthwatch; demonstrating models of co-production of health risk messaging that could be more effective in reaching the RAS community and changing behaviour; contributing evidence to regional and national research into the health impacts of new immigration legislation; sharing new ideas for example promoting learning from the International Rescue Committee on the impact of Toxic Stress on RAS mental health and recovery models delivered by local sources of psychosocial support (which itself reinforces the unique role of RCOs).*

*However, restructuring and staffing changes within health (and many other) agencies means RRFNE often has to re-build relationships when key staff move on, noting 'most organisations seem to have no or very little hand-over policy or legacy for work achieved'. It finds that often 'change is not absolute' and that positive developments need to be nurtured or they can be lost.*

**Targeting both Policy and Practice** RRFNE has needed to target both policy and/or practice to achieve the change its members need. RAS' everyday lives are impacted by both local services

and by national asylum policy and both are important. The Forum has found it helpful to be clear about where power lies – with local authorities and public services or with central government / the Home Office. It's members often prioritise influencing the delivery of local services over Home Office policy and support. Perhaps because making a real difference to the latter seemed less achievable. RRFNE's approach to influencing local services draws on the theory of Street Level Bureaucrats (Michael Lipsky) – that however good a policy might be, it is only experienced by RAS at the point where it is delivered to them as a service. And if front line staff do not have the right understanding, skills, cross cultural competencies, attitudes and motivation then the policy will fail to deliver the support intended.

Change takes time and needs long-term engagement and sometimes a change in tactics to see it through. RRFNE learned the importance of 'sticking with it' as nothing is 'set in stone' beneath, for example, a contract's top lines and many things can be improved by offering practical solutions during the long journey to implementation. Long term change can also happen through brokering direct relations between local services and local RCOs, where listening and learning are mutual. RRFNE believes this should always be a strand in any change activity.

*This approach worked well on the issue of integration which RRFNE argues begins from arrival in the region and needs systematic provision of orientation information to prevent someone unknowingly transgressing UK laws, expectations, systems, values or social norms. Whilst this wasn't included in Home Office contracts, NEMP picked it up and secured funding to produce orientation information for the region, commissioning RRFNE to produce multi-lingual 'Welcome to the UK' orientation guides for newly arriving refugees, covering: parenting and education; looking after your health; laws and life. These guides are now used in the New Arrivals Pathway, an initiative led by NEMP that connects new arrivals to VCS provision on dispersal to the area.*

**Influencing what others do rather than engage in service delivery itself** RRFNE has always avoided taking on service delivery itself, to remain free from conflicts of interest, able recommend solutions and to focus on closing gaps and mainstreaming support, as it has no 'business interest' in the gap itself. RCOs often deliver services themselves and RRFNE has been careful not to be in a position where it is competing against its members.

*This has meant RRFNE has been able to build and sustain a productive a respectful working relationship with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), with the Forum chairing NESMP's sub-group on economic inclusion and supporting the development of: resources for new status refugees that have been rolled out widely – including information cards for RAS and a newcomers employment checklist and online directory for employment support providers; a process pathway securing an active referral for new status refugees to their local job centre (this was piloted by HO in the region and is now rolled out nationally). The Forum presented evidence from RAS and employers for the need for employment-orientated ESOL provision, resulting in DWP now commissioning ESOL for employment courses, sector based work academies and funding skills transfer training courses for refugee doctors.*

**Involvement of members in collective action** RRFNE has found collective action can elevate its profile and, especially if genuinely member-led, can create a buzz within the membership, cementing many relationships for years to come. Even if the target policy/practice itself remains unchanged, collective action can lead directly to further member-led projects as it inspires confidence and ambition. It can also provide valuable vehicles for bringing on more member advocates who may go on to take a leadership role in the Forum. Change initiatives that developed organically, as opposed to being engineered, produced the strongest leaders of change for the Forum and resulted in increased member inclusion.

*This approach worked well when RRFNE mobilised its members to identify why many RAS are deterred from reporting to the police when they are victims of crime, resulting in hate and crime against RAS being under-reported and therefore deprioritised in police planning. Its 'Take Action on Hate' project was led by its membership and: uncovered incidents of hate that were mis-recorded by the police as anti-social behaviour; advocated a victims first approach countering the conflict of interest between police's role in keeping people safe and identifying and alerting Home Office to people who might be in the UK illegally; delivered training to front line staff in these agencies to help them gain insight into the dilemmas facing RAS, many of whom have experienced police brutality, persecution and corruption in their countries of origin, and help build trusting relations; encouraged RAS to report hate using third party routes; supported RAS to understand their rights; built direct engagement between RCOs and sources of local support. This all led to an increase in referrals of RAS victims to victim support services by police officers. Learning from the project was shared with the Home Office and its contractors through a regional event 'Developing and Sharing Best Practice in preventing victimisation of RAS'.*

However, RRFNE notes that such initiatives often suffer from a lack of dedicated capacity to seize the moment and build on it. Several other great ideas remained unrealised through lack of dedicated capacity to support members with potentially good ideas left to fizzle out.

**Representation of RRFNE on external platforms** In the early years Trustees and/or members represented RRFNE on the NEMP with members attending (and sometimes co-chairing) key sub-groups as representatives of the Forum. This is still viewed as the ideal, but in reality it demanded a lot of support capacity from staff to ensure representatives were: armed with the collective voice - in turn requiring a process to create one on that particular issue; had time to be involved in that process to understand the 'asks' and targets (or to be fully briefed by staff); had the back-up they needed to take actions forwards. Over time direct representation by members diminished and, by default rather than design, was replaced by staff attendance. RRFNE questions whether it is appropriate for Forum employees to be the conveyors of the collective voice, rather than facilitators of it, even when in practice they hold the most collective evidence from member RCOs. It is felt this is especially relevant when the employee does not themselves share the lived experience of being a RAS.

**The distinctiveness of RAS' community needs** RRFNE makes the case for RAS facing additional and specific challenges that are not shared by non-refugee migrants or other racially minoritised communities. It sees its role as: providing evidence; bringing attention to specific needs and fostering understanding that specific solutions/responses are needed. It seeks to provide insight into lived experience and focuses on collective lived experience rather than individual stories, which may not reflect what is shared and recurring or systemic.

One notable challenge was the resistance that RRFNE encountered from many quarters, including local authorities, local infrastructure organisations and non-RAS led VCSE, around recognising / supporting / embracing the role of RAS led community action amplifying an uncontrolled & unmediated voice. At times this made RRFNE's work harder than it needed to be as it had to push against doors that really should have been open.

This reflective report was produced for Millfield House Foundation by former RRFNE CEO, Georgina Fletcher, with editorial input from MHF Trust Manager, Cullagh Warnock.