

## *Soft Touch Arts*

Leicester is a city known for its diversity, but an influx of refugees and asylum seekers since 2000 has strained community relations and created tension, particularly among young people. Soft Touch Arts has contributed towards an array of community cohesion measures developed by the city to try and prevent unrest.

The main focus of Soft Touch's work has been developing integration activities – part of the challenge was the emerging animosity between young people from different communities. Antagonism has been particularly directed at the Somali community, which was estimated to have grown by 10,000 people in recent years.

Projects have focused on offering capacity-building support to both refugees and asylum seekers and helping refugee support agencies and community organisations with outreach and integration projects.

The Babington Welcome project, working with a local college to try and develop positive relations between young people, was one such initiative. Working with the Minority Ethnic Language and Achievement Service and funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, this programme aimed to develop confidence and self expression, improve social interaction among students, develop awareness among teachers of the needs of newly arrived students and increase the involvement and confidence of parents.

An existing music programme, *Sound Exchange*, has been developed to include activities designed to ease tensions between young people from the African and Caribbean communities and new arrivals. Based at a local community centre the project is encouraging young people to share and create music together as a means of communicating and breaking down barriers.

Soft Touch works collaboratively with other organisations and agencies providing services that support refugees and asylum seekers. In one such project it enabled refugee families to develop paintings and murals that would improve ToCH's centre and give the centre's service users a sense of pride and ownership. During Refugee Week 2006, the artwork from the project has also been promoted and exhibited by BBC Radio Leicester as a means of promoting positive images of refugees and asylum seekers in the city.

From the beginning of the New Arrivals programme in February 2005, Soft Touch has worked with around 35-40 refugees from Francophone Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, Rwanda, Kurdistan and Somalia to develop their creative skills. It has been working with these refugee artists to raise

awareness of the issues in local schools. One such artist is Elizabeth Joseph who was previously a teacher in Africa. Her teaching skills enabled her to deliver spellbinding storytelling and puppetry workshops with primary school children. "The kids were just amazed and really interacted well with her. As many of them had had no previous contact with people from Africa, it was a very positive experience," says project development worker Alice Joseph-Harney.

Tackling the range of needs is one of the issues that Soft Touch has found most challenging. "The needs we have found are very multi-layered," says Joseph-Harney. "While we started with creative work being very high on the list, we have found that it's always important that our work is addressing basic needs such as housing, education and health, because those are the priorities for many people.

"Most people express a sense of isolation, and so through our projects we hope to provide opportunities for them to come and meet people from the same or different areas of the world."

Some of Soft Touch's most important work is around building up a sense of confidence and security among refugees and asylum seekers. "I have had refugees who were very afraid to come out and were not confident to participate in any workshops or comfortable working with anybody except others from their own communities," says Joseph-Harney. One of those was a woman who found it very difficult to get on stage or stand up in front of anyone. Now she is running storytelling, drumming and dance workshops."

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