

Refugee Support Group Devon

Evaluation by Professor Bill Jordan June 2008

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Executive Summary

This evaluation is based on interviews, discussions, three focus groups (two with service users) and documentation. It updates the evaluation carried out in 2005 for the Big Lottery Fund. Since then, the Refugee Support Group (RSG) has transformed itself from a low-key back-up to NASS and Devon County Council services for dispersed asylum seekers to being the main support service for those who have sought humanitarian protection in the UK living in Devon.

In the context of a tense and restrictive political climate over immigration, this has involved supporting increasing numbers of very vulnerable individuals facing destitution and homelessness, with unresolved asylum claims. But it has also allowed the mobilisation of refugees' skills and energies in a range of activities enabling social integration and access to citizenship, while requiring the development of a range of advice and support for broader issues, concerning family, employment etc.

The evaluation is concerned with continuing challenges for RSG, such as accommodation, record-keeping, the funding of its core advice and support service (the drop-in), and the support of volunteers. But it aims to set these against future strategic questions, about how to combine a service to very vulnerable individuals with a set of membership activities for resourceful refugees with much to contribute to the organisation.

Although there has been a tendency for RSG's service users to polarise between these ends of a spectrum, the report illustrates that many able and active members, who act as volunteers or group participants, still have unresolved issues over immigration status, entitlement to benefits etc. It also shows that those who have progressed to citizenship still expect and seek help and advice over dealings with official agencies. These overlaps and complexities represent a challenge for RSG.

(a) Could the Drop-In be Better Organised?

The unsuitability of the accommodation may mask issues about the drop-in service. RSG seeks a friendly, empowering and inclusive approach, in contrast to state bureaucracies. It also includes service users as volunteers, and encourages engagement in the organisation.

This level of *informality* is in fact difficult to sustain, in combination with efficiency and impartiality. The co-ordinator is required to take a lead in sustaining consistency and upholding basic rules, for instance over emergency payments. But service users in focus groups criticised the way the drop-in is working, despite the invaluable assistance they have received in the past.

The report argues that RSG is right to uphold its informal and accessible approach, but that volunteers need more training and support to sustain this. Volunteers need to be confident to set priorities and give feedback to service users in a respectful way, including being challenging at times. The role of the training and development officer should be better explained, as service users do not fully understand this.

(b) Can Group Activities Support/Help Fund the Drop-In?

The report argues that, even before more suitable accommodation is found, RSG should consider whether it might be possible to develop group activities for more settled members into something like a Social Enterprise, which could contribute to the general fund, and hence subsidise the drop-in, which is the most difficult to fund through external sources.

Using the example of a 'cultural café', the report suggests that RSG should investigate whether this might draw together some of present activities in the Women's Group and the allotment, into some kind of continuing paid and voluntary work, which should be explored now, rather than waiting for them to emerge after a move.

(c) Other Issues

RSG has proved itself to be flexible and adaptable in a changing environment, and communications between trustees, staff and service users are good. The training and development officer is making innovative links with other agencies and groups, but his role should be better clarified and protected. The co-ordinator's role should be one of leadership, support and training of volunteers, for which she has excellent qualities.

Recommendations

- Training and support for volunteers, focusing on confidence in handling informality, should be strengthened.
- Record-keeping in complex cases should allow updated notes to be shared and kept by service users.
- Service users should be involved in the training of volunteers.
- The implications of a possible social enterprise should be investigated.
- The roles of new staff should be clearly defined, so as to allow the co-ordinator to concentrate on leadership, support and training volunteers.

Report

Introduction

This evaluation is based on interviews and discussions with trustees, staff, volunteers and service users, and on three focus groups with service users (2) and volunteers, as well as reading of documentation. The aim has been to update the evaluation carried out in 2005 in connection with the award of Big Lottery funding, and to allow reflection on the direction to be taken by the Refugee Support Group in the next few years.

RSG came into being under the aegis of the Devon and Exeter Racial Equality Council (DEREC) at a time when asylum seekers were being dispersed to Exeter through the new arrangements of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). It was registered as a charity in 2002. Dispersed asylum seekers were supported by Devon County Council, so RSG was mainly concerned with assisting in their adaptation and eventual integration into the wider community.

This role was changing at the time of the 2005 evaluation, because the NASS contract with Devon County Council was terminated. As a result, the work of RSG became concerned with asylum seekers arriving in Devon with unresolved legal issues (most of whom lacked access to official financial support or accommodation) and with refugees granted leave to remain, including many who have chosen to move to Devon.

This shift has required rapid adaptation by RSG, from a fairly low-key back up to the front-line services for asylum seekers to being the main support service for those who have sought humanitarian protection. As the political and legal context has become more tense and restrictive, RSG has been supporting increasing numbers of very vulnerable people, facing destitution and homelessness, and relying mainly on networks of friends and fellow-nationals for everyday living. However, at the same time it has been able to draw on the energies and skills of a growing number of refugees, making a successful transition into work, community participation and citizenship but sometimes encountering family, employment and other problems.

In seeking to identify and make recommendations about the strategic implications for RSG of this shift, I have been struck by the complexity of the issues for the organisation. Although the overall trend is towards a polarisation between extremely vulnerable and needy asylum seekers and more settled and resource-rich refugees, this is an over-simplification. I shall therefore start my report with some examples of people who have benefited from RSG's support, but whose stories illustrate these complexities.

I have not made any attempt to quantify my information in the way that the 2005 evaluators did. My aim has been to identify which of the issues raised by their report have been resolved, which are still around in one way or another, and which new issues have arisen. I shall try to project present questions of strategy forward, to anticipate possible directions for future development and to suggest how likely problems can best be addressed.

Examples

The interviews, discussions and focus groups I conducted were lively and stimulating. They reflected an organisation in which both volunteers and service users have a strong investment, and in which trustees and staff are open-minded and adaptable. They also illustrated the challenges faced by any organisation seeking to raise consciousness of humanitarian protection, and to support those claiming it in the UK, in the current political climate.

As provision for asylum seekers has become more restrictive, but numbers with unresolved asylum claims, or have failed claims but who cannot be removed or have evaded the authorities, continue to arrive in Devon, advice and support work remains the central task of RSG. Meanwhile, others who came through NASS between 2002 and 2005, or who moved to Devon after their claims were successful, are active within the organisation, as volunteers or in activity groups. But these categories are not separate. Some resourceful activists still have unresolved immigration status, and

some who have achieved refugee or even citizenship status still require advice and support, as these examples illustrate.

Isabella

Isabella claimed asylum from Angola, along with her sisters. She left London, where she had been accommodated by NASS, two years ago, but with her immigration status still unresolved. She received help from RSG in gaining financial support, but this is still precarious. She and her two teenage children were also helped to find accommodation. She is now an active member of the RSG Women's Group, and her children are doing well at school – she hopes they will go on to university. She says: 'When I came to Exeter, I needed help with everything for myself and my children. I found RSG very helpful with benefits, accommodation, everything'.

(Since this report was drafted, Isabella and her children have received indefinite leave to remain.)

Emily

Emily is from Zimbabwe, where her child is still living with her extended family. Like Isabella, she has an unresolved asylum claim, going back five years. She needed intensive help over accommodation and benefits when she was referred to RSG after moving to Devon. However, she has since done a number of courses at Exeter College, after receiving learning support funds. These include a business course and a university access course, though she cannot yet enter university because she has not yet identified a source of funding. She is now a volunteer, giving advice in the drop-in service, and also attends the women's group. Emily says: 'They say you have a failed asylum claim, but ... because of what is happening in places like Zimbabwe, they can't remove you, so you are just here ... you are in limbo'.

Ali

Ali moved to Devon in 2004, after claiming asylum from Iraq. He received help from RSG with his claim, with benefits and with housing. Eventually he was granted leave to remain, with permission to work, which 'changed his life'. He now has citizenship. He is very appreciative of all the help he received from RSG during these processes, but feels that the organisation has changed, and has a number of strongly-expressed criticisms. He asked for advice following the loss of his job. 'It used to be very good, but now there are lots of different people. Sometimes they ignore you or say they can't help you. One of them asked, "Why don't you go back to work?". [Some] act as if the money [for emergency payments] comes out of their own pockets'.

Ali's criticisms are echoed and reinforced by several other younger men, who took part in the first focus group for service users. They complained that emergency payments were not made unless they attended on Mondays, and that not all the volunteers were attentive and helpful. They all praised the qualities of Annette Hughes, the co-ordinator, saying that she had most knowledge, and was also most understanding.

'Everyone tries to see her, she is the best, in everything ... She is like a lawyer, she's more friendly, more professional, we get a better service ... When we see her, she's more understanding, she knows what you want.'

In what follows, I shall try to uncover the issues raised both by the successes of RSG in sustaining the involvement of Isabella, Emily and many others, and broadening their participation in the community, and by the criticisms in one of the focus groups. I shall attempt to put these in the context of the 2005 evaluation, the evolution of the organisation, and the strategic questions for the future of RSG.

(a) Could the Drop-In be Better Organised?

Everyone acknowledges that the drop-in, which is the 'core business' of RSG, is very much hampered by the unsuitability of the accommodation, and the difficulty in combining an office, interview room and waiting/chatting space within the existing resources (part of a large, open-plan workplace, and a small administrative area).

However, this may to some extent disguise some unresolved dilemmas about the nature of the drop-in service. It is part of the ethos of RSG that the relationship with service users should be friendly and supportive, and should not replicate the impersonal, rejecting and excluding practice they are likely to have experienced from Home Office and some other officials. RSG seeks to empower, to include, and to involve asylum seekers and refugees, former and current service users have become volunteers, one former service user is now an employee, and user involvement is encouraged.

As part of this ethos, *informality* is built into the culture - but informality is itself quite difficult to sustain, in combination with efficiency, impartiality, and the other virtues which are supposed to be upheld by bureaucracies. Informality is always at some risk of becoming, or at least seeming, arbitrary or disorganised. Paradoxically, it requires great strength and clarity to achieve viable informality. Annette clearly has these qualities, and the volunteers (and service users) look to her for leadership in many respects. These include continuity in the application of rules (e.g. over emergency payments), and efficiency in supplying reliable advice and information.

The 2005 Evaluation, while stating that RSG provided an invaluable service, criticised record-keeping, recording of feedback, translation and interpretation services, housing support, the newsletter, the training and support of volunteers, and some aspects of the culture (the demonstration of mutual respect). Most of these recommended areas for improvement were ones which concerned the formalisation of processes which had been face-to-face, word-of-mouth and interpersonal (i.e. informal, and rather unsystematic).

Several of these issues have been addressed in the past two years. Records are now more systematically kept, providing more data about service users. Although there is understandably resistance to keeping files on individuals and families, attempts have been made to get them to record their own details of contacts and outcomes - without much success. In complex cases, a suggested compromise would be for notes to be made on progress, but kept by both the RSG office and the service user. There are now two newsletters, on different aspects of RSG's work, one (written by Ramazan, the new training and development officer) more for service users, the other for the wider public, on asylum and immigration issues.

My conclusion is that the most important outstanding matter of those raised in 2005 is the question of training and support for volunteers, together with the culture of respect (the two closely linked). If RSG decides to maintain its informal approach, resisting the pressure to adopt more managerial, bureaucratic and official methods, then it is necessary to offer very good training and support to volunteers. Informality is more demanding than formality, in the sense that it relies more on the confidence and personal skills of those in face-to-face contact with service users, and the negotiation of issues, rather than the implementation of rules. Without the security of a strong sense of individual and collective identity, mutual support and the sharing of skills, it is very difficult for volunteers to sustain their work with service users facing many pressures and problems.

In particular, the culture of the drop-in should allow volunteers to be confident in setting priorities, and challenging some of the demands placed on them. In the first focus group, service users complained that they were being 'brushed off' at times by volunteers, when the questions and tasks they presented were seen as unimportant. I suspect that this perception arises from a combination of situations where there are urgent problems of destitution and homelessness requiring attention, and more experienced, settled and able service users asking for assistance with relatively routine matters. But volunteers need to feel empowered to explain their reasons, either for

asking the latter service users to attempt a task (such as form filling) themselves, or asking them to return later.

The challenge of mutual respect is made slightly more complicated by the fact that most of the volunteers are women, and most of the service users men. There may be a subtext of expectation that volunteers will be compliant and unchallenging (as women). This makes it all the more important for volunteers to feel able to be respectfully challenging at times; it is an opportunity for male service users to learn this aspect of UK culture.

Finally, I feel the situation is confused by a lack of clarity over Ramazan's role. There is already some resentment among service users over his appointment as a paid staff member. His role in development and training is not well understood, and his visibility in the office reinforces this. Many service users expect him to attend to their needs in the drop-in, and perceive his preoccupation with other issues as ignoring and neglecting them. Either he should work on these tasks elsewhere, or clarify his priorities to service users where he is visible in the drop-in.

I would recommend that more systematic group training and support should be offered to volunteers, focussed on the issues of effectiveness and respect within an informal setting. These issues will still be relevant when better accommodation is acquired.

I also recommend that, if other staff are appointed to assist in the office, the co-ordinator, Annette, should remain in the role of leader, supervisor and trainer of the advice and support arm of the work. She has enormous strengths in this role, and is an inspiration to volunteers and service users. Her personality, experience, training and values communicate themselves very clearly. New staff could become involved in tasks such as record keeping, funding applications and preparation for Refugee Week.

(b) Can Group Activities Support/Help Fund the Drop-In?

Despite the complexities shown in the examples, since the 2005 Evaluation, the work of RSG has become more polarised between emergency help for asylum seekers, many of whom are destitute and reliant on friends for accommodation because of long-term problems of immigration status, and refugees with leave to remain and permission to work, some of whom are seeking (or have gained) citizenship. Not only are many of the latter 'success stories' for RSG; they also include some who now act as volunteers. Although some of the former group participate in activities – sports and recreation, English classes, the allotment, the women's group, etc. – there has been a tendency since 2005 for the membership of the service user group to diverge between a more vulnerable and impoverished, and a more settled and prosperous population.

In addition to this, RSG's funding strategy has been successful in relation to activities and projects focused on the social integration of refugees, and their access to citizenship, but it is more difficult to get funding for the core activity of the drop-in, which is staff-intensive, and hence costly. There are few funding bodies which support work with asylum seekers, especially those with problematic legal status, who are long-term destitute and homeless. The drop-in also has to deal with a wider range of issues, including family and employment problems, brought by settled refugees.

For these reasons, the question arises whether there could be a strategic decision with RSG to seek further development of some of the group activities, with the aim that they would help sustain the drop-in service.

Something like this has already happened on a one-off, *ad hoc* basis; The chair and the training and development officer have provided training sessions on refugee issues to educational establishments, which have given rise to donations to the RSG general fund (January Management Committee minutes). Ideally, some activities might be reconstituted as a Social Enterprise, and profits could be shared within RSG - this occurs in other similar organisations.

One ‘dream scenario’ for the future of RSG looks like this. Together with another voluntary organisation, it acquires the lease of a café, with space for offices, etc. the café provides a much more convivial space for service users to meet, including those waiting to see volunteers, or use computers, etc. In addition, it allows a ‘cultural kitchen’ to be developed. (The capacity to do this has been demonstrated on a one-off basis during Refugee Weeks.) Some members can be paid, and the café makes a profit, some of the proceeds of which then subsidise the drop-in. Items made by the Women’s Group are on sale. The produce of the allotment supplies some of the ingredients of the food sold.

This scenario would allow the fundamental goals and values of RSG to be far better expressed than they are within the present organisational framework. Service users would become more like ‘members’ or ‘colleagues’ in the enterprise. There could be issues about how much unpaid and how much paid work was contributed (e.g. if cooks and waiters were paid wages, would garden workers also be rewarded?) but these would have to be negotiated. Advice about the rules governing such businesses could be sought, for instance from the Community Business agency in St. Sidwell’s House.

Some of these ideas link directly with the development and training work currently being undertaken by Ramazan. I think it is important to make them explicit, and to start to investigate their feasibility, rather than wait for a suitable venue to turn up before thinking about them in a systematic way. For instance, how much time would refugees be willing to devote to such an enterprise, given the priority on maximising income for families after a period of enforced unemployment as asylum seekers? Several men attending the focus groups said they would be unwilling to work in the drop-in, or do other office-based tasks, but they might undertake more active, physical roles. More investigation of the skills on offer would be of value.

Another possibility for expansion would be in the provision of practice learning placements for community work and social work students. This would not, I am informed, be a source of additional income, but could add energy and skill.

A possible model which combines both enterprise and student elements is START (Students and Refugees together) in Plymouth. There the ‘cultural kitchen’ concept is combined with a drop-in and a fully-fledged student placement facility. However, there are some aspects of that model which might not appeal; START does some housing work under contract to the Home Office. Ramazan could investigate and report on this.

Finally, there is the issue of finding a partner (preferably not a refugee or ethnic minority organisation) to share the costs of the accommodation. How might any of these scenarios play out on the question of partnership and resource use?

I recommend that RSG starts to discuss and explore all these matters.

(c) Other Issues

The trustees are to be congratulated on the agility and adaptability with which they have coped with new issues and a changing context in recent years. There do not seem to be any problems in the communications between trustees and staff – problems are quickly identified, discussed and dealt with. The involvement of trustees in volunteer roles helps achieve feedback.

The appointment of Ramazan as Training and Development Officer has been an opportunity to make RSG more outward-looking, and to improve links with other, non-refugee groups and organisations. He is imaginative and has had good experience of this kind of work. As well as being involved in extending opportunities for service users in language classes and employment, he has engaged with a wide variety of such groups and agencies. His greatest enthusiasm is for the creative arts, and he is investigating the possibility of starting a music and drama group in Exeter, on the

lines of a very successful initiative for refugees in Plymouth. A possible venue has been identified, and members of the Plymouth group may be willing to spend time in Exeter to help get this off the ground.

However, there have been some problems around Ramazan's role, as indicated earlier. Some younger male service users are resentful of his paid post, and consider that he should work entirely in the drop-in, and without pay. It would be easier for him, I think, if his development and training work were done out of sight of the office users, and eventually he was not required to do drop-in work. He could then be visible in his most useful function – as an innovator and a link with the wider circle of activities and participation. This would fit well with the 'dream scenario'.

The work of the drop-in has expanded, from about 170 per month in 2005 to 230 per month this year. The range and complexity of issues is wider, and so is the range of nationalities using the service. At least one extra paid member of staff will soon be needed, but Annette's main focus should, in my view, still be on supporting and sustaining the direct work with service users in the drop-in, by example and through training and support, as she has many special gifts for this work.

There may be other ways to involve service users more in the work of the drop-in – perhaps in the selection and training of volunteers – since some of them have strong views on the way in which advice and support are given.

Recommendations

1. Training and support for volunteers should be strengthened, with special attention to building confidence in feedback to, and setting boundaries with, service users. This should address the challenges of working in an informal setting, with an ethos of empowerment and inclusion. Volunteers should be required to undergo such training. (I understand that this recommendation has already been implemented, following a discussion with the trustees. This is very encouraging, and illustrates the open-mindedness and quick response of the organisation. It is also encouraging that several service users engaged in discussions with the co-ordinator on these topics after the first focus group, evidence of good communications and trust.)
2. Record-keeping in complex cases might be strengthened by recording important aspects of a situation, in collaboration with the service user. Two copies could be made of any notes, with one retained by the service user, so that ownership is clearly shared.
3. Service users could be involved in the training of volunteers, as well as being encouraged to become volunteers. Feedback on the functioning of the drop-in could be regularly sought.
4. Even before more suitable accommodation is obtained, investigations could be carried out into the possibilities of developing a social enterprise out of one or more of the group activities (the Women's Group, the allotment, or a cultural group being initiated by Ramazan). In particular, the rules governing paid employment of members of these groups, under the terms of a social enterprise, could be more clearly established, and the possibilities of combining such employment with volunteering discussed. This would help clarify RSG's strategic orientation to the future challenges of combining work with very vulnerable asylum seekers, (which is hard to fund) with the mobilisation of resourceful refugees, for which it is easier to attract funding.
5. When new staff are appointed, they should have clearly defined roles, such as writing funding applications, keeping statistical records, organising Refugee Week, doing educational projects, supporting activity groups, etc. This will leave Annette as co-ordinator with more time to focus on her inspirational role as trainer, supporter and model for volunteers working in the drop-in.