

IAP NEWS

No 9

The newsletter for the Inter-Agency Partnership May 2001

Welcome to the May edition of IAP News. This edition features information on changes to the services in Refugee Action's Manchester office, the Voluntary Returns Project, an update on NASS related issues and the Bulletin Board

Refugee Action is a national, but relatively small, voluntary sector agency. They are funded by NASS to provide a Reception Service to all new asylum seekers (in specific regions); to act as a focal point for local and community action to complement services provided by the statutory sector; to provide basic signposting services to Asylum Seekers and to act as a strong voice for asylum seekers. Jill Roberts, Director, Asylum Advice explains why the services in Manchester are changing.

Why are Refugee Action changing the delivery of services in Manchester?

Since April 2000, a small team of six caseworkers has been delivering the services in Manchester. The Manchester region, along with Liverpool and Glasgow, has received the largest amount of dispersed asylum seekers. The number of newly presenting asylum seekers in the North West is on average 40 per week – this is far higher than the 7 that was originally thought. This has led to the team supporting over 1,500 people in Emergency Accommodation.

It is clear that in the future with continued high numbers of people being dispersed to the region, we will no longer be able to provide the same services as we do now. We have therefore had to make some difficult choices and make some difficult decisions in relation to what we will and will not provide. We are aware that this will have an impact on our existing local partners as well as on the partnerships that we hope to develop in the future, but one of our key aims is to work through other agencies to build a wider more 'joined up' support network for asylum seekers in the Manchester area.

The Future

In the future then, we will continue to provide a reception service for new asylum seekers presenting in the North West. We will continue to work with NASS and other agencies to reduce both the length of stay of asylum seekers in 'emergency accommodation' and the number of asylum seekers accommodated in this way. We will continue to work to ensure a high standard of safety and quality in this accommodation. We will shortly be unable to continue to provide a comprehensive 'drop in' service for dispersed clients. This is for two reasons, first because it is clearly impossible for one small agency to deal with all the needs of asylum seekers over a large geographical area. Secondly, given this situation, our role must be one of ensuring that asylum seekers coming to the area have access to a wide range of mainstream services, rather than one being the major access point of access for advice and information in the region.

What are the changes to the services?

Over the next few weeks we plan to phase out our 'drop in' service. From 23/04/01 to 18/05/01 we will be providing this service for only three days a week. From 21/05/01 onwards, we will not provide any more 'drop in' sessions. However, to ensure a more comprehensive range of services for asylum seekers in the region we will be offering the following services:

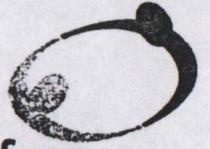
- A signposting service to other agencies. This will be through leaflets and through a freephone 'client line' service. If people do come to our offices, we will refer them as appropriate to other agencies. Our intention is that, over time, clients will have sufficient information when they arrive in Manchester area to make this unnecessary
- A specialist 'agency advice line' for agencies that provide services to asylum seekers but who are unfamiliar with the NASS support arrangements. This line will be open on 26/04/01 and will be available on 0161 233 1215
- A limited number of outreach and appointment based advice sessions to assist and support the development of new services across the region and to support work on social policy issues
- Continuing work with other agencies to improve services in the area

If you would like more information on the change to services in Manchester please call Dave Garratt or Jill Roberts on 020 7840 6518.

asylum support programme



MIGRANT HELPLINE



refugee action



refugee arrivals project



REFUGEE COUNCIL

scottish refugee council



WELSH REFUGEE COUNCIL

**Gerry Hicky, Refugee Action introduces:
The Voluntary Return Project**

The Voluntary Return Project (VRP), which is run by Refugee Action, was set up in 1998. If we were to sum up our work in a couple of sentences, the project is about providing confidential, independent and impartial advice to refugees and asylum seekers who are considering returning to their country of origin. The advice can take the form of informal counselling and in brief, the aim of the project is to assist people to make informed choices in a non pressurised environment. The Project also has the broader aim of promoting an awareness of the needs of returnees and the need for assistance with resettlement in the country of origin.

For the first two years of our existence we were funded by the European Union as a pilot programme. At that time the EU had created a special budget for organisations offering support for voluntary return. We were among a dozen of such organisations in Europe which received funding for this work. We are now funded by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) as part of the Voluntary Assisted Returns Programme. IOM processes applications to return, makes travel arrangements, advises on travel documentation and offers support at the point of departure and arrival.

Refugee Action has a long history of working with Refugee Communities Organisations (RCOs) and it was through our contact with RCOs that the idea for the Project arose. The issue of return to country of origin has always been evident amongst refugee communities in the UK and often, it has been a difficult and contentious issue to broach. Prior to the development of the Voluntary Return Project there was no one service that offered holistic advice on voluntary return. It was also important for the Project to be based in an organisation such as Refugee Action, which has no vested interest in return.

Over the three years, we have built up a great deal of specialism in the area of voluntary return. This knowledge includes the needs of specific communities which are considering return and the more practical issues such as immigration rules around travel and re-entry rights.

When we work with someone who is considering return there are several key questions we will ask. Firstly we will explore the reason behind the decision to return and see if there are external factors which may be influencing the decision. We ask why the person is considering returning now. We explore the reasons why a person fled their country and try to find out if these conditions still exist. We can get country of origin information from sources such as Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and the World Health Organisation.

We can advise individuals on their legal rights such as entitlement to family re-union and this can help an individual to make a more informed decision. We can provide advice on how leaving the UK will affect any status the person holds in the UK. The rights of family members remaining in UK, especially dependants, could be affected by a person returning. A person may have a problem in the UK which can be remedied (e.g. a housing issue) and we can help advocate on their behalf and if the problem can be resolved, the desire to return may diminish. Lastly, after looking at all their options, if the person finally does decide that they wish to return, we can assist them to apply for the travel and travel documentation costs.

We currently receive about sixty enquiries each month from a broad range of nationals. To date, we have come into contact with around 60 different nationalities. In the past, a large proportion of our clients were those with status or who had been settled in the UK for some time. **However, since the introduction of NASS, the number of newly arrived people seeking asylum approaching the service has increased drastically.** This group cite issues such as isolation, harassment, lack of access to healthcare, etc as their main motivation for choosing to return. This is a worrying trend for the Project as we are concerned that NASS is failing to meet some of the basic needs of asylum seekers. This in turn is acting as a kind of push factor as individuals find it too difficult to cope with living in the UK.

As I mentioned earlier, it is also a role of the Project to promote the needs of refugees who wish to return. At the moment no assistance beyond a one way air ticket (and financial assistance for travel documentation as necessary) exists for those who are considering returning. Refugees are often considering return to countries where the infrastructure has been partly or totally destroyed. If that return is to be both sustainable and viable a much greater level of support and assistance is needed. Our European neighbours have progressed further in their thinking around the issue of resettlement. Countries such as Denmark provide this support through the provision of training, and grants to set up small enterprises. **The next stage for the Project will be to research this need in more detail by commissioning the views of refugees and their communities.** We are hoping to apply for trust funding later this year. We then hope to be able to use this research to lobby for change in policy so return can be a more sustainable solution.

Please contact Gerry Hickey at the Voluntary Return Project if you would like to comment or discuss any issues about the project further:

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UPDATE

Emergency Accommodation (North) Project:

The number in Emergency Accommodation as of the week ending 27/04/01 totalled 8640 (according to agency figures). A total of 4408 were in Refugee Council accommodation in London – 50% of the overall total. In response to this situation NASS is currently engaged in negotiating with Local Authorities for the provision of Emergency Accommodation outside the London area. The objective is to prevent asylum seekers settling in London, from where dispersal is problematic, by providing Emergency Accommodation outside the London area as an alternative to the current Emergency Accommodation in London. The thinking is that asylum seekers arriving in London will be temporarily accommodated for a matter of hours, at the most for a night or a weekend – until they are put on a coach and dispersed to Emergency Accommodation outside of London. If an asylum seeker is unfit to travel e.g. for medical reasons they will be placed in separate accommodation. Asylum seekers will have to have completed a NASS application form before boarding a coach. The rest of the process of support will happen in the normal way.

There are some obvious concerns about this plan, particularly in relation to special needs cases which need to be addressed appropriately. **It should be emphasised that nothing is yet finalised and the plan is in the very early stages of development.**

The Chief Executive Officers of the Partnership are meeting with Barbara Roche on Tuesday 1st May and will be expressing their views on the future proposals for the Programme. The Partnership, as always, will continue to advocate on behalf of asylum seekers. Feedback from the meeting will be in the next edition of IAP News.

Vouchers

Problems with the voucher system remain a major issue for asylum seekers. Agencies report that the main problems are the Sodexo letter not arriving, vouchers not being renewed, the incorrect amount being issued, the crown post office being more than 3 miles away and subsistence only clients waiting for weeks without vouchers.

The Voucher Enquiry Line has passed on over 9000 call notes to the Voucher Enquiry Team since 2nd February. This clearly reflects the problem with the system. We must continue to encourage asylum seekers and advice workers to call the Enquiry Line – this provides hard evidence about the nature and level of the problem.

For problems with vouchers call the Enquiry Line on 020 8760 3500, for subsistence only clients who have never received vouchers call Veronica Hurstwaite 020 8633 0118, fax 020 8633 0129.

Asylum Statistics

The number of applications for asylum in the UK in **March was 5,815**, which is 13% lower than in March 2000 (6,680), although 5% higher than in February (5,520). Applications made in-country fell by 2% to 3,425 in March from 3,490 in February. Applications made at port rose by nearly a fifth (18%) to 2,390 from 2,030 in February.

Main Nationalities of Asylum Applicants: March 01

Nationality	Number
Afghanistan	680
Somalia	470
Iraq	425
Sri Lanka	410
Turkey	355
Iran	295
Romania	285
Fed Rep of Yugoslavia	210
China	175
Pakistan	175
Czech Republic	175
India	165
Sierra Leone	155
Zimbabwe	145
Other nationalities	1,575

NB: All figures are provisional and rounded – source Home Office

Number of NASS Applications as at the end of February 2001

At the end of February NASS had received a total of **38,550 applications** (of which 34,870 had been assessed). It is estimated that out of the total number of applications that 1,200 are from disbenefited cases.

Assessed Applications	Total
Accommodation and Subsistence support	24,130
Subsistence only	10,700
Accommodation only	40
Total Assessed	34,870

NB: All figures are provisional and rounded – source NASS

BULLETIN BOARD

Seeking asylum in Nottingham

150 asylum seekers and refugees living in Nottingham attended a conference on 17th February 2001 to discuss common interests and problems. The conference was organised by a planning group of refugees and supporters of The Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum (NNRF). The aim was to help to develop networks which would offer mutual support, campaign around asylum issues and discuss ways of pursuing shared interests, for example sport and voluntary work. The conference was for asylum seekers and refugees only and was followed by a meal and then a social event in the evening to which supporters of the NNRF were invited. There was representation from the key national and language groups in Nottingham: Turkish Kurdistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Albania, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sierra Leone, Russia, Angola and Roma from the Czech Republic.

Following presentations by refugees living in Nottingham, the conference broke into nine smaller workshops based on the different language groups. **The key issues discussed included the unfairness of the dispersal system and the strain of living on vouchers.** A number of people were not happy with the service they were getting from their solicitors, citing serious delays which sometimes led to a refusal of the application for asylum. Lack of a permit to work legally added 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.' Interpreting services and accommodation also received much discussion.

An action plan was agreed, with many points already addressed. As a result of the conference, a group of Nottingham asylum seekers have:

- **held a follow-up meeting for asylum seekers and refugees interested in doing further work on the issues identified at the conference, and continued to meet on a weekly basis;**
- **met with local MPs to advise them on the problems they are experiencing;**
- **organised a meeting with local immigration solicitors;**
- **obtained funding for further social and cultural events.**

The conference report has been circulated to agencies working with asylum seekers in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.

For more information contact the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum, 79 Beech Avenue, New Basford, Nottingham NG7 7LR.

Refugee Doctors Database

The refugee doctors' database is a project organised by the Refugee Council and the British Medical Association. We are asking refugee doctors in the UK to send us their details, so that we can keep them on a database. We will use this to send refugee doctors information which we think will help them as they prepare to continue their medical careers in the UK. **This is a voluntary database.** If they do not want to send their details they do not have to. Any details sent to us will be **confidential.**

We know that there are many refugees in the UK who are qualified doctors. Some of them have been able to carry on working as doctors in the UK, to pass the exams for registration with the General Medical Council and to get medical jobs in the UK. There are many organisations who want to help refugee doctors continue their medical careers in the UK but they do not have the information they need to help them do this. Our database will be able to help by answering these questions:

- **How many refugee doctors are in the UK?**
- **In which cities are the refugee doctors living?**
- **At what stage of their career are they?**
- **What help do they need?**

If you know of anyone who might want their details on the database they will need to complete a data collection form. For a copy of the form and for further information contact:

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Please send articles or letters that you would like to appear in the next edition of this newsletter to:

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