

Refugee Support Devon Annual Review

Year ending

31 March 2021



CHAIR'S REPORT

In this unprecedented year of pandemic and lockdowns, RSD's services to refugees in Devon have been needed more than ever. When I wrote my annual report a year ago, staff had just begun their move to remote working and none of us would have believed they would still be working from home a year hence. Risk assessments were carried out and safety measures drawn up along with careful proposals for a phased return to working from our offices at Exeter Community Centre. From time to time there have been partial returns to the office for a few staff, but much work continues remotely.

Unfortunately RSD has been unable to welcome new families to Devon through the VPRS (Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme) due to lockdowns and the absence of international flights. However, for our service users already settled here, the problems of negotiating family business with various agencies over the phone, rather than in person, have often proved too daunting, as you might imagine if you have ever had to conduct business over the phone in a foreign language. So they have turned to our support workers at RSD for help more often than they might otherwise have done. Staff, together with a few of our volunteers, have risen to the challenge, but we have recognised that they are frequently overstretched.

Many of our clients have nevertheless found a way to master online learning while our volunteer teachers have also been getting to grips with new ways of teaching via the internet. New online classes have sprung up and proved very popular, alongside one-to-one teaching by volunteers. The number of service users benefitting has doubled during the year. We anticipate that this form of learning will continue long after life returns to what we used to recognise as normal.

The changing and growing nature of demand for RSD's services is also reflected in our drop-in and

casework provision. Recognising the continued absence of any agencies offering free immigration advice in Devon and the limitations of the OISC (Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner) Level 1 advice they had been offering over the last 2 years, caseworker Neli Montes de Oca and volunteer Tony Griffin have embarked on OISC Level 2 training in order to provide a professional immigration advice service, which is now available to clients who need it.

So I'd like to thank all our wonderful staff and volunteers, as well as our funders, for their unstinting commitment to RSD's work during what has been a difficult year for everyone.

RSD's work is expanding to meet demand. We have to date been relatively successful in raising funds to support the work we do, but as ever, the future is uncertain and the competition for funding is also growing. The coming year will involve a major review of our services and, I hope, a welcome return to meeting colleagues and clients in person.



Jenny Longford

VOLUNTEERS

"I have found my experiences working with RSD informative, challenging, rewarding and enjoyable. I have enjoyed interacting with the many people I have met. It has been a privilege and pleasure to meet people from different backgrounds and cultures, and assist them in their learning of language, culture and functional skills." RSD volunteer

We were more dependent than ever during the course of the year on our fantastic volunteers to help deliver our services. Many of them went above and beyond what was expected of them even while volunteering virtually. Our board of directors/trustees provided strategic direction during this testing year and we're grateful to them for their wise counsel. Teachers adapted to online teaching, drop-in volunteers came to the office as soon as government restrictions eased up, allotment volunteers nurtured the land and provided food to those in need, outreach volunteers, of course, couldn't visit clients at home, but kept in touch through regular phone calls and video chats. A few volunteers were

isolating and therefore unable to help directly. We kept in touch with them and a few were even able to participate in online CPD courses.

In spite of the Covid crisis, 86 people enquired to volunteer with us. We were able to take on only a handful of new ESOL volunteers while we were working mainly from home.

Volunteer reflections

"It was all going so well. The family I was befriending were settling in and knew their way around. Then came the first lockdown just as we were beginning to do all the fun stuff! Suddenly contact was limited to video calls and the occasional walk when regulations allowed. There was then a brief



respite when we could meet up in the garden to clear the beds and plant some colourful flowers.

“Winter brought the second lockdown and unfortunately health issues in the family. Reaching a doctor during the pandemic has not been easy for anyone, but when you’re still finding your feet in a country with a new language, making your needs known over the telephone and online presents special challenges. My role as a volunteer then changed dramatically. Thank goodness all the staff at the GP practice proved supportive and cooperative. They allowed me to make appointments, request medication and pass on information about the patient’s progress.

“On the positive side, having a role to play in the pandemic has helped me get through it, and the crisis has given the family important insights into the way our society works. And I’m happy to report that – like the Covid situation and the weather – our patient’s health appears to be improving rapidly.” Yvonne

Laura volunteered to support a new family just before the pandemic struck. She campaigned for four years with a dozen other supporters to resettle a family in their town. Their amazing perseverance eventually paid off – and a family “complete with their luggage, an oud and a saz” finally arrived to a very warm welcome. These are her musings:

“The lockdown (which happened within days of the family’s arrival) brought the local support network into action — there were regular meetings on Zoom with an Arabic translator; an RSD volunteer English teacher worked weekly with the parents; and someone found the family an allotment to help ease them into life in a Devon market town. When we were allowed to meet in a park, we brought food and drink and listened to Mohamad singing and playing Kurdish music on his oud. And later, we also heard him playing on his saz. The family has had to be patient, resilient and resourceful over the last year. Now that life is opening up, they’re beginning to flourish.”



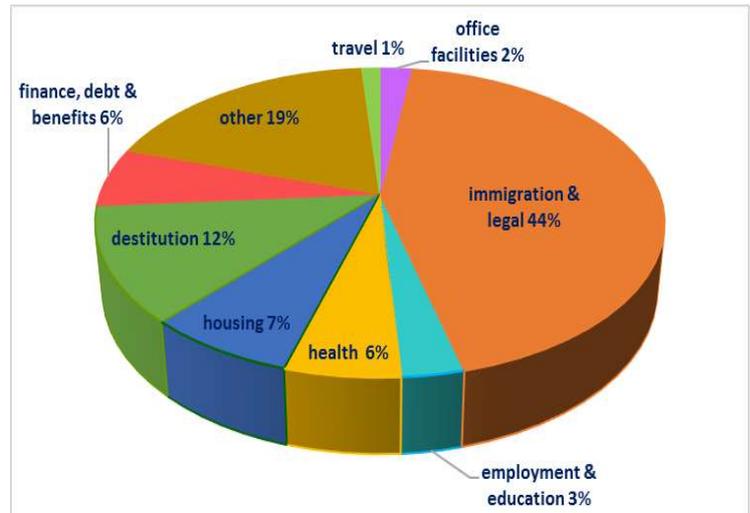
DROP-IN SERVICE

When our office closed on 20 March, we met as a team to discuss how to continue providing essential services while we worked from home. Our drop-in service is very much the heartbeat of our organisation. Neli and her small team of volunteers heroically found ways to carry on supporting clients via telephone calls/video chats/email. This was, of course, a tough task, especially when clients didn't have access to smartphones or computers. So as soon as lockdown restrictions eased, Neli and her volunteers worked from the office so that they could see clients on an appointment basis. They helped 108 people through our drop-in service and immigration clinic with a total of 588 visits/enquiries between them. Of this total, 23 per cent were asylum seekers, 23 per cent refugees or with a refugee background and just over half had complicated immigration status. Please see the chart for the reasons people asked for assistance.

“As an asylum seeker I arrived to the UK with a deep depression, anxiety and hopeless to try to keep myself alive. Once I approach Refugee Support Devon my life change drastically as they started to work on my case for asylum, providing me the support and help I required, not only dealing with my asylum claim, also helping me to rebuild my life and apply for university, and even emotionally supported by them.”

“I cannot thank them enough for the help, support and friendship they offer me.” RSD client

Drop-in services used by clients



IMMIGRATION ADVICE GOES UP A LEVEL

Immigration law is regulated and only qualified advisers are allowed to give advice on matters related to immigration. In 2018 Neli and three of her volunteers were accredited by OISC (Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner) to offer Level 1 immigration advice and this year, in spite of the pandemic, Neli and volunteer Tony are studying to attain OISC Level 2 accreditation.

There are no immigration legal services in Devon outside Plymouth which will take on publicly-funded cases, so we're building networks with other organisations in the region. We're developing criteria for the cases we can take on. This will help meet gaps in current local service provision and avoid duplication of what other organisations are offering. We currently help with:

- complex applications for Leave to Remain
- documenting and information gathering for fresh asylum claims
- registration of children as British citizens, naturalisation etc

- applications for Legal Aid Exceptional Case Funding and then referring to appropriate solicitors for representation.

We dealt with 93 enquiries/visits this year from a total of 39 clients, 18 of whom were new clients.

Tony reflects, *"This year, I've dealt with four asylum claims; five spouse visas, one on a discretionary basis outside the rules; three applications for leave to remain; one application to remove the 'no recourse to public funds' condition; and one complex citizenship application. Working remotely has made everything much slower. I'm proud to work with RSD which has continued offering its excellent services to clients through all these difficulties."*



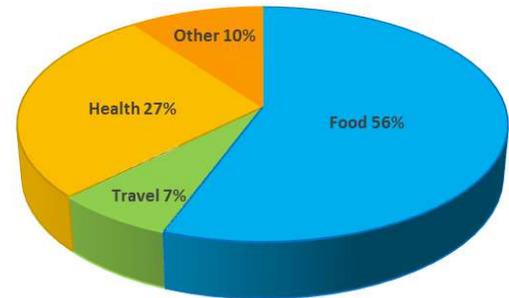
DESTITUTION

The aim of this project is to support individuals who are in severe financial crisis to obtain the help they're entitled to and to provide immediate financial relief by way of our emergency fund. Some people don't receive government support or there may be delays in payments of benefits or people sometimes experience financial hardship. The small amounts of money we give them on a weekly (or fortnightly during lockdown) basis help tide them over in these tricky times. This year more than ever, our destitution project proved to be a lifeline for those who found themselves in financial crisis. We gave a total of £4,800 to 19 individuals, four of whom were women. This was almost double the amount we gave last year, which demonstrates the havoc the pandemic has wreaked on people's lives. We are extremely grateful to those individuals who make regular or one-off donations and those who do fundraising activities on our behalf. We couldn't run this project without them.

A client who we helped with his re-qualification journey as an asylum-seeking medical doctor in the UK:

"I believe such support from RSD is very important in empowering refugees/asylum seekers towards their self-sufficiency, integration in society and confidence building. I am very grateful to RSD for this great contribution to my goal and I hope that RSD continues to provide support to asylum seekers and refugees this way or any other way that helps their sustainability and self-reliance."

Emergency Fund April 2020 - March 2021



CLIENT JOURNEY

“If there had been no RSD, I don’t know where I would be. I would not have got the same help anywhere else.”

Jay is from Africa and has been in the UK for just over 20 years. He came when he was 18 to live with his mum in London and ended up overstaying his visitor’s visa. He moved with his partner to Devon and they had two children. When the relationship broke down, Jay became destitute and homeless. His various applications for leave to remain were unsuccessful.

After several more applications and appeals, Jay was finally given leave to remain, but with no recourse to public funds. *“I was in a desperate situation with no money, no home, no job and no other means of support when I came to RSD,”* he says quietly. Little by little we helped Jay to piece his life together again. We put him in touch with another charity to have the “no recourse to public funds” condition lifted, worked with him to put a CV together and apply for jobs, helped him find temporary accommodation, and gave him emergency financial support (see facing page). Jay’s situation had left him in a state of depression so we gave him plenty of emotional support and cups of tea too.

Four years on, Jay is in a much happier place now. He has a regular job, he’s moving into his first secure home soon and he is making an appeal for joint custody of his younger child. The older one is an adult now, so Jay has regular contact with him. He’s also recently had his leave to remain extended by two and a half years, so there’s a definite spring in his step now as he looks forward to a fresh start in a country that’s been his home for over 20 years.

“RSD is my big parent. I am what I am because of you.”

VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

As with much of our work, this was a particularly trying year for our project supporting vulnerable families from the Middle East settled in Devon by Devon County Council and the UK government. The programme of bringing in new families from the Middle East was suspended in March 2020 because of the Covid crisis. So we've been working with the 30 families who were already here before March 2020, plus a family that moved to Devon in March 2021. The pandemic has been a setback for many of the families who were severely affected by being isolated and not having access to IT or not knowing how to use it. Mental health issues in particular came to the fore, and families therefore leaned on us more than ever. We dealt with just over 2,400 enquiries from 68 individuals over the course of the year. This represented an increase of 275 per cent in the visits we had in the same period in the previous year! We are extremely grateful

to our volunteers and community groups who have kept supporting the families in these testing times. Newton Crisis Aid, Exeter Mosque, Exeter Muslims Association, South Street Baptist Church, Totnes-based Food in the Community and many others did much to support families during this difficult period. As ever, we feel privileged to have their ongoing support.

Tameem Shaaban, one of our resettlement coordinators, reflects:

"The year 2020 will forever stay in history as the year of virtual rather than physical connections! Being shut indoors for months at a time required creativity, tech resilience and upskilling. Turning our dining table into work and study stations was a funny, but a practical solution for my family to stay productive at work and at school! Clients also had to go that extra mile and learn quickly about the world of online interactions.

"I've been responding to unprecedented



situations that clients found themselves in, and have had to adapt quickly and to deal with all aspects of health, social and economic dimensions of the crisis. Clients have worked in cooperation with us and we've given them the best support we

could in the circumstances. However, this brutally isolating time has taken its toll on several clients.

"The pandemic hasn't stopped the support we give our clients. Big events such as house moves went more smoothly than I'd expected.

"I'm hoping to be more hands-on with the easing of restrictions because working face-to-face with people gives you more a sense of joy and job satisfaction, which is less apparent when responding to a need online."

Souad Fadel, our other resettlement coordinator, is also pragmatic about the highs and lows of last year -

"2020 was certainly a new experience in my

career. Working from my kitchen table forced me to think creatively on how to work with families so that they felt safe during this deadly pandemic. Supporting a family that had arrived ten days before the first lockdown was not easy, but they finally managed to settle into their new home after the close involvement of our volunteers and the local community.

"I helped three families to move homes and there were two babies born during this difficult period.

"I'm thankful for all the training I had this year; I also built up good relations with other organisations like health centres, district councils, schools, Citizens Advice and children's centres. We had two women's group gatherings, both of which were online. They were not the same as our face-to-face get-togethers, but we still managed to have a blast on both occasions."



WALAA'S STORY

"My name is Walaa. I am a refugee from Syria. I arrived in England in 2016 with my family.

"Despite the pandemic, I have had a very active year. I work at The Olive Tree in Exeter to help Syrian refugee families improve their English, through finding volunteer teachers; arranging ESP courses; and helping college enrolment. This has been a new experience for me which I have really enjoyed.

"I have taught Arabic on Zoom at Exeter Muslim Association to two groups of school children. I loved this work because it reminded me of happy days teaching in Syria and Lebanon.

"Having experienced difficulties myself of arriving in England without knowing any English, I am keen to help others in this situation. I have been working as an interpreter with Home from Home, at first as a volunteer and then in a paid position. It is such a nice job.

"I have also been studying to complete the degree which I started in Lebanon. I am nervously awaiting the results.

"My husband, Hajji, has just successfully completed a master's degree (merit) in Middle

East and Islamic Studies at Exeter University. I am very proud of him.

"I hope to set a good example to all refugees. I am very proud of my accomplishments. My dreams are many and I will put all my efforts into realising them. I came to this country without the language and life was very difficult for us. I've been in England for four and half years now and every year I take on new experiences and challenges. The concept of starting again was so hard for me, but eventually I got there.

"I am so grateful to everyone who helped and is helping me and my family since we arrived here. Thank you to RSD and to volunteers, teachers, friends and colleagues."



REMOTE VOLUNTEERING



Paul, RSD volunteer, recounts the challenges of providing support to a family remotely:

“Imagine volunteering to help people in a ‘hands-on’ way when the recent situation has turned the experience into ‘hands-off’ help for 18 months. Our support has become phone and computer-based because of the pandemic and as a result of our own health issues, unrelated to Covid.

“However, looking back at our diaries, although communication was difficult we still seemed to have provided quite a bit of support to the family. There were issues around a change of address, including an entertaining WhatsApp video call trying to sort out technical issues. Then there was the need for information on the transfer into secondary education and subject/uniform considerations. Most time-consuming of these issues were school meal voucher arrangements which weren’t working properly: cue a series of calls to helplines based in El Salvador! Marian, my wife (also an RSD volunteer), continued her English lessons via WhatsApp before and after her operation supplying video links to encourage written work. We also helped with the Census form, and sorting out a potential volunteering opportunity for Amina.

“To our sorrow, we missed out on general social opportunities, especially during Ramadan and sharing Iftar with Saleh, Amina and the children.

“Keeping in touch has been vital - checking by text that all is well, remembering the children’s birthdays, sending gifts and receiving photos of them and audio messages. Regular contact has been very important, not only because of Covid, but the whole issue of settling into a new neighbourhood and not feeling more isolated, like many people have felt during this difficult time. We look forward to closer contact and sharing family occasions more in the near future.”

EDUCATION & EMPLOYABILITY

A year ago, our ESOL volunteers were meeting their clients regularly in homes, cafés and libraries. Classes were taking place weekly in halls in Exeter and Newton Abbot. Then came lockdown and for a while, everything stopped while we worked out how to proceed. At first, we were not sure how long the situation would last, so we expected teaching to return to normal before long, but when that didn't happen, we had to look for other ways to support our clients.

It took a while for volunteers and clients to settle into a new way of teaching and learning using our new resource – Zoom. Some struggled with it and a few decided to wait until normal service could be resumed, but the majority bravely set about learning new skills and adapting to the new normal. In fact, our classes expanded from two to six, enabled by magnificent support from STAR (Student Action for Refugees) volunteers, for whom Zoom held no terrors.

Our class attendees doubled, as more clients

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

could access classes from the comfort of their living-room. Mothers with young or sick children could attend, husbands and wives joined together to learn and everybody enjoyed the novelty of seeing so many faces on a screen. Some learners were more proficient at using Zoom than others, but nearly all agreed with one student who said, "At the beginning it was difficult, but we got used to it in time."

Volunteers rose (wo)manfully to the daunting task of teaching online and we are indebted to the perseverance, adaptability and professionalism of all our ESOL volunteers. Thanks to them, our clients have continued to make progress with their English, keep in touch with each other and most importantly, have fun!

What about the future? While most students said they preferred to be in a traditional classroom, it was agreed that there's definitely a place for online teaching. It enables students to attend classes without the cost and time involved in travelling. For some, it's a lifeline if they're unwell or have sick children at home. So the year was a steep learning curve but well worth the effort!

During this period we took on three volunteers to work specifically with clients who feel ready to enter the workforce or find work after redundancy. Of course, it has been a tough year for people to find new jobs, but now that the restrictions are easing, we're confident that our volunteers will have success in this area. We also have a volunteer working for the Department for Work and Pensions, whose role is to support refugees and immigrants, so that bodes well for the future.

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

Volunteers Mike and Lois played a key role in coordinating RSD's online English classes. Rising magnificently to the occasion, they also supported new volunteers from Exeter University's STAR (Student Action for Refugees). Mike tells us:

"We were impressed by the adaptability, enthusiasm and sense of responsibility from STAR volunteers. They caught on quickly, and their involvement seemed to promote team-building, raise morale and increase our capacity for more learners. Without them – and Nel, Nattie and Daisy in particular - it would never have been possible. It's been a lot of fun too, Lois and I have really enjoyed our time working with RSD. What a privilege to be walking down the street and run into a learner we've taught on our online class, to chat and feel that we've been welcomed into their circle of friends."



ALLOTMENT

Our allotment was looked after wonderfully throughout the lockdown by Mark, Jean, Helen and Pat, with additional help when permitted, from a few clients and their families. With a shed filled with hand sanitisers, gloves, masks and other PPE, we were able to ensure those who wanted to come would be safe. We certainly needed help with the watering!

We had a productive harvest, but as there was no regular face-to-face contact with clients, we donated our surplus to the Exeter 'community larder'.



Work on the allotment continued into the autumn and much planning has been going on for future renovations and developments. We even had a delivery of manure on Christmas Eve. Thanks to Jean and her partner for shifting it off the path – that was true dedication!

“The main event of spring this year was planting a wildflower meadow with seeds donated by Exeter Connect. We are waiting for the seeds to emerge but due to the very cold and wet spring it has all been delayed. This time last year we were starting to harvest strawberries and spinach but sadly, this year we are still waiting. I managed to source a free greenhouse for the allotment which means we’ll be able to grow more produce and protect the plants in the future!”

“We have a new volunteer now, Ann, who has started helping on the allotment. She also speaks some Arabic which is handy when we’re working with Arabic-speaking clients. Ann and I are usually at the allotment every week. There are other volunteers and clients too who’ve been helping us to turn it into a real refuge.”

**Mark,
allotment volunteer**



STAFF AND TRUSTEES

Staff and volunteers took part in a huge range of webinars and online training sessions. As well as staff and a volunteer studying for OISC L1 and L2 courses, there were rich pickings of other CPD courses that staff and volunteers were able to take advantage of. These included care and well-being awareness of refugees during the pandemic, International Organisation for Migration cultural awareness sessions, increasing the effectiveness of online teaching and learning, engaging volunteers during the pandemic, domestic violence and immigration, the rights of women, and media training.

TRUSTEES/DIRECTORS

Jennifer Longford (Chair)

David Mezzetti (Secretary)

Chris Hill (Treasurer)

Bob Mycock

Liz Oxburgh

Bernadette Chelvanayagam

Shurouk Al-Sabbagh

Grace Frain

Dr Ben Hudson (from Aug 2020)

Ruth Grove-White (from Jan 2021)

STAFF

Annette Hughes

Denise Parker

Nelida Montes de Oca

Nick Floyd

Souad Fadel

Tameem Shaaban

Trupti Desai

Manager

Education and Employment
Coordinator

Casework Coordinator

Administrative Assistant

Resettlement Coordinator

Resettlement Coordinator

Administrator

EVENTS

Fundraising events were more difficult than usual in 2020. We had to master the art of digital platforms quickly! For the annual Refugee Week in June, we partnered with Devon County Council to gather “Refugees Voices”. We received some wonderful home videos of refugee families resettled in Devon telling their stories, which can be viewed on our website, as can the winning entrants of our online Refugee Week competition - where we asked people to share their stories/poems/pictures on the theme “Imagine”.

Other events included:

The wonderful staff at *The Flat* restaurant donating £1 for every £10 spent on dining at their restaurant to RSD.



Trustee Liz Oxburgh promoting “Giving Tuesday” in December by making Maamoul cakes from RSD’s recipe book. She posted her progress on online videos and encouraged others to join her. Demand for our recipe book soared, resulting in more

donations during the month.

Grace Frain, another RSD trustee, baking delicious brownies by the truckload, donating proceeds to RSD.



ACCOUNTS

There was initially much concern about the few opportunities for fundraising activities, and increased competition for grants and awards. We were, however, fortunate to secure several emergency grants, which is a great tribute to the hard work of our fundraising team striving under difficult conditions. We were able to keep all staff working from their homes, where necessary. We also provided all our services - successfully developing most of them online - during the pandemic.

We thank Devon Community Foundation, The Barrow Cadbury Trust, The National Lottery Community Fund, Access to Justice Foundation and Migration Exchange. Their grants during this difficult period ensured no services had to be cut or curtailed.

We are even more grateful than usual this year to all our individual and community group supporters, especially our “400 Appeal” donors who contribute monthly to RSD. This makes an immensely positive impact on our work. We thank you all for your wonderful generosity.

	2020-21	2019-20
Income	217,002	212,646
Expenditure	183,444	183,782

Our full accounts will be ready to view at our AGM in October 2021.

400 Appeal

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

Become a Refugee Support Devon donor by either

- ◆ visiting or calling us to make a one-off donation or to set up a standing order with your bank; or
- ◆ using the QR code here to donate or set up a monthly donation via PayPal.



Charity Registration Number 1143884

Company Number 7731995

17 St Davids Hill

Exeter EX4 3RG

01392 682185

info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk

www.refugeesupportdevon.org.uk