



Hearing the Voice of Refugees in Policy and Practice

Collective Advocacy by the North East region's Refugee & Asylum Seeker community

**Report by the Regional Refugee Forum North East Chair of
the Board of Trustees
Karen Kavivi Harrison
to the AGM held on 10th December 2015**

Report on period 1st December 2014 to 30th November 2015

Our work over the past year has been funded by



The Millfield House Foundation



1a. Who's been leading our Collective work this year?

A huge thank you to volunteers from across our membership who have contributed so much to our 3 Working Groups. They are the drivers of our Collective action and Voice

To the 23 members of our **Health & Wellbeing Working Group**

from 16 RCOs and 15 countries of origin who are focusing on influencing policy and practice so that it

- prevents the deterioration in mental health that happens after people are dispersed to the region
- helps RAS improve their diet and exercise so reducing their risk of long term health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease

They have

Delivered 35 workshops to skill up 979 students

- 586 Nursing students at Teesside University
- 350 Medical students at Newcastle University
- 43 Public Health students at Sunderland University

= by hearing our direct authentic voice we can help the next generation of health professionals understand our distinctive issues with health and wellbeing and develop professional competencies to deliver an effective service to us

Delivered 8 engagement and consultation events with 25 target agencies including

- 7 Healthwatch teams: Hartlepool, Durham, Stockton, Middlesbrough, Sunderland, Newcastle and Gateshead
- Reps from 4 Public Health departments: Middlesbrough, Stockton, Sunderland and Newcastle
- Reps from 3 Clinical Commissioning Groups: South Tees, North Tees, Newcastle-Gateshead.
- Rep from the Care Quality Commission

= so that the Collective Voice and key messages about what would work better were heard by the people who design and commission health services across the region.

68 other RCO members joined in these events

Organised 2 guided visits to the Middlesbrough Life Store for 19 members to learn about its role in connecting public with a large range of health and wellbeing services.

1b. Who's been leading our Collective work this year?

A huge thank you to

The 5 members of our **Stronger Families Working Group**

from 4 RCOs and 4 countries of origin who are working to influence policy and practice to provide more early intervention support to RAS families to

- prevent them from falling apart under the unique stresses they face
- reduce avoidable escalation of problems to the point where children are taken into care

They delivered 6 workshops to skill up 183 students of Social Work and Youth & Community Work

- studying at both Masters and undergraduate level at the Universities of Sunderland, Durham and Northumbria.
- presenting key messages about professional practice, specifically addressing what our members feel are the knowledge, skills and values that students will need to develop to become effective social workers.

And organised 3 training workshops for RCOs

- from Northumbria University School of Law
- from PJ Watson solicitors who specialise in Family Law

27 RCO members learned more about UK law, cultural approaches to parenting in the UK, and parents' rights to representation

Helped select the next intake of social work students

- joined the admissions panel at Sunderland University

1c. Who's been leading our Collective work this year?

And a huge thank you to

The 4 members of our **Community Safety Working Group**

from 4 RCOs and 4 countries of origin who are focusing their attention on improving policy and practice to tackle Hate Crime by

Making presentations at 2 regional conferences

- *'Why is hate crime on the rise? Is austerity to blame?'* Organised by the TUC & VONNE
- Conference on Hate Crime, part of National Hate Crime Awareness week organised by the North East Centre for Race Equality and Northumbria Police & Crime Commissioner

Where their key messages about the distinctive dilemma faced by Asylum Seekers and Refugees around reporting Hate Crime and recommendations for practical actions to address it was heard by over 100 key agencies from the

- Criminal justice agencies: 2 police force, 3 PCCs, Crown Prosecution Service
- University criminology and social policy departments
- Local Authority community safety partnerships

Organising an engagement event with Cleveland Police's new Assistant Chief Council, Office of Cleveland PCC and Middlesbrough Council where they presented a number of issues identified by our Tees Valley members, and questions and recommendations for clarification and discussion. Attended by 28 RCO members

1d. Who's been leading our Collective work this year?

In summary

- A total of 25 volunteers from across 17 RCOs and 15 countries of origin have led our Working Groups
- A further 121 RCO members have taken part in activities organised by our Working Groups, from another 7 RCOs and 10 countries of origin
- Meaning a total of 146 RCO members have been involved in our Working Group activities, from 24 RCOs and 25 countries of origin.
- We have directly engaged with 36 agencies with significant roles in our agenda to improve health, strengthen families and promote safety in the community.
- And a total of 1,162 students of medicine, nursing, public health, social work, and youth & community work have had their understanding transformed by hearing the direct authentic voice of our members and clear messages about how this needs to inform their professional practice

2. What difference are our Working Groups making ?

Examples of Impact

- All written feedback forms completed by students show that the up-skilling workshops had transformed their understanding about the real lives of RAS and ignited a wish to 'get it right' when they deliver a service to them in the future
- University teaching staff told us we go further in linking issues to lessons for professional practice – they say speakers from other sections of the community present personal stories but students don't know how to turn that into practical action
- A new weekly health access drop-in started in Sunderland last month as a direct result of our engagement with Sunderland Healthwatch
- Our issues and recommendations have been captured in reports submitted to Clinical Commissioning Groups and commissioners of health services across the dispersal areas. For example, our evidence and recommendations around intervention and support for HIV are being considered this month by Middlesbrough Public Health who are re-commissioning of their sexual health services.
- Both Northumbria and Cleveland Police Forces and their Police and Crime Commissioners want to work systematically and strategically with us next year
- Written feedback from Working Group members show they feel their involvement in the Working Group is
 - empowering them as advocates, both in their own lives and for their community
 - raising their confidence as public speakers
 - helping some progress their own career pathways
 - giving them a deeper understanding of the issues affecting the refugee communities
 - giving them more understanding of how the system works here
 - and more connections to more services
 - And helping their communities to be receptive to healthy lifestyle messages and change their diets and do more exercise

3. Lessons we've learned and what we'll do differently

1. Some agencies don't appreciate the difference between a *Collective Voice* and a collection of individual voices

- Agencies may treat us as a 'Gateway' to accessing individual refugees and asylum seekers rather than partners in identifying what is distinctive, shared and recurring for RAS (= the collective experience).
- But we are a Membership organisation with our own objectives which our funders fund us to achieve. No one funds us to be a gateway for others to fulfil their own remits. But if we don't deliver this Gateway they call us 'Gatekeepers'.
- A risk that written reports of engagement recorded by other agencies actually present misinformation to commissioners because those workers do not understand the complexity of what they are hearing, or they have not differentiated between key messages about collective experience from personal stories or opinions, or they fall into stereotyping and profiling, or they focus on what they experience as 'exotic' or 'sensational'. This is counterproductive to our work.
- We will give clear messages about who we are and what our objectives are and make sure our resources and capacity are focused on securing our objectives
- We will ask to see draft copies of reports to check their accuracy &/or we will consider submitting our own reports directly to commissioners

2. Risk of consultation duplication and fatigue

- We have had consultation requests that seem to repeat other consultation or which aren't specific about what they want to ask people to give evidence about. We recognise RCOs are busy and we don't want to burden them with repeated requests to discuss '*what issues do you have with health?*'
- We will ask agencies to be more specific about the exact purpose of the consultation, and how it links clearly to a timetable for strategy review or service commissioning

3. Case Studies

- are a strong tool for advocacy. Public sector agencies find these most effective for understanding unique issues and pathways and designing solutions.
- We'll be asking RCOs if you can contribute to building our evidence base of case studies for each of our working groups

4a. What have we done to influence the work of the North East Strategic Migration Partnership (NEMP)?

- NEMP was created in late 2014 under an enabling grant from the Home Office.
- It's a Local Authority led collaboration of organisations across the statutory and voluntary sector and includes input from the Home Office, G4S and Jomast.
- The RRF and NERS are members of NEMP Asylum & Migration Stakeholder Group whose remit is *to provide a strategic leadership, advisory and coordination functions for asylum and refugee groups in the context of wider migration for the region*. The group comprises senior reps from each of the region's local authorities, from the Police and Health, and the Home Office and their contractors.
- We are also a member of all 3 NEMP Subgroups (Health & Wellbeing , Move on & Economic Inclusion, and VCS Forum) and attend the 7 local multi-agency meetings

Influencing NEMP's first Work Programme

1. January 2015: we sent a Survey to 128 Voluntary & Community Sector agencies (VCS) across the region playing a role in migration – including all RCOs.
2. February : we collated responses and worked with NEMP to design an interactive workshop for the region's VCS. 26 organisations participated, half of them RCOs, and discussed issues and recommendations for immediate actions with the Home Office reps.
3. May: NEMP held its inaugural meeting and presented its first Work Programme. 30 of the 45 issues and action match the recommendations made by the VCS

Helping create the VCS Forum, one of NEMP's 3 subgroups

1. We helped create the Terms of Reference for the subgroup, and ensured all RCOs invited to participate
2. We helped organise the first VCS Forum meeting held in November 2015 attended by the Home Office and Migrant Help. 25 members of 16 RCOs attended along with 18 other VCS agencies.

4b. What have we done to influence the work of the North East Strategic Migration Partnership (NEMP)?

Continuing to Co-Chair and Co-ordinate the Economic Inclusion Subgroup

1. Now officially adopted as one of NEMP's 3 Subgroups and renamed the Move on & Economic Inclusion Subgroup
2. We organised 3 meetings of the Subgroup. 20 key agencies attended including DWP, HMRC, Jobcentre Plus, the Citizens Advice Bureaux, Local Authorities, ALMOs, and VCS agencies with a role in Move on
3. Making progress with improving compliance and consistency of process for registering new claims at Move on (when someone gets granted leave to remain) and informing change at the national level too
4. The Subgroup will begin to explore access to housing at move on and at accommodation for destitute refused asylum seekers
 - Request to RCOs – let us know continuing problems at Jobcentre Plus, or cases where people become destitute because they cannot get their benefits started when their Home Office support stops, and recurring problems with accessing housing

RCOs can get directly involved in the North East Migration Partnership and help influence migration policy and practice in the region

- Next meeting of the North East Strategic Migration Partnership will focus on the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme is on Friday 15th January 10m to 1pm in Middlesbrough. This meeting is open to all stakeholders so including the Voluntary & Community Sector . RCOs are invited to send one representative. The next meeting of the Voluntary & Community Sector Forum will focus on the Immigration Bill 2015-16 – date to be announced soon.
- Watch out for emails to you from the Partnership's Officer, Lesley Williams labelled 'Items of Interest' Lesley_Williams@middlesbrough.gov.uk for latest information shared by the Home Office , about policy change and for requests for your evidence on how services or policy are impacting RAS in the region.
- RCOs could attend your local multi-agency meeting, to raise issues directly . These happen every 2 months. Please ask Herbert for more details

5. What else have Trustees & Staff and been doing?

- **3 Peer learning visits** organised for 13 members from 7 RCOs to share learning about their experience of developing specific activities and organisational growth.
- **Development support to 7 RCOs** by student Youth & Community Studies placement from Durham University
- **RRF Facebook** launched September 2014
- **Refugee Week: Public Event on Reforming Immigration Detention in the UK.** Organised in partnership with NERS & national campaign organisations Detention Forum and Detention Action to consider the findings of the Parliamentary Inquiry and help identify practical actions through which our region's VCS could help ensure the report's recommendations for reform are implemented.
- Helping Universities in the North East understand routes for identifying and referring RAS academics in the region to the **CARA scheme** (Council for At-risk Academics)
- **4 Trustee meetings, and Governance training** with *Building Better Governance in the North East*

6. Scanning the Horizon – what changes in the external environment do we need to consider?

1. Immigration Bill 2015-16

Currently passing through Parliament and likely to become Law in the next few months

Designed to make it '*much harder for illegal immigrants to stay in the UK when they have no right to do so..... by taking action to stop (them) from working, renting a flat, opening a bank account or driving a car*'

Contains clauses to

- Extend “deport first appeal later” powers
- Further restrict support for refused asylum seekers
- Require landlords to check immigration status for all new tenancies and identify and make sure those with no legal right to remain in the UK leave the property
- Give police more powers to check immigration status and take driving licence of anyone without legal status in UK and create new criminal offence of driving whilst unlawfully present in the UK
- Require banks and building societies to make regular checks on the immigration status of their account holders and then freeze or close accounts belonging to those here illegally
- ***Full details and discussion about likely impact at the North East Migration Partnership Voluntary & Community Sector Forum on 15th January in Middlesbrough – all RCOs invited to send a rep***

2. Immigration Act 2014

Implementation of charging for certain categories of people for access to primary and secondary health care.

Will refugees, asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers be affected?

3. If the UK exits from the European Union

Implications for Asylum policy if no longer part of the European asylum policy

4. Closure of Northern Refugee Centre

Who will move into the gap created in Yorkshire and Humberside? Will this affect relations in the North East

5. Devolution in the North East

Challenges and opportunities this represents for the North East Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector

7. Looking ahead to the future

1. Continue to **support our issue-based Working Groups to progress the priority issues they have identified and opportunities created by them** as drivers of our collective action and voice, so that they can work systematically towards equality of access to and outcomes from local services.
2. **Support more members to join our Working Groups**
3. **Continue to influence the work of the North East Migration Partnership and support RCOs to get directly involved** so that their evidence and voice can be heard and they can benefit from its shared communications
4. **Support the emergence of self-organising** within newly arriving communities and newly establishing community groups through peer learning opportunities, **promote their inclusion within our activities**, and link them to mainstream capacity building support
5. **Contribute to regional and national advocacy** aimed at reforming and improving Asylum policy and its procedures and support services
6. Secure the additional resources needed to deliver this work

Thank you

All our members for their contribution to the work and achievements of the Regional Refugee Forum over the past year.

Fellow Trustees serving this last year

- | | | |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| - Panganai Svotwa | Susan Mansaray | Ibrahim Diallo |
| - Riyaz Marzook | Shafia Saeed | Ramatoulie Saidykhan |

Staff team: Georgina & Herbert

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members





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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaBGcNZmyJQ>

