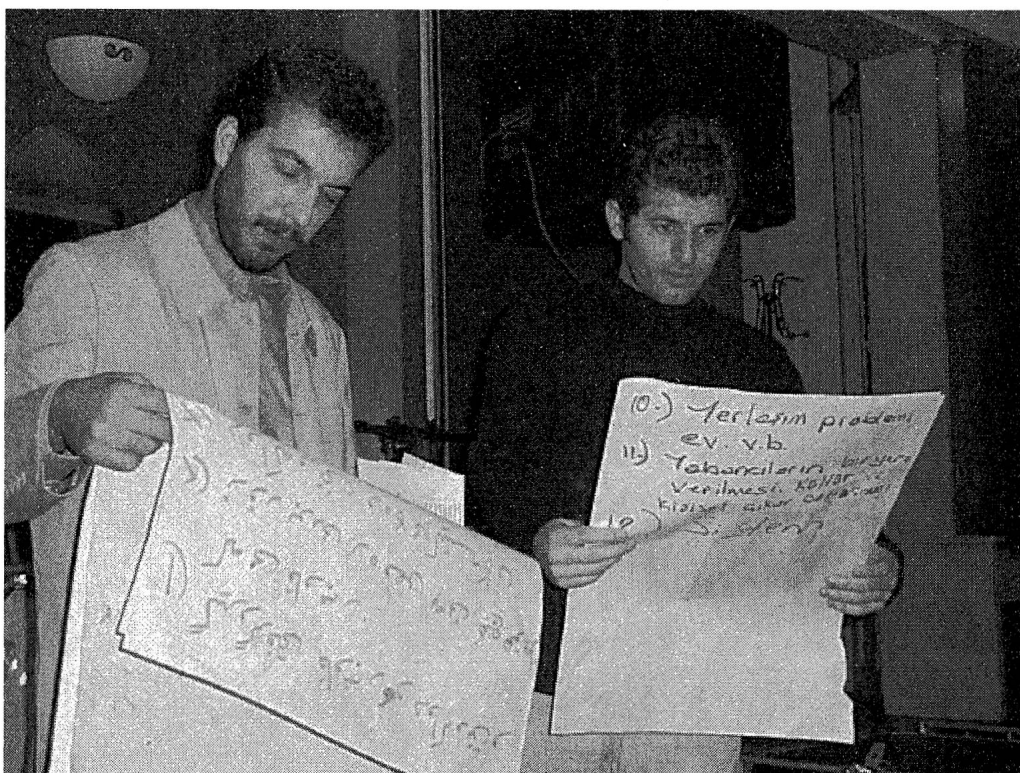


# Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

## SEEKING ASYLUM IN NOTTINGHAM



**Asylum seekers and refugees conference  
17<sup>th</sup> February 2001  
The Italian Community Centre, Nottingham**

***CONFERENCE REPORT***

## **Acknowledgements**

Our thanks go to the following organisations and individuals for their financial support:

- members and supporters of the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum;
- the Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council;
- the Nottingham Jewish Socialist's Group;
- individual donors, particularly those who contributed generously on the night.

Thanks also to:

- Mustafa, Nawzad, Siamak, Sam and Aris for translating throughout the event;
- the staff and volunteers of the Italian Community Centre, who extended a warm welcome and showed great flexibility as the numbers grew;
- members of Lady Bay Baptist Church for organising the creche;
- the band 'Mas-y-Mas' who delivered a great set;
- all the musicians and dancers;
- members of the conference and social organising group;
- Nick Palmer M.P., for turning up at the social event and agreeing to help us pursue the issues raised at the conference.

**The Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum can be contacted c/o:**

The Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council  
67 Lower Parliament Street  
Nottingham NG1 3BB

Tel: 0115 958 6515

# **Asylum seekers and refugees conference and social 17<sup>th</sup> February 2001**

## **1. Background**

The Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum (NNRF) was convened in 2000 to offer practical support to asylum seekers, campaign on refugee issues and educate the public. Since its inception, asylum seekers have joined the Forum and participated in the management committee. Towards the end of 2000 it became clear that asylum seekers in Nottingham needed an opportunity to voice their own concerns and priorities. A working group was convened to organise a conference to which all asylum seekers could be invited, followed by a social event in the evening.

The Italian Community Centre, Sherwood Rise, Nottingham agreed to host the event, which took place on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2001. Posters were produced with information in English, Albanian, Farsi, French, Arabic, Portugese, Kurdish, Turkish and Urdu (Appendix One). Information was distributed via informal networks of asylum seekers and refugees and also via agencies such as Refugee Action, Refugee Housing Association, Nottingham City Council Social Services and local further education colleges.

The day was organised in three parts: a conference for asylum seekers only (4pm-6pm), a buffet supper and an evening social event. NNRF members and supporters were invited to attend in the evening.

## **2. Introducing the conference**

As the conference invitation was 'open', there was no way of knowing exactly how many asylum seekers would attend. In the event, approximately 150 people arrived, roughly double the numbers anticipated. There was representation from the key national and language groups in Nottingham: Turkish Kurdistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Albania, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Czech Republic (Roma), Sierra Leone, Russia and Angola<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the profile of asylum seekers in Notts can be found on the Nottingham asylum seekers' web site at [www.nottas.org.uk](http://www.nottas.org.uk)

The conference was opened by Sam Azad of the International Federation of Iranian Refugees. Three refugees then offered their personal accounts of what it is to be an asylum seeker in Nottingham today. These accounts are summarised in the boxes below (names have been changed to protect identities).

**Khalid, age 23, Kurdistan**

I am from the East of Turkey, the place Kurdish people call Kurdistan, where I was a professional footballer and student. I have been living here since 1998 as a refugee. I had ethnic and political problems with the Turkish government. I was not safe in Turkey. Before I came here, I had been detained a lot of times by the Turkish authorities because of my ethnic origin and beliefs. The last time, I was arrested by the police for no reason and I was threatened with death. I was being forced to join the Turkish army - if not, I would be killed. I had no choice but to decide to run away from Turkey.

I had no passport so I had to choose an illegal way. I found a smuggler, who was a driver and travelled to the UK. I paid him £3000 to take me to the UK in the back of a lorry. I travelled for six days without seeing anything. When the lorry arrived at Dover, I got out and looked for a policeman. I was so scared, and did not know what to do. I saw a police vehicle and went over to it. I could not speak English, but I managed 'no passport.' The policeman shook his head and understood that I was a refugee. I was a little bit happy after I found the police but they treated me as if I was a very guilty person. I was shocked, because I had run away from this sort of treatment but I was facing the same thing as I had faced from the Turkish police. I was kept in the police cells until a lawyer and interpreter arrived. They took me to London, where my sister was waiting for me at the train station. I was over the moon.

I thought I had left all my problems back home in Turkey, but it wasn't as I thought. I knew nothing about the UK and how the system works here. English was always a big problem. I had never spoken to any professional advisers about what to do in these new circumstances. I get benefit, which is not enough to cover my weekly expenses. I am lucky because I get support from relatives and friends who are working, but I know a lot of people don't have this kind of help.

**Helai, age 17, Afghanistan**

I came from Afghanistan with my family nearly eight months ago. I came here because of the bad situation we were facing and because I wanted to continue with my education. I couldn't do this in Afghanistan because of the Taliban regime which came to power about four years ago. They stop girls from going to school. The other reason that made us escape from our country was not having the freedom we wanted. By this, I mean the freedom to work, to study, to make our own decisions. Women, especially, were under a lot of pressure most of the time. For example, they were not allowed to work nor were

they allowed outside their homes. Not even women doctors were allowed to go out except in an emergency. Women could only go out with their male relative - if they were alone, they were beaten. So these were the reasons why we decided to leave our country.

After we came, we lived in London for two weeks and then we were sent to Nottingham. We were given less than a day's notice and we knew nothing about the place. When we came to Nottingham we didn't know anything about Refugee Action or ways of getting into education for almost three months. We thought maybe we would receive a letter that would tell us where we could get some help, but the only help we got was from our neighbours.

We moved to our new house when we were given leave to remain. We had problems with the electricity, gas and water as well as a leaky ceiling. For one month, no one came to see if we had any problems in the house. I think that wasn't right, because what would have happened if we hadn't known any English? Beside this, we had problems with the vouchers we were getting instead of money. We had to go to special shops to buy things, and after buying we could not get any change. All of our vouchers were in my father's name, so sometimes shops would not accept the vouchers unless my father was there.

**Mohammed, age 33, Iran**

I am from Iran and have been living in Nottingham for the past eleven months. I left Iran much against my wishes, after practising as a General Practitioner (GP) for three and a half years. I am not going to say very much about the difficulties of life in Iran and the lack of any human rights. My departure, including the hazardous journey which I had to undertake to reach somewhere safe, in itself highlights that a person in my position - a qualified doctor only wishing to serve people - had to flee and leave my country.

I would like to speak about life in Britain, a country supposedly with laws and regulations safeguarding human rights and freedom. We sadly find, however, that asylum seekers are denied the most basic rights and amenities. For the past seven months, I have been taking part in many meetings relating to refugees and asylum seekers. This has led to my meeting many different people who are trying to help refugees and asylum seekers in Nottingham, and I would like to thank them all.

Despite all their efforts, asylum seekers are still struggling to cope with the variety of totally unnecessary problems such as vouchers, which isolate and segregate us from the rest of society. There is also the language barrier and the lack of sufficient teaching resources, which compounds our isolation, and the lack of decent accommodation (in some cases, no heating and hot water which has led to much misery and stress). I hope that by participating in meetings such as this one we will get to know each other better, manage to highlight our problems and work out how to solve them with greater success.

Following these accounts, the conference broke into nine smaller workshops based on the different language groups. Each group was asked to explore the issues described in Appendix Two, and then to feed back to the conference as a whole. Feedback was presented in both English and the range of refugee community languages, with refugees fluent in English translating. As the issues raised were common to all groups, they are summarised together in the following paragraphs.

### **3. Problems facing asylum seekers in Nottingham**

#### ***Vouchers***

- Some refugees have not been receiving their vouchers. It seems that the Home Office fail to send them out or send them to the wrong address.
- Using vouchers is embarrassing and shaming, and makes refugees feel different from everyone else. People want money, not vouchers.
- It is unfair that asylum seekers receive no change from vouchers.
- The range of goods on which people can spend the vouchers is limited, and some shops are confused about what the vouchers can be spent on.
- The vouchers are time limited, which means people can't save to buy more expensive items.
- Vouchers can only be used by the named person, meaning women and daughters/sons cannot shop where the man is identified as the 'head of the household' and the vouchers are sent in his name.
- Vouchers cannot be used to participate in hobbies such as sport.
- Young people under 25 have the same needs as older people but only receive £28.95 in vouchers per week compared to £36.54 for the over-25s.

#### ***Transport***

- Getting round the city is a problem, as vouchers cannot be spent on transport. It is particularly difficult to get to appointments at the hospitals when the asylum seeker has a serious health problem.
- Some asylum seekers are being placed in districts on the edge of the city such as Bulwell. One asylum seeker in Bulwell is disabled but is still expected to walk into the city each week to sign on with his accommodation provider.

### ***Interpreting and translation***

- Local service providers such as GPs and hospitals, the police, social services and solicitors often do not seem able to arrange interpreting and translation.

### ***Education***

- Asylum seekers are finding it hard to get into English classes at local colleges, which have growing waiting lists.

### ***Legal advice***

- A number of people are not happy with the service they are getting from their solicitors. Important information is not being passed on and there are serious delays, sometimes resulting in refusal of the application for asylum.

### ***Work and leisure***

- Lack of a permit to work legally can add to the attractions of the 'black market', where refugee labour is seriously exploited (e.g. working for 50p an hour).
- People cannot get involved in sports such as football or boxing on such low incomes. As one asylum seeker put it, 'we are dying of boredom.'
- There should be more opportunities to learn new skills for use in the workplace, e.g. computing.

### ***Accommodation***

- Some accommodation is of a poor standard. The equipment is old and inadequate – there are not enough chairs or kitchen utensils.
- There were stories of houses where water is coming in, there is no heating and no hot water.
- Landlords promise to provide equipment or carry out repairs, but often fail to keep their promises.
- Sometimes as many as ten people are sharing a house, three or four in each room.
- People of all nationalities, languages and cultures are placed in shared houses, which leads to misunderstandings and stress.
- The private sector landlords are not providing enough support, e.g. to register with a GP or get into English courses. They are business people, and seem unable to deliver the social support specified in their contracts.

- Asylum seekers queue for hours to be seen at Refugee Action, and are sometimes turned away. People are not sure about the role of Refugee Action, or where else to go for help.

### ***The Home Office 'system'***

- The dispersal system is so inflexible. Asylum seekers are not given any choice, even when there are places where they have family or know people who can help them. For example, there are asylum seekers in Nottingham with family in Manchester, while one Nottingham refugee's aunt has been sent to Hull.
- Some asylum seekers have not received the form from the Home Office that allows them to register with a GP.
- It is taking longer than six months for asylum seekers to receive the forms to allow them to work. One asylum seeker was asked to go to Croydon to sign a form.
- People should be allowed to work, even during the first six months.
- Asylum seekers are still waiting too long for decisions.
- Many asylum seekers are receiving refusals although they have not attended an interview with the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND). The IND often send important letters to the wrong address – and not attending an interview means automatic refusal.
- When asylum seekers are asked to attend an interview with the IND, they are sent a form to complete for a travel pass. Often, the IND do not send this form or the asylum seekers do not understand what they are supposed to do.
- Refusals seem to be made for no comprehensible reason and with no explanation.
- A refusal letter means the withdrawal of a work permit, even when the asylum seeker is appealing. Some asylum seekers have had their papers forcibly seized.
- Many asylum seekers feel that the Home Office's understanding of the political situation on their home countries is very limited, or that human rights problems are deliberately ignored.

## **4. Conclusion**

The bullet points above cannot really do justice to the detail in which asylum seekers shared their problems and the individuality of their situations. However, an overwhelming impression was gained of people living in difficult circumstances who are anxious to become 'socially included', or to be able to participate fully in British



life. Indeed, one working group's main desire was 'to be accepted as residents of the community.' Asylum seekers want to participate in work and leisure activities, and not to feel set apart by having to rely on vouchers for their income. A recent article in the *Nottingham Evening Post* was perceptively headlined 'From terror to red tape' (Appendix Three). Certainly, many people felt they had escaped from dangerous and abusive situations only to face more difficulties and humiliation in the UK – a country whose reputation led them to expect more humane treatment.

Although the points raised may be familiar to those working with asylum seekers or up to date with recent reports<sup>2</sup>, we think that this conference and social event is unique in the UK. It provided an opportunity for asylum seekers of all nationalities and language groups to meet together and identify common concerns. The following points were agreed as actions to be taken following the conference. The success of the conference will be ultimately be determined by the practical outcomes.

## **1. Action plan**

- Hold a follow-up meeting for asylum seekers and refugees interested in doing further work on the issues identified at the conference.
- Arrange for a group of asylum seekers to meet local MPs to advise them on the problems they are experiencing.
- Make representation to local immigration solicitors.
- Circulate the report to all agencies working with asylum seekers in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire and ask for specific responses, e.g. around access to leisure or English language education.
- Circulate the report to appropriate national organisations.
- Seek funding for further social and cultural events at which asylum seekers, refugees, friends and supporters can enjoy each other's company.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the Audit Commission's *Another Country* (2000, Audit Commission: London) and the King's Fund's *The Health and Well-Being of Asylum Seekers and Refugees* (2000, King's Fund: London).

**Appendix one: leaflet advertising the conference**

# Nottingham Refugee & Asylum Seekers Conference & Social

**When:** Saturday February 17th 2001

**What time:** 4.00 – 6.00pm

**Where:** Italian Community Centre,  
Sherwood Rise, Nottingham

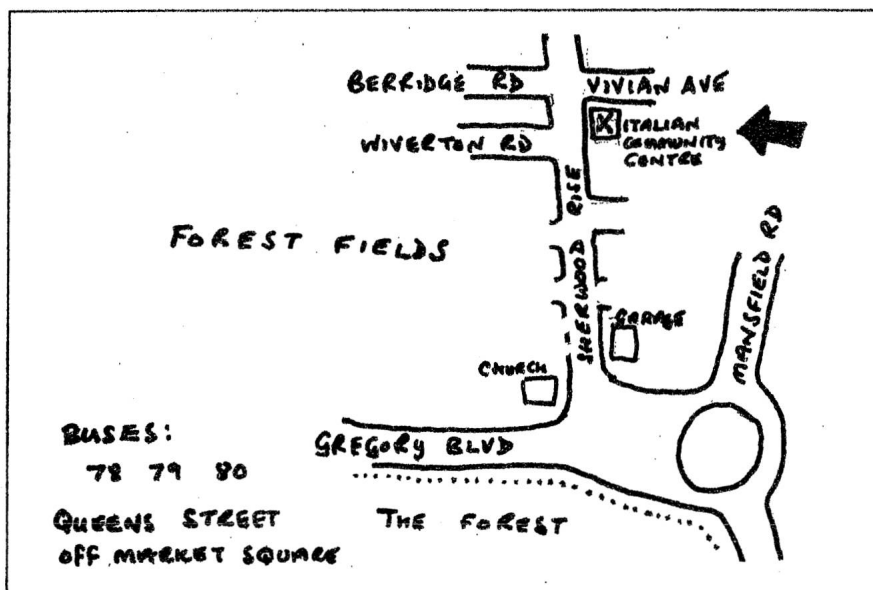
❖ *Childcare / creche available*

And after the conference

- 6.00pm – vegetarian food available
- from 7.00pm – music by Mas-Y-Mas (South American)

This conference has been organised for asylum seekers & refugees in Nottingham to:

- meet other asylum seekers / refugees
- discuss common problems & issues
- start organising to support each other



For more information phone: Sam - 0795 7430990 Nawzad - 0781 8434761  
Siamak - 0794 7711505 Rob - 0794 6748449

If you need help with transport (if you need a lift) phone: Myra - 9603355 (evenings and weekends).

Conference supported by: Nottingham & Notts. Refugee Forum c/o REC 67 Lower Parliament St. Nottm.

INFORMATION IN OTHER LANGUAGES  
— ON OTHER SIDE —

Konferenca sociale për refugjatët dhe azilantët të shtunën 17 shkurt 2001 në orën 16-00 - 18-00. Ne qendren e komunitetit Itallian ne rrugen Sherwood Rise Nottingham. Cherdhe dhe kujdesje per femijet eshte mundshme gjiathashtu. Te njihni azilante te tjere te bisedojme per probleme te ndryshme dhe te organizojme grupe te qe te ndimojme njeri tjetrin. Mbas konfernces do te kemi ushqim per te ngrene ne orën 18-00 dhe argetim me muzik ne orën 19-00.

## گردهمایی و جشن پناهندگان

شنبه ۱۷ فوریه از ساعت ۴ تا ۶ بعد از ظهر:

آشنائی با پناهندگان دیگر، بحث و تبادل نظر در باره مشکلات مشترکمان و پیشنهاد برای حل آنها و ایجاد اتحاد.

بعد از ساعت ۶ عصر: صرف غذا و جشن به همراه موسیقی

محل: ITALIAN COMMUNITY CENTER, SHERWOOD RISE

Conférence pour les réfugiés et demandeurs d'asile de Nottingham. Samedi 17 Février 2001. 16h00 - 18h00. Italian Community Centre, Sherwood Rise, Nottingham. Garde d'enfants possible et crèche. Rencontre d'autres demandeurs d'asile et réfugiés; discussion des problèmes communs; organisation du soutien et de l'entraide entre réfugiés. A l'issue de la conférence, un repas vegetarian sera servi a 18h00 et animation musicale a 19h00.

مؤتمربلقاء اجتماعي للاجئين وطالبي اللجوء يوم السبت 17 فبراير 2001 من 4 مساءً مركز الجالية الإيطالية شيرود ريز، نوتينجهام مع حضارة مخصصة للأطفال. هنا يتم لقاء لاجئين وطالبي لجوء آخرين، ومناقشة المشاكل والقضايا المشتركة، وتنظيم مساعدة للآخرين. بعد المؤتمر ستتوفر مؤدبة طعام نباتية على الساعة السادسة مساءً مع احتفال بسيط يتضمن موسيقى في الساعة 7 مساءً.

Conferência para refúgiados e asilados em Nottingham. Sábado dia 17 de Fevereiro de 2001 das 16:00 as 18:00 horas. Local: Italian Community Centre (Centro Comunitário Italiano) Sherwood Rise, Nottingham. Má creche e passoaas para cuidar das crianças. Todos os refúguados e asilados se unem para discutirem seus problemas em geral e comecarem a organizar-se para apoiarem uns aos outros. Depois da conferência, haverá comida vegetariana a partir das 18:00 horas. Também, haverá um encontro social com musicas as 19:00 horas.

کونفرانس لاجوع وه داواکردوی کجوع له نوتنگهام له روتشه مه (۱۷/۲/۲۰۰۱) کاتے ژمی، (۶-۷) شوآره له م جیگایه ی شوآره وه به لکویه کتس بیین وه بیلییار وه شا که له م لاجیئانه ی نوتنگهام فویان باسی بگه ن له تاکو بیوانن بشتی به کتر بگرن وه یارمه تی به کتر بده ن. دوا ی کونفرانس فواردن وه موسیقا هه به.

جیگا: Italian Community Centre Sherwood Rise Nottingham

Nottingham mülteci ve sığınma hakkı arayanlar sosyal yardımlasma toplantisi. Tarih: 17 Şubat 2001 4.00 - 6.00. Yer: Italian Community Centre, Sherwood Rise Nottingham. Çocuk bakımı ve kreş mevcuttur. Diğer sığınma hakkı arayanlar ve mültecilerle görüşün; ortak problemlerinizi ve konularınızı tartışın ve birbirinizi desteklemek için örgütlenmeye başlayın. Toplantıdan sonra saat 6.00 da vejeteryan yemeği ve saat 7.00 de sosyal aktivitelerle birlikte müzik olacaktır.

نا شنگم میں رهائش پذیر ہمارے اور پناہ گزینوں کی کانفرنس بروز صفتہ ۱۷ فروری ۲۰۰۱ (سنا) ۴ بجے سے ۶ بجے کے درمیان اٹالین کمیونٹی سینٹر شیرووڈ رائز ناٹنگھم میں منعقد ہوگی۔ بچوں کی دیکھ بھال کیلئے کڑپش کی سہولت موجود ہے۔ اس موقع سے فائدہ اٹھانے جوئے آپ دکرھے ہمارے اور پناہ گزینوں سے متعارف ہوں اور عمومی مسائل اور تھک بھت کو زبردست لائیں تاکہ ہلتر اور منتظم طریقے سے ان مسائل اور تھک بھت کو دور کرنے کیلئے شروعات کر سکیں۔ کانفرنس کا اختتام پروفیسر بن کمانا اور تفریح کیلئے موسیقی کا پروگرام پیش کیا جائیگا۔

**Appendix two: notes for the discussion groups**

## What this conference is for.

- 1) to meet other people, most importantly other refugees / asylum seekers
- 2) to listen to each other . . . to talk to each other . . . and to discuss common problems
- 3) to find out what interests you share
- 4) to think about what you can do together yourselves to improve your situation
- 5) to collect information that you and people who want to support refugees / asylum seekers can use
- 6) . . . . . ???

## Notes for the discussion.

At this conference we want to try and get as much information as we can about:

- 1) the *problems and difficulties* refugees face
- 2) what refugees / asylum seekers are interested in.

On the big sheet of paper, just write down short notes (in English or your own language).

After you've talked in your group, a group representative can tell the whole conference about what you have written. Later, we will put all the notes together in a report.

### Problems could include:

- vouchers
- housing / accommodation
- transport
- health
- education / school
- legal support / advice
- deportation
- children
- clothing / shoes
- translators
- dealing with officials - e.g. the Home Office
- concern about relatives and friends back home
- not knowing other families with children
- (women) not meeting other women
- 
- 

### Interests could include:

- work
- voluntary work
- sport
- art
- 
-