

Engaging with schools:

A guide for refugee organisations



This guidance supports refugee community organisations (RCOs) to build effective relationships with local schools. It provides ideas for activities that could be delivered together, including those that raise awareness of why people become refugees.

How can engaging with schools help RCOs?

Schools are usually keen to develop closer links with local communities. This is particularly true where there are specific needs in the pupil population. Establishing a good relationship with a local school can:

- improve communication between the school, parents and the community.
- help settle new arrivals.
- support the education of pupils from your community, including support for learning home languages.
- increase the confidence of parents from your community to get more involved in their children's learning.
- raise awareness with children, parents and teachers of your culture and community.
- lead to further involvement through activities like mentoring, holiday or homework clubs or starting supplementary schools.

How can this help your members?

Benefits for individuals who want to get involved with schools include:

- opportunities to support the progress and achievement of children and young people.
- improving understanding of the education system.
- learning how to get involved as a school governor or as a member of a parent council.
- opportunities to set up new initiatives like home language or homework clubs.
- gaining work experience for a CV and a reference from the school.
- meeting a wide range of people outside your community.

Deciding what to offer

Before getting involved with a school, it is useful to think about the following:

- What you want to achieve for you organisation or group.
- The skills and expertise you can offer.
- How much work will it take to be involved with a school? How much time can you offer and what resources do you have or need?
- Existing links with local schools that you can build on. e.g. through parents.
- The needs of people living in the local area, including parents' concerns about learning, communication with the school and other issues such as bullying.
- Foster greater integration with the wider local community.





Making contact and getting involved

Understand the school

- Visit the school's website and look at their prospectus to find out more about the school and how it engages with the community.
- Identify people at the school whose role is to involve parents and communities. They might be called 'parental involvement coordinator' 'inclusion manager', 'extended services coordinator' or 'ethnic minority achievement coordinator'.

Introduce yourself

- Write to the headteacher introducing your organisation and explaining how you would like to work together.
- If you have links with the school, such as a parent or member of staff, try to make an introduction informally.

Develop a partnership

- Arrange a meeting with a school representative and discuss ways that you might be able to work together.
- Consider if cultural celebrations and international days can provide opportunities to make links. Schools value communities' knowledge and skills.
- Plan with the school what you have agreed to do.
- Build trust with the school by keeping in regular contact and being reliable.
- Ask the school about their child protection policy. This is a legal requirement for protecting pupils' safety. Check with the school about how this affects you if you decide to work together. You may be asked to apply for a CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) check, which the school can help with. Many London boroughs have a volunteer centre which can also help you with this process.

Steps to successful work

- Advertise what you are doing to as many schools as possible in your area. Your local authority website will have a full list of schools.
- Communicate with just one person in each school to avoid confusion and allow decisions to be made more quickly.
- Before working with children, think about the activities that will get them interested in what you are talking about and make sure the information presented to children is suitable for their age.
- Be aware that if you are asked to complete a CRB check a cost is involved and it can take up to 60 days to be completed.

Examples of how RCOs can work with schools

Helping children to learn about why people become refugees

Refugee community organisations can work with schools to identify opportunities in the curriculum for children to learn about refugees and why people are forced to flee and seek safety in another country. Providing children with the opportunity to listen to refugees' experiences can:

- reduce negative perceptions about asylum seekers and refugees.
- provide an alternative context for subjects like geography, history and citizenship.
- present refugee and other ethnic minority children with positive role models.
- give confidence to children from a refugee background to be open about their own experiences.

Refugees into Schools

Refugees into Schools supports refugee volunteers to visit over 1500 pupils in London per year, sharing their experiences to help pupils understand conflict, human rights issues and why people are forced to leave their countries. The volunteers give children the chance to talk to someone who has first-hand experience of seeking asylum, challenging stereotypes. Volunteers who take part learn more about the education system and gain valuable skills and experience. Refugees into Schools is managed by the Employability Forum.

Refugee Week

Refugee Week is a national celebration of the contribution of refugees to the UK, and encourages a better understanding between communities. Many RCOs link with schools during Refugee Week and develop activities jointly. www.refugeeweek.org.uk

Supplementary and community schools

These are sometimes known as homework clubs, language schools or Saturday schools. They operate after school and at weekends to provide extra help and support to children. Many schools welcome partnerships with RCOs who offer educational activities for children and young people. For more information visit: www.continyou.org.uk

School governors

Becoming a school governor is one of the most important ways that parents and members of a community can help their local school. Refugee school governors bring knowledge of their community and its culture.



For more information about London Councils' grants funding and the work of some of the 300 groups they support please visit www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/grants

'The experience I gained from this project raised my confidence and encouraged me to apply to work as a teaching assistant.'

Eritrean teacher, journalist and Refugees into Schools volunteer

Family learning

Family learning can help refugee parents understand how pupils are taught in school, provide them with access to English classes and also improve parents' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.

Volunteering and employment

There are many opportunities for volunteering in schools and this can also provide valuable work experience. Refugees have the right to work in the UK and schools offer a variety of jobs from teaching and pupil support to welfare and administration.

Parent Ambassadors, Harrow

A group called 'Parent Ambassadors' in Harrow works with schools to improve links with parents, particularly those from minority groups. Many of the ambassadors are refugees. They provide links between parents and schools to enhance children's learning. Workers provide various forms of support, through coffee morning groups, Stay-n-Play sessions, information sessions, forums or one-to-one support.

Need more advice?

Refugees into Schools has experience of working with many schools that have welcomed visits from refugee volunteers. Please contact us for more advice and guidance about working with schools in your community.

Employability Forum

Website: www.employabilityforum.co.uk

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