



# Newsletter - March 2024



Opening this newsletter is the delightful news that for the first time RAMA has a patron! We are thrilled that **Nick Butterworth**, our longtime supporter and renowned author and illustrator, has agreed to take on the mantle.



**Nick Butterworth** is a best-selling author and illustrator of children's books, most famously the *Percy the Park Keeper* series, which have sold in their millions across the world. His books have made their way across the Atlantic, and in every other direction, including to Europe, China, Australia, Africa and South America. *Percy* has even been spreading the message for a kinder world in both Russia and Ukraine!



Nick's books are now used as part of the reading and writing curriculum for many schools in the UK, so Nick – or at least *Percy* – is a household name for children everywhere. The author has won numerous awards including the top award from the Society of Illustrators and the Nestlé Gold Award. *In a career spanning over forty years*, Nick has written and illustrated many more books for children including *The Whisperer*, *Thud!* *Albert Le Blanc*, *Trixie the Witch's Cat*, *Tiger*, *Jingle Bells*, *Amanda's Butterfly* and *Q Pootle 5*. The children's animated TV series about Nick's friendly alien, *Q Pootle 5*, has been broadcast in over a hundred countries.

Nick Butterworth was born in London, but moved at the age of two, to Romford, Essex, where his parents took over a corner shop, or as Nick likes to call it (revealing his own priorities) a sweet shop. Having initially intended to go to art college, he instead took up a role as an apprentice typographic designer at a printing company. He quickly progressed to working with major London design consultancies before founding his own graphic design business. He has also worked as a children's television presenter, signwriter, carpenter and college lecturer. He has written illustrated stories for a national newspaper. He is in demand as a speaker at conferences and book festivals – where he often spends hours signing books after presentations that include storytelling and live drawing – and also in schools where he continues to inspire new generations with a love of stories and books.

His phenomenal success makes Nick one of the most popular author/illustrators working today. At RAMA we are honoured that he is to be our patron. He has been a supporter for a number of years: donating boxes of books and signed copies – distributed to many clients' children – and supporting us via his own social media channels. We are excited about this new partnership and look forward to welcoming him to all the upcoming local and RAMA events that he has time to attend.

Nick says...

*"I feel very honoured. RAMA is an organisation that truly puts people first, helping those who are in most need in a great variety of practical ways. They are wonderfully kind and genuinely care about the plight of those who, for whatever reason, find themselves spiralling downwards with no safety net or parachute. They have helped countless individuals and families to successfully get back on their feet. It's a privilege to be asked, and I'm delighted to accept, the invitation to become a patron."*



We were honoured again in February when we received a visit from the **High Sheriff of Essex**, Charles Bishop, and his wife, Nellie. They joined us for an informal Friday lunch during which they listened with great attention to the team's descriptions of their work. It was a real pleasure for us to host such curious and thoughtful guests, who asked pertinent questions and were clearly sympathetic to the difficulties our clients face. We thank them for their time and interest. RAMA staff also learned that the High Sheriff is the sovereign's judicial representative in the county. The word *sheriff* is a contraction of the term *shire reeve*, denoting a royal official (*reeve*) responsible on behalf of the King for law and order in the county (or *shire*). The office, held for one year, is one of the oldest in the country, possibly dating back to the tenth century. Nowadays the High Sheriff's functions are largely ceremonial, and include attendance at royal visits and proclamation of a new Sovereign, as well as acting as a returning officer in county constituencies during elections.



Charles Bishop (4th from right) with RAMA staff

### Supporting volunteers

When RAMA (formerly Refugee Action-Colchester) was founded in the summer of 2015, everyone on the team was a volunteer. As the work done by RAMA was noticed by local and national authorities, funding was provided to support full-time and part-time staff. However, the work done by volunteers has always been the core of RAMA and its principles.

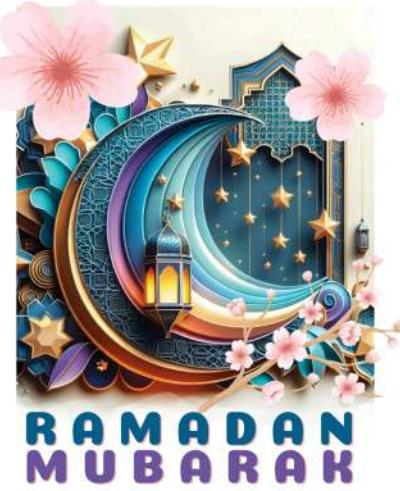
The things volunteers do at RAMA include, but are not limited to, being at the reception, food bank, interpreting and translation, befriending, running social activities, and accompanying clients to appointments. As volunteers are on the frontline, they also need support and training. Therefore, in 2023, a **Reflective Practice Group** was created for volunteers, especially those in the office.

Reflective practice aims to help with questions without easy or straightforward answers and encourages us to ask more questions in complex situations (Kurtz, 2019). Even though the term "Reflective Practice" was coined in 1980 by Donald Schon, its rationale can be traced back to the Socratic method (Schon, 1983).

Similarly, before the Volunteers' Reflective Practice Group was set up, some volunteers would come together casually and try to learn from each other's experiences. What we did was to create a structure around this and add a facilitator to the group. The group meets once a month and tries to find ways to tackle the difficult / complex situations volunteers face at the office. They share experiences and learn from each other, with Dr Mehmet Demir, the facilitator of the group, providing training and practical tips when necessary. A further positive impact of these meetings is the chance for volunteers to meet each other, since with 70+ helpers on the RAMA register, in and out of the office at different times, it is not easy to make connections.

**Dr Mehmet Demir, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Lead**

Following the government's announcement at start of the year in which the PM and Home Secretary claimed to have processed the c100,000 asylum claims in the 'legacy backlog' (you may well ask whose legacy they are referring to!) the number of **Home Office (HO) decisions** has slowed considerably for dispersed asylum seekers in the Colchester area. Whilst we, along with our local partners, are still supporting many clients to find suitable accommodation once they receive the happy news that they have been accepted as refugees in the UK and their HO support ceases, the homelessness crisis of the final few months of 2023 has eased somewhat. However, the mass evictions from HO dispersal accommodation in late 2023 and early 2024 have resulted in a backfilling of dispersal accommodation and RAMA caseworkers are welcoming new clients to Colchester on an unprecedented scale. This, along with the casework around those who appear to have slipped through the net of the recent initiative to process 'legacy backlog' cases, is keeping all at RAMA very busy but also allowing us to make new friends and offer all the support we can to those most in need.



The month of **Ramadan** holds significant spiritual and cultural importance for the global Muslim community, serving as a period of intense self-reflection, heightened devotion, and increased acts of charity and compassion. Beyond the physical act of fasting from dawn until sunset, Ramadan is a holistic experience encompassing various dimensions of personal and communal growth.

Muslims view Ramadan as an opportunity for spiritual purification and self-discipline, in which they foster a sense of empathy for those who are less fortunate. Charity, or *zakat*, plays a crucial role during this month, as Muslims are encouraged to share their blessings with the less fortunate. This often includes providing meals for those in need, contributing to charitable causes, and supporting various community initiatives. The spirit of Ramadan

encourages Muslims to reflect on their privileges and actively engage in acts of kindness and social responsibility such as reaching out to marginalized groups and advocating for inclusive policies that address the unique challenges faced by these communities.

In the global context, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges faced by Muslim communities, including refugees, in different parts of the world, such as in the United Kingdom. Refugees often encounter unique struggles related to displacement, cultural adjustment, and socio-economic integration. During Ramadan, the sense of community becomes even more crucial as refugees may find solace in connecting with fellow Muslims, sharing the traditions of Ramadan, and receiving support from local communities. In the UK, Muslim organizations, charities, and individuals frequently come together to organize events, *iftars* (breaking of the fast), and other initiatives to ensure that refugees feel welcomed and supported during this sacred month. As well as addressing immediate needs such as meals, these foster a sense of belonging and solidarity within the broader Muslim community.

In essence, Ramadan serves as a time for Muslims worldwide to strengthen their connection with God, cultivate empathy for others, and actively contribute to building a compassionate and supportive community. Through acts of charity, community engagement, and reflection, Muslims aim to deepen their spiritual connection while positively impacting the lives of those around them, including refugees seeking solace and stability in their new home. **LA**



We are enormously grateful to the wonderful Jenny Moss, **National Landscape for All** Officer, who has provided our clients with several opportunities to visit the countryside in north-east Essex. These day trips out usually involve a guided walk, lunch and train transport to and from a starting point.

Our clients have hugely enjoyed discovering the geography and history of our area. Most recently, a group visited the pretty hamlet of Flatford to walk in the footsteps of painter John Constable through the places that inspired his most famous paintings, to share a meal, enjoy a craft activity and roast marshmallows over a bonfire. All participants (and our accompanying staff and volunteers) have come back glowing from these active days out in the fresh air, and delighted with what they have learnt.



## Social Media

At RAMA, we are thrilled to share how our digital platform has been supporting asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in north-east Essex, thanks to the incredible support of our community. Since our social media relaunch in 2023, our online presence has blossomed into a hub for education, action, and empathy. Our posts celebrate good news, share real-life stories, and provide valuable information about the challenges faced by our clients. They also allow us to express our gratitude for your generous donations.

The wave of support we have received has been truly uplifting. Our online community is growing day-by-day and becoming a space where people can learn more about RAMA's work and how they can contribute. Each *like*, *share* and *comment* reflects the unity and kindness that defines our online community.

Our social media appeals and requests are answered by many generous individuals. Our Local Giving page is our main source of financial donations which we use to support our clients: from paying for a night in a hotel to making someone safe from domestic violence, to paying for interpreting services. We also use donations for destitution payments and to buy resources for clients in hotels. In an appeal for two Honduran women to assist them with their education and transport we raised over £900 with the help of the community. We have also been able to highlight the generosity of local businesses such as Dr Chippy's Restaurant and Takeaway, which offers free meals during Ramadan, to individuals of all faiths or none, with donations as small as £5 from community members.



Looking ahead, we remain committed to enhancing our social media presence and reaching even more people. The support from those online helps us to make a real difference in the lives of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in our area. We extend sincere thanks to every one of you for the continuous support that enables us to fulfil the mission of RAMA.

Big things have come from our social media:  
please keep *liking*, *sharing*, and *commenting* on our posts!

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## Operations

When the global scene is so full of conflict, it is important to keep alert to injustices closer to home. It is often such injustices that, in other countries, spark rebellion or crises. One that needs addressing locally in Essex is causing destitution and ongoing suffering for a growing number of RAMA clients. **No recourse to public funds – NRPF** – is a condition usually attached to somebody's immigration status. It means the individual or couple cannot access benefits nor, in most cases, work, which can spiral into homelessness. Essex County Council has NO funds for supporting anyone, except children, with this condition in place. Separately, we are working with Together Free and other statutory and voluntary partners determined to end modern slavery in Colchester, Chelmsford and Southend. Yet there is an intersection here that is counterintuitive. Homelessness is one of the greatest causes of exploitation and abuse. If, as a society, we have no funds to support those who are at risk of destitution, and if we are not prepared to invest in assisting them to find alternative means of existing, then we cannot be shocked when individuals in this group become so vulnerable they succumb to exploitation.

RAMA and other voluntary groups are often the *only* organisations whose policies do not exclude these people from support. But we have little, if any, funding to provide accommodation, food and clothing while we work on resolving complex and often challenging cases to find a route for a person who may have nothing left. The most urgent of these cases relate to domestic violence/abuse victims who are on a spousal route. For those who leave their British partner (and thus their right to support as a spouse) taking their children but often no belongings, there is no access to public funds or accommodation – even a refuge is out of reach. We all assume these cases are supported by statutory agencies or charities but nationwide there are only a handful of beds available for victims with NRPF. Last year we spent £23,000 on supporting such victims while our immigration team made applications to get temporary leave and ultimately Indefinite Leave to Remain for these victims. Funding for issues like this is a challenge as most people do not understand how this shocking situation could arise.

We are grateful to our Integrated Care Board for providing us additional funding for the immigration caseworker to make sure we continue to support these people at a time when nobody else can.

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