Annual Review 2014/15

How we welcomed asylum seekers, refugees and detainees
Asylum Welcome exists for people fleeing persecution and danger in their own countries, who seek refuge in Oxfordshire.

Our members and supporters, of various faiths and politics, have shared values based on a common humanity and social justice. Our work is to reduce poverty, suffering and social isolation and to enable asylum seekers and refugees to live with the respect and dignity to which they are entitled.

Asylum Welcome exists for people fleeing persecution and danger in their own countries, who seek refuge in Oxfordshire.

The Trustee Board 2014-15

In addition to their governance responsibilities many of our trustees take part in practical volunteering activities.

Trustees throughout the year:

Very Revd. Bob Wilkes Chair
Marcus Thompson MBE Deputy Chair
Renee de Louw A.C.A. Treasurer
Judy Boon
Belinda Cootes
Dr. Melanie Griffiths
John Prangley
Wyon Stansfeld
Professor Roger Zetter

To these ends, we:

- provide advice, information and support to asylum seekers and refugees;
- befriend, visit and support the rights and welfare of detainees; and
- work with other service providers and the public to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees.

We make every effort to inform and influence public debate and to dispel myths and misinformation about asylum seekers and refugees. We aim for the highest standards of integrity, confidentiality and quality of service; to make no judgements of individuals and to meet the needs left unmet by others.

Asylum Welcome Members

The experience and opinions of the members guide the organisation and strengthen our links with local communities. In 2014-15 our membership increased to 230 people. An important development this year has been the introduction of free membership for our clients. This resulted in asylum seekers and refugees becoming members for the first time, and it was great to see some attending and asking questions at the AGM. The AGM was a vibrant and celebratory event including space for other organisations to hold stalls and compelling presentations from staff, trustees and guests.

Asylum Welcome Members

847 Total number of individual asylum seekers, refugees and detainees we helped this year.

From the Chair

I do hope that you are encouraged, as I am, when you read this Report. Kate, in ‘From the Director’, tells us how our services have grown and been improved. There is clearly still a need for the support we give to asylum seekers, refugees and detainees. Once again, sincere thanks are due to the staff and over 100 volunteers who have enabled Asylum Welcome to be effective both at a local and national level.

Having been Chair of the Trustees for about a year, I am keenly aware of the heritage we have in Asylum Welcome from all those who have worked so hard over the years. I pay particular tribute to John Prangley who stepped up as Acting Chair of Trustees at a challenging time, and held things together as new staff and new trustees took up their roles.

This past year we have built on the foundations laid the previous year. We have been able to plan ahead, strengthen the trustee group, and ensure sound finances. Now we are setting off into a new year with the will to sustain our work well. Thank you to all the individuals and trusts who support us financially.

So we move ahead, hoping that all who seek safety and welcome in today’s world will find it.

Bob Wilkes
Chair of Trustees

From the Director

In 2014-15 Asylum Welcome focused on making its services more useful to asylum seekers, refugees and detainees. We registered as an advice-giver with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC); we provided more technical help to people using computers; we increased our visits to detainees in Campsfield House; we provided more food at the youth club; we trialled new projects like community gardening and sharing recycled bikes; and we increased training for our volunteers.

As a result, the demand for our services has increased – we helped more detainees, and attendance at our youth club grew. Advice, English classes and other services running from our Welcome Centre all saw numbers rise. An increasing number of clients became involved in the running of the organisation as volunteers, as members and by doing building work in the offices.

In 2014-15 Asylum Welcome also contributed to community events and to national policy discussions. We were part of the successful challenge to the Campsfield expansion plans.

We were able to achieve this thanks to a new and highly committed staff team, more stable funding, the phenomenal efforts of our amazing volunteers and the support of local people.

Kate Smart
Director
Volunteer co-ordination

As well as being a great asset to Asylum Welcome, volunteering helps people to feel they are contributing to their local community. Our team of around 120 volunteers do an incredible job.

With a new Volunteer Co-ordinator this year we have been able to develop a more organised approach to volunteer management, allowing us to recruit a diverse range of talented volunteers and offer them proper training and support.

Training enables volunteers to confidently meet the needs of our clients: to explain their rights and responsibilities, seek improvements in their situation and provide additional help by liaising with other organisations. All new volunteers have been given induction training, plus targeted training courses have been arranged with external experts. These include training on safeguarding children, recognising and dealing with trauma, trafficking, and the basics of immigration and asylum law.

Volunteers have also had the opportunity to attend regular meetings to keep up to date with changes, contribute their ideas and feel part of a team. We also recognised the contribution of long-standing volunteers by presenting them with certificates at our AGM.

We worked hard to increase the number of volunteers with refugee backgrounds, and one of the big successes this year has been that more service users became part of the Asylum Welcome volunteer team. Their confidence, self-esteem and sense of purpose has increased and they are pleased to feel they are “giving something back”.

A new team

2014-15 began with a new team of staff, restructured to emphasise good quality services. They brought an impressive array of skills and experience to the organisation, and a shared commitment to the cause.

An important development this year was the recruitment of a designated member of staff to co-ordinate volunteers in both the Detainee Support Service and the Adult and Family Advice Service – bringing much needed direction, energy and expertise. His appointment means Asylum Welcome has recruited its first member of staff who arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker. We continue to employ a qualified social worker as our Youth Service Co-ordinator. The recruitment of a new Volunteer Co-ordinator, after a period when this post had been vacant, has made a positive difference to all aspects of our work and has ensured a well-supported volunteer community. The sterling work of our Fundraising Officer and Office Manager have kept the organisation afloat. Recruiting a Finance Officer who is a qualified accountant has strengthened our ability to manage our finances.

To support the staff team, we have been very grateful for the hard work and commitment of a social work placement student from Ruskin College, and an experienced communications intern from Austria.
Welcome Centre

During the year we continued to make improvements in the Welcome Centre to make it more useful and welcoming.

We introduced tea and coffee making facilities, baby changing facilities, children’s books, a wider range of toys and a limited amount of second-hand clothing. Some of these changes were in response to the increased numbers of mothers with small children using our services, and in turn it encouraged them to use our services more. We were delighted by a donation of beautiful hand-knitted items from the charity Knit for Peace.

In keeping with our emphasis on improving our advice services, we installed a second interview room for giving one-to-one advice – this was built by our clients (see photo, bottom right). We also improved accessibility by translating key information into languages spoken by our clients.

The computer zone, created in the previous year, has become a very popular amenity, not least because we have installed Skype so that clients can speak to their relatives.

Partnerships

We rely on good working partnerships with other agencies who have a stake in providing for asylum seekers, refugees and detainees. We welcome referrals and are very grateful for all the help we receive. We are developing effective professional relationships with statutory service providers, in particular social services and with the staff at Campsfield House.

Asylum Welcome continues to benefit from, and contribute to, the Lottery-funded partnership project Oxford Advice Agencies Stronger Together. We chair the inter-agency meetings on unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Oxfordshire and attend the London Destitution Forum and the UK-wide Detention Forum.

During the year we had a series of meetings with Refugee Resource about how the closely related work of these two neighbouring organisations can be brought together. A practical result was a joint seasonal party for our clients.

Other notable partners during the year have been Red Cross, Open Door, St Francis House, St Mungo’s, Children’s Society, OCVA, Oxford Foodbank, the Student Hub, Key 2 Housing Association, Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees, Medical Justice and Bail for Immigration Detainees.
Detainee Support

The number of volunteer visitors, the frequency of visits and the range of work undertaken on behalf of the detainees makes Asylum Welcome one of the most effective services for detainees in the UK.

Over the past year, we significantly increased the number of people that we were able to help by making direct contact with every new Campsfield detainee, rather than waiting for a referral from an intermediary.

We matched each detainee with a regular, one-to-one visitor, and helped overcome communication difficulties by relaying messages between detainees and family, friends, lawyers and other voluntary organisations.

We made efforts to identify detainees who are survivors of torture and/or have serious medical conditions. We referred such cases to Medical Justice and to Bail for Immigration Detainees, and requested that the authorities release them. We also intervened to find lawyers for detainees who struggle to access legal advice.

We made small amounts of funding available via the Campsfield welfare office to collect detainees' belongings and provided phone cards so they can contact the outside world.

After the government's decision to end detainees' access to the Assisted Voluntary Return scheme, we received a number of requests to help with travel costs, which sadly we could only partially meet.

Since detainees are often moved between detention centres, we worked with visitor groups nationwide to endeavour to provide continuity of support.

Case study

In early 2015, Asylum Welcome responded promptly to the case of a young person who had challenged Newport Social Services decision that he was an adult, but had been detained at Campsfield House before the result of a second age assessment. Asylum Welcome visited him regularly, raised concerns about his detention with the Campsfield authorities and with Social Services in Oxfordshire and Newport. We also worked closely with his solicitor. The second age assessment concluded that he was 18 years of age and we continued to offer him support while his solicitor and social services challenged the decision to detain him. As a result of this combined effort he was released from detention.

Adult and Family Advice Service

Our advice service for adults and families provides help on a wide range of topics against a background of austerity measures and tighter immigration controls.

In 2014 we registered with the Immigration Services Commissioner to give immigration advice at OISC level 1. This extends the breadth and the quality of the advice we can legally provide.

We helped asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute to apply for Asylum Support payments. We helped people to register with GPs, complete HC1 forms for medical costs and we advocated for clients who struggle to communicate with health professionals. Our volunteers accompanied the most severely unwell to the health centre. We advised and supported several people separately from their children who want to bring those children to join them in the UK. We helped families to place their children in schools.

Accessing housing in expensive Oxford is a common problem for people with Leave to Remain. Landlords are reluctant to take tenants on housing benefit, rents are soaring and refugees find it difficult to afford a deposit. The city’s strict rule on having a ‘local connection’ is a barrier to social housing for refugees. To help rough-sleepers we strengthened partnerships with the St Mungo’s No Second Night Out scheme, Stepping Stones and Crisis and we also passed on donated blankets. We made a small number of payments to clients to alleviate hardship.

Case study

A man with UN Refugee Status had permission to bring his wife and child to the UK. They arrived and were living in a very dilapidated studio flat. Although they were entitled to welfare benefits, while his wife’s benefit claim was being processed, his benefits were stopped. During this period the family was destitute and entirely reliant on food from Asylum Welcome. The situation became more desperate when a new baby was born. After complaining about the state of their accommodation to their landlord they were evicted. Asylum Welcome volunteers worked hard to involve statutory authorities and thereby secured them temporary accommodation and the support of a regular health visitor.

652 adult and family advice sessions over the year
Education

We continue to empower asylum seekers and refugees through assistance in learning English and re-entering education. As a result they can communicate more independently, adjust to a new culture and gain independence and confidence.

We provided tailored one-to-one classes from qualified and experienced volunteer teachers for asylum seekers and refugees who are unable to attend mainstream classes (for example because of cost, regulations or personal circumstances). This year we bought some more modern teaching materials, including some learning games – especially helpful for those with very little English.

We also advised asylum seekers and refugees on other options for learning. We successfully referred clients to City of Oxford College, Ruskin, EMBS, Crisis Skylight, and FELLOW. We also offered coaching prior to college interviews. Places were secured mainly for ESOL courses, but also Maths, IT and photography and social studies – many leading to qualifications.

Education service volunteers met regularly with their clients to support them as they progress through their courses, encouraging them to attend classes regularly and complete homework, and congratulating them on their successes. We provided bus passes to travel to college. Free courses are increasingly scarce and so we helped with small grant applications if there were fees to pay.

We have two second-hand laptops which we loaned to students to help them with their courses. Students who would not otherwise be able to afford an individual computer could participate fully in their course and study independently at home.

Youth Service

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children continued to arrive in Oxford through the year, including children from Albania, Eritrea, Egypt and Afghanistan. As each one arrived, Asylum Welcome’s Youth Service Co-ordinator – a qualified social worker – was closely involved in the child’s ‘Orientation Programme’.

During 2014-15, there has been a significant increase in numbers attending Asylum Welcome’s Venda Youth Club – a place to relax, play music and games, socialise and get advice from the Youth Co-ordinator. Free food is provided, and this year our young clients warmly welcomed the addition of kebabs once a month. Several trips were organised during the Summer holidays – swimming, skating, sight-seeing – providing a chance simply ‘to be children’.

The evening youth club builds trust so that we can work effectively with young people through appointments at the office. Crucially, because we run a charitable service, our support for these young people can continue even if statutory support is withdrawn.

These young people are not only coping with life in a new culture and with the complexities of the asylum system, they are also dealing with the issues that every teenager faces growing into adulthood. The Youth Service Co-ordinator works with voluntary and statutory agencies to help meet health, education and welfare needs.

Sadly, we are seeing an increasing number of young people, mainly Afghan, whose asylum claims have been refused and rights of appeal have been exhausted, and whose discretionary leave is not being extended past 18 years of age. They face the loss of all support, and the possibility of return to their home country. Some of these young people have been in this country for years, and have adopted British culture. A small number of these young people are homeless.

Our Education Service provides relaxed lessons...

... loads of resources...

... and qualified teachers
Refugee Rights Support Fund

Thanks to a fund set up by one individual donor, we made it possible for asylum seekers to pursue their legal claims to be granted asylum in the UK. We used the fund to obtain copies of asylum seekers’ case files from the Home Office so that they have a complete immigration history.

We have seen increasing numbers of asylum seekers being asked to ‘report’ to the Home Office in London instead of at a local Oxford police station, but without the Home Office making available the funds to travel. We used our fund to pay for travel so that appointments would not be missed, but we also lobbied the Home Office (including through a local MP) for clearer and more consistent procedures for reimbursing travel costs.

We also paid travel costs for asylum seekers to attend appointments with lawyers or immigration tribunals in Cardiff, Birmingham and Liverpool. In the case of some youth clients, we paid for our Youth Service Co-ordinator to attend tribunals as a witness. We referred a small number of clients to reputable and professional legal representatives, for which we have agreed to pay. We can see clear benefits in the enhanced legal advice received by clients, and we gain from the advice that these lawyers give to us.

Case study

A single mother from Zimbabwe had given birth after being ‘appeal rights exhausted’. She was staying with friends initially but then became homeless. She and her baby approached Asylum Welcome with nowhere to go. Social Services believed that she and her child could apply to the Home Office for accommodation. Asylum Welcome arranged legal advice and representation. The possibility of pursuing a legal case with the Home Office was fully explored and the client was advised accordingly. As a result of this process, Social Services were provided with sufficient information to persuade them to provide accommodation for her and her baby.

Employment and IT advice and support

Advice and support in applying for jobs and employment-related training is a feature of our three community-based advice services: our Youth Service, our Adult and Family Advice Service and our Education Service. Staff and volunteers across these services help with preparation of CVs, job-searches and advice on interview preparation.

Following the development of the computer area last year, we have now been able to provide more assistance with seeking and applying for jobs online.

We are very grateful for the help of a volunteer with a strong IT background, who has led this work. He has also helped to teach clients basic IT skills and he is on hand to help with any difficulties they encounter.

We have also purchased a laptop for use at the youth club to help young people with CVs and applications.

Case study

A young man from Afghanistan has attended the Venda youth club regularly since his arrival in Oxford as an unaccompanied asylum seeking child over 5 years ago. Over the years, volunteers helped him with his school homework, especially English assignments. On leaving school he asked for help to apply for a full-time job with a major supermarket, which could offer him the prospect of a long-term career. Asylum Welcome staff and volunteers assisted him with the initial online application process and updating his CV, and helped him to anticipate the sort of questions he might be asked at interview. His application was successful: he is now working full-time and very much enjoying the experience.

Using the Support Fund, we supported a very vulnerable young man from Afghanistan, who had arrived in Oxford as an unaccompanied child. We contributed to travel costs, provided a character witness and gave evidence of his poor mental and emotional health at his tribunal in Birmingham. His appeal was successful and he has been given a further two and a half years Discretionary Leave, at the end of which he should be eligible to apply for settlement in the UK.
Food

The provision of food makes a big difference to people who are destitute or reliant on Asylum Support payments.

We provided a mixture of fresh food, packaged food and toiletries. This year, in order to manage growing demand, we established a more organised way of distributing the food: preparing food parcels, tracking what kinds of food are popular with clients, and adding options like eggs to increase the nutritional value of the food parcels.

We continued to provide freshly cooked hot meals every week, mostly for clients, but also open to staff, volunteers and other visitors, because socialising is an important element of our service. The meals are cooked by a dedicated group of volunteers, with some contributions from service users: for example, one of our clients who comes from Afghanistan cooked Bolani – traditional fried Afghan flatbread stuffed with garlic and leeks.

Over the year, we received 657 bags of food, from 86 individuals and organisations.

Thank you!

The beginnings of new services

Bikes

In 2014 we began conversations with bike recycling projects: the London Bike Project for asylum seekers, and Oxford’s Broken Spoke, to increase access for our clients, especially as Oxford is a city of cyclists. One outcome was the very generous donation of 18 new children’s bikes from FrogBikes, which were given away to refugee children over the Christmas period.

Gardening

A volunteer helped build a connection with the new Oxgrow community gardening and food-growing project. Our clients were encouraged to take part during the Spring, Summer and Autumn, and this was particularly valuable for those who had a connection to the land in their country of origin.

Self expression: Welcome Voices

We began a project to train our clients to speak in public, led by an experienced refugee journalist – they set up a blog and a twitter account. We also set up a reading club – this was a hit with a small group of refugee women, providing useful conversation practice as well as social support.

Case study

An asylum seeker who has no means of support other than friends was involved in a road traffic accident whilst cycling on the High Street. Thankfully he was unhurt, apart from some cuts and bruises, but his bike was badly damaged. Asylum Welcome contacted the Oxford Quakers, who generously agreed to fund the repair of his bike through the charity Broken Spoke. He is now reunited with his bike, fully repaired and reconditioned.
Using our influence

In response to the growing political debate about asylum and detention, Asylum Welcome has made some well-judged contributions throughout the year.

We gave many media interviews – for example, we took part in a Radio Oxford debate about numbers of asylum seekers and migrants in the UK, and offered a response to a Sky News investigation into boats crossing the Mediterranean.

Asylum Welcome contributed written evidence to the Chief Inspector of Prisons during the Campsfield inspection, and to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Immigration Detention.

When a film emerged on the internet made by Campsfield detainees complaining about alleged mistreatment by staff, our response to the media, police and Campsfield managers was prompt, thoughtful and well-researched; and raised questions when needed.

Stop Campsfield Expansion!

Asylum Welcome submitted an impressively detailed and evidenced response to Home Office plans to expand Campsfield Immigration Removal Centre from 279 to 566 beds.

We attended the local authority planning committee hearing, and gave numerous press statements, including a feature article in the Oxford Mail. Asylum Welcome, alongside the Close Campsfield Campaign played a lead role in the Stop Campsfield Expansion coalition which secured pro bono legal assistance. Our efforts were rewarded by the Home Secretary’s decision to withdraw the expansion plan.

Promoting understanding

Asylum Welcome encourages sympathy, understanding and welcome.

We regularly provide answers to local people’s questions about asylum seekers, refugees and detainees. We support the vision of Oxford as a ‘City of Sanctuary’ where asylum seekers and refugees are included in all kinds of organisations, institutions, activities and communities.

In 2014, trustees ran stalls at the Elder Stubbs Festival and the Cowley Road Carnival. We hosted a workshop as part of the ‘Syria Speaks’ writers’ tour. Maurice Wren, CEO of the Refugee Council, spoke at our AGM and Sarah Teather MP spoke at our seasonal event in December.

An Asylum Welcome trustee gained widespread praise for co-ordinating the most active and ambitious ‘Refugee Week’ that anyone can remember in Oxford, with events hosted by Refugee Resource, the Red Cross and Amnesty International, including a film, a debate and various musical events.

As the statistics below show, our social media presence rose substantially compared to the previous year.
Statement of financial activities for the year ended 31 March 2015

INCOMING RESOURCES

Incoming Resources from Generated Funds
Voluntary Income 99,400 117,720 217,120 195,760
Activities for Generating Funds 5,918 – 5,918 3,878
Investment Income 209 – 209 215

Total Incoming Resources 105,527 117,720 223,247 199,853

RESOURCES EXPENDED

Costs of Generating Funds
Costs of Generating Voluntary Income 22,965 – 22,965 16,937
Charitable Activities 72,507 117,720 190,227 170,220
Governance Costs 7,849 – 7,849 6,422

Total Resources Expended 103,321 117,720 221,041 193,579

Net Incoming/ (Outgoing) Resources 2,206 – 2,206 6,274

Transfer between Funds – – – –

Funds Brought Forward April 1 2014 56,091 – 56,091 49,817

Total Funds Carried Forward 31 March 2015 £58,297 £0 £58,297 £56,091

Balance Sheet as at March 31 2015

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Represented by:
Unrestricted Income Funds 58,297 56,091
Restricted Income Funds – –

£58,297 £56,091

Our funders

Without our donors and funders, we simply would not be here.

In 2014-15 we were funded from diverse sources including trust funds, local authorities, faith groups, community organisations and partnerships. Asylum Welcome is immensely fortunate to have a loyal base of local, individual supporters. We most sincerely appreciate the many individuals who support us financially, especially those who contribute by standing order and those who organise fundraising events. This year, in-kind donations also played an important part in our work: for example we saw a steady increase in donations of food.

A huge thank you to you all!
I'd like to support Asylum Welcome

I would like to donate: £

MY DETAILS

Name: 
Address: 
Postcode: 
Email: 
Telephone: 
Date: 

I'd like to support Asylum Welcome regularly by standing order:

Please speak to your bank, and give them our bank details:
Asylum Welcome
Account number: 65026773
Sort code: 08-92-50
Co-operative Bank plc, Salford M5 2QP

I'd like to be a member of Asylum Welcome:
Please tick here, complete the contact details above, sign below, and please ensure your donation/standing order is at least equal to the membership fee.

Membership fee: £20 individual
£6 volunteer/senior citizen/unwaged
Free for service users

Signature: 

I'd like Asylum Welcome to claim Gift Aid on my donation:
Please treat as Gift Aid donations all qualifying gifts of money made       today       in the past 4 years       in the future (Please tick all boxes you wish to apply). I confirm I have paid or will pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for each tax year (6 April to 5 April) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that all the charities or Community Amateur Sports Clubs that I donate to will reclaim on my gifts for that tax year. I understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify. I understand the charity will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give on or after 6 April 2008.

Signature

Thank you very much!

Please return this form to:
Membership Secretary, Asylum Welcome, Unit 7, Newtec Place, Magdalen Road, Oxford OX4 1RE

Asylum Welcome is a registered charity, number 1092265, and company number 4361627.

You can help

Our supporters fundraise in all kinds of ways, for example cake sales, books sales and sponsored runs. If you have a fundraising idea, we'd love to hear from you!

Please consider supporting Asylum Welcome today – thank you!

Asylum Welcome
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Tel: 01865 722082
Fax: 01865 792582
Email: office@asylum–welcome.org

www.asylum–welcome.org

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Design: www.goodthinkingcommunications.net

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