



Refugee Support Devon
Annual Review
Year ending 31 March 2022

CHAIR'S REPORT

2021-22, Refugee Support Devon's 20th year, was an eventful year for the charity in which we saw many changes and developments.

Casework Co-ordinator, Neli Montes de Oca, and volunteer, Tony Griffin, gained OISC level 2 accreditation, which will enable RSD to develop its free specialist immigration advice service to refugees, the only such provision south west of Bristol. Meanwhile, demand for RSD's education services continues apace with the development of a new programme: *Refugees as Medical Professionals* (RAMP), which is enabling refugees with a medical background to access the training they need to take up their professions again in the UK.

RSD sprang into action in February to respond to a group of asylum seekers who were put temporarily in a Tiverton hotel. We took the initiative to engage with Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support, the Red Cross and local volunteers to meet the immediate needs of around 70 individuals. This marked a new step in our quest to work collaboratively with other organisations.

In October, we were delighted to welcome Rupert Blomfield as our new Manager, bringing a wealth of experience of managing refugee programmes in Devon and Cornwall. Annette Hughes, who had served the charity as Manager for 18 years, is still with us, but in a new capacity focussed on financial management. We were sad to say goodbye to Tameem Shaaban, a Resettlement Co-ordinator, who left RSD to take up a new job in London. Experienced volunteers Harriet Watford and Aqeel Abdullah took over this role in the summer with Harriet thankfully continuing as Co-ordinator from September.

There were changes at board level, too. Our thanks go to Bernadette Chelvanayagam, Liz Oxburgh, Dr

Ben Hudson and Grace Frain, who stepped down. We were pleased to welcome new trustees Anna Camilleri and John Green who bring considerable relevant experience.

Our big Refugee Week event at Exeter quayside celebrated the history of refugees arriving in the



Jenny handing a certificate to Betsy

city through theatre and music. In September, RSD threw a party to celebrate its 20th anniversary. Volunteers old and new together with service users made this a warm occasion and we were honoured by the presence of Exeter's Lord Mayor and a number of Devon councillors. Many thanks go to RSD's volunteers for the time and effort devoted to making these events a success. Thanks also go to our amazing supporters like 8-year old Betsy Salt whose sponsored swims raised over £3,000 for RSD.

International events such as the hasty evacuation of British troops from Afghanistan, together with Afghans who had served them, as well as the mass refugee exodus from war-torn Ukraine, have resulted in new arrivals in Devon and public interest in supporting them. These developments are making a considerable impact on the services RSD can offer and it is of paramount importance that we raise sufficient new funds in the coming year to maintain and develop them.

Jenny Longford

VOLUNTEERS

“It's been a beyond wonderful experience getting to know some of the Syrian families and having the opportunity to support them; I'm very grateful to RSD for this chance - thank you.” RSD volunteer

Volunteers are the heartbeat of RSD. We would not exist without the generosity, energy and commitment of our volunteers. They play a vital role in all aspects of our work, including giving legal support to asylum seekers, nurturing our allotment, teaching everyday English to speakers of other languages, helping clients to find jobs, writing fundraising proposals, organising fundraising and awareness-raising events, promoting our social media presence, and of course, acting as trustees to provide strategic direction especially during this testing year. We're extremely grateful to - and proud of - each and every one of them for their dedication.

A total of 189 people enquired to be volunteers during the course of the year. This was a 120% increase from the previous year and it reflects the interest from the public “to do something concrete”

after the humanitarian emergencies in Afghanistan and Ukraine. We ran eight online volunteer training sessions. We had approximately 80 volunteers during this period.



Lizi and Cameron, event and drop-in volunteers, staffing a stall in CREDITON.

VOLUNTEER REFLECTIONS

“In February, we co-ordinated 70 recently arrived asylum seekers, who were temporarily housed in a Tiverton hotel by the Home Office for about four months. The local community response was immediate and encouraging. RSD played an important role in supporting them and worked with Mid Devon District Council, Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support (DCRS), local churches, the Exeter Mosque, CHAT (Tiverton foodbank), Plymouth Hope, the British Red Cross, and other charities and local community members. It helped overcome the fear many of the guests had of the British being cold and unwelcoming.

“Every Wednesday, the church hall in central Tiverton became a focal point for the asylum seekers. There were board games, table tennis, free drinks and food, donated clothes and other essentials, and even free haircuts. Most importantly, they met people outside the hotel to interact with – Google Translate became a vital tool! RSD and DCRS volunteers helped them complete essential paperwork. RSD also provided language classes in the hall and at the hotel.

“I volunteered at the church hall on numerous occasions. A little daunted at first, I took inspiration from people from diverse countries and cultures, who had escaped war, persecution or other trauma. They were also far from their families and were adapting to a very different world with little or no money and uncertain futures.

“I wish them luck in navigating our asylum system and trying to find some stability and security in their lives, whilst being moved around the country by the Home Office.”

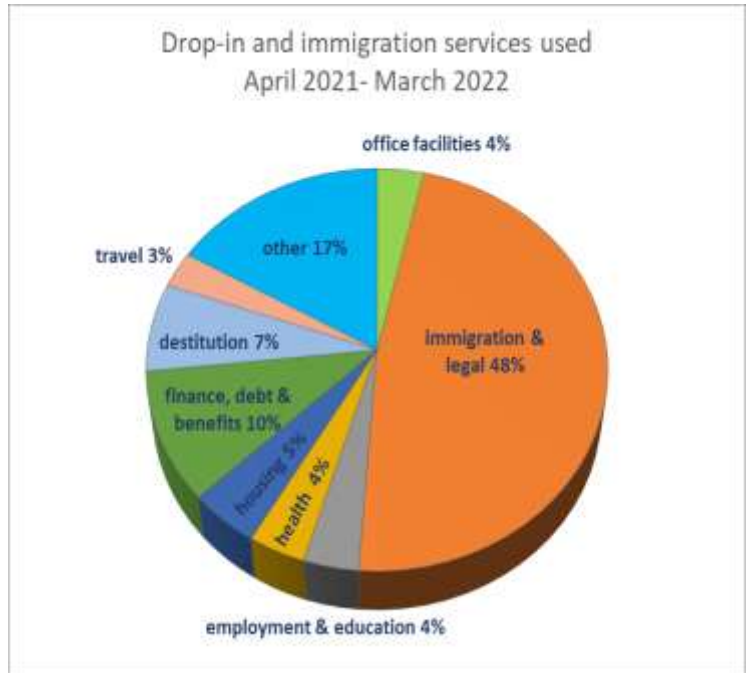
Cameron, drop-in volunteer

DROP-IN SERVICE

Drop-in and immigration clinic staff and volunteers carried on seeing clients mostly face-to-face during the course of the year in spite of the uncertainties over Covid. As in the previous year, we saw clients by appointment only. Neli and her volunteers supported 209 people through our drop-in service and immigration clinic with a total of 803 enquiries/visits between them. Of this total, there were 101 asylum seekers, 56 had a refugee or refugee background and 52 had complicated immigration status. Please see the attached chart for the reasons people asked for our assistance.

“Neli and Tony were thrown in at the deep end by some very challenging immigration cases, but their determination and professionalism meant they were never out of their depth. It was an honour to supervise them! RSD’s level 2 casework will be a lifeline for some of the South

West’s most vulnerable migrants.” James Conyers, Legal Trainer, Refugee Action (see article on facing page)



IMMIGRATION ADVICE GOES UP ANOTHER LEVEL!

“What an eventful year it has been for the immigration clinic! We started by offering immigration advice at OISC L2, under the supervision of James Conyers, Legal Trainer, Refugee Action. This was new and exciting territory for us.

“We had to navigate complex immigration cases that often involved human rights issues, such as the right to private/family life. Examples include helping a mother of a British child to apply for leave to remain as a parent after her asylum claim had been refused. We also assisted someone who had lived in the UK for at least 20 years - and whose various applications for leave to remain were turned down - to finally being granted leave to remain.

“As a result of funding cuts to Legal Aid, people needing immigration advice – often on complex cases – don’t have access to Legal Aid. There’s one Legal Aid provider in Devon and Cornwall but most of their time is taken up with asylum cases with no capacity to take on other cases. We are working with other partners to fill this crucial gap in the South West.

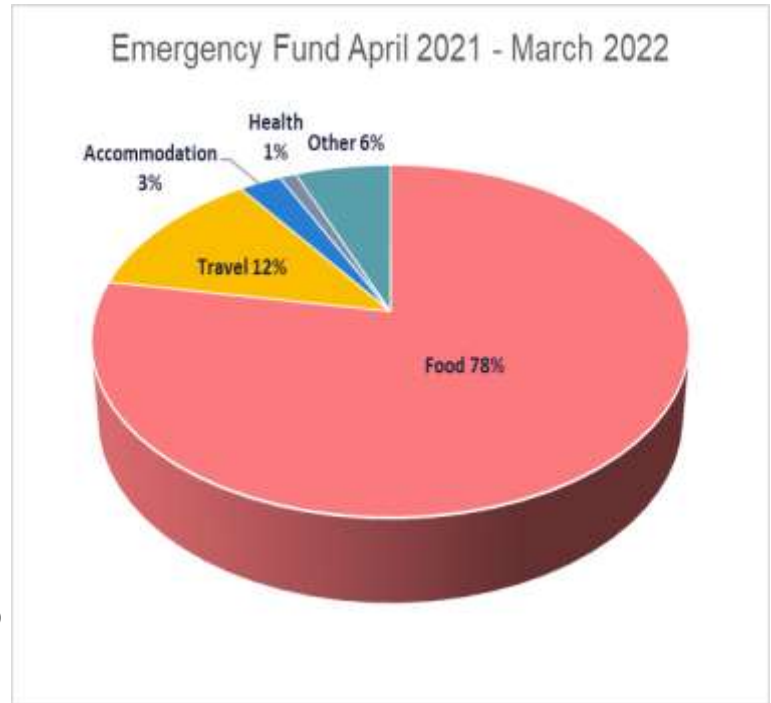
“It took Tony (one of our dedicated volunteers) and me two attempts to pass the OISC L2 exam, which is known for its low pass rate and complexity. I shed a few tears, had more than a few sleepless nights and worked hard in the process. It was all worth it as we’re now registered to give OISC L2 advice, which is both a daunting and an exciting prospect! This achievement wouldn’t have been possible without the support of James, our management team and our volunteers. My thanks to all of them!”

Neli, Casework Co-ordinator

DESTITUTION PROJECT

This project continues to be a lifeline to those who find themselves in financial hardship, or who don't receive government support, or where there may be delays in payments of benefits. The pandemic continued to wear away at people's lives. We supported 20 individuals who made 93 requests for financial assistance between them. Out of these, three were women and six of the claimants had eight dependents between them. We gave just over £3,700 during the course of the year.

All funds for this project come from our supporters who either make regular or one-off donations to us as well as those who do fundraising activities on our behalf. We're indebted to each and every one of them.



RAMI'S STORY

“RSD has always been there for me whenever I've needed you. You never say no and I would like to thank Tony, Neli and Jenny for always helping me to sort my problems out.”

Rami was one of the first Afghans to arrive in Devon in 2001, after international forces entered Afghanistan following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Refugee Support Devon was a group of volunteers then and they helped the Afghans settle in Devon. Rami recalls practical and emotional support from RSD in the early days – ranging from helping him to obtain his national insurance number through to taking part in social and sporting events.

Over the years, Rami settled down in Devon and became a taxi driver. He kept in touch with RSD, especially when he had to deal with officialdom, for example, when he lost his travel document and we helped him to get a new one from the Home Office.

More recently, he discovered that his 14-year old son had also managed to escape Afghanistan and find his way to Greece. Rami's ex-wife could not accompany him and stayed back in Afghanistan. We assisted Rami in liaising with the Greek and UK authorities to bring his son to Devon. It was a complex immigration case and we worked with *Refugee Action* and *Safe Passage* to reunite Rami and his son. Happily, his son is now at school here, about to start his GCSE year. His ambition? He'd like to go to college and study electronics.



VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

The Government's Vulnerable Persons/Children Resettlement Scheme (VPRS/VCRS) was brought to a close during this period. We remain committed to the 31 families we've supported since they came here under this scheme. Ten of the families have officially left these schemes after being in the UK for five years. Those who still need support after this period visit our general drop-in service. Many families are now integrated in their local communities. This is evidenced by 16 people in jobs in local organisations. A small handful are also in the process of setting up their own businesses. Twelve people, including two women, have passed their driving tests. We also welcomed one new baby into the community this year.

We continue to receive help from local community groups such as Newton Crisis Aid, Totnes-based Food in the Community, and West Devon Safe Haven to support the families, for which we're extremely grateful.

"Since coming to Devon from Beirut, not knowing the language or the customs of this country, RSD has been amazing in their support of me and my family. We could not have settled in so well, or found the happiness we have been seeking, without their aid... Their help has been invaluable and me and my family will be forever grateful to them."

VPRS client



Visit to Killerton House

BORN TO BE A BAKER

“Thank you RSD for standing with us, especially when we arrived here. We are lucky to be in the UK and thank you to Souad for helping us complete all the procedures we need.”

“I arrived with my family to Exeter in 2019. My husband and I found life difficult here in the beginning. Everything was very different from Sudan – the customs, the weather, the language, the accents and the people. Slowly with RSD’s help, we learnt more about life here. Our children started going to school and now their English is much better than mine! My husband has also found a job as a security officer. “Two years ago, on my son’s birthday, I bought a cake from a supermarket. Although it looked nice, we didn’t like the taste of it. This made me think that I should learn to bake. So during lockdown I signed up for an online baking course. I baked lots of cakes, which was not easy at first but I’m more confident now. I’ve been on more online courses and have watched many YouTube videos on baking. I can now bake cakes not just for my family, but also for friends and my kind neighbours. I’ve also run baking workshops and have a Level 2 Food Hygiene certificate.

“Although I still struggle with English, I’m proud of what we have achieved as a family. As well as looking after my children, my husband and I attend English and IT classes. I volunteered for a charity for a year and I’m now applying to volunteer in a bakery. One day I would like to own a cake shop! We received a lot of support from RSD in the beginning, but now I make my own GP appointments and I can talk to the school teachers about my children. Souad still supports me with more complicated issues, like finding another house for us in Exeter.”

Neama, supported by the VPRS project



EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

This year has been a particularly busy one for the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and employability teams. We returned to holding a few ESOL classes face-to-face after more than a year of being online. However, these did not prove to be well-attended so gradually these classes were replaced with online teaching again. The positive side is that our clients are now more confident using technology and we have been able to extend our reach across the county.

We had 22 ESOL volunteers who supported at least 30 students through classes and one-to-one learning. We are increasing our one-to-one tutor support as building relationships with tutors helps to provide more consistency in attendance which results in improved learning.

The employability team has four volunteers supporting ten clients individually to access further training, apply for higher education courses and learn new digital and employment skills.



"The English classes have helped me with passing my 'Life in the UK' test. I can make a little conversation, and I understand more than before."

"I think the English class has helped me to contact my children's school and helped me to understand more things about the school."

"The classes have helped me with volunteering with Food Community in Newton Abbot and Totnes. We make food with people in the church."

RAMP – A NEW PROJECT

Our latest venture, the *Refugees as Medical Professionals* (RAMP) scheme supports refugees with a medical/healthcare background to qualify to work in the UK.

In order to work as medical professionals, refugees in the UK must pass exams to demonstrate English language proficiency, such as OET or IELTS before taking specialist medical knowledge exams, such as PLAB for doctors. Our tutors are qualified EFL teachers who have undergone specialist OET training. We also work with teams of British medical professionals who provide professional input to help with exam preparation.

Mary, one of our experienced retired GP volunteers, writes:

“We’re now working with twelve vets and three doctors. We have been meeting together informally once a week in the evenings to help familiarise the vets from Afghanistan with many aspects of general health care in both animals and humans that are likely to be topics in their preliminary language exam. This is in addition to their course at Exeter College and attendance at veterinary practices in the area. Originally we were a team of three UK doctors because of the emphasis on human health in the exam, but the addition of four vets in the team has been very worthwhile in extending the discussions. We have covered a wide range of topics, not always health-related, practising speaking and pronunciation, terminology and listening, reading and writing skills.”

“As a result of your support, I passed OET on my first attempt. I was then able to book my PLAB1 GMC exam. So it paved the way for me to move to the next steps of my requalification as a doctor.”

RSD client supported by the RAMP project

WOMEN'S GROUP

Due to lockdown restrictions, we were not able to organise events in the first half of the year. Once the women could meet up from December, the group became a hive of activity. There were fun visits to Crealy theme park and Killerton House. These were hugely popular with women and children alike! There were also workshops on Shiatsu and First Aid, as well as celebrations of International Women's Day and an *Iftar* get-together during



Proud owners of certificates after a baking skills workshop



Parent First Aid training workshop

Ramadan, where participants shared a few baking and cooking skills and were able to demolish the results! The women in particular have valued these opportunities and we're now exploring ways at how they can run these events themselves.

We're grateful for the grant from the *National Lottery Awards for All*, and our thanks also go to our colleague, Souad, and all her lovely volunteers who spent long hours coordinating these events.

ALLOTMENT

Our community garden is a little haven of peace and quiet for both our volunteers and clients. Mark, our volunteer who oversees the development of the allotment, was kept busy during the course of the year. He also co-ordinated a workshop on building new raised beds and a composter with *Wood for Good Exeter* and *Co Create Exeter*.

We had a productive harvest of fruit and vegetables and all surplus was sold at regular community events. Proceeds were ploughed back to RSD.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Mark and all the volunteers who manage this lovely space on our behalf.



One of our new raised beds built by the allotment team!

EVENTS



Delicious cake baked by Neema, one of our VPRS clients!

Celebration! was the key word for the two main events we organised in 2021.

The first was a day-long gathering in June as part of Refugee Week, called *Destination Devon* on Exeter Quayside to commemorate 400 years of Devon welcoming refugees from across the world. Actors and musicians in period costume marked the waterborne arrival of Huguenots from France in the 17th century. There then followed talks, music

and dance featuring modern-day Syrian refugees, university academics, Italian and Indian dancers, Filipina singers and English bagpipes. Mountains of food prepared by refugee families fed a large crowd of visitors, enjoying the first taste of freedom after Covid restrictions. The UN's refugee agency UNHCR provided a genuine refugee tent, with a photo exhibition of a local refugee family inside.

In September, it was RSD's turn to celebrate its own 20 years of history with an open-air party in Exeter's Belmont Park. Families from the original contingent of Afghan refugees who were RSD's first clients were among those attending the event, together with more recent arrivals from Syria and elsewhere. Dignitaries from Exeter City Council paid tribute to RSD's work over two decades. RSD Chair Jenny Longford reminded visitors of the vital work done – and to be done – by an organisation now well-established as part of a welcoming city and region.

Jeremy, events volunteer



STAFF AND TRUSTEES

Staff and volunteers took part in a huge range of webinars and online training sessions, as well as formal courses such as the OISC L2 course and exam. CPD courses included dyslexia and English language; English language learning for refugees; preparing successful fee waiver applications for immigration; family law for migrant parents; refugee family reunion outside of the immigration rules; and a number of courses on social media.

TRUSTEES/DIRECTORS

Jennifer Longford (Chair)
David Mezzetti (Secretary)
Chris Hill (Treasurer)
Bob Mycock
Liz Oxburgh (until Nov '21)
Bernadette Chelvanayagam
(until Nov '21)
Shurouk Al-Sabbagh
Grace Frain (until Mar '22)
Dr Ben Hudson (until Nov '21)
Ruth Grove-White
Anna Camilleri (from Jan '22)
John Green (from Mar '22)

STAFF

Annette Hughes Manager (Finance Manager from Oct '21)
Rupert Blomfield Manager (from Oct '21)
Denise Parker Education and Employability Co-ordinator
Harriet Watford Resettlement Co-ordinator
Neli Montes de Oca Casework Co-ordinator
Nick Floyd Administrative Assistant
Souad Fadel Resettlement Co-ordinator
Tameem Shaaban Resettlement Co-ordinator (until Jul '21)
Trupti Desai Administrator

THANK YOU

We're extremely grateful to all the charitable trusts and funding organisations which support our work. We would also like to pass on our heartfelt thanks to all the individuals and community groups who raise much-needed funds for us each year. If you wish to organise a fundraising event with RSD as your nominated charity, then please contact us via our website for further information. We thank our "one-off" donors, like eight-year-old Betsy Salt, who raised over £3,000 for RSD with her Swimming Challenge in February, and who brought us to the public's attention via a series of local media interviews. A special mention should also go to our nearly 100 monthly donors who contribute over £16,000 annually to RSD. Their generosity helps us to continue to provide our services to vulnerable clients.

Our principal funders during the reporting period were: Community Justice Fund, National Lottery Community Fund, Migration Exchange, AB Charitable Trust, Garfield Weston, Barrow Cadbury, PLR Trust and the Rotary Club of Exeter Southernhay and Topsham. To them and to everyone else who made a donation to/supported RSD...THANK YOU!

ACCOUNTS

	2021-22	2020-21
Income	£205,268	£217,002
Expenditure	£195,626	£183,444

Our full accounts will be ready to view at our AGM in October 2022.

400 Appeal

A regular monthly donation is the easiest way to support the vital work we do. Could you donate one hour's living wage a month and provide the security of funding that RSD needs? We would be so grateful.



**Refugee Support
Devon**

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Company Number 7731995

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www.refugeesupportdevon.org.uk

RSD has a new look! We've updated our logo to make it more contemporary. It's an abstract representation of the RSD community linking together as a source of support, solidarity and strength.

Our thanks to the Rotary Club of Exeter Southernhay and Topsham for their sponsorship.