Empowering Birmingham's migrant and refugee community organisations

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An exploration of how migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) can be supported and trained to collect evidence from their communities that will help influence policy and service provision.

The role of MRCOs in providing support and guidance to new arrivals is well acknowledged. However, they also lack the resources and capacity to engage in consultation and influencing processes to help shape the ways in which services are provided for the communities they represent. This report explores the support offered to community leaders in a range of MRCOs in the West Midlands and examines the scope of capacity building work to:

- develop the skills of MRCO leaders to engage in, and shape, the research agenda;

- develop relationships with policy-makers and service providers;

- engage in policy debate and influence strategy and service provision.

The report explores the barriers and constraints to success and makes recommendations aimed at helping to shape future initiatives.

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Executive summary

Background

In 2006, the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) entered into a partnership involving the Community Resource Information Service (CRIS) and Birmingham New Communities Network (BNCN). The aim of the partnership was to build the capacity of migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) to collect evidence from their communities to help influence policy and service provision. Additionally, CURS was able to develop its community research skills course to give recognition to the communication and data collection skills of MRCO leaders.

The partnership identified four key themes for research and influencing:

- English for speakers of other languages (ESOL);

- mental health (later retermed 'well-being');

- young people and education;

- employment.

It decided that gender issues would be explored in each of the four topic areas rather than as a topic in its own right.

The partnership

CURS managed the project, undertook the research training, and supported MRCOs with evidence collection and analysing the data. CRIS was to take the lead in lobbying, provision of training around participation in policy-making and organising meetings with BNCN. BNCN identified the MRCO leaders to be trained as researchers and worked with them to collect data, and to develop new data collection systems and new relationships with stakeholders. After much

debate it was agreed each refugee community would identify a member to train as a community researcher. The management of the overall partnership and review of progress was to be undertaken by a steering group with representation from each partner.

Setting up the community research

There were five parts to the training: peer research skills, using qualitative research skills, understanding qualitative data, quantitative research skills and understanding the principles of community organising. The first four modules were delivered by CURS while CRIS arranged the training on community organising.

Fifteen community researchers worked closely with their trainers in CURS to develop a topic guide with questions about ESOL and mental health, and a script for introducing themselves to their interviewees. All their materials, including a computer, were supplied and they were each allocated a mentor. Each community researcher undertook ten interviews. All were trained in data analysis techniques and were supported to analyse and write up their findings in an academic manner.

As part of the quantitative research training module, the community researchers developed a questionnaire survey, with their tutor, exploring young people's experiences of education. Each researcher was asked to locate and interview 20 parents of children who were, or who had been, outside education.

The principles of community organising course covered different forms of power; the difference between local, national and global politics/ structures; understanding how policy is made in the UK; community politics; community renewal strategies; lobbying and approaching policy-makers and service providers; effective community leadership; effective communication with policy-

makers; and different forms of self-interest and community consultation.

Evaluating the project

The community researchers were interviewed during the early stages of their training to explore their aspirations, expectations and support needs, as well as again at the end of their training. Evaluative interviews were also conducted with five members of the steering committee and four members of the BNCN committee. The community organising course was evaluated on completion. Overwhelmingly, most community researchers felt their expectations had been met, and indeed exceeded, helping them to gain increased confidence and work opportunities.

The evidence

The full reports from the ESOL and well-being studies can be found at: http://www.curs.bham. ac.uk/Research/CICG/CURS0526.htm.

ESOL
The aim of the ESOL research was to examine: refugees' experiences of ESOL, the concern raised by BNCN that refugees were not progressing in ESOL and potential improvements in provision. In addition, CURS sought to analyse the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC's) progression and retention data to gain a quantitative overview of student success rates. A small number of ESOL tutors were also interviewed by CURS.

Mental health
The aim of the mental health research was to explore the extent to which refugees and asylum seekers experienced mental health problems and the factors that impacted on their well-being, as well as the support they were getting to help them with those problems. A further 18 in-depth case studies were undertaken with refugees who had experienced a mental health problem. CRIS interviewed 13 local service providers to examine what was in place for refugees in Birmingham and undertook three interviews with specialist providers from outside the city to explore what kinds of specialist services might be provided.

Education
This survey sought to examine the schooling experiences of 11- to 16-year-old asylum-seeking and refugee children, with a particular interest in those outside of education. Some 200 initial interviews helped identify 19 respondents outside of education. A further five in-depth interviews were conducted with families who had children outside education to examine their experiences in greater detail.

Employment
A basic one-page questionnaire was designed to ascertain refugees' knowledge and use of employment services, and this was completed by refugees at community meetings and known meeting places. Some 171 questionnaires were completed in total.

The influencing phase

This stage began in earnest after the data was collected. A seminar was run for policy-makers and service providers in order to build relationships and swap information. On completion of the evidence-collection phase, the steering group decided to prioritise ESOL and well-being. Two people from the BNCN membership were identified to take on the role of 'expert' in each thematic area, working closely with the project team in their specialist area to attend meetings and to build knowledge and the confidence to take part.

The results

The LSC proposed a working group to try to take some of the ESOL recommendations forward.

Many promising developments evolved from the well-being findings, not least a dissemination event. This resulted in a promise from the chair of the cross-primary care trust (PCT) mental health working group to develop a mental health service for refugees, possibly based around a one-door model.

The education findings have been forwarded to Birmingham City Council for its needs assessment for newly arrived children and families, and to the Education Department.

Clearly, some of the findings have wider relevance and have been circulated to such bodies

as the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, the Advisory Board on Naturalisation and Integration (ABNI) and the University College Union (UCU) ESOL campaign.

Lessons learned

The project presented many challenges, not least the impact of personnel change within CRIS and BNCN. Many positive and negative lessons were learnt. Broadly speaking, they fall under issues concerning policy, methodology, partnership and budget/administration.

The lack of a formal contract concerning the roles and responsibilities of the steering group was problematic, particularly when there were fairly radical changes in personnel, resulting in a lack of feedback between MRCOs and the steering group members who represented them. This led to a perceived lack of transparency in the actions of the steering group and misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities. The lack of a strategic plan outlining the influencing phase meant that not all opportunities were acted on by the organisation with responsibility for lobbying.

However, employing a collaborative approach between BNCN, CRIS and the community researchers developed a sense of ownership, commitment and empowerment. The training proved to be of considerable benefit to the community researchers. Concerns expressed initially by policy-makers around interviewer bias were overcome through rigorous training and the triangulation of divergent perspectives with the views of service providers. The use of CURS mentors and the support of CRIS were especially useful in tackling differences in abilities among community researchers and ensuring their continuing attendance.

Although there was a degree of capacity building within both BNCN as a network and its MRCO members, it did not commence early enough in the project. This resulted in strains in partnership working from time to time, unrealistic expectations about the speed and degree of change possible, an inability to capitalise on opportunities and questions about the sustainability of the current momentum.

Conclusions

The Making a Difference project has undoubtedly raised the profile of BNCN and the awareness of service providers and policy-makers. The project ends with a range of opportunities and positive prospects for BNCN.

- The focus on partnership was a new way of working for the three organisations involved. Linking established respected organisations with lesser known but critically important community-focused organisations provides an excellent model for raising the profile of those organisations and giving a voice to their communities.

- Partnership working provides many opportunities for new relationships and learning, overcoming some of the problems identified by Zetter and Pearl (2000) with regard to networking.

- The Making a Difference project has provided a range of opportunities for BNCN, but the lack of sufficient capacity building might limit its ability to engage with those opportunities.

- Empowerment happened at the level of the individual and their MRCO. Unfortunately, this may have undermined BNCN as a network, because individuals have followed their own paths into employment and MRCOs have planned new futures. Most community researchers have personal success stories to tell.

- The MRCOs involved and BNCN have begun to overcome a problem endemic in MRCOs – a lack of understanding of the UK system (Gameledin-Adhami *et al.*, 2002) – to the point of engaging with the system. However, in order to proceed in a strategic way and make use of its limited resources, BNCN needs to be supported to prioritise its influencing activities over the next 12 months and perhaps to develop an action plan that its wider membership can sign up to. Work needs to be undertaken to develop the governance

of BNCN and to secure its financial and ideological independence.

- The influence of the project has been considerable, with actions likely in three of the four areas and work yet to commence in the fourth.

- The efficacy of ESOL is now being questioned sub-regionally and refugee mental health is very much on the agenda in Birmingham and across the region. There are signs that the evidence collected in these areas will have an impact nationally.

- The outcomes of this project provide a strong argument for increased work with community researchers to uncover the reality of the lived experience in a way that is not possible through conventional academic research. Given training, support and resources, MRCOs can move from a defensive to a transformation role. If they are supported to understand and work within the existing policy frameworks, their collection of evidence can give them the power to make a difference and can raise their profile

1 Introduction and background to the project

The past six years have seen the arrival of large numbers of people seeking asylum in the UK. Following the establishment in 1999 of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to co-ordinate and fund dispersal of asylum seekers around the UK, Birmingham became one of the areas in the West Midlands that serve as dispersal areas for the region. Combined NASS and Interim Authority data in 2005 showed there were 3,792 asylum seekers in the city – some 39 per cent of the regional total (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006). Estimates of the number of refugees suggested a figure of 69,865 in the region and 27,240 in Birmingham by the end of 2007. The number of refugees living in the city might be even higher, as there is evidence that, once asylum seekers receive a positive decision, they leave other parts of the region to search for work and housing in Birmingham (Phillimore, 2004). Numbers of refugees are further bolstered by several thousand 'newcomers', individuals who have received their refugee status elsewhere in Europe and have moved to the UK. These individuals are largely from a Somali background.

In 2005, CURS was approached and asked to join a partnership aimed at building the capacity of migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) to use evidence to influence policy and service provision. Following discussions with Birmingham New Communities Network, it was decided that the project offered an opportunity for CURS to develop its community research skills course in a way that would aid recognition of the communication and data collection skills of MRCO leaders, and to develop those skills to be accredited by the National Open College Network and the University of Birmingham. Based on the integrated employability pathway, CURS developed a proposal that brought together opportunities to use and develop existing skills, get the skills accredited, practise skills through work experience and develop a relationship with a mentor.

MRCOs and their role

Although studies of immigrant associations attracted little attention until the 1970s (Moya, 2005), there has been a considerable amount of interest in the role and activities of refugee community organisations (RCOs) in more recent times. Griffiths *et al.* (2006) explored the term 'RCO' through interviews with refugee groups and other organisations. They found that a 'plurality of organisational terms were the norm, with the provision of services on the basis of ethnicity to refugees and asylum seekers as the defining feature of an RCO (Griffiths *et al.*, 2006, p. 891). Any assumption of discrete ethnic or racial groups was found to be inappropriate, with many RCOs defining their own boundaries, perhaps by geographical area or by language. Central to the definition of RCOs is that they are established *by* asylum-seeking or refugee communities (or their pre-established communities) *for* asylum-seeking or refugee communities (Zetter and Pearl, 2000). Moya's (2005) review of the formation of migrant associations found that they often emerged because of shortcomings in the migration process itself and, as such, they serve to satisfy unmet needs such as welfare, leisure and social interaction. Evidence suggests that the development of RCOs is also a response to the difficulties that refugees experience in trying to access mainstream services (Carey-Wood, 1997) and that RCOs have a better understanding of refugees' needs than statutory agencies (Salinas *et al*., 1987, cited in Griffiths *et al.*, 2006).

Gameledin-Adhami *et al.* (2002) provide a four-fold typology of the contribution of RCOs. The first is to provide cultural and emotional support, and opportunities for self-determination and the development of a common identity (cf. Salinas *et al.*, 1987, cited in Griffiths *et al.*, 2006). Through the development of social contacts, refugees can gain assistance to access resources such as

housing and employment (Duke, 1996, cited in Griffiths *et al.*, 2006). The second contribution is to deliver practical assistance, in particular orientation to the host system, translation and mediation. The third involves raising awareness and understanding. The final contribution is to provide expert knowledge to inform policy development. Gameledin-Adhami *et al.* (2002) also identified that, while they provide a wide range of services and support, there is 'an overwhelming sense of fragility about RCOs', with those based in the regions more vulnerable than those in London.

Until recently, most emphasis was placed around the positive functionality of RCOs and less attention was given to their limitations (Griffiths *et al.*, 2006). These include their problems around inclusivity, which span the exclusion of women, and the fragmentation of refugee 'communities'. Other functional issues include the ability to attract sustainable funding and achieve longevity, the lack of social space, limited knowledge of the British system and the dependency on small numbers of dedicated individuals (Gameledin-Adhami *et al*., 2002). There is little evidence in literature to suggest that RCOs have undertaken any effective networking or information sharing (Zetter and Pearl, 2000). Concerns around representation and accountability have also been raised, but only superficially explored. RCOs have to compete for funding with more established NGOs and, where they do apply for funding, they have to ensure that their aims and objectives meet the requirements of funders. This can be problematic when one of the main roles of RCOs is to support asylum seekers. Particular concerns have been voiced around the situation of RCOs in dispersal regions. The lack of significant new public funding to help RCOs establish in the regions has left them 'doubly disadvantaged' as they try to establish without a track record while dependent on small-scale and short-term funding (Zetter *et al.*, 2005). Any capacity to become mediators in the process of refugee integration is taken up with the range of defensive tasks that emerge from trying to support asylum seekers who, with the advent of increased restrictionism, have nowhere else to go. In the absence, at the present time, of a national integration programme,[1] they are also the first port of call for refugees being evicted from NASS accommodation after they have received

their leave to remain. The result of this situation is that RCOs find themselves in a largely defensive position without the resources to undertake any role other than to take a defensive function and help asylum seekers and refugees contend with their situation. Research looking at the work of RCOs across the UK found that they viewed themselves as having little influence on policies at any level. Only three London-based organisations had been involved in research or advocacy work aimed at highlighting concerns with policy-makers (Gameledin-Adhami *et al.*, 2002).

Although the rhetoric prescribes a role for RCOs in integration and equal opportunity terms (Home Office, 2002, 2005), the reality for RCOs might be somewhat different, with their main contribution relating to meeting the survival needs of their community members. The Refugee Council (2006) argues that the defensive work undertaken by RCOs threatens their role of helping refugees to integrate because they are forced to focus on the immediate needs of their community rather than on the strategic role outlined by the Home Office in *Integration Matters* (Home Office, 2005). The UK Government has generally viewed the organisational activities of refugees as helpful in the process of integration (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005) and has provided small amounts of funding to support their activities and development. Griffiths *et al.* (2006) argue that, by providing front-line services and helping their clients access the welfare system, they are helping in a small way to integrate them into society. However, while debated, integration is conceived as a two-way process that requires some adaptation on the part of the receiving society. There is little evidence of RCOs being involved in the development of resources aimed at the longer-term integration of refugees. Here it is argued that, for RCOs to have a role in integration in its fullest sense, they need to have what Narayan *et al.* (2000) describe as a transformational, rather than a survival function, and to develop the power and ability to 'negotiate with local elites and participate in local, national, or global governance and decisions' (Narayan *et al.*, 2000, p. 276). Gameledin-Adhami *et al.*'s (2002) survey of RCOs highlighted that virtually no RCO had any means of systematically prioritising the needs of its communities. Only two organisations had undertaken any survey work but both lacked

the skills to use the findings strategically. RCOs had an integrative role when it came to dealing with the individual but they felt marginal from the process of integration: 'they observed gaps in their relationships with other agencies, yet they knew that their work with mainstream agencies was vital if they were to make a difference' (Gameledin-Adhami *et al*., 2002, p. 11). Gameledin-Adhami *et al.* (2002) argue that more investment is needed in RCOs in organisational development and more generally into civic infrastructure so that, when policy decisions are made, the needs of refugees are taken into account. The key recommendation of this study was that RCOs are given the opportunity to learn about engaging at different levels including the policy level and that this is a prerequisite for transformative action. The main aim of the Making a Difference project was to build the capacity of RCOs in Birmingham to engage more fully in transformational work. The report now moves on to discuss the approach employed in a bid to move towards achieving this goal.

Birmingham and BNCN

Birmingham has gained a reputation as one of Britain's foremost multicultural cities. In terms of ethnicity, it is now apparent that Birmingham will become Europe's first non-white majority city by 2011 (Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 2005). In the present day, the city is home to a wide range of different communities, including the descendants of the Jewish people who fled discrimination in Eastern Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Afro-Caribbean and South Asian economic migrants of the 1960s and 1970s, and those escaping conflicts and persecution in Chile, Indo-China and East Africa in the 1970s and 1980s (Dick, 2004). More recently, people from Somalia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iran, Kosovo and Kurdistan, to name but a few countries, have escaped from war, genocide and tyranny and have been sent to live in the city as part of the National Asylum Support Service's (NASS's) dispersal programme.

While Birmingham has provided a home to those who seek sanctuary or new opportunities, and the city today sees its multicultural identity as one of its defining characteristics, new communities in the city have had to face a range

of difficulties when striving to make a place for themselves. The majority of migrants move, or are dispersed to, multicultural parts of the inner city such as Handsworth, Aston, Newtown and Nechells, which have been associated with high levels of deprivation (Phillimore, 2005). Handsworth, as the main focal point for new arrivals in the city, is well known for the riots of the 1980s and many of the tensions articulated at this time are as relevant to the present and new communities as they were to the past. Research in the city has revealed that new communities face a range of obstacles to their successful integration in the city, including the resentment of local people, high levels of homelessness, extreme levels of unemployment (over 60 per cent) and underemployment, difficulties accessing education, poor quality ESOL provision and difficulties accessing appropriate health care (Phillimore and Goodson *et al.*, 2003, 2005; Bloch, 2004; Phillimore, 2004; 2005; Goodson and Phillimore, 2005).

The Birmingham New Communities Network was formally established in March 2005 after several years of development. The network's members are all MRCOs and membership is not open to intermediary bodies. The aims of the network are: to build strong relationships between new communities, institutions of power and wider civil society; to represent the interests of MRCOs; and to ensure that new migrants are fully able to contribute to the city economically, culturally and politically. There are currently 75 member organisations, a management committee drawn from 13 MRCOs, a directory of members, a programme of work on education and employment issues, and a website. Member organisations vary from large, mature registered charities with a five- to ten-year history and considerable bodies of work and achievement, to smaller, more informal social networks.

Research undertaken in Birmingham recommended to policy-makers that the role of MRCOs in service provision be elevated and the evidence base relating to migrants be improved in order to demonstrate the extent of the challenges faced and the new opportunities offered by new communities in the city, and how those challenges could be addressed. At the beginning of the Making a Difference project, there was

little knowledge about the numbers, ethnicities and geographical locations of new communities in Birmingham (Phillimore and Goodson *et al.*, 2005). Despite the overwhelming need for different approaches to evidence collection, there have been few moves towards change. In particular, the role of RCOs as both a source of evidence and expertise about new communities had been underutilised. This project, which was created through the joint working of the Centre for Urban Studies (CURS), the Community Resources and Information Service (CRIS) and Birmingham New Communities Network (BNCN) and a number of its members, was seen as a way of overcoming these difficulties and enhancing the role of MRCOs. The project sought to build the capacity of MRCOs to use existing evidence, to gather new evidence and to work collaboratively to use and communicate this evidence. Through this approach, we sought to improve stakeholder understanding of the value and contribution of MRCOs in supporting settlement and cohesion, and work towards reviews of policy in several critical areas identified by BNCN: the delivery of ESOL; young people's access to education; employment of skilled refugees; and mental health services.

JRF's rationale

The support of the Making a Difference project and a London-based project, Change from Experience, marked a move by JRF from policy research to action research as a developmental tool. It hoped to support a practical, transformative process, which brought about change for both the MRCOs and key stakeholders involved in the project through strengthening relationships, increasing MRCO influence, and improving stakeholder understanding of the value and contribution of MRCOs in supporting settlement and cohesion. It understood that several factors played a part in influencing MRCOs and stakeholder relationships but, in the context of this project, it was particularly interested in the use and communication of 'evidence' in this developmental process. While the process was intended to bring tangible benefits to those involved, it was also aimed at generating wider learning that could be shared with MRCOs and stakeholders (service commissioners, service deliverers, policy-makers, others) elsewhere in the UK.

The rationale of Making a Difference

The project was funded for a 12-month period and commenced with a meeting of MRCOs, BNCN, CRIS and CURS at the end of January 2006. The overall aim of the project was to build the capacity of RCOs to identify and collect robust, reliable evidence that would improve stakeholders' understanding of their role and aid progress towards policy change. The approach to this task involved several phases of work, which are set out below.

- To examine the ways in which MRCOs in Birmingham collect data and support them in developing compatible, cost-effective data collection and analysis systems.

- Reach agreement about the key areas of interest in terms of MRCOs' relationships with stakeholders and identify associated gaps in data and MRCOs' data needs.

- Provide training to help MRCOs to collect the data they need in robust and reliable ways. The JRF funds were matched to the European Social Fund (ESF) from the Progress GB EQUAL project to accredit this training and develop it in a way that increased participants' employability.

- Support MRCOs in the collection and analysis of data relating to the policy areas they had identified.

- Work with key stakeholders to explore the nature of their relationships with MRCOs and the ways in which MRCOs might positively influence both what type of information was accepted as evidence and how it should be reported and used.

- Work with stakeholders to explore how evidence generated by MRCOs was, and could be, used to change the nature of relationships with key stakeholders, leading to improved outcomes for migrant communities.

- Work with key stakeholders to examine the ways in which their data collection and management mechanisms could support the data needs of MRCOs and, where necessary, be altered to meet those needs.

- Work with and support MRCOs in order to maximise their ability to influence and negotiate the nature and basis of their relationships with key stakeholders through improving stakeholders' understanding of the unique nature of their role.

- Mobilise evidence generated by MRCOs from their own monitoring, casework, consultation, research and lobbying activities in order to improve stakeholders' understanding of the unique role of MRCOs and to broker change in policy in key areas.

Through this process, it was hoped that the project would ensure that a permanent and continuing capacity was built in MRCOs in Birmingham to research and organise evidence in order to argue their case in the public arena both during and after the project duration. From this perspective, it was anticipated that there would be several levels of impact. From the top down, these included stakeholders, BNCN, the participating MRCOs, the individual MRCO leaders working on the project and refugees more generally. While the project had a sub-regional focus, all the MRCOs were based in the city, and we primarily sought change at this level. We also expected that some of the evidence collected and some of the methods used would generate learning and data that would be of use regionally and nationally.

2 Roles, responsibilities and decisions

CRIS, CURS and BNCN worked together in late 2005 to develop the proposal. From the early stages of the project we sought to work as collaboratively as possible. This process began with a meeting to discuss roles and responsibilities and budgets, and to make decisions about the types of evidence that BNCN would find useful. The meeting was attended by several BNCN committee members from different MRCOs, CRIS and CURS. BNCN was concerned that the project be utilised to provide 'facts' about problems that it was experiencing within its communities. It had previously sought to engage stakeholders on these issues and had been asked to provide 'data' to demonstrate the scale and nature of the problems that newcomers were experiencing in the city. BNCN hoped that the provision of data would help it to provide evidence to persuade policy-makers and service providers that they needed to act to resolve these problems. The key themes and related issues raised were as follows.

- ESOL: BNCN felt that ESOL was failing its members, many of whom had been in classes for years without actually learning to speak English.

- Mental health: many refugees had mental health problems but were getting no help from the NHS.

- Young people and education: many refugee children were outside of any kind of education or training.

- Employment: many refugees were skilled but could not find even basic employment.

BNCN also expressed concern about the problems that refugees were experiencing in trying to access housing, but this topic was not included because JRF was focusing on it in another project and had asked for proposals to focus on other issues.

Allocating roles and responsibilities

At the initial meeting, it was agreed that the proposal would include the problems identified but that the topics would be reviewed by a wider group of RCOs if the proposal was successful. Roles were allocated at this early stage of project development. CURS, with its project management experience, was invited to be lead partner and to lead on the research training, supporting RCOs with evidence collection and analysing the data. CRIS, with its experience of working with policy-makers, would take the lead in lobbying, provision of training around participation in policy-making and organising meetings with BNCN. BNCN, with its broad network of RCOs, would invite members to be trained as researchers and would work with them to collect data and to develop new data collection systems and new relationships with stakeholders.

Discussions were also held about how the funding might be shared between the three organisations and how BNCN's proportion might be allocated. The members present suggested that the BNCN RCO researchers be paid to undertake the training and the research. Payment was intended to recognise the level of commitment that was required in both training and data collection, which, it was felt, involved too much work to be undertaken on a voluntary basis. The management of the overall partnership and review of progress was to be undertaken by a steering group consisting of representatives from the three partner organisations, plus possibly some policy-maker representation.

Setting up the community research

When the project formally began the partnership it called a meeting for all the BNCN member organisations that were interested in getting involved. Some 28 individuals from 24 organisations attended the day. CURS and CRIS

outlined the background to the project as well as its aims and objectives. They also explored the existing data collection and management systems of the RCOs that were present. The process for selecting paid researchers commenced with an explanation that the project was a two-sided commitment. This was documented in the form of a job/person specification and a learning contract, both of which had been drafted by CURS, and then amended through group discussion. The job/person specification set out the expectations and qualities of the community researchers, while the learning contract set out what community researchers could expect from CURS (see Appendix).

The JRF budget allocated to BNCN allowed for ten paid researcher places. A further ten unpaid training places were offered. Some 18 people expressed an interest in being a paid researcher and all declared that they met the specified criteria. The group were asked how the ten paid researchers might be selected. Suggestions included:

- a lottery;

- on the basis of community size;

- on the basis of a wide spread of organisations;

- by interview;

- by gender;

- prioritising those who were currently unemployed;

- by a vote.

After much debate, it was agreed that each community should identify a member to lead on the project and train as a community researcher. Sole representatives of each community were offered a place. Larger communities such as the Kurdish, Somali and Great Lakes were offered two paid places. Agreement was reached about who would secure the paid community researcher places through negotiation within MRCOs, but it was felt necessary to offer two extra places to ensure that the criteria of community and gender

were met. This was funded by allocating extra money from the CURS budget. At the end of the process, 15 paid community researchers had been selected, with two of the posts being offered on a job-share basis. A further three individuals wanted to undertake the training and research as volunteers, perhaps taking over from paid researchers in the event of drop-out.

The next subject for debate was the role of the steering group. It was agreed that this would:

- help to decide the course of activities, i.e. direction, who should be influenced;

- make sure the project progressed to plan;

- take an active part in work trying to influence policy-makers in an area of interest;

- help to promote the project to MRCOs and others;

- keep their own organisations informed of progress;

- troubleshoot – help find solutions to the barriers faced by the project.

The group agreed roles and responsibilities, and suggested that three or four MRCOs joined the steering group to ensure that they had a clear voice and that there were enough members to cover for absences. Four people volunteered to become members and their membership was agreed.[1] A further meeting was held to discuss the issues that would be the focus of the project. All those who could not attend that meeting were met or telephoned by CURS to discuss their preferences. Once all the MRCOs had been consulted, CURS prepared a paper setting out the key issues that had been identified through this process. The ESOL, employment and young people remained substantive issues. Concerns about stigma associated with mental health led to this theme being changed to 'well-being'. Several MRCOs stressed the importance of a gender perspective. After some discussion, it was decided that gender issues would be explored in each of the four topic areas rather than as a topic in their own right.

Finally the training schedule was set out and agreed. It was proposed that there would be ten days of training across the year, with a break for data collection after each module. Paid researchers and all those wishing to be accredited needed to attend every training day to ensure they had sufficient contact hours and could be assessed. Most community researchers wanted the training to be held at the weekend, with Saturday being the preferred day.

The steering group

The steering group met every four to six weeks, with frequencies of meetings increasing when the project entered the influencing phase. Representation from CURS and CRIS was relatively consistent, and two BNCN members remained with the steering group throughout its duration. Midway through the project, Dipali Chandra of JRF joined to provide expertise and input into the influencing work and more BNCN members, some of whom were community researchers, were asked to join to help with the decision-making in this area. All meetings were minuted.

CURS chaired and administered the steering group while CRIS was responsible for working with BNCN to secure attendance. All questions about strategy, and also many questions about day-to-day issues such as payment of community researchers, were channelled via the steering group. The group provided a useful function for CURS in terms of ensuring that decisions were made as a partnership and recorded in the minutes for dissemination. The evaluation interviews revealed that, despite the release of a paper setting out the function of the group, the other partners were unclear about its role and their responsibility to disseminate the decisions made to their organisations. Thus it appeared to some BNCN members that decisions were taken without BNCN's involvement, even though those decisions were discussed at minuted steering group meetings where BNCN members were present.

An example of this is where BNCN had decided that it wanted to undertake a survey exploring refugees' knowledge of employment support. There was some difficulty motivating community researchers to collect the survey forms and time was running out to reach the target figure needed to enter the influencing stage. It was agreed at a steering group that a small budget from the project would be used to pay those community researchers who had a track record delivering reliable data. Several weeks later it emerged that some community researchers were concerned that others had been paid to undertake this task and had in effect been paid more than them. They had no knowledge of the decision-making process and were concerned that favouritism might have been shown towards certain community researchers. This example indicates that having a transparent decision-making process is inadequate if the mechanism for disseminating decisions fails. The problem here may have been the unavoidable inconsistency in attendance of some steering group members so that they 'missed' important decisions, but was more likely to have been the assumption that everyone would understand how a steering group would function and that their role was to disseminate decisions made to members of their organisations.

Building capacity

The training
There were five parts to the training, each of which was accredited by OCN. The parts were:

- peer research skills;

- using qualitative research skills;

- understanding qualitative data;

- quantitative research skills;

- principles of community organising.

Some of the community researchers lacked a computer on which to undertake their work, so they were given a laptop computer and two days training on how to use it. Handbooks, which included learning materials and workshop suggestions, accompanied all courses.

Qualitative research training

The first three modules comprised qualitative research training offered by CURS. These modules were designed by CURS to bring academic social research skills to a range of different communities who may find the use of written media challenging. All modules were taught through a range of techniques including role play, workshops, group work, self-directed learning and one-to-one support.

In the first module, students were taught the principles of social research. It covered issues around the purpose of interviewing, ethics, subjectivity and researcher bias, listening and inquiring, probing, questioning and topic guide design, body language, identifying respondents, setting up interviews and collecting data. During this module, the students worked on the wider theoretical issues through consideration of two of the BNCN topics: ESOL and well-being. They worked in small guided groups to brainstorm the issues around these areas, considering what they felt their organisations and stakeholders needed to know in order to help understand the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers.

After identifying thematic areas, further group working helped turn issues into questions. The whole group then worked closely with their trainers to develop a topic guide. The guide was produced as one of the assessed outcomes of the training. Students were partnered to pilot the topic guide and to begin to practise their interview techniques. Each mock interview was observed by a trainer and was followed by a session in which community researchers and their interviewees completed a self-reflection form about their performance. The interviewer was then given constructive feedback by the other parties before the interviewee was given the opportunity to interview their partner. This process was repeated several times to encourage development of interview techniques prior to the students entering the field. Throughout this module, students were assessed on their engagement in group tasks, materials produced as a result of interactions (including interview questions and a script for introducing themselves to their interviewees) and one-to-one observations and discussions.

The next module began with each student being allocated a mentor. They were also issued with a tape recorder, tapes, copies of the topic guide, pens, paper, an A–Z of Birmingham, envelopes, postage pre-paid stickers and a diary. The mentors ensured that their students understood the work required in order to complete the task. They were asked to follow a process.

- Identify an interviewee, a refugee or asylum seeker who has or is engaged with ESOL.

- Set up an interview in an appropriate place.

- Introduce themselves and the Making a Difference project.

- Ask permission to record.

- Undertake and record the interview.

- Complete a socio-demographic information questionnaire.

- Summarise the findings from the interview in a data analysis table.

- Complete a self-reflection form.

- Post the tape, table and form to their mentor.

- Await detailed feedback from their mentor.

- Speak to their mentor about their feedback.

- Repeat the process, building on the feedback they received.

This process was repeated ten times within six weeks. The data analysis tables and accompanying socio-demographic information formed the basis of the data for the next module. The goal for accreditation was three to five 'successful' interviews. These constituted interviews where the community researchers were able to collect the data needed in the manner outlined and where materials submitted were accompanied by a self-reflection form.

The final qualitative module taught students how to analyse their data in a systematic fashion and then how to write it up into an academic-style report. Once again, group work was employed to collaboratively develop themes, codes and a data analysis framework. However, students then developed their own version of their framework and, with the support of their mentor, themed their data and prepared a report. Community researchers had the choice of a simple bullet-pointed account of their findings or a detailed academic-style report that encompassed quotations and critical analysis of the findings. Students who chose to complete this aspect of the training forwarded a draft report to their tutors. They were then offered feedback and were given the opportunity to redraft their report before submitting a final version for accreditation.

Quantitative research training

The quantitative training was based on a series of exercises to be undertaken on the community researchers' new laptop computers. It began with a session about using the internet to locate relevant data and developing the skills to analyse the data. This exercise was aimed at showing the community researchers how they and their organisations could locate data to contextualise problems within their communities. Researchers were then taught some basic database, spreadsheet and analysis skills, before entering a workshop where they developed, with their tutor, a questionnaire survey exploring young people's experiences of education. The survey was then finalised by their tutor and piloted by the students. Students were asked to locate 20 respondents who were parents of children who were, or who had been, outside education.

The quantitative training was more problematic than the qualitative. First, the training required each student to have a computer that functioned. Once the training had commenced, it was clear that the new laptops had not been set up properly and they had to be returned to the voluntary organisation that had supplied them. A change of personnel at this organisation resulted in substantial delays returning the computers so that the course could not proceed for several months. Second, the community researchers had wildly differing levels of IT skills, so it was difficult for the

tutor to teach even basic quantitative skills and satisfy the needs of all community researchers. Finally, the research took longer than anticipated because the community researchers struggled to identify young people outside of education. After the delay, and following consultation with the community researchers, it was decided not to take this course beyond the introductory level. CURS paid subcontractors to input the education data and analysed the data themselves.

Principles of community organising and capacity building

Training on community organising was originally to be provided by CRIS but, after a change of personnel, it was moved to an accredited course offered by a private college. The partnership was offered the opportunity to review the course material and suggested a range of additional elements. The course covered various forms of power – the difference between local, national and global politics/structures; understanding how policy is made in the UK; community leadership, politics and renewal strategies; policies and plans including lobbying and approaching policy-makers and service providers; effective communication with policy-makers; and different forms of self-interest and community consultation. Like the qualitative methods programme, the course was delivered through a range of techniques, with emphasis placed on discussion and group working. It was assessed through written reflections on some of the key issues.

One of the aims of the project was to build the capacity of MRCOs, and BNCN in particular, to empower them to engage with policy-makers on their own terms. The responsibility for capacity building was taken on in the proposal stages by CRIS, the organisation most experienced in this area. The community organising course taught the principles of engaging in policy. However, more work was required in developing the governance of BNCN, building its ability to self-organise and helping it to become independent. The proposal did not set out formally how this work might take place, largely because of an assumption that it might take different forms depending on the ongoing needs of BNCN and its constituent members. At the end of the process, it was clear that little work had been undertaken to

build organisational capacity, although the social research training had been highly successful in building the capacity of individuals, as the evaluation of that training will demonstrate.

Evaluating the project

The CURS training was subject to a two-part evaluation. We sought to undertake face-to-face interviews with the community researchers during the early stages of their training to explore their aspirations and expectations, and the types of support they might need to help them succeed in their goals. We then sought to repeat the exercise at the end of their training. However, some of the community researchers had changed their addresses and telephone numbers so that, although 14 of them were interviewed initially, only ten were interviewed at the end of their training to explore the gains made and the problems encountered. To evaluate the wider programme, interviews were also conducted with five members of the steering group and four members of the BNCN committee. CURS staff who were not involved with the delivery or management of the project carried out all evaluation interviews. The community organising course was evaluated on completion by the tutor who ran the programme.

The community researchers hoped that the training would provide them with:

- confidence;

- qualifications;

- life skills;

- communication skills;

- research skills;

- paid work;

- increased knowledge about the communities they served;

- the ability to analyse and use information.

There was universal agreement that all expectations had been met with the exception, for two trainees, of locating sustainable paid employment. In particular, community researchers stressed the impact that the training had made on confidence and communication skills. The students also made other gains that they had not anticipated. These included the ability to:

- analyse quantitative data;

- carry out research in a consistent and credible manner;

- engage with high-profile people;

- write reports;

- work under pressure;

- work to a deadline.

The researchers said they had found all elements of the training useful, but the qualitative methods training had been particularly useful because they had learnt new skills that they could apply to a wide range of different situations. The mentoring element of this training had been critical, with mentors providing a great deal of advice and encouragement. One student felt the data analysis training had allowed insufficient time for those without good IT skills.

The community researchers found their new skills and learning impacted on their current work and on their prospects. Some had gained employment as a result of the training. One student was employed as a research co-ordinator, others as researchers – one for the Home Office, another for the UN – and a final student as a mentor. The community researchers had also found the skills useful in their voluntary roles as RCO leaders. They felt they had a greater understanding of their community's problems and could communicate and inquire better within their role as advisers. Several researchers wanted to do further research work or training, while two wished to use their new skills to progress in their careers as advisers. Two of these community researchers gained work – one as an employment adviser, the other in education. Both found that their involvement in the data collection element of their work had helped them in their job.

With so many community researchers wanting to move forward in this area, CURS is now seeking to explore the possibility of a community research social enterprise and is undertaking a mapping exercise of the further training available within the region. Finally, students were asked how the course might be improved. Two students had no suggestions, others proposed longer or additional teaching hours (three students); fewer teaching hours (one student); linking the course to a paid job; providing opportunities to gain higher-level accreditation; individual budgets for travel and incentives, and lecturers to observe students in the field

Roles, responsibilities and decisions

3 The evidence

The evidence collection part of this project was multifaceted. For ease of presentation, each theme is discussed in turn, beginning with the aims and objectives of the research, the questions explored, the methods employed and the key findings that emerged. The full reports from the ESOL and mental health studies can be found at http://www.curs.bham.ac.uk/Research/ClCG/CURS0526.htm.

ESOL

The aim of the ESOL research was to explore refugees' experiences of ESOL, to examine whether there was any basis for the contention that refugees were not progressing in ESOL, to explore the reasons for slow progression and to examine the ways in which ESOL might be improved. More specifically, the following research questions were explored.

- What are the main issues faced by refugees when they are trying to gain access to ESOL?

- How did they find out about ESOL?

- What difficulties did they encounter when they were trying to access ESOL?

- What experiences do refugees have of ESOL classes?

- What are the main barriers and opportunities that they come across in learning English?

- What do refugees want to gain from their ESOL classes and are they getting what they need?

- What suggestions do refugees have about improving the quality of ESOL?

There were three research elements to the ESOL study. CURS sought to analyse the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC's) progression and retention data to gain a quantitative overview of student success rates. The community researchers undertook qualitative interviews with individuals who had been or who were currently enrolled in ESOL. Refugees were encouraged to discuss in their own words their experiences of ESOL. Interviews were either conducted in the mother tongue of interviewees or in English. CURS undertook the task of analysing the 138 interviews and, while the community researchers carried out their own analysis to produce a report for accreditation, the final report was written by members of the CURS research team and was based on CURS analysis of the community research and other data. Finally, CURS undertook eight interviews with ESOL tutors to examine their perspectives on the issues raised by the LSC and community research data.

ESOL findings

Findings indicate that the main source of information about how to locate and register for ESOL is friends, family and community members – although some individuals gained information from their housing adviser or asylum officer. Refugees faced a range of barriers accessing ESOL. These included the accessibility of colleges and the cost of transport, the ability to communicate when registering for a course, lengthy waiting lists and the need to gain work. Women in particular had responsibility for childcare, which impacted on their ability to travel to study. They were also reluctant to attend classes in the evenings because of fears around personal safety.

Once the students were in an ESOL class, their aims and objectives differed. Some wanted to learn the language purely for communication purposes, while others wanted ESOL to help them to improve their language to the point where they could study or secure professional work. Those wanting ESOL for communication were better

served than those with higher aspirations, although even they expressed high levels of dissatisfaction. On the whole, there was insufficient differentiation between standards of students, to the extent that many left their course because they found progress too slow or work repetitive. There was a lack of availability of higher-level or specialist courses, to the point that the needs of those seeking employment or further study were rarely met.

While some respondents reported excellent standards of teaching, with tutors who provided high levels of pastoral as well as language support, many reported variable teaching standards, poor quality lessons and a general lack of consistency. There were also insufficient hours for people to proceed as quickly as they wanted. For many, ESOL provided a social opportunity as much as a chance to learn, and the majority of students welcomed the mix of cultures and languages. While LSC success rates indicated that the majority of students were succeeding in ESOL, interviews with ESOL tutors and students contradicted this impression. Further examination of LSC data demonstrated that colleges were recording only those students who were present at the point of census. Omission of those who had dropped out after a few weeks gave the impression that success rates were far higher than the reality. Overall, the data revealed that ESOL classes had not provided refugees with the support they needed to learn English and that many changes were required to improve the system so it could better meet the needs of newcomers.

Mental health

The aim of the mental health research was to explore the kinds of issues that impacted on refugees' well-being, the specific mental health problems experienced by refugee and asylum-seeking communities, and the types of support that they were getting to help them with those problems. The following specific research questions were explored.

- What are the common problems that refugees experience that affect their well-being?

- What types of mental health problems do refugees experience?

- What services are used by people from migrant community organisations to support their mental health/well-being?

- What ideas do refugees have about the kinds of services they need to help support them with mental health problems?

These questions were explored during the same interview as the ESOL questions and thus yielded 138 responses, which were analysed in a similar way. Because the initial interviews sought more general information about well-being, it was felt necessary to augment the community researchers' initial interviews with some in-depth interviews with refugees who had been, or were, experiencing mental health problems, in order to explore the issues in much greater detail. Community researchers undertook some 18 additional case studies as part of the final stage of the evidence collection. In addition, CRIS embarked on a series of 13 interviews with local service providers to examine what was in place for refugees in Birmingham. It also undertook three interviews with specialist providers from outside the city to examine what kinds of specialist services might be put in place.

Mental health findings
The issues facing asylum seekers and refugees were found to be multifaceted, interlinked and complex. In the absence of a clinical diagnosis, many respondents discussed symptoms rather than a particular illness. These included anxiety, insomnia, depression and feeling suicidal.

A range of factors was found to have impacted on mental health. These included the following.

- Past experiences of war, persecution, torture, sexual violence and flight.

- Concern around continuing political problems in their country of origin.

- The asylum system and the length of time it often took for a decision to be reached.

In particular, there were issues around the questioning of stories that were difficult to tell, uncertainty about the future, being detained, being criminalised, stigmatisation and respondents developing a mistrust of the State.

- Discrimination, feeling unwelcome and being harassed or bullied.

- Isolation, loss or separation from friends, family and the ethnic community.

- Unemployment and skills downgrading, with concerns around the inability to be self-sufficient.

- Culture shock and difficulties understanding how to conduct themselves in UK society.

- Difficulties accessing services, in particular housing.

- Gender issues:
  – isolation from traditional child rearing and social support networks;
  – sexual and domestic violence;
  – increased difficulties accessing services, ESOL and work;
  – the belief by some that women are inherently 'weak'.

- Community-specific issues:
  – Qat use among Somali men;
  – the impacts of chemical warfare on the Kurdish community – in particular, newborn babies.

Support
Few respondents knew how to access support and many believed there were no services they could access. Those who had been referred to a GP found that medication was the main means of treatment. While some were provided with anti-depressants, many were given paracetamol or sent away. Others were put off clinical treatments by the waiting list. Counselling was offered sparingly and generally had little relevance to the scale of problems that refugees experienced. A number of women said they were reluctant to speak to white male GPs about their experiences of sexual violence. Of the 13 service providers interviewed in Birmingham, only two provided a specialist refugee service and both of these were experiencing funding problems. One of them was threatened with closure. Other providers occasionally dealt with a refugee but felt they lacked the knowledge, expertise and resources to provide the service required.

Importance of community
Ethnic, and in some cases faith, communities fulfilled a key role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees with their mental health problems. Not all respondents were able to locate a community but those who did found support provided in terms of advice, empathy and understanding to be critical in their recovery and general ongoing well-being. MRCOs were, however, overwhelmed by the needs of their community and there was often a lack of social space or resources to attend to the needs of all of their members.

Much more work is needed to help asylum seekers and refugees with mental health problems. This category of people present a particular challenge to providers because of the sheer scale of problems that they face. A holistic approach is required, together with some consideration of how the asylum system could be made more humane and how service providers might work together more effectively. The provision of health promotion for asylum seekers and refugees might be a more realistic approach in the short term.

Education

The education study sought to examine asylum-seeking and refugee children's experiences of school in Birmingham. A particular focus was placed on those children who were, or who had been, outside of education. The research questions covered included the following.

- How many asylum-seeking and refugee children are outside of education?

- What are the reasons they are outside of education?

- What experiences do asylum-seeking and refugee children have of school?

- What are their future aspirations?

While the ESOL and mental health studies were viewed as having national relevance, the main focus of this study was the experience of children in Birmingham.

This education dimension of the research was evidenced mainly by quantitative data. To this end, an age cohort of 11–16 (essentially a secondary school age population) was targeted by the researchers and structured interviews were conducted with a parent or guardian with the child in attendance. Because of concerns that large numbers of children were outside of education, it was decided that the community researchers would seek to identify and interview specifically children without a school place to explore why they did not have a place. As the research commenced, it became clear that the researchers, who came from 16 different refugee communities, were having difficulties identifying children outside of education. Children outside school were identified in the Sudanese, Somali, Iraqi and Iranian communities but not in other refugee communities. It was rapidly concluded that the problem was specific to certain groups. In total 200 surveys were collected. Some 19 respondents were found to be outside of education. Following the survey, community researchers undertook five in-depth interviews with families who had a child/children outside education to examine their experiences in greater detail.

Education findings
Of the 19 respondents found to be outside of education at the time of the research, some 13 children had never attended school in the UK. Most of these were from Sub-Saharan Africa. They were more likely than children engaged in education to be living in private rented housing and to have moved recently. Their parents were more likely to be out of work and to rate their language ability as poor. Ten considered their frequent movement around the UK to be the reason why they had not attended school. Seven did not wish to attend; none had been approached about attending. Of the six who had previously

attended school in the UK, three blamed family breakdown for their leaving education, one bullying or harassment and two did not wish to attend. In-depth interviews revealed that these students came from households experiencing a mix of exclusionary factors – a combination of unemployment, language, housing and family composition. Parents had little knowledge about how to access the system. Some children did not want to attend education, as they found it difficult to engage because of language problems.

Of those engaged in the system, 66 per cent were studying for GCSEs. The majority were highly motivated and engaged in a range of extra-curricular activities. While only 6 per cent planned to leave their courses before they completed, many were concerned that they might have to leave because of cultural or peer pressures, bullying or, most likely, financial pressures. Those asylum-seeking and refugee children who were outside of education or feared having to leave the system were those who had the least stable housing and parents who were least integrated. Findings suggest that more support is needed to help refugee children to reach their potential.

Employment

BNCN decided that it wished to focus on refugees' knowledge and use of employment services for its employment study. This was largely because it felt that projects with a remit to support refugees were not reaching the majority of unemployed refugees who were seeking work. It argued that evidence that could demonstrate that communities were not being reached would help to promote debate between BNCN and those agencies, as well as statutory bodies. This was thought to be particularly useful, as it would help develop a strategy that could identify ways in which BNCN and other agencies might work together to ensure that refugees were better linked with specialist services. BNCN members suggested a range of issues they wanted to explore, including:

- the status of the individual and how long they had been in the UK;

- their current employment status and whether they were actively seeking work;

- the employment organisations they had heard of and whether they had used those organisations.

A very basic one-page questionnaire was designed. Interviewees went to community meetings or meeting places to encourage people to complete the form. Some 171 questionnaires were completed in total.

Employment findings

The majority of respondents (80 per cent) were unemployed. There was no discernable pattern between the date of gaining status and whether or not a refugee was unemployed. Respondents were asked whether they were actively seeking work. Some 144 (84 per cent) reported they were looking for employment at the time of the survey; a further 20 (12 per cent) were not seeking work. Overall findings suggest that three-quarters of those currently employed in some way were looking for improved positions. The majority of respondents (66 per cent) had heard of Jobcentre Plus and all but four of those respondents had used the organisation. Given that Jobcentre Plus is the main statutory agency offering employment advice and access to benefits, it was surprising that not all of those seeking work had heard of the organisation. Fewer people had heard of or used local organisations established to improve refugees' employability. For example, some 21 per cent of respondents had heard of the Employability Forum's Trellis Project and 17 per cent had used it; 10 per cent had heard of RETAF (Refugee Employment and Training Advocacy Forum); and 6 per cent had heard of the TUC Centre for the Unemployed. Some 81 per cent (139) of respondents wanted more advice. Of these, 128 (70 per cent) wanted to be referred to an organisation that could help them gain work.

The evidence was collected incrementally. Once it had been analysed and written up in research reports, the project was able to move into the influencing stage.

4 The influencing phase and the results of the research

The influencing phase

Building relationships

The influencing stage represented the culmination of the project, whereby the evidence collected was to be used to help influence policy-making and service delivery. Although temporally this was the last stage in the project, the partnership felt it was important to invest in the building of relationships from its early days. In order to do this, some two months after the commencement of the project, it ran a seminar for some of the people it wished to influence. Individuals were invited or were asked to nominate an attendee from a wide range of organisations working in Birmingham on issues relating to the project's four thematic areas.

Some 23 attendees from 17 organisations attended. These included Birmingham City Council, Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust (BSMHT), Mind, LSC, Divercity, Jobcentre Plus and others. Attendees were introduced to the project, its aims and objectives through presentations from CURS and BNCN. They were then invited to take part in themed discussions to explore the types of information they held about refugees, what sort of information they required to help them better understand and meet the needs of refugees, and the ways in which they might work with the Making a Difference project team. The event was successful in helping the team to build links with a range of organisations – for example, the LSC, which provided data that was used in the ESOL study; an ESOL tutor who helped link CURS to interviewees; and organisations such as Trellis and BSMHT, which have been closely involved in the work that followed the research. CRIS also sought to visit 16 different organisations with a mental health remit to explore their perspectives on the ways in which influencing might take place and to consider how they might work with BNCN on refugee mental health issues.

Once all the evidence had been collected, it was clear there was a need to prioritise the issues that might form the focus of the influencing work. Originally, the steering group had considered dropping the issue of mental health because this was the area where the members had least knowledge and experience. However, the data revealed that this was possibly the most serious difficulty facing asylum seekers and refugees. Discussions between BNCN and the steering group led to agreement that ESOL and mental health should become the main priorities and that, in the short term, employment would be addressed in a low-key way and that education should be considered at a later stage. In addition, the overall findings for mental health, ESOL and education were presented to the BNCN committee and steering group members, with discussions held around the validity of the findings and ways in which the recommendations might be prioritised.

How to fully engage BNCN in the dialogue with policy-makers and providers was another key issue considered by the steering group. It was felt important to locate individuals who had knowledge and experience of particular subject areas and who would provide continuity in relationships between BNCN and policy-makers. Following discussions, CRIS decided to identify BNCN members who could take on the role as 'expert' for their organisation. They invited two people in each thematic area to work closely with the project team in their specialist area. In most cases, these individuals had little experience in the policy area but were committed to making a difference. Through attending meetings, initially led by CURS or CRIS, they would gradually build knowledge and the confidence to take part.

The results

ESOL

Building on the offer of joint working following the policy-makers' seminar, CURS, BNCN and CRIS met on a number of occasions with the LSC. They provided support to analyse their data, and met to listen to the findings of the research and CURS's interpretation of their data. The group was joined by representatives from Aspire,[1] Birmingham City Council's Economic Development Department and the Trellis Project. The LSC expressed concern at the findings and proposed to set up a working group to try to take some of the recommendations forward. The findings were presented at the Aspire conference in March 2007 and over 130 copies of the report were circulated. It is anticipated that the LSC working group will run over a number of months and will be focused on long-term solutions. BNCN and CURS are awaiting details of how the working group will run and the role that BNCN might have within the group.

Mental health

Building on a number of leads and introductions from Dipali Chandra at JRF, CURS contacted the diversity and equality leads at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust (BSMHT) and the Community Service Improvement Partnership (CSIP). A number of meetings were held between these organisations and the partnership. Together, BSMHT and CSIP have funded a dissemination event, which was held in June 2007 and was aimed at practitioners, clinicians, commissioners and communities. Findings were presented at the event and organisations came together to consider how they might provide for refugees. The event culminated in a promise from the chair of the cross-primary care trust (PCT) mental health working group to develop a mental health service for refugees, possibly based around a one-door model. The following also emerged:

- opportunities to disseminate to the Community Development Workers Network and black and minority ethnic (BME) women's conference;

- a mental health day for BNCN members, supported by JRF, and involving BSMHT

and discussions of how RCO leaders might become trustees;

- proposals about the development of a regional mental health network, with a fund for mental health promotion work;

- the development of a strategic mental health network focused on refugee issues.

The research also helped the Refugee Council to shape its tender for a consultant to develop a mental health strategy for Birmingham. The Medical Foundation is using the research to support its rationale for developing a new service in Birmingham.

Employment

BNCN has met with the Trellis Project to discuss how they might work together to promote specialist services for refugees seeking employment.

Education

Both CRIS and BNCN have an existing relationship with Birmingham City Council Education Department and plan to meet to discuss the findings in due course. The report has been forwarded to Birmingham City Council for its needs assessment for newly arrived children and families.

Engaging with other agendas

The findings from the mental health and ESOL studies, although based on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Birmingham, have wider relevance and can help inform on the situation of individuals living in other dispersal cities. The reports have been circulated and welcomed by the:

- Independent Asylum Review;

- Commission on Integration and Cohesion;

- Advisory Board for Nationalisation and Integration.

The ESOL report was submitted to the UCU campaign against the exclusion of asylum seekers from ESOL. Some of the findings of the JRF project have been discussed at a round-table discussion that was held at the Department for Communities and Local Government, and was aimed at informing the development of the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

Sustaining influence

BNCN's management committee recognises that the project has opened a number of doors for the network and has raised the interest of some of its members in trying to influence policy and provision. Two members of BNCN have been heavily involved in the influencing work and are networking in their specialist areas in their own right. It has been difficult for other members to sustain involvement in the project because of gaining employment or a lack of resources. In addition, some of the 'experts' felt compelled to take on the role and would have preferred people to have nominated themselves in a general BNCN meeting.

While the training was undertaken in a highly structured fashion so that the community researchers knew what to expect, the influencing was undertaken in a more ad hoc manner. This was partly because the partnership was heavily reliant on the availability of policy-makers and providers, and was unable to schedule meetings to any time frame. It was also because there was no set lobbying plan in the way that there was for the training. Early discussions with BNCN

had agreed that the community researchers would get paid in increments for their evidence-collection work, but no budget had been set aside for influencing because it was assumed that the BNCN committee members would undertake this task as part of their role as RCO representatives. While some were able to and did do this, others were unable to do so. One committee member expressed concern that the community researchers had become reluctant to get involved in the influencing work in the way they might have done prior to the project, because the project had introduced the notion of payment for community work. This may have been the case for a few individuals but others were fully engaged in newly found employment or were taking an active part in the policy work.

On the whole, community researchers and BNCN committee members were agreed that the project had raised the profile of BNCN and had brought some of the issues facing refugees to the notice of the right people. They felt that partnering with organisations with a reputation for good-quality research, such as a university, gave the organisation status. They also felt that the data collected through the project would enable their own MRCOs to make funding applications more effectively. Some MRCOs had made direct contact with service providers as a result of the influencing work. However, some people have expressed concerns that a voluntary organisation such as BNCN cannot sustain the level of influencing activity initiated by this project without funded staff. They hoped the project would enable BNCN to employ staff to help it to continue the policy work.

5 Challenges and good practice

The Making a Difference project faced a range of challenges and uncovered some good practice in the areas of partnership working, research training, community research methodology, and influencing and empowerment.

Partnership working

The collaborative way in which the proposal and particularly the research themes were developed meant that the community researchers had a direct role in shaping the overall project and ownership over the research process. They were also very motivated to undertake the research because it related to problems that they themselves had identified.

The establishment and regular meetings of the steering group were useful in helping to make decisions about direction and the day-to-day operation of the project. Without a formal mechanism to bring together the partners, the project would have been more research and less empowerment focused. Minutes were very useful for recording decisions and for helping the partners to focus on the tasks to which they had committed themselves.

While the roles and responsibilities of each partner organisation were discussed in some depth at the proposal stage and the early stages of the project, they were agreed without any formal contract and were rather more loosely outlined in the proposal. This presented difficulties when there was a change in personnel both within BNCN and CRIS, and tensions around the ways in which tasks were shared and decisions made. In particular, the new CRIS management did not see capacity building of BNCN as a priority and took no obvious actions to encourage its independence as an organisation.

The remit of the steering group could have been made clearer at the beginning of the process. It might also be necessary to build the capacity of some of the steering group members to participate fully in the activities of the steering group. The importance of disseminating decisions that impact on wider partnership members cannot be underestimated. Failure to do so leads to concerns about lack of transparency. In the case of this project, all decisions were recorded in the minutes but, in some cases, were not widely disseminated to the BNCN committee or the wider membership.

Research training

From the perspective of the community researchers and BNCN more generally, the research training was viewed as a successful part of the project. There were a number of reasons why the training was so successful. The location of the training within the university and the name of the university on the certificates gave it status and value. Agreeing training days in advance, the flexibility to offer the training at weekend and on the occasional evening, and the efforts of CRIS to remind students the day before training was held all helped to ensure attendance. Provision of computers, tape recorders and all materials necessary for study meant all community researchers operated from the same playing field. The focus on role play and group work meant students bonded, made new links between organisations and quickly developed friendships within which they supported each other. Students also found the embedding of the research into the training useful so that ethereal concepts such as subjectivity were more easily understood when placed in the context of actual experience. The students found the observed role-play sessions extremely useful in developing their interviewing techniques and confidence to enter the field. They also found the support they received in developing the ability to reflect on their performance aided them to develop their skills through self-reflection.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of the teaching

was the mentoring system. This was particularly important because the students had different skills and aptitudes, and required intensive one-to-one work in different areas to bring them to the point where they could undertake successful interviews. The mentors provided a wide range of advice and guidance, most relating to the training, assessments, reporting and fieldwork, but also other support around immigration issues, employment and benefits. This holistic support was necessary to help people to continue to focus on their studies and research. The packaging of the community research programme as a job was useful for community researchers, particularly those without employment. The research phase of the project was treated as paid employment, with the community researchers having targets and deadlines to adhere to. This was something that was not universally popular or respected, but ensured that, in the main, work was completed in a timely and professional manner, students could enter the programme as employment on their CVs and ask CURS for a reference. Several of them used this facility and have subsequently been successful in gaining employment.

The wide range of ability levels within the group did present a problem for tutors and for some students. Although there was a person specification for the job (see Appendix), essentially the community researchers were nominated by their MRCOs, rather than being interviewed. This approach to recruitment was partly to ensure inclusivity but also to expedite the process so the 12-month deadline could be met. To ensure suitable skills and aptitudes, it would have been better to advertise the programme within BNCN and to interview those who were interested. The provision of computers was a mixed blessing. Some students were IT literate and rapidly changed their operating package to one that was more compatible to PCs within their workplace. Others were very inexperienced with computers and struggled with the most basic activities, despite the training they had received from the voluntary organisation. The failure of the operating system slowed down the training process to the point where the majority of the more able students were no longer interested in attending because momentum had been lost.

Several of the students became interested in taking their research training further. While CURS is now seeking to map the move-on training available locally, it would have been preferable to have had this information available for the point when students completed the course.

Problems were experienced with accrediting the students. Some students produced excellent quality work that was submitted on time, others struggled to deliver and in some cases did not succeed in completing their work. Waiting for these students delayed accreditation for the others. In a bid to wait for all students to submit their work before undertaking internal and more importantly external verification, tutors let the deadlines slip.

Community research methodology

The involvement of BNCN and its community researchers in every stage of the research – including deciding on topics, questions, research tools, participants, analysis frameworks and recommendations – meant that the evidence collected in this project was truly embedded in the MRCOs that participated and focused on the problems that those communities experienced from the perspectives of those communities. The community researchers were able to access information about lived experience that simply would not have been available to academic researchers. This was particularly the case with the mental health research, for example, where the community researchers uncovered the experiences of African women who had undergone sexual violence and who had witnessed murder. They would not seek support because of the shame they felt and their lack of confidence in their GP's capacity to understand. Community researchers reached those who are hard to reach in conventional academic research and, because of their knowledge of their communities and the trust they enjoyed as community leaders, were able to ask questions about sensitive issues in a culturally appropriate way. Working with community researchers also increased the capacity of what would otherwise have been a very small research team and meant that a large volume of data was collected in a relatively short period of time. While some community researchers wrote their own accredited reports providing a summary of their

findings, CURS prepared the final report to offer an overview of all the findings. The draft report was distributed to all community researchers to gain feedback, and findings were disseminated so that they could be discussed and agreement could be reached about which recommendations should be prioritised.

Community research is not without its challenges, some of which are methodological, others ethical. A key concern was that of researcher bias. Given that the researchers had selected the research themes because of the concerns of their communities, could they be relied on to be objective in their questioning and data recording? The issue of subjectivity is one of concern in *all* social research, although it tends to be associated more with qualitative methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Convincing arguments have been made that no researcher can be entirely objective and that what is required is the ability to identify, and account for, one's own subjectivities through a process of self-reflection (Nolin, 2006). That said, the subjectivities and positioning of a community researcher are likely to be different from that of an 'outsider'. The community researchers were given a significant amount of training in issues of researcher bias and subjectivity. Teaching reflexivity and documenting reflexivity through the use of self-reflection forms were methods used to identify subjectivities and help the community researchers take account of them in their approaches. Some policy-makers might have called into question the validity of data collected by community researchers. To overcome this, the final research reports contained detailed accounts of the methodology employed. We also sought to triangulate through the use of research undertaken by CURS and CRIS with service providers, which enabled us to gauge a different perspective. In the research reports, we stressed where views converged and diverged.

The way in which the data was recorded was also an issue of concern. There was insufficient budget to translate and transcribe all of the community researchers' interviews, so a data analysis table was prepared and the community researchers were asked to summarise everything that was said in relation to a particular issue. Some community researchers completed detailed, clearly written tables. Others were extremely brief – for example, stating that someone's experiences of ESOL were 'good'. Mentors returned data analysis tables that were of poor quality and requested further detail. Overall, this approach meant that we had a great deal of summary data that had essentially already been filtered by the community researchers. To collect some richer, more in-depth data, we used the initial round of interviews to identify issues that required further exploration and then prepared detailed topic guides for the community researchers to undertake in-depth case studies that were recorded and transcribed in full.

Taking part in the interviews raised the expectations of the interviewees. Some spoke of how relieved they were to have the opportunity to articulate their problems, concerns or experiences, while others took part because they wanted change. The remit of the project was to use the evidence to enhance the role of MRCOs to work with policy-makers to make a difference, but the policy process is slow and poorly understood by refugees. Shortly after their interviews, some individuals questioned what was happening as a result of the study and were disappointed to hear that progress was slow. Further work was required to explain the project and what realistically it might achieve in the short term to respondents.

Researchers faced a number of functional challenges that would require resolution in future projects. Many were uncomfortable about tape recording interviews, something that was obligatory for their accreditation. A few respondents refused to be interviewed because of concerns about being taped. Future community research training needs to focus on building confidence in this area. The community researchers incurred costs through travelling, mobile telephone calls to set up meetings, refreshments and the occasional request for incentives that had not been accounted for at the commencement of the project because it had been considered the payments offered would more than adequately cover these costs. While the opportunity to be interviewed by a community researcher was welcomed by some individuals, others were less trusting and may have been reluctant to share sensitive information with someone in their community, despite declarations about confidentiality. A letter of introduction

from the university explaining the purpose of the research and the role of community researchers helped to overcome concerns in some cases.

Influencing

One of the two key objectives of the project was to 'make a difference'. The partnership has begun the process of influencing policy and practice in some of the thematic areas. The first challenge was to identify a range of specific areas on which to focus and to prioritise those areas. This task was undertaken by the BNCN committee at special meetings focusing around mental health and ESOL. The policy-makers' seminar helped to 'recruit' some policy-makers at an early stage in the process, so they were prepared to engage when the evidence was ready. Others were identified through use of existing contacts and a snowballing approach whereby contacts were asked who else might help. Snowballing proved very successful because networks were made through personal introduction rather than cold calling. When meetings were arranged through contacts made in this way, people were already willing to engage and did not have to be persuaded. BNCN felt that the link with JRF and the university gave the project kudos and enabled doors to be opened in a way that would not have been possible had it been acting alone. It argued that the research was more rigorous because the community researchers had learned the principles of social research. The possession of 'hard' evidence was seen as a powerful tool for both BNCN and individual MRCOs.

An early problem encountered by the partnership in the influencing stage of the project was the lack of understanding within BNCN of UK approaches to policy formation and service provision. Certainly some individuals expected instant results, became disillusioned because 'it's just talking' and gave up fairly rapidly. Others were nervous about following up on unfulfilled pledges and saw failure to deliver as a sign of a lack willingness by the policy-makers to engage with BNCN. There was also a lack of understanding of the importance of linking refugees' needs to organisational objectives and targets and, on some occasions, difficulties understanding the point of partnership working because it was assumed that

organisations working in the same policy area were in competition. Finally, there was some reluctance to engage with individuals or organisations that had not been particularly receptive to BNCN members in the past. Much work had to be undertaken to build understanding of institutional culture and governance in the UK. It would have been better to have invested this time at the early stages of the project, so that there was less of a delay in commencing the influencing stage.

The development of the 'expert' system was not entirely successful. Two individuals came forward to work in the areas of ESOL and mental health. They rapidly built expertise, knowledge and confidence, and began to take an increasingly active role in the influencing, attending events, presenting findings and networking outside of the region. One or two others showed an interest but were often busy working – a key problem when meeting policy-makers is the timing of those meetings. Only community researchers with sympathetic employers or who are unemployed have the flexibility to engage regularly. No budget had been set aside to resource the influencing stage of the project beyond covering the costs of the organisation that was leading in this area. This meant all the others participating did so out of goodwill. One BNCN committee member felt that community researchers should have been paid to take on a lobbying role because they may have been more prepared to take time out of other income-earning activities. Another felt that paying the community researchers at all had led to a situation where they expected to be paid and were more reluctant to volunteer than they had been before the project. Certainly, the lack of paid co-ordination at BNCN put extreme pressure on some individuals. While many doors did open for BNCN, the organisation simply did not have the capacity to follow through every opportunity.

The partnership hoped that more would be achieved in the duration of the project, but soon realised that influence happens over time and in an incremental fashion. Activities and actions are under way but, until BNCN gains further funding, continued engagement in these areas depends entirely on the goodwill of the partnership, which, at the present time, is undertaking activities around its other commitments – a situation that is not sustainable in the long term.

Challenges and good practices

Above all, the partnership lacked a strategic plan to shape the way in which influencing would be undertaken. This was partly because of the need to await findings to enable decisions to be made about exactly who to influence, and partly because there was a change of management within CRIS, the organisation leading the influencing, which resulted in a delay in beginning the process. Ideally, the networking/snowballing stage would happen simultaneously with the evidence collection so that, as soon as evidence was available, actions could begin. A strategic plan might also have established some goals and responsibilities, and set out a procedure for the community researchers to engage with the process. A more formal mechanism was/is needed for keeping BNCN and the community researchers up to date with the developments in influencing, so that they can report back to their communities and feel that their work is making a difference. More BNCN members might be inclined to engage in the influencing process if they were aware it was progressing, albeit slowly.

Empowerment

The second key objective of the project was to empower BNCN and MRCOs more generally. This section looks at the ways in which that has been achieved and also considers the empowerment of individuals. At this stage, the impact of the project on BNCN has been relatively limited, partly because it has been unable to take up many of the opportunities on offer. In addition, little or no capacity-building activity was undertaken between CRIS and BNCN because the shared understanding about work that was to be undertaken was lost with the change in personnel and, in the absence of a formal agreement, it was difficult to encourage activity. However, the project raised the profile of BNCN. Every communication relating to this project has referred to the three partners, closely linking BNCN with an established NGO – CRIS, the university and JRF. The research reports have been widely circulated, with BNCN as a partner and the role of the community researchers acknowledged, and the events that are planned are being run for BNCN. Representatives of BNCN, the 'experts', have taken part in all of the influencing meetings and

are now well known by policy-makers and service providers. The majority of these organisations knew little about BNCN before the project and were not in contact with it. Several funding opportunities that were not on offer before the project have been raised with BNCN. These have occurred primarily through links with JRF.

The community researchers have argued that their MRCOs have been empowered though the project. Once again, this process has largely occurred through meeting new people. The training gave the community researchers opportunities to meet and work with leaders from other organisations. They have shared knowledge and experience, learned from each other and undertaken some joint working outside of the project. Three MRCOs felt that their organisations had become stronger as a result of the project and have proceeded to locate dedicated office space in the new Piers Road Refugee Resource Centre. The project also put them in contact with organisations such as CSIP and BSMHT. The publication of evidence has given status to the organisations that took part and materials they can use for funding applications. MRCOs are now more interested in influencing policy rather than undertaking purely defensive work.

Arguably, the greatest empowerment occurred for those individuals who took part as community researchers. Their role as interviewers working for the university gave them status and earned them respect within their own organisations. The evaluation of the training and project demonstrated that most felt they had gained skills and confidence. Several had gained work as a result of their engagement with the project. The majority of them will gain qualifications. To some extent, the success of certain individuals within this project might have come at a cost to BNCN and MRCOs. Those who gained paid work were less able to engage than those who did not.

The breakdown in relationships within both BNCN and CRIS resulted in the personnel who had conceived the project with CURS departing from the organisations and the project. These ruptures were not anticipated and dealing with the resultant political fallout was problematic. Reviewing the situation, some of the community researchers and BNCN committee members felt that responsibilities were not clearly allocated

within the new BNCN committee and the committee members were not working as a team. Others felt overburdened by responsibility. Two committee members who were not involved in the early stages felt that they did not have ownership over the project and would have preferred BNCN to have been the lead organisation. As the project proceeded, BNCN had fewer meetings of its own. It is possible that the project actually distracted community researchers from their role in BNCN while they were busy with their studies and research. This problem could have been resolved by intervention to develop the capacity of BNCN but, as stated above, the willingness to build capacity reduced with the change in CRIS management. It might have been wise if time and support had been requested midway through the project for the new BNCN committee to consolidate and to review its aims and objectives, particularly with regard to the project, but this was difficult because 16 individuals were part-way through their training. These tensions between individual empowerment, MRCOs and the overarching network have not been resolved. Future projects of this type might consider aims and objectives at these three levels prior to commencement of activity.

Where next?

The project ends with a range of opportunities for BNCN. There are many prospects: free accommodation, follow-on funding, strategic roles and leadership of thematic networks. Work is currently under way to refocus BNCN in light of this project and BNCN's other work. The committee plans to meet, decide its aims and objectives, apply for funding and seek paid staff to take the pressure off those who are currently undertaking the majority of the work. They hope to continue working in partnership and to build on the opportunities that have emerged from the project.

6 Conclusions and summary of lessons learned

The Making a Difference project with its focus on partnership hailed a new way of working for the three organisations involved. Linking established, respected organisations with lesser known but critically important community-focused organisations provides an excellent model for raising the profile of those organisations and giving a voice to their communities. Partnership working provides many opportunities for new relationships and learning, overcoming some of the problems identified by Zetter and Pearl (2000) with regard to networking. An analysis of the power dynamics and the ways they have impacted on the project is difficult. Certainly, BNCN has emerged as an organisation with lots of opportunities open to it and a higher profile, but the extent to which its capacity to engage with those opportunities has increased is debatable. The rupture that occurred within two of the partner organisations led to a situation where the third was compelled to take a stronger leadership role to ensure that momentum was maintained. The result of this change in dynamics might have been that unrealistic expectations were placed on BNCN, as many doors opened but it lacked the capacity to respond in a strategic way. On reflection, it might have been wise to suspend the project while the organisations consolidated and the partnership restructured, then to proceed with new objectives – something that is difficult to achieve midway through a programme of work. Empowerment in this project happened at the level of the individual and their MRCO. This, too, may have undermined BNCN, as individuals followed their own paths into employment and MRCOs planned new futures.

The influence of the project has been considerable, with actions likely in three of the four areas and work yet to commence in the fourth. The MRCOs involved and BNCN have begun to overcome a problem endemic in MRCOs – a lack of understanding of the UK system (Gameledin-Adhami *et al.*, 2002), to the point of engaging with the system. Some of the impact of the project will be sustained without continued work by the partnership – for example, the strategic mental health network. Other areas require further engagement. These areas are currently being led by either CRIS or CURS and, although supported by a BNCN volunteer, will require further support if BNCN is to take a greater lead. Early indications are that, subject to other work commitments, the partnership will continue the influencing work on a voluntary basis. In order to proceed in a strategic way and make the best use of its limited resources, BNCN needs to be supported to prioritise influencing activities over the next 12 months and perhaps develop an action plan, which its wider membership can sign up to. Work needs to be undertaken to develop the governance of BNCN and secure its financial and ideological independence.

Much has been achieved through the project, and some of the aims and objectives have been met, but the project represents only the beginning of a process that, in order to continue, requires some resolution to ongoing capacity issues. The profile of BNCN and the work of MRCOs has been raised through the evidence collected and disseminated. The majority of community researchers have personal success stories to tell. The efficacy of ESOL is now being questioned sub-regionally and refugee mental health is now very much on the agenda in Birmingham and across the region. There are signs that the evidence collected in these areas will have an impact nationally. This is testimony to the role of the community researchers in undertaking research that gave an insider's perspective to complex or sensitive issues such as language learning and mental health. The outcomes of this project provide a strong argument for increased work with community researchers to uncover the reality of the lived experience in a way that is not possible through conventional academic research. This might be possible only through use of a social activist approach to research, whereby community

researchers, and their interviewees, are motivated to engage in a project because of the desire to make a difference. Given training, support and resources, MRCOs could move from a defensive to a transformation role. If they were supported to understand and work within the existing policy frameworks, they might find the evidence they collected would give them the power to make a difference and would raise their profile.

Lessons learned

- Working collaboratively to develop the proposal and the research themes gave the community researchers a sense of ownership and commitment.

- A steering group with membership drawn from all partners, which met regularly and where decisions were minuted, enabled people to focus on all aspects of the project, facilitated decision-making and reminded people to undertake tasks they had committed themselves to.

- The lack of a formal contract outlining the roles and responsibilities of each partner organisation and the remit of the steering group presented difficulties when there were personnel changes and would be advisable in other projects of this nature.

- Training by and in association with the university lent kudos to the community researchers and the data they collected.

- Being flexible about training times, agreeing dates and times in advance and reminding students before a training session helped to ensure attendance.

- Providing all the materials and resources necessary for study and research eliminated some of the barriers to completion.

- Group working enabled students to make new links between organisations and to support each other as individuals.

- Role play allowed students to learn quickly and increased their confidence to enter the field.

- The mentoring system enabled intensive advice and guidance on a one-to-one basis when required and fostered a much more holistic approach to helping the students.

- Treating the research as employment encouraged discipline and professionalism, and was a useful addition to the students' CVs.

- Involving BNCN and its community researchers at every level of the project meant that the focus was on problems voiced by the communities themselves. The researchers were able to gain access to information and people that was often denied to academic researchers.

- The problem of researcher bias was addressed by focusing on issues around subjectivity in training and by seeking alternative perspectives from service providers and triangulating data where possible.

- Because the policy process is slow and often poorly understood by newcomers to the UK, some interviewees – and, indeed, some of the communities and members of BNCN – had unrealistic expectations about what might be achieved within one year.

- The lack of a separate budget for expenses left some researchers feeling they were out of pocket.

- The policy-makers' seminar and the snowball effect of using contacts developed by JRF and the university helped to encourage policy-makers to engage.

- Work is needed to build MRCOs' capacity to understand UK institutional culture before expecting them to be able to influence policy decisions.

- A strategic influencing plan helps to establish goals and responsibilities, and offer a procedure to engage community researchers in the process.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. The Home Office is planning to offer, via contractors, a National Refugee Integration Service for all new refugees from April 2008. There is no defined role for RCOs within this service and no funding to aid RCOs that are providing support for refugees who gained their status before this date – a process that research has demonstrated might continue for several years.

Chapter 2

1. None of these individuals was a community researcher because the group felt community researchers would be too busy studying and collecting evidence.

Chapter 4

1. A Birmingham-based project, which is funded by EQUAL and focuses on improving access to ESOL.

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Appendix
Job/person specification and learning contract

Job/person specification

- Be associated with an RCO based in Birmingham.

- Be prepared to travel around the city.

- Attend all the training sessions (ten days).

- Have sufficient written and spoken English to understand basic instructions and record basic information.

- Speak the language(s) of their community.

- Undertake data collection within their community.

- Work with CURS to analyse data.

- Be prepared to work with CRIS to lobby policy-makers for change.

- Good communication skills.

- Genuine interest in refugee issues.

- Ability to cascade learning to colleagues at MRCOs.

- Basic IT skills.

- Reliable and responsible.

- Ability to work to deadlines.

- Able to manage own workload.

- Sticks to commitments.

- Realistic about time management.

Learning contract

- Good-quality accredited training.

- Support and advice.

- Help with managing their data.

- Toolkit: A–Z Birmingham, diary, paper and pens.

- Access to university seminars, etc.

- Access to policy-makers and funders.

- Contacts at CRIS and the university to advise and guide.

- Tools to strengthen own organisation.

- The opportunity to take part in wider dissemination at national level.

- A UK work reference – as appropriate

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