



# **ANNUAL REPORT**

## **2007 -2008**

## Chair's Report

At the beginning of the year the Refugee Support Group (Devon) was facing a serious funding crisis. The Trustees put in place a number of options, including slimming down RSG's work and, as a last resort, closing down altogether. Happily the success of a number of funding bids prevented any such drastic outcome, notably our application to the Henry Smith Charity, the John Paul Getty Jnr. Charitable Trust and, later in the year, the HCD Memorial Fund. This new funding enabled RSG to plan ahead on a firm foundation, though continued fund-raising will always be necessary. The RSG is indebted to Jeremy Cushing for his tireless and systematic searches for and applications to funding bodies.

Thanks are due also to the Trustees, whose judicious management ensures that the organisation is in sound health and able to support the work of the staff and the volunteers. To this end a complete set of policies and procedures has been updated ready to be legally approved, and a full evaluation of RSG is planned for 2008.

The demands on the staff continue to grow and become more complex. As well as playing her central part as Project Co-ordinator, Annette Hughes has had to take on a more managerial role: following this year's appraisal of her work her job description is being re-written to reflect this shift, and she will in future be known as the Project Manager. Annette's commitment can never be praised enough: she continues to be the hub of the Drop-in Service. Having a very willing and popular MA Social Work student, Sam Gillard, for three months eased the burden, while the support of the volunteers was, as ever, indispensable.

The new funding enabled us to appoint Ramazan Mohammed as Training and Development Officer in January on a 6 month contract, hopefully to be extended. Rami brings a considerable range of skills, experience and talents to the RSG, including 4 languages, drama and singing. He has been into a number of schools and colleges to raise awareness of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as taking some of the strain in the office. Peter Foy, working one day a week as Finance Administrator, has been a most welcome addition to the staff and he combines efficiency with humour. The RSG has also continued to work with other agencies, and had a very successful public profile in Refugee Week and at the Respect Festival.

In meeting the needs of service users, RSG's present accommodation has become increasingly inadequate, especially in terms of privacy and confidentiality, and of also being a useful social space. That the staff and volunteers provide such an efficient and popular service there is astonishing: meanwhile, finding and funding more appropriate premises is likely to become a high priority.

In addition to their work in the office, volunteers also undertake outreach and befriending work and RSG is hugely grateful for all they do. Their relative invisibility should not disguise how vital their role is, especially with the increasing number of refugee families joining their husbands already here.

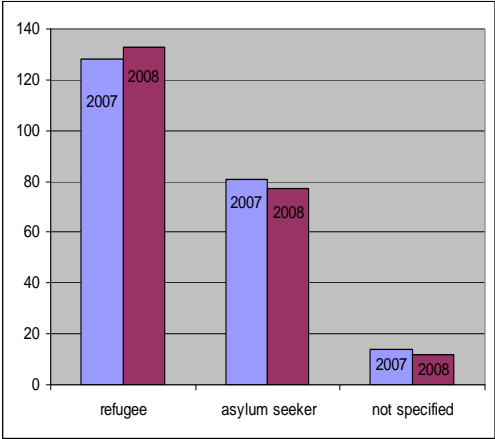
And to end on a family note, there has been the pleasure of a number of new babies, indicating the extent to which refugees have become settled in Exeter. So the invaluable work of support for asylum seekers will continue. It is all the more vital given the context of often hostile public opinion and Home Office hurdles. The dignity and respect of our users is, meanwhile, an example to us all.

Fran Jenkin  
Chair

**Drop-in Service**

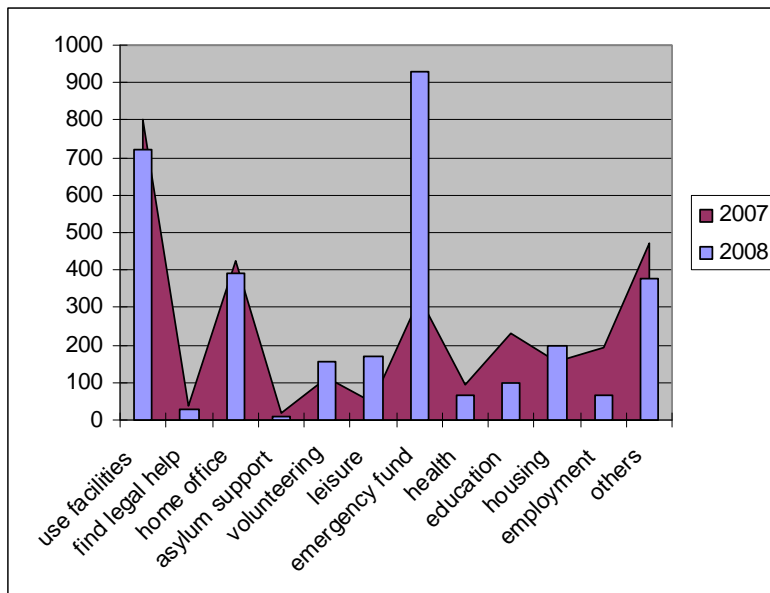
The RSG Drop-in Service is open 4 days a week, and is staffed by its dedicated team of volunteers, the Project Coordinator and also, after January 2008, Ramazan Mohammed as Training and Development Project Worker. Between April 2007 and March 2008 the service has helped 217 individuals directly. This number is similar to last year, but the number of actual visits has increased by some 20%. Female visitors to our services also increased this year – almost double the number of the previous year, accounting for 18% of our service users. This is mainly due to the numbers of wives arriving to join their settled husbands, and to the success of the women’s outreach project which has built up the women’s confidence.

A third of those coming to the Drop-in Service for help are asylum seekers, the remaining two-thirds refugees or those with settled status.



The main countries of origin remain as before, that is Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq/Kurdistan. Smaller numbers of people come to us from Angola, Zimbabwe, China, Algeria, Guinea, Mali, Congo, Bosnia and Kosovo.

People come to the Drop-In service for a variety of reasons. The following chart shows the type of help people have received from RSG between Apr 07 – Mar 08 and compares this with the previous year.



With the increasing number of families arriving to settle with their refugee husbands, RSG has needed to widen its range of services to include links with children’s services. This has involved liaising with Education Departments, contacting schools admissions organisations, helping with child benefit and tax credit queries, and supporting women and new babies. RSG has developed good links with other agencies and community organisations, creating effective signposting to ensure people receive the best possible service for their individual circumstances.

Use of the office facilities – telephones, fax, photocopier, computers - continues to be a major reason for people seeking help from RSG. The office space has frequently become a social hub, with people seeking a friend to chat with, a cup of tea and a snack. It is a safe place and we are proud that so many people have the trust and confidence to drop by. This is also a great compliment to the warmth and helpfulness of the office volunteers.

Annette Hughes

### **RSG’s Emergency Fund**

Throughout this year there has been an increase in the number of those seeking urgent assistance from our emergency fund. This reflects the nation-wide problem of destitution among asylum seekers in the current political climate.

The emergency fund supported 51 people through the year. The help has mainly been cash for subsistence, often on a weekly basis. Other needs have included help for buying medical prescriptions or for urgent transport costs. Through the year we were able to link with the British Red Cross, who administer a destitution fund in the form of fortnightly vouchers. Links were also established with the St

Petrocks Group in Exeter and Festival Harvest donations, who were able to supply food for distribution. This has been a real lifeline, particularly at times when our own emergency fund was running low. Major fundraising efforts are aimed at maintaining this vital service.

The reasons why people may need to have recourse to the fund are various. For instance, asylum seekers may have had their case refused – if they have no further appeal rights, any government support here is stopped. Many people do not believe it is safe to return to their homeland, for example to Afghanistan, Iraq, Zimbabwe, and are forced into destitution whilst they try to get further legal help. Since asylum seekers do not have permission to work, they are also vulnerable to exploitation by employers for whom they work illegally. Sometimes support stops because of communication errors between the Home Office and support services. It can take several weeks to get this reinstated: during this time people have no means of supporting themselves. Some people have made new applications to the home office for permission to stay in the UK (this could be because fresh evidence has been obtained that wasn't considered for their original asylum application, or because their personal circumstances have changed): again, they have no means of support while waiting for a response. Asylum seekers are therefore sometimes forced into destitution, or into illegal working for employers who exploit them. RSG fully supports campaigns to stop this happening.

Annette Hughes

## **Advocacy and Campaigning**

With few new asylum seekers arriving in Exeter now, RSG is being requested to help people with more complex applications where they are still pursuing permission to remain. This may be in terms of referring people to solicitors, assisting to find relevant up to date information on their countries of origin and support while making crucial decisions such as whether to return to their country of origin voluntarily.

RSG undertook extensive searches on the EIN (Electronic Immigration Network) website for useful case-specific information and passed this on to the solicitors dealing with these cases. (E.g. the availability of AIDS treatment in Zimbabwe; the persecution of homosexuals in Iran). The subscription to the EIN site was funded for the second year running by an immigration solicitor from London who supports RSG's advocacy work.

It is possible for people to make fresh applications to the Home Office if the situation has changed in the home country; if the personal circumstances of the applicant have changed; or if there is new, original evidence. Five people have been able to get fresh evidence, eg arrest warrants, and we have helped them to have the documents officially translated and authenticated, and to find a solicitor. Two men were finally able to get their government support reinstated – though

this also meant they had to move into accommodation away from Exeter.

Two men's cases reached the High Court, with our support in compiling their legal documents: one was refused at the Court while the other awaits his hearing.

Three men were forcibly removed from the UK following arrests when they signed their usual immigration conditions at the local police station. RSG started campaigns at the request of two of these with the help of NCADC (National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns). This involved writing case histories, publishing the facts on the NCADC website, faxing airlines and ministers. Strong contact was maintained with the men throughout their detention, including visits from volunteers. Unfortunately neither was successful. Two men were returned to Afghanistan, leaving friends, loved ones, and in one case a child, here in the UK, their home. The third man was returned to Syria where maltreatment of returnees has been well documented. We did not hear from him.

Three men took voluntary returns to Afghanistan. This involved liaising with the Refugee Actions Choices team and the IOM to help those men make an informed decision. It is of real comfort to us at RSG when we have contact from these returnees and hear that they are with family members.

Whilst we would like to think that getting Indefinite Leave to Remain means people's problems are over, RSG is frequently requested to help with family member's visa refusals. Some of these cases involve men separated from their wives and children for a number of years; therefore the logical next step is that they be allowed to have their families join them to settle here. The reasons for refusal have been mainly because of unacceptable paperwork which led the authorities to disregard the fact of marriage; disbelief that accommodation in the UK is suitable (eg where tenancies are short term and, where children are involved) or that they have an adequate number of rooms. In some cases DNA samples have even been requested to prove the paternity of their children. RSG has helped people to understand the correspondence and to refer to legal help to submit appeals or resubmit applications for consideration. At times RSG volunteers have attended court as a friend to support through this process.

Other advocacy issues have involved RSG supporting a young person in an age dispute with Social Services. RSG has provided personal support to the boy in this instance and assisted him to get legal help. RSG has also supported people with housing disputes, for example with troublesome neighbours, and in one case has given support with eviction issues. Volunteers are vital in providing additional support to vulnerable people who feel the systems are against them.

RSG also became involved in campaigning, aimed at the media and the police, about the way in which issues were reported in the local media. This involved liaising with the Devon Racial Equality Council and the Police Diversity Team to ensure the vulnerable group we work with are not persecuted by misreporting and the over-use of race and status issues.

RSG members were actively involved in two national campaigns throughout the year - 'Strangers into Citizens' involved petitioning and joining a rally at London's

Trafalgar Square, while the 'Still Human Still Here' campaign included a collaborative effort between Exeter University Amnesty Group and RSG. Students petitioned throughout a chilly day and braved a sleep-out at their university campus, attracting a good deal of media interest. Both campaigns continue.

Annette Hughes  
Francisca van Holthoon  
Fran Jenkin

### **Women's Outreach Project**

As the Refugee Support Group (RSG) drop-in office is largely male oriented, it can be daunting for women newly arrived here. To find ways to enable them to feel welcome and less isolated the Outreach Project was launched following a grant of £9,597 by Devon Community Foundation, from the Exeter Positive Steps Fund.

The Women's Project has continued to raise its profile through the year. The women have been filmed by Positive Steps and there was a promotional article in the South West Forum's newsletter which described it as 'a perfect example' of how inclusivity can be achieved through a small project. Starting with just four women, By July the project had grown to a group of sixteen women from Afghanistan, Iran and Africa. This number has now (March 2008) grown to thirty-three. The group meets regularly to improve English, share and learn skills, build self-confidence and integrate.

Because the project aims to help at the point of need it is very quickly enabling the women to overcome isolation, make friends, learn how to navigate the world outside the home, and even develop their own micro-enterprises. Besides enabling the women to go to weekly English classes, individual volunteers give one-to-one English lessons in the homes of the women. Shopping trips also supplement the more formal ways of learning English, as well as helping the women to find their way around Exeter, use money and understand the vagaries of our supermarkets.

Using women's homes for meetings to reflect the sort of social environment they are used to, we get together fortnightly in a friendly atmosphere to share food, experiences and skills. RSG volunteers have learnt how to henna their hands for celebration, how to cook Afghan and Iranian rice and - a particular success, traditional embroidery, 'Gold Dozi' (flower sewing).

The Afghan and Iranian women are so expert at this craft that the Project has spawned a Gold Dozi business. It was launched with a Gold Dozi workshop on 18th June, at the beginning of Refugee Week at the Phoenix Art Centre, at which the women sold their work, and displayed and demonstrated their art. Over Christmas the women had a stall in the Council's Christmas fair for four weeks and sold over £600 worth of embroidery. Articles sold included hand-made cards, framed Gold Dozi and wall hangings, as well as crochet work by an African woman.

Through Exeter College there have been classes for the women on setting up their own business, marketing and publicity. Two sessions run by Business Link have led to the women engaging in market research and trade testing. They have all also learnt mono printing in a workshop run by Double Elephant. During Refugee Week the women provided a 'cultural kitchen' of multicultural food at St Sidwell's Community Centre and fed over 150 people. They also provided the food for International Women's Day in partnership with Amnesty International, for the RSG Newroz party and for the launch of the newly independent St Sidwell's Centre.

Other activities have included taking children to the zoo, meetings with Relate, the police, a Health Visitor and a facial skin specialist, as well as taking part in the Turab (Arabic for Earth) Project at the Phoenix Centre, which produced an exhibition in the café.

There have also been additions to the group, with some bouncing babies! So we have also been able to help in navigating the antenatal system, getting baby clothes and linking with the Family Centre and children's activities.

Currently two women have passed the Citizenship test, one with full marks, and one is learning to drive. Another is working as a volunteer in the British Heart Foundation charity shop. We are fortunate to have woman volunteers from backgrounds other than British, - Egyptian, Iranian and Pakistani. The group's and events are therefore a buzz of different cultures, skills, languages and stories from which we intend to produce a collection of stories for publication.

Fran Jenkin

## **Volunteers**

RSG has 59 volunteers on its database. Of these 45 are involved in RSG activities on a regular basis. This includes 20 volunteers who have helped out in the office drop-in service over the year (generally there are 12 volunteers each week - working one or two half-day sessions each), 10 volunteers with the Women's Project, 4 volunteers on the allotment, 13 voluntary management committee members and volunteers who work on the newsletter, website, advocacy, interpreting and general fetching and carrying person-Friday jobs. 18% of our volunteers are people who use or have used our services.

RSG has not needed to advertise or run any recruitment drives. Most volunteers come to us through word of mouth, out of interest in refugee issues or via our website. Attendance at functions such as volunteer fairs, open days, conferences and training groups attracts welcome new interest in our group. As volunteers leave to pursue new horizons, their spaces are quickly filled, though of course they

are missed. Most volunteers maintain contact with us and support our activities when they do not have time to become actively involved.

Volunteers are the heart of RSG – the organisation could not function without the generosity, support, dedication and commitment each and every volunteer brings to the group. For this we are extremely grateful.

Annette Hughes

## **Training and Development**

We were fortunate this year in receiving funding for a Training and Development pilot project, beginning in January 2008. This proved to be a much needed service – both to people seeking our help through the drop-in service and in respect of providing training and awareness sessions to other organisations. The project enabled the employment of an additional full time worker and with his skills and experiences the project has got off to a flying start:

- 42 people were referred to educational establishments and employment training – this included ESOL and IT training and basic skills courses. Help with completing applications for grants and support funds enabled those with low or no income to succeed in enrolling for these vital courses.
- Time was spent assisting people with job searches and application forms, although this proved to be in less demand than accessing English classes.
- 12 educational sessions were delivered to schools and colleges throughout Devon to raise awareness on asylum and refuge issues. These sessions were received extremely well and further sessions are planned throughout the next financial year.
- Increased media involvement included interviews for Radio 4, Newsworld, Radio Devon and Gemini Radio. This was a follow-up from the Independent Asylum Commission's report on asylum seekers facing unfair treatment, destitution and loss of dignity.

To boost the morale of local asylum seekers and refugees 'Newroz', or 'New Year' (Persian & Kurdish calendar – 21 March) was celebrated. The event was attended by almost 200 people. It included music and dancing, and food was provided by the RSG Women's Outreach Group. This looks set to become will be an annual event.

Ramazan Mohammed  
Annette Hughes

## **English and Citizenship**

Low attendance meant the end of RSG's weekend Citizenship classes this year. Many people suggested they were too impatient to do a course of lessons, and wanted to brush up quickly and take the Life in the UK test as soon as possible. Those with poor English needed to attend an approved English with Citizenship course, and we therefore made many referrals to Exeter College and Action 4 Employment.

Many people have come in to the Drop-in Service for help in completing application forms for British citizenship and marshalling documents. RSG has referred these applications to Nationality Checking Service agencies which carry out a final check on the forms, copy documents and dispatch them to the Home Office. During the year at least 14 men obtained naturalisation as British citizens and attended ceremonies at County Hall. RSG volunteers have been privileged to have been invited to some of these events.

As the women's project developed, the English language needs of the women were highlighted as a clear priority that we needed to respond to. This was brought into sharp focus with the cessation of the WEA classes in Exeter. These had been an excellent resource, as childcare was provided. Many of the women we were in contact with had arrived in England recently and therefore had little or no English. Some had medical or health issues that made attending classes at Exeter College or outside their homes difficult. Additionally, five women had babies during this period and were unable to pay for childcare and/or did not want this option.

Since November 2007 a group of five teachers have been offering English language tuition sessions within individual women's homes. Currently 8 women are participating in these classes: all are beginners and the teaching aims are to develop basic vocabulary and conversation skills. A few of these women have also been able to attend Saturday morning classes at Exeter College. These are offered on a four-week basis only. One young person is receiving support with his English at home. In addition to these home sessions six other women are attending classes twice weekly at Exeter College. These classes include some welcome input on Citizenship.

Annette Hughes  
Clare Henry

## **Working Together**

RSG hosts a multi-agency networking meeting three times per year. The meetings provide a forum in which to share information and concerns, and to seek solutions together as appropriate. They have been instrumental in maintaining strong working relationships, facilitating signposting and support with complex issues such as mental health, housing and racism. They are well attended by

representatives from statutory organisations such as Health, Housing, Social Services and Police, alongside other voluntary and community groups including the British Red Cross, mental health and housing charities, Devon Racial Equality Council, United Women, volunteering groups, and education and training providers.

Annette Hughes

### **Allotment**

The allotment has been well maintained throughout the year. We now have three plots to work on, two of which are fully functioning, with a plentiful supply of vegetables throughout the summer. Paving stones have been set down to make an attractive walkway and work has been undertaken on the shed. Manure was collected and dumped, and a wider variety of fruits and vegetables started for the coming summer. Pat and Jenny have beavered away along with two regular helpers from RSG, and a handful of additional helpers that make the occasional appearance for a hard days graft. We are hoping to encourage more use of the allotment and are keen for individuals or families to look after their own small patches.

Annette Hughes

### **Refugee Week**

Refugee Week, held between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> June 2007, gets bigger and better each year. Joint working involving RSG, British Red Cross, Exeter Amnesty International, Devon Racial Equality Council, along with support from many other local organisations, culminated in a week-long programme of events in Exeter.

Thanks to funding from Devon County Council, Exeter City Council, Devon and Cornwall Police, UNISON, NUT, and Exeter Community Initiatives, we were able to have the Actors for Refugees and Ice and Fire theatre company perform 'Asylum Monologues' at the Phoenix Centre. This was a very moving occasion, with music and real life accounts of the UK asylum process.

The Multi-faith Celebration and the Coffee Morning, both regular Refugee Week events, were as popular as ever, with Exeter's MP and Lord Mayor attending the latter. Refugee Action provided an evening speaker at St Sidwells Centre, who highlighted the plight of destitute asylum seekers and gave information about active campaigns such as 'Still Human Still Here'. Exeter Picture House showed the film 'Tickets', which explored issues of refuge and race, and the Global Centre hosted a 'World at Lunch' where a close group discussed thought-provoking issues around seeking asylum and refuge in Exeter.

RSG's Women's group held two events - a Gold Dozi workshop, and a Cultural Kitchen Lunch Café at St Sidwells, An event still being talked about! With food traditional to Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Africa it was a huge success, with over 150 covers sold in just two hours.

A Ceilidh evening got people up and dancing on Friday night, and a children's craft workshop was held at the Respect Playdays in the Park on Saturday. The grand Football Tournament ended the Refugee Week Celebrations on Sunday, with the winning cup going to the Exeter group Africa United.

It was truly a week to remember, with lots of information given and awareness significantly raised. We also raised more than £500 over the week to go to our Emergency Fund.

Annette Hughes

## **Leisure**

A grant from Sport Relief enabled the continuation of our leisure pass scheme at the Pyramids Leisure Centre. Throughout the year we supported 60 individuals in leisure pursuits. 22 swimming passes and 24 gym passes were issued, and we were able to equip two refugee football teams with new strip, boots and footballs. Both teams met regularly for practice and competed in two important tournaments in the summer - The Refugee Week Exeter Cup, and the Kick It Out Tournament.

These activities most certainly help to boost the confidence and self worth, as well as provide meaningful activity and a pathway to integrate with other local community members.

Annette Hughes