

WATFORD AND THREE RIVERS REFUGEE PROJECT – ANNUAL REPORT 2010

The Project

The Project, run entirely by volunteers, continues to provide practical and emotional support to local asylum-seekers, particularly those deemed to have `failed`, and refugees in the area. All those assisted are destitute and often desperate; and some have small children. Most of those assisted are not allowed to work or to claim State benefits and some are in fear of deportation. The Project seeks, doggedly, to:

- Befriend them;
- Give practical help (food, toiletries, nappies);
- Help to find accommodation;
- Work with the statutory authorities and other voluntary agencies on their behalf;
- Publicise their plight.

The Project is managed by a Committee which comprised Richard Kendall (Chairman), Chris Carter (Treasurer), Joy Hobbs (Volunteer Coordinator), Maureen Tilbury, and John Shaw. Towards the end of the year Sheila Swan (Honorary Secretary) and Tim Wilkinson joined the Committee. The annual accounts were once again examined by Marjorie Rolfe.

The Project's pattern of work has continued much as in previous years, though we have had some success in recruiting additional volunteers, thereby increasing the amount and extent of our befriending. In the present political climate the cash-strapped statutory authorities find our clientele rather anomalous. Nevertheless, we have had excellent cooperation with the Watford Housing Department. The Social Services, particularly the Children, Schools and Families Department of Hertfordshire County Council, clearly find working with small voluntary organisations like ours rather challenging. Certainly, our work frequently bumps up hard against Government policy and legislation, not to mention the policies and practices of the responsible authorities, many of which are heavily weighted against the best interests of our clients.

Work-load

This has increased during the year, rising from 10 cases in February to 17 in November. Our referrals come from a variety of sources and most are lone mothers with babies or young children. All are in desperate need. Our clients come from a wide range of countries, including Albania, the Congo, Kenya, Mauritius, Somalia and Uganda. The service we offer includes provision of food and, on occasions, money, befriending, acting as advocates with the statutory authorities, help with finding accommodation and with navigating the complex channels of officialdom, particularly completion of application forms and other manifestations of bureaucracy. In short, helping our clients to come to terms with and understand the ways in which the people and systems of this country operate.

One example may serve to illustrate the range of our activities. A heavily pregnant woman was referred to the Project by the Citizens Advice Bureau. The NHS Trust concerned had billed her as an `Overseas Visitor` for £420, even though the court had given her `leave to remain` seven months earlier. The bills subsequently escalated to £4,200 following delivery by Caesarean Section of her second child. The Trust put the matter of this penniless mother into the hands of a debt collector,

whose increasing demands caused great distress to the mother. In the event, the Project intervened on her behalf and, after much correspondence and meetings with representatives of the Trust, the `debt` was cancelled. On hearing this news, the mother hugged our volunteer and said, `Praise God! Praise God! Oh, thank you, Lord. Now I can sleep at night. Oh, thank you`. In the meantime, she and her family have been put in touch with other services and support.

With help from the Project a number of families have successfully applied for `leave to remain` during the year. Such status drastically improves such families` finances and future prospects. It gives them greater independence and a proper sense of belonging in a community, including school attendance and, in many cases, where relevant, church involvement. One client put it this way, `I feel free. I can walk down the street and hold my head up high. I feel so happy to be here in this country`.

Volunteers

Our volunteer numbers have increased during the year and are now up to 15 in active service. Eleven of these work directly with clients, visiting regularly and helping in any way, appropriate (including de-flea-ing a cat on one occasion!). Care has been taken to ensure that all volunteers undertake satisfactory Criminal Records Bureau checks. With the increase in volunteers, it is important to share information, experiences, and encouragement more generally. To that end, we have held two training evenings for volunteers and these have been successfully hosted by Joy Hobbs (our Volunteer Coordinator) and led by Maureen Tilbury, a professional trainer and a member of our Committee. At the second of these, training was given about effective communication and a discussion followed about accommodation problems for clients. Our Chairman also attended, outlined the development of the Project and thanked the volunteers heartily for their help. All were impressed by the range of experience, skills and talents offered by the volunteers. Maureen summed up by saying, `It was a rewarding occasion and lots of smiles were exchanged; and the cakes and warm welcome in Joy`s home were great!` The intention is to make these get-togethers a regular feature and a further one is planned for Spring 2011. Incidentally, members of the Committee are, of course, also volunteers and lend a hand from time to time with house moves, transporting tinned goods, and shifting furniture.

There is little doubt that the recently-announced cuts in Government spending will make life more difficult for refugees and those seeking asylum. As a result, we can expect the number of referrals to the Project to continue to increase. Fortunately, as already noted, there has been a steady increase in the number of our volunteers and so far we have been able to cope, thanks to their hard work and dedication. But more volunteers are required to deal with the increase in referrals. The more volunteers, the more lives we can touch. All offers of help to Joy Hobbs on 01923 228171, please. To all our volunteers a very big and sincere `thank you`.

The Store

This is a vital, if unglamorous, part of our service. In the shape of a garage, leased from Three Rivers District Council (TRDC), the store houses a mass of tinned foods and packets of pasta, rice, tea, coffee and breakfast cereals, plus assorted toiletries, nappies, washing powder and jars of baby food. Size 3 nappies, baby wipes, and washing powder are in particular demand. Tony Hobbs, our indefatigable store keeper, makes up and delivers some 7 parcels a month to our clients. During the

year, the store had to be vacated for a number of weeks, during which time TRDC carried out some badly needed repairs to the roof of the store. This meant that we had to find temporary alternative storage space in commercial premises, which cost us some £200, not to mention the labour involved in shifting all the goods there and back. Tony took the opportunity of this upheaval to reorganise the store and to dispose of some items (e.g. bedding) which had gone mouldy. Towards the end of the year, our store of tinned good was severely depleted. It was most timely, therefore, that, as in previous years, several local churches and schools generously gave us the proceeds of their Harvest Festivals. As a result, by the start of the new year our Store was safely replenished.

Governance and Publicity

The Committee meets about every two months and, under Richard Kendall's skilful chairmanship, we conduct the administrative and managerial business of the Project. As a matter of routine, we review our case-load, the recruitment of volunteers, and our financial position. We also agreed an important change of policy in respect of our relationship with the statutory authorities (see `Approach to the authorities` below). We also took an important initiative to spread more evenly the load of receiving referrals. To that end, we have set up a dedicated `smart` telephone line and a rota of duty officers, who will, for a week in turn, take calls about referrals on the `smart` line switched to their own home. This new system will go live shortly. The `smart` telephone number for all referrals will then be 01923 252434. Please spread the word. We have also spent some time developing a newsletter to be distributed to all our supporters around the turn of the year. In addition to `news`, the newsletter appealed for more volunteers, more supplies, and more funds.

In July, Joy and Tony Hobbs held another of their successful garden parties on behalf of the Project. This was perhaps not as well attended as in 2009 but nevertheless it was a successful opportunity for people to get to know each other and to socialise. Although not intended as a fund-raising event, some £300 was raised from the sale of plants and from the consumption of Joy's delicious tea and cakes.

We held our 2009 AGM at the Friends Meeting House in Watford on 15 February 2010. This was the final meeting attended by Lawrie Coe as our Honorary Secretary. Our Chairman presented Lawrie with a gift on behalf of us all and thanked him most warmly for his immense hard work on behalf of the Project since its inception. Our guest speaker on that occasion was Dr. Hannah Lewis, an independent researcher for the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. She spoke of the studies undertaken among the many refugees and asylum-seekers in Leeds, and of the privations which many of them had endured. She memorably quoted one asylum-seeker who had said, `In my home country they would kill me quickly. In England they kill me slowly!` We were glad to welcome Sal Brinton, one of the Parliamentary candidates in the (then) forthcoming General Election, to the AGM and congratulate her on her subsequent elevation to the House of Lords.

Our 2010 AGM will be held at the Friends Meeting House on Monday 15 February 2011 at 7.30 p.m. Our guest speaker will be Christine Knight, Chief Executive of the Southampton and Winchester Visitors Service, which operates in much the same field as ourselves but on a much bigger and more sophisticated scale. Christine has agreed to take `The Next Stage?` as her topic and it should be an evening full of interest and potential for us all.

Finance

This year, as in the previous two years, we have had an income of some £2,500, which this year included the final payment of £1,000 of a three-year grant from the Hertfordshire Community Fund, as well as donations from a number of churches and individuals. This income excludes the value of hundreds of donated tinned and other items and the free use of the St. Mary's, Watford mini-bus on occasions.

Thanks to this income and the balance brought forward from 2009, we have been able to fund our activities this year, which have cost some £4,000. 2010 has seen a significant increase in the amount of cash required to fund our activities. This is partly due to the increase in our activities but also because of new commitments (for example, insuring our volunteers and paying for the hire of the new `smart` telephone line). Our end of year balance is likely to be around £2,200 with a further £800 held on behalf of named individuals (final accounts will be available at the AGM).

2011 will present us with some challenges. First, we will have to find other sources of income to replace our Hertfordshire Community Fund grant. We are reasonably confident of being able to do this, given the steady financial backing we have had from supporters in the past. Second, we will need to meet the costs of the expected rise in referrals. Although `costs per case` are usually modest, some are much more expensive, particularly if nationality applications are involved or one-off grants of money are made. So, additional funds will be needed in 2011 and we are hopeful that our forthcoming newsletter (see above) will elicit a fruitful response. Chris Carter, our Treasurer, stands ready gratefully to receive all contributions. His address is 23, Kingsfield Road, Oxhey, Herts. WD19 1PP. Telephone: 01923 460508.

Approach to the Authorities

In the past, when problems arose which were felt to be the fault of the authorities, a somewhat combative approach to these bodies was adopted. The rationale for doing this was a belief that this was the best way to make our views known and to achieve our aims. It applied mainly to our dealings with the Children, Schools and Families Department (CSF) of Hertfordshire County Council where the bulk of difficulties occurred - and still do. This extended to submitting, or encouraging our clients to submit, formal complaints when they had experienced problems and providing written submissions to support such claims. This work was very time-consuming and involved much complex correspondence, meetings, and general expenditure of nervous energy.

The Project committee has reviewed this approach and, after much thought, has concluded that, overall, this approach does not work in the best interests of our clients. Indeed, we believe that it may even have been counter-productive, especially in our dealings with CSF. Our view is that, wherever possible, we should try to work with the authorities by displaying a more collaborative and less combative approach. This change has already been put into practice and appears to be paying dividends.

This does not mean that we fail to stand up for those we seek to help; we always strive to act in their best interests. But the staff of CSF and elsewhere are, after all, only human. If they can see that we are at least trying to understand the pressures they are under, particularly in these times of austerity, collaborative working is more productive to the benefit of our clients and of the Project itself, and they are more likely to do their best to assist us and our clients.

However, we must not be naive. There is a limit to what we can hope to gain from co-operation with the authorities. They are having to apply a system, imposed on them by central government, which many feel is prejudiced against those we seek to help and which is often too inflexible to take account of their particular circumstances. For this reason, although campaigning is not one of our key objectives, we continue to publicise the plight of our clients and to fight for their rights.

Our concerns about CSF's handling of certain mother-and-baby cases were drawn to the attention of the Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Board via the local Primary Care Trust. Fifteen months later the issue reached the Board's agenda in October 2010 and the formal outcome of its discussion was, 'The meeting agreed that the Board will review the response of agencies to families with children where these families have no recourse to public funds. This work will be reported back to a future meeting of the Board'. The Project feels strongly that the present arrangements in such cases (£47.95 for a first child and another £20 for an additional child and no cash whatsoever for the mother) are totally unacceptable.

'Not Gone, But Forgotten'

The British Red Cross published a document of this title in June 2010. It made four key recommendations:

- Adoption of the principle that destitution should not be an outcome of the asylum system;
- Additional support for all destitute refused asylum-seekers with dependent children;
- An end-to-end asylum support structure, including permission to work, until the applicant is either removed or granted leave to remain;
- An entitlement to healthcare throughout the asylum process until removal or granted leave to remain.

Your Committee heartily endorses these recommendations. We could not have expressed them better ourselves.

Thanks

The last word must be to all those – clients, individuals, volunteers, agencies, organisations, churches and – yes – even representatives of the authorities themselves, on occasions – who have assisted the work of the Project in any way (time, care, concern, money, goods, transport). Without you all, we could not continue. Thank you.