



Nottingham & Nottinghamshire **REFUGEE FORUM**

Background Information

1. The Forum

The NNRF was launched in 2000 to work with refugees and asylum seekers living in Nottingham. It was set up by members of faith groups, trade unions and concerned individuals with the backing of the Racial Equality Council, in response to the government's policy of dispersing from the south-east and London, people seeking asylum. It is a registered charity, run by a management committee.

Since then, the Forum has established a reputation for providing practical and social support for these new arrivals in our city, and for campaigning for their human rights.

Over the past 7 years, the Forum has grown from a group purely of volunteers to one that employs 11 workers, including 5 refugees. Over 200 people visit our centre each week for help and advice and over the past 4 years we have assisted nearly 3000 people. These include refugees needing help with benefits, housing, education, form-filling, finding employment and health; and people seeking asylum, wanting support to cope with the injustices of the asylum system, including inadequate legal representation and problems with support and accommodation.

Although we receive funding to cover some of this work, the Forum remains an essentially voluntary group, run by a volunteer Management Committee and with a membership of over 460 and over 60 active volunteers who include refugees, asylum seekers and local people. Our management Committee currently includes 5 refugees and asylum seekers.

Forum activists have been involved in campaigns against deportation; against Government proposals to build so-called Accommodation Centres, in which asylum seekers would be segregated from the rest of the community, against the neglect, indifference and suspicion shown by the Home Office and recently against the plans to prevent asylum seekers from accessing English language classes.

We are supported by a network of trades unions, faith groups, community organisations, staff and students in local universities, many local people and service providers in both statutory and voluntary sectors. Through this network, we have tried to challenge the anti-asylum racism, prejudice and fear that dominate the asylum 'debate'.

2. The Centre

The Forum has operated from a Centre since January 2002 years and in October 2005 moved into our present, larger premises, providing disabled access and improved facilities. The main activity at the Centre is the provision of advice and support to refugees and asylum seekers.

- **Drop-in sessions**

These are currently held three afternoons per week. They are staffed mainly by volunteers with support from staff advisers. Requests may include reading letters, filling forms, making legal/health appointments, sorting out NASS support problems, legal sign-posting, providing emergency grants, travel document and Nationality applications. These sessions are supervised by the Centre Manager to ensure the quality and consistency of advice and support being provided.

- **Staff Advisers**

The Forum presently the following projects providing professional advice and casework support.

- City Council funded One-Stop Shop Advice service, covering Housing, Social Services, Education and other local authority services plus Health.
- Benefits and Welfare Rights advice
- Tenant Support Service (“Floating Support” under Supporting People programme).
- Capacity-raising project in regard to Housing-related services (working with service providers and refugee community groups).

In addition, advice/support sessions are run at the Centre by the following:

- Careergrad, providing assistance with accessing training and employment
- The Red Cross Tracing and Messaging service.
- Paragon Law offering immigration advice.
- HLG’s refugee housing worker assists with accessing Homelink, using the Centre’s computer suite.

- **Interpreting and Translations**

It is the Forum’s policy to provide interpreters whenever needed.

We employ 2 in-house interpreters who cover 4 of the most frequent languages spoken by refugees and asylum seekers. We also employ 3 Floating Support workers who between them speak 6 languages. In addition, we can call on the services of volunteers or sessionally paid interpreters.

All our publicity and many of our notices and Floating Support proformas are translated into the main refugee community languages.

- **Training**

The centre has a training/computer room which is used to run ESOL, IT and Driving Test Theory courses.

Training sessions are also run for our staff, volunteers and workers from other agencies on topics such as the Asylum system, the rights and needs of refugees and service information.

- **Refugee Women’s Group**

Refugee and asylum seeker women run their own group at the Forum, organising activities for women and their children. We have a well equipped playroom which is used at women’s sessions and while parents are waiting for support.

- **Refugee Football team**

This has recently been started by refugees and asylum seekers who are now applying to Sports Relief for some funding for kit.

- **Social and cultural events**

There are regular Saturday night socials, organised by refugees, and the Centre has hosted arts workshops and exhibitions. 'Travelling Light' and 'Roaming Pictures', two refugee arts and film projects, are based at the Forum.

- **Destitution Support**

This is run by groups of volunteers, many of whom are asylum seekers, who distribute small cash payments and food to destitute, mainly failed asylum seekers, on a weekly basis. All funding for this work comes from donations from supporters.

- **Refugee Community links:**

Through the large number of refugees and asylum seekers who have visited the Forum on a regular basis and especially those who have become volunteers at the Centre, we have developed good links with many of the embryonic refugee community groups that are emerging in Nottingham. This has been deepened by the work of our Access development manager who for the past year has produced an electronic newsletter for refugee communities, providing information on services, training opportunities and other matters of interest. The Forum hosts regular meetings of the Refugee Community Network and has provided training to its members.

- **Networks**

NNRF is an active member of the following:

- City Council-led Multi Agency Forum on Asylum Seekers and Refugees,
- The PCT asylum working group
- Supporting People Providers' Forum
- Nottingham Black Partnership
- ENABLE
- Advice Nottingham
- EMCARS
- Voice
- Police-led liaison group on refugees and asylum seekers.

In addition, we have built up close links with a wide range of service providers in both statutory and voluntary sectors including:

- Health visitors, GPs, Mental Health staff, HIV social worker, the Health Shop.
- Hostel and short-term accommodation providers including YMCA, Salvation Army, Tuntum Housing, NACRO.
- Education and Children's services.
- Social services asylum team
- Connexions and Next Step
- FE colleges and other providers of ESOL.
- Job Centre Plus and Benefits offices; Housing Benefit staff.

- Housing Aid, DASHH managers, Nottingham City Homes at central management and local office level.
- Refugee Action, Refugee Support (formerly Refugee Housing) and Priority Properties (the other NASS accommodation provider).
- 'Time Together' refugee mentoring project.
- NCVS' asylum seekers' volunteer project.
- Churches and other faith groups
- Family First.
- The Vineyard Arches
- The Friary

The range of expertise that we can draw 'in-house' and through our network of contacts, enables us to provide integrated, holistic support to individuals, whilst they are asylum seekers, after they receive a final decision, whether positive or negative, and for those allowed to remain, through the period of adjustment to their new circumstances –and for those with leave to remain – in the early years of building a new life.

Patsy Brand

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