

Refugee Week: Message from our CEO

World Refugee Day is a special day for reflection, congratulations and collective thinking at Ashley Community Housing (ACH). Indeed, with offices in Bristol, Birmingham and Wolverhampton and over 8 years' experience of working directly with refugees, we understand the enormous benefit they have and continue to bring to their adopted countries and communities.

Where once refugee matters were discussed in the periphery in most countries, including the UK, today it is at the centre of international political thinking. The ongoing wars in the middle east and the global scramble to find solutions to turn the tide of desperate refugees escaping this violence is only further evidence of the prevalence of this matter going forward for some time to come.

At ACH, we have always stood with refugees and we continue to advocate, promote and practice partnership working to ensure refugees in the UK are welcomed, settled, supported and integrated into society so that they can re-establish themselves after what for many of us would be an impossible and traumatising struggle to escape from the very homes we know and love.

Despite the negative anti-refugee campaigning in the mainstream press and in some sectors of society in Europe, we have never met a refugee that ever wanted to leave their home willingly to risk everything for a foreign land. The stories we hear from tenants and those that we support are traumatising to hear let alone live through. Violence, displacement, family separation and in most cases, not knowing where one will end up as a refugee, is more stress and pain than most of us could bare. But refugees feel and experience all of these things almost always, even upon arriving in safe countries.

At ACH, we fully understand and have witnessed that refugees are an asset to their new societies. Most of them are young, hardworking and in many cases, come equipped with skills, including languages. However, once they arrive in their new countries they need holistic and culturally sensitive support aimed at rebuilding their confidence, helping them to come to terms with their difficult experiences as refugees and navigating an often unfriendly maze of public services which are vital for their welfare. As one former refugee tenant, now proudly in full time employment in Bristol said, "All the doors are open and all the doors are closed at the same time." The job of ACH and its partners is to ensure that the refugees are able to open these doors by themselves and confidently so that they can do the same for others as integrated and productive citizens of their new communities.

ACH's package of supported housing, skills training and language support either in house or with partner educational establishments, is a successful model that is built on the concept of holistic support with an aim of achieving meaningful and sustainable social inclusion for refugees. Neither housing nor jobs alone, as important as they are, can achieve inclusion. Patience, support, guidance and skills acquisition are vital elements which must combine for refugees to lead an independent and meaningful lives in their new homes.

In this difficult political period for refugees internationally, ACH has enhanced its refugee advocacy and awareness programs to include digital campaigning. This year we proudly launched #RethinkingRefugee campaign which aims to educate the wider public about the realities associated with been a refugee and the positive contribution they make to our country, communities and individual lives. In fact, through our partnership with refugees as an organisation, we are a witness to this truth and we will continue to enjoy this privilege as we aim to work even more closely across refugee reintegration and support policy forums regionally, nationally and locally to inform and improve best practice to empower refugees to become integrated and successful citizens.