

# Newsletter - December 2022

## Seasons Greetings to you all!

Wishing you all well as the year draws to a close, and the chance to enjoy special times with family and friends. We are grateful that we can, as we know for so many of our clients it's not possible. At least we are able to provide a refuge for them, and the office will barely close over the festive period, just the Christmas and New Year bank holidays.

It's been an intensely busy year, with significant growth and change in the organization, so we will take a moment to pause, reflect and regroup, and prepare ourselves for what's in store in 2023!

Finally.... we can announce it's official: our email and website addresses have made the switch to RAMA! To find us on the internet, please type into the browser bar <https://rama.org.uk/>  
For the time being it will be helpful to add 'Colchester' to your search.



The wonderful 'courageous advocates' from St James Primary School in Colchester who made up, decorated, and delivered gift bags for all the Afghan children in the Marks Tey hotel as well as learning phrases in Dari and Pashto. A big THANK YOU to them, and to their teacher Ms Ozbeser for encouraging them in their quest to find ways to support those in need in the community, particularly refugees.

This autumn RAMA was nominated for an **Essex Activity Award** for our football project. You'll have read in the last newsletter about our football team's exciting day out for a match against Crystal Palace refugee team. Since then they have also played a team from Ipswich, an event filmed for the big award ceremony that took place at Chelmsford racecourse on 6 December.

Despite not winning, RAMA was recognised with Highly Commended (see left). Unfortunately Colm was unable to attend owing to illness, but was replaced by Maud-May along with team captain Masoud from Iran and star player Liubov from Ukraine representing the multinational team.



## Ukraine report



Ukrainian arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, and therefore our home visits, have slowed to around one per week, though we continue to support 251 (and rising!) Ukrainian visitors in Colchester Borough. At the beginning of the project, following our home visit we would assist with Universal Credit applications, making biometric appointments, applying for child benefit, applying for ESOL courses, making referrals to work schemes, and so on. Now the landscape has changed and we are assisting with homelessness applications, housing benefit claims, council tax issues, negotiating issues between guests and hosts, assisting hosts with moving to a lodging arrangement, and continuously fielding (justified) complaints from hosts that they have not received their 'thank you payments' from ECC.

It has been a full six months since the first Ukrainian arrivals in our area and the appetite for support has decreased. Hosts have reached a point where they feel they have 'done their bit' and want their homes back, for many reasons, such as having family to stay for Christmas, having to look after an elderly parent, or simply older children returning home from university. Very few are prepared to extend their offer to a year, which is understandable. However, the options for their Ukrainian guests are limited. The guests' first choice would undoubtedly be to live independently and rent privately. In most cases this is not an option because they cannot meet the landlords' / letting agents' requirements; they do not have a UK guarantor; they do not have a sufficient credit rating; they do not have the required address history; they are not able to pay six months' or one year's rent up front.

Re-matching is an option, although also limited. We have been very busy re-matching guests and hosts, and so far have matched 14 visitors/families to new hosts, however the list of potential hosts has dwindled. Despite a big piece of work done by Colchester Borough Council to source new hosts for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the response was minimal, resulting in a very small pool of potential hosts, most of whom are only prepared to take a single person. This has meant several homelessness applications and we currently have three families residing in hotels; each family group consists of a mum plus two children sharing just one room. Owing to a lack of emergency accommodation in the Colchester area, any future homelessness applications will be housed out of area; not necessarily Tendring, but more likely further afield such as Sheffield or Hull - anywhere that has capacity.

To end on a more positive note, here is an extract from an email I received from very grateful re-matched Ukrainian client, L :

*"I would like to express my enormous gratitude to you & for everything you've done for us. Thank you very much. A little update on our situation: everything is fine here. My new host is lovely & understanding. My son likes her a lot and waits until she gets home after work with her dogs. They even walk the dogs together. We go out on the weekends. It was Dedham last Saturday. My son starts school tomorrow. The school is nice, everybody is kind and tries to help. Thank you from the bottom of my heart"*

MMC



*Two Ukrainian visitors  
enjoying African drumming  
at Firstsite*

As another indication of how important we are becoming in the eyes of our local partners, in October EL and MW were invited to the Mayor's Oyster Feast. The other groups invited were directly related to the Mayor's charities, so we were honoured to be in such worthy company, and were seated in a preferential position for full view of proceedings. We were served delicious vegan fare rather than oysters, and enjoyed the presentations and the chance to step out of the office. It was rather a long afternoon, so we did not stay to the end, but some good networking went on nonetheless. We also remained sober – unlike many others!



## Asylum seekers in dispersal accommodation

At RAMA we have a dedicated team supporting asylum seekers living in NASS (National Asylum Support Service) accommodation. Colchester is now a dispersal centre for asylum seekers (AS) who are allocated rooms in shared houses or in hotels by the Home Office. As caseworkers, we meet single men and women, as well as families, living in such accommodation and we provide practical and emotional support to ensure their wellbeing and safety. We work mainly in Colchester, but also cover surrounding areas in north-east Essex. At present we serve 300 AS in NASS accommodation and this number is rising.

Below are some examples of what we do and the issues faced by these clients:

Once registration with RAMA is completed, we assist with essentials: providing them with a phone, sim card, registering with the GP surgery closest to their accommodation, completing an HC2 form (medical exemption certificate), referring them to college for ESOL classes, and referring them to a solicitor to support with their asylum claim. The registration process helps us to get an idea of each individual's background and any problems that require looking into. We also introduce clients to groups and activities that are run by our organisation and by other local agencies, eg our RAMA football group, drumming sessions, sewing group and The Big Garden Project are all popular and well attended. We also provide wifi for clients living in NASS housing as they receive £40.85 a week per person to pay for food, clothing and toiletries. This is not sufficient to pay for internet services. AS have no right to work and often suffer anxiety from living in shared accommodation with people they do not know. Access to wifi offers some relief and comfort.

Given that our clients are offered asylum support accommodation anywhere in the UK on a no-choice basis, we receive a number of requests to move to areas where they have connections to friends or family. This process is complex, requiring the client to gather evidence to present to the Home Office, and also liaison with other agencies such as Migrant Help. Sadly, most cases are rejected. NASS housing is usually of poor quality and our clients are always reporting repair issues such as no heating or hot water. We flag this with the housing provider, but unfortunately, it is never an immediate repair and our clients continue to suffer whilst waiting.

When clients in NASS housing get a positive decision on their asylum application and are awarded refugee status, they have 28 days to move out. We are then faced with the significant challenge of preventing homelessness. There is very little housing support from the local council for single men and women with no diagnosed condition who are awarded refugee status. Equally if the circumstances are that an asylum claim receives a negative decision we also support by exploring what options and route the client may have.

Throughout the working day we make time to see our drop-in NASS clients alongside our booked appointments. We are always busy, and try our absolute best to support these very vulnerable clients.

HU



## Initial Accommodation: hotels

Recently we saw the opening of two new Initial Accommodation sites (ie hotels) in Colchester and Clacton. Like last year, it is depressing to visit to see the usual problems of isolation and issues with the (bad) food provision. What made things worse initially was that these people had weeks with NO access to medical help. Local GP surgeries have no spaces for new registrations so a system has been put in place where a team of GPs will visit the hotel once a week to see residents there. Eventually all residents should have had a full health check and be registered locally. This process is not without issues though, as although the ICB have secured funding, the workforce is not so readily available (they are asking GPs to do overtime). The service will also cover the Afghans in the Marks Tey bridging hotel who have been there longer, so it will be some time before all residents have access to full medical care.

There are some residents who need urgent help, ie their medication has run out, or they are suicidal. This has been problematic, as even the hospital emergency service were refusing to prescribe, sending them back to the hotel saying they must register with a GP, which of course they could not do. Other advice was to call 101, but they too were unable to prescribe. It ended up going in circles: any emergency saw the emergency services telling hotel staff to call police; police saying call an ambulance; medical staff unable to treat without pre-registration with a GP.... The situation is improving slowly, after we worked hard on escalating things, but it should not be this difficult! And in the meantime there is already an outbreak of scabies in the hotel.

We have had some new clothes from *Calais Light* from whom we've had wonderful donations in the past. We are referring the majority of clients for legal aid solicitors, and giving SIM cards with free data and the prospect of phones coming soon. There is still plenty of work to be done, but most importantly we listen and we care... and we can't underestimate the power of that.

We already identified six age-disputed children in the hotel, and community care solicitors are working on moving them into age-appropriate accommodation. Some residents previously spent weeks at the Manston facility and have only the clothes they are wearing. Already some are presenting with severe health issues and complications, so we are trying to provide the support they need.

The small number of residents at the Clacton hotel are there because they have specific physical or mental disabilities, and a range of needs, from missing limbs, experience of torture, or blindness. At least this cohort has been registered with local GPs in Clacton and will soon have much needed appointments. The staff are warm and helpful and seem genuinely to care, which is lovely.

We are supported on these visits by our wonderful translators who take on so much (emotionally well as practically), and Olivia our placement student from the Social Work MA course who is an absolutely IT wiz, and invaluable in scanning hundreds of pages of documents for us. Although the work recently has been intense and at times overwhelming, our systems are improving and we are glad to be able to make a difference. Lastly we must not forget the skeleton staff left at the office when a big percentage of us disappear for afternoons at a time. They – and the reception/foodbank volunteers -- are left extremely busy with our Colchester town clients. It's very much a joint effort by all and will continue to be so with different staff and helpers slotting in on these outreach clinic sessions as needed.

SBO



*Children from the Marks Tey hotel enjoying activities organized by the Mercury Theatre.*





## Community activities - Autumn 2022

Community activities continue to give clients pleasure and the opportunity to meet one another on neutral ground to pursue various interests. The Sixth Form college students' Friends Not Foes group continues to support us with their successful Friday evening Homework Club, and table tennis in their college Sports Hall, run for our clients by our volunteers, Clare, Pete and Peter.

Our sewing group is humming and the machines are being put to good use. A number of volunteers - Geraldine, Julia, Barbara and Wendy - keep this going, supervising the cutting of patterns and sewing, playing with the children and teaching knitting. The Coffee Mornings have fluid but regular attendance and we are also planning to enable sewing and knitting here. We can welcome more people as some previous members are now at university, the Institute or working. We miss seeing them regularly but it is wonderful to see them gaining confidence and making their own lives.



The Wednesday drumming group has been going for over 3 years and still takes place at Firstsite, but now in conjunction with Hassan's other group at The Quaker Meeting House on Monday evenings. We are welcome at the Meeting House and they are welcome to join us. Sometimes there are 6 of us and sometimes as many as 20.

Thursday activities at Together We Grow's Big Garden give some clients much needed physical activity. Others benefit more from the companionship of cooking together, or from Mehmet's therapeutic talking group. The heartening thing is that we have seen so many men gain confidence and develop new, and lasting, relationships.



During the autumn, clients have attended musical performances at The Colchester Arts Centre and one has even become an Arts Centre Volunteer. We are currently building up audiences for the Arts Centre Christmas Show, which is always popular, and our partnership with director Anthony Roberts is much appreciated. Free tickets for concerts by the Colchester Symphony Orchestra at St. Botolph's Church were provided by Ruth, and the event well attended and much appreciated.

In November, 56 of us (families, befrienders, asylum seekers and volunteers) attended the Open Dress Rehearsal of the pantomime at The Mercury Theatre. As always, the children loved it, as did various other clients. The eldest child of family got a birthday mention and a male befriender became the butt of the jokes of the irrepressible Dame.



### A Plea

I would like to think that some of you, having read this, will be motivated to play table tennis, come drumming, help to look after and play with children at the various groups or take part in our newly projected groups (below) and/or attend them when other volunteers are away. You can contact me at [ec@rama.org.uk](mailto:ec@rama.org.uk).

## New Projects to take part in

A cohort of Afghan refugees has arrived at Marks Tey Hotel this autumn. They are people who worked for the British Government in the army or the British Embassy. There are a number of articulate men who were translators, but others have less English, having been security guards and mechanics, etc. They have only recently made it to the UK, having been in transit since August last year. I have been impressed by their resilience and patience despite the desperate need for a new, settled life for their families. Most of the admin work for this group (Universal Credit, National Insurance, GP registration, school admissions etc) is done by another organization paid by the Home Office. RAMA, in contrast, has been working with the Mercury Theatre, our therapists and our community volunteers (including some clients) to provide welcome events.

The first involved about 100 men, women and children who we entertained in the Marks Tey Village Hall. The second brought nearly 150 people into Colchester to see the town and its landmarks, to play in Castle Park and to have refreshments and more play at the Mercury Theatre. The theatre staff want them to know they are welcome to call in there.



1. The Mercury outreach staff would like to invite women to **sewing sessions** to meet their request for sewing, conversation and companionship, possibly with a view to creating a communal quilt. Marks Tey Village Hall is the likely venue, and there could be activities run by Mercury drama therapists for children who are under school age.

**We need volunteers** who could drive to Marks Tey to take part in the **making session** or the **childcare**. This may involve 2 to 3 hours of your time and would need to be fairly regular. Times and days are still to be decided; initially we need to gauge interest.

2. We would like to invite you to join a **Global Voices singing group** at The Mercury Theatre, Tuesdays 1pm – 2:30pm (from 10 Jan 2023). It will be led by a professional facilitator with childcare provided. We hope to welcome people from Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and all the ethnic groups in Colchester. We also **need volunteers** to take part, to encourage clients and to be the 'glue' of the group.

For each of these please contact me at [ec@rama.org.uk](mailto:ec@rama.org.uk)

EC



*Thanks to Elizabeth C and Barbara for arranging a team social at Cannock Mill in December. Delicious food as ever, and wonderful company!*

We were delighted recently to welcome Ayse to the team as a new caseworker. Ayse is fully qualified in international refugee law and a specialist in asylum and human rights. She has significant experience in the fields of displacement, gender-based violence and trafficking, having previously practised in Turkey before coming to Essex university to complete an LLM in International Human Rights Law. She will work alongside Shelley and Maria with hotel clients and also on more complex cases. In time she will also complete OISC training so that RAMA can become an OISC-registered centre, meaning we can provide increased immigration advice and services to our clients.





## Good News!

Colchester City Council has given us the cost of another caseworker. This has enabled us to offer two days a week to a client who has recently had a positive decision, and can now work. He has four languages as well as English – our most needed languages: Sorani, Arabic, Pashto and Farsi. He has been volunteering for us nearly every day for a few months and knows the team well. We will find him an appropriate interpreting courses to formalise his skills and assist him to get more work. Welcome Karo!

CVS Tendring have provided funding for Ukraine work so Maud-May and Natalie will do outreach work there one day a week, training CVST staff until they can take over. As well as this, Tendring District Council have given us additional funds for this and for work with clients in dispersal accommodation.

We have been asked to be part of a 'Task and Finish Team' looking at how Colchester deals with the massive number of new arrivals, including the Ukrainians, that presents challenges for GP services, council services and us. We have also been approached to be part of the NE Essex Homelessness Alliance sub-group – as so much of what we do prevents destitution and homelessness, and primarily addresses inequalities. One of the huge local issues for Colchester City Council has been the lack of emergency accommodation and also private accommodation, exacerbated by private rentals being used to house dispersal clients. In addition, people with rooms to rent have used them for Ukrainians, and now for overseas medical staff (ECC are advertising very good incentives to landlords to house people coming to work for NHS).

Having now working closely with Colchester City Council it is clear how much more involved they are with people living locally than are other councils. Both Braintree and Tendring look to Colchester for advice. The credit for this goes to Yvonne Cook, who is now Lead for Refugees and Resettlement in CBC – she was previously thematic lead but can now focus in. She feels like part of our team and we are delighted her important role has been recognised.

Since the last newsletter we've seen a significant increase in client numbers. The reopening of the A12 hotel for asylum seekers was a complete surprise. The local council had objected to this move on several grounds during a short period of consultation, but this was ignored by the Home Office. We are pleased to support these clients, but the lack of planning time makes it hard to prepare and to keep people safe. These new clients add to existing numbers in dispersal accommodation in the town, and owing to increased numbers across Tendring too, new clients have come to us from Jaywick, Clacton, Harwich and Frinton. In one week, our numbers rose by 270 !

MW

Recently we took time to record **client interactions** – every email, call, text, face-to-face appointment, drop-in, foodbank visitor, attending a group etc - to show how many people we support.

Currently we have over 3,000 'live' clients (meaning we have interacted within the last 6 months and expect to again).

The result was an astonishing **500 interactions** on an average day! It is amazing what work is done here and how much it contributes to positive outcomes for people.

MW



Look at this beautiful carving Joyce brought back to us from her home in Kenya!

Remind you of anything....?



And that's it for this year! This is, as ever, just a snapshot of everything that RAMA is busy with. We are a crucial part of the landscape now in our city, and an active member of numerous groups of statutory and voluntary services that focus on caring for those in need. We feel we are in a good place, and benefitting from the increased recognition that has come our way over the past 12 months. We are therefore conscious of the debt of gratitude we owe to the many, many people who volunteer, donate, work with and support us in so many ways.

You are all sincerely valued!

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We hope you've found this informative. Please address any comments to the editor: [el@rama.org.uk](mailto:el@rama.org.uk)