

REFUGEE SUPPORT DEVON

NEWSLETTER

Summer 2021



RSD at Exeter Quay...thank you for coming!

“Such a lovely day, meeting old friends, making new ones, sharing experiences and celebrating the huge positive contribution which refugees make to British society - both today and for many generations.” “Lovely to see so many bright yellow ‘refugees welcome’ t-shirts.” “It was a brilliant event. Well done, everyone! Thank you for organising it and thank you to everyone involved.” These were just some of the comments posted on RSD’s social media following our ‘Destination Devon’ event at Exeter Quay on 26 June. Despite the government’s decision to extend the period of restrictions beyond the original 21 June deadline, everything went ahead smoothly in front of a large socially-distanced crowd in the Transit Shed. The day began with a re-enactment of Huguenot refugees fleeing religious persecution in 16th Century France being welcomed to Exeter at the Quay, and continued with a widely-varying programme. “More than 20 different groups and organisations contributed to the day,” RSD trustee Liz Oxburgh explains. “Actors, musicians, community groups, local (and not-so-local) academics, immigration law experts, our clients, volunteers and staff...the UNHCR brought a tent as used by refugees around the world and we ended on a high with music and dance from Inclusive Exeter.” Principal organiser Jeremy Toye

reflected: “The big surprise and delight was that it all went according to plan! Every one of the actors, musicians, dancers, singers, speakers, food providers and volunteers not only turned up on the day, but individually excelled in their enthusiasm. And the reaction of the hundreds of people who took part in the proceedings in and around the Transit Shed was very positive. It may be that this first chance to get together with friends after months of Covid restrictions added to the flavour of the day for many, but they chose to be with us. What was on offer was the result of just four months’ hard work by a dedicated team, with Anita Caproni, Adele Evans and me



The day began with a re-enactment of Huguenots arriving from 16th Century France



RSD volunteer stewards wearing yellow ‘refugees welcome’ tee-shirts

spending many hours working out how it could all fit together and contacting dozens of organisations by phone and email. The most satisfying element of all was the active participation of so many of the families who have used RSD’s services over the past few years. On stage, on the food stalls, in the UNHCR tent and among the audience, they were living testimony to the themes of the day - an inclusive, supportive and engaging community. Thank you to everyone for working together to make it all work.” Jeremy commissioned a video of the event which can be viewed at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIRISSUwKs>, and photos taken by RSD supporter Debs Gallagher can be seen by visiting our website. Let Liz have the last word: “For me the real joy was catching up with families whose children had all grown up by the yard since we’d last

met 18 months ago, seeing all of the volunteers and staff who turned up to help, and being able to chat with many members of the public who were enthusiastic and positive about the work Refugee Support Devon is doing. We had a great event and we should be proud of what we have done and what we are doing.”

Thank you Tameem...and welcome Harriet and Aqeel

In July we bade a very sad farewell to Tameem Shaaban, who has moved on to pastures new. Tameem joined RSD as a Coordinator for the Syrian Resettlement Programme over four years ago and has worked tirelessly to help support the 30+ families we have welcomed to Devon since the scheme began in 2016. He will be greatly missed, by RSD staff, volunteers and clients alike, but we all wish him and his family well as they begin their new life in London.

Former RSD volunteers Harriet Watford and - until the end of August - Aqeel Abdulla have taken over Tameem's duties. Soon after they began in their new roles we asked them a few questions...

Tell us a little about yourselves...

Aqeel: I am currently working as a lecturer at the University of Exeter's Drama Department. I am originally from Syria and was selected to do a Ph.D at the University: I arrived in the UK two years before the war started. I felt very lucky to be here in freedom and safety and I wanted to do something to help other Syrians.

Harriet: I qualified as a lawyer in private practice and then worked for the Crown Prosecution Service for several years specialising in criminal law, but my first degree was in Arabic. Before starting as a volunteer with RSD I completed an MA in Politics and International Relations of the Middle East.

What volunteering did you do with RSD?

Aqeel: I joined RSD as a VPR volunteer soon after the first families began to arrive in Devon in 2016 and helped with all the things that we do for new arrivals, meeting and greeting at the airport, familiarising the new arrivals with their accommodation, the local transport and shops, arranging appointments with GPs, things like that.

Harriet: I started volunteering with RSD at the end of 2018. I have divided my time between working with VPR families, as I speak some Arabic, and the drop-in. I also recently provided outreach support to a family who came to the UK via a community sponsorship group.

How do you feel about this role with RSD?

Aqeel: I've been so busy doing it I haven't really had time to think! But I believe it has come at the right time for the families, especially the ones that are reaching the end of their five-year support programmes and need to develop a self-reliant mindset. I will be here until the end of August but then I will be leaving to start a new job at King's College London, so it is appropriate that they make the transition towards an English-speaking resettlement coordinator.

Harriet: It has been very busy so far because in addition to taking over resettlement work from Tameem I have been covering the drop-in work whilst Neli has been away on leave. Having Aqeel around as a fluent Arabic speaker has been very helpful, and all the volunteers have been really supportive and knowledgeable, which has made life a lot easier. It will be a challenge working with the VPR families when Aqeel has gone but in the long term it will be good for them to deal with a resettlement coordinator whose first language is English.

We all wish Aqeel and Harriet good luck in their new roles.

Aqeel recently featured in a project run by Documental Theatre, a local Exeter theatre company which produced a mini podcast series featuring the voices of carers and people in support roles, touching on the isolation they can experience. They interviewed carers of loved ones in an immigration process, carers of disabled loved ones, carers of people in addiction recovery, military families, prisoners' family members, carers working in residential children's homes. The project is called "PROPS" and you can hear Aqeel's contribution at <https://soundcloud.com/user-168619241/sets/props-podcasts> .

Could YOU rent your property to a refugee family?

Anthea Duquemin rents a house in Exeter to a family relocated to Devon as a result of the war in Syria. She is keen to raise interest among local landlords in renting their properties to refugee families and recently wrote to tell us more...

All Devon District Councils are now ready to accept suitable privately rented homes for the recently launched UK Resettlement Scheme [UKRS], which replaces the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (<https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2021/06/14/how-does-the-uk-help-refugees-through-safe-and-legal-routes>). Under this scheme an agreed number of refugees approved by the UNHCR as those most vulnerable and in need of resettlement could right now be starting new lives in Devon.

A key factor that limits uptake of the scheme is the lack of privately rented housing available for resettled families. Since 2015 private landlords in Devon have made their homes available for resettled families through the SVPRS, which like the UKRS, is operated by District Councils, and through Community Sponsorship, a similar scheme where local community groups take responsibility for providing housing and support. Landlords sign a two-year contract with guaranteed rent and pay no management fees for this period. The typical house needed for rental is a two- or three-bedroom house in good condition and in easy walking distance of shops and schools. Ideal locations are those with good public transport links with both town and rural locations being considered. Interested landlords can find out more by contacting Devon County Council (<https://www.devon.gov.uk/refugees-in-devon/landlords-can-help>). Landlords involved in these schemes speak very positively of their experiences and encourage others to consider doing the same. Below are the experiences of landlords from two different Devon districts:

From a Devon landlord renting through Community Sponsorship:

“We had been preparing to host ‘our’ Syrian family for 9 months, the community team had furnished the new-build semi. We stood at the door as the minibus from the airport turned up. First out, a three-year old boy, runs up the path, past us into the lounge and found the toys waiting for him. His parents and sister followed, after a few minutes we left them to get on with the food the team had prepared for them. All the effort was worth it. The next day we met with an interpreter and went through the rental agreement in both English and Arabic. When we subsequently saw more Syrian destruction on the TV, we felt, at least we had helped to save one family from this.”

From a Devon landlord renting through the SVPRS:

“For a few years now we have been landlords of a house that is now home to a family from Syria who were brought to our area by the Government as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. We cannot even begin to imagine what this family have been through before arriving here, or how strange and challenging it must have been for them to start a new life so far from their family and friends and all that was familiar. What we can say and want to say to anyone who is considering offering a property to a refugee family is that they should have no worries or hesitation in doing so: at no time have we ever regretted our decision, in fact quite the opposite. On the practical side - renting a property to the District Council means that there need be no worries about the rent! The rent is paid by the Council quarterly direct to us. Refugee Support Devon give us and the family all the help and support that we need - not that we have needed much at all - we have had no problems at all with the family as tenants. The family in our house have four children, and it has been a pleasure to see them grow and blossom in their time here. Being landlords on this scheme has been straightforward and rewarding in every way - we are so happy to be able to help, and would very much encourage others who have the opportunity to do the same - it has been a very good thing to do!”

Anthea Duquemin

Getting to know RSD's trustees - David Mezzetti

Continuing our series of RSD trustee profiles, David Mezzetti (pictured below), RSD's Company Secretary and the longest-serving member of RSD's Board, comes under the spotlight...

David's background

After a brief - failed - career in town planning I started a travel business with a friend. We specialised in archaeological tours of the Middle East. From there we set up a specialist archaeology bookshop in Great Russell Street, near the British Museum, which became something of a hub. It was very exciting, starting a business in London back in the days when these things were less regulated. We sold the travel business in 1989 and I retrained as an early years teacher, eventually working in various capacities with special needs pre-schoolers. From there I became an Ofsted inspector and in 1999 I moved to Devon, inspecting rural schools.



I gave up working in education in 2010 and helped set up the Real Food Store and the Exeter Growers Co-Op in Shillingford.

How did you become involved with RSD?

My wife was involved with RSG (as it was then) from the start in 2001, and I got involved through her. Exeter was a dispersal area and I helped welcome people fleeing the 'war on terror'. We faced some early crises, including campaigns to stop deportations, but those days increased my understanding of the world and gave me many good memories, for example of organising trips to Dartmoor with groups of asylum seekers. I spent a lot of time between 2003 and 2006 finding housing for successful asylum applicants. I knew an agent for a private landlord and persuaded them to settle tenancies for our clients, paid by housing benefit. They ended up describing our clients as their best tenants! It was a very positive story at the time, for Exeter to accommodate people like this, which the city had never seen before.

Fran Jenkin was chair at the time. She was an inspirational figure who sorted everything out. Lawrence Sail took over after Fran and after Lawrence stepped down, I took over as temporary chair until a new Board was gratefully established, led by Jenny Longford.

How do you think RSD has developed over the years?

To begin with RSD was 'a phone that no-one answered but which took messages' in Wat Tyler House. The office was very different, with laptops for clients to use and gather socially over a coffee. Over the years RSD has become very professional but has not lost its ability to be moved by what it has to deal with, balancing empathy with practical help. The organisation has had to be very nimble in recognising and anticipating the changing needs of clients. In the early days we assisted asylum seekers - usually single men - with their applications and helped them settle. Cases are often more complex now and we work much more with families. It is very hard to plan ahead in the current climate but our quality of recruitment - both of staff and volunteers - has been of a very high order.

How do you see your role on the Board?

Assisting team work and helping to ensure good governance. A strong, professional Board is worth its weight in gold. I have particular current focus on supporting Jenny with her increasing workload and duties. It takes time to understand what collaborative action looks like but I hope I have brought useful things I have learned from the Real Food Store and the Growers' Co-Op.

(continues on the next page...)

David Mezzetti interview (continued...)

How do you see RSD going forward?

We will continue reviewing our services, planning our route to continued provision of those services for the coming years. I am optimistic that refugees will continue to receive support from the communities in which they are trying to settle. There will always be nasty stuff from time to time but we haven't seen a 'rise of the far right' in this country. However I fear that asylum seekers may be 'tripped up' with family and/or citizenship issues and we might see a repeat of the 'Windrush' problems. Ideally I would like to see RSD participate in challenges to asylum legislation, to stop people suffering and being impeded by rules, but I realise we are limited in this by our capacity.

What is your personal plan for the future?

I have never had a plan, beyond hoping to be an engaged citizen for as long as possible and being able to plant good seeds in fertile soil.

Our thanks to David for the time he gave to this interview and also for the years of service he has given RSD, going right back to the early days. Interviews with other trustees, staff members and volunteers will follow in future newsletters.



Lizi with fellow RSD volunteer Cameron Caverhill

RSD stall at Crediton Diversity Festival

RSD had a stall at the Crediton Diversity Festival on Sat 31st July. The weather forecast was terrible but thankfully it was wrong and we had a lovely dry day. It was great to meet up with the Crediton Refugee Support group who had a stall there too and have been involved with sponsoring and supporting a Syrian family in Crediton. There was music and stalls and we had a lot of people interested in joining our mailing list and finding out more about the work we do, so a very worthwhile activity.

Lizi Allnatt, RSD volunteer

Eid cookies!

The pictures below, of cookies and cakes made by RSD client Neama to celebrate the end of Ramadan, got to us just after we sent out our spring newsletter...but we decided they were too good to ignore. So here they are...well done, Neama!



And finally...happy twentieth birthday to US!

Yes, it's true, in September RSD will be celebrating its twentieth year of existence. If you have read our interview with David Mezzetti you will know that in the early days RSG (as it was known then) was 'a phone which no-one answered but which took messages' and an office 'with laptops for clients to use and gather socially over a coffee'. Things have now moved on, of course, and we provide a wide range of support services - including English lessons, assistance to find work and advice on immigration-related issues - to the local refugee and asylum seeker community, together with the welcome and integration support we have been giving to families arriving since 2016 via the VPR scheme. RSD is undoubtedly bigger and more professional than it was back then but, as David adds, the organisation 'has not lost its ability to be moved by what it has to deal with, balancing empathy with practical help'. We hope to continue doing just that for many years to come.

Plans are afoot to mark the occasion with a celebratory event on **Sunday, 19 September**, so please keep that date clear in your diary. We will send everyone on our newsletter list an invitation to this event very soon. In the meantime: RSD trustee Grace Frain comments: '20 years on from its establishment Refugee Support Devon has grown, adapted and developed in more ways than could have been imagined. In this unprecedented year of pandemic and lockdown, RSD's services to refugees and asylum seekers in Devon have been needed more than ever. We have to date been relatively successful in raising funds to support the work we do, but as ever, the future is uncertain. The competition for funding is growing so we have set up a crowdfunder in aid of our 20th anniversary. It will run until 13 September and we want to raise £10,000 to ensure that we can continue to grow, providing support and a safe environment for all.' To make a donation please visit <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/rsds-20th-anniversary> . Over £850 has already been raised: many thanks to everyone who has contributed so far.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have contributed to RSD down the years in so many different ways, either as donors or as volunteers...you know who you are and you have all been part of our growing success story: we couldn't have done it without you. If you do not yet donate to RSD but would like to do so we would love to hear from you. Regular or one-off, large or small, we are very grateful for all your donations. If you're intending to do something like a triathlon or a marathon - and you will be collecting sponsorship - then please think about nominating RSD as your chosen charity. Let us know what you will be doing and we can help promote your challenge in our newsletter and via social media. Even if you aren't contemplating anything quite as energetic you can help. **Donations via bank transfer** can be made through our bank account, Refugee Support (Devon) Ltd., Cooperative Bank account number 65849280, sort code 08 92 99. If you would like to



The 400 appeal

make a regular donation ask us about our **400 appeal**, which aims to get 400 people to sign up to a monthly £10 direct debit. **To donate through PayPal or by using a debit or credit card**, search for Refugee Support Devon via the PayPal Giving Fund or visit www.refugeesupportdevon.org.uk and click on the 'donate now' tab. Lastly: please consider **leaving a legacy to RSD in your will**. For advice speak to a solicitor or a will-writer. You will need the following: Refugee Support Devon, Exeter Community Centre, 17 St Davids Hill, Exeter EX4 3RG, registered charity no.1143884. If you need more information about supporting RSD, call 01392 682185 or e-mail info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk . And remember:

- £10 - pays for a vital medical prescription for those who are destitute
- £20 - provides mobile phone credit, enabling vital communication with solicitors and family
- £50 - purchases a bus ticket to attend an immigration hearing or legal appointment
- £100 - helps to equip someone's first home with essentials after long periods of destitution or insecure accommodation. It can also pay for a team of volunteers to be trained to help respond to queries from asylum seekers and refugees
- £500 - funds a staff member for a week to coordinate volunteers and respond to queries from the most vulnerable

Thank you!