

REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP (DEVON): ANNUAL REPORT 2008 – 2009

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Chair's report

The year 2008-2009 was a year of consolidation, the Refugee Support Group having successfully secured funding sufficient for the immediate future. With a reasonable financial base, the trustees focused on defining and clarifying our strategies. That said, fund-raising will always continue to be essential: at the time of writing, it is already clear that ahead lies a crucial and testing time for maintaining RSG's core funding, as well as developing its various projects.

In July 2008 we commissioned Professor Bill Jordan of Plymouth University to evaluate the RSG. His detailed report, besides praising our work, gave insightful pointers to possible improvements. To complement and extend this evaluation we held an away day at which a professional facilitator helped trustees, volunteers and clients to review our operations and establish priorities. The trustees have initiated regular strategy meetings to plan ahead. To underpin our operations the policies and procedures handbook has been completely updated and legally validated, while a revised constitution has been adopted. RSG works closely with a number of organisations, both statutory and voluntary. To reflect this the trustees decided to recruit new trustees with relevant experience and expertise from other organisations.

In seeking to respond to the ever-changing needs of our clients and to provide a more professional environment, new premises emerged as the top priority. The search for new offices began in earnest. Bigger and better facilities will enable the project manager, Annette Hughes, to oversee our expanding and vital service. We are hugely grateful for the invaluable work of Annette and also Ramazan Mohammed, the Training and Development Officer. Their work and that of the volunteers demand commitment, a wide range of skills and, above all, flexibility. We also owe much to our treasurer, Chris Hill, to Peter Foy for his work on the organisation's finances, and to Jeremy Cushing for his tireless fund-raising for RSG.

We would like to thank everyone who works for the RSG in whatever way. For our service users life has become increasingly difficult, with frequent changes to government policies on asylum, but our clients and supporters alike remain wonderfully resilient. Some refugees have had personal successes, mostly educational, which we celebrate and acknowledge as a testament to their spirit, hard work and determination.

Fran Jenkin [signature]

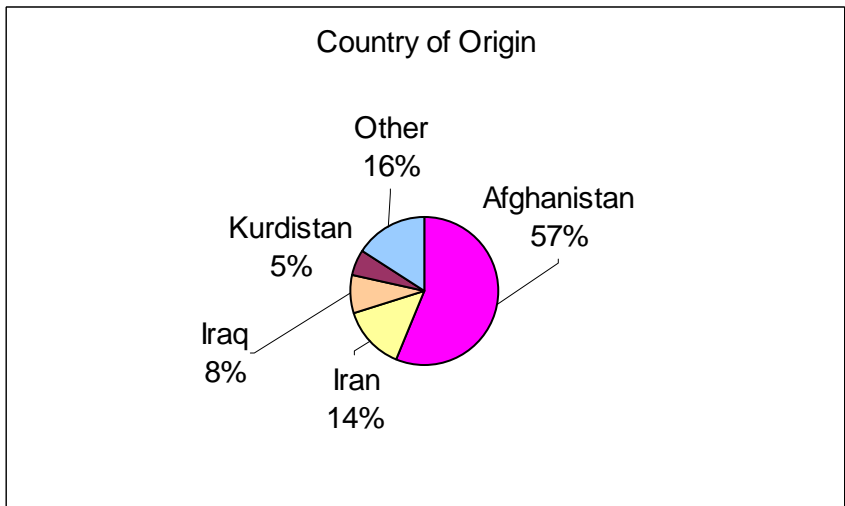
Drop-in service

The drop-in service continues to be the hub of the organisation. This year, seeing 229 individuals through the year, with 2445 actual visits to the office, we have supported more refugees than asylum seekers, with an increase in the number of families settling in Exeter, and of asylum seekers returning to their countries of origin (voluntarily and through forced removal).

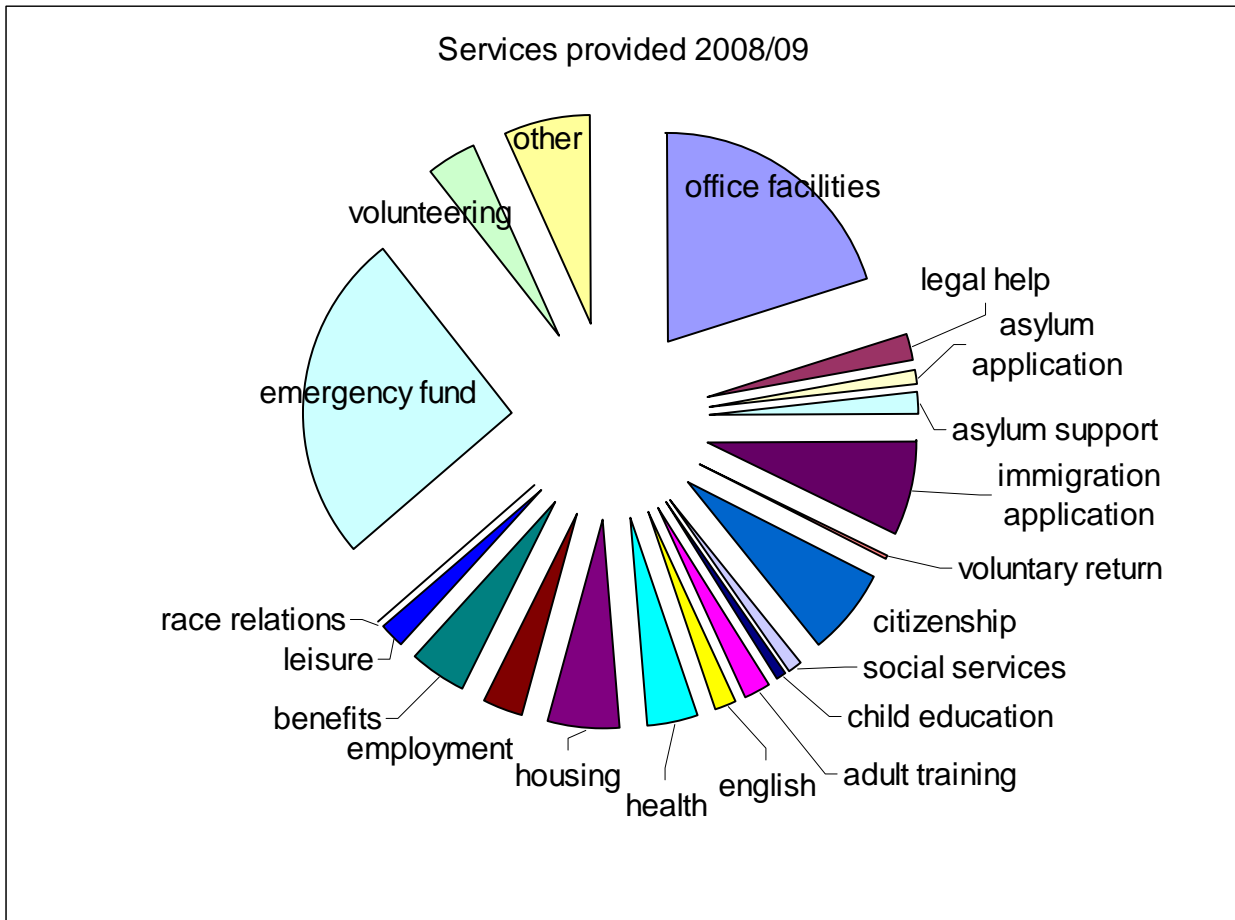


The asylum seekers we have been supporting have in the main been resident in Exeter for a number of years: some made unsuccessful asylum applications but are unable to return to their country of origin, others have open cases and are still awaiting the outcome.

Many of our clients are originally from Afghanistan. Iranians, Kurds and Iraqis form the remaining majority of drop-in service users, while we have also helped small numbers of people from Angola, Bangladesh, Bosnia, China, France, Guinea, India, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Latvia, Mali, Palestine, Poland, Turkey, UK and Zimbabwe.

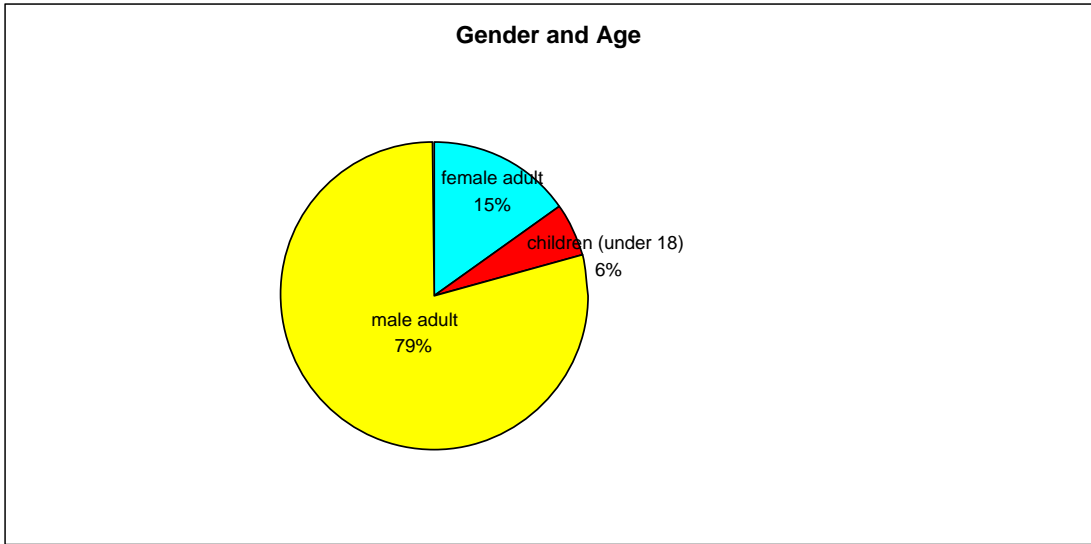


There are frequent requests for the use of the office facilities. This year we have also seen a large number of requests for help in completing forms in relation to immigration issues – citizenship, spouse visas, extensions of leave to remain. With more families settling in Exeter, housing issues have also accounted for a significant percentage of enquiries.



RSG has well established working relationships with other organisations in Exeter, including the Devon Race Equality Council. Such links ensure access to specialist advice about housing, race relations, benefits and debt.

The drop-in service has supported fewer women in comparison to the previous year, which is probably due to the success of our women's project. However, we have helped growing numbers of children and young people – unaccompanied young asylum seekers needing information and help with issues such as proof of age, legal representation and access to education.



The drop-in service has had to remain flexible to respond to changing needs and demands of refugees and asylum seekers in Devon. The increase in family arrivals, legislative changes and developments in policy through court judgements all contribute to the need for us to learn and develop our methods of support. RSG remains the only organisation in the Exeter area that solely supports refugees and asylum seekers, and the large numbers passing through our doors highlights the need for us to continue operating such a service. We have also become increasingly aware of the limitations of our current premises – space, confidentiality and privacy, facilities for record keeping and storing information. WE look forward to moving somewhere more suitable in the coming year.

Emergency fund

During the year we have supported a total of thirty-three individuals. This figure includes six families. Much of the fund has been applied for weekly cash subsistence on a regular basis. Each week there have been between ten and seventeen people receiving such support. Most of them are asylum seekers who have made fresh applications or are appealing their cases. Some have been refused government support, others feel unable to apply as they know it means being moved away from Exeter, where they have developed good support networks. A small number are asylum seekers seeking legal representation.

Other emergency support needs have included travel costs, contribution to accommodation and subsistence in cases where there has been loss of employment or benefit delays. The Exeter charity Foodbank opened its doors at the end of 2008 and RSG has been able to refer people to collect emergency food parcels when available. RSG is also grateful for help from St Petrock’s.

RSG’s emergency fund is commonly the only immediate financial support available to destitute asylum seekers in Exeter, as the following instances show:

A. claimed asylum in 2002. His application was refused, however he was granted one year discretionary leave to remain. At the end of this period he applied to extend his leave. He had a regular job in Exeter and had begun to feel safe and settled. After a year of waiting

this application was rejected and it took a further 18 months to receive an appeal hearing. His appeal was rejected. A. feared to return to Afghanistan and sought legal help to make further representations to the Home Office. His right to work was taken away when his appeal was refused and he was forced to seek help from friends and charity, RSG Emergency Fund being the key regular help. By now he had lived in Exeter for more than four years: it had become home. He could only apply for support if he was willing to return to Afghanistan, and his legal representative was requesting more money to submit a new application to the Home Office. He borrowed money, paid a solicitor and didn't hear anything for a year. Without confirmation of his application he could not apply for any government support, although this would mean leaving Exeter, his home, where he had friends and felt at peace. In 2008 he was able to engage a Devon lawyer who noticed discrepancies in the decision-making process of his original application in 2002. Other similar cases had set a precedent in the courts. Whilst this has given him hope he is still waiting for a response from the Home Office, is still unable to work and has no right to benefits. He remains in receipt of help from RSG's Emergency Fund.

H. was seeking asylum from Zimbabwe. She was pregnant and her partner had disappeared. She was not entitled to support as she had not applied when she initially arrived in the UK. She had support from friends she had recently made, but knew this support would be limited once her baby arrived. She was scared to apply for government support as she feared being returned to Zimbabwe (the government was acknowledging difficulties in Zimbabwe and forced returns were not happening, however she knew the procedure could change). She tried to get help from Social Services, but they refused until the baby arrived. RSG Emergency Fund and other charitable organisations in Exeter assisted H. with food and finances, and RSG helped to open dialogue with Social Services who provided temporary support once she left the maternity hospital with her baby. Hope's legal representative continues to pursue her case with the Home Office and she now has left Exeter to accept government asylum support, in the knowledge that her case still awaits a decision.

Advocacy and campaigning

As the number of those with refugee status increases so advocacy needs shift: the current emphases are housing, physical and mental health, education, utilities, benefits, employment. Obtaining spouse visas for husbands settled here has become a major area of our advocacy work this year, involving lengthy communication with solicitors and the consul in Islamabad.

It is often necessary for refusal of visas to be appealed and on several occasions individuals have been accompanied to the tribunal in Newport. This is a great support especially if they are putting their own case in person. We have assisted with obtaining legal advice, putting papers together, making sure that people understand the process, and helping to book interpreters when necessary.

Appeals have been largely successful but the process is very drawn out. Wives have been granted visas but still have to wait to sort out applications for infant children born after the initial application or appeal. One wife came to the UK initially without her baby.

In the main families are eventually being reunited, though there is one family that is now applying for the third time. It is very perplexing to understand the niceties of these decisions, which may rest on not accepting marriage documents or being able to prove that the marriage is continuing. Surprisingly it appears easier for the recently married than if you are older and were married and had a family before leaving your country. Financial documents, bank statements and pay slips are scrutinised to prove income and savings. Too great savings can be considered questionable, as can too little. One adjudicator at the tribunal did contest the Home Office representative's statement that on the income shown the man could not have built up such large savings. It was acknowledged that refugees work long hours and do make tremendous sacrifices to secure their family's future. However, the man failed in his appeal because of financial considerations.

Of course it is wonderful to see families reunited especially when it involves older children who have known only a disrupted family life. Well mannered and keen to settle to a new life, many of the children have already made a good start with English at school before arriving here and are ambitious for their future. This new life inevitably leads to a raft of obstacles to be overcome: finding schools, houses, work, health issues, English classes, making friends. Integrating into communities and a new culture is not plain sailing. Two years, the length of most visas, goes very quickly and we have now begun helping people to understand and work towards the next stage in the building of a permanent home here.

Amongst the asylum seekers are three unaccompanied minors for whom we work closely with the Social Services. They need advice and information about asylum and its processes. The asylum laws and policies change frequently, so it is important that we keep up to date.

As the crucial date of 2011 approaches, which the Government has set as a deadline for clearing the backlog of applications, we hope to be able to assist more of these so-called 'legacy cases' to find legal representatives to reopen and argue their case to stay – not least, after many years in limbo, on the grounds of human rights.

Sometimes the UK border agency detains asylum seekers to interrogate them; we are vital in informing their solicitors and advocating to secure their release. In this we have been successful for those whose cases are open, but sadly those whose cases have failed are removed. One person who was removed made a successful application from Pakistan to join his family in the USA.

Where possible we help to open cases, when there is fresh evidence available. Research into country of origin information helps to support applications and is time consuming but often vital. Solicitors are now only paid to undertake up to five hours work for an

asylum seeker, so we play an essential role, for example in supplying background information and getting documents translated and authenticated.

There have been many training, teaching and development sessions for all ages, from university MA students to primary school children. We have a place on the Independent Advisory Group to scrutinise and monitor the police and have developed good relations with the local media. We continue to be involved with the two national campaigns 'Strangers into Citizens', to end destitution for asylum seekers, and 'Still Human, Still Here', calling for legal status for long term migrants and, for our clients, the right to work while they wait (sometimes for up to nine years) for a Home Office decision.

Some of the clients we work with are often desperate, under extreme stress and without hope. It is a privilege to advocate for them. For those settled here, it is a pleasure to help them further along the path of integration.

Particular thanks are due to Francisca van Holthoon and Fran Jenkin for all their work in this area.

Women's outreach project

We have exceeded our expectations. At the beginning of last year twenty women were involved: now we have fifty-five. We have a waiting list of women needing ESOL volunteers to teach one-to-one on the home tuition programme. Seven women have passed the citizenship test (one with full marks) and five have been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain. One has completed an interpreting course and is now on the list of local professional interpreters. One works in a charity shop and most can manage UK currency, serving on the Gold Dozi (embroidery) stall. All the women who need ESOL qualifications are studying at Exeter College and attend free WEA classes three times a week.

We have business cards, order forms and invoices for selling the Gold Dozi. The women participate in local events, such as International Women's day, the RESPECT festival and city council Play Days. They have also had a much admired embroidery display at a prestigious Westpoint exhibition and at Exeter University's Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies.

The women's cooking is popular: they have catered for the Women's Aid AGM, a Human Rights seminar, a staff party at the Spacex Arts centre, a Cultural Kitchen and coffee morning during Refugee week, and for a retirement party for one of our trustees.

We also help with doctor/dentist/hospital appointments, visits and counselling. As a group we meet fortnightly when we have speakers such as a health visitor or a specialist to help us learn relaxation and massage techniques, as many women suffer from trauma and culture shock. Sometimes we even have a party. School holiday outings (for up to fifty-three women and children) to the zoo, aquarium or a farm are very popular.

English language home tuition

This has been a very positive year for the English home tuition scheme. As the women's outreach project has expanded there has been a sharp increase in demand for developing English language skills. Sixteen women and one young person received home tuition and in March we had five women on a waiting list. To meet demand we have recruited enthusiastic volunteers with experience in ESOL teaching and now have a teaching group of seven offering good quality teaching support. Feedback shows that individual women really value this service.

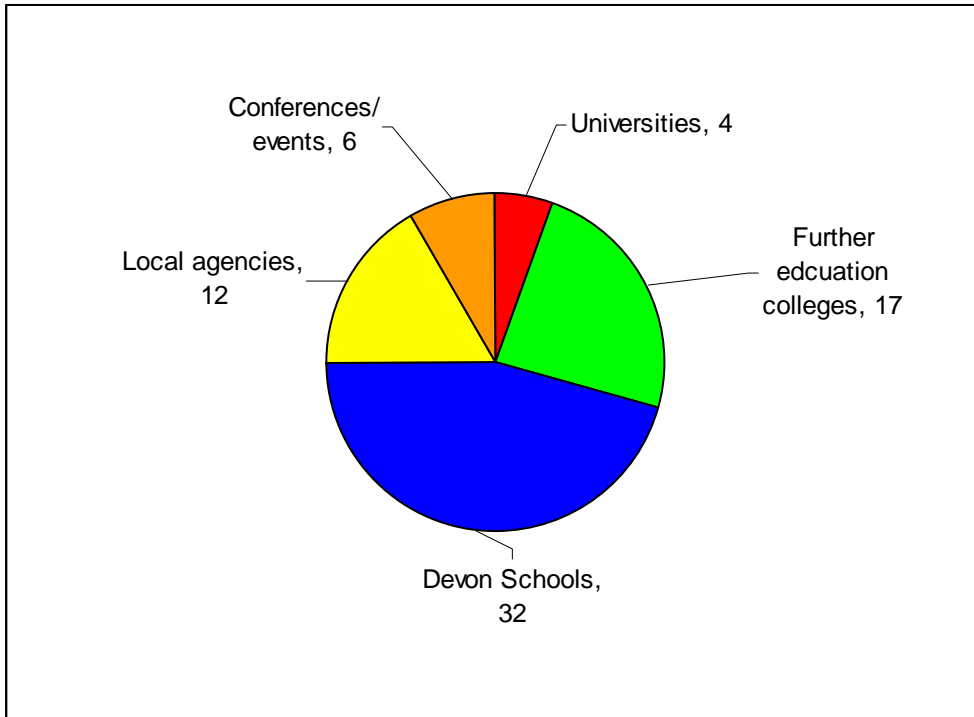
All of the women (except one) have attended ESOL classes at Exeter College and we have excellent links with the ESOL team there. Three of the women we have been visiting have passed their Speaking Exam and have therefore been able to secure Indefinite Leave to Remain: more will be taking exams in June. The legal requirement to pass English language exams as a condition of obtaining leave to remain has placed enormous pressure on the women and their families, many of whom arrive without any spoken or written English. It has been fantastic to see the enormous progress everyone is making.

Immediate goals are to address the fast growing waiting list by recruiting more teaching volunteers. At the moment we are only able to offer support to those doing exams for visa purposes. It would be useful at some point to be able to offer more advanced English speaking group classes. Many of the women would like to continue developing their skills in order to do volunteer work or seek employment.

RSG is grateful to the tutors, and to Clare Henry for her work as co-ordinator of the teaching programme.

Training and development

With the continued employment of our training and development worker, Rammi, we have been able to continue delivering training to a variety of educational establishments and other local organisations. During the year sixty-five training workshops/sessions were held throughout Devon. In addition, RSG provided talks/workshops at five events/conferences.



Established and new RSG members have benefited from structured induction and training, particularly focusing on refugees' experiences of the systems and challenges faced in the UK. We have tried to encourage the active participation of asylum seekers and refugees. This has proved problematical for a variety of reasons: lack of confidence, training, time commitments. It is an area of work that will need a close focus next year.

RSG continued to host the local inter-agency networking group for refugees and asylum seekers, with three meetings through the year. The positive outcomes of such meetings include receiving up to date information on changes within other services, sharing of ideas and information, and raising and addressing any issues with the people who can make change happen. We aim to continue with these network meetings through the next financial year.

We have sought the views of our service users and engaged people as much as possible in the planning and delivery of our activities. With the use of volunteer interpreters, and the benefits of Rammi's language skills and understanding of the communities we work with, we have been able to meet a growing need.

RSG has also developed criteria and eligibility for individual grants to encourage the personal development of service users and has set aside a specific sum in the next financial year for this purpose. A panel will be convened to consider applications for such grants.

Volunteers

The organisation would not exist without the passion and dedication of our tireless volunteers, who continue to be the heart and soul of RSG. They represent a rich diversity

of experience, from students to retired professionals, local people to refugees and migrants.

The tally of volunteers remains steady at sixty, many of whom have now volunteered with RSG over a number of years. Volunteers provide information and support in the drop-in service, assist with administration and operational needs, manage our allotment, provide English tuition, support the women's outreach group, campaign and raise awareness, support people in leisure and recreational activities, fundraise, produce our newsletter and website, serve as trustees, network and liaise with other organisations, represent RSG at events and functions.

Following our evaluation in June 2008 a more structured procedure for recruiting and providing training to volunteers has been put in place. RSG hopes to be able to offer further training opportunities to volunteers in the future. All volunteers working with the Women's outreach project undergo CRB checking before starting to volunteer and this has also been swept out to the volunteers in the drop-in service.

RSG would like to express its sincere gratitude to all the volunteers for keeping our services alive.

Allotment

The allotment has been very productive again last season. Broad and runner beans, potatoes and onions, beetroot, parsnips and, of course, courgettes were all excellent. We also harvested good crops of fruit: raspberries, blackberries and blackcurrants, as well as apples. More ground has been cultivated so the whole area is looking better maintained. A good lockable shed was bought with the help of a grant from the Gemini Radio Charitable Trust. The new shed is proving essential, given the increased size of our plot. One of the things being stored there is 'the allotment bike', for the use of anyone who needs it for travel in connection with allotment work. With the help of a further donation of vouchers we also purchased a good petrol driven brushcutter/trimmer which is proving invaluable.

We will be very sorry to lose Zafar, who is to return to Afghanistan later in the year, although, of course, we wish him well. He has worked extremely hard on the allotment over the years and is justifiably proud of his achievements. He has started to cultivate the new ground so that he has his own plot, for potatoes and onions. It is Zafar that we depend on for the bulk of the heavy digging work, as well as strimming (he completed his Health and Safety training for this) and much besides.

Following advice, the damson and plum trees were severely pruned. We will have to wait for a while to see if the fruit improves. Both had suffered from disease and insect attack in the past. The two apple trees on the new plot were also tidied up as the lower branches were brushing the ground. It is now easier to keep the area free of the dreaded bindweed. We did not go to the stables at Ide with Jeremy's trailer to collect manure this year - the ground was appallingly soggy last autumn. However, Jenny managed to transport

several sackloads in the boot of her car. We now have two compost bins in action and hope by next year to have some home produced compost for use.

Another client who also works his own plot has started to make a pond. So far we have seen slow-worms and snakes in our 'garden'. We are looking forward to seeing some new wildlife when the pond is established.

The individuals who have been helping this past year are now rapidly gaining the confidence to work by themselves at the allotment. It is rewarding to see people taking ownership of the project. It provides a small but welcome oasis of freedom and equality. Zafar agrees it turned his mood around, and made him happier. Being interviewed before returning to Afghanistan, he said that working alongside older volunteers had helped him appreciate his youth and strength, instead of dwelling on the negative. 'It's good for your body. It makes you feel better.'

We still need to convince more of our clients of the universal and wide ranging benefits of growing your own food – even here in the sophisticated West where the supermarket is king.

RSG is very grateful to Pat Comery and Jenny Stephens for all their work.

Refugee week 2008

Refugee Week, co-ordinated by RSG, was a huge success this year. Collaboration with other agencies was key, including Amnesty, the Red Cross and The Ivy Project. We had such a variety of activities throughout the week that there was something for everyone.

The annual football tournament was won by the Devon and Cornwall Police team. The Banner theatre performed "They get free mobiles....don't they?" at the Barnfield Theatre, a show that tackled and dispelled myths and fallacies surrounding asylum seekers in the UK. We had two nights of entertainment at Exeter Library – 'Words of Freedom', with local poet Louise Parker, and Helen Bamber, the well known founder member of Amnesty International and the UK Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. . All those able to attend this evening could not have failed to be moved by the stories of survival, and the passion and dedication that Helen brings tirelessly to her work. On the second evening, 'Sounds of Freedom', local talent (including our own star Rammi) sang, played music or read poetry.

The Exeter Picture House screened 'Grow your own', a moving and humorous look at life on the allotments for a group of migrants. RSG's Women's Outreach project provided a fascinating workshop on the art of Gold Dozi embroidery as well as hosting the 'Cultural Kitchen' once again at the St Sidwell's Centre. The response to these events was highly appreciative.

Refugee Week also held its regular lunchtime discussion at the Global Centre, the Red Cross providing a great insight into the effects of destitution on asylum seekers in Devon:

and a coffee morning was held at Stephens Church, attended by the Deputy Mayor and senior County Councillors. The women's group once again enticed us with their delicious home-made sweets and cakes, and sold samples of their beautiful embroidery. Refugee Week closed with a multi-faith celebration at St Sidwell's church.

Whilst many participants at the events already knew RSG, we also met many people (for example, at the Cultural Kitchen and the Coffee Morning) for the first time, and were able to share information about our work. Next year we plan to work even harder on our promotion to pull in the crowds from more walks of life.

The charity's funders

In an increasingly testing climate we are most grateful to all those bodies and individuals that support us. In addition to one trust that wishes to remain anonymous, and others already mentioned, we have received funding as follows:

Core funding

Sir John and Lady Amory's Charitable Trust
The Henry Smith Charity
The J. Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust
The Lloyds TSB Foundation
The Pennon Group (S W Water)

Women's outreach project

The Allen Lane Foundation
The 29th May 1961 Charitable Trust
Viscount Amory's Charitable Trust
The Co-operative Community Fund
The Elmgrant Trust
The Marchday Charitable Trust
The Odin Charitable Trust
Positive Steps
The Claude and Margaret Pike Charity
The Trusthouse Charitable Foundation

Emergency fund

The Leigh Trust
The Jill Franklin Charitable Trust
The Hilden Charitable Fund
The Pyke Charitable Trust

Allotment

The Gemini Radio Charitable Trust

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

Income and Expenditure Summary 2008-2009

	at 31 March 2009	at 31 March 2008
<u>Brought forward</u>	45,533	36,790
Income	135,973	86,149
Expenditure	97,151	77,406
<u>Balance carried forward</u>		
Restricted	59,787	12,502
Unrestricted	4,568	18,031
Designated funds	20,000	15,000
<hr/>		
Total	84,355	45,533

RSG (Devon): Trustees 2008/2009

Jeremy Cushing

Rehab Farag (from November 2008)

Kate Hannan (resigned August 2008)

Chris Hill TREASURER

Christopher Holdsworth

Francisca van Holthoon

Fran Jenkin CHAIR

David Mezzetti

Tim Niblock

Asia Rahman (from November 2008)

Colin Stiff

Lawrence Sail SECRETARY

Neil Whiter (resigned August 2008)