



RSG gets top marks

RSG 'providing an invaluable service': but needs to make more people aware of what it does; work more with women; and improve feedback on its services.

A report on RSG's operations during the last eighteen months has given the organisation an enthusiastic verdict (see next page). RSG commissioned an evaluation by two experienced outside consultants, Angela McTiernan and Sarah Targon.

One of the difficulties reported by the consultants was that RSG's records were difficult to interpret. These problems are partly due to the fact that much of the data on which this analysis is based is incomplete,

partly due to RSG's wish to allow people to only give background information if they wish to.

In fact RSG has a policy of not requiring personal information from people who ask for help. Many come from countries where having your name in anyone's records can be dangerous. Many don't trust the Home Office, and who can blame them? We don't need to record such information in order to help people, so we don't ask for it. It can cause problems, of course, when we need to prove we've done useful work!

RSG goes on line

RSG has a website – at last! Cyrus (see last month) has designed a new site that aims at making the best of RSG available to volunteers, asylum seekers and refugees on line. We hope it will also appeal to the general public and link with other organisations doing similar work.

Features will include information about RSG (the evaluation – see page 2 – warned that we are not known to everyone who might want to use our services). All our past newsletters will be posted, together with documents produced by or about RSG – currently the report RSG made to the Home Office about improving immigration procedures (see last month), our evaluation and reports on progress in RSG's work: for example, Susan Loughran's report on her storming first month in post, and records of transactions in RSG's management committee.

We hope also to include advice on how to get help on all sorts of topics – health, housing, legal services, finance: you tell us what you need – in Exeter and Devon: always difficult if you're not local (and sometimes even if you are). The site will include details of how to contact RSG, and we hope users will do just that, to tell us how to improve it.

Log onto RSG at www.rsgdevon.org.uk.

Training and jobs: RSG can help

Do you want to gain new skills, attend a course or find the right job for you? If you are a refugee or asylum seeker and are interested in the above, please call into the RSG office for a chat.

A successful bid to the Home Office Refugee Integration Challenge Fund has enabled RSG to employ me, Susan Loughran, as a full time project worker, for one year.

My role will include helping **refugees**:

- find and access training courses such as English and computer courses or a course of your choice. (there is also a limited fund to help towards course costs)
- gain new skills through doing voluntary work
- find a work placement to help increase your skills in an area of work you are

interested in

- find the right job for you
- write a CV (i.e. a description of your past training and experience)
- search for jobs.

We can also help **asylum seekers**:

- find and access training courses such as English and computer courses or a course of your choice (there is also a limited fund to help towards course costs)
- gain new skills through doing voluntary work.

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RSG management committee

Meetings are held on a
Wednesday once a month at
6.45 pm in Wat Tyler
House (see above). Every-
one welcome. For informa-
tion contact the office.

Every meeting starts by
considering any proposals
or requests put forward by
asylum seekers, who are
particularly welcome.

Agenda items to the office
if possible two weeks be-
fore the meeting, please.

***NB views expressed in
this newsletter are not
necessarily those of the
Refugee Support Group
Devon***

RACE EQUALITY ACTION PLAN

The Government Office for the
South West has produced a re-
gional action plan for increas-
ing race equality and commu-
nity cohesion (available in
RSG office). (Those who have
read the Devon and Exeter
Race Equality Council's study
'Multi-Ethnic Devon' will
know how badly this is
needed.) The OSW wants
comments by 3rd February.
Please send to the RSG office
or to Imogen.potter@gosw.
gsi.gov.uk.

RSG gets top marks

(continued from page 1)

The evaluation report focuses on what RSG volunteers and service users think about its operation in terms of quantity, quality and impact.

Quantity

In the year from March 2004 235 individuals were seen by RSG staff or volunteers, in a total of 2379 contacts. Contacts thus averaged about 10 per client, with obviously far more being seen on fewer occasions (77 were seen only once). About 60% of those seen were asylum seekers and 30% refugees (some were both). Asylum seekers tended to need more contacts than refugees. The biggest groups were Iranians and Afghans (36% each). The great majority were men, reflecting the original NASS [National Asylum Support Service] dispersal contract, which was for Farsi- and Dari-speaking single men.

During this period there were about 60 volunteers, of whom about 60% were actively involved in special projects, and all were 'extremely committed'.

What did RSG do?

The biggest group of contacts (31%) involved the use of RSG office facilities: the Internet, other computer functions, photocopying and telephoning. This was followed by queries on asylum (13%) and requests for support from the emergency fund (10%). 7% wanted to find a lawyer, 6% had problems with NASS, 6% wanted leisure passes and 5% had housing queries.

Quality and impact

The consultants asked two groups

– volunteers and service users – to comment on the value of services and how they could be improved. In addition to the two groups a sample of service users were interviewed by phone.

There were significant differences between the two groups. Volunteers were asked what they valued about their work with RSG. Asked what benefits they had enjoyed, they quoted improved understanding of the issues facing asylum seekers; satisfaction in doing a good job; contact with a wide range of people; friendship. Some quoted improved confidence, confronting their own prejudices and acquiring more skills. Asked what services they thought were most useful they put English classes top (4.3 on a scale of 0 to 5), followed by signposting to legal, housing and employment advice, providing information to other organisations (e.g. by speakers), and housing support through Exeter Housing Action Group (HAG) (all 4.0). Advocacy and campaigning scored 3.7, sport and leisure 3.6.

Service users had asked for help for various reasons. Befriending came top, followed by sport and leisure provision and help with legal issues (especially concerning asylum) and help with Home Office appeals. Smaller numbers had asked for financial help, help in improving English and housing advice. When asked what elements in RSG's provision they valued most highly they put sport and leisure facilities first (4.9), opportunities for volun-

teering (not necessarily with RSG) at 4, befriending at 3.9 and English language classes at 3.4.

The biggest differences between what volunteers thought was valuable and what service users thought concerned sport and leisure provision, befriending and volunteer placements (all valued more highly by clients than volunteers); housing support, information for other organisations and signposting (all of which the volunteers valued more highly than the service users). Sport and leisure was much the biggest difference.

Improvements

There were many positive comments from both volunteers and service users. There were also some negative comments and some suggestions for improvement. It was clear that confidentiality remained a big issue for service users and one or two complained of 'nosy' volunteers and asked for more private surroundings. They also wished for more cultural understanding. It was sometimes frustrating if a client did not meet the same volunteer on different occasions as this meant starting all over again. Interpretation and translation facilities needed boosting. The consultants noted that RSG did relatively little work with women, and this might be an area for investigation.

The report is based on analysis of RSG records, three focus groups and telephone interviews (in Farsi) with six service users. Copies of the full report available from RSG office (runs to 37 pages).

The committee

The RSG management committee met on 18 January.

RSG's new Refugee Integration Project worker, Susan Loughran, gave an upbeat account of her first two weeks of work at RSG. She met with various key organisations and made some useful contacts as far as education

and training for refugees are concerned. She has started signposting refugees and asylum seekers to relevant services and is clearly enjoying her job. Secondly, RSG's revamped website was discussed at some length and useful suggestions as to developing the site, which will be an ongoing process, were made.

Thirdly, the committee discussed the evaluation report (see above). The report gave some very helpful insights into how RSG can further improve its services and the next committee meeting will discuss the implementation of the report's recommendations in more detail. All ideas welcome.

In the news

Deportation subsidy

The government has announced a scheme to offer asylum seekers (failed or otherwise, apparently) up to £3000 to go home. This will be administered in collaboration with the International Organisation for Migration, and may cost the Home Office up to £1m a month. The Home Office is desperate to increase the numbers departing after admitting that it will fail to meet the Prime Minister's target date of December 2005 for more failed asylum seekers to be sent home than are having their claims rejected. (They now hope to meet this target by the end of February.)

In spite of the cost the immigration minister, Tony McNulty, claims that it will save £11m in costs if 1000 leave voluntarily every month (as expected). He denied that this would make it more likely that more people would apply for asylum, but admitted that many of those who join the scheme would have left anyway.

The scheme involves a £500 payment as soon as the payee boards a flight, another £1500 when they arrive in their own country and subsequent benefits worth a possible further £1000.

The Refugee Council welcomed the scheme as 'cheaper, more humane, and more efficient'. The shadow Home Secretary said it was sensible but it was all the government's fault that it needed to be done.

Winter crisis

The Refugee Council in Yorkshire and Humberside issued a warning that Kurds whose 'hard case' support under section 4 of the Immigration Act 1999 had been withdrawn because they did not sign letters agreeing to be voluntarily returned to Iraq (see right) were in danger of destitution this winter. The letters have been received by 1600 Kurdish asylum seekers. Two hundred have already been evicted from their accommodation in Leeds alone.

'The government wants to decrease the amount of money spent supporting asylum seekers. In our view there is a much more decent, dignified way to do that, and that is to give asylum seekers the right to work.'

Meanwhile a Home Office survey has discovered that the government's dispersal programme for asylum claimants is resulting in many of them ending up in areas of poverty and deprivation where they are likely to face racial harassment and attacks. The police have also urged the Home Office not to cram asylum claimants in small areas because it made it very difficult to enforce deportations when this became necessary.

Government proposes to deport Iraqis

The government is trying to deport Iraqis on the grounds that northern Iraq is now safe for failed asylum seekers to return to. This follows a low rate of acceptances for Iraqi asylum claims, criticised by the UNHCR, and is accompanied by a range of oppressive measures to force as many claimants as possible to depart voluntarily. Those deported are dumped in Iraq with a minimal payment and left to sink or swim.

For reasons which are obvious, one of the largest groups – about 7000 – of failed asylum seekers in the UK is Iraqis. Clearly the government would like to deport them, not only on principle in pursuance of repeated promises to enforce our asylum policies but also (perhaps) to demonstrate that the Iraq war was not the policy disaster which most people think. The government's determination to enforce deportations was also probably affected by July 7th.

In February last year the government decided (apparently) to start deportations. In August this year the Home Office announced that it proposed to fly failed asylum seekers to Arbil (Erbil or Irbil – choose your source), which is the capital of the Kurdish region of Iraq. At that point they had 38 men in detention centres. The plan was to use an RAF plane and fly them out there via Cyprus.

The Kurdish part of Iraq is undoubtedly one of the least affected by the war and the subsequent Iraqi resistance, and also by the depredations of the previous regime. It is becoming slowly more prosperous. It is certainly true, therefore, that if this part of Iraq is not safe, no part is. Also, as the Home Office points out, some Kurds have been returning voluntarily.

The government's decision was greeted by a storm of protest. The Kurdish regional government declared that asylum seekers should not be forced to return. Kurds in England were frightened, with many claiming they would be killed if they returned. The UNHCR once again declared all of Iraq unsafe for returns. There was a general feeling that (contrary to its assurances) the Home Office would not give proper consideration to each individual case. 'It is chaos. Officials just have targets to meet.'

The Kurdish region of Iraq has always had a turbulent and confused history, and there are many reasons why an individual might feel threatened as a result of his past. Some may have been targeted in the past by Islamic radicals and would be again if they returned. There are fewer bomb outrages in these provinces than further south, but that does not mean they don't happen, or that

Islamist groups don't operate there.

Kurdish Iraq was also a centre of opposition to Saddam, and many will have sought asylum because they were likely to be killed by his agents, who, of course, form a major element in the resistance. A significant part of the Iraqi resistance is Saddamist, so such asylum seekers are in truth very likely to have their name still on their lists.

There are also issues arising from Saddam's ethnic clearance programme for major northern oil centres, especially Kirkuk and al Mawsil (Mosul). Under Saddam, Kurdish families were evicted and Arab families moved in. Now the reverse is happening. This is likely to be an unsafe place for anyone who was involved at any time. Added to these factors are feuds between the two main Kurdish political parties, the PUK and the KDP, or simply among local tribes.

The UNHCR says that the Kurdish regional government 'is not yet able to protect citizens from violent attack'. It says that Iraq is 'very, very fragile' and opposes any forced returns. *Voluntary* returns are 'feasible' (only) for three northern (Kurdish) provinces.

The current situation

The Home Office was forced to abandon its planned flight, but recently the first flight has happened (Mohammed Nadir Sadiq, from Plymouth, was one of those deported). Because Kurds are mostly Muslim (and mostly look 'Middle Eastern') public opinion is more supportive of their removal than before the London bombings. The Home Office is stepping up pressure by threatening Kurds with removal of 'hard case' support. They are asked to sign letters agreeing to return voluntarily; if they do not, they lose their accommodation. This then enables the Home Office to label them as 'absconders' and make them look like criminals. A few are still in detention, and the fear of being detained and of forced return is creating the likelihood of more 'absconding'. A vigorous campaign is being conducted to persuade the Home Office to back off (see the NCADC website). [JC]

Government proposes new fast-track asylum policies

The Home Office has announced a 'new asylum model' aimed at ensuring more efficient processing of the now much smaller number of asylum claims. Fewer people are still being deported than receive refusals: in the second quarter of 2005 there were 6320 applications of which 5855 (93%) were rejected at initial interview. In the same quarter 3460 applicants were deported (3935 including members of their families). The government has thus failed (again) to meet the PM's demand that more should be deported than fail. The number deported is actually falling.

The new proposals envisage a much greater use of detention. All applications will be given an 'initial screening interview', the aim of which will be to classify applicants. There will be nine categories and it is intended that they will be treated differently. This may involve limits on applicants' freedoms, maybe by detention or tagging; different rules for under-18s; fast deportation for obviously false claims and – creditably – fast processing of apparently 'well-founded' claims. This last proposal will be developed in consultation with the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Initial decision-making

There are also signs that the Home Office is making efforts to improve its initial decision process, which has been often and severely criticised. It is proposed that each applicant will have a single caseworker, and that legal aid provision will be improved. This is probably the weakest part of the system, as evidenced by the fact that 18% of appeals were upheld in the latest quarter, and by wild variations among national groups (49% of Eritreans had their cases upheld, for example, 42% of Russians and 39% of Somalians).

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the system doesn't work well (see Amnesty International's report 'Get It Right'). One local asylum seeker was told by an immigration official 'We will try our best to send you back to your country'. This was before he had had any chance to state his case; the official can have had no idea whether his claim was genuine or not. At least (one suspects) the official was honest.

Part of the problem appears to be ignorance; part a built-in ethos of disbelief;

and part lack of resources. Both initial interviews and appeal hearings seem to be characterised by refusal to allow full explanations from applicants as well as by a tendency to disbelieve them on inadequate (often absurd) grounds and a failure to understand facts about local politics and culture.

It is therefore reasonable to believe that changes in the initial decision-making process will have to go much further than the present proposals before critics will be anywhere near appeased. Many (like RSG) urge that the only satisfactory recourse will be when decision-making is taken out of the hands of political organisations and some kind of independent assessment process is created.

Detention

It is also difficult to applaud proposals to increase the use of detention. In the immigration system detention is in fact imprisonment without trial: the immigration authorities do not have to have the approval of a court to detain someone. In theory decisions are regularly reviewed, and also in theory detainees can apply for judicial review. However for this system to work there would have to be a robust system of translation and legal advice, and neither is the case. The government admitted that in March last year 45 people had been held for a year or more.

There is also the question of children, whom the Chief Inspector of Prisons has said should only be detained in exceptional circumstances. Three years ago the government reversed a previous rule that children could not be held in detention centres.

There have also been claims that women held in detention centres have been 'upset and traumatised by their experiences of immigration detention in the UK'.

Basically you cannot avoid the fact that we are imprisoning thousands who are likely to be confused, frightened and damaged and have committed no crime.

Currently the numbers officially in detention are relatively small. In March last year the Home Office said about 1600 people were detained. However Amnesty International said the true figure would be more like 25,000. There are ten 'removal centres' (immigration prisons, all privately run), three 'removal prisons' and one 'reception centre' (also privately

run). No-one knows how many immigration detainees are also held in mainstream prisons. A former Chief Inspector of Prisons stated that he did not consider the detention of asylum seekers to be a fit and proper role for the Prison Service, partly on the grounds that it has an ingrained culture of racism.

Deportation

The obvious fact about deportation (the government likes to call it 'removal') is how difficult it is to use. A recent research paper for the UNHCR shows that this is also the case in other developed democracies. The authors consider that this is because deportation 'is a politically costly exercise'. In all countries public opinion supports it in general (and government can lose votes by seeming feeble); but there are contrary pressures when voters actually know the people involved. In the UK it is notable that popular national newspapers push for harsher policies, but local newspapers are much more cautious and often campaign against deportation. A second and very obvious factor arises from the fact (already noted) that the initial decision-making process is so poor. The result is that (although the Home Office cannot admit it) thousands of asylum seekers are rejected although their fears are genuine. They cannot be sent home, because English (as well as international) law prohibits 'refoulement' – i.e. returning people to places where they may suffer persecution. However this limitation depends on cases being taken to the High Court, which is expensive.

What to do?

It is not reasonable at this stage in history to urge the abolition of scrutiny of asylum claims, or even detention facilities. It is obvious that some provision is needed, and meanwhile the democratic pressures on every government are immense and unremitting. It is clear that No. 10 constantly demands more repressive policies, and that the Home Office is under pressure to comply.

There is a need for counter pressure to reduce or remove the most unacceptable aspects of the immigration system. The inevitable conclusion is that without untiring campaigning by people like RSG members, governments would be able to – and would – adopt much more draconian policies. [JC]