



**REGIONAL REFUGEE FORUM NORTH EAST**

**Review August 2022 - July 2023**

## Message from our Chair Ramatoulie Saidykhan

Our last report highlighted how you all responded so brilliantly to the challenges of the Covid pandemic, helping your communities through the isolation they faced when services had to close.

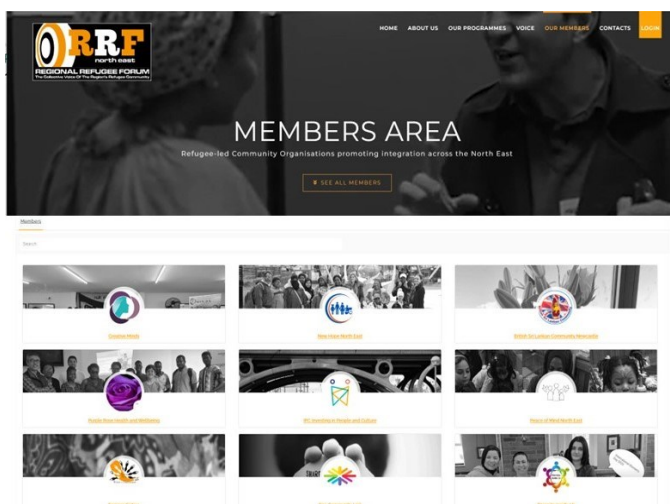
Now, once again, we see how amazing you've all been during the cost of living crisis. Inflation, the energy crisis and harsh changes to national asylum law have added so much stress to our communities, adding to the constant challenge of securing sanctuary in the UK and adjusting to life here. Meanwhile, for many, families and loved ones back in home countries face ever more difficult conditions and risks to their safety. You have responded by working even harder to support your communities. You have worked tirelessly and selflessly. We acknowledge the many personal sacrifices you make to help others. And we celebrate the difference you are making for them. You are all incredible people.



In this report you will read how the RRF has tried to support you through this. It also describes how our staff and members have been influencing change on the issues chosen by you. Understandably, you prioritised immediate support for the crises created in people's daily lives by the rising cost of living and had little time left to contribute to long term policy change. So our collective advocacy has had to take a back seat this year. Still, 4 of our members acted as panellists for The Commission on the Integration of Refugees' North East hearing this year and the RRF was a signatory to pledges and call outs organised by national NGO and civil society coalitions around the critical changes to asylum rights proposed within The Illegal Migration Bill as it went through Parliament. It became law in July and, if all its provisions are implemented, will have a devastating impact.

## Empowering RAS-led community action

We continued to help you turn your ideas to support your community into practical action. We did this through one to one support, group learning, training, arranging visits between RCOs to learn from each other and gain confidence of what can be achieved, and enabling you to build your networks of support and influence. Your work has so much impact: you reduce isolation by providing social spaces for people who share language, culture, experiences and locality to meet together, connect to others, and learn from each other and together is so important; you create safe and culturally appropriate opportunities for exercise in many forms to help relieve stress, protect health and overcome forced inactivity whilst waiting for a decision; you help local services better understand the needs of your community and what works in supporting them; you make so many vital interventions to help individuals overcome crises and challenges in their daily lives, from translating and explaining the many letters and demands people get, to calling blue light services for people who do not have the confidence or knowledge to do it themselves.



And all the while you work to increase your community's ability to act independently, exercise informed choice and secure their rights.

We don't think your great work gets the recognition it deserves! So our website now has a members page where each RCO has a profile. We hope it will bring more RCO's to the attention of more funders and other agencies that want to support your work.

# Preventing mental health deterioration after arrival in the UK

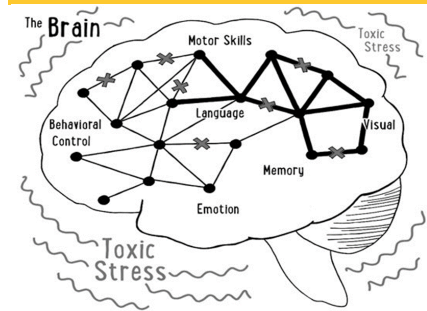
We continued to advocate for strategies that will help prevent deterioration in mental health after Asylum Seekers arrive in the UK. This is a priority issue for our members.

People go through traumatic experiences before arriving in the UK. Then life waiting for a Home Office decision is full of constant anxiety and stress. It would undermine anyone's resilience. Resilience can be strengthened if people are linked to local community support as soon as they arrive. To gain more insight into the impact of trauma and prolonged stress, we organised training for our members delivered by [The International Rescue Committee](#). It explained how toxic stress affects people's ability to function in daily life, and how people can recover if they connect to 'psychosocial support' for their emotional, cognitive, spiritual, social and physical needs. Most people do not need individual and specialised mental health care. Access to peer support and safe spaces, being able to build trusting relationships, find essential information and practical help, join fun and relaxing activities and regain a sense of control over their lives prevents deterioration and helps people recover. This is the type of support offered by RCOS and other local community organisations. However, if the link to this vital support is left to chance, the most vulnerable are the least likely to bridge the gap.

So we contacted the Home Office and suggested The New Arrivals Pathway (NAP) piloted by NEMP, MEARS and the VCSE in the North East could provide a quick, low cost and high impact national model for systematically connecting newly dispersed Asylum Seekers to local sources of psychosocial support as soon as they arrive so helping to prevent mental health deterioration and aid recovery from toxic stress. The HO is now organising a workshop for NEMP to present the NAP model to Strategic Migration Partnerships and HO asylum accommodation contractors in other UK regions. We hope this may lead to the model's wider transfer and roll out and help connect more asylum seekers to psychosocial support more quickly.

We have also been looking at community facilitated self-help resources that could prevent mental health decline. We shared information about the WHO's 'Self-Help Plus' resources with the HO. This toolkit is used in refugee camps abroad, where psychological distress is high but access to services is limited. WHO research shows 'it is effective in reducing stress and can prevent the onset of mental disorders'. We are asking the question, can such resources be used to help RAS in the UK, where the need is also high?

## How do toxic stress and trauma affect the brain?



Healing Spaces Training Programme



## Challenges for Refugees: Move on and Employment

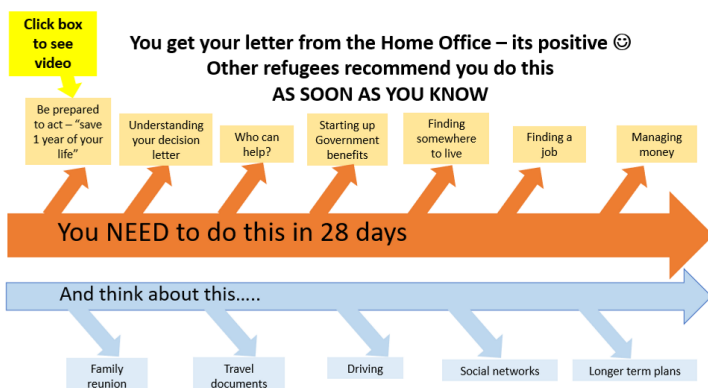
Our members worked together with front line advisers at the NE RISE programme to develop the key messages for a video guide to the 28 day Move on period. The guide will be a collection of 3-minute videos, translated into 10 languages, that explain what a new refugee should consider and what they should do during those days to avoid homelessness or destitution, and to help them exercise choice and agency as they move to independent living. We

applied the same process used to create our 'Welcome to the UK' video guides, so the content reflects what most matters to new refugees themselves at this transition and addresses specific gaps in understanding of processes and systems that can trip them up. When finished, the videos can be embedded in any website, to widen access.

The new Home Office funded Refugee Employment Programme (REP) begins delivery in September and we are working with the NE contractors, Reed in Partnership, to make sure RCOs understand who it will support and how to refer their community into it.

We continued to Chair the North East Migration Partnership's multi-agency Move on & Economic Inclusion Subgroup, helping develop its agenda and follow up

ideas. Meetings regularly engage over 30 staff from key employment support teams from all sectors, the Home Office and its contractors. They say the meetings are very valuable for their understanding, planning, delivery, networking and for identifying issues that need to be escalate. Agendas have explored DWP's development of ESOL for employment; operational clarity from the Home Office around discontinuation of support for the increasing number of asylum seekers with permission to work, generated by the backlog of decision making; research into how employers can best support refugees amongst their workforce that will lead to an employers' toolkit; and planning for the start-up of REP.

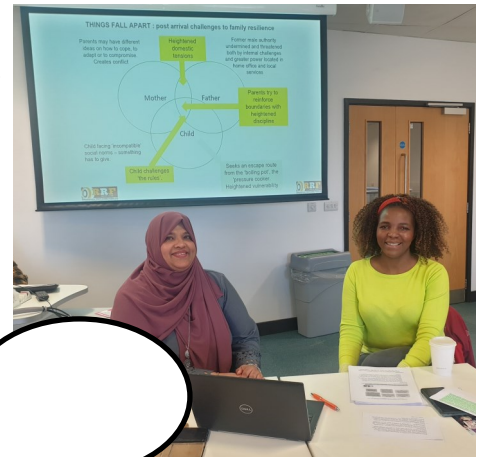


# Training front line workers: Parenting in the UK and UASC

Our members Sazi and Suraiya deliver training to Social Workers to help them gain insight into the distinct challenges RAS families face when they have to adjust to the different legal and cultural expectations around parenting in the UK. The half day sessions help front line workers gain greater empathetic understanding into the impact of pre-arrival trauma and post-arrival stressors on the internal dynamics of RAS family life which undermine family resilience and which can lead to avoidable safeguarding interventions. This is another priority issue for our membership.

Feedback is very positive. Trainees most often use the words 'informative', 'transformative', 'thought-provoking', 'engaging' and 'valuable' to describe the sessions and their evaluations show how they feel the insight gained will inform their practice:

*'I have more understanding and so much more compassion'*  
*'Hopefully people will feel more warmth and empathy from me now'*  
*'It really made me think of this issue from a parent/family point of view'*  
*'How challenging it must be as a parent to face huge cultural changes'*  
*'I'll take into account issues and difficulties facing asylum seekers that I had not thought about previously'*  
*'I understand more. I will take peoples' reasons more into consideration now'*  
*'Not to be as judgemental and be more understanding, meaning asylum seekers can open up more'*  
*'I'll seek to understand the situation without judgement'*  
*'Take on board what people have been through and understand their perspective'*  
*'I now have a deeper understanding of culture clashes'*  
*'Making me more aware of the issues they face and listening to how they want to be helped'*  
*'Hearing the voice of the people you work with and understanding what is important to them'*



Congratulations to Aza for his work to promote understanding of the specific challenges faced by Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and what works in supporting them. There is an increasing need for staff training and Foster Carers as Local Authorities across the UK are being asked to host more UASC under the mandatory National Transfer Scheme.

Aza spoke to meetings of potential Foster Carers as part of NEMP's 'Give Hope a Home' initiative to increase capacity across the region. He spoke at NEMP's regional event designed to share Good Practice in support for UASC. And he is co-delivering training to front line teams through a partnership we have developed with The International Rescue Committee. Their 'Healing Spaces' training session aims to help teams develop a trauma informed approach to UASC care.

Trainee feedback shows how Aza's lived experience enables them to reflect and reach understanding that can translate into more person-centred and sensitive support: *'(It) made me think more deeply about what they've lost and how they might be feeling'*.

## What you said about the support you want

Funding for our 3-year Community Action Programme came to an end this year. Since it began, we have supported 106 RAS community mobilisers active in 45 RCOs across the region, 17 of which emerged during the project. This included 67 women and 38 men from 37 countries of origin and now living in 11 of the region's 12 Local Authorities.

To help us review our work and design future support, we engaged an independent consultant to evaluate the programme and to research the question 'What works in turning your ideas into action?'. We published the interim findings on our website. We also surveyed 31 members from 18 RCOs, asking them: *What do you need for? What does good support feel like? How do you want support delivered to you?*

Trustees and staff are now exploring the idea of partnership working to build this support capacity for RAS-led community action and to promote more insight into the particular needs and challenges RAS community mobilisers face in supporting their communities.

*We need access to someone who.....*

- ◇ Sees me as full of potential
- ◇ Responds positively and actively to me when I say I have an idea to help others
- ◇ Is open minded and motivated when I approach them, rather than close me down
- ◇ Is a source of motivation and confidence building, to push me
- ◇ Won't hijack my ideas and do it themselves
- ◇ Doesn't look down on me
- ◇ Doesn't have other agendas they push to the front instead of listening to what I want to do and what help I need





## REGIONAL REFUGEE FORUM NORTH EAST

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[info@refugeevoices.org.uk](mailto:info@refugeevoices.org.uk)

Regional Refugee Forum North East is on  
Facebook and YouTube



### RRF Constitution signed 4th March 2003

*'The objects of the Association are the advancement of education and relief of poverty, distress and sickness amongst asylum seekers and refugees in the North East of England and to that end to provide a mechanism for hearing the Voice of asylum seekers and refugees by bringing together in council representatives of Refugee Communities working in the area of benefit.'*

### Our members (RCO's)

Are community organisations set up and run by refugees and asylum seekers to support other RAS living across the North East region. 117 RCOs have joined the RRF over the last 20 years.

### Board of Trustees

Our trustees are all elected by the membership from the membership. A big thank you to the following for the many hours they have dedicated to Governance and strategic planning. They held 5 meetings in this period.

Chair	Ramatoulie Saidykhan
Treasurer	Alice Mupaya
Secretary	Nisha Mayurathan
With	Sara Muzaffar, Printha Muthukumar, Degu Tariku, Larry Amadi-Emina, Jeffreys Muguti

### Staff:

Chief Officer	Georgina Fletcher
Support Officer	Suraiya Riyaz

And thanks to Terry Docherty for preparing our management accounts. See our independently examined Annual Accounts at <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity>



## Keeping members informed and up to date with change

In addition to the workshops we organise for our members on issues shared by their communities—an example being with Energy Saving experts—we also share information via our members' WhatsApp group and facebook. This year we added a Members' E-Newsletter to deliver a range of information that could help your community action. It shares news about policy change and new opportunities such as training, funding, services, resources and ways you can contribute your evidence and voice to campaigns for change. We also want to share news of your activities and celebrate your successes, such as when you win awards!. We welcome your feedback and recommendations to help us get the right balance between sharing relevant news and overloading you with information.

In the last 16 months the Government passed two major laws designed to deter people from seeking asylum in the UK and to treat people with a proven need for sanctuary differently depending how they arrived in the UK. The provisions of The Nationality and Borders Act (April 2022) and The Illegal Migration Act (July 2023) are radical and complex. How and when they will be implemented is still unknown or unclear. We use our communications to keep members up to date on what is changing, when, how it will impact on people's lives, and action RCOs can take to support community members, evidence impact and challenge changes that cause suffering and injustice. And we will arrange members' meetings with experts as soon as the Supreme Court makes its decision on the Government's 'Rwanda Policy'.

