



REGIONAL REFUGEE FORUM NORTH EAST

The Regional Refugee Forum North East (RRF) is an award-winning, independent, self-managed membership organisation created in 2003 by and for the North East region's Refugee-led Community Organisations (RCOs). We currently have 43 active member organisations across the region, each set up and run by local residents who are asylum seekers and refugees. 8 of them are based in Stockton.

The RRF plays a unique role in the sector by empowering its membership to be active agents in change by speaking up for and by themselves to decision makers to inform and influence change in policy and practice in the interests of all the RAS community. Collective advocacy is our core aim, not an add on. The RRF unites its members in collective action, providing a platform for them to produce their Collective, authentic, advocate voice and empowering them to present that voice *directly* to decision makers so to inform and influence policy and practice that will promote settlement and integration of *all* refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) living in the region, and promote equality of outcomes from them as users of local services.

So the RRF does not deliver services to individual RAS. Our core aim is to unite our diverse membership in collective advocacy to influence change in policy and practice. We work to identify gaps in services and support, and then to close those gaps through promoting evidence based policy development and recommendations for practical implementation in services.

We deliver the Collective Voice through our issue based Working Groups, each composed of volunteers from across the member organisations. We support them to work together to draw on their shared lived experience of the distinct and additional barriers faced by RAS in accessing and benefiting equally from local services, and of impact of national policy, then to identify what works best, and then to present their collective voice directly to local and regional policy makers and service providers.

Our Board of Trustees is elected by and from the membership. We currently employ 3 regional staff operating from office bases in Gateshead and Middlesbrough. Our work is supported by grant funding from charitable foundations.

LOCAL PROJECTS

Our projects are regional and operate equally in all Local Authority, so including Stockton. In the past year:

RRF Health Working Group (HWG)

Our HWG Project works to use the evidence base of our membership and their recommendations of what works to influence policy and practice that will a) prevent the deterioration in mental health amongst RAS *after* arrival in the region and b) reduce the long terms risks to health arising from poor diet and lack of exercise. This 3 year project began in May 2016 and runs to May 2019, funded by Comic Relief. 25 members (17 women and 8 men) from 18 RCOs contributed to the HWG to help deliver the Collective Voice and inform policy and practice. They

- delivered 28 workshops to 842 students of Nursing, Medicine and Public Health studying at the region's universities to increase their competencies in working with RAS.
- held 6 engagement events with 19 target agencies including commissioners from 8 Public Health departments, 7 Wellbeing Boards, 5 Clinical Commissioning Groups, and Public Health England
- their evidence base and recommendations are now being used to inform JSNA's and commissioning intentions. Key messages about mainstreaming professional competencies (as opposed to specialisation) and working with communities to deliver solutions have been taken up.



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RRF Community Safety Working Group (CSWG)

Our CSWG has been influencing policy and practice on reporting and responding to hate crime and building good practice in preventing the victimisation of RAS. Our work was funded by the Police and Crime Commissioners for Cleveland and Northumbria under their Community Safety and Supporting Victims funds. 23 RCOs in Cleveland and 16 RCOs in Northumbria force area (from 24 countries of origin) took part.

- In Cleveland, the Police, VCAS, 5 Local Authority Community Safety teams, and the Crown Prosecution Service gained a practical understanding of what a 'Victims First' approach should be from the perspective of RAS themselves
- We brokered direct relations between each RCO and their local Neighbourhood Policing Team
- RCOs consulted with Cleveland Police on their Everyone Matters policy (equality, diversity and human rights), their Hate Crime Action Plan and with the CPS on its *Public Policy Statement on Racially and Religiously Aggravated Hate Crime*
- Over 300 Police staff received upskilling sessions from our CSWG
- 20 members of 12 RCOs were trained as Community Hate Crime Champions and 9 RCOs took part in advocacy training
- We worked with NEMP and Cleveland PCC to organise the seminar '*Developing and Sharing Best Practice in preventing victimisation of RAS*' attended by the Home Office and G4S

RRF Stronger Families Working Group (SFWG)

Our SFWG raises awareness amongst policy makers, service providers, and Social Work students of the distinct challenges faced by RAS families which undermine their resilience. They advocate for local and regional policy and practice that delivers preventative approaches so as to reduce the risk of family break up, and which promote social justice based social work and anti-discriminatory practice. Our SFWG delivered 4 upskilling workshops to 145 undergraduate & post graduate students of social work and delivered two '*Parenting in the UK*' sessions to Syrian families (SVPR). Our project is now funded by Ben & Jerry's Foundation and will be scaled up over the next year to systematically engage with Local Authorities.

National work

We regularly submit collective evidence and recommendations to national policy consultations such as the Home Office COMPASS transformation process, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee '*Inquiry on Hate Crime and its violent consequences*'. We also share evidence with and support national advocacy work by national NGS such as Still Human Still Here and Asylum Matters to inform and influence national asylum and immigration policy.

We also support RCOs to develop their own initiatives and capacity

LOCAL CO-ORDINATION

Depending on the issues that our Working Groups are focused on we seek to engage with target agencies who have a direct decision making or delivery role in those issues, so this can change from year to year. In the past year we have engaged with:

- Stockton Council Community Safety team
- Stockton Council Public Health team
- Navigator Project
- Health Watch

- Health Visitors
- Arrival Practice
- Cleveland Police
- Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner
- Victim Care & Advice Service
- Crown Prosecution Service

In addition we regularly link with the North East Migration Partnership and with the key refugee assisting voluntary and community sector agencies:

- North of England Refugee Service
- Justice First
- Open Door
- Red Cross
- Stockton Parish Church (drop in)

INVOLVEMENT WITH NORTH EAST MIGRATION PARTNERSHIP (NEMP) / LOCAL AUTHORITY

The RRF has worked very closely with the management team at NEMP since its start up, supporting the Partnership to engage with and mobilise stakeholders from across Local Authorities, statutory services and the voluntary & community sector to engage with the Home Office and its contractors to develop and deliver best practice in dispersal and settlement policy and practice.

In Jan-Feb 2015 we designed and delivered the regional Voluntary & Community Sector Consultation Survey and Workshop exercise to identify key issues for the Partnership to address, and which informed 75% of the Partnership's first annual Work Plan.

We continue to actively contributed at all levels of the Partnership structure and actively influence the ongoing work programmes:

- We are a member of the Core Group (one of only 2 voluntary sector groups included)
- We co-chair and co-ordinate the Move on & Economic Inclusion Subgroup
- We are a member of the Health & Wellbeing Subgroup
- We are a member of the VCS Forum and regularly work with NEMP to establish the agenda
- We attend the 8 Local Multi-agency operational groups

In 2017 we were commissioned by the Partnership to research the experiences of Refugees settled across the region over the past 16 months under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme (SVPR), in order to help identify what works best from the perspective of refugees themselves, and contribute to strengthening the settlement offer going forwards. The Home Office and UNHCR are using the report to inform their national policy development.

KEY ASYLUM SEEKER ISSUES / CONCERNS / GAPS IN PROVISION

Current issues

- 1) Stockton has comparatively fewer opportunities for purposeful and positive activity for asylum seekers who cannot work whilst waiting for a decision on their case. While the Drop- ins provide a very valuable

source of information exchange and social contact, they do not provide the types of structured activity that are *so necessary in preventing avoidable deterioration in mental health after people are dispersed to Stockton*, arising from enforced inactivity and stress of waiting to know their futures for an indeterminate period. There are good practice examples in Middlesbrough, such as the gardening, bicycle and walking projects operated by Middlesbrough Environment City, and arts projects at MIMA. (Some refugees who are residents of Stockton do have allotment gardens, but these are on individual basis only).

- 2) More active support is needed for RAS to utilise new information they receive about healthy living into *actual change in behaviour/practice*. There is currently not enough follow through for the information to have the intended outcome of reducing long term health risks associated with poor diet and lack of exercise
- 3) Access to ESOL before the 6 month entitlement is patchy in terms of capacity and quality.
- 4) Stockton could take similar action to Newcastle City Council Housing department (and other local authorities across UK) in preventing the sharing of rooms by unrelated adults, which is the cause of much tension and escalating risks amongst COMPASS (G4S) residents.
- 5) There is a gap between the ending of the Stockton Navigator project and the start up of the Red Cross Ariadne triage project (new staff currently being recruited)
- 6) Public sector and VCS agencies need to develop their understanding of the unique role of small, often informal, Refugee-led Community Groups (RCOs) and recognise their role as part of the solution to local problems and their role in promoting active and engaged citizenship amongst new residents of Stockton. Agencies need to develop genuinely collaborative partnership working with them (as opposed to exploitative relations). Agencies also need to recognise the value difference in evidence based policy making between individual experience and collective experience (what is shared and common to all asylum seekers).
- 7) We have not been able to find any Community Development Work capacity in Stockton to support the emergence of new RAS community initiatives. There is no bottom rung. (The loss of CDW is a regional issue)
- 8) More support for development of enterprise initiatives amongst refugee residents of Stockton. Most refugees who are residents of Stockton find employment outside the borough. Many want to consider enterprise routes but cannot find the support needed.
- 9) Need co-ordinated action now to map impact and identify mitigating action for the Implementation of provisions of the Immigration Act 2014 and 16 from autumn 2017 (In particular the withdrawal of support for refused asylum seeker families, further restrictions in access to legal aid, charging for NHS services) and the high potential for discrimination against the BME community arising from the Government's designed 'Hostile Environment' for those who do not have the legal right to be in the UK (further checks and restrictions on bank accounts, driving licences, residential tenancies, employment).