



Leicester
City Council

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Libraries

WELCOME TO YOUR LIBRARY FINAL REPORT

LEICESTER LIBRARIES

LEICESTER CITY COUNCIL

DECEMBER 2007

1. Introduction to Welcome To Your Library

About Welcome to Your Library

Welcome to Your Library was a national project connecting public libraries with refugees and asylum seekers. By increasing opportunities for participation, Welcome to Your Library aimed to improve access to and quality of public library services for everyone.

Vision and aims of Welcome To Your Library

.. connect public libraries and refugee communities to nurture learning, well being and a sense of belonging through

- PARTICIPATION of refugee communities throughout the work
- PARTNERSHIPS to raise awareness and increase public library use
- CONFIDENT, TRAINED library staff
- SHARING GOOD PRACTICE based on evidence
- ADVOCACY for public library work with refugees and asylum seekers

Background

Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and co-ordinated through the London Libraries Development Agency (LLDA), the Welcome To Your Library pilot project took place in the London boroughs of Brent, Camden, Enfield, Merton and Newham in 2003-4.

In 2005, a further £250,000 from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation enabled Welcome To Your Library to extend the project nationally to the end of 2007. Further information at www.welcometoyourlibrary.org.uk

Partners

After a competitive selection process, five public library partners, including Leicester Libraries, participated in the project:

- London Borough of Hillingdon working with Healthy Hillingdon
- Leicester City Council
- Liverpool City Council
- London Borough of Southwark
- Tyne & Wear (a consortium comprising councils in Newcastle, Gateshead, North and South Tyneside and Sunderland).

2. Refugees and asylum seekers in Leicester

Leicester is a historical area of migrant settlement that has attracted many people of different races and cultures over the centuries. Leicester has now seen over 50 years of settlement of Black and Asian people. Today, Leicester is one of Europe's most multicultural cities with a well-integrated ethnic minority community comprising over one third of the city's population. Outside of London, Leicester has the largest Black and minority ethnic population in England and Wales, at 36% of the total population of 280,000 [Census 2001]. The local authority has reported that a recent survey of all schools in Leicester revealed that there are now 100 languages represented in the city. The refugee and asylum seeking population has grown and diversified considerably with the implementation of the Home Office's dispersal programme, which since 2000 has made Leicester a key city in the reception and resettlement of asylum seekers and refugees. Data gathered at the end of May 2004 showed that asylum seekers of 57 different nationalities were being supported by NASS in Leicester. Today approximately one thousand asylum seekers supported under the National Asylum Support Service [NASS] live in Leicester. There is also a significant population of those who have been granted leave to remain living in Leicester.

3. National policy context

Leicester Libraries strategy, policy and services are informed by and measured against key national initiatives such as:

- **Shared Priorities** – An agreement made in 2002 between the government and Local Government Association about shared public service delivery priorities
- **Framework for the Future** – A strategic framework issued by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2003 outlining the Government's long term vision for the role of public libraries. The framework aims to provide agreement on key objectives between central government, library authorities and local communities
- **Fulfilling their Potential** – A national development programme for library services to young people providing a basis for planning a long term vision and strategy to redefine libraries' relationship with young people
- **Every Child Matters** – The framework developed by the government for improving outcomes for all children and families. Identifying the need to protect, promote well being and support all children to develop their full potential
- **Inspiring Learning for All** – A framework developed by the Museums, libraries and Archives Council (MLA) to improve services in libraries, museums, and archives and measure the impact on peoples' informal learning

In addition, and specific to refugees, the key national initiative that informed Leicester Libraries work was the Home Office document *Integration Matters: a national strategy for refugee integration* published in 2005. Its three main recommendations were that refugees are able to:

- Access public services
- Achieve full potential
- Contribute to communities.

4. Local policy context

4.1 Leicester City Community Plan

The City of Leicester has worked hard over the last three decades to promote harmonious race and community relations and has achieved a great deal. The aim now is to take community cohesion forward. The key priorities are:

- Diversity
- Community Safety
- Education
- Health and Social Care
- The Environment
- Jobs and Regeneration

The Community Plan for Leicester can be viewed in full at www.leicester.gov.uk

4.2 Leicester's Local Area Agreement (LAA)

Local Area Agreements set out the priorities for a local area as agreed between central government and the local authority / Local Strategic Partnership and other key partners at the local level. The aim of LAAs is to simplify some central funding, help join up public services more effectively and allow greater flexibility for local solutions to local circumstances.

Leicester Partnership is the Local Strategic Partnership for the City of Leicester. It was established in 2001, and members include those representing major public services, local businesses, community groups and voluntary organisations. Three of their main responsibilities are: The Community Plan, Neighbourhood Renewal, and Local Public Service Agreements, and developing the local area agreement forms a key element of their work programme. The Leicester Partnership is also drafting a new arrivals strategy for the City.

The vision of the LAA is that by 2025 Leicester will be:

The most cohesive city in Europe, with safe and strong communities where people successfully live, work and learn together, new arrivals are made welcome and where diverse cultural traditions enrich one another and the lives of all its citizens

A city at the heart of a thriving sub-region that has mobilised the skills and economic potential of its diverse population to become a major driver of wealth creation in the East Midlands

A sustainable city recognised as a model of excellence internationally, which minimises its impact on the local and global environment and where no one suffers from serious economic or social disadvantage

The strategy of the LAA for Leicester identifies four key drivers that will address the city's current problems and build a better future for the people of Leicester:

- Children and young people who achieve their potential and make positive contributions as effective citizens
- Communities that are cohesive, safe, creative, strong and sustainable and where people want to live and work
- People who are healthy and older people who have a good quality of life
- An economy with increased GDP per capita, improved productivity and employment rates and increased entrepreneurial activity

The penultimate draft of Leicester's Local Area Agreement is available at www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk

4.3 Leicester City Council's work with refugees and asylum seekers

When Leicester Libraries started working with refugees and asylum seekers, key departments of the Leicester City Council had dedicated units to specifically deal with aspects of services to refugees and asylum seekers. The council facilitated the Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seeker Multi-Agency Forum bringing together all of the public, private and voluntary providers of services for refugees and asylum seekers.

The main aims and objectives, as outlined by the City Council's former Refugee and Asylum Seeker Unit, were to:

- Provide advice and information for refugees to help them integrate
- Help promote and support integration strategies for refugees in partnership with local residents, agencies and other stakeholders
- Signpost refugees into training and employment
- Support and promote the work of other agencies and organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees
- Help in increasing the confidence and self-esteem of refugees
- Provide a 'culturally sensitive' and appropriate service for refugees
- Help in community development

4.4 Diverse City – a vision for cultural life in Leicester

Leicester Libraries are committed to and a key part of Leicester City Council's Cultural Strategy, *Diverse City - a vision for cultural life in Leicester*. This is based on the belief that:

“ All communities should be able to celebrate, express, explore, share and develop their own culture, regardless of colour, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, disability, age, marital status, responsibility for dependents, economic status or sexuality”

“ Cultural activities can help unlock the potential of individuals, improve our environment renew our neighbourhoods, raise educational standards, improve health, reduce the fear of crime and promote Leicester positively to the rest of the world”

“ Individuals and organisations engaged in culture and cultural participation at any level are to be encouraged and supported, with a focus on quality and innovation”

The core values and vision of Cultural Life in Leicester are outlined in *Diverse City*:

- Where the cultural diversity of the population is seen as one of the city's overwhelming strengths and defining characteristics
- Where cultural difference can be celebrated, cultural heritages and traditions are understood and valued and opportunities to promote and develop culture are embraced
- Where cultural activity has helped to make social disadvantage a thing of the past
- Where opportunities to access excellent formal and informal educational and training opportunities exist for everybody regardless of age and which is known as a learning city
- Which demonstrates in practical ways a belief that access to cultural activity and freedom of expression are a basic human right

Diverse City – a vision for cultural life in Leicester can be viewed in full at www.leicester.gov.uk

5. Leicester Libraries

Leicester Libraries are committed to playing their part in delivering the vision and values set out in *Diverse City* and supporting Leicester City Council's aims and objectives regarding refugees and asylum seekers. The library service works in partnership with other council departments in developing and improving services to these groups.

Leicester Libraries are a part of Leicester City Council's Department of Regeneration and Culture. The department has recently been awarded beacon status for delivering cultural services to hard to reach groups. The department will be working with other beacon councils to share good practice with other local authorities across the UK and will be seeking to involve both staff and partners in a programme of dissemination activities and learning events.

Following extensive consultation with users and non-users, and the publication of the report *Achieving Inclusion* a review report in 2000, a transforming strategy for Leicester Libraries was put into place in 2001. At the heart of the strategy was the mainstreaming of equality and diversity to achieve an inclusive service promoting and supporting community cohesion. This work had started well before Leicester Libraries became a partner in the Welcome To Your Library project.

To date, great progress has been made in engaging refugees and asylum seekers through the *Achieving Inclusion* Strategy, through:

- The removal of barriers to library use (no identification needed to join, free reservations, free internet access)
- The reallocation of stock, training and display/ events budgets to target hard to reach groups
- The mapping of refugee communities
- The drawing up and implementation of action plans and outreach work to include librarian's action plans and outreach work to include engagement of refugees and asylum seekers
- The appointment of a librarian to develop services to refugees, asylum seekers and EU nationals

In recognition of the work achieved, and the structure already in place, Leicester Libraries received Home Office Challenge Funding in 2006 to provide a voluntary work experience programme for refugees.

Leicester Libraries partnership in the Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seeker Multi Agency Forum meant that the service was very well informed about national, regional and local issues and needs concerning asylum seekers and refugees through contact with public, private and voluntary service providers covering all aspects of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers.

Leicester Libraries are also a partner of the East Midlands Refugee Community Development Network - 'Unity Works'. Facilitated by Refugee Action and supported by the East Midlands Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, Unity Works aims to bring together community development workers to increase communication across the region between projects and organisations.

5.1 Participation in Welcome To Your Library

In early 2006 when Leicester Libraries started work on Welcome To Your Library, we already had in place an overall direction and our project work was therefore concerned with developing this direction further. Participating in the Welcome To Your Library project gave us a focus that helped us articulate how the aims of the project fitted with a wider policy agenda and enabled us to place the aims and objectives of the project work into context. We used the project work to show evidence of impact and to place greater emphasis on:

- embedding in the staffing structure an awareness of the particular needs of refugees and asylum seekers as individuals and developing communities
- developing library services in partnership with refugees and key refugee service providers
- improving information, communication and advocacy of library services for refugees and asylum seekers locally, regionally and nationally

Our main activities included the volunteering scheme for refugees in the library service, and making use of library space for a range of activities, often suggested by the volunteers. These include citizenship support sessions, Babies of the World sessions, supporting self-help groups and sessions to enable people to understand official documents and letters. The majority of volunteers have gone on to find work (including some in the library service) or to study.

The volunteering has helped build relationships between people from different backgrounds. It has also had a big impact on the library service, both on staff and on cementing and developing partnerships. Leicester Libraries is definitely viewed as a trusted partner by a range of organisations, and the testimonies in Appendix Two provide evidence of this.

Project work information has already been detailed in previous progress reports and is available on application from Leicester Libraries. The Welcome To Your Library project plan is available on the Welcome To Your Library website and

there is also a case study about the volunteering scheme:

http://www.welcometoyourlibrary.org.uk/editorial.asp?page_id=88

The remainder of this report focuses on how the Welcome To Your Library work has impacted on planning for the future and where we aspire to go from here.

6. Welcome to Your Library: impact on Leicester City Council Libraries Strategy 2008 – 2013

Better Libraries – Better Lives: Putting libraries at the heart of sustainable communities

When Leicester Libraries wrote a project plan for Welcome To Your Library in 2006, future strategy, as described in the Service Improvement Plan 2006-8, was being developed. The following key features, among others identified and highlighted at that time, were:

- Address social exclusion and remove barriers to library use
- Change management
- Improvement of quality

The following illustrates how these aspirations have been incorporated in the new Leicester Libraries strategy 2008 – 2013, which has recently been published. This is entitled *Better Libraries – Better Lives: putting libraries at the heart of sustainable communities*. The impact of Welcome to Your Library on the new strategy for Leicester Libraries is obvious throughout the document, and the transferability of what has been learnt more widely, which is why so many excerpts from it are reproduced here..

Outlining the service vision, the document begins:

“Leicester has an award winning Library Service. In 2007 our part in the 'Welcome to your Library' project attracted a national 'Libraries Change Lives' award because of our innovative work recruiting and training volunteers from the refugee and asylum seeker communities to gain work experience and transferable skills, offering self-help sessions and study support groups.

The previous libraries strategy, implemented in 2001, 'Achieving Inclusion', generated a sustained increase in the take up of services, particularly by those groups in the city experiencing social exclusion. This work contributed to the City Council's achievement of 'Beacon' status for cultural services for hard to reach groups in 2006/7.

Our ambition is to build on those strong foundations by engaging with local people and, maximising the positive role that libraries play in local communities. It is our intention that every user will be able to access a comprehensive range of library services. This includes providing books and other reading materials which encourage and enthuse children and adults to read more, giving access to information and to personalised learning advice and support, as well as providing opportunities for participation in arts and health activities.

Over the next five years we aim to significantly increase the number of people using library buildings and services by promoting reading and learning, improving access, and making sure our libraries are friendly, attractive and well equipped. We will continue to expand our partnerships with other agencies and Council departments to ensure that libraries are alive with activity, that library users receive a high quality service that meets their individual needs and that the Service plays a full and active role in the delivery of the Local Area Agreement.

Our key aims are that by 2013:

- Leicester Libraries Service will be recognized locally, regionally and nationally as a centre of excellence for engaging hard to reach communities in cultural participation and community learning, raising skills and aspirations through successful partnership working.
- Leicester's libraries will be a source of pride and community identity making a unique contribution to quality of life and well being, helping Leicester to become a harmonious place where people feel safe and comfortable.
- Leicester Libraries Service will be recognised for successfully developing the unique role of public libraries in encouraging reading as a valuable cultural activity and actively helping individual adults and children to improve their literacy as a vital life skill."

The priorities for development 2008 – 2013 include:

Targeting hard to reach groups

Through the "Achieving Inclusion" strategy (2001 to 2006) the library service did much to remove barriers to participation for hard to reach groups, achieving considerable increases in library use, particularly in inner city areas. However, Leicester has 13 of the poorest wards in England, so meeting the needs of hard to reach groups in the city will remain a key priority.

Cultural diversity: responding positively to demographic change

By 2011 Leicester is predicted to be the first City in Britain to have a majority ethnic minority population. Libraries have a role to play in ensuring that the City benefits positively, both economically and socially, from these changes enabling everyone to participate as an active citizen. We have an excellent track record of

reaching out to Leicester's diverse populations with the result that just over 50% of active library users are now from BME communities.

We will continue to ensure that library staff reflect the rich cultural diversity of the population, and that libraries offer the books and learning materials to meet the needs of all cultural groups. Libraries already provide books in over 30 languages and we have systems in place to respond quickly to requests for other languages although the growing number of languages is a challenge.

In response to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees taking part in a work experience and volunteering project in Central Lending, we have established new in house, accessible and informal citizenship classes and opportunities to practice speaking English. These classes can now be delivered through other appropriate libraries. Through innovative outreach programmes and partnership working we will continue to identify and work with new communities, however small, ensuring that the library service supports their needs.

Contributing to community cohesion

Without a combination of reading, ICT and English language skills it is difficult for people to play an active role in society – a literate population is essential to the creation of an inclusive and cohesive society.

One of Libraries' strengths is our ability to bring people together to develop a sense of community and promote civic values. Libraries provide free and neutral spaces and a wide range of resources and learning opportunities, which are highly valued by people from all communities.

Since 2006 we have developed no less than 126 partnership projects that promote active citizenship. Joint working with external agencies such as Connexions, Citizens Advice, Nextstep and Age Concern at a neighbourhood level have made our libraries a great place to socialise and learn. Our priorities for the next five years will support cohesive communities whether in inner city areas or on outer city estates. For new communities, libraries are an essential venue for people wanting to study to gain British citizenship, providing free access to many learning resources including ESOL (English language classes).

It's not all about study. Libraries can enhance intercultural understanding by recognising the City's different communities; libraries celebrate Eid, Divali and Christmas, for example, and actively participate in Leicester Carnivals.

Promoting adult learning

Libraries are successful providers of accredited adult learning, signposting and supporting people into training and employment through established partnerships with the Council's own Adult Learning services, as well as with adult education and further education colleges in the City.

Libraries support a very wide range of training courses that develop key skills and lead to qualifications in English, numeracy and computing. Many libraries offer classes and study support for language skills for Leicester's diverse new and migrant communities, many of whom are enthusiastic users of library services. One of our innovations has been to host 'ESOL' teachers from local colleges to provide language support classes. (English for Speakers of Other Languages.) Some adult learning provision is provided in-house by library staff, such as the citizenship and language conversation classes provided for asylum seekers and refugees, family history, silver surfers, ICT classes and reading clubs.

Pathways to training and employment

The City has ambitious plans to get 12,000 more people into work by 2012. Libraries will make a contribution to achieving this target. We have already run a number of highly successful volunteering and work experience schemes.

We will continue to expand this work over the next 5 years, creating a city-wide volunteer programme for libraries for people of all backgrounds and ages, enabling them to gain essential skills and work experience, and sign post them to further training and employment opportunities.

The following quote from a former library volunteer appears in the document:

"I am a widow, a mother of 5 and I was a full time housemaker. In January 2006, I got the chance to enroll onto the volunteering project (Refugees into Libraries) at Leicester Central Lending Library. I found the staff to be really helpful, caring and I quickly felt I was in a very friendly and comfortable environment. I started to regain my self-confidence and became motivated enough to apply for vacancies in the library. Now I am a Library assistant and I would advise anybody to take part in opportunities like these."

Strengthen the library workforce

Leicester's achievements in workforce development have been acknowledged nationally. In 2001, a successful competency based approach to recruitment was implemented throughout the service for all library posts so that they are no longer based on criteria and qualifications which are out of touch with the needs of modern public libraries and their work in local communities. We have pioneered work experience and volunteering programmes within libraries with some participants going on to successfully apply for jobs in the libraries service as well as in other organisations. This has enabled the service to develop a diverse workforce that reflects Leicester's social and cultural plurality and has strong links with local communities.

Library use by 'hard to reach' groups

The Libraries Service has been particularly effective in targeting disadvantaged and socially excluded people making a significant contribution to the Council's 'Excellent' rating in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) audit in 2005, and to the Council's achievement of Beacon Status for Cultural Services for Hard to reach Groups in 2006/07. The following figures provide an overview of our performance in relation to key demographic groups.

- 36.45% of active borrowers are under 16 years, compared to 20.68% in the local population.
- 10.33% of active borrowers are aged 60 or over, compared to 16.15% of the local population.
- 3% of active borrowers and 16.2% of library users have a disability.
- 51% of active members are now from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.
- 63.26% of users are from groups C2, D, E.

From these figures we can conclude that the previous strategy, 'Achieving Inclusion', obtained huge increases in the use of libraries by black and minority ethnic communities, by socio-economic groups C2, D, and E, and by children and young people. The use of libraries by people with disabilities and older people also grew but to a lesser extent and we will be seeking to further improve these figures as a priority over the next few years.

Action plans around these priorities include:

- Develop a citywide community engagement plan to increase residents' participation in planning and developing library services.
- Target hard to reach groups
- Increase citywide support for asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers by increasing the number of library staff able to offer language and citizenship support programmes.
- Consult with local communities on the provision of informal adult learning in libraries
- Creating citywide volunteer programmes for libraries for people of all backgrounds and ages.

Principal outcomes of these actions:

- Residents will have been able to participate in planning and developing library services to meet local needs.

- A greater level of neighbourhood level partnership working will promote libraries to hard to reach groups who can benefit from using library services and resources.
- Adults with low literacy skills will have access to free, confidential advice, support and learning opportunities in ways that suit their needs.
- More people in need of language support and citizenship programmes will have access to free services provided in house by library staff.
- Local people will have more opportunities to participate in a wider range of cultural activities.
- Families will benefit from increased social interaction and learning opportunities.
- Local communities will be involved in decisions about the informal adult learning that will be provided at their local library.
- Local people will be able to take part in volunteer and work experience programmes in their local libraries, increasing confidence and skills and enhancing their employability

7. Leicester's Local Area Agreement

Evidence from work carried out through Welcome To Your also provides a firm basis for the library service to make a clear and strong contribution to Local Area Agreement outcomes for Leicester. The following is taken from different blocks in the LAA:

Stronger Safer Communities Block

- To empower local people to have a greater choice and influence over local decision making and a greater role in public service delivery
- Increase in local participation in governance as expressed by the % of residents who feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area
- Increase in community cohesion and inclusion
- Increase in volunteering as expressed by the % of residents who affirm that they carried out voluntary work in an organisation once a month or more in the past year
- Widen access and remove barriers to participation in culture and sport in order to improve liveability, health, well-being and community cohesion
- Access to cultural activity and institutions (Libraries, Museums, Sports and Arts) as expressed by access by priority groups
- To develop community cohesion, increase social interaction and increase social inclusion

- 'Diversity'
- 'Sense of Belonging' as expressed by the percentage of people surveyed who feel they belong to their local area
- 'Engagement / Involvement' as expressed by the percentage of people surveyed who have taken part in decisions about their neighbourhood or the local services / facilities available in their area.
- Percentage of residents who have taken part in decisions about the neighbourhood they live in or the local services/facilities available in the area
- Percentage of residents who agree that they can influence decisions affecting their local area
- Percentage of residents who have given unpaid help in the last 12 months to any groups, clubs or organisations
- To improve the quality of life for people in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and ensure service providers are more responsive to neighbourhood needs and improve their delivery.
- Percentage of residents reporting an increase in satisfaction with their neighbourhoods
- Increase in volunteering as expressed by the % of residents who affirm that they carried out voluntary work in an organisation once a month or more in the past year
- Growth of the voluntary and community sector as expressed by the % of VCS groups and organisations: affirming growth in activity over the past year in terms of financial turnover and accessing capacity building help in the past year. Accessing training opportunities in the past year.
- Increase in key public services delivered by the VCS as expressed by the proportion of services in selected public service areas delivered by VCS organisations on behalf of the local authority

Economic Development and Enterprise Block

- For those living in the wards with the worst labour market position that are also located within the districts in receipt of NRF, significantly improve the overall rate and reduce the difference between their employment rate and the overall employment rate for England
- Increase the employment rates of disadvantaged groups (lone parents, ethnic minorities, people aged 50 and over, those with the lowest

qualifications and those living in the local authority wards with the poorest initial labour market position); and significantly reduce the difference between the employment rates of the disadvantaged groups and the overall rate.

- Reduce the numbers of workless households and long-term unemployed.

Children and Young People Block

- Achieve economic well-being
- Decrease the number not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- Reduce the proportion of young people not in Education, Employment and Training.

The Welcome To Your Library work and the new Leicester Libraries strategy also complements the Local Area Agreement priorities for 2008-11, which are:

Community cohesion

- % of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area

Social inclusion

- % of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood

Neighbourhood working

- Overall/general satisfaction with local area

Community engagement

- Participation in regular volunteering

8. Conclusion

The embedding and mainstreaming of project work begun in Welcome to Your Library into *Better Libraries – Better Lives: Putting libraries at the heart of sustainable communities* aptly illustrates the lessons that Leicester Libraries learned from engaging in the project. Leicester Libraries are committed both to:

- the continued work with refugees and asylum seekers
- the transferability of that experience into working with other groups of new arrivals and other hard to reach groups.

New work is now ongoing with both refugee community organisations and new migrant communities to help funding applications both in establishing and developing services in partnership with Leicester Libraries.

Furthermore, as project funding for agencies like Refugee Action and Refugee Support appears now to be more directed to casework rather than community development, greater opportunities will be afforded for library service involvement with these groups.

The rest of this report is set out in two Appendices which provide direct evidence from those who have been affected by the work of Welcome To Your Library in Leicester. The first comprises responses from asylum seekers, refugees and other volunteers and the second comprises responses from their provider organisations (and partners of the library services).

They provide compelling proof of the role and impact that Leicester Libraries has had as a result of participation in Welcome To Your Library and the way that the library service has become a trusted partner.

Appendix 1

How refugees, asylum seekers and other volunteers see Leicester Libraries

“My name is Chantal. I was an asylum seeker who came to the UK four years ago from Cameroon. My first language is French. When I first came here I couldn't speak any English. The library and the adult education college helped me a lot. Here in the UK I had no family. The people I've met in the library are like my family. My daughters and I almost live in the library.

As an asylum seeker I could not work, even though I am a trained nurse. I could do voluntary work though. I just wanted to help people like me who struggle with English when they start learning. I have helped people find materials to help them with their study. I helped the staff in the library set up a reading and conversation group, named after me. It was good to help people who do not get much chance to practice English between classes. The staff allowed me to suggest materials that were of most use to people new to English. I have even helped English people with their French in the library.

I have just been granted my leave to remain in the UK! Now I am a free woman and I can look for work. I'm convinced that all I did with the library has helped my case and really thank the staff for all their help over the last four years.

I'm very happy because of this library!”

Chantal, volunteer

“It was really good doing work experience in the library. I had a lot of help with my English from the staff and it was great working with other volunteers from Europe, Asia and Africa. It was good to be able to practice my English with the staff and learn how real English is spoken. I got a lot of help in understanding job application forms and other things like letters and bills. I was also able to help other people coming from Poland. Some people were surprised when I answered them in Polish and that someone who spoke it was working in the library. I also helped the staff change the books that the library had in Polish. When I got there they were very old fashioned or as you say 'crap'. The people coming over now are usually younger and want to read modern novels. I was able to tell the library what to get and they got them, which was good for me and other Polish people. I want to be a journalist and I got help in how to go about this. Working in the library was very enjoyable. Thank you.”

Jola, volunteer

“I learnt a lot from working in the library. I got experience and a reference to help me find work. I got lots of help in how to do job application forms. After a few months I got a job!”

Nasser, volunteer

“ My name is Anisa and I did some work experience in the library. I gained a lot of confidence by doing this and improved my understanding of English. It was good to work with a group as I didn't feel so much that I was on my own. I want to study law and got some advice about how to apply to colleges and which courses to do. I got help with the application forms and what to put in my personal statement. It was really helpful and I managed to get a place at university.”

Anisa, volunteer, Somalia

“The staff at the library have been great in helping me with my English studies at college. They have often helped me with understanding homework. Being able to talk to other volunteers and the staff has helped me a lot. I have been able to use the computers whenever I wanted to and had lots of help in understanding letters and forms. It was good to volunteer and I now have a part time job.

Raya, volunteer

“I did work experience at the Central Library as part of work done by the library and the Zalai Foundation in Somalia. It was arranged by Abdulahi Hassan, one of the founders of the Zalai Foundation with the Central Lending Library. The foundation has opened the first public library in Mogadishu, Somalia for 16 years and Leicester Libraries donated some books to the library. I am learning the job of Library Assistant to learn the skills to take back home to Somalia and train people there.”

Abdi, volunteer

“We are a group of volunteers who were giving informal English language support at the British Red Cross. Unfortunately the room we were using had to be used for something else and it looked like we may have to stop the service. Kerri Beech at the Red Cross Refugee and Asylum Seeker project said we should approach the library to see if they could help us.

We contacted Simon and were immediately told that we would be able to work in partnership with them in starting a group in Leicester City centre. We received great support from Simon and the library. We now operate out of the Learning and Information Library and have a great room and facilities with computer and internet access. The library ordered books specifically for the group such as picture dictionaries and have publicised the group widely amongst all the agencies they work in partnership with.

We offer help with speaking, reading and writing support to refugees, asylum seekers, those with discretionary leave and humanitarian protection. We also offer access to the internet and practice with computers. It's a chance to meet people and make new friends while learning in a relaxed and friendly way.

A member of our group works at Leicester Immigration Advice Centre and the contact with the library has benefitted both organisations in terms of referrals. I understand that this was originally made possible by funding from the NRF,

which is great. What is also good is that we were able to continue after the time span of the project finished and are still going.”

Matt, Katy and Sadie, volunteers

“We are members of the Afro-Innovation Group. In December 2006 we were looking for a place to establish our group to offer community advice to asylum seekers, refugees and other people new to Leicester. Gill Buttery of the Refugee Support organisation suggested we contact Simon at the Central Lending Library as she had worked with him before. We met and space was offered to work in a room at the library. Since January 2007 we have been working there doing work that is often not able to be done by other asylum and refugee agencies due to capacity.

Our overall aim is to help refugees, asylum seekers and other people new to Leicester integrate into the community. We wanted to give practical help in helping people to access public services, get them access to entitlements, reduce isolation and improve social cohesion. From the library we offer one to one advice sessions, run social and cultural events and workshops to the community. The community advice work includes work that other agencies do not have the time to deliver, including: help filling in forms for immigration issues and appeals, jobs and benefits; supporting letters and time consuming research to support asylum cases; contacting other agencies such as council departments and utility companies to resolve problems; signposting to other agencies with specialist knowledge such as the British Red Cross, Refugee Action, Refugee Support, the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advice Project (RASAP); accessing the legal system and solicitors specialising in immigration cases. Our group has access to and knowledge of speakers of the languages used in Africa. If clients need more formal translation and interpretation services we are able to signpost them there. We also help people with job search, job applications, interview skills, CV writing and understanding basic computer techniques.

We also run the Afro-Innovation Music Project which aims to share the knowledge and techniques of African music with other musicians in Leicester. We are now running the project from Southfields Library. As part of Refugee Week, funded by the NRF we participated in workshops with classes from Fullhurst college at the Brite Centre in Braunstone. We worked with a storyteller who talked about refugee issues and got the kids drumming. They were really enjoyable sessions. We’re really interested in doing more of that kind of thing.

It’s been really important for our community in having such an accessible place to work and we believe many more people with African backgrounds have been using the library because of us being there. We are currently working on a funding bid with Simon to the Reaching Communities fund of the Big Lottery to extend the project and strengthen the partnership with the library.”

Evariste, Godson, Blaise, volunteers

" Libraries and all that they offer have always been a passion of mine and so when an opportunity to volunteer at Central Lending Library arose it presented me with a perfect way to gain some valuable work experience in an environment that I love.

I hadn't realised how simple it could be to volunteer! I found my time at the library extremely enjoyable and that was entirely down to the staff who made me feel welcome and taught and guided me whenever I was struggling. The skills I've learnt will stay with me. I can honestly say that it was worthwhile to volunteer, not only to experience work but also to meet new people and friends. The voluntary work experience helped me when I applied for a job as a library assistant. I felt I really knew how libraries work in the community and I got the job!"

Nuzhat, volunteer

" I am Zubeda Ahmed, a widow, a mother of 5 and I was a full time housemaker. At the same time, I was always committed to taking on a range of courses. These allowed me to progress in life and helped me to build up my skills.

Later I began volunteering. I got the chance to enrol onto the volunteering project at Leicester Central Lending Library. Here I really enjoyed my duties and the staff and surroundings. I found all the staff to be really helpful, caring and I quickly felt I was in a very friendly and comfortable environment. I started to regain my self confidence and became motivated enough to apply for vacancies in the library.

Now I am Zubeda Ahmed, Library Assistant and full time mother.

I would like to thank all the staff at Leicester Central Lending Library for their support and also the government for providing services such as this project.

I would like to advise anybody out there to know that they should take part in opportunities like these. By volunteering, there are many more advantages to add to your achievements and future than the disadvantage of not being paid."

Zubeda, volunteer

My name is Amina. I came to Leicester from Kenya. I saw some publicity for voluntary work in the Central Library, spoke to another volunteer about her work, and then volunteered myself. My time at the library was a beautiful experience. I enjoyed it so much I applied for a job and was successful. I now work at Highfields Library.

Amina Yusuf, volunteer

"When I arrived in Leicester from Holland I had no one to talk to or any friends. That changed when I started going into the Central Lending Library. I decided to do some work experience as I felt really welcome there. The staff really helped me, especially Kanika, who was supervising the volunteers. The more times I

visited the more I gained in confidence with my reading, writing, speaking and understanding of English. It was a really good experience for me and it feels like I've made friends rather than just working with people. I know that there is somewhere I can go if I need help with anything. Thank you."

Geita, volunteer

"I have volunteered with Leicester Libraries in two ways. I did some work experience as a library assistant and have given advice sessions for my community with the Federation of Iraqi Refugees in Leicester. Working as a voluntary library assistant gave me new skills, confidence, the chance to improve my English, to represent my community and use my language skills to help others. Being able to give advice to my community from a city centre library allowed us to see and help many people. Members of our community were amazed that we were working in the library!

Since February 2007, working from the Central Learning and Information Library we have been giving community support for refugees and asylum seekers from the Iraqi and Kurdish communities, offering: Help in accessing immigration advice services; help in accessing housing, welfare, job and education services; help in accessing translation and interpretation services; a referral service to different agencies in order to get appropriate help and information, and helping the community to promote social activities and to integrate in the UK.

I have now been offered a job as a reserve library assistant!"

Aram, volunteer

"I am a member of the Zimbabwe Women's Network-UK (ZIWNUK) which was set up in June 2003 to focus on the issues concerning the rights and welfare of Zimbabwean women refugees, asylum seekers, students and migrant workers and their families living in the UK, as they face challenges in the process of settlement and of integrating into the UK community. It is a group made up of Zimbabwean women with energy and resourcefulness working to contribute towards gender equality. Our vision is to facilitate the full integration and re-settlement of Zimbabwean women and their families and to promote cultural identity, independent living and positive images of Zimbabwean women in the UK.

Our aims are: to facilitate the full integration and re-settlement of Zimbabwean women and their families and to promote cultural identity, independent living and positive images of Zimbabwean women in the UK. and to create an organisation that nurtures and draws strength from its Zimbabwean women and works with their cultural experiences and values and to be committed to each other through transparency, fairness and integrity.

The Zimbabwe Women's Network – UK, East Midlands Chapter was set up in February 2007 in Leicester and caters for Zimbabwean women living in the East Midlands region that includes, Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Northampton.

Thanks to Leicester Libraries and Simon for giving space for our organisation to give advice to our community in Leicester and across the Midlands. We are making Simon an honorary Zimbabwean woman!"

Musse, volunteer

My name is Amina and I run the Warabi women's group. We are a voluntary group giving advice to Somali women. We help them fill in forms, translate and understand letters and suggest where they may go for more assistance. We were offered a place to work in Westcotes Library. This was really helpful to us because we were previously working from home. The library staff gave us help and assistance and helped with publicity. It is really good to help our community from a library.

Amina, volunteer

My name is Heddi. I am a French Algerian. I was told about the work experience opportunities by Louise Armstrong at Leicester Adult Education College. She said it would improve my English language skills by working with the staff and public. I did lots of work on the counter and gained a lot of confidence. I did voluntary work with Leicester Libraries while I did my college courses. I now have a job with the Royal Mail.

Heddi, volunteer

Appendix 2 Feedback and comments from Leicester libraries' partners

Feedback on the volunteering programme in Leicester Libraries

Refugee Action

I am writing to congratulate you and offer Refugee Action's continuing support for the 'Refugees into Libraries' project.

As refugees experience such difficulties in utilising their own skills and being able to access anything but the most menial employment it is both refreshing and encouraging that in Leicester we have such a valuable project that aims to combat this by providing work experience and references.

Mo Odifa our Community Development Officer had kept the team informed and up to date with the project and its work. Aware of how many potential participants the team could access she was always available to signpost clients, advise and support on criteria and suitability issues. It was heartening to see the refugees who were involved in the project becoming more confident and feeling valued and so many moving into paid employment.

As this project has exceeded the initial expectations I hope it is possible it will continue and if does happen Refugee Action would be keen to be involved again.

Best wishes

Amanda Soraghan, Leicester AA/office manager, Refugee Action

Refugee Support

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you and Leicester Libraries on the success of 'Refugees into Libraries', which is such a good example of a 'win-win' project - benefiting the refugees involved by providing invaluable local work experience and a reference to improve their chances of securing interviews and employment relative to their qualifications and experience in a hostile job-hunting environment, and benefiting the library by hearing directly from members of our 'new arrival' communities what services and resources the libraries can offer to most usefully aid their settlement into their new lives in Leicester.

I would like to offer my support for any future funding bids to replicate and/or develop this work.

Regards, Gill Buttery
Community Initiatives Officer, Refugee Support

British Red Cross Refugee & Asylum Support Services

I am writing to show my sincere support and gratitude for the city libraries volunteer project. Red Cross has established a successful referral process and are making the most of this fantastic opportunity. The pleasure gained by our clients experiences during their volunteering is immeasurable, we have noticed how much this empowers a very vulnerable group within our society.

Thank you for your time and commitment, keep up the good work!

Kerri Beech, Service Co-ordinator, British Red Cross, Refugee & Asylum Support Services

Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advice project (RASAP)

RASAP would like to express their gratitude to the work carried out by the Refugees Into Libraries' above project in helping many of our clients with an opportunity to gain work experience and acquire new skills and allowing them to transfer the

skills they had brought with them from their home countries. From the feed back received from clients is very positive in terms of quality of work experience they gained and the opportunity given to improve library services for new arrivals to Leicester.

We would like to support your project in obtaining further funding to continue the work which has been carried out and develop further on the ideas forwarded by the service users.

Tahera Khan, Project Manager

Leicester City Council Persons from Abroad Team

On behalf of the Persons from Abroad team, I would like to offer our continued support for the Refugees into Libraries Project. The numbers of refugees helped by the project show how valuable it is. As well as assisting individuals by enhancing their skills and building upon their confidence, it also provides other practical support such as providing references which are not easily obtainable for this client group, and work experience which has actually led to employment for many users of the service. The figures are quite impressive!

The project must ultimately benefit the whole community by learning from it's users and also by contributing to it's economy. If can be of further assistance in offering support to the Project, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Bev Barsby, Social Worker, Persons from Abroad team, Children & Young People's Services

The Long Journey Home project

“I have been very impressed by the project 'Refugees into Libraries' run through the Leicester Central Library. I know that refugees have really benefited from the scheme, not only those directly involved but through them, others who have felt that the library may be a place for them.

One of my friends was a participant in the project so I know how much it did for boosting self-confidence. I would be very pleased for the project to continue.

I want to make special mention of the staff involved in creating and running the project. They have inspirational ideas, and the courage to put them into practice. They are open to new ideas, and support others who are working for the same ends. I have confidence in their judgment and in the sense of humanity that underpins their work. The benefits of this project are much more than those identified, and many of the seeds sown will be unseen.

I really hope that they are given the support to continue and develop their project”

Sheila Mosley, Long Journey Home Project
12, New Street, Oadby, Leics LE2 5EB
07751888391

Leicester Faiths Support Group for Asylum Seekers and Refugees

“I am delighted to hear the results of the "Refugees into Libraries" scheme and sincerely hope that you will be able to find funding to continue with the programme.”

Best wishes,
Albert Mosley (Rev Dr) (Leicester Faiths Support Group for Asylum Seekers and Refugees)

Leicestershire & Leicester City Learning Partnership

“I am writing to endorse the Refugees into Libraries project that was developed by the Leicester City Library Service.

This initiative complemented the work of the Leicestershire & Leicester City Learning Partnership because it provided refugees and asylum seekers with learning, skills development, information advice and guidance to enable them to gain access to the labour market (once they had gained refugee status).

This group of learners are particularly hard to reach and need support that is appropriate to their circumstances. This can be difficult to provide in a mainstream ESOL and other learning setting.

The outcomes of the initiative were that 13 people got jobs. This adds to the local labour market, boosts the economy and reduces the level of benefits paid. The

increase in the diversity of the workforce works towards reflecting the diversity of the population. It also provides a model of working that is effective and could be replicated in the future.

Sue Grogan, Deputy Manager, Leicestershire & Leicester City Learning Partnership

www.llclp.org.uk

East Midlands Consortium for Asylum and Refugee Support (EMCARS)

I am writing this on behalf of the East Midlands Consortium for Asylum and Refugee Support (EMCARS) in support of the continuation of the well-established and successful '*Refugees Into Libraries*' project, which has helped many refugees to move on in their lives in Leicester.

EMCARS was established in March 2000 to coordinate activities to support asylum seekers in the region and has later widened its remit to also include refugees. It is a non-statutory strategic regional partnership body, hosted by Local Government East Midlands, without subscription fees. The Consortium is committed to supporting all asylum seekers during their stay and to working to enable the fullest settlement and integration into society of all those granted leave to remain in this country.

One of the barriers for successful refugee integration is the lack of work experience opportunities. As most asylum seekers cannot undertake paid work, many individuals have gaps in their employment records and when they are given a positive decision to stay in the United Kingdom, they have no available employment references from UK and it may be extremely difficult to obtain any from their country of origin. This has, without any doubt, an adverse effect on their employability and long-term career progression.

Refugees Into Libraries, the Home Office Challenge Fund funded project in Leicester, has been a success and an inspiration to everyone working with asylum seekers and refugees by providing opportunities to individuals and increased access to the services libraries offer, to this what is often regarded a 'hard-to-reach' client group.

We understand that the project has provided work experience opportunities for 23 refugees. By the end of the year 57% (13) had gained employment as a result of the project. In addition, the project signposted many to more vocational volunteering opportunities or further ESOL study.

The volunteers were also responsible for developing reading/study groups that support integration of individuals from abroad such as ESOL, Driving Test, Citizenship and Forms/application and forms/letters/documents and were involved in stock recommendations for books which means that the libraries are in a better position to cater for the diverse communities they serve.

I see *Refugees Into Libraries* as being an example of how the principles and policies contained in both the Home Office National Refugee Integration Strategy *Integration Matters* and the East Midlands Refugee Integration Framework that is currently being drafted, can be implemented.

Integration Matters states that successful refugee integration involves three key principles, namely achieving full potential, contribution to the community and access to services. Integration should be approached holistically and although Home Office only refers to integrating refugees, in practice, for localities it is equally important to integrate any residing asylum seekers to enhance community harmony. Facilitating opportunities to share different cultures and customs adds great pride, value and sense of belonging to individuals. Culture is part of our experiences and identities as individuals, citizens and members of a specific community. We are extremely proud to have had such a statutory sector led project that has direct positive impact enhancing integration in Leicester.

East Midlands has hosted asylum seekers through Home Office for 5 years. It is estimated that it currently hosts approximately 3,000 asylum seekers and will do so for the foreseeable future. According to our recent research, *Counting Up*, East Midlands also has approximately 9,000 refugees.

It is paramount to ensure that adequate services will be provided and delivered in the region as well as to plan how to best assist the individuals to integrate and to re-build their lives in the East Midlands. There is clear evidence that the assistance and support that given to refugees and asylum seekers at the earliest opportunity pay dividends to the locality in years to come.

There is a need to have a project such as *Refugees into Libraries* that will ensure that the skills and talents of the asylum seekers and refugees residing in East Midlands will be harnessed for the benefit of the region. It would be a considerable loss for the region to lose a successful project that has years of experience in this field and which has proven to be excellent value for money.

Please use this letter in support of any negotiations or funding applications you may be carrying out and do not hesitate to contact me if there is anything I can do to assist the project to continue.”

Yours sincerely



Helen Everett
Manager, EMCARS

Leicester Adult Education College

It's good to see the diversity of frontline staff now working with library users around the city - much credit to your work on the 'Refugees into Libraries' scheme. For our ESOL learners, it helps them feel that they are included as users of the many services provided, from language learning resources to IT facilities and preparation for the Citizenship Test. We've also noticed the improved selection of books in community languages for adults and children, thanks to the informed recommendations of your volunteer staff.

In our experience, once an ESOL learner has been encouraged to make a first visit to the library and register as a borrower, they will return independently. For asylum seekers and refugees in particular, the libraries are an invaluable resource in terms of information, communication and learning, and as an open, mixed community. Without free access to welcoming public spaces like libraries or colleges, many new arrivals are thrown back on their own language communities and feel increasingly alienated from the wider society.

Recent feedback includes that of an asylum seeker with nursing qualifications, who is enthusiastic about the support she has received both as a language learner and as the mother of two young children. One of our ESOL tutors is also delighted that she has been able to borrow 20 copies of a class reader, allowing learners from more orally based cultures to experience reading within a supportive group. She is planning to organise a visit to the Central Lending Library, where she wants these learners to meet one of your refugee volunteers/employees.

We are happy to support any further bids for project funding from the Home Office and hope to continue our partnership with the libraries in developing resources for refugees and other new arrivals to Leicester.

Best wishes,

Louise Armstrong, ESOL Learner Support Organiser, Leicester Adult Education College

Refugee Week feedback Rwanda-Burundi Community Association

“Thanks for the contributions to our Twese Hamwe event in Refugee Week. It was wonderful to see so many people coming together to sing, dance and eat. The event and the visit from the mayor shows that our communities are recognised.”

“Thank you for providing some funding for our events during Refugee Week.”

Eric Waweru
Centre Project, Spokesperson, Rwanda-Burundi Community Association

“The asylum monologues at the Cathedral was a really powerful and informative piece of work. It showed the experiences of real asylum seekers and was great at challenging the usual stuff that gets printed in the press. It was good to see Peter Soulsby MP there. It shows that someone is taking notice of these things in Leicester.” Karen Redmond

British Red Cross

“ Red Cross and Refugee Action celebrated Refugee Week 2007 by hosting a fundraising evening to raise vital funds for our destitution project. We chose the theme ‘ONE WORLD’ – a celebration of our oneness and the rich diversity of our city.” Kerri Beech

Spokesperson, Refugee Action

“ Having a football tournament in the rain was typical, but everyone had a great time, 16 teams representing many nationalities and over 200 spectators. It was a great turnout and hopefully one that Refugee Action can repeat annually”

“What better way to raise awareness than to stand up in public. Refugee Action was certainly in action, myth busting in Leicester City Centre”

Long Journey Home

“Refugees and asylum seekers singing in the Museum and Central Library was really taking music and culture to people who wouldn’t otherwise see, hear and enjoy contributions people bring with them to Leicester. What better place could you find musicians and dancers from Iran, Kurdistan, Angola, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Afghanistan and Congo? It was brilliant.” Sheila Mosley

Fosse Primary School

“We all in class 5LW would like to say thank you for everything. We also thank you for inviting us to the Guildhall, we had so much fun. Thank you for telling us what an asylum seeker is.” Keval Mashru

Australian visitors

“Thank you so much for the Strangers in a Strange Land exhibition. They were very well put together. I hope lots of people see it and you change some opinions!” P.J. and Mike

Spokesperson, Refugee Action

“Football to Footprints in the Sand, people from all over the world jumped in some paint and walked their journey to the UK on a giant world map, the children loved getting mucky and so did lot of the adults!”

Refugee Action

“ Celebrating Refugee Week is very important for our clients. It gives them an opportunity to showcase their talents and meet other people. The events this year were very successful due to the NRF funding. We accessed the funding via the contacts in Libraries and Museums. It gave staff and clients the chance to meet and work together. It gives us the opportunity to work in partnership with other organisations, raise awareness about our work and raise awareness about refugee and asylum seekers issues. We worked with Leicester Central Lending Library, British Red Cross, Time Together, Haithi Productions, Leicester Welcome project and the Long Journey Home
Amanda Soraghan, Leicester Asylum Advice/Office manager

Refugee Support

“Thank you for the funding in assisting the production of the Strangers in a Strange Land Exhibitions in the Library and Museums. I was amazed to find that over 20,000 people saw them! Refugee Support considered it a complete success and it was great for our 50th year celebrations.” Gill Buttery