



Refugee, Asylum seeker & Migrant Action
Action is the antidote to despair
formerly
Refugee Action Colchester

Newsletter - July 2024

We have FINALLY moved!

...and we are absolutely delighted to be here.

The spacious premises provide a range of offices, a large activity room, a huge kitchen, space for Foodbank supplies, two lifts and a welcoming reception for those who come to visit. We loved the Queen Street office, but we are so excited to see what new opportunities present themselves now we are right in the centre of the city. We are pleased for our clients that they too benefit from the improved accessibility and comfort of the new surroundings. We continue to offer as warm a welcome as ever, but with the increased professionalism that this functional space allows.



You can find us at our new offices:

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Just round the corner from Boots, next to Timpsons ...



We've already been in for two months; time has flown, and we've enjoyed making ourselves at home. While the build-up to the move took a VERY long time, about 18 months—during which we learnt new skills in negotiation and reading legal documents! — the move went relatively smoothly, with many hands on deck for practical help. Huge thanks to Karo, Bryce and the placement students who gave so much time to decorating and planning the rooms, which are now in bright colours with plenty of light. There is still work ongoing: our thanks to the Lion Walk team for being responsive to our various needs and the Council for ensuring it's fit for purpose.

It's great to be in the heart of town and so close to places our clients use – the post office, chemist and library. For those struggling to find us on the map or by post code you can use 'What 3 Words' – 'legend.courier.lush' (the official post code oddly does not correspond with location!) It has been a pleasure to offer the large room for partners to use. We have already hosted meetings with Colchester against Modern Slavery (CAMS), One Colchester and some Hate Crime training from the police. We have also done Yoga for Trauma, table tennis and other events. Plans include using the catering kitchen to cook with clients and offer meals for visitors and it will be a warm space in winter for everyone to come to eat.



King's Award presentation

It was wonderful soon after arriving to host this ceremony with 164 guests in attendance: staff, volunteers, directors, our patron Nick Butterworth, dignitaries and so many supportive partners.

We were joined by both the Lord Lieutenant, Jennifer Tolhurst, and the new High Sheriff, David Hurst, in their official regalia. We thank them both for their time and genuine interest in our organisation. After a number of speeches by two RAMA directors and two volunteers, and a commendation by the Lord Lieutenant, Karo received the beautiful award on our behalf, while the official citation from King Charles III was read out. There was also a special award for Elizabeth and Richard Curry, for all their invaluable volunteering over the years of RAMA's existence. Without them, so many of our existing partnerships would not have been created.



The formalities were followed by delicious food kindly prepared by the Bangladeshi Women's Association, and a great deal of enjoyable interaction between all present. It was a delightful and proud day for us all!



Goodbye Foodbank

Sadly the last food parcels supplied to us via Colchester Food Bank were handed out to our clients the week beginning 22 April 2024. CFB no longer had the funding to continue to provide us with food parcels as we had become the single busiest satellite in their network. Whilst totally understandable, it was a sad time for us as the Foodbank had long been the hub and centre of activity at our Queen Street premises. It was also a blow—in practical terms—to many of our clients who had come to depend on the fortnightly parcels to supplement their limited Home Office allowance. Change is difficult for many of our clients and we have tried to make the transition as smooth as possible.

The beginning of May signalled change all round: for Foodbank staff and volunteers too. Not only were we moving to new premises, but doing so without the Foodbank as we had come to know and love it. Rest assured we are still maintaining a scaled-down version, and are always grateful for the donations we receive from the local community and volunteers and of course we continue to collect supermarket surplus most days from M&S, Aldi or Sainsburys. We are still a referral agency for Colchester Food Bank and can provide our clients with vouchers to redeem at one of their own food banks, however we cannot give them more than one per month. We are still looking at other ways to support our clients so they don't fall into the food poverty trap. We have already successfully appealed for donations to fund £5 annual subscriptions to the Community Supermarket at Greenstead. This will allow local residents to access the supermarket and purchase goods at a discounted rate, supporting a much needed local initiative at the same time.

The new premises offer a number of exciting possibilities with the asset of a huge catering-sized kitchen which we hope to utilise to its full potential in the near future. We will undoubtedly be bringing back the popular cooking clubs, and possibly offering hot food and/or frozen meals to take away. Everything we do will be user-led.

My own role has evolved into Client Welfare Lead with specific focus on preventing destitution for our clients. The majority of them are already living on the breadline and it would not take a lot for them to be tipped over into extreme poverty and deprivation, including families with young children. To this end, I will be exploring how we can avoid this by finding out their needs, providing them with the basic living essentials, furniture, and anything which will ease their situation: whether it's a bike for transport, a buggy for the baby or a desk for studying. I am also keen to develop partnership working with other agencies to try and expand and enhance the support we can offer to our clients.

SD

Growing concerns about incompetent immigration advice

As mentioned in the previous newsletter, immigration law has undergone regular changes, and many of these are unfavourable to our clients. We emphasise on every platform the importance of obtaining competent immigration application advice. Due to incompetent advice, people are losing their status, becoming overstayers and finding themselves in situations where they must leave the UK or live here without having any rights, which makes them more vulnerable and increases exploitation and abuse. Unfortunately, poor quality advice is sometimes provided by law firms. For instance, one of our clients, a victim of domestic abuse, was advised to reconcile with the perpetrator. When the client refused and asked for legal advice, she was only sent an evidence list without an advice letter or guidance for collecting the evidence. For both straightforward and complex applications, the legal advisor is obliged to provide a legal advice letter, explain the steps taken, and guide the clients in collecting evidence.

As the RAMA legal team, we regularly enrol in training and meetings with partners and other organisations to ensure that competent legal advice is given to our clients. Despite this, there is still a long waiting list, and it is very difficult to find legal aid law firms for referrals due to the government's current policy regarding legal aid on immigration matters. Like other grassroots organisations, we believe that this is a part of a hostile environment. Many of our clients also cannot afford private law firm fees. As a result, they either lose their cases or cannot even make the application and appeal, even when there is merit in their cases. Legal representation is a fundamental human right, especially necessary in a country like the UK, where immigration law is part of a hostile environment towards migrants and refugees. Representing themselves without legal representation in front of the Home Office or the tribunal can jeopardise their precarious immigration situation many times.

We are striving to increase our capacity to provide competent advice to more people. Through our volunteer legal practitioners, immigration lawyers and legal interns, we are able to represent more clients based on their immigration matters than before; however, given the high level of need, we must increase capacity still further. We also share our knowledge and experience with partner organisations through meetings and training.

AUD

Pamoja Project



We are delighted to have received significant funding through the PHAB programme (Public Health Accelerator Bids) run by Essex County Council for new projects that help people live a healthy life. Our project in northeast Essex aims to enhance public health and psychosocial support for marginalized migrants through group-based interventions, incorporating therapeutic activities and translation services.

Working jointly with African Families in the UK (AFiUK), we seek to expand outreach and combine our expertise for more effective outcomes. Migrants face significant barriers to primary care due to language and access issues resulting in untreated health issues among asylum seekers, refugees, and trafficking victims. Our objectives include training peer supporters and community ambassadors in mental health support, empowering clients to identify their mental health needs, and establishing a sustainable support network. We emphasize accessibility and inclusivity in all activities, ensuring provision for interpretation, translation, and disability accommodations while maintaining rigorous monitoring and evaluation to refine our services and ensure long-term impact.

Operating from multiple locations including Colchester, Harwich and Clacton, supported by AFiUK and RAMA with additional resources from Colchester City Council, we aim to create lasting change and support for marginalized migrant communities beyond the PHAB grant period.

Pamoja Project team

Leena Alfrhat (RAMA): Clinical Lead
 Sarah Foley (AFiUK): Research Lead
 Marcus Mayimbi (AFiUK): Activity Lead
 Jenny Wilson (RAMA): Activity Lead / Researcher
 Chantal Williams (Business and Performance Manager, Health Outreach, Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust [EPUT]): Project Evaluation Oversight Officer
With support from
 Maria Wilby: Operational Lead, RAMA
 Rachel Walton: CEO, AFiUK
 Elizabeth Long: Partnerships Coordinator, RAMA



The team in discussion with Ginny Idehen and Kerrie Barker from NE Essex MIND.

We are proud to have the support of Tracey Allen, Senior Wellbeing and Public Health Officer at ECC, in our suicide prevention efforts. Additionally, Ginny Idehen, CEO of NE Essex Mind, will provide invaluable assistance with our Mental Health Toolkit. We're also pleased to welcome Gail Casey, an experienced yoga practitioner specializing in trauma recovery. Together, they enhance our ability to offer comprehensive mental health support to our clients.

LAT



As you know, the Mercury Theatre and Colchester Library have become Organizations of Sanctuary over the past year and we all came together in Refugee Week to do **story-telling sessions** in the Harlow and Colchester libraries. A group of us from RAMA provided the substance of the sessions, with the library providing the venue and the Mercury providing an activity, and both of them doing the advertising.



We now hope to repeat our story sessions ourselves. A young woman, Elisa Vasquez-Walters, who came to Colchester from Chile at the age of 2, in 1976 (and who I met at that time!), gave the true child's experience of leaving her home, and extended family, for a strange country. She also stressed the importance of the Greenstead Library to her and her family at that time. A Turkish friend and a client of RAMA, Abdullah Aktas, was a children's writer in Turkey. He had two of his stories - about childhood kindness and dreams - translated into English, and they were an important part of the event. We



were delighted to be joined by RAMA's patron, Nick Butterworth, who writes the Percy the Park-keeper stories. These also feature kindness and refuge, with Percy keeping the park as a sanctuary for the animals. Nick read one of his stories and entertained the children with sketches and nonsense! We are pleased to have been invited to do this again, in the autumn, at the Greenstead Library, and two schools are already interested in the repeats. One of these schools, in north Colchester, has children who speak 30 languages between them... so for Abdullah to read in Turkish and Elisa to say something in Spanish will be highly appropriate. I look forward to reporting back in the autumn.



EC

During Refugee Week, RAMA had the opportunity to raise awareness among young people with an invitation from teacher Mr N Attafuah at **Philip Morant School and College** to present assemblies during the week. The school prides itself on its inclusivity and tolerance, and all pupils are taught from Year 7 onwards the importance of kindness and belonging. It also has extensive experience hosting refugees, with a large number of Ukrainian students having enrolled in the past two years, as well as Afghans for some time before that. The presentations by EL gave students a chance to answer questions, discuss, and hear an alternative view to the prevailing negative narrative around immigration. The experience was well received by students who were fully attentive and a credit to their school.

 **Colchester City Council** @yourcolc... · 1d Another wonderful tale from #refugees in Colchester! The Colchester RAMA Refugee/Asylum Seeker football team enjoyed a fantastic match against Fulham FC's team at Fulham's state-of-the-art facility. RAMA won 6-2! ⚽️🏆 Thanks to @ColU_CF for arranging. #RefugeeWeek 🏆



In the community

With the growth of RAMA so many individuals, groups and organizations are involved in providing activities for our clients. Sometimes they find themselves unable to choose but mainly the activities do not clash and they are grateful for all the opportunities we provide.

Many clients are very conscientious English Language students, again in various locations but primarily Colchester Institute, and, impressively, always put their classes first. Now the term is ending many of them will be returning to sessions with Together We Grow at the Big Garden - one came yesterday and it was wonderful to be able to talk so much more freely because of his improved English and confidence. Others will most probably join our Conversation sessions in the Dome Room at the Co-op Bank.

During the past year the charity Changing Lives moved to 45-47 Crouch Street and provides a well-equipped daytime gym, weekly free food from M&S and Lidl, and classes and sessions which our clients attend. These are promoted, and often run, by a Ukrainian friend, Liubov, who also now works part-time for RAMA. Another refugee has run chess groups at the Changing Lives 'hub' so the network is truly communal. RAMA's own table tennis, coffee, sewing and other therapeutic groups continue to provide support and friendship, and links with outside services are thriving.