

Regional Refugee Forum Case Study

The Regional Refugee Forum is unique in the refugee sector, deliberately not delivering services, nor seeking public sector funding. Instead, it focuses on influencing policy to close gaps in mainstream services for refugee and asylum seekers.

It believes this policy-focused approach gets the Forum listened to by, and invited to a seat at the table with, statutory agencies. “When we explain we’re only asking to close gaps rather than seeking funding to deliver services, they tend to listen. It opens doors for us when they see we’re not pitching for business,” says Georgina Fletcher, Chief Executive of the North East-based charity.

Once at the table, it speaks authentically amplifying the collective voice of more than 35 refugee and asylum seeker-led community organisations across the region. The Forum has a “collaborative” relationship with the Home Office, which recognises the Forum’s unique local (and national) role.

One current priority is reducing the number of children taken into care. A lack of awareness of UK safeguarding legislation and cultural expectations around parenting, compared to their home countries, means too many refugee children are removed from families. This causes heartache for families and incurs huge costs. The Forum believes much of this is avoidable if early information is given to newly arriving refugee and asylum seekers. Triggers for intervention include differences around disciplining, supervision and communications with schools.

The Forum recommended the Home Office introduce a ‘parenting in the UK’ element to the national ‘Welcome to the UK’ induction given to all asylum seekers on arrival. Disappointingly while highlighted as good practice, this didn’t make it into new national asylum support contracts. Instead Forum members will deliver a regional orientation programme, including parenting information, for the Strategic Migration Partnership, to be rolled out across all North East local authorities in 2020.

“Some people ask us ‘why are you working with the government, aren’t they the enemy?’ But we want to help them produce the best policies they can. There will always be policy, so while some lobby against bad policy, our role is to constructively inform good policy” explains Herbert Dirahu, Project Manager, on the Forum’s pragmatic and practical approach.

Recent work with the Cabinet Office’s Policy Lab produced a film about the barriers facing young refugees arriving without family in the UK, attempting to engage high level policy makers in an empathetic understanding of the issues, rather than just hard data.

When the national Lift the Ban campaign (seeking the right to work for people seeking asylum) needed evidence, prompt responses from Forum members meant 80% of national campaign data came from the North East, highlighting its ability to mobilise and motivate groups quickly.

It spends as much time influencing frontline service staff as policymakers. Georgina says: “there is no point in a good policy if it’s then implemented badly at grassroots level.” This wide-ranging work includes delivering training to police, social workers and students across the region.

It’s this local concentrated policy work that stands the Forum apart from other national campaigning organisations. Georgina states “We are as much about influencing the everyday lives of service users in our local community as we are about influencing policy.” Yet it still manages to punch above its weight when it comes to its impact, both locally and nationally.