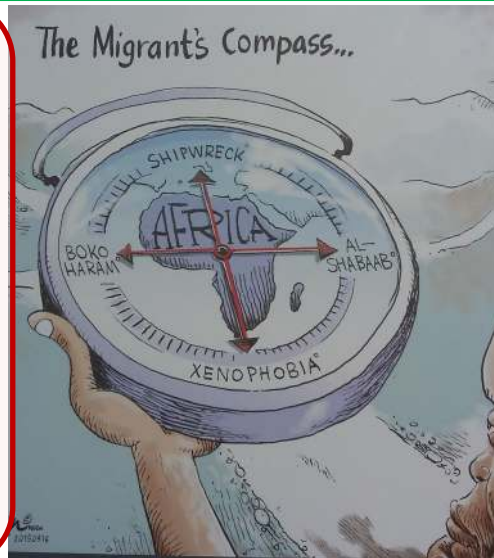


Newsletter - September 2022

Greetings to all our fabulous friends and volunteers! And welcome to this inaugural edition of our new-style bulletin/newsletter/update that will share information and news about our community.

It will appear as regularly as we can manage, and we hope you will all feel better informed about the work and diverse activities that the organisation does inside and outside the office.

First and foremost, our name. You may know we are in the process of becoming **RAMA**, as above, in order to better reflect the range of newcomers that we support. The aim is to have this completed by the end of this year, though the much-loved *Refugee Action* will remain in circulation as a habit that's too hard to break!



Volunteer recruitment

We continue to have a steady stream of potential new volunteers, for which we're grateful, but we need to halt intake temporarily while we reorganise our engagement process. Anyone out there who is thinking of offering time or skills to RAMA, please don't go away: there will be an induction session in the new year, after which we will be very happy to make use of you!

Mehdi—Exhibition at Firstsite

We hope you have all had a chance to visit the exhibition at Firstsite where on display are some exquisite handcrafted rugs by master carpet-maker Mehdi Jalalaghdamiah. Mehdi is an asylum seeker from Iran and the rugs are a personal response to his experiences, made during time spent in Sweden as an asylum seeker. The exhibition highlights the painstaking hours Mehdi devoted to creating such works of art by hand. It is thanks to the combined efforts of RAMA and Firstsite Director Sally Shaw that the exhibition—after many obstacles—is finally a reality.

We were delighted to attend the official opening in the company of Councillor David King, who provided a warm welcome and reinforced the new status of Colchester as a City of Sanctuary, and with Mehdi, who—through an interpreter—shared his thoughts and feelings about his work and the journey he has made.

The exhibition will remain at Firstsite for a year. Highly recommended!



Detail of carpet

RAMA Refugee/Asylum Seeker Football & The BIG MATCH!

Over the past several months our weekly football activity has proved to be a great success and is eagerly attended on Monday evenings. Over 30 individuals have participated at various times in the games and training sessions, and skills and fitness levels have increased dramatically, as have friendships and camaraderie among the players. The activity is organised and funded through the cooperation of RAMA, Community 360, Active Essex, Colchester Sixth Form College, Colchester Borough Council and Colchester United Football Club.

This success led myself (Colm McDonald, RAMA caseworker), Scott Tatum (Head of Programmes at C360) and Colchester United coach Ed King to start thinking about broadening our horizons and embarking on new challenges for the group. And through his useful network of contacts Ed managed to find us a fixture against a refugee/asylum seeker team attached to the Premier League's Crystal Palace FC! Our players are thrilled at what looks to be an extraordinary day out and unique opportunity for all involved. The tireless and enthusiastic Scott has also found funding for a bus to take us to the fixture, food/snacks for the journey, as well as a team meal together back in Colchester on our return.

The game, scheduled for 03/10/22, will take place in Crystal Palace's training ground in South London. Our team will be resplendent in the stripes of Colchester United while the opposition will be in the colours of the mighty Eagles. Crystal Palace will be promoting the event on their social media platforms, and we hope to get some great footage as well as a few goals!

Come on The U's!!!!

Au revoir to Kate

As some of you may know, we are sadly soon to lose one of our key team members. Kate Khan was one of the founding members of Refugee Action – Colchester, and has been with the organisation, first as a volunteer and subsequently as a paid member of staff, through all the highs and lows of the past 7 years. She has turned her hand to a whole variety of necessary tasks: casework, social media, fundraising, bid writing and event management; she has been on the Management Team and a Director; she has manned countless stalls, been on demonstrations, and made flying trips to Calais to support desperate people over there.

Is she off to take a break? Not at all. Kate is beginning a Master's Degree at the university on the subject of political behaviour—something very relevant to the work of RAMA. We all wish her the very best of luck in this new adventure, and look forward to hearing all about it. She will keep a hand in by continuing to look after our social media pages, so we are deliberately not saying *goodbye*, but just *au revoir* for the time being...



Therapeutic Community

The varied activities at Wayne Setford's **Big Garden—Together We Grow** on Tuesdays and Thursdays seldom take a break. Hours of gardening, therapeutic meetings, friendship, group cooking, bicycle maintenance and laughter help to keep us all going through the week. These activities are supported mainly by Wayne's volunteers, student occupational therapists, and Elizabeth and Richard Curry, and run very smoothly under the auspices of The Big Garden—Together We Grow. The pictures speak for themselves about how much energy and commitment go into the work, and how much pleasure and companionship ensue.

Ukraine



Since April 2022 there have been 238 Ukrainian arrivals in Colchester under the H4U Scheme launched by the Government. Colchester Borough Council commission us to do first visits to new arrivals and deliver the £200 emergency payment given to guests. We take a massive folder of information and have helped people to: access GPs, banks, book biometric visits, apply for schools, training and employers, apply for other family members, apply for benefits and to access specialist refugee support for mental health, and much more.... It's an ever evolving list.

There are around another 100 people here in Colchester who have come under the Family Scheme. These people *may* be switched to the H4U scheme, so in the meantime we at RAMA provide them with the same services, aside from the £200 welcome payment. A large part of the work has been with hosts, but I am proud to say that the support we offer to guests and hosts alike has made this area one of the most successful in terms of people living together harmoniously.

Ukrainian arrivals are granted 6 months leave and once here they must apply for an extension which gives 3 years leave to remain in the UK. There is no clarity around what happens next, and little clarity around the status of the new arrivals. They are not 'refugees' in the Home Office sense and their Biometric Residence Permits vary: leave to enter, leave to remain and refugee status are just some of those recorded.

We run a drop-in at C360 Hub each Friday and are often joined by great organisations like Signpost or the vaccine clinic. We have seen over 100 people there so far, guests and hosts needing guidance. We are ably assisted by native Russian speaker Natalie, who now works full-time for us, and makes all our work so much easier.

Despite the assurances of the authorities that visitors would integrate smoothly into life in the UK, there are a number of specific issues that they face: delays with permits, UC and child benefit, residence and work-related paperwork; the fact that most hosts have still not been paid their monthly £350 despite the looming cost-of-living crisis; and biggest of all, the housing issue. After the initial 6 months, many visitors must leave current accommodation, and risk being homeless (a predicted 74 in Colchester). We are working very closely with the Council on monitoring this, but there needs to be decisive action from central government as the same situation exists all over the country. On the positive side, the strengthened links with the Council, C360, job centre, colleges, vaccine teams, Library and others will be of benefit to ALL our clients in the longer term.

Domestic Abuse

One of the sadder aspects of RAMA's work in recent months has been the rise in number of clients we see who are suffering some form of domestic abuse or violence. The number initially increased during the Covid lockdown, and we know that the current cost-of-living crisis will only add to the strain on families and relationships. DV clients now form a significant stream of RA-C work, alongside refugees and asylum seekers. Some make their way independently; some are referred to us by other organisations. While this type of work is new to the caseworkers at RAMA, they have all undertaken courses in areas such as trauma-informed practice, domestic abuse awareness, DASH training (domestic abuse, stalking, and harassment), which means they are trained to offer support and guidance to those in need. Unsurprisingly, most of these clients have related issues around their status, accommodation and finances, so demand significant input from RAMA caseworkers.



Community Report

As usual our community is active, with a lot of varied activities and opportunities made possible by a large cohort of volunteers who give their time regularly or can be called on at short notice.

Concerts and Plays

Before the summer different groups of clients (numbering at least 40) attended productions at the Mercury Theatre on complementary tickets: *'Kabul goes Pop'*, set in Afghanistan; and *'Sold'*, featuring drumming, acting and dance, on the subject of slavery.

Others went to the Colchester Arts Centre and saw a wonderful concert of Turkish and Kurdish music and singing, and also a performance of Ghanaian Drumming and Dancing.

We were also lucky enough to be given tickets by Community 360 for the Essex Opera Festival and to attend a production of *Così fan tutte* in the beautiful setting of Layer Marney Towers. Five of us had a sunny picnic on the lawn and thoroughly enjoyed the updated version of the classic opera.



Activities



Table tennis, the sewing group, Community Meetings and the Coffee Mornings took a break over the summer owing to holidays and the availability of activities for children at Firstsite. These will all resume at different times in September, as usual run by committed volunteers.

The drumming sessions at Firstsite continued throughout as there are no premises restrictions and asylum seekers appreciate the continuity. Our drummers performed as part of the **Mercury Theatre's** Jubilee celebration.

During the June half-term holiday **Art Days** for clients and families were held at the Big Garden, funded and led by

We Are The Minorities and hosted by Wayne, TGW and a number of our volunteers at the Big Garden.

In August the **Community Rail Partnership** and **Prosperity to The Coast** funded and accompanied us to the seaside for a day. From their point of view they were promoting our coast, rail travel and safety, and for us 40 people had a wonderful day together on the train and at the seaside.



Five volunteers, 2 members of staff and assorted families got to know one another better and for some it was their first experience of playing in the sea and/or going on the train. A further train trip to Harwich, again with the Community Rail Partnership, was held at the end of August and enabled 16 participants to explore independently.

It is wonderful to see more and more people feel part of our community and of the wider Colchester community, and to see those who were our first refugees making their own new lives. For so many others life is still very precarious - we just try to make it a little more bearable.

Elizabeth Curry, Community Coordinator



Our **Foodbank**—Food from Home—continues to provide essential supplementary supplies that are culturally appropriate, as well as being a place for clients to meet and chat. Since Joyce and Sue took over as managers, the place has been transformed, providing a lifeline to clients. Not only does it provide practical support in the form of food, clothing, furniture and housewares, but it is often the first point of contact on arrival in Colchester and a warm welcome and friendly face go a long way to easing fears and anxieties around being in a strange and sometimes hostile environment.



Through the Foodbank, we have the opportunity to build a rapport with regular clients who sometimes just need a sympathetic ear or reassurance to allay their concerns and in this way we are able to take pressure off our busy caseworkers. Obviously they also appreciate that as well as the regular supplies they can find with us, like flour and oil, we try to bring in produce such as fresh yams and plantains and spices that are instantly recognizable to them.

As our spending has increased exponentially, part of our remit is to attract more donations from local businesses and other organisations supportive of our values. We are also endeavouring to raise awareness of our Foodbank in the wider community.

Although the office has been as busy as ever, we have not held many **events** over the summer, so we made the most of those that *were* arranged. There was a meal at Cannock Mill in July which was a lovely opportunity for RAMA staff and volunteers to get together; and there was an informal gathering hosted by Wendy, another of our volunteers, with food, drink, conversation, and even dancing. Thanks go to the organisers; we must do it again!

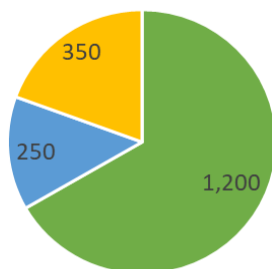
And we are grateful to Mehmet, our clinical psychologist, and other volunteers, who devoted a Saturday in August to a local **Pride** event that raised awareness and some useful funds, as well as being a very lively and joyous celebration!

Good News!

There continue to be highs and lows in the office when dealing with clients. But among recent events we can share news of:

- The wonderful wedding of Sri Lankan couple Kal and Punitha who have waited **10 years** to be reunited owing to immigration complications. The RAMA staff who helped them with their case were honoured recently to share their very, very happy day.
- A 16-yr-old Ukrainian boy judged the second best goalie in Ukraine who has been accepted by Sudbury Football Academy after his host arranged a try-out.
- A host in Mersea who arranged a moving reunion... His guests – mum and two children -- had lost touch with dad who was fighting, but who contacted hosts having been injured and with permission to come to UK. The hosts revealed nothing, but took the guests for a walk... where dad was waiting by the sea. You can imagine how special that moment was!

Numbers in brief



Our **5 caseworkers** support a caseload of **1,283** clients from **100** countries. This does not include **250** dispersal clients who are in National Asylum Support Service accommodation, nor the additional **250** Ukrainians under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and the further **100** or so under here under the family scheme.

Staffing

RAMA has grown significantly over this year, both in terms of workload and employees. A significant injection of funds from the Clinical Commissioning Group in the New Year enabled us to think about restructuring and advertising new roles. Similarly, the workload has evolved as a result of changing world events and, as mentioned, the fall-out from the war in Ukraine has generated a new stream of clients to our doors. Of course we continue to do as much as we can with the resources we have, and we're pleased that RAMA is being increasingly recognised as an equal partner among statutory bodies and other service providers in the local area. The funding that we receive is always time-limited, so there will continue to be changes to staffing; below is the list of the current office team.

Operational Lead: Maria Wilby

Senior Caseworkers: Maria Wilby, Shelley Braddock-Overbury

Caseworkers: Colm McDonald, Maud-May Cuthbert, Hasina Uddin, Natalie Umzulu

Community Coordinator: Elizabeth Curry (volunteer)

Partnerships Coordinator: Elizabeth Long

Office Coordinator: Ruth Ronay

Foodbank Coordinators: Joyce McIntyre & Sue Duffy

Social Media: Kate Khan

Finance / Fundraising / IT / Business strategy: Philip Horner (volunteer); Phil Dunnett (volunteer)

Psychotherapy & Therapeutic Community: Mehmet Emin Demir & Shireen Dossa (Refugee Council)

Therapeutic Community project assistant & caseworker: Zaenab Al Tak

Office cash flow: Liz Dunnett (volunteer)

Office assistant: Gemma Kopel-Doree (volunteer)

There are also several **reliable volunteers** who monitor our reception desk and help in the Foodbank.

And we are conscious of the many, many more **volunteers** who generously give their time in numerous other ways. *We* know we couldn't operate without you... we hope *you* know this too: you **ALL** deserve a name-check!



We hope you've found this informative. Please address any comments, or anything you'd like included, to :
elizabeth.long@refugeeactioncolchester.org.uk