

Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

WORKING FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Welcome To The First Issue Of The Newsletter

■ Welcome to the first issue of the newsletter. Its main purpose is to keep in touch with our supporters. We also hope that by circulating it widely through libraries, community centres and any appropriate mailings, we can reach people who may not yet know about the Forum but who share our interest in campaigning for and supporting asylum seekers and refugees.

There are already a number of people in Nottingham who have found their own way here from countries such as Kosova, Somalia, Iran, Iraq, and Bosnia. From mid-August it is likely that many more will be arriving under the Home Office dispersal scheme.

Locally there are refugee groups who have been here for a long time and who are well-established in the city, for example, Vietnamese and Chilean people and Ugandan Asians who were forced to leave their country during the time of Idi Amin. Going back still further, there are

Jews who arrived in Nottingham after fleeing from Nazi oppression in Germany in the 30s.

We know that refugees and other immigrants bring a richness of experience and culture to the places in which they settle so as well as offering our support to those who have recently arrived, Nottingham will also gain tremendously from the new arrivals.

■ We aim to produce a newsletter every 2 months. Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum is still very new and things are changing fast so this plan may be hopelessly unrealistic or, who knows, it may be necessary and possible to publish more often. There will be a news section, information about what is being provided and some regular features. If you have any comments please send them to Myra Woolfson at NNRF. (See contact details below for the address)

In THIS Issue

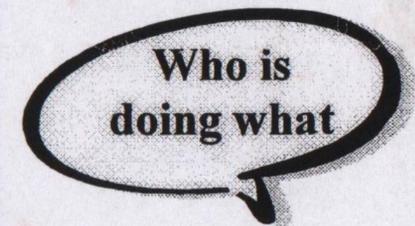


■ Why I support refugees and asylum seekers by Jeremy Hardy

■ A message from the Chair



■ What's happening in Nottingham?



■ Hassan's story



■ How to join NNRF

NNRF will be running a temporary clothing distribution centre every Thursday from 11am -2pm. at St. Catherine's Church, bottom of St. Anns Well Road (opposite the mosque).

Volunteers are needed to run this. If you can help, contact the NNRF secretary.

Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

67 Lower Parliament Street, Nottingham NG1 3BB ,Tel 0115 958 6515

NNRF

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum was formally constituted in June of this year. Meetings had been taking place since October 1999 of a number of local community groups and interested individuals to discuss how local people could be involved in supporting refugees and asylum seekers and in particular help to fill in some of the gaps in provision which it would not be possible for the other agencies to meet. (See item from the Chair of NNRF.) Supporters of the Forum come from a very wide range of organisations, cultural and work backgrounds. A co-ordinating committee meets monthly and a number of task groups are being organised where specific issues can be focussed on. An important principle is that refugees and asylum seekers should themselves be involved in the running of the organisation.

Task groups include:

- ★ Education and training
- ★ Campaigning
- ★ Drop-in centre
- ★ Fundraising
- ★ Media and newsletter
- ★ Health
- ★ Liaison with schools and legal advice
- ★ Cultural and religious links, translating and interpreting

Since the Government has provided funding for only one drop-in centre per region, there will be a need for somewhere in Nottingham where refugees and asylum seekers can meet, organise themselves and obtain advice and support. The Forum is looking out for suitable premises and applications are being made to various funding bodies for money to run this.

There are a lot of ways in which people who want to help can be involved. If you want to help, fill in the form on the back page and send it off and one of the committee will be in touch.

Numbers

There are currently around 120 asylum seekers in Nottingham being supported by the local authority. Over half of these are ethnic Albanians from Kosova. The majority are single, male adults. There are a small number of families, unaccompanied minors and single women.

A small number of asylum seekers have been in the City long enough to have permission to work.

Full implementation of the Home Office National Asylum Support Service is due to take place on 14th August so numbers are likely to increase after that date.

How do asylum seekers get to Nottingham?

Over half have made their own way to the city, often by getting lifts with truck drivers. They will then report to a police station on arrival here or may have been stopped in transit. Just under half have arrived under the government's "interim dispersal programme", the purpose of which was to share the financial and other costs of supporting asylum seekers more fairly across the country. The Government's recent commitment to speeding up the system for processing claims for asylum by appointing more case-workers is likely to lead to quicker decisions and therefore more asylum seekers being sent back to their countries of origin. This is likely to lead to a reduction in the time asylum seekers are supported whilst awaiting decisions about their applications.

What sort of people are they?

Asylum seekers in Nottingham come from very varied backgrounds. They include skilled and unskilled manual workers, doctors, engineers, actors, airline staff and relatives of government personnel. Many cannot speak English, and have few or no possessions and no money. Most have fled their countries in fear, with little time to prepare for travel

and often they do not know the whereabouts of their families. Many have worries that their friends and relatives may be dead.

What financial support is available?

The cost of supporting asylum seekers has so far fallen on local authorities. In future this responsibility will be taken over by the Home Office through the National Asylum-Seeker Support Service (NASS). Currently accommodation costs are paid by Social Services Departments who claim the money back from the Home Office.

A subsistence allowance is paid which is about 70% of Income Support levels (already a pretty minimal amount) and most of this is paid in vouchers. The amount paid is not sufficient to cover the cost of clothing, transport or toys for children.

Who provides accommodation?

The Government has signed accommodation contracts with 8 private providers and a number of local authority consortia. Nottingham is part of the East Midlands Consortium for Asylum Seeker Support (EMCASS) which is aiming to provide about 700 units of accommodation of which 250 will be in Nottingham. This housing contract will be managed on behalf of EMCASS by the

Refugee Housing Association (see below). There will be a mixture of local authority stock, housing association property and some private sector property. Support will be provided to all those who are accommodated in this way.

It is likely that the private contractors with whom the government has signed contracts will also seek to provide accommodation in Nottingham and it remains to be seen what level of support they will offer.

Providing support

Who is doing what?

Refugee Action is one of 5 agencies to receive grants from the Home Office to provide advice and support to Asylum seekers from April 2000. They have the lead role in 4 areas: East Midlands, North West, South Central and South West.

They will be providing 2 types of services in Nottingham:

1 The "Reception Role": assisting asylum seekers who will need support with their NASS application; where necessary, providing emergency accommodation for 7 days while NASS decide whether to support the person and offering appropriate advice once a decision has been made.

planned for one centre in the East Midlands, probably in Leicester.

There is funding for 2 caseworkers to be based in Nottingham but since there are still relatively few asylum seekers coming to the City under the new scheme, the service is currently provided by caseworkers visiting from other centres in the region.

2 The "One Stop Service" which will provide orientation advice and assistance to asylum seekers who have been recently dispersed to the region under the new arrangements. This will involve: local orientation advice; casework support for accessing accommodation and statutory services; advice on obtaining appropriate legal assistance and access to emergency food, clothing and toiletries.

The Refugee Housing Association is also a national organisation and is a member of the East Midlands Consortium for Asylum Seeker Support. It is already managing 26 households for refugees and asylum seekers in Nottm, accommodating 51 individuals. Furniture is provided including bedding and cutlery. RHA employs a regional manager and 2 housing workers who manage the properties and also offer advice and support to their tenants.

A drop-in facility with hot meals and leisure activities is

Nottingham City Council provides support to refugees and asylum seekers mainly through its Housing and Social Services department. The Housing Department provides initial reception accommodation as well as medium term housing. It has also contracted with the Home Office as part of the East Midlands Consortium to provide 250 units of housing for those arriving as part of the dispersal scheme. The Social Services Department established an Asylum Seekers Team in January 2000. It offers support to asylum seekers dispersed from the South East as well as those who have made their own way to Nottingham by finding accommodation and providing subsistence. Current staffing is a manager, one caseworker and one admin worker. The team has succeeded in moving people out of bed and breakfast accommodation into less expensive independent housing in the inner areas of the city. As well as being cheaper, asylum seekers themselves prefer to live in their own homes. About half have been accommodated in Housing Association property (mainly Refugee Housing and the North British) and the other half in the private sector. Privately rented accommodation is the cheapest option but does not offer the kind of support which can be provided by the Housing Associations and which is of great importance to asylum seekers. The Nottingham Multi-Agency Forum consists of all departments within the City Council which have, or will have, involvement with asylum seekers, together with the Police, the Health Authority, the local Medical Committee, the Benefits Agency and refugee organisations. Its function is to ensure that all services are co-ordinated properly and that each is kept up to date with developments locally and nationally.

Hassan's Story

Hassan Haji is a refugee from Somalia in his early 60s. He agreed to be interviewed by the Newsletter to help people understand more about the background of some of those who have sought asylum here. It is intended that each issue will carry one person's story.

When and why did you leave Somalia?

I left Somalia in October 1999 because of the war. My home was in the South, near the Kismayo area. This is the most fertile part of the country and has always been contested. The people who live in that area are the Bajuni people. Their ethnic background is not pure Somali and they speak Swahili as their mother tongue, not Somali. Bajuni people also live in the north of Kenya and in part of Ethiopia. They regard these people as "brothers". As a result, they were often discriminated against by the Somali government and regarded as foreigners. They are Muslims but seen as not being strict enough because, for example, their women are educated.

In 1991 the situation became particularly bad. Most of the warlords were trying to dominate them, there was no functioning

Government and the SFTA, who were bandits, would come and start shooting. You had to bribe people in order to survive. Many people were arrested. I was a businessman, a trader in goats and fish. I didn't want to leave. Home is home. It is my country. But eventually I had to. Nothing is better than one's life.

Who did you leave behind?

I have grown-up children from my first marriage who are 35 and 29 and I don't know where they or my first wife now are. I married again in 1995. My wife has a son of 12 from her previous marriage and we have 2 children who are 7 and 5. It is not easy to leave as the journey can be hazardous and we decided that I should go and then apply to bring my family. I was not looking for a good life, just some security. I don't know where my wife and children are but think they are probably in a refugee camp in the Kismayo or Liboi area.

Tell me about your journey.

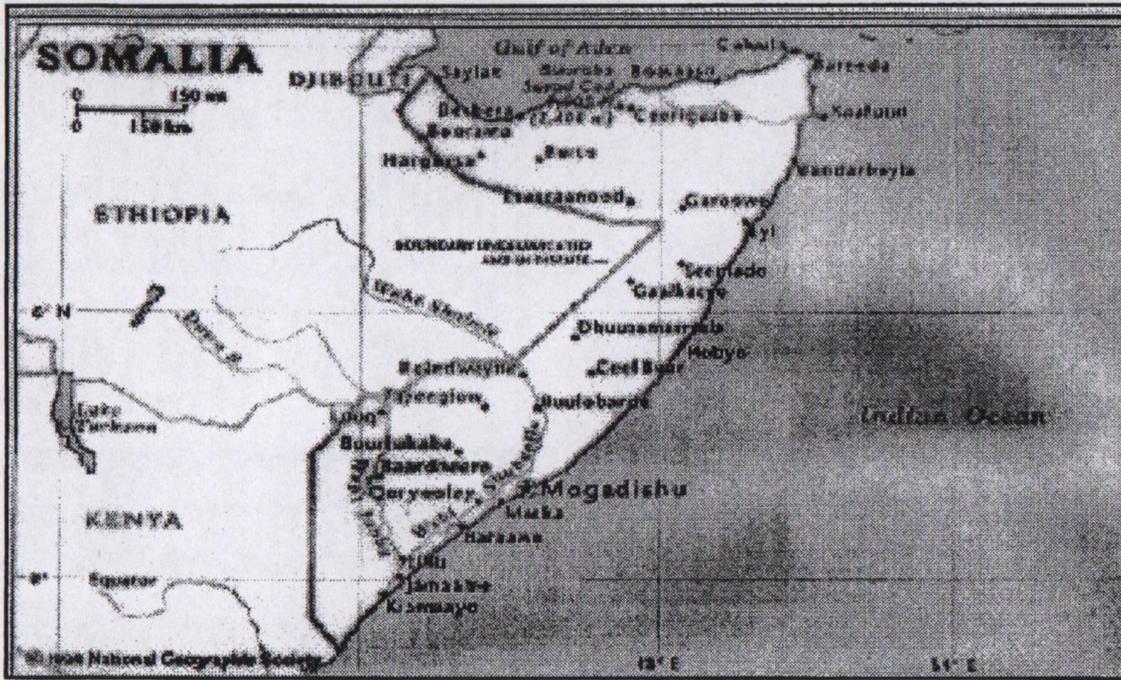
I travelled on foot through Ethiopia to Manderu in the north of Kenya. I could only walk during the day as there are a lot of snakes and other animals at night. From there I travelled in a lorry used by Ethiopian traders to the Ogaden region and then I took another lorry to Addis Ababa. All this took several days. Then I found someone who was travelling to San'a, the capital of the Yemen. I had to pay a lot of money to an agent who arranged a passport for me.

I didn't choose to come to Britain and wanted just to be in Europe but I found myself in London. We were a group of 4 and were told by our agent not to speak, even those of us who knew English. In London he told us to wait and said he would get a taxi to take us to a hotel. He gave me £10. He never returned. I kept waiting, waiting. Finally I met someone who helped me - a samaritan. He said that where we were was very expensive and I would never get a hotel there. He took me to Romford Road and gave me another £10. The following day I kept talking to people and was told to get a travel card and go to the Home Office in Croydon. The first day I tried and didn't find it. Then I had no money for a hotel. I went to an Indian hotel and found someone who knew some Swahili. In the end I got to the Home Office. I found them to be very nice. I was shown the procedure. Then I had to pay £3 for photos. I had only £1.50. I had to borrow from other asylum seekers. I registered and was given all my papers.

What happened after you reached the UK?

In order to register I needed an address. In Romford I had met a friend who had given me his address in Northampton so I could communicate with him. So I used his address but then realised I had made a mistake because I didn't have money to go to my friend. But the African people are great people. The little they have they share with their brothers. Someone took me to Victoria and paid my bus fare.

Hassan's Story



He wouldn't give me money in case I spent it on drink - even though I don't drink..

When I got to Northampton, I talked to people I thought were African. Then I found out they were Jamaican. Eventually I saw some people from Somalia and they directed me to Social Security. I was given a small room and stayed in Northampton about 8 months.

I left Northampton mainly because I wanted to do a college course and they didn't have what I wanted there. But there are so many refugees there and local people don't like them.

How have you found life in Nottingham?

When I arrived here in Nottingham, I had my Home Office papers but I struggled for 2 days before I could find the right place to go. I had a little money which I spent on a hotel. Finally I went to the City Council and then I was directed to Roy's office. (the Asylum Seekers Team). He had to interview me about why I wanted to be here.

Then they took me to a small hotel and I was there for a few weeks until I came here. I really wanted to have my own place. I don't smoke or drink. Young people might want loud music, other people might cook pork. It is very hard to live with people you don't know, who are not family.

I'm still waiting for a decision about my asylum application. Maybe I'll be dead before I get one.

There are not so many refugees here and they are not all in one place though one of my neighbours is also a refugee. People here often regard me as Jamaican or Trinidadian until I talk to them. I was very lucky as I have found some voluntary work with old people in a home. I used to help people in Somalia including Germans and Italians so I am used to Europeans. It is hard to find paid work once you have been here long enough to have permission to work. Some of us have been teachers, can work on computers, have been taught by the British, but they don't accept our qualifications.

I'm still waiting for a decision about my asylum application. Maybe I'll be dead before I get one.

"There's a job for anyone who wants to help - we're looking forward to hearing from you."

■ The Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum has been set up to help and support refugees and asylum seekers in our area. The Government's dispersal scheme will soon be directing both single people and families here and they will start with nothing, apart from basic housing, and little money to buy anything.

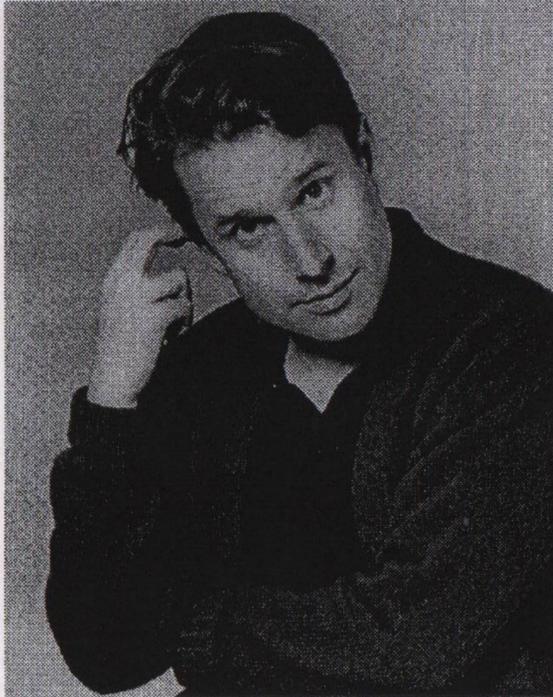
Imagine yourself or your family in a strange, wet country, where you can't speak the language and are blamed by the press for escaping from war or racial attack. Because refugees are human beings we feel a responsibility to help.

The NNRF will be setting up a Drop-In centre and will make sure clothes, toys and furniture are available for people who need them. We will also arrange "befriending" to support people and help guide them through the complications of life in a new country. Campaigning against the immoral and expensive Voucher Scheme will be a priority too.

In fact, there's a job for anyone who wants to help - we're looking forward to hearing from you.

Mike Scott,
(Chair, NNRF)

Why I support refugees and asylum seekers



■ I am horrified by the way newspapers are turning vulnerable people into targets of hatred and that the Government, rather than speaking out in defence of refugees, is encouraging the prejudice.

A Government containing several ministers who are themselves from refugee families is detaining asylum seekers at port or scattering them all over the United Kingdom. Then they are forced to live on vouchers. By doing this, they are sending a message to the world that Britain is a nasty, cruel intolerant place where refugees are singled out and exposed, making them easy to target. A Government that speaks so much

about racism is both practising it and encouraging racists to make sure that refugees are made to feel unwelcome here.

Jeremy Hardy
(Jeremy Hardy will be performing in Nottingham on Sunday 10th September at the Maze in a benefit for NNRF. See box advert for further details)



An Evening with
Jeremy Hardy
@ **The Maze**

In Aid Of Nottm & Notts Refugee Forum

Sunday 10th September
Doors 7.30 - Act 8.00
@ **The Maze,**
270 North Sherwood St
Behind The Forest Tavern Pub

Tickets
£10 waged - £5 unwaged / low waged
Tickets available from
Maze, Forest Tavern
or ☎ 9603355

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.....

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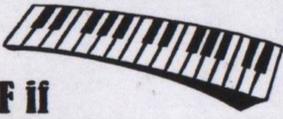
..... Postcode.....

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

Wanted



Good quality toys and clothing for refugees and asylum seekers and.....
a keyboard 
Contact NNRF if you can help

★ 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. ★