

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

Annual Report 2000 / 2001



Celebrating Sanctuary. Notts refugees enjoying the recent Refugee Week event in the Market Square

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

Annual Report 2000 / 2001

Contents	Page number
Message from the Chair	1
Secretary's Report	2
Treasurer's Report	3
Media and Campaigning	3
Practical Support	3
Asylum seeker and refugee self-help and organisation	4
Appendix (financial statement)	5

The view from the Chair....

While this is the view from the Chair, I have to say that there hasn't been much time during our first year to sit and admire it! Since our foundation last summer, we have had three main priorities:

- To raise the profile of refugees and the problems they experience;
- To help to address those problems;
- To secure funding to set up a base in Nottingham for Nottingham and Notts Refugee Forum (NNRF) activities.

We are fortunate that the local media has not taken an anti-refugee line and there has indeed been a good deal of positive publicity from the *Nottingham Evening Post* and *Radio Nottingham* in particular. This was especially noticeable earlier this year, when we uncovered the crisis of people starving as a result of the breakdown in the voucher system. This crisis led to the establishment of an emergency food distribution centre, organised by the Southwell Diocese of the Church of England, which continues to feed refugees without vouchers or money. The NNRF was also instrumental in organising the very successful Refugee Conference in March, which brought refugees and asylum seekers together to discuss their problems and priorities and led to the setting up of the regular 'Tuesday Group.'

On the fund-raising front, many of you will have attended one or more of the benefits held on our behalf. Thanks for these to everyone involved, in particular Jeremy Hardy, the Clarion Choir and Ben Bryant for their time and effort. A rather different sort of funding has been the 'Fight Vouchers with Vouchers!' scheme, which raised hundreds of pounds in gift vouchers for distribution to refugees on two occasions. Larger scale funding has been sought both nationally and locally. We have received £28 000 from Comic Relief, though we were unsuccessful in our bid for lottery funding (a revised bid will be re-submitted later this year). Nottingham City Council have guaranteed us £4000 to date and investigating the possibility of further grants. The Comic Relief grant has enabled us to push ahead with the setting up of a base for the NNRF / drop-in centre, which we hope will open this summer at 118 Mansfield Road (near Nottingham city centre). The 118 Centre will be managed by a Co-ordinator, initially on a part-time fixed-term contract that we hope to extend when more funding has been secured. The 118 Centre will be a meeting-place for refugees, a source of information and assistance and a base for NNRF volunteers and other activities. We are very excited to have reached this stage and will be looking for lots of active support from NNRF members and supporters in the work we hope to develop over the next year.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the hard work of Management Committee members during our first twelve months - none of our achievements would have been possible without their energy and commitment. Linda East (secretary) and Bob Crane (treasurer) have, in particular, worked tirelessly to 'get the show on the road.' The Racial Equality Council also merit a special mention for their support and encouragement. A report such as this is by nature a summary, so please don't be upset if your contribution has not been mentioned. Other reports, here and at the Annual General Meeting, will cover our activities in more detail and we are truly grateful for everything NNRF members and affiliated organisations have done and will do in the year to come.

Mike Scott (Chair)

Secretary's Report

Recruitment of new members has progressed steadily over the year, and at the end of June 2001 the NNRF had 86 individual members. A further 26 members represent the following subscribing organisations:

Bestwood Parish Church Council
Bulwell United Reformed Church
Burton and Burton Solicitors
Burton Joyce United Reformed Church
Community of Reconciliation (Sisters of St Francis)
Diocese of Southwell Social Responsibility Group
East Midlands Socialist Party
Elliott Durham School (EMAG Department)
French and Co. Solicitors
Grangewood Methodist Church
International Federation of Iranian Refugees
Nottingham Jewish Socialists' Group
Lady Bay Baptist Church
Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture (Nottingham branch)
NATFHE (People's College)
New Wine Family Church
Nottingham City Unison
Nottingham City Arts
Notts County Unison
Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council
Nottingham Jewish Socialists' Group
Notts Socialist Alliance
Nottingham Women's Centre (Training, Employment and Development Project)
Oxfam
Roshni (Nottingham Asian Women's Aid)
Student Action for Refugees (STAR)

NNRF Management Committee

The following members were elected at the June 2000 inaugural meeting:

Mike Scott (Chair), Bob Crane (Treasurer), Linda East (Secretary), Barry Brazier, John Truscott, Gary Freeman, Myra Woolfson, Jeff Cohen, Andy Belfield, Rob Peutrell, Patricia Stoaat.

John and Andy had to resign during the year due to other commitments.

The following members have been co-opted during the course of the year:

Siamak Taymouri, Fadi Sukaria, Pete Loewenstein, Jude Marks, Roy Stansfield, Barrie Ward, Jason Slaney, Bea Tobolewska, Sam Azad, Nawzad Awchi, Mustafa Barak, Patsy Brand, Debbie Ross, Jon Simons, Krista Blair.

Siamak and Jude have had to resign due to other commitments.

In addition to the above, the following agencies are regularly represented at NNRF management committee meetings:

Refugee Action
Refugee Housing Association
Nottinghamshire Police
Nottingham City Council (Housing, Social Services and Education Departments)
Nottingham Health Authority
Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council
BEGIN

The Management Committee has met on thirteen occasions between June 2000 and June 2001.

Linda East (Secretary)

Treasurer's Report

The NNRF accounts for the period ending 31 March 2001 can be found in Appendix One of this report, accompanied by explanatory notes.

Media and Campaigning

The *Media and Campaign Group* met roughly every 6 weeks following the inaugural meeting of the NNRF, with about 4-5 people attending each time. Unfortunately, the demise of Oxfam in Nottingham meant that the group lost one of its key members plus other support. It began to look as if having a separate media and campaign group was not the best way of managing limited time and resources so it was recently decided to disband it and that the two core members not on the management committee would attend and contribute to the monthly management meetings. In the time it was meeting, the group achieved the following:

- A communications plan. This set out goals and priorities and possible ways of achieving these. An initial priority was to raise the profile of NNRF among refugees and potential supporters. A press pack with information briefings and NNRF positions on a number of key areas, for example, the voucher scheme. The pack can also be used as a speaker pack.
- A regular newsletter that goes to all NNRF supporters and is also circulated quite widely through libraries, community centres and mailings to local voluntary groups. Three editions have been distributed during 2000-2001.
- Short articles have been written in Unison newsletters (City and County).
- Useful contact was made with the local NUJ group.

The following points summarise our objectives for the coming year:

- A viable group of people who will monitor the press and respond to letters and articles. (The problems in setting this up so far may be partly due to a relative lack of hostility in the local media.).
- A media training workshop.
- Organising a bank of people prepared to speak to local interested organisations and setting up a mechanism whereby this can happen.
- Make contact with local communities in which refugees were living (and find out what progress other organisations might have made in doing so).

Myra Woolfson (Media and Campaign Group)

Practical Support

The Diocese of Southwell Social Responsibility Group has taken the lead role in co-ordinating practical support for asylum seekers in Nottingham and Notts. As a result of the failure of the voucher system since February 2001, they have provided basic food and toiletries to 240 destitute asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are referred to St Catharine's

House (the Social Responsibility offices of the Diocese of Southwell) from Refugee Action. Each person receives on average £6 worth of basic food etc. Financial support for this work has been provided by a number of church congregations (mainly Anglican and United Reformed Churches), some individuals and local Trade Union branches. The St Catharine's office is staffed from 2pm – 4pm Monday to Friday to receive people in need.

A clothing distribution centre was initially set up at St Catharine's Church, opening on Thursday mornings from September to December 2000. As well as providing clothing, the church provided a venue for socialising particularly for women and families. The centre was staffed by volunteers, and the additional needs of asylum seekers became evident at these sessions. However, it was not practical or possible to continue to use the church building, so this provision has now been relocated to the Link-Up Community Shop on Berridge Road, Hyson Green. Asylum seekers can be referred there for free or cheap clothing, which has been donated to the NNRF. The staff of the Link-Up shop have also provided space for the distribution of emergency food parcels to asylum seekers without vouchers, and their support for the work of the NNRF is highly valued.

Wendy Pearce/ Patricia Stoaat (Practical Support Group)

Asylum seeker and refugee self-help and organisation

Seeking Asylum in Nottingham: NNRF Conference and Social, 17.02.01

This conference/social was organised by a small group of asylum seekers, refugees and supporters. The aim was to give asylum seekers who had recently arrived in Nottingham an opportunity to meet and to share common concerns and interests. We expected about 60 to turn up; on the day there were over 150 asylum seekers representing 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.

The conference in the afternoon involved group discussions in which asylum seekers talked about the problems they had encountered since arriving in the UK. These discussions were followed by a plenary, with notes from each group translated into the main languages represented at the conference. A report was produced and disseminated locally and nationally, and the conference was reported in the *Nottingham Evening Post*.

At the evening social we were entertained by a Czech Roma band, local band *Mas Y Mas* and Kurdish and Iranian music and dancing. What was special about the social was the way in which the asylum seekers themselves took over the entertainment.

This fitted in with the aim of the event: to encourage and support asylum seekers' own organisation. The organisers wanted to offer an alternative to the ways in which asylum system forces asylum seekers into a situation of dependency – on NASS, the Home Office, the private housing providers, social services, voluntary organisations . . . and, if we're not careful, on political activists and other supporters.

Nottingham Refugee Club

Since the conference there have been regular weekly meetings of asylum seekers – known at the moment as the *Nottingham Refugee Club*. These meetings are open to all asylum seekers, and regularly attract over 30 people. The meetings are supported by a small group of around

ten volunteers, including refugees now settled in Nottingham. These meetings offer both an opportunity to socialise and a space for asylum seekers to discuss issues that concern them. People are able to seek help with specific problems – very often housing related.

The meetings have led to work around issues such as the voucher system, deportation, and housing provider harassment. For example, we have been able to link local asylum seekers with the local and national media and we have organised anti-deportation petitions in local schools. We have also collated information on housing provider harassment, made a collective complaint to the police and are now monitoring housing provider behaviour. In April a delegation of asylum seekers met local MPs, Alan Simpson and John Heppell, who have taken up a number of the points raised by Nottingham refugees with Home Office Minister, Barbara Roche.

The meetings have also helped us to put asylum seekers in contact with local people who can offer practical support. For instance, there are plans to organise an event at Nottingham Playhouse to bring together arts/theatre workers – from Nottingham and from the asylum seeker community. Two families now have an allotment, and the Groundwork Trust are planning to work with the Refugee Club to enable asylum seekers to access local environmental and countryside activities. There are plans to set up a website with a local Unison activist working with Iraqi Kurdish asylum seekers, including two Kurdish journalists. Any practical ideas and offers of practical help are, of course, welcome.

With the opening of the 118 Centre, the hope is that asylum seekers will have more opportunity to organise with some autonomy. There is a demand from some groups to meet independently. Hopefully, this will mean that the discussions at the open meetings will more closely reflect the interests and concerns of asylum seekers themselves.

We are aware that the meetings tend to attract mostly Kurdish and Iranian asylum seekers, and that we need to find ways of getting people from the other groups involved. We plan therefore to re-launch the meetings soon.

Celebrating Sanctuary: Refugee Week 2001

On June 24th we celebrated National Refugee Week with music in the Market Square. The high-point of this event was the Kurdish and Iranian music and dancing. The format of the event were decided at the Refugee Club meeting, where it was agreed not to go for a march with overtly political themes (e.g. 'Asylum Rights!; 'End the Voucher System') but to go instead for a cultural event. The important thing is that this decision was reached after discussion amongst the asylum seekers themselves. Those of us involved in supporting these meetings see this as fundamental to what we are trying to do. We are not in the business of making decisions on behalf of asylum seekers; asking them to support events organised by others on their behalf.

Our next event will be a conference in the autumn that will look at the reasons why asylum seekers have come to the UK. Discussions on this have already started – so watch out for details oh, and we've just been offered some more money to go towards another social! Hopefully, the Refugee Club will go from strength to strength as the NNRF enters its second year.

(Rob Peutrell, Refugee Club)