

The logo for the Reading Refugee Support Group is a green, rounded shape on the right side of the page. Inside this shape, the text "Reading Refugee Support Group" is written in a white, serif font, stacked in four lines.

Reading
Refugee
Support
Group

Annual Report

for the Year ending

31 March 2014

Chair's Report

The past year has been a one of many changes and difficult decisions for the Board of Trustees, but it has also provided the organisation with time to reflect and review our work and strategic aims for the future.

Due to the need for urgent budget cuts in 2013, we had to restructure the management of the organisation and this resulted in staff redundancies and the creation of a new overall role of Manager, combining some Casework Manager and Director duties. Nina Lugor and Alison McQuitty left in November after many years of working with RRSB and Amal Mohammed resigned her post in October. We wish them all the very best for their future careers.

Nick Harborne joined us as Director and Flora Roshi (a former service user) took up the post of Administration and Volunteer coordinator in November 2013. We saw this is a new chapter in the history of RRSB with Nick and Flora managing some significant reorganisation of RRSB's work and practice. We have been successful in recruiting many volunteers to take on roles in fundraising, marketing, website design and social media engagement. It is important to state how incredibly valuable all of our volunteers are in providing this vital service to Reading. We thank each and every one of you for the generous time you devote to working with us as administrators, publicists, fund raisers, on stalls, in the office, advising clients and offering a warm welcome to RRSB.

We continue to work with other organisations and successfully completed our work with European Partners and further developed the Homework Club at Abbey School – this project has been so successful that we hope to develop it further in the coming years with funding from BG Group.

The financial year 2013/14 has ended with a deficit of (£4,257) compared to a surplus last year (£8,164). However, as the accounts reveal, our overall income has dropped significantly as several large grants came to an end and we were left relying more or less solely on our grant from Reading Borough Council. We have been successful in accruing funding from the Earley Charity (£2,325.60), The Hilden Trust (£5,800) and, more recently, BG Group (£4,076.56); together with tireless targeting of the press to publicise our work, it seems that RRSB's profile is becoming more well known in Reading.

We are very grateful to Reading Borough Council for their continued financial support and, as we are currently engaged in a formal review of our work with them, look forward to how we can continue to provide the historically warm welcome that Reading has always extended to refugees and asylum Seekers.

I would like to extend my thanks to the Board of Trustees who also give their time so generously to support RRSB and wish you all a very successful year ahead.



Mary Richardson, Chair of Trustees

Treasurer's Report

RRSG has withstood a year of significant financial challenge and organisational change which has required a strict monitoring of our cash flow position and radical action by trustees to bring our expenditure into line with reduced income. Due to the stringent measures put in place the year saw us end with only a small deficit, which, given the outlook at the year's commencement, is a significant achievement.

Having been unable to replace cuts in Home Office funding with other voluntary grant income, together with the end of the EU-funded 'Women Learning Together' project, we faced a reduction in income of over 50%. This required very difficult decisions to be made – especially given that staff costs represented more than half of the total RRSg expenditure. To ensure a proper process and a financially sustainable solution, trustees decided to address this by prudent use of reserves during the first half of the year, whilst a plan was developed and implemented to bring our expenditure into line with known income by the half-year point. Sadly this meant that key and valued members of staff were made redundant during the latter part of 2013.

On the positive side, recruitment to the new staff structure saw us engage an experienced and energetic new manager to help us reconfigure our service provision, raise public profile and win new income.

Reading Borough Council has again been our main funder, providing £46,989 income to fund our core advice and support services to Asylum Seekers. In addition we were successful in winning new grants from the Earley Charity (£2,326) to support recruitment and training of volunteer caseworkers and Hilden Trust (£5,800) to support our core advice service in the coming financial year. We are actively exploring other sources of income including Local Giving which is starting to see regular donations received.

Income and Expenditure

For the reasons set out above, income and expenditure were greatly reduced this year; income fell from £117,579 to £55,933 and expenditure from £109,415 to £60,190 with staff costs (including redundancy) being the most significant at £42,325. Further significant savings were made in training, equipment and client costs. All significant client costs were funded via the Red Cross destitution fund.

Despite these efforts the group's future remains uncertain, especially with regard to our core funding grant. Nevertheless trustees and staff remain committed to continue making our vital services available to the refugee community in the Reading area and we are positively planning to meet their needs.

Thanks as always are given to the staff and volunteers both in the office and those who work to support us in other ways, for their boundless time and energy without which we would be unable to provide the support we do.

John Turay,

Hon. Treasurer

Manager's Report

Last year 2012/13 was a challenging time for Reading Refugee Support Group, struggling after significant cuts in funding from the Home Office at short notice. At the time of writing RRSG is having its core funding reviewed by Reading Borough Council (RBC) which is aware that overall numbers of people knocking on RRSG's door have been declining. Facing huge pressure itself to find savings in a time of austerity, RBC is examining whether savings could be made if the needs of refugees and asylum seekers could be met by other organisations in Reading. So as an organisation 20 years old this year, we have to ask ourselves the very important question: *Is Reading Refugee Support Group still needed?*

I started working at RRSG in December 2013. It took me just four weeks to realise the levels of despair and isolation faced by our client group. I had assumed arriving in Reading, having fled war, persecution, torture, sexual abuse, and famine, asylum seekers and refugees would feel safe. In fact it can mark the start of a new journey punctuated by fear, loneliness, isolation and grief for our service users.

There is ignorance about the difference between asylum seekers/refugees fleeing for their lives compared to economic migrants seeking employment. As government policy reflects and responds to public concerns over immigration, our clients are caught up in changing legislation making it more difficult to get vital support they need at the very point they need it most. Some clients face total destitution, families potentially made homeless, access to health care denied.

Growing international unrest in places such as Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, South Sudan and Gaza all suggest a further movement of peoples seeking refuge in future years. As a part of a civilised and humane country, organisations like RRSG represent a town's identity and willingness to share its own good fortune with the least fortunate and its readiness to respond accordingly to unfolding international events.

RRSG sees every client as an individual, as a person. We are here to respond to identified individual need, regardless of numbers. RRSG staff are knowledgeable, skilled and appropriately experienced to deal with the range of requests from our clients. Our casework approach marks us out as a vital organisation experienced and able to respond in a culturally appropriate and sensitive way. Ensuring continuity and building trust are essential to meeting the needs of clients often traumatised by their past and wary of dealing with 'officialdom' – even voluntary sector groups.

We continue to be grateful to former clients who explain that they return to volunteer at RRSG to "*give something back*" or because we have provided the "*backbone*" which enabled a client to "*turn her life around*". Our volunteer case workers (all Office of Immigration Services Commissioner accredited) provide outstanding support four days a week. Long-term volunteer, George Buchanan stepped up and led the case work team following the restructuring. Together with Tenisha, Mobina and Behnam and with Flora, the admin volunteer team and Trustees kept RRSG running smoothly, professionally and protected a vital service.

The year 2014 marks 20 years of RRSG and as we look forward, plans are well underway laying the foundations for the next 20 years.

- A new business plan 2014 - 2017 will guide the organisation;
- A fundraising strategy will increase our financial security;
- Working with other organisations across the sector, we will increase the effectiveness of our service to our clients;
- RRSG will strive to maintain its client-led focus and we will look to reposition ourselves at the centre of the voluntary sector services in Reading.

The answer to the question 'Is Reading Refugee Support Group still needed?' is YES now more than ever before.

Nick Harborne, RRSG Manager

Our Advice Service

This year has been another challenging year for RRSB but one which has magnified the importance of our volunteers across the organisation. Flora and the admin volunteer team working closely with the caseworkers and the Board of Trustees, kept RRSB running smoothly.

Our volunteer caseworkers deliver our core service of support and advice for asylum seekers and refugees. George Buchanan our senior volunteer caseworker of 5 years standing stepped up and led the casework team after redundancies were made. George, together with Tenisha and Behnam who both joined us this year, are all Office of the Immigration Service Commissioner (OISC) accredited and Mobina, who also volunteered this year, is a fully trained law graduate due to sit her OISC exam in August 2014. Together they ran our Advice drop in service (10am-12.30pm each Monday) and our appointment service Tuesday – Thursday 10am to 1pm.

During this past year our caseworkers assisted 43 new clients, a decrease from 57 last year (Table 1) Overall, these new clients gave rise to 315 separate queries during the course of the year. In total we assisted 102 clients, a decrease from 125, (Table 2); the majority of our clients are those formally seeking Asylum in the UK.

Table 1: New clients (2013-14)

New Clients 2013 – 2014 by immigration status	
Latest Immigration Status	No of Clients
Asylum Seeker	20
British Citizen	2
Discretionary Leave to Remain	2
Indefinite Leave to Remain	2
Mixed Status	1
Refugee -five years	8
Other	8
Total	43

Table 2: All clients (2013-14)

All Clients 2013 – 2014 by immigration status	
Latest Immigration Status	No of Clients
Asylum Seeker	58
British Citizen	2
Discretionary Leave to Remain	6
Indefinite Leave to Remain	6
Mixed Status	1
Refugee -five years	16
Other	13
Total	102

Table 3 shows the total number of queries from all clients for the year and the proportion of requests as a percentage of the total. Just over 50% of assistance requests that RRSB caseworkers deal with directly relate to our clients' claims for asylum, especially NASS¹ assistance. However, the overwhelming proportion of caseworker time is spent on these categories due to their frequently complex nature.

Table 3: Client Queries

No of Queries from all Clients 2013 – 2014 by category		
Category	No of Assistance Requests	%
NASS ¹	117	17
Nass- Section 4 ²	86	13
Asylum related issues	84	12
Travel document	70	10
Integration	40	6
Accommodation general	37	5
Destitution	25	4
Benefits general	24	4
Immigration related issues	24	4
Health general	19	3
Family reunion	17	2
Reporting to immigration/police	16	2
Items needed – other	15	2
Other	15	2
Education general	14	2
English classes	14	2
Job Seeker's Allowance	11	2
School	10	1
Naturalisation	7	1
Child benefit	6	1
GP/Dentist	6	1
Tax credits	6	1
NI number	4	1
British Passport	3	0.4
Mental Health	3	0.4
Employment	2	0.3
Financial assistance for education	2	0.3
Mentoring/befriending	2	0.3
Council Tax benefit	1	0.1
English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	1	0.1
Utilities	1	0.1
Voluntary return	1	0.1
Total	684	100

¹ National Asylum Support Service (NASS), which provides accommodation in appointed properties and £37.50 per week subsistence. Also in this category are clients applying to NASS for the first time and do not yet have access to public funds

² In certain limited circumstances, Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 allows NASS to provide full-board accommodation outside London for destitute Asylum Seekers who have exhausted all their appeal rights but are unable to return home.

Table 4 shows the breakdown of client group by family status.

Table 4: Clients by Family Status

Clients by Family Status	2013 - 14	2012 - 13
Single Female	15	21
Single Male	54	68
Sub total	69	89
Family Female Headed	15	23
Family Male Headed	18	13
Sub total	33	36
OVERALL TOTAL	102	125

Case Studies

Joe

Two weeks before Christmas 2013, Joe³ knocked on our door; he told us he had slept rough at Reading station the night before. We gave him a cup of tea, listened to him and then provided a sleeping bag and a food parcel, but at the end of the day we closed the office door knowing he would be sleeping rough again that night. This scenario repeated itself every day for two weeks.

Through our ongoing, and time consuming, interactions with him, we finally unravelled Joe's story and found that he had fallen between the remit of three different agencies and was very ill. With a proper diagnosis, Joe was immediately hospitalised and he remains there some five months later. Our volunteer caseworkers continue to support his claim for asylum and support him in his appeal against the Home Office decision to deport him. The Home Office have declared him well enough to travel and claim that his home country is able to support his medical requirements; however, Joe remains too ill to be discharged from hospital and we are unconvinced he will be fairly treated if deported to his home country.

Family X

In December 2013, we arrived at the office to find an entire family: mum, dad and two children in the reception area. They carried all their belongings and did not know where they could sleep that night having just lost their accommodation at short notice. With no recourse to public funding, they had no food or accommodation. We were able to listen, to give them all some hot drinks and snacks and reassure the parents that we could help. Our volunteer case workers knew what to do next and secured them emergency accommodation that night leading to more permanent accommodation.

Impact of Home Office procedures

It was reported last year that "hundreds of boxes of correspondence had lain unopened or not matched to a UK Border Agency client file". The Home Office is believed to have recruited and begun training more officers to deal with this backlog. As the rate of Home Office decisions on these outstanding asylum claims increases, there is every chance that we may see a consequential increase in clients seeking advice and support.

³ All names have been changed to protect our clients' identities

Our Integration work

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Project

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes are an important tool to enable our clients to integrate into the local community. Our clients include young people whose education may have been disrupted and also parents and single adults who have to deal with feelings of isolation and loneliness resulting from the inability to communicate. Many studies have been conducted into the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers and research shows that isolation due to lack of communication skills can have devastating consequences for an individual's mental health⁴. Our small-scale ESOL work is tailored to meet the specific needs of asylum seekers and refugees.

This year RRSB has supported eight students from Afghanistan, Albania, Morocco, Iran, Kosovo and Sudan with one-to-one ESOL classes. The classes take place in different public venues such as the Reading Library and the tutors work with clients to develop lessons which provide specific and relevant content to aid client integration and confidence.

One of our ESOL volunteers has described her work with our clients.

Over the last year I have worked with three clients. Two were young male asylum-seekers, still without leave to remain and facing a very uncertain future. They were both very intelligent and, having missed out on years of schooling due either to conflict in their country of origin or to their difficult personal circumstances, they were hungry to learn. The third client is a married woman settled in the UK for a considerable number of years and with children who were born here.

All three clients already had quite a good level of understanding of everyday English. My aim with all of them was to help them improve their accuracy and fluency and to extend their vocabulary; we often read simplified editions of classic texts to improve their fluency and served to increase their familiarity with British culture. I offer my clients a 90 minute session per week. We usually meet in the Central Library; I am grateful to the librarians for not operating a strict no-talking policy!

For the first time since I started ESOL work for the RRSB over four years ago, I had the sad experience in January of losing contact with one of the clients in mid-course. He was about to turn 21, which for him would mean losing Social Services support and his life was becoming more and more fraught. We do not know what has happened to him. This has been a vivid reminder of the desperate situations many RRSB clients face and a further spur to do what we can to help while we have the opportunity.

Liz Bailey – ESOL Volunteer

⁴ Burnett, A and Peel, M. (2001) Health needs of asylum seekers and refugees. *British Medical Journal*. 322 (7285) pp 544-547.

Client and a Volunteer - Case study

One client has kindly agreed to share their story with us – it is important that we document and share these narratives as they are unique records of why it is that people are forced to flee their homes, friends and their country of birth. They underline why this is not a decision that is made lightly or for economic reasons.

“I came into this country as little girl not knowing what exactly was ahead of me. My emotions about my journey were a complete mixture of not belonging and how I could fit in to a completely different culture. I had so many questions running through my head.

Would I be treated the same as everyone else? My spoken English vocabulary was not great. Would I ever be able to make friends like the ones I had back home? I wondered if our lives would ever be the same again.

After about two months in the UK my mother found out about an organisation: Reading Refugee Support Group, where all the questions we had and fears we held would be answered and listened to.

We were welcomed with nothing but love from the people of this wonderful organisation. We were not seen as refugees but rather we were seen as young children who needed a hand and a sense of direction to our new chapters in our lives. They helped and made us feel comfortable to be ourselves; we were introduced to other children in the same situation so we got to know each other and grew a relationship with each other that we called friendship, we grew fond of each other. It was okay to speak English that wasn't very clear and it was okay to speak to each other about where we all came from and listening to everyone's stories made life seem different.

This organisation [Reading Refugee Support Group] helped me and my sister in so many ways I can't even think of when we started school. We reached out to be helped with homework which we didn't understand at times; that little extra help that we got, it pushed us so far more than we can ever imagine.

We looked forward to every weekend for we knew there something ahead for us and that was coming to the support group, my favourite moment of all would have to be the time I was offered an opportunity to start acting classes. This was of particular interest of mine and I never thought anybody would give me but then I was offered such an incredible opportunity to start my acting classes.

Day by day life started to be better not just for myself but for my family for we knew when we needed a hand or even someone just to listen to us about our concerns we knew where to go.

When I grew up, I knew exactly what I had to do. I wanted to come and volunteer with the people that made our life just a little easier for us and to give something back, so I decided to come in and become a volunteer which I truly enjoy. I was given an opportunity, to go and do an interview with BBC Berkshire, which yet again was an amazing experience and I was very excited talking about what this organisation has done for me and my family and what we do to help those in the same situation.

So for that experience and for the many more coming ahead; I am so thankful for such powerful and amazing organisations like Reading Refugee Support Group”.

The Homework Club by Cristina

This project is a continuation of the fantastic achievements of 2012/2013 which we are always trying to improve on.

This year the homework club 2013/2014 started on the 17th September 2013 and finished on the 31st March 2014.



The job done together by the Abbey School and RRSB has been more effectively organized during this year with more supervision from both sides. We formed a working team with volunteers from RRSB, a supervisor from Abbey School and some teachers which has strengthened the relationship between the children, the school and the parents resulting in increased attendance from the children.

In December, the Abbey School and RRSB organised Christmas events for all children participating in the Homework Club. The Abbey School invited Santa Claus, who gave children books and sweets and RRSB organised Christmas gift bags for each family.

The first term had higher attendance rates than the remaining terms but overall attendance has been stable. However, one of the problems that we have been informed of by parents as being an issue is the distance that some of our clients have to travel to arrive to the Abbey School.



As a result towards the end of the last term RRSB began looking for some funding with the idea of expanding the homework club project to other schools, with a view to increasing access to a wider area of clients hopefully resulting in an increase in numbers.

Our Volunteers

Volunteers have played a very important part in the 20 years of RRSg. This year their commitment and enthusiasm remains outstanding and crucial in the delivery of the services we offer to our clients. The time they have given, their knowledge, experience and kindness have made a difference and given hope to the lives of many families. On behalf of our clients, RRSg is thankful to all volunteers for their consideration, their determination, and passion that they have all shown in helping others.

During this year we have said farewell to some of our volunteers and have welcomed 7 new volunteers to our team bringing the total number of volunteers to 17 with a contribution of around 62 hours per week for this year (excluding trustees' input). This significantly exceeds the input from paid staff hours, highlighting the voluntary nature of the organisation, grounded in its founding ethos of mutual support.

Quarter	New volunteers	Number of regular volunteers	Number of volunteer hours per week
Q1	5	19	68
Q2	1	18	68
Q3	0	16	53
Q4	3	15	57

Their support has been in the following areas:

- Casework advice
- Reception
- Administration
- One to one English classes (ESOL)
- Homework Club
- Organising and assisting events
- IT, design and fundraising support.

"I have been volunteering with Reading Refugee Support Group since March 2014 running their social media profiles and helping to set up their new website.

"I was moved by something that Mary, the current chair of trustees, told me on my first day here. It was something that one of our clients had once said to her – that when he arrived through the doors at RRSg, no demands were made of him; instead, he was greeted with a smile, offered a cup of tea, made to feel welcome for the first time since he had arrived in the country.

*I knew then that I wanted to be a part of this unique organisation, and help out in any way I could. I have been impressed with how friendly and dedicated the staff and volunteers here are. I strongly agree with RRSg's ethos of treating refugees and asylum seekers with dignity and humanity, and hope to raise the organisation's public profile, so that more people in Reading are aware of the vital work that goes on here." **Alice, Volunteer***

Without the support of our volunteers and our very dedicated board of trustees we wouldn't be here.

Thank you.

Flora Roshi, Admin and Volunteer Co-ordinator.

Income and Expenditure for the year ending 31 March 2014

	2014 £	2013 £
Income Resources		
Grants, Donations	55,908	117,496
Membership Fees	10	30
Interest	15	53
Total Income	55,933	117,579
 Expenditure		
Wages & Salaries	38,700	64,167
Administration Costs	6,444	7,083
Training	911	3,936
Travelling	63	365
Premises	7,338	9,017
Publicity & Publications	0	200
Events	2,472	12,925
Refugee Welfare & Expenses	1,569	5,123
Office Equipment	1,350	4,681
Membership Fees & Subscriptions	436	904
Bank Charges & Interest	24	22
Professional Fees	733	753
Sundry Expenses	150	239
Total Expenditure	60,190	109,415
Excess of Expenditure over Income	(4,257)	8,164
 NET ADDITION TO RESERVES		
Opening Reserves	22,224	14,060
Closing Reserves	17,967	22,224

RRSG funders

Reading Borough Council
Hilden Charitable Trust
The Earley Charity
EU Grundtvig Fund

RRSG donors

Elaine Bradshaw
Dianne Hilfi
A J Moss
Roger Tribe
David C Wilson

Other Supporters, we thank:

British Red Cross for supporting our clients with small grants.

Faith Christian Group for their generous provision of food parcels to help support destitute clients.

The staff and students of Abbey School for their dedicated support to refugee children with their school work.

Volunteers

Caseworkers:
Behnam Balalimood
George Buchanan
Neelam Khan
Mobina Mahmood
Tenisha Trotman

Admin:

Cristina Barba
Avinash Nitish Bhawon
Amanda Chou
Marlena Gandhok
Dhurata Hazizi
Arpits Mondal
Betty Nsenga
Faryal Saghir
Vanessa Yarde

Fundraising:

Tomson Chauke

Computer/IT/

Social Media/website:

Stephen Cook
Alice Driver

Integration Activities:

Liz Bailey
Elaine Edge
Ben Gordon
Mariama Sheriff

Staff

Nick Harborne
Flora Roshi
Sharon Cole

Alison McQuitty
Nina Luger
Amal Mohammed

Manager
Admin & Volunteer Coordinator
Bookkeeper

(resigned Nov 2013)
(resigned Nov 2013)
(resigned Aug 2013)

Trustees

Mary Richardson
Paul Harper
John Turay
Katherine Prudhoe
Kate Smart
Rachel Spencer
Bet Tickner
Mike Martin
Shamin Zafar
John Davies

Chair
Secretary
Treasurer

(resigned Nov 2013)
(resigned Dec 2013)