

Bristol Refugee Rights

Annual Report 2008–2009



Bristol Refugee Rights

About us

Bristol Refugee Rights was set up as a voluntary organisation in 2005 to uphold and champion the human rights of asylum seekers and refugees. We provide a place of welcome where any one of about 1,000 asylum seekers and refugees in Bristol can meet and be helped to play a full part in the life of the wider community. We also campaign more widely for the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Bristol Refugee Rights aims to deliver a 'user-led' service that addresses the practical and psychological needs as well as the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers by:

- welcoming people into a safe place
- empowering people to achieve an independent and productive life
- enabling social inclusion
- focusing public attention on the need to reform the asylum system to remove the abuses of human rights experienced by our service users.

If you would like to find out more about us you can log on to our website: www.bristolrefugeerights.org.

It's like our home, we feel comfortable here

Service user's comment

When I came to the Drop-in Centre I felt happy because I met different people. I like it in this Centre there is good teaching English class and the teachers are very friendly.

Service user's comment

Chairs' report

Once again we have had a busy and successful year providing a service to asylum seekers from an ever growing number of countries. We continue to consolidate the work from last year and are concentrating on developing a sturdy and sustainable structure to carry the organisation through the next few years. In this we have been very lucky to receive significant funding for the next three years which will allow us to employ two more part-time staff to work at the Welcome Centre.

In pursuing our human rights objectives we organised a public meeting in April at which a packed audience heard asylum seekers speak of their experience, an inspirational address was given by human rights lawyer Minoo Jalali and many people signed our petition asking for asylum seekers to be given the right to work. Continuing our campaign for "Dignity not Destitution", we plan a similar event in association with other organisations on Human Rights Day, 10th December.

The Drop-in Centre is simply my house. I hardly ever miss a day.

Service user's comment

We must take this opportunity to offer our heartfelt thanks to our two staff members, Caroline Beatty and Sue Scott. Their energy and creativity is at the heart of the welcome and support we offer asylum seekers as well as much else. We are delighted to announce that Caroline has taken up the new post of Welcome Centre Manager and Sue's contract as BRILL Coordinator has been extended so both will be able to continue with their excellent work.

I feel very relaxed and I'm happy coming here and I miss it when I can't come. I meet nice people here.

Service user's comment

We must also thank the extraordinary group of volunteers working in the Welcome Centre whose dedication and commitment to the cause makes it such a uniquely imaginative and welcoming place. The names of our volunteers are listed at the end of this report and we would like to extend our gratitude to each one.

We were very sorry to learn that Sue Njie died in hospital last July. Those of you who knew her will know what an important and influential person she was for asylum seekers and refugees in Bristol. She was the founder of Bristol Refugee Rights in the days when it was known as Holding Refugees and Human Rights in Mind, she chaired the committee in the early days and organised the drop-in centre when it was based in St Pauls. In more recent times she was the city council advisor to BRR and often attended Board meetings in that role. We shall all miss her wisdom and experience.

Damaris Le Grand
Co-Chair
Bristol Refugee Rights

Naomi Roberts
Co-Chair
Bristol Refugee Rights

October 2009

The teachers explain everything about social life in the UK and I get the confidence to speak English.

Service user's comment

When I came in this Centre I was very happy because I met different people from different cultures.

Service user's comment

Welcome Centre Coordinator's report

The Welcome Centre opens on Wednesdays and Thursdays at Newton Hall in Easton, and since August has started a morning session at the church of St Nicholas of Tolentino St Nick's on Tuesdays.

Attendance continues to rise. We regularly receive 60 service users on Wednesdays and 120 on Thursdays. The ratio of men to women remains 2:1, and up to 10 children use the crèche each week. We have a total of more than 750 registered service users from 45 different countries.

Newton Hall provides space for reception in the main hall, a large kitchen for tea and coffee and a hot meal, six additional rooms for classes, advice sessions, crèche, office space and other occasional activities and meetings. The yard outside is well used for bike storage. The staff at Newton Hall have been very generous in their provision of space and support for our work.

Volunteers

All the activities of the Welcome Centre rely on our volunteers. At any one time we have about 50, of whom about a third are asylum seekers or refugees. During the year we have had more than 80 volunteers altogether.

Our volunteers of refugee background have an increasingly important role and voice in the centre. They have been meeting as a group during the year, supported ably by Jo Bloxam of Thinking People.

Activities

Welcome and Reception

This remains the core of the welcome centre. We aim to greet and welcome each service user. New service users receive a brief assessment to ensure that we know what support is needed.

Information and Advocacy (IA)

Five volunteers deliver one-to-one sessions of information, advocacy and signposting throughout a Thursday. They regularly see 20 people a week, supporting a growing number of people who are destitute; about half their work entails obtaining fresh legal representation for asylum claims. The team works closely with Refugee Action. The Avon and Bristol Law Centre provides consultancy support and appointments. Our IA service is in demand and urgently needs further resourcing.

The people who work in the Centre are very friendly and helpful.

Service user's comment

Cooking

We alternate each week between a bought-in Halal meal from Red Sea Restaurant and cooking a vegetarian meal in-house, using ingredients from FareShare, and brought by volunteers.

Training

Induction training is provided for new volunteers, and ongoing evening training and review sessions are available. The BRILL volunteer team are well supported with regular trainings given by Sue Scott. Refugee Action supports the IA team with training sessions. We have provided placements for two social work students and three students on the community volunteering course at Bristol City College

The crèche

A crèche is held on both mornings, staffed by Level 2 qualified workers. It is well used and supports parents to join in centre activities. We have now been granted three years funding from BBC Children in Need to put the work on a firm footing, with appropriately qualified staff.

British Red Cross

We continue to work closely with the Bristol branch of the Red Cross, who provide massage sessions, tracing and messaging, hardship payments to destitute service users, vouchers for the Red Cross shop and individual support to service users through the orientation scheme, using the Welcome Centre as a base or link point.

Access to Leisure

BRR is working with Bristol City Council, the NHS and Refugee Action to pilot a scheme for enabling service users supported by NASS (National Asylum Support Services) to have free access to facilities at Bristol's leisure centres. This pioneering scheme has been enormously popular, and has largely been coordinated by one of our volunteers.

Stress reduction sessions

Pilot sessions are running in partnership with the NHS on Mondays for small groups with appropriate language support.

Bristol Bike Project

75 or more bikes have been received from donors, repaired by service users under expert tuition and given to them, with locks and lights. This project, conceived and executed entirely by a volunteer from the Centre has been astonishingly successful. The outside of the hall bristles with bikes, locked to new bike racks supplied by Cycling City.

Arts project

Students from Cardiff facilitated professional artists to do a series of art workshops at the centre, including paper sculpture and photography. A centre volunteer ran a series of afternoons on mosaic making. BRR banner continues to grow.

Voucher swap

We publicise the issue of gift cards for those on “Section 4” support and enable service users to exchange their cards for cash.

Project Development

Three service user volunteers are managing an extension of the Welcome Centre in St Nicholas of Tolentino’s community room on Tuesday mornings. This also provides support for people who have to sign at Trinity Police Station that day.

Several other developments to the centre are planned, contingent on funding.

We are working all the time on improving our consultation processes for project development. Besides the daily briefing and de-briefing that all volunteers are encouraged to attend, there are regular evening sessions and evaluations of activities. This autumn we will hold a consultation event for all volunteers.

When I came my first time I was shy. Then I started to come regularly and I felt happy because I met different people

Service user’s comment

Community Cohesion

Activities include service user participation in Stapleton Road Street Fair, St Paul's Carnival and Refugee Week. Volunteers support individuals to get involved in a wide range of particular activities such as the East Side roots community garden project. We held a very successful open day during Refugee Week when the public, especially local people, were invited in to "have a cup of tea with a refugee"

Networks, links and wider support

The Welcome Centre continues to provide a contact point for many organisations that work with new arrivals and new refugees, including British Red Cross, NHS services, Single Parent Action Network, Refugee Women of Bristol, Bristol Defend Asylum Seekers Campaign, Womankind, departments in Bristol City Council and UWE, .

We have regular contact with, and support from Avon and Bristol Law Centre, Refugee Action, Bishopston Bread Store, Sustainable Frome and the Pierian Centre.

We would particularly like to thank our partner organisation St. Nicholas of Tolentino and its priest, Father Richard McKay, for their continued support.

We have built on contact made in earlier years with Kerry McCarthy MP, Roger Berry MP and Stephen Williams MP, who regularly advocate in support of individual service users.

BRILL Coordinator's report

Classes

a) BRILL

The language programme, now re-named British Life and Language (BRILL) to reflect its general content and purpose, continues to thrive. Each service user is placed in a class at the appropriate level. Six classes are held twice a week throughout the year, all taught by trained volunteers. Small groups provide an opportunity for people to get to know each other. About 30 students use this service each day.

b) Maths

Two volunteers (one herself an asylum seeker) teach a well-attended maths class once a week.

c) IT class

In partnership with Trinity Community Centre, a language-based IT session is held on Friday mornings for our service users, in the IT suite at Trinity. Again, this is taught by volunteers from the Welcome Centre.

d) Newsletter

Our first newsletter was published in July and we hope to be able to publish regularly in future. The newsletter gives our service users a voice and most of the articles were written by them.

e) Excursions

With a grant from Quartet specifically to support trips, there have been many this year: including to the House of Commons (met by Kerry McCarthy MP), Bristol Harbour, Explore @ Bristol, the Central Library, Bristol Cathedral, London "Strangers into Citizens" rally, two popular ones to Bristol Rovers and a day at Folly Farm.

Treasurer's report

We have undertaken a lot of fund-raising work in the past 12 months and have been successful in several areas.

- Tudor Trust have made a three year grant to enable us to consolidate the Core work of the Welcome Centre.
- HCDMF have given us a grant to support our work with St Nicholas of Tolentino.
- BBC Children in Need have given us a grant for three years for the crèche
- Redland Society of Friends have agreed to extend funding for BRILL
- Two further applications for extension work for BRILL have been made and are under consideration by the funders
- We have been invited to continue to the second stage of a substantial application to Reaching Communities

When I came to the UK my English wasn't good enough and they help me with my English. I meet people from different countries and now I am feeling great..

Service user's comment

Public Education and Campaigning

Through daily contact with people at the Welcome Centre we have come to understand directly and in a personal way the effect of the asylum process on their lives. Our experience accords with the finding of the Independent Asylum Commission, published in the summer of 2008, that “the treatment of asylum seekers falls seriously below the standards to be expected of a humane and civilized society.”

A packed public meeting which we organized in April was addressed both by services users and by Minoo Jalali, a human rights lawyer, on the need for asylum seekers to have the right to work. A week later, two coaches took service users to the “Strangers into Citizens” demonstration in London, and after these two events many of them wrote movingly of how they felt supported and empowered by being able to speak and be heard.

We have worked with Bristol Defend the Asylum Seekers Campaign and St. Nicholas of Tolentino Church in raising publicly a number of issues as well as in supporting individuals under threat of detention and removal. Matters of particular concern to us are:

- The destitution faced by refused asylum seekers
- “Section 4” support – provided in the severely limited form of supermarket gift vouchers
- The arrest and detention of children
- The need for asylum seekers to be able to work to support themselves.

We ask all members and supporters to raise these issues with politicians and others in a position to influence government policy.

Together with Refugee Action, City of Sanctuary and St. Nicholas of Tolentino we are organizing a public event at our Welcome Centre at 3:30pm on Human Rights Day (10th December 2009) at which asylum seekers will again speak about their experience of the asylum system and representatives of public bodies, including faith groups and trade unions, are invited to make a public pledge of their support for the reforms we advocate. Our petition for “Dignity not Destitution” is now being widely circulated, and at this meeting completed petition forms will be presented to a local Member of Parliament.

The future

City of Sanctuary

We are fully involved in the plans and preparation work needed to launch Bristol as a City of Sanctuary in April 2010 (during the European Year of campaigning against poverty and social exclusion). In this connection we are providing guidance and support to an independently organised Hospitality Network, set up to enable hosts to provide shelter to people who are destitute.

Expansion of the Welcome Centre

With recent grants we are in a position at last to increase staffing at the centre. This will eventually mean that we can open on a fourth day, maintain a high quality of service, and be better able to support our volunteers and service users.

Conclusion

We continue to be extremely grateful to those who back BRR – both individuals and organisations. With your help we are able to work towards our aim “to uphold and champion the human rights of asylum seekers and refugees.” The Welcome Centre is growing into a community of people who know and care about each other, and is able to offer a little of the social, practical and political support that is desperately needed by asylum seekers in UK .

2008 Bristol Refugee Rights Volunteers

- Abraham Gebrer
- Abdurahman
- Adil Jaifar
- Aggie Forster
- Alice Cutler
- Amadou Sumaru
- Ann Brook
- Anna Schiff
- Barbara Charnock
- Becca Wharton
- Bernard Kamtcheu
- Benny Talbot
- Bevanlal Richardson
- Brigitte Kamtcheu
- Bryony Hutt
- Burhan Karim
- Caroline New
- Chris Jones
- Charlotte Hooper
- Christine Tollerton
- Daahir
- Damaris Le Grand
- Derris Whitston
- Duncan Winton
- Giulia Di Mattia
- Hana Hamaz
- Hassan Ahmed
- Harry Holmes
- Hilary Cole
- Hilary Baldick
- James Lucas
- Jamie Walling
- John Stephenson
- Joesetter Ishimwe
- Judith Wainwright
- Linda Ewles
- Linda Polden
- Liz Ferrie
- Maiy Ajak
- Maria Clark
- Maria Mapwashike
- Maureen Prior
- Meg Davies
- Megan Jenkins
- Moira Byrne
- Naomi Bannister
- Naomi Millner
- Naomi Roberts
- Naomi Williams
- Natalia Miroshnichenko
- Omayyah Al-shaba
- Oonagh Skrine
- Patrick Spackman
- Penny Clark
- Peter Shannon
- Quentin Noorber
- Rachael Bee
- Reza Mirnezami
- Richard Henderson
- Robin Hanley
- Rose Codner
- Rosemary Bloxam
- Sally Rose
- Sam Cronin
- Sarah Mothon
- Shreya Bali
- Sophie
- Sue Smailes
- Tom Daly
- Viv Talbot

Bristol Refugee Rights

Assisi Centre

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We are grateful to our funders for their support during 2008/09:

- Bristol City Council
- Redland Friends
- Church Urban Fund
- Allen Lane Foundation
- South Gloucestershire Council
- Quartet
- Red Cross
- Refugee Action
- Quarterdaze
- Thinking people
- Numerous personal donors and supporters of our greetings cards fund



Church Urban Fund



the Tudor trust