



Newsletter

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

It's coming. Come and help

Refugee Week 2010 will soon be upon us again – 14th-20th June! Plans are already well advanced but more help will be needed

Annette Hughes writes: RSG and Exeter's Amnesty International group have once again been beavering away to compile a week-long programme of events to raise awareness of refugee and asylum issues and to celebrate the skills and contributions refugees make to our society.

Our full programme will be printed into an attractive glossy flyer and ready for distribution towards the end of May. We will also be seeking volunteers to help out with the numerous activities – there'll be fetching and carrying, hosting and making tea, mingling and speaking as well as lots of other jobs to fill! We'll be holding a volunteer evening in May to coordinate all this help. Meanwhile, here's a sneaky preview of the events we are planning, all subject to our funding applications at this stage.... Full details will be sent to you all once finalised.

Sunday 13th June

Football tournament at St George's Playing Fields, Topsham Road – there

could be around 10 teams this year, a real international feel to the event and so close to another major event it could be Exeter's version of the world cup!!

Monday 14th June

We are hoping to showcase some of the Women's Group handicrafts at Exeter Phoenix, an opportunity to buy, chat and perhaps learn a few techniques!

In the evening 'Write to Life', a literary group from the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, will be reading some of their work and discussing the importance of their work.

Tuesday 15th June

Its international cuisine time at St Sidwell's Community Café. Make sure you take a proper lunch time break to enjoy food from around the world prepared by RSG Women's Outreach Project.

In the evening we are launching our art exhibition at the Exeter Picture House. An installation designed by one of our refugee friends will be unveiled and will be shown for a fortnight. There will be wine and nibbles and opportunity to mingle amongst supporters and friends.

Wednesday 16th June

Mid week brings the hugely popular music evening to Exeter Library. We

already have a list of performers and will welcome all those wishing to participate or come along to listen.

Thursday 17th June

The Global Centre will be hosting again their 'world at lunch' discussion with the theme 'send them home'. A must for those wishing to air their views, learn some facts and possibly share their sandwiches!

In the evening the Picture House will be showing a film – The Welcome. And while you're there another chance to view our exhibition!

Friday 18th June

Friday brings our events to a close with the respected coffee morning at St Stephen's church in the High Street. We're hoping to attract a wide range of visitors including some local dignitary.

As well as these events we will be displaying information at various venues around Devon – St Sidwell's Café and County Hall in Exeter, libraries in Tiverton and Barnstaple to name just a few! Keep an eye out! Further information will be posted on our website nearer the time. We look forward to seeing many of you during the week.

Also in this issue

The Sanctuary Pledge, ESOL and Trustee report (next page)

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Yarl's Wood: a disaster? (page 4)

HELP FOR REFUGEE WEEK

As noted, we need volunteers to help - a briefing evening will be held on Tuesday 25th May. Contact the office for details.

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EDITORS

Annette Hughes and
Jeremy Cushing

RSG trustees

Meetings are scheduled on Wednesday 21st April and Wednesday 19th May, both at 5.30 p.m. Everyone welcome. For information contact the office.

Every ordinary 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.

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

The Sanctuary Pledge

Michelle Cockell writes: In the run-up to the General Election, a group of us including RSG volunteers, Exeter University students and representatives of multiple faith groups have established a 'Citizens for Sanctuary in Exeter' coalition. We have now become part of a national campaign to save Sanctuary in Britain.

The UK has a proud history of providing sanctuary for those fleeing persecution, dating back to the 17th century. However, in the past few years, with extremist politics, media scares and high-

profile failings by the Home Office, Britain's tradition is under threat. The general election, being as close a contest as predicted, provides a momentous opportunity to place pressure on the parliamentary candidates to implement change. With politicians being forced to listen more and more to voters, it is important to highlight to them that 66% of their potential voters think it is important for the UK to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution. As part of a national campaign we are asking candidates in the Exeter constituency to sign the Sanctuary Pledge.

This pledge consist of the following items: it asks the candidates to campaign responsibly, positively and sensitively, not pandering to the fears about people seeking sanctuary; to promote a culture of sanctuary locally and nationally; to support policies that will end the detention children and families for migration reasons; to promote the understanding between local communities, and finally to safeguard the long-term culture of sanctuary within the UK. With the 2010 general election being so momentous in British politics, now is the time to act to save sanctuary and keep a long-standing British tradition alive.
<http://sanctuarypledge.org.uk/>

English language tuition

RSG has offered help with English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) since its creation in 2002. More recently new developments have arisen out of the women's group. Clare Henry describes their progress

Background

The Home Tuition programme started two years ago in response to requests from women involved with the outreach project for English language tuition. Initially a small group of 7 women were supported by volunteer teachers, teaching sessions taking place in the women's homes. All of the women were from Afghanistan and all had recently arrived in England to join their husbands who were settled refugees.

Many of the women had little, or no, access to formal education previously and were unable to speak any English at all. Being plunged with their children into a totally strange cultural environment was extremely stressful. Legal requirements however also required the women to pass certified ESOL exams as a condition of obtaining leave to remain in Eng-

land with their husbands and children. Attending college and undertaking formal exams felt hugely daunting challenges in themselves. Home tuition became a forum where such stresses could be acknowledged freely and help offered to build confidence and language skills.

Current situation

Currently 22 women receive one-to-one English tuition within their own homes. Sessions are offered once a week, although many of the women would like more frequent sessions. We have six women on a waiting list: some have been waiting for quite a while and we need to decide how best to address this.

The women report that they value the one-to-one sessions as they allow a focus on their own unique learning needs within the context of a supportive relationship.

Volunteers and training

We have a stable team of 11 teacher volunteers all of whom have teaching experience and/or are qualified in teaching ESOL. Most of the volunteers have two students. I stay in regular contact with all the teachers and we meet together each month to identify teaching issues and learner needs and plan accordingly. They are a very enthusiastic and committed group.

Dave Wright has run a training session for the team and next month Bob Mycock is offering training around the assessment process at the College, which will be very useful for us. There is an ongoing need for resources, training, and support. Meanwhile the local authority says it regards ESOL as important, but has no way of funding it. Where next?

Trustee report

Trustees met on 17th February and 17th March.

Risk management

Michael White's risk management report was further discussed and trustees are still trying to identify which elements need action. They are also looking at a document issued by the Charities Commission about the

economic downturn. Proposals will be discussed on 21st April.

Trustee training

A group of trustees had been given an induction to the office. Further training would be needed and especially if RSG responded to requests by other organisations for talks on asylum and refugee issues.

Fundraising

It was decided that Emma Marshall would be employed full time for six months, during which period she would devote part of her work to the fundraising operation. At the end of six months trustees would review the funding situation and decide on the future. The possibility of SLAs (service-level agreements or contracts, with local authorities) was discussed.

ESOL

Our ESOL provision was discussed against the background of changes in public policy, which looked as though the local authority might have to take more responsibility.

RSG's profile

It was agreed that we needed to raise our public profile. RSG had not been invited to key local meetings and our work was not widely understood.

News roundup for March

Ruth Gidley

Russian family 'jumped to deaths' from Glasgow flats

Three people who plunged to their deaths from a multi-storey flat in Glasgow were a Russian family seeking asylum in the UK, the BBC reported. The father, mother and son had been granted asylum in Canada but left after a dispute with the authorities there. Their application to remain in the UK had recently been refused but they had not been issued with a removal order. The apparent triple suicide happened at the Red Road flats complex in the Springburn area of the city.

The BBC understands the family first arrived in the UK in 2007. According to a source familiar with the case, the family had been told that they had to leave their flat in Springburn after their application to stay was refused. No removal order had been issued, however, and they were advised to seek help from the Scottish Refugee Council to find alternative accommodation. Scottish charity Positive Action in Housing said the family who fell to their deaths had received a final notice from the agency demanding that they leave the UK.

Many of the Red Road high-rise flats are unoccupied as the local housing agency is moving residents to new accommodation. Glasgow Housing Association said the block at 63 Petershill Drive is currently let to the YMCA. It is understood the block involved holds a mixture of asylum seekers, refugees and other residents, but has partly been cleared in preparation for a demolition programme. All eight tower blocks in the Red Road complex, which are up to 30 storeys high, are due to be demolished in a phased programme which will start in the spring. They were the tallest tower blocks in Europe when they were built in the 1960s.

BBC story online and Positive Action in Housing probably has more information: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/glasgow_and_west/8554849.stm

Give an Afghan your vote, activists urge Britons

An activist group called Equality is inviting British voters to give their right to vote to someone in one of three developing countries which, it says, are 'directly affected by UK policies on war, climate and poverty.' Britons can register on giveyourvote.org to donate votes to Afghans, Ghanaians or Bangladeshis and, on the eve of the election - expected on May 6 - they will receive a text message telling them who wants to vote for which party.

Reuters story: <http://uk.news.yahoo.com/22/20100314/tuk-uk-britain-election-global-fa6b408.html>

Report shows asylum seekers abused during removal

A report published on March 12 has found immigration and security staff used handcuffs and violent techniques to restrain asylum seekers during their removal and deportation. The independent report by Dame Nuala O'Loan found that handcuffs were used to restrain people during their detention and removal, including women with serious health complaints, and showed that in many cases the use of force was not proved to be 'proportionate or necessary'. Lady O'Loan reviewed 29 complaints of ill-treatment and found that UKBA had failed to properly investigate two-thirds of these cases.

The inquiry was ordered by the Home Office after a report entitled Outsourcing Abuse based on 300 cases of alleged physical assault and racist abuse was published in 2008 by law firm Binberg Peirce, and organisations Medical Justice and NCADC.

Refugee Council: refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/archive/news/2010/March/120310_newsabuseremovals

[RG]

Stop press

Disturbances at Oakington immigration removal centre

Protests occurred at Oakington after a Kenyan detainee died, probably of a heart attack, having reportedly been denied medication by staff. 'He was asking for a doctor. It's very hard to get a doctor there. He had a heart attack and he died.'

guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/apr/15/oakington-detention-centre-immigrant-death

Amnesty International attacks memorandums of agreement

AI attacked the British government for relying on no-torture agreements with states where torture was endemic. AI claimed that Amnesty International said the practice of returning suspected terrorists to certain countries that promised humane treatment was a 'failed experiment'. The British government is also likely to be taken to court for handing prisoners over to the Afghan government.

news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8614626.stm

The office

We are continuing to love being in our new offices, the space, the light, and having plenty of visitors! But we do continue to have a problem that some telephone lines are not able to call us! Sounds strange, but at the moment those with virgin cable phones cannot call in... We are still exploring this, but if you are experiencing any problems calling our general number (01392 682185), please drop us an email so we are aware, and also so we can get in touch!

Otherwise the new premises are well set up and much credit goes to staff and volunteers who worked hard to achieve this. The most important development is probably the decision to employ Emma full time. She will work as coordinator for the drop-in service, and also undertake work on fundraising.

RSG is now on Facebook! If you are on there already please add us as a friend - our profile is 'RSG Devon'. We also have a 'page' that you can become a fan of (Refugee Support Group Devon). Some people reading may not have a clue about what any of that means ... but if you are a social networker and want to use it as a way of advertising us to your friends, please do! It's a really easy way for us to communicate our message for free, a useful tool in the current economic climate. We will also use it to advertise events etc, but don't worry - we will carry on with all our other ways of communicating, i.e. this newsletter, emails, etc ...

RSG in the press

RSG Women's Outreach Group features in Devon Life this month. It's page 130, framed in a piece about textiles around the county. Check it out!

Yarl's Wood: a disaster?

For months pressure has been building up from charities and other agencies over Yarl's Wood. Stories about poor treatment of detainees have surfaced again and again, including a major disturbance and fire in February 2002, and recently they culminated in another disturbance followed by a hunger-strike.

I'm really puzzled about Yarl's Wood. The stories you hear about it remind you strongly of the classic Stanford prison experiment (you will remember that this recruited ordinary students to role play, and had to be halted after a week because those designated 'guards' were seriously abusing those designated 'inmates'). Recent cases include Reetha Suppiah and her sons, Danahar and Emmanuel, Denise McNeil, Shaunice Bignall-Young and Sakinat Bello. Their descriptions of what happened to them in Yarl's Wood include insensitivity, repeated violent assaults, sexual abuse, theft and a male officer filming a strip search of a woman detainee. They make Yarl's Wood seem like a US rendition centre.



Reetha Suppiah

However, Yarl's Wood has been under the spotlight for years, and particularly since the fire in 2002. Unease has tended to be most acute over children, especially since a medical report on 24 children held at Yarl's Wood, published in October last year. This listed a catalogue of bad practice and resulting health problems including loss of weight, sleep problems, bed-wetting and regression in language skills. All 9 parents expressed strong distress and six of them had contemplated suicide.

Serco has tried to improve its treatment of child detainees. There are specially-designed classrooms and a nursery which was rated 'good' by OFSTED, a new improved complaints procedure specially for children, gym facilities and access to local authority social services.

Ironically, however, concentration on children may have made it worse for adult women at the centre, and in February at least 50 detainees started a hunger strike in protest against their detention. If their claims are accurate Serco seems to have responded to the protest very badly, using 'kettling' (without access to toilets) and in some cases acting with unacceptable brutality, e.g. by using police riot shields to 'crush' detainees who tried to escape through a window.

All these allegations seem to indicate that Yarl's Wood is an institution which is totally out of control, riddled with racism, sexism, brutality and the rampant abuse of power. The similarity with the Stanford experiment seems inescapable.

However, there is another side. Precisely because Yarl's Wood has such a high profile, it is also relentlessly scrutinised. In the last 15 months it has been thoroughly inspected by two different independent bodies: the Children's Commission and HM Prisons Inspectorate. HMPI actually conducted two full-scale inspections during that period, the second of which was unannounced. There have been three CC inspections in the last four years. If you read the reports, they give the impression of an organisation which started off weirdly naive and unprofessional, but has worked hard to catch up with what the public sector would regard as acceptable standards. Many of the recommendations made by HMPI seem reassuringly trivial (food for vegetarians inadequate; not enough supervision of the gym; inadequate provision for activities, ESOL provision not good enough, outer reception area should contain activities for children). Others are less so: the use of force was still not clearly enough regulated and 'several centre staff lacked confidence in live situations'. In this context HMPI recalled prophetically that 'a protest in the family unit in June 2009 had resulted in detainees occupying a corridor and large-scale intervention involving the use of force on a number of men and women in sight of children'.

Another feature of external reports is that it is often not Yarl's Wood or Serco which are the cause of distress. The most significant problem for children was arrest, followed by transport (done by other agencies such as G4S). It was arrest, not detention, which the CC said caused children distress; and even here over half the sample said that the arresting officers had been 'friendly'.

As so often, there are strong indications of, at least, weak leadership at senior levels. Louise Perrett, a case owner at the UK Border Agency (UKBA)'s Cardiff centre, blew the whistle on practices she said were typical of that operation, and if any significant part of her allegations is true there is no way that management in UKBA could have been unaware of it.

There are 10 immigration removal centres (formerly called 'detention centres') in the UK, of which 7 are run by private firms. Yarl's Wood is the only IRC to hold only women, children and families. It's in Bedfordshire and is run by the private company Serco Ltd. In November 2009 it held 306 detainees (official capacity is 405). It was inspected by HM Inspector of Prisons in February 2008. An unannounced follow-up inspection was held in November last year. In February 2010 it was inspected by the Children's Commissioner for England, also following up previous visits.

('Umbongo, umbongo, they kill them in the Congo' was the helpful advice of a UKBA legal adviser.) The poor practice of what Andrew Rawnsley called 'the appallingly inadequate immigration bureaucracy' has often been



Louise Perrett

detailed, and still continues (as the government admits). The truth seems to be that rather than Yarl's Wood being to blame, the whole system is. And probably, as an increasing body of expert medical opinion believes, the practice of detention is simply harmful by its nature and should, at least for children, be stopped. The Home Office is not famed for its sensitive handling of complex issues, and the detention policy is probably inherently unmanageable.

Interestingly there is no evidence that detention (which costs an average of £800 a week per detainee) is necessary. In letters to us UKBA was unable to point to any. On the contrary, a survey of 98 detainees who were released on bail in 2000-1 showed that 90% complied with the conditions of their bail.

It seems likely that the main reason for the persistence of this policy, which is expensive, morally repugnant, damaging to both adults and children and in the end unnecessary, is political pressure. Ever since Tony Blair's obvious panic at rising numbers of asylum claims called forth a tsunami of repressive policies, anyone working for UKBA, or the Home Office, or Serco must be well aware that whatever lip service is paid to good practice, in the end the overriding imperative is to find reasons for looking tough on asylum. In these circumstances professional pride in high standards of service must be the first victim. The temptation for UKBA staff to give in to their worst instincts must be hard to resist. Louise Perrett suggested that few succeeded. [JC]