

# Oasis Cardiff

*Case study: Small charities and social change*  
*Field: Migration*

---

## At a glance

Oasis Cardiff provides a welcoming space for asylum seekers and refugees and delivers a range of projects to help them integrate into life in Cardiff. With an annual income of just under £200,000, they have two full-time and seven part-time staff, and are funded by a portfolio of charitable trust foundations, with no statutory funding.

## Focus of the case study

The focus of this study is the involvement of Oasis Cardiff in Rumourless Cities (RC), an URBACT European-funded project set to run for two years. Its purpose is to challenge myths and rumours in order to change social attitudes and perceptions about asylum seekers in Cardiff, by applying best practice from other European cities.



## What does advocacy mean for them?

For Oasis Cardiff, advocacy has always been about developing long-standing relationships with other external agencies and senior civil servants. Rather than participating in external campaigning, the senior leadership team has adopted a more subtle, insider approach, using its positive reputation to build trusting relationships with key individuals. This has proved to be an effective way to promote social change. As their Director says, *'I have worked really hard to develop good relationships with those individuals in the Home Office, and I think rather than going to the media there is a much gentler way of changing perceptions'*.

Challenging social attitudes works hand-in-hand with their advocacy for individuals. For refugees and asylum seekers, this has been an essential part of integration. Oasis Cardiff has used creative methods such as storytelling and holding art exhibitions by asylum seekers and refugees to bring together local residents and service users in two-way integration. The Rumourless Cities project directly addresses the rumours and stereotypes that are associated with different groups. A common myth is that asylum seekers *'get a vast amount of money every week to survive ... that they don't know the language and they are terrorists. They are not friendly ... they don't want to integrate'*.

Looking at the role that other refugee organisations in Cardiff are playing and seeing a rise in reported hate crime and xenophobic attitudes have been two factors in encouraging Oasis Cardiff to get involved in Rumourless Cities.

The focus in Cardiff is to design messages that can dispel rumours in the city and to use innovative approaches to bringing different communities together. Although the primary focus of the organisation is asylum seekers and refugees, this project aims to take a much broader perspective: *'We want to be a voice for our clients, to share their stories, but we also want to give a voice to local communities as well'*.

## What's worked?

Oasis Cardiff is already well embedded within the area. Over 10 years of operating, they have become well established, built a positive reputation with service users and professionals, and are known for their expertise in the refugee sector across the country. Using innovative ways to make sensitive and complex issues accessible and relatable to individuals from different cultures and backgrounds has been effective in tackling negative social attitudes and behaviour.

Staff understand service users' needs: *'I drink coffee with them, I play pool. I celebrate with them when they get a job and I grieve with them when they get told to go home. So you really get to know people, to understand their lives more. That's a massive thing being on the frontline'*. The mutual trust that develops puts Oasis Cardiff in a valuable position to advocate for this group. The local authority member behind setting up the

Rumourless Cities project recognised the crucial role of Oasis Cardiff as a key gateway into the community.

For Oasis Cardiff, Rumourless Cities was a wonderful opportunity to draw in key community leaders from across sectors, fields and areas to find those who will be active in making a change. They could *'identify the key rumours and ask people in the community what are they. Then ask what are the best ways to present this message to people'*.

Creating a larger voice has lent the project momentum and energy to encourage others to get on board and challenge traditional silos. Networking and building relationships through personal connections, particularly for the Director, has been crucial (and only been made possible by receiving core funding for her post): *'Say with the housing provider ... I have built strong relationships with the senior management and I can ring them and say there is this still this issue and I don't need to go to the press. Because we have a relationship and it is [a] much better way of sorting things out'*.

But the role of other key individuals cannot be underestimated. The local authority member, who already had experience of working with the voluntary sector, said: *'it's been fairly easy for me to kind of pick up this work with the voluntary sector because I already knew everyone anyway ... the trust was already there on a personal level so it's been easier to just pick up and run with it'*.

## Challenges/what we've learnt?

Before the Rumourless Cities project there were poor relationships between voluntary sector organisations within the refugee sector. Within such a fragmented sector it can be challenging to bring together stakeholders that have varying purposes, personalities, and presumptions. But at the same time it can create a louder voice as well as a shock factor.

To ensure the collaboration is effective, programmes like this have to be structured in a way that takes this into account. It requires a shared purpose across the stakeholders; a flat decision-making process which can lead to co-design and co-delivery of the programme; a will to shift the power dynamics, e.g. by holding meetings in community settings; and time to spend on building relationships such as ongoing dialogue.



In the past, Oasis Cardiff has refrained from having an external advocacy approach to avoid jeopardising relationships with senior civil servants and external agencies. This has limited the opportunities for service users to be involved in directly representing their own voice. This is partly because of the potential risk to service users and the hostile environment within which they work, but also because they didn't yet feel confident to take this course. However, positive examples of service user involvement in other fields, such as violence against women and young girls, have shown that this approach can be done in an appropriate but also beneficial way for the service user.

Being involved with this project has encouraged Oasis Cardiff to think deeply about the pros and cons of their insider approach and of avoiding expressing views in public. Is it a conflict of interest? Has it prevented them from using the media as a powerful advocacy tool? Is it mission focus or self-censoring? Or is it just lack of confidence? At Oasis Cardiff they have become aware that a failure to see both elements as important parts of the organisation is in some respects silencing the voice of the organisation and the people who access its services. Perhaps there is a way of creating more synergy between the frontline work and external influencing.

Involvement in Rumourless Cities has also, however, underlined some of the organisation's strengths. One is the value of being embedded in the community and developing trusting and supportive relationships with service users and other agencies. This gives them an authentic voice – they have a strong reputation for understanding the concerns of refugees and asylum seekers, which provides a good foundation for future advocacy on their behalf.

---

This is the case study of one of 11 organisations we spoke to from four fields: criminal justice; homelessness; migration; and violence against women and girls. These case study organisations had annual incomes between £50k and just over £1m. We are incredibly grateful for the rich and open insights that were shared with us.

The case studies are part of IVAR's study *Small Charities and Social Change*, which builds on existing research, drawing on the experience of 11 organisations, to explore the role and contribution of small charities in more depth. It asks how and why small charities are challenging, shaping and changing policy, practice and attitudes. It discusses the challenges and opportunities that they face in doing so.

The report and case studies can be found here [www.ivar.org.uk/social-change](http://www.ivar.org.uk/social-change).