At a time when the availability of social housing was declining, the five Accommodate partnerships delivered tangible outcomes that met the housing needs of refugees.

In the five years since Accommodate started in 2004, the policy context and experience of migration has changed beyond recognition. There were significant reductions in asylum applications and leave to remain decisions, increases in secondary migration and economic migration from Europe, as well as alarming levels of destitution amongst failed asylum seekers.

Within housing policy, investment partnering reforms, housing market renewal areas and the drive towards Decent Homes standards have all impacted on housing opportunities. A linked reduction in housing supply resulted in increases in house prices and rents making access to decent housing for refugees increasingly difficult.

— Continues on back of document
Accommodate – the refugee housing integration project

The Accommodate project evolved from hact’s work with refugee community organisations (RCOs) over the previous decade. Hact understood that many RCOs were working in isolation as they responded to the extreme levels of housing demand within their communities. This was exacerbated in areas of new settlement following the introduction of enforced dispersal of asylum seekers in 2000. Hact believed that by building the capacity of, and effective partnerships between RCOs, housing providers and local authorities, this isolation could be reduced, resulting in more effective services that addressed community needs.

The aim of Accommodate was to discover ways of plugging gaps in policy and practice that have prevented integration and equitable access to housing for refugees. Hact wanted to test how effective partnership working could provide solutions. Uniquely, the Accommodate project demonstrated not only the positive benefits of partnership working, but also the responsive, co-operative and inventive spirit inherent within the social housing and community sectors.

The project was groundbreaking in its scope and ambition, and was pioneering in its outcomes. Five partnerships of housing providers, refugee community organisations and statutory agencies were able to pursue different practical ideas to improve refugee housing. Each was based in a different area of recent refugee settlement. Each provided lessons that are already informing the future of refugee, and new migrant, housing and related service provision.

How were the partnerships chosen?
The process of setting up the partnerships was itself pioneering. Initially, ten partnerships in different parts of England received seed corn grants to develop action plans to improve refugee housing. Based on criteria agreed beforehand, five partnerships were then awarded larger grants to put their plans into action. Each was led by a different type of agency, had a different focus, and was located in a different area of recent refugee settlement. Over the three-year life of the project, over 370 organisations took part – including 163 RCOs, 71 housing providers and 32 local authorities.

How has the project been evaluated?
A full evaluation was led by David Mullins, Professor of Housing Policy, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS), University of Birmingham. It incorporates the work of the CURS evaluation team, self-assessment by each of the partnerships, input from over 370 organisations and the findings of 24 community researchers.

The full evaluation reports and summary document can be downloaded from our website at www.hact.org.uk
Project information

**Accommodate Birmingham** – *involving refugee communities in regeneration*

Led by Family Housing Association (Birmingham) with 17 local partners, this large partnership worked to influence plans to regenerate North West Birmingham. It engaged refugee communities and established a resource centre as home for originally eight RCOs (now 22), with free office accommodation. The centre provides a strong base for future RCO activity and also delivered a training programme for frontline housing and local authority staff. There are plans for a self-build housing scheme for refugees.

**Accommodate Bolton** – *meeting the housing needs of emerging refugee communities*

Led by Bolton Community Homes with five local partners. Bolton Community Homes resourced New Bolton Somali Community Association (NBSCA) to lead a community research study which provided clear evidence of the housing needs of Somali families, and helped build the alliances necessary to address them. Recently renamed as Bolton Solidarity Community Association, it has expanded its services to reach a wider audience, has influenced the local choice-based lettings scheme and is also directly managing properties owned by Irwell Valley HA.

**Accommodate Bradford** – *helping new refugees move to mainstream housing*

Led by Manningham Housing Association with eight local partners. Local advice agencies, RCOs, housing associations and the local authority developed integrated housing options advice for new refugees, based at a one-stop centre hosted by a housing association partner. The partnership supported development of a refugee forum and made ambitious plans to regenerate an estate where many refugees live. The partnership also achieved policy changes to enable refugees to have greater access to the local choice-based lettings scheme. Relationships built through Accommodate later provided the foundation for resettlement of refugees in Bradford under the Home Office's Gateway Protection Programme.

**Accommodate Leeds** – *nurturing refugee skills to improve housing supply and community cohesion*

Led by Canopy Housing Project with eight local partners. Canopy Housing successfully extended its community-based approach to creating quality homes from disused properties, while empowering refugees and local volunteers. It is a powerful model of community cohesion in action that also provides homes for young refugees and refugee families. The partnership also provided office space for newly established RCOs. Canopy has now secured further properties from a local ALMO and is successfully promoting their model.

**Accommodate Sheffield** – *linking refugee housing and community mental health support*

Led by MAAN (Somali Mental Health Project) with 13 local partners, this partnership influenced local mental health and Supporting People strategies and improved monitoring and referral by local health agencies. It provided support to smaller RCOs and training and awareness raising for a range of local agencies. Towards the end of the project, partners responded to the growing crisis of destitution and its links with mental health. MAAN now provides mental health services to other refugee communities, not only Somalis.
The context

About 23,000 asylum seekers arrive annually in the UK. In 2008, the largest numbers came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka. About half are likely to get leave to remain in the UK. A small number will be accepted as refugees. While the total number of refugees is unknown, around 50,000 refugees or their dependants seek the right to settle permanently in the UK every year. Most will have lived here for a number of years.

As one of the most marginalised groups in society, asylum seekers and refugees struggle to access and maintain secure housing. The Government introduced enforced dispersal in 2000 because most asylum seekers had been choosing to live in and around London where housing shortages are most acute and staying there once they had leave to remain in the UK. Not only did the Government contract housing for many asylum seekers in areas of low housing demand, but they also hoped refugees would settle there more permanently. Social housing is, however, in short supply in many dispersal areas where, for example, regeneration programmes may have further changed local market conditions.

Most asylum seekers receive accommodation and subsistence support from the Government while their asylum claim is assessed. At this time they are not eligible for local authority accommodation or nominations, or to receive welfare benefits. They are unlikely to be regarded as potential customers of housing associations.

Once granted leave to remain or refugee status, refugees have the same rights as UK citizens. Many will have gone through a period of living in insecure conditions. Having a proper place to live and a fixed address will enable them to start to integrate and rebuild their lives. Information on the housing circumstances of refugees shows:

- refugees tend to use private rented accommodation and often make many moves until they find secure, affordable housing;
- refugees are particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless: a recent government survey of families accepted as homeless found more than one in ten had applied for asylum;
- a critical period for refugees is immediately after the point of decision on their refugee status, when they are often required to leave their UKBA contracted accommodation at very short notice: they should be allowed up to 28 days, but in practice many find it is far less and that key documents needed to prove their status are not provided in time to facilitate benefit claims and housing applications.

The complex choices faced by refugees highlights the role housing providers can play. The lack of knowledge about housing options is a common problem among refugees.

Housing related advice and support for refugees is very patchy. Since 2008, newly approved refugees have been eligible for help through the Home Office Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES). This is organised regionally and delivered by different providers. The number of hours available for each case is, however, limited. As RIES may not be effective in helping refugees secure good accommodation, they often turn to refugee community organisations (RCOs).

RCOs play an important role in the housing context because they:

- have important local knowledge about people’s needs in their communities;
- provide the basis for housing bodies engaging with refugee communities;
- may already be offering services – especially advice and support – formally or informally;
- may have the potential to develop further.

Government integration policy recognises the important role of RCOs. So did the Housing Corporation in their BME Action Plan, which encouraged housing providers to work in
partnership with community based bodies, such as RCOs, so as to meet diverse needs.

The landscape has changed. From 2009, the Tenant Services Authority is responsible for the regulation of social housing and the Homes and Communities Agency for investment in housing supply. Both are currently considering how they require (in the case of the TSA) or enable (in the case of the HCA) housing providers, planners and developers to address equalities and diversity issues. The Audit Commission also has a responsibility in terms of the inspection of public services. The Accommodate partnerships demonstrated that multi-agency approaches which engage the capacity and experiences of refugee communities are vital in developing equitable housing outcomes for refugees.

**Demonstration projects**

One example of a demonstration project came from Accommodate Bradford. Green Lane is an estate of ten-storey blocks that had been used to accommodate asylum seekers. Despite poor conditions, it was popular with refugees who wanted the option of being housed permanently in the area. Two of the Accommodate Bradford partners were part of a new build consortium, so they developed plans for a new housing scheme in conjunction and consultation with RCOs and local residents.

Although the project has not yet secured funding, it has demonstrated how housing associations can respond to refugee housing needs and involve them in designing housing.

As well as creating homes, demonstration projects provide powerful models of ways in which traditional barriers between housing providers and consumers can be broken down. They can create a real sense of ownership for individuals and community organisations, and can be used in diverse communities to break down barriers between individuals.

**Rebuilding communities**

Accommodate Leeds was a small, grassroots community housing demonstration project. It involved refugees working alongside young people and volunteers to bring empty homes back into use. Over the life of Accommodate, the project trained over 200 volunteers in building work, of whom 39% were asylum seekers and refugees and many of the remainder were from local communities. This is an inspiring example of directly engaging refugees (alongside other communities) to address housing needs, while also building personal relationships that promote community cohesion.

The project turned ten empty properties into homes, which are now occupied by refugees. It also invested in the skills of volunteers by “providing an excellent volunteer programme providing a valuable community service” (Investors in Volunteers Assessment Report, January 2007). Emphasis was placed on giving formal recognition to the skills gained by volunteers in job references, specifying numbers of work placement days, their personal contribution and specific skills developed.

With help from hact, the lead agency, Canopy, has secured ten more properties in need of renovation through a 21-year lease from local social landlords. All will be turned into homes for refugees. It is also forming a construction trading arm as a social enterprise and has secured renovation grant works contracts from Leeds City Council.

Canopy is helping to spread the take-up of similar self-help models. Its influence on the other Accommodate partnerships was noticeable: many are keen to develop their own self-build projects.
Practical work involving volunteers from different backgrounds is also an ideal way to promote cohesion within communities. Seeing people from different backgrounds working together to regenerate the neighbourhood can be a potent symbol of integration, as Canopy noted:

“We do have some positive impacts on neighbourhood cohesion. The whole street sees our diverse workforce working together and going out to play football. Our practical efforts to involve people are highly visible.”

The downside is that the impact of small-scale projects is limited, even with the kind of active promotion Canopy has carried out. In relation to the numbers of homes provided, they also demand considerable planning and commitment of an agency’s staff to recruit, train and manage volunteers.

## Advice and signposting

Accommodate Bradford developed a referral card system to enable local agencies such as RCOs to signpost refugees to housing advice services at their ‘point of decision’ when they were most in need of support.

In Bolton, the New Bolton Somali Community Association (NBSCA) hosted advice sessions using statutory agencies and built its own expertise on legal issues.

Accommodate Sheffield made links with statutory housing and mental health services, signposted refugees to those services, and developed its knowledge of their effectiveness. Sheffield’s Supporting People strategy acknowledges the influence of Accommodate Sheffield, and lead agency MAAN, in identifying refugee mental health needs. As a result, despite limited resources, refugees have been helped to stay in their own homes.

These approaches were based on a perception that many newcomers have limited awareness of the options available to meet their housing and support needs. One of the best ways to tackle this information gap is through linking community groups (such as RCOs) with mainstream service providers and advice agencies. The networking process can empower community organisations by building their knowledge base and usefulness to community members. It also helps service providers engage with hard to reach groups and meet their equality aims.

The Bradford project faced complications because of considerable reductions in the number of asylum seekers in the city. A decision was made to adapt an existing advice service (Bevan House, run by Horton HA) to provide refugee services. This provides a comprehensive, ongoing service but may be affected by cuts to Supporting People.

## Awareness raising

In Birmingham, training courses for frontline housing staff engaged housing associations with Accommodate. A pilot programme of four half-day training events on working with refugees was facilitated by a local agency. Participants told an independent evaluator it was very positive: city council staff commented that, prior to the training, they knew little about refugees. The idea was then taken forward by the city council. It organised a further programme early in 2007 and planned to follow it by enrolling senior managers from the city council and housing associations on further courses.

The training (and similar work in Sheffield) was important not only in raising awareness of refugee issues, but also in bringing RCOs closer to the council and to housing associations, and helping to make the advances achieved through Accommodate more sustainable in the long term.
The NBSCA advice sessions in Bolton were popular with local people (not just refugees) and with the statutory agencies that service them. They have improved communication between the different agencies and with RCOs.

In Sheffield, MAAN made 34 successful referrals to mental health services and widened its reach outside the Somali community.

Lessons include the need to be adaptable to (sometimes rapidly) changing circumstances. Given the inevitable dependence of many refugees on the private rented sector, the projects highlighted how advice services are of limited use in securing better quality private sector lettings – this requires wider work. A positive outcome was the way in which the development of these advice/signposting services itself raised the status and capacity of the RCOs concerned.

Community-led research

Accommodate Bolton engaged a Somali researcher, based at NBSCA, to build links with the community and research housing needs. The main outcome was a report called The Somali Community in Bolton: An Assessment of Service Need, which contained the first detailed information on the Somali community and the responses of service providers concerning the community's needs. The report launch was attended by a variety of local agencies.

The report catalysed action to improve service provision for the Somali and other communities:

- it led to work with the PCT and Drug Strategy Team on the use of the drug khat in the Somali community;
- it was used to argue successfully for changes to the local choice-based lettings scheme, with new ethnic monitoring categories for people of Somali, Yemeni and Nigerian origin.

The research aided understanding of refugee housing needs and the complexity of their 'pathways' to secure housing. It raised expectations in the community about the response of service providers and the priority they would attach to urgent issues, such as poor conditions in the private rented sector where many Somalis live. The challenge is to sustain a response to the research over the long term.

Accessing private housing

Following receipt of a positive decision on their asylum application, most refugees, particularly single people, end up living in the private rented sector. The Accommodate project only scratched the surface of potential solutions.

As a result, hact has supported two further Accommodate projects in the West Midlands and Newport to look specifically at the private rented sector, each looking at different ways to improve access by improving relationships and testing private sector leasing. The learning from these projects will be available towards the end of 2009.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Hact has produced more detailed guidance on the role of RCOs in providing services, building the capacity of RCOs and the role of housing associations as community enablers:

- More responsive public services: a guide to commissioning migrant and refugee community organisations (JRF/hact, 2008);
- Making partnerships work (Accommodate insight series, hact, 2009);
- An opportunity waiting to happen: housing associations as 'community anchors' (Hact/NHF, 2006);
- For further information about the housing rights of refugees and other migrants in the UK, see www.housing-rights.info.
As a consequence of these shifts, adapting to change was a key theme for all five Accommodate partnerships. Partners used the relationships built through Accommodate to work collectively on new responses to changing needs. The methods adopted by the partnerships to tackle these challenges included:

- **Demonstration projects**: in Leeds and Bradford, two small-scale projects demonstrated practical solutions to refugee housing problems that could be replicated elsewhere;

- **Advice, signposting, referral and outreach services**: in Bradford, Bolton and Sheffield, partnerships with RCOs helped to improve refugees’ access to reliable and helpful advice on housing issues or provided referrals to nomination or lettings schemes;

- **Accessing private rented housing**: in Birmingham, the partnership increased the housing options available to refugees by making creative use of private sector properties, whilst tackling issues of access, affordability, quality and security;

- **Community-led research projects**: in Bolton, the partnership carried out action-oriented research, using researchers recruited and trained from refugee communities. The results were then used to influence local policies and local housing provision for refugees;

- **Awareness raising within mainstream agencies**: in Birmingham and Sheffield, partnerships carried out training and held conferences and events in order to raise awareness of refugee housing issues amongst mainstream agencies.

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Incommunities has developed the Centre for Partnerships, which supports the creation of sustainable partnerships in the housing, health and education sectors – www.incommunities.co.uk

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