

# Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

**WORKING FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS**

## The Story So Far

■ There are currently about 400 asylum seekers in the County, the majority living in Nottingham. Roughly half this number are supported by the Social Services Asylum Seekers Support Team (Nottingham City Council) and the rest by the National Asylum Support Service (Home Office). There may be up to another 200 people who are self-supporting, either because they are staying with relatives or because they have been here longer than 6 months, have the right to work and have succeeded in finding a job.

About half are ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and the next biggest group is from Iran. Most of those supported by Social Services are single adults. There are a small number of families and unaccompanied young people.

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum is gradually building contacts and resources so that we can add to the very basic services and support that are provided by the state. Fundraising efforts are continuing so that we can have a building where refugees can meet and where advice and support can be offered. A clothing store has been opening on one day a week at St. Catherine's Church and usage is growing as this becomes more widely known. A welcome lunch was held in early November (see report inside). Work has begun to develop awareness of the educational needs of asylum seekers and refugees.



ENTERTAINMENT AT THE WELCOME LUNCH PROVIDED BY PAT GUTTERIDGE AND HER VERY INVENTIVE PUPPET THEATRE.

A number of issues are beginning to emerge:

- The need for *self-organisation* by asylum seekers for social support and to pursue issues such as education and training. They may also wish to develop their own campaigns around refugee rights.
- We need to find ways of fighting more effectively against the voucher system. The government has promised to review the scheme but are they backtracking? (See article by Oxfam worker Sara Duckett.)
- The potential disparities in accommodation and support depending on which part of the system an asylum seeker ends up in.

Continued on page 2

## In THIS ISSUE

■ Asylum seekers need a fairer deal

■ A training & awareness day

■ Buyar's story

■ Welcome Lunch

*Fight the voucher scheme – buy a voucher*

The Forum has initiated its own voucher scheme to supplement the voucher scheme. Confused? The idea is that people can buy gift vouchers so that asylum seekers can purchase some of the things that the miserly Government voucher scheme doesn't allow for. For information please contact the Secretary at NNRF - or send in gift vouchers from Boots, Argos, Woolworths which we can pass on to those who need them.

**Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum**

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The story so far  
Continued from page 1

Nationally, the Government is attempting to speed up the decision-making process in order to achieve a level of 12,000 "removals" a year. They are also planning to increase the number of detentions of people whose only crime is to have applied for asylum in this country. Current figures are about 1000 asylum seekers in detention. Britain ranks only 8<sup>th</sup> out of 13 European countries in numbers of refugees. By far the majority of refugees stay close to home. There are 24 million refugees worldwide, uprooted mainly by war and ethnic conflict. This puts the figure of 43,120 asylum applications in the UK last year into perspective.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for the UK and Ireland the process of dispersal has been inadequately resourced and organised. All over the country similar complaints are made by local consortia: lack of adequate funding to reduce the impact on schools and medical services; insufficient consultation with local authorities on the suitability of housing in the private sector; insufficient legal representation and lack of interpretation.

Some of these problems have not hit Nottingham in a big way – yet. This is mainly because numbers are still low. But this does not mean that everything is plain sailing for asylum seekers. Far from it. Life as an asylum seeker is hard. Which is why we need your support.

Details of how to join are on the back page and if you are already a member, please ask friends and colleagues to join. There are lots of ways in which you can help and once we have your details, our secretary Linda East will be in touch with information. We look forward to hearing from you.

## Asylum seekers need a fairer deal

■ The voucher system was introduced in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and made the provision that asylum seekers would receive vouchers to live on, as opposed to cash. It only entitles asylum seekers to between 70-80% of basic income support.

There are major problems with the voucher system and as a result asylum seekers are being forced below the poverty line. The system is unreasonable, unfair and discriminates against people at a time when they are most vulnerable. Asylum seekers can only use their vouchers in a limited number of shops and supermarkets and a 'no change' clause applies. The supermarkets and shops which participate in the voucher system are not allowed to return change from the vouchers when items purchased are less than the total value of the voucher. The system allows supermarkets and shops to benefit from the voucher system at the expense of asylum seekers. The vouchers include a £10 cash element per adult per week but this is also in the form of a voucher which can only be exchanged at a Post Office. The £10 cash element is clearly insufficient to meet the everyday needs of asylum seekers (e.g. stamps, phone calls and transport costs), additionally vouchers expire after four weeks and are costly to administer.

Oxfam, NNRF & a variety of refugee and asylum organisations have been campaigning for a change to the system. At the Labour Party conference in September, the National Executive Committee agreed that the voucher system would be reviewed and that change should be given to asylum seekers. The review is welcome but we are concerned that the deadline of 22nd December for submissions to the review is too tight. It is also disappointing that the 'no change' clause is not to be abandoned immediately and that the government appears to be back-tracking with talk of lower denomination vouchers, rather than abolishing the 'no change'

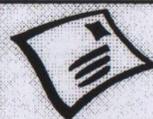
clause completely. The voucher system needs to be comprehensively reviewed and the 'no change' clause abolished, in order to give asylum seekers a fairer deal.

If you wish to support the issues raised in this article there are a number of actions you can take:

- Write to the Prime Minister and congratulate him on the decision that his government is to abolish the 'no change' ruling as reported by the media.
- Ask him when asylum seekers will be able to receive change in shops.
- Welcome the review of vouchers and express the hope that the review will ultimately abolish vouchers.
- Write to local newspapers calling for a review of the voucher system and show your support.
- Read the letters page of newspapers and respond to any negative views about asylum seekers.

Sara Duckett (Oxfam)

For further information about asylum issues please contact Phillipa Hunt at Oxfam Campaigns, Nottm 942 4324.



### Letter writing group

One important aspect of our work is to ensure that the needs of asylum seekers are presented positively in the media. Nottingham hasn't had the vicious anti-refugee headlines of some areas and we want to keep it that way. The best way of doing this is to respond quickly to negative letters in local papers and also to present positive information. It is important that as wide a group of people as possible do this so it isn't always the same few names in the paper. Karen Curtis from Oxfam is trying to build a group of people who will be willing to write letters and will be supporting them with useful facts and ways of dealing with myths and negative stories. For further information contact Karen at the Oxfam office on 0115 942 4234 or by email on [kcurtis@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:kcurtis@oxfam.org.uk)

## Training and awareness day

■ This seminar was organised by a sub-group of the Multi-Agency Forum to bring together organisations who are (or will be) working with asylum seekers. It provided a useful opportunity to meet and exchange information. Some of the most interesting facts to come out of the day included:

- 80,000 people are currently waiting for a decision as to whether they can stay in Britain.
- The Home Office has revised downwards the number of asylum seekers expected to arrive in future. This will not have any effect locally where between 1000 and 2000 are expected within the next year.
- Local landlords, sub-contracting to private companies contracting with the home office will provide 300 flats / houses for up to 1000 people. They have a responsibility to provide information about local support and services.
- Both private and council housing should include furniture and basic equipment.
- Housing provided can be anywhere within 3 miles of an approved Post Office (ie. one allowed to issue vouchers). Locally, this is only Queen Street in the City centre at present.
- Communication, both written and verbal, is often difficult. Home Office information and forms are all in English and the cost of translation and interpreters is high. Since there is no real attempt to keep people from the same background together, one area can contain people with a dozen or more languages.
- Aside from the practical difficulties, one of the main problems is boredom, since asylum seekers are not allowed to work for the first 6 months. They have now been given permission to do voluntary work.

■ Mike Scott (Chair, NNRF)

# Buyar's story

■ Buyar is a refugee from Kosovo who came to Britain in 1997.

In 1912 Kosova was separated from Albania and given to Yugoslavia. Since that time there has been racism by Serbs towards the ethnic Albanians. My home was in Gjakova. My father was involved in a political party. One day in 1993 when I was 20, I was staying with a friend and returned home to find that my house had been burned down. I did not know what happened to my parents but understood that it would be dangerous for me to stay and that I would have to leave immediately.

I travelled through the mountains to Greece where I worked illegally, mostly in restaurants. When the Greek police discovered me, they would send me back to Kosova or to Albania. There was a lot of racism in Greece and dislike of Muslims. Sometimes after I had been working somewhere for a month or two, the employers would ring the police. That way they didn't have to pay me. You can't apply for asylum in Greece so I just kept going back illegally. I changed my name several times.

In all, I was deported from Greece about 7-9 times. The last time was to Albania in 1997. War had broken out there between the Government and the people after many people lost money through investing in pyramid companies which then collapsed. I decided to leave but did not want to return to Greece again. I wanted to be somewhere where I would be treated better. I hated racism. Even the girls wouldn't look beyond the fact that someone was a Muslim. In the restaurants I had met some British people. They seemed friendly and looked at me in a different way. We went out together and some had given me their addresses including a couple from Mansfield.

I had some money and bought a false Greek passport and then travelled by

train through Macedonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Belgium and on to Ramsgate. At Ramsgate I gave my passport to the authorities and said I wanted to claim asylum. They detained me for 2 days and wanted to return me to Belgium (as a safe third country). I spoke to my friends in Mansfield who made a lot of contacts, including the Refugee Legal Centre, who agreed to take my case. They threatened to go to the High Court. My friends offered to support me and drove to Ramsgate and finally the authorities agreed to let me stay.

I lived with them for 2 months in Mansfield and then went to London where the Refugee Council helped to find me accommodation. It was a tiny bedsit with a shared kitchen, bathroom and toilet which were disgusting. I wasn't allowed to work for the first 6 months so had to depend on support from Brent Council. There was no money: they paid the rent and provided food.

After 6 months, I got a job in a Wimpy restaurant. I was living near Wembley stadium and met my girlfriend there. She was going to a Michael Jackson concert. Her home was in Scotland and in December 1997 I moved there to be with her and got a job as a restaurant manager. Following some family problems, we decided to move back to Mansfield, where we rented a house. I was able to obtain some irregular sessional work and when I was not employed, claimed job-seekers' allowance. Then, 10 months ago, I obtained a full time job. 3 months later, I bought a house in Nottingham, which I have completely done up.

Now I have been granted exceptional leave to enter (remain). Once I get my papers for this I will be able to obtain travel documents. Then I want to visit Albania, since I have heard that my parents may be there.

# Welcome lunch, 4th November



■ Refugees, asylum seekers and supporters of the Forum were invited to a welcome lunch at the International Community Centre in order to get to know one another, swap stories and information. If noise level is any measure of success in these things then this event can be judged to have been very successful. The hall was crowded with people from different countries and backgrounds ranging in age from 5 weeks to elderly. The event provided

an opportunity for people to socialise and find out a bit more about Nottingham and what support is available.

Entertainment was provided by Pat Gutteridge and her very inventive puppet theatre

which was enjoyed by the children. At the end of the afternoon, toiletries and household goods were collected by those who needed them. These gifts were generously provided by churches, especially Lady Bay Baptist Church and St. Paul's Wilford Hill Anglican Church, and by other individuals connected to the Forum.

The opportunity to meet and the gifts were much appreciated.

Wendy Pearce

## News

### Health Outreach Worker

Nottingham Health Authority has appointed a Health Outreach Worker for asylum seekers and refugees. Stephen Williams takes up his post in December.

### Jeremy Hardy

There was a packed house at the Maze to see Jeremy Hardy in September & their expectations were fully realised as he gave a great performance – and helped to raise about £1200 for NNRF. Thanks to Nottingham Jewish Socialists' Group for organising this event.

### Clarion Choir and Fieldwork

Our thanks also to the Clarion Choir for organising a benefit for NNRF on 2<sup>nd</sup> December at Sherwood Depot. Another full house enjoyed Jonathon H-Jones and the choir in good voice as well as an hour of favourites from Fieldwork which had the audience cheering and clapping ecstatically.

### Website

There is an excellent website on asylum in Nottingham. Anything you ever wanted to know on the subject can be found at:

[www.nottas.org.uk](http://www.nottas.org.uk)

## Membership Form

Please tick as appropriate

- I would like to become a member of NNRF.   
(Membership is £5 waged and free for those who are unwaged/low waged.)
- I do not wish to become a member at present but would like to be kept informed. Please put my name on your mailing list.
- Please send me information about how I can help refugees and asylum seekers in Nottingham.
- I would like to make a donation to NNRF and enclose a cheque for £

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

.....Postcode.....

Tel. No.....



Cheques should be made payable to: NNRF-  
Please return this form to: Linda East, Secretary, NNRF,  
c/o 67 Lower Parliament Street, Nottingham NG1 3BB



Organisations supporting NNRF:- Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council; Refugee Action; Refugee Housing Association; Nottingham City Council; Student Action for Refugees; Diocese of Southwell Social Responsibility Group; Notts County Unison; Nottingham City Unison; East Midlands Socialist Party; Lady Bay Baptist Church; Jewish Socialists' Group; Oxfam

