



RSG pushes new network

Annette Hughes writes: A local refugee and asylum network group has been initiated by RSG, and the first meeting was held on Wednesday 6 December. There hasn't been such a multi-agency forum since 2004, when Devon County Council's Asylum Seeker Project finished.

The idea grew from an increasing awareness of how many organisations are working with this client group. It was hoped that by co-operating we could secure the benefits of sharing information and experience in order to give each other support

and the clients the best possible service.

The meeting began with some rather delicious sandwiches (goats cheese, olives and tomato ones were rather tasty...) and a chance for informal discussions and catch-ups with people we have mainly spoken via telephone! It was great to have 20 people turn up to this meeting, representatives from various organisations, e.g. Exeter College, Devon Race Equality Council, Exeter CVS, Devon Library services, Meaningful Occupation Project, Social Services, United Women's Project, Exeter Community Initiatives, Police Diversity and of course RSG.

It was agreed the meeting will be a useful tool to keep up to date with progress and changes within each organisation. It was also agreed that a theme for each meeting would be useful, for example, around policy or legislation changes, Refugee Week, country information. Further ideas were brought forward on developing an internet-based message board for the network group. This would be a secure area where members can bring queries and issues and may get quick responses from those with the relevant know-how.

Next steps

Future meetings will be held in February, June and October 2007. Dates to be confirmed but will be on a Wednesday lunchtime (with some refreshments of course!). If we missed any organisations out in our initial invitations, please contact RSG so we can keep you in the loop with details about February's meeting.

WINTER CRISIS APPEAL

Christmas is coming! The weather has turned colder and the days are much shorter. While families are decorating their houses and preparing for the seasonal festivities, the town centre is lit up bright with the shops enticing us to Spend! Spend! Spend!

What must it be like for those who are separated from their families? Whether or not Christmas is celebrated by one's faith, there is a constant reminder wherever you look that now is the time for families. Now is the time for giving. Now is the time for feasting. Now is the time to be jolly and thankful!

To have been refused asylum, to make further lengthy appeals, to have your life

unravelling in front of suspicious authorities, to not be believed, to have your meagre support taken away ... How can you possibly get into the UK festive spirit?

This is what it is like for some of the people RSG meets. To them, our emergency fund is a lifeline. Through this we have been able to provide cash for food. However, our funds are low and the small money we can offer (currently just £10 per week) may be the only help some people get.

Please spare a thought for those in need this Christmas. All donations to RSG go straight to our emergency fund so the whole amount is used purely to help those in crisis. This year we would like to help

people more through these cold winter months. A warm coat, a sleeping bag, a pair of shoes that don't let the rain in, a hot meal at the end of the day. These are some of the things that can really make a difference. Your cash can help us to provide the things that are really needed.

Please send cheques addressed to Refugee Support Group Devon. If you are a taxpayer and would like to boost your donation with Gift Aid please indicate this when sending your cheque, or fill in a donation form from our website (above). Or write to us (address on page 2 overleaf).

THANK YOU. We wish you all a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Also in this issue

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MANURE APPEAL

See article on page 2: if you do have an off-road vehicle we'd be very glad of the help ... What could possibly be a better way of using a Saturday afternoon?

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RSG management committee

Next meeting is Wednesday 17th January in Wat Tyler House (see above), 6.45 p.m. Everyone welcome. For information 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 before the meeting, please.

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

DOWN ON THE ALLOTMENT

The allotment is in its winter phase, with lots of digging required and consequently lots of MANURE.

Everyone who deals with any kind of soil knows the importance of this magic commodity, so three stalwart volunteers



Pat and David getting the good stuff



Jeremy hard at work

set out to procure some. Alas the weather conditions over the last month ensured that they became mired in deep mud and puddles, much straining with wheelbarrows was required and the car and trailer were seriously in danger of becoming stuck and having to be pulled out of the mire

by the AA (or such). Brilliant driving by your editor ensured that this did not happen however and in due course a large load was delivered to the allotment and barrowed in by Gholam and Jenny Stephens (see right: no

mention of manure, though). We had intended a second and even a third trip but the mud defeated us: it was like the Battle of the Somme. Anyone out there who has a four-by-four and is willing to use it for its proper purpose instead of the school run, please get in touch ... [JC]

A day in the life of an office volunteer

Jenny Wilson writes: As a student at Exeter University I normally volunteer at RSG one afternoon a week (at least during term time!) and always look forward to the experience. No afternoon is ever the same at RSG. Over the past two years I have helped out on a basic level, i.e. developed a very close relationship with the photocopier, but I've been involved in many other ways too. Often clients need help with understanding letters from the council or housing organisations, and require you to phone up on their behalf to clarify or explain their situation. Other times people ask you to help them fill out forms, and it worries me that despite being an English native speaker this can be challenging! Composing letters is another frequent activity and I'm always surprised by how grateful people are, even when I feel I've barely helped. However, my favourite memories of volunteering are times when I've sat down with people and over a cup of tea or coffee had a chat about current world affairs and how our opinions differ. (I'm sure this has nothing to do with the fact I'm a politics student!) It is fascinating to get perspectives from people whose views so often go undocumented. All in all every afternoon I spend at RSG is rewarding in different ways and I know I will miss the people and atmosphere when I leave Exeter next year.

Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 13th December. The main issues discussed were:

Policy and procedures: new drafts prepared (also new constitution). A very dry topic but important as we need to be sure we are well managed.

Treasurer: we think we've found one! Phew, what a relief. Finances are another as-

pect of running a charity which it is vitally important to get right.

Finally **fundraising**, again: the committee worked on the next stages of our fundraising strategy. We are hoping to move away from being funded by one big donor (previously the Home Office and the Lottery): it's a good situation as long as your donor sticks with you, but if one big donor walks away you are in serious trouble. We decided it

would be better if we moved in future to a more flexible method. This means basically applying to more potential donors, which in turn means a lot more work and a lot more need for careful co-ordination. The committee agreed to break RSG's operation down into nine projects and apply for funding separately for the future.

Members were invited to offer help in devising applications for

funding which even the most sceptical donor could not refuse.

The committee praised the work of Annette and Jenny Stephens in the office. RSG was full of dynamic activity these days. Which should make it easier to get funding ...

Fran, Jeremy and John had been to a conference on trustee responsibilities. Having been duly terrified they proposed to pass on the information to all the other trustees.

And down on the allotment the manure (see above) has already been dug in, we were told.

Fran's poetry corner

Occasional poems chosen by readers

Boy with Orange: Out of Kosovo

A boy holding an orange in his hands
Has crossed the border in uncertainty.

He stands there, stares with marble eyes at scenes

Too desolate for him to comprehend.

Now, in this globe he's clutching something safe,

A round assurance and promised joy

No-one shall take away. He cannot smile.

Behind him are the stones of babyhood.

Soon he will find a hand, perhaps, to hold,

Or a kind safe, some comfort for a while.

[Lotte Kramer]

Lotte Kramer, born 1923, was herself a child refugee when she arrived in Britain from Germany in a 'Kindertransport' in 1939.

A song for England

An' a so de rain a-fall

An' a so de snow a-rain

An' a so de fog a-fall

An' a so de sun a-fail

An' a so de seasons mix

An' a so de bag-o'-tricks

But a so me understan'

De misery o' de Englishman.

[Andrew Salkey]

Andrew Salkey was born in Panama and raised in Jamaica. He attended the University of London, became part of the West Indian Students Union and later helped to found the Caribbean Artists Movement. He died in 1995 in the USA..

'Strangers into citizens' campaign

The NCADC [National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns] has announced a campaign to achieve the regularization of UK people without status.

'Like the campaign to abolish the slave trade, which finally succeeded 200 years ago, "Strangers into Citizens" is driven by a religious and humanist consciousness of the innate human dignity of all human beings and an indignation at the denial of that dignity.'

The aim of the campaign is to bring pressure to bear on government to regularise the position of the many people who, through no fault of their own, are in the UK illegally: asylum overstayers for whom it is too dangerous to go home are an obvious group, but the campaign also supports people who

came here to make a better life but are categorised as 'illegal' by the authorities.

The idea is to get the idea of 'regularisation' into the public mind and create a positive attitude to it. This is something many other governments have done (e.g. Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium and the US), so there is every reason to believe ours can be persuaded if enough people support the effort. Such a move would not only benefit irregular migrants. It would also strengthen the rule of law and help enforce a stricter immigration policy; reduce the possibility of exploitation and help employers to find workers legally.

To find out more, and offer support: visit www.cof.org.uk, or email Austen.iverleigh@cof.org.uk; tel 020 7375 1658. (COF stands for Citizens Organising Foundation.)

Developments on the back line

Duncan Atkinson writes: Since 2004, failure to produce valid travel documents when seeking asylum has been a punishable offence. A High Court ruling last October improves the situation. It stated that if a refugee had never been able, or felt it unsafe, to acquire a passport, and declared this, they should not be prosecuted. This is in line with article 31 of the Refugee Convention, forbidding punishment of refugees for immigration irregularities. It remains to be seen whether refugees previously imprisoned for such offences will be freed or compensated.

Also in October, the 'Refugee or person in need of international protection', regulation came into effect, confirming the EU directive calling for 'minimum standards' in treatment of refugees, and harmonisation in European interpretation of the Refugee Convention. This has gone on to result in anonymity of claimants, a general practice in initial asylum hearings, being extended to the Court of Appeal.

Finally (still in legal territory, unfortunately), papers being drawn up by the government for publication next Janu-

ary call for faster decision on the asylum claims of minors. It brings up the higher costs of supporting minors and giving foster care, and claims they largely seek asylum to 'take advantage of the benefits of migration to a richer country'. Wider dispersal of minors and a faster deportation process will also be recommended. Unaccompanied minors have also been accused in one publication, on no apparent basis but cynicism, of withholding the location of guardians in their home country to discourage deportation.

A faster interview process, already badly informed and distrustful according to a Guardian report last month, Seeking Asylum Alone, would be much worse for children already uncomfortable with the process, and confused. Another earlier report from the Refugee Council claims that provision of accommodation and support is also badly coordinated, even at present. There is still little to no reduction in detention of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, and only 5% of cases are successful. Ironically, this figure is cited in the paper to be released as evidence most of the claims are without foundation.

55,000 migrants claiming benefits

(and that's only the official figure)

Thus screamed the *Express*, in its 22nd November issue. More recently it complained that we were actually *teaching* them to claim. Once again, we are in a panic about immigration. (It's perhaps nice that asylum seems to be on the back burner, though for distinctly nasty reasons.)

EU 'immigration'

The headline refers to government figures indicating the current state of migrant workers from the EU. This has, of course, been an issue for the red-tops since the accession of 10 new countries to the EU in 2004, since when (reportedly) tens of thousands of Polish plumbers have invaded the UK to take advantage of ('abuse' in Blairspeak) our generous benefits. (The 10 new countries are confusingly referred to as the A8 [accession 8] in social science jargon. This is because of the ten, Malta and Cyprus were considered so small and so rich that they didn't merit any special restrictions.)

The truth of the matter is in fact disturbing in that actually we have no real way of measuring the number of foreign workers currently in the UK. When the new states joined, the UK adopted a liberal approach, unlike most other members of the original 15: David Blunkett introduced a 'Worker Registration Scheme' [WRS] under which people from the A8 had to register with the Home Office within a month of finding work in the UK. Anyone not finding work would be refused the right of residence, which in theory means they would be forced to return home and not allowed to claim benefits in this country. If you worked here for 12 months, you gained right of residence (and therefore eligibility for benefits). This compromise was intended to blunt right-wing hostility and pre-empt tabloid stories about benefit 'scroungers'.

There are several reasons for thinking that the WRS has not actually been very successful. This is because there is no way of discovering what proportion of foreign workers actually register; and there is no way of ensuring that those who do not find work go back home. Homelessness charities are reporting, in fact, a surge in eastern European citizens needing their help, which indicates that many have not. Now we discover (as the *Express* correctly states) that some A8 workers are claiming benefit. (The vast majority of these are claiming tax credits or child benefit.) This is presumably because they have now been here, and working, for the 12 months WRS requires.

A second reason for questioning the usefulness

of WRS figures is that the scheme explicitly excludes two possibly large categories: self-employed workers (the classic Polish plumber) and 'posted' workers. The latter are people employed by firms abroad who are 'posted' to Britain. Research indicates that there may be significant numbers of them.

A third reason is that many probably do not register (it costs £70, or about two days' wages).

All this leaves the way open for almost any estimate of the numbers of A8 residents who come to the UK to find work.

Should we be worried?

First, many thousands will already have gone home. The rate of arrival is probably also already levelling out or declining: there are only so many people in Poland, after all.

Second, common sense suggests that the overwhelming majority of foreign workers make a positive contribution to the economy. This is certainly what the government thinks. The Treasury, facing a likely tax famine in the next five years, is gambling on 185,000 immigrants every year to bail them out. (Meanwhile the Home Office is planning to tighten up on immigration. Probably not by chance, the Treasury has frozen its spending.) Low wages for Poles may rescue education and health spending for Gordon Brown, PM.

However, some aspects are not so good. One is the possibility that migrant labour depresses prospects and wage levels for our own citizens. Certainly unemployment in the UK has been rising for some time now, and wage inflation has been suspiciously low. The OECD puts this down partly to immigration and partly to higher numbers of retired people coming back to work.

A second is that high levels of immigration may undermine the longstanding British national consensus that public services should be broad-based and largely free or subsidised. Some research suggests that this depends on citizens perceiving their society as cohesive and made up largely of 'people like us'. We may not like this syndrome, but it is no use denying the possibility out of hand. When the *Express* talks about foreign workers 'flooding' into Britain and argues that 'with more and more pouring in, the strain on the welfare state is set to soar every month' it may be giving us a better picture of public opinion than of immigration facts.

What ought to be done?

There are a number of possible suggestions,

NUMBERS

Total WRS applications to date 510,000

Proposing to stay

- less than 3 months* 45%
- 6 to 11 months 3%
- 1-2 years 4%
- more than 2 years 6%
- Don't know, don't say 41%

Total applications for any kind of state or local benefit: 40,000

*probably gone home long since ...

Of persons registered with WRS

- 97% are working full-time
- 82% are between 18 and 34.

some more practical than others (blowing up the premises of all the tabloids being probably not a goer). It would probably help if the government were able to count people accurately. However it seems unlikely that this will be practicable in the near future. Proposed national electronic embarkation controls are only promised by 2014; and in any case the government's record on large IT schemes does not inspire confidence in its ability to bring in such a scheme successfully. (Incidentally no-one has shown how the proposed and colossally expensive ID card system would help in this context.)

Again, we need some way of reassuring public opinion about forthcoming immigration from Bulgaria and Rumania. The government is working on this, but very cautiously.

We also need to be much cleverer at supporting public services in areas where pressure from migrants may genuinely cause problems. At present this doesn't work very well, which means some local authorities (especially in London) are under real pressure. (Building more houses would help: housing is a pinch point.)

Quotas are the obvious answer; but as many people have pointed out, EU rules (and especially the 2004 Free Movement directive) may make most possible limits illegal. It is also true – in general – that limits, or quotas, or whatever you want to call them, on migrant working are likely to have all sorts of bad side effects. One of them is that people will come anyway (there are 90m-odd travellers into and out of Britain in a normal year, and tracking them all down is simply not possible). They may then work illegally, which makes it more likely that they will be exploited and less likely that they will contribute to British tax revenues.

So reassuring public opinion may not prove to be easy. Measures aimed at doing so may either be illegal or prove ineffectual or even damaging to the economy, and the latter is likely to be extremely unwelcome to the Treasury. Yet public opinion, and the tabloids, remain hostile to the idea of immigration, and it regularly figures as one of voters' most serious concerns.

Maybe blowing up the *Express* isn't such a bad idea after all. [JC]