

Allotment

We were very sorry to lose Zafar, when he returned to Afghanistan; he had been very active on the allotment for a number of years and was justifiably proud of his work. However, new help arrived in the form of Ali Mousavi, who prepared some good beds on our third plot, as well as making a lovely little pond which has already attracted frogs. He has also taken over the strimming.

Yet again the allotment was very productive in the summer and autumn. We now harvest a wide range of fruit and vegetables. The shed is proving essential – we seem to have acquired much in the way of garden tools and accessories over the year. The cold and wet winter, and the increased area of land, meant that we did not do our usual 'manure run'. However, early signs in the spring of 2010 suggest that we will have another

bumper year.

Ali says: 'When I was asked to write about the allotment I thought what can I really write about a place where one can free his or her soul? As far as I know RSG'S allotment is not about having a hobby or killing time to me or my friends! It is where we share our interests, love, pain and joy. The allotment is where we show our respect for the earth and appreciate its value! Over the years we had some friends who passionately worked with us but because of the force of circumstances we lost them, for which we are deeply sad although we will remember them fondly... I hope that RSG will be able to run this project in the future as it means a lot to people who are currently working there and other friends who use the place to escape from the pressure of every day life!'

Grants to Individuals

We were fortunate this year to be able to support individuals with one-off grants. The purpose of the grants was to support and enhance personal development, and to increase integration and independence. They were available only to refugees and asylum seekers without recourse to public funds, or on a very low income.

A formal application process and assessment by a panel resulted in nine individuals receiving between £150 and £500 each. Two women were supported with costs for driving lessons, one successfully passing her test in the same year. Another recipient had help towards his taxi driving lessons and test, and is now successfully self-employed. Four received contributions to their college course fees or equipment, two of whom are studying catering and hospitality, one a degree in film and media and another on a pre-university access course. One woman purchased a laptop to help with her studies towards a Business degree, and the final grant enabled a young man to increase his independence, with repairs to his bicycle.

As one recipient wrote: "I couldn't have done this without RSG. It is so difficult to get help when you are an asylum seeker. Even though I have lived here for 8 years there are still so little places to get help from. Thank you."

Refugee Support Group (Devon) ANNUAL REVIEW year ending March 2010



2nd Floor, 93 Fore Street,
Exeter EX4 3HY

Tel 01392 682185
info@rsgdevon.org.uk
www.rsgdevon.org.uk

Registered Charity No.1092410

The full Annual Report for 2009/2010, together with a list of trustees and independently examined accounts may be inspected at the Refugee Support Group's office.

RSG's Emergency Fund

This fund was set up in 2004 in response to destitution faced by asylum seekers, and unfortunately this need is still very apparent. This year 26 individuals (with, in 4 cases, their children) have received support.

The fund offers a small amount of cash subsistence where people have no recourse to any other funds. The fund is also used for vital purchases such as medical prescriptions and transport fares that enable people to access legal help and present information to the Home Office in London or Liverpool. Recipients are generally asylum seekers who have submitted further representations to the Home Office but have not yet received any response that would enable them to claim government asylum support; asylum seekers

seeking legal services to help submit a case after an application has been unsuccessful; people who have recently received permission to remain, yet are without papers and not able to work without them and have other support cut; and recently arrived asylum seekers who have yet to submit a claim for government support.

The Emergency Fund is made possible by ongoing generous support from volunteers, members of the public, church groups and trust funds with an interest in this area, as well as collections and appeals at public events. We are extremely grateful to all those who support this vulnerable group of people, including Exeter Foodbank, for the periodic provision of food parcels.

Chair's Report

The year has been one of significant change and development. One of the most notable has been the move to more spacious and suitable premises, completed in October. We are grateful for the accommodation we had at Exeter CVS for a number of years, while welcoming the much greater potential of the new office. We are now able to offer a private room for confidential work, a large room for meetings with a screened-off area for individual work, a suite of computers, a social space with access to drinks and snacks, and a staff office. We celebrated the move with a very successful event in February which also offered the chance to bring RSG's work to the attention of a number of important guests.

We were sad to say goodbye to Ramazan Mohammed, our Training and Development Worker, whose engagement with schools and colleges was highly valued. His loss was balanced by the recruitment of a drop-in service coordinator, Emma Marshall, in December. Emma, with a Master's degree in

International Human Rights Law (LLM) from Exeter University, previously volunteered in the drop-in service and provided back-up support at times of staff absence. She has already been a most beneficial addition to the service.

Other developments include one-off grants for individual clients, and the expansion of RSG's programme of English Language Home Tuition for women. These are reported in detail elsewhere in this review.

This year we have helped more refugees than asylum seekers. Exeter is now home to a number of settled refugees who arrived between 2000 and 2004 under the government's dispersal programme. It is a pleasure to see the transition from uncertainty during their application process, to receiving permission to stay and the building of their new lives. However, gaining status to remain in the UK does not mean an end to the difficulties they encounter.

Our two basic dependencies remain. Firstly, our debt to all those who work for

RSG, in whatever capacity. We thank all our supporters, from our indispensable volunteers to those who give us funding. We thank particularly our project manager, Annette Hughes, as well as our treasurer Chris Hill, and Peter Foy for his continuing work on our finances; and Jeremy Cushing, for all that he does by way of fund-raising. And that, of course, is our second dependency: in an increasingly difficult climate, we rely on being able to continue to find the funds we need to fulfil our varied and exciting projects. In this respect the next twelve months will prove crucial: and we are mindful of the need to seek support locally and regionally as well as nationally, and to be alert to the potential of partnerships.

In all that we do, we have the encouragement of our clients' example – their successes and their fortitude in often appallingly difficult circumstances make every effort worthwhile.

Lawrence Sail
(acting Chair)

The Charity's Funders 2009/2010

In an increasingly testing climate we are most grateful to all those bodies and individuals that support us. We have received funding as follows:

The Allen Lane Foundation; Devon County Council; John Paul Getty Junior Charitable Trust; Devon Community Foundation - Positive Steps; Devon Community Foundation - Comic Relief; Marchday; Trust House; Lloyds TSB; Devon and Cornwall Police; The Odin Charitable Trust; 29th May 1961 Charitable Trust; The Henry Smith Charity; Exeter Quakers; St David's Church Exeter; Jill Franklin Trust.

We would also like to thank Chris Robins for his independent examination of the charity's accounts.

ACCOUNTS SUMMARY

	at 31 March 2010	at 31 March 2009
<i>B/fwd</i>	84,355	45,533
Income	103,349	135,973
Expenditure	104,524	97,151
Balance		
Restricted	36,354	59,787
Unrestricted	26,826	4,568
Designated funds	20,000	20,000
	83,180	84,355

Volunteers

It is entirely thanks to the generosity and commitment of a pool of dedicated volunteers that we are able to continue all our services. 40 volunteers have worked on a regular basis this year, providing support for our drop-in service, women's outreach and home tuition group, the allotment. A further 20 have worked on a more ad hoc basis, supporting campaigns, advocacy, refugee week and speaking at public events. Many of our volunteers have been supporting us for at least 3 years – others, such as university

students, help out for a year. RSG's 14 trustees are also volunteers. Each volunteer brings his or her unique experience and skills to the organisation: as a group, they include past and current service users, retired skilled professionals, and local and newly arrived residents. All the work carried out voluntarily is almost equivalent to 4 full time staff. This is a fantastic commitment, and demonstrates the dedication of our volunteers as well as the value we offer our funders in return for their generosity.

Drop-in Service

The number of service users remains at a similar level to the last two years. 212 individuals have been recorded as coming for help, with a total of 2459 actual visits to the office. During the year we have met people from a total of 22 different countries. Those from Afghanistan, Iran, Kurdistan and Iraq remain the majority of our client group, with small numbers of people from various African countries: Zimbabwe, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Algeria, Mali, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Guinea and Nigeria. China and Belize represent the rest of Asia and the Americas.

Many refugees seek help from us in areas such as housing, employment, education and immigration support for family applications. Many come to us as the first stop as they are not sure where to go for help, others come when they have had difficulty accessing other services or need help in making their situation understood. Through the contacts we have established with other services in Exeter and regionally, both charitable and statutory, RSG is able to provide support and signpost people to appropriate services.

Immigration queries range from supporting people with applications for their families to join them, to supporting those with human rights applications following protracted asylum cases. Whilst the number of individuals is low, actual visits to the service are frequent, as these are often lengthy processes and require ongoing support for the individuals involved. Unsuccessful asylum applications, lengthy appeals and strict eligibility criteria for support have resulted in more requests for information on the voluntary return schemes, though the numbers actually returning remain low (in the past year, one person returned to Afghanistan through the assisted migration programme).

We have had the pleasure of seeing many long-term friends of RSG going through the naturalisation process and successfully becoming British citizens – no less than 41 people this year, and we have had the privilege of attending many of these ceremonies.

The arrival of family members continues to be a major reason for people to seek help. As far as possible families are seeking accommodation through the private sector, but with factors such as the economic crisis and health problems there have been some complex situations requiring close collaboration with the City

Council and charitable housing groups.

The number of female clients has increased this year, reflecting the increased membership of the Women's Outreach Project, as well as the greater spaciousness of our new premises. While the stairs must be difficult for mothers with children, they have not proved a major difficulty to date.

The number of young people (under 18 years of age) who have come to the drop-in service has also grown. Many of these are family members of longer-term refugee clients. Professional support from social workers, education establishments and integration into mainstream services have lessened the need for RSG to intervene on specific child focused issues, although RSG takes a role to support and advocate for young asylum seekers where necessary.



The drop-in service has continued to operate for four days each week throughout the year: we hope that the year to come will see increasing use – for instance, for computer use, English and other education programmes, and leisure and social occasions running alongside our drop-in sessions.

Advocacy and Campaigning

We have continued our advocacy for refugees in the realm of housing, health, education, utilities, benefits and employment, as well as helping to obtain spouse visas for wives of husbands already settled here. There are still cases of difficulty in gaining permission for children to join their fathers (or mother, in one case). On a number of occasions we have elicited the help of our M.P., Ben Bradshaw, as well as accompanying clients who go to his surgery. We have also raised concerns about the asylum process with him. We have representation at various agencies, for example Devon and Cornwall Police's Independent Advisory Group, the Crown Prosecution Service Scrutiny Group, Devon Safer Partnership, and the Plymouth and Devon Racial Equality Council.

For wives and children joining their husbands ESOL classes and education are a priority. We appreciate our excellent links with the staff at Exeter College, who are always supportive. We also help clients who have successfully moved on to become undergraduates, and those who need to change jobs.

Housing remains a particularly difficult area, and it is sad to have

to report that there are still times when racism needs to be challenged. For those without refugee status we help with legal issues by writing supportive letters, liaising with solicitors and sorting out documents. We work with unaccompanied minors and help them to gather all the evidence that they need to prove that they have settled here and should not be returned. We also work with the Social Services in understanding the needs of minors.

The UK Border Agency continues to detain some asylum seekers, and we are a vital line in helping those with cases still open to be released quickly. Our contact number is displayed in the custody centres of police stations throughout Devon and Cornwall. If the detainee's case is closed we try to get a solicitor to take up the cause, not always successfully. We are particularly grateful to one solicitor who gave assistance most helpfully – and successfully – throughout a very harrowing time for one of our clients.

We owe a great deal to the continuing work of Fran Jenkin, Francisca van Holthoorn and Jenny Stephens

Refugee Week

Organised jointly by RSG, Amnesty International, Exeter Group, and the British Red Cross, Refugee Week was once again a notable success. Sponsorship came mainly from Devon County Council, securing a week's programme of events, from 15 to 21 June.

The week kicked off with a football tournament, this year joining forces with the Kick Racism out of Football annual tournament. (RSG also held its own smaller tournament later in September.)

An excellent speaker from the national campaign 'Still Human, Still Here', Mike Kay, highlighted the struggles of destitute asylum seekers. A thought-provoking film shown at Exeter Picture House, 'The Visitor', pictured the dilemmas facing asylum seekers and

other immigrants. The music event 'Sounds of Freedom' attracted quite a crowd again this year. More than two hours of an eclectic mix of music from around the world celebrated the range of different cultures that Exeter is lucky enough to host. A moving piece of theatre, 'Asylum Monologues', was performed at the Phoenix Centre, with readings of first-hand stories of people involved in the asylum system; and a discussion at the Global Centre focused on raising awareness and deciphering fact from fiction in the media. The annual coffee morning was supported by the Mayor of Exeter and local councillors; and the week's events closed with a multi-faith celebration at the Friends' meeting house, with readings by representatives of various faith groups.

The Women's Outreach Project once again provided a gastronomic feast at the Cultural Kitchen, feeding more than 100 with dishes from around the world. This has to be the most popular event of the week, and the one that is most talked about. The women also catered for the coffee morning, as well as showcasing and selling their handicrafts, including cards, jewellery and hand-sewn fabrics.

Refugee Week is an important opportunity for RSG to gain new friends and supporters, and for increasing public awareness. Everyone involved in the planning and execution of the week gave their time and work voluntarily, and we are extremely grateful for such enthusiastic support.

Women's Outreach Project

The women's Outreach Project gets stronger by the year. With 60 members now, the group has met fortnightly throughout the year. Afghan women are the largest group, but there are also members from Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and a number of African countries. It is a chance to get together to share experiences, plan activities, make friends and learn to adapt to the often confusing systems in the UK. During the school holidays the group has met up for walks, trips to Public Gardens and taking their children to the Zoo.

The group has become adept at planning catering and craft activities, displaying and selling their Gold-dozi (embroidery) at occasions such as the local Green Fair, a multi-cultural event at the Barnfield Theatre, the Respect Festival and Refugee Week, and the annual Christmas Market in Exeter City Centre. They have prepared a feast of international cuisine for a wide range of occasions – Refugee Week, Eid parties, the Kick Racism out of Football Tournament, the launch of RSG's new offices and the Persian New Year, as well as sharing recipes and cookery skills amongst the differing nationalities of the group.



Guest speakers have assisted the women in understanding the role of Health Visitors, learning about issues of women's health and childcare, as well as gaining some massage and hairdressing skills.

All members are encouraged to enrol for ESOL classes. Learning English is still a high priority for many of the women, as a requirement for their conditions of remaining in the UK: accordingly the English Language Home Tuition element of our Women's Outreach Project is developing rapidly.

RSG would particularly like to thank Fran Jenkin for her inspirational role in sustaining the women's group.

English Language Home Tuition

The ESOL programme has continued to expand, offering one to one weekly English tuition in women's own homes. An experienced volunteer helps with those areas of English language most useful for an individual they agree a learning programme. This year we have had 23 women and one young person on the programme – nearly all from Afghanistan. It is a very popular service and in March we had 6 women on a waiting list.

Some women on the programme have little knowledge of English and have only recently arrived to join their refugee husbands. Others find speaking English socially very difficult as their language skills

are very elementary. Additional help and preparation for ESOL exams at Exeter College is also a priority for many. Feedback shows that individual women really value this service.

13 of the women have successfully met the legal language requirement for securing Indefinite Leave to Remain. This is a great achievement for all involved. For some, passing exams at College has encouraged them to undertake further educational courses and training. There is a large demand for computer training in particular.

The teaching team has grown over the year and now comprises 13 volunteers offering weekly tuition. They are a very

committed group and all really enjoy their teaching work. To quote one volunteer, "I've gained a better understanding of Afghan culture and of the pressures young women coming to this country face. I've watched my student's confidence grow and she's now talking about going to university in the future. I've also learned to cook some Afghan food."

We have been fortunate in being able to benefit from ESOL training at Exeter College, and also from input from Dave Wright. Thanks are due to all those who contribute to the programme, especially Clare Henry, the co-ordinator.