



## **Background as of Oct 2021**

Reading Refugee Support Group (RRSG) was formed in 1994 at a refugee conference organised jointly by Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC), Oxfam and Churches Together in Berkshire. This conference was in response to the civil wars and oppression in Somalia, Zimbabwe and Sudan and the large numbers of refugees coming to Reading.

Initially a peer to peer support group, RRSg has provided legal and practical advice and support for asylum seekers and refugees for over 26 years.

As one of only 2 charities in Berkshire that are solely dedicated to supporting refugees, we are regulated by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) overseeing our support for asylum seekers in Reading, West Berkshire and Wokingham, reaching into Hampshire. We are holistic in our service provision, supporting integration into local communities through English language courses, job support, projects in schools and other social activities.

In 2015 the international refugee crisis hit the world's headlines with the conflict in Syria. The UK Government started the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme. During this 5 year programme, RRSg has worked with 5 working local authorities in Berkshire and Hampshire.

Covid-19 presented many operational challenges for RRSg. We quickly transferred most of our services to online and telephone support. Our casework service continued online and over the phone, with staff and volunteers working from home. Our drop-in centres moved to online meetings and have been popular: Mar 19 – Feb 20 saw a total recorded attendance of 286 (2/3 caseworkers) against March 20 – Feb 21 with a total recorded attendance of 811 (5 regular caseworkers). RRSg staff have largely worked from home with regular but necessary office attendances from key staff members to follow up on supporting paperwork and administration.

Plan from the Government to continue the resettlement programme under its new heading of the Global Resettlement programme has been overshadowed by the crisis in Afghanistan. The Afghan Resettlement programme now supports people who formerly worked with the British forces and refugees who have been evacuated by the British Government. RRSg is working with 3 local authorities.

The Forbury Garden tragedy was in June 2020. RRSg aimed to protect the staff team and refugees community, keeping a low media profile at this time.

Our corporate partnership with Deloitte has continued during Covid. We worked together to produce our Business Case for purchasing an office/community centre, and they assisted us with developing an online booking system for our website.

In March 2020, dispersed asylum seekers were accommodated in a hotel in West Berks. RRSB immediately started receiving referrals from other refugee support groups asking for help and supports for individuals they had been helping prior to them being relocated to West Berks.

A number of hotels in Reading have since been commissioned and taken over and used to accommodate asylum seekers. The Covid pandemic has meant people have been accommodated for longer than anticipated and has further exacerbated support issues around education, health and mental health. RRSB received a small amount of funding from the High Sherriff of Berkshire, which was matched by RBC and Berks West CCG to provide a link caseworker to work directly with the resident and hotel staff.

RRSB chaired, hosted and funded Reading City of Sanctuary. In 2017 Reading was declared a City of Sanctuary. RBC has referred to this title several times in public messages across Reading. Funding the ongoing work has been difficult, but the potential impact RCoS can make in Reading is significant, and it remains a priority for development in their business plan. We work closely with all agencies, including healthcare services, the Red Cross, Readifood - the local food bank, Reading Community Learning Centre and many others.

## **Our services**

We provide a range of services and support for refugees and asylum-seekers.

### **1. OISC Case Worker advice and Support**

Our caseworkers meet with individuals and families to provide advice, signposting and guidance on a wide range of issues and services. We have expertise and skills in asylum support, benefits advice, housing, schooling, and we work hard to ensure that all our service users are accessing the support that is available to them.

Where required, we can provide volunteers to attend meetings, to translate information and to offer general support.

### **2. Drop-in centre**

Our drop-in enables a welcoming environment for our service users to access our casework and advice service. At these sessions, our caseworkers hold initial consultations with individuals and families, addressing any immediate needs and arranging for longer appointments if necessary to explore more complex issues such as asylum support, housing or benefits. Our service users often attend with children,

befriending other clients and volunteers and receiving support with English and employability at our Job Club. Play resources are available for children, and a range of information on services and recreational activities is on display. This service has enabled us to better address the needs of our service users and helped us to assist more families.

3. Homework Clubs

We have homework clubs at two independent schools in the Reading area. One school holds one session, and the other holds two sessions a week. At each session, teachers and sixth formers assist the children and young people with homework. Over thirty children benefit from these sessions weekly, which are entirely volunteer-run.

4. Wednesday conversational group

This group aims to reduce the profound social isolation of many of the women who access our services. Providing a safe and social space for women, the group offers support and works with the attendees to help them to achieve their personal goals, whether this is in employment, education, language skills development. Around 15 women attend this group weekly.

5. Job Club

This group focuses on CV writing, identifying employment information, as well as providing access to computers. We are working to establish direct relationships with employers such as the new Ikea to provide supported employment opportunities as well as work experience. This group averages ten people a week.

6. English Classes / Befriending

Volunteers work with individuals and families to develop their language skills. This can be one-to-one or in a group setting.