

Newsletter - March 2023



The Royal visit

Four of our Ukrainian visitors, along with refugees from Iran and Nepal, were invited to meet King Charles and Camilla during their visit to Colchester in March. The group went along with five equally excited members of staff (all from different countries themselves — a really international group). Despite a delay and a very long wait, they were delighted that the King shook hands and spoke to each of them in turn, and seemed genuinely interested in their respective situations. The whole group was absolutely thrilled with the day; definitely one to remember for them all.



At the end of March we sadly say goodbye to two of our longest-standing members of staff. **Kate Khan** and **Philip Horner** were both founding members of Refugee Action in 2015, and worked voluntarily in all sorts of capacities for several years as, with Maria, they built the organization from the ground up. In the early days it was collecting donations and delivering them to Calais; later on all the other work involved in nurturing a new operation: fundraising, accounting, casework, policies, developing partnerships, technology, business plans, systems and more. Both were also directors for several years, bringing their compassion and individual expertise to so much of the organization's work. The new manifestation of RAMA is far removed from those early days. Philip continued for a long time to do work behind the scenes on our finances and anything technical, while until very recently Kate was involved in casework, fundraising, partnerships, and particularly social media. Both have expressed a desire to pursue other avenues: Philip fulltime work elsewhere and Kate studying for a higher degree. We all join in wishing them exciting and fulfilling times ahead; we're sure they have plenty of adventures in store. Nonetheless they remain an important part of RAMA's story, and we are very sorry we will no longer see them in the office. Good luck to both!



Operations

We are currently operating in a climate made extra difficult by the cost-of-living crisis, with the NHS — currently our main funder — stretched to breaking point. However we remain hopeful we will receive the funding that we have been promised to pay staff and support clients for another year. On the plus side, we have proved our worth at hotels and with residents in other accommodation, preventing homelessness and suicide and tackling other mental health issues. Without our presence the costs to the community and other services would be far higher.

We have been preparing data for use in funding bids and reports and now have figures such as the amount of voluntary hours that RAMA benefits from: 70 days a week! This amazing total includes the work hours staff do outside our contracts, the placement hours (five students next month with 11 days a week between them), the time given by directors, and all those who staff the reception, the foodbank, sewing, gardening, and table tennis; plus the translators who come to the hotels etc. Elizabeth and Richard Curry's hours alone account for a good share of the total. Without such generous input we could not have grown in the way we have. We only have 8.5 full-time staff equivalence. We have 3,500 clients from 102 countries on our books. The work streams that have become key are homelessness prevention, suicide prevention, domestic violence and complex EU and other immigration cases.

Cllr David King, Head of Cabinet, has continued to take an interest in our clients. He has written to Robert Jenrick, Minister for Immigration, with an invitation to visit the hotel for himself. One of the most disturbing issues there recently is the case of a man whose name has been on the medical needs list since November and who finally saw a GP 3 weeks ago, for them to discover he has metastasised cancer in many areas of his body. He is only in his 30s, with family back in Iran. The difficulty for hotel residents is that transport will only be approved by the Home Office if the client has a formal appointment letter (and this approval takes a minimum of 4 hours). Clients do not always have such letters. This client *walked* home (in the dark and the rain) from the appointment where he received his devastating diagnosis (which he received without a translation) owing to the complications of contacting the hotel which in any case cannot supply transport without Home Office (HO) approval.... Thankfully he was eventually able to access a fast-track system which has no appointment letters. The connections we made with the team at the hospital meant they were able to keep him in for the four days of tests which culminated in emergency surgery on Saturday. He is now back at the hotel where he shares a room and where he cannot get the specialised diet he needs. Our role is to raise safeguarding concerns and try and get him dispersed to the town where we can give him a bus pass to easily access treatment and assist him with his nutrition.

Pamela Donnelly, CEO of the Council, has also been shocked by what is happening and called a North East Essex Alliance resilience meeting to look at system support for us and our staff. Topics in the meeting were:

- clients arriving here from psych wards or community care with no transfer of care;
- the same issue relating to clients from prison or probation teams being sent here with no information on crimes or needs;
- lack of money put aside by ECC for those with no recourse to public funds and domestic violence (DV) clients;
- safeguarding issues unresponded to by the HO and accommodation providers;
- housing for both clients who get status and those who may become absconders if they do not respond to the new asylum questionnaires (sent to those from specific countries by the HO instead of an interview appointment under its new streamlined system);
- the need for contingency to be able to plan for sudden influx and threats resulting from new HO legislation.

Our activities have spread more into Clacton as the Ukraine team have supported Ukrainians settling there, and some extra funding for that has come via CVST (Community Voluntary Services Tending). We also visit the hotel for disabled and high-needs mental health asylum seekers each week (currently 30 people). There is also a growing number of dispersed asylum seekers in Tendring – Walton, Harwich, Frinton, Jaywick — and plans for 101 more people to be placed there. We are still hopeful Tendring District Council will recognise the work we do and provide us with some of the funds they receive from central government for asylum seekers, as Colchester City Council has done so effectively.

The key ingredient missing is our involvement at a level where we can prevent the gaps in provision for our clients, making sure we have a voice so they are included in the decisions made around how they will be cared for.

Dispersal

We continue to be met with a steady influx of new dispersal clients, and another seven NASS houses will soon go live, housing 30 - 40 potential new clients. This situation has become all the more frustrating for both ourselves and the clients as local services are struggling with the existing workload.

Colchester GP surgeries have temporarily paused new registrations, leaving some clients without access to primary care. Hasina, unfortunately, has seen several new clients with extremely complex needs (histories of violent behaviour, psychological conditions, prison stays, etc) and has worked extremely hard to provide support and raise concerns with relevant agencies, safeguarding teams and authorities, so that unpleasant situations do not arise. She has become quite the expert at getting through to NHS services for these cases, pushing for resolutions that seemed impossible at the outset, particularly as some of the relevant agencies appear to have no knowledge, understanding or will to act.

The new questionnaires that have been sent to asylum seekers from five countries in lieu of a substantive interview have created further capacity issues with our partner legal-aid law firm, NLS, which had already been experiencing capacity issues prior to this HO initiative. Clients need the help of a legal specialist to complete the form – we are not allowed to do it. The knock-on effect is that many clients have not been contacted for other appointments they are waiting for; and also that we are unable to offer referrals for legal-aid representation with asylum claims to new or existing clients who request help with this; and finally that clients who have pre-existing legal representation are having struggles contacting their lawyers.

We have also found in the last few months that the Home Office is much slower to respond to various applications and requests (Permission to Work/Application Registration Card [ARC] chases /Biometric Residence Permit [BRP] corrections etc). This may be due to a shift in resources towards the questionnaires, but we can only speculate.

On the plus side there does seem to be an upsurge in positive decisions lately, and while this is always good news initially, it then creates the issue of dealing with the moving-on process, since HO accommodation/support terminates 28 days later. I had been expecting problems regarding accommodation after eviction from dispersal housing and this is really beginning to bite as more and more clients don't understand / don't have a plan / don't have any options. It is very hard telling people constantly that the Council will not house them and that RAMA cannot find them accommodation, even though we try hard to find solutions.

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Photograph by Natalie

More thank yous!

We often say how grateful we are to those who provide all sorts of material comfort or entertainment to our clients, but it could always bear repeating so we'll name a few here: **Colchester Sixth Form College** for providing space for our football and table tennis clubs; for running a homework club via the Friends not Foes society; and for 15 wonderful festive hampers for families packed and delivered by students during the Christmas break. **Colchester Symphony Orchestra**, who have regularly donated piles of free tickets for clients to attend performances at St Botolph's church. These have been extremely well received, with clients delighted by the experience of listening to good quality live music. **Colchester Arts Centre** has also warmly welcomed a small cohort of clients who have become regulars at concerts and now feel quite at home there. And of course the **Mercury Theatre** which has been working tirelessly to create opportunities for so many people — our clients and others — to engage in activities for wellbeing and integration.

Hotel work

We visit the two hotels weekly: three caseworkers, interpreters, and placement students. In the Colchester hotel, there have been regular doctors' visits for three weeks, which has had a positive impact on residents, but there are still ongoing challenges due to structural problems and systemic failures. In the Clacton hotel, the clients have complex physical and mental health problems. There are fewer of them, but their care requires much time, effort and capacity. Problems for them attending hospital appointments has already been mentioned; equally some of them cannot go to the pharmacy because they cannot afford bus tickets, and the closest pharmacy is a 45-minute walk from the hotel. Even if they manage to go to the hospital, they cannot get proper treatment owing to multi-layered problems: language barriers, waiting times, lack of transportation, and lack of GP registration.

We referred some clients to social services for age assessments; two were still deemed to be adults although they look about fifteen. Another challenge is the situation for LGBTIQ+ clients due to the lack of a gender-based approach from the Home Office. Despite the urgent need for a transfer for specific individuals, as well as our outreach referral to Migrant Help, this has received no attention.

In Clacton, clients have been registered with GPs after we had to fight against refusals because they had no ID (this is *not* a requirement). Some clients have been referred on, but are still waiting to be seen. These individuals really need specialist care, and despite the efforts of the staff many issues are not resolved. We have made outreach and safeguarding referrals, but these take time, and while waiting some people are living with deteriorating conditions.

On a more positive note, social services have started to assess residents in the Clacton hotel. Two are now in line for wheelchairs and others may follow. Another man has been able to move to Manchester, where his brother lives, after our change of conditions application. English lessons have begun. Clients in one hotel have access to a free gym in Colchester, and the regular C360 bus to the town centre. Clothes distributions have been made in both hotels, and further funding for another distribution has been found. Thanks to our volunteer doctor and nurse, we have managed to understand clients' health problems and to signpost them to the necessary services. Without our support and advocacy, all these issues might have remained hidden from statutory services. We remain determined to make life as bearable as it can be for the individuals we see, despite the many obstacles that must be overcome. AD

Slow cooker club

We are so happy to share these pictures of individuals thoroughly enjoying our new **Slow Cooker Club**. Made possible through Essex County Council's **Essex ActiVate** funding, the project aims to equip participants with the knowledge, skills and cooking tools to prepare low cost and nutritious meals. The goal is to teach 30 of our dispersal clients, ten at a time in six-week blocks. Each participant receives a slow cooker and attends a weekly session where they learn, under the warm and encouraging guidance of RAMA Foodbank co-manager Joyce, how to cook a delicious, healthy meal. Like our clients, the recipes are from a range of countries, so meals are familiar and comforting. In fact the process is collaborative: with Joyce the participants create their own recipes so everyone feels included. There is music and dancing along the way... the joy in the room during sessions is a credit to their teacher and a reminder of how little it takes to transform someone's day in a positive way. We have seen an impact on mental wellbeing: one client was struggling with his mental health and drinking excessively, causing him to isolate himself. Since joining the Slow Cooker Club he has been happily coming along and socializing with the others, participating in the WhatsApp group and generally coming out of his shell.

The next step is for participants to recreate the meals at home, using their new skills and the starter packs they also receive. From the photos they have sent to us of the meals created at home they are proving very quick learners! We hope they will be inspired to continue their journey of culinary discovery long after the sessions end, and the next impatient cohort is busy cooking! JM



Partnerships

The RAMA directors held a long and constructive 'awayday' in January focusing on finances, after significant work on streamlining them, particularly by Phil D. As has always been the case, we live from one month to the next, with few guarantees that the coffers will remain full for long. Up to now the situation has always been saved at the last moment by a welcome grant or donation, and that's again where we are now – thankfully with a 95% chance of a considerable injection of funds from the ICB to secure most of our salaries for a while longer. As a precaution, though, we drew up a 'Plan B' for how we could reduce the scope of operations and focus on limited key priorities, if the need did arise.

For a time we thought we would very reluctantly have to close our foodbank owing to spiralling costs, but we had a last-minute reprieve, and are able to keep it going for at least the first part of this year. This is a blessing, as the warmth of wonderful managers Joyce and Sue means far more than just food to both the clients and the team. Additional food-related funding has enabled us to initiate two food projects: the Slow Cooker Club previously described, and the lunchtime hot food lovingly prepared by Zaenab to bring home comfort and a sociable hour's gathering to isolated clients.

Funding obviously demands much attention: finding sources and writing bids or follow-up reports.

We have recently had funds from Essex Community Foundation (for Ukraine work in Tendring and the Foodbank), EALC's Winter Warmth and Resilience Fund and Essex Activate (for the Foodbank); Violence and Vulnerability Community Safety grant (for DV/safeguarding). We have also been allocated funding by CVST for work in Tendring with Ukrainians. A fund of almost £50,000 came for work we will do with Together We Grow as part of the Live Well initiative. We visited an existing project in Tendring run by iCARP who work mostly with veterans but are keen to offer opportunities to our clients. They have fishing lakes, chickens, bees and wonderful space for therapeutic activities of all kinds. Another opportunity is the large allotment in Clacton run by Sailship, where we hope the Clacton hotel clients can be helped to spend time for their wellbeing.

We continue to advocate for our clients in one-off meetings with researchers, film makers, other community providers, trusts, foundations and charities, as well as regular meetings with groups such as One Colchester (both the Delivery Board and a Task & Finish Group); Strengthening Communities (Essex); Foodbank Network; Winter Resilience; Homelessness Alliance; Strategic Migration Partnership; SNEE and many more. March saw a Community Connect conference where the partnership board of the ICB discussed their latest Health plan for north-east Essex and Suffolk. They recognised that the voluntary sector is the 'community glue' and made a commitment to listen to the voices of organizations like ours, to support us, and to use the expertise in the voluntary sector to develop their own workforces. This is welcome, though we feel there is still work to do as their latest 5-year plan makes no specific reference to refugees and asylum seekers, just a generic mention of ethnic minorities.

There was also a conference for International Women's Day run by the Police and Crime Commissioner at which much reference was made to improvements in treatment of victims of domestic abuse. 61% of violent crime is against women and girls. This statistic has more than doubled since 2015, as demonstrated by the huge rise in DV cases that RAMA has seen since Covid. We look forward to seeing these improvements really filter down to where we are on the front line.

The directors have been thinking about how RAMA needs to adapt to the ever-changing environment in which we operate: the demands of increasing numbers and limited funds. EL is participating in a programme run by Essex Community Foundation and the Cranfield Trust, which provides guidance to representatives from Third Sector organizations to improve their skills in areas such as leadership, change management, partnership working, income generation etc – all areas that are crucial to successful operational management. This should ensure RAMA can continue to be effective well into the future.

The most recent contact with the London solicitor about our move to **new premises** suggested that movement *may* be imminent, but we still can not say more than that. Once contracts are exchanged the real work begins: installation of a new boiler, deep clean of the kitchen, remedial work on the toilets, revamp of the 'staff room', repair of ceiling tiles and general decorating where necessary. Not all of this is imperative before we move, but completing the major tasks before we do makes sense and will make life more comfortable for everyone. We have been anticipating this move for so long now, it's good to feel we might be approaching the final hurdle!

Community Activities

As in my Autumn report, the Community Activities continue, made possible by our committed volunteers. Anyone reading this who is now in the position to help make the lives of asylum seekers and refugees more pleasant, on a regular basis, may apply to be a RAMA volunteer. This involves filling in a form, obtaining two references, an informal interview and the willingness to fit in wherever is the greatest need at the time of applying. These needs fluctuate and we do occasionally have to add people to a waiting list.

We are happy that sewing, drumming, table tennis, coffee drinking, chatting, befriending, English conversation and attending music concerts all continue, and in addition a few new things are happening.

At the **Together We Grow Big Garden**, a cycle maintenance project has proved popular. It has equipped some clients with new skills, enabled others to use skills they already had and with the improvement of clients' vocabulary, it has provided bike maintenance and the possibility of getting advanced level cycling certificates. The friendship and cooperation between those involved makes this a very heart-warming project. Others at the Big Garden continue to hoe, plant and sow, some cook and some have a go at everything. Wayne, Mehmet and volunteers continue to talk, and to listen, when it is needed, and the general atmosphere is one that we all value greatly.



The two new projects with the **Mercury Theatre** have started very well.



Two new volunteers are working with RAMA volunteer Clare Crick, and Elodie Gilbert (Mercury Theatre), on the **Creative Sewing** project for Afghan clients from the Marks Tey hotel. Everyone has had to be flexible in their expectations of the project and to work with translators, but they all seem to be having lots of fun. Elodie started with surplus fabric from the Wardrobe Department at the theatre and then an appeal on Facebook gave rise to whole rolls of other

fabric being donated. Many of the women have great hand-sewing skills but all have a thirst to use the machines the Mercury has obtained.



The **Global Voices** singing group is settling into a rhythm and the teacher, Deborah, enthusiastically makes us feel we are doing well. It is attended by people of various ethnic backgrounds, who are Colchester people, our clients and others. We are learning a Ukrainian song from our Ukrainian friends, and our repertoire also includes rap, Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles, Rhianna, and even Handel.

A cricket coach from **Eight Ash Green Cricket Club** has offered coaching to various cohorts of Afghans from the Marks Tey Hotel. The response has not been overwhelming but our volunteer William took one man to indoor net practice and the following week others joined him. As the weather improves more people may want to play outdoors. There will also be opportunities for women and girls.

Meanwhile two Afghan families from the Marks Tey Hotel, who some of us got to know quite well through our gatherings at the Mercury Theatre, have been relocated to houses in Hull and Leeds. They are excited to settle into their new, and hopefully more permanent, lives, and we wish them luck.



In February Terri from the **Community Rail Partnership** and Jenny from **Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** hosted us on a rail trip to **Wrabness and Harwich**. The day started very misty and it was magical seeing the sun gradually emerge through the mist and clouds. Caseworker Natalie and I organised those who attended (Ukrainian mums, their children and two little Uighur boys) and it was a lovely day. The Ukrainian women expressed great appreciation of the woods and River Stour and everyone enjoyed fish and chips at Harwich. I hope the mother of the two little boys appreciated the large bag of oysters and cockles shells that they took home!



There was a second trip for adult asylum seekers in mid-March. This day started very wet and miserable and yet there were still 22 of us, staff and clients, and everyone had a good time. The clients enjoyed seeing new places and meeting new people and being out of town in the countryside, particularly as the rain had stopped by the time we arrived.



A third trip saw eight asylum seekers enjoy the same route with volunteers, in lovely sun, taking in the Grayson Perry house, the 11th century church, and a tour of the Electric Palace cinema with an enthusiastic local insider, before the eagerly anticipated lunch on the beach.

We plan to have another day trip to the lovely beach at Walton on the Naze, with families, in the summer.

With thanks to all our volunteers.

Elizabeth Curry, Community Coordinator

Ukraine



We continue to assist our Ukrainian clients with all types of applications, advising them and supporting them emotionally.

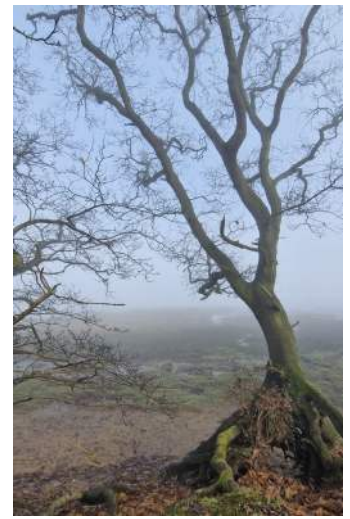
In the past month we have managed to arrange five re-matches with new hosts for those families who were about to become homeless. Two of our longstanding emergency hotel residents have been offered temporary accommodation by Colchester Borough Homes. One of them is getting significant help from befriender Martin, one of our volunteers, in settling into her new place.

There was also a big event at Community 360 at the end of February, marking a year since the beginning of the ongoing war in Ukraine. A large number of Ukrainians, some with their families, were in attendance, along with lots of local Colchester residents keen to show their support. There were baked goods, crafts, paintings, activities for children, and best of all—from the audience point of view — the playing and singing of national music. It was important for our visitors that they were able to mark this important day and to share the anniversary with each other and also with the local community.

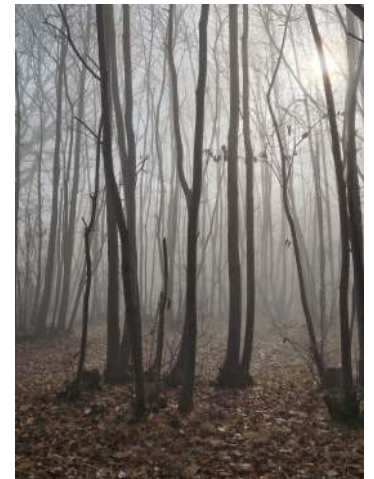
Many of you will be familiar with the heart-breaking story of our client from China who was in the local press recently. He was trafficked here many years ago to work in awful conditions at a cannabis farm. Even though he escaped, he then survived hand-to-mouth for years, working for a pittance, hiding, and sleeping on store-room floors. His exposure to toxic material in his initial work has led directly to his current diagnosis of stage 4 cancer. He was effectively homeless and without recourse to support in all this time. Despite a short time in a care home, and hospital attention, he had no GP, no follow-up care, and nowhere to go. Once he came to us we put him up in a Colchester hotel. Maria has done a huge amount of advocating on his behalf, meeting frustration after frustration, and mostly in vain, as nobody would take responsibility. The article in the local paper triggered a huge response, with most people, rightly, unable to believe that our services should have failed him in so many ways, and that a charity organization should be obliged to pay for accommodation to keep a terminally ill man off the streets.

The **good news** is that he is now living back in his previous care home in Chelmsford. Under pressure from its staff, the home has taken him back in for as long as necessary. He was over the moon to return — it's clearly a place he feels safe and supported — and the staff were equally overjoyed to see him. They have set up his room as he likes it, equipped him with a rice cooker and steamer, and have generally given him an incredibly warm welcome.

Maria will remain involved in his case for as long as it takes to have his situation fully resolved.



Photographs by Natalie



The **Cannock Mill** Winter Fundraising Meal in January was another successful evening, and a good time was had by all. The food was supplied by Syrian company **White Gardenia** and the Sixth Form College volunteers, Friends Not Foes, helped in every way other than cooking. We raised £460, with a significant amount of this being kind donations from Cannock Mill residents. Sincere thanks again to them all for being so warm and welcoming.

Football

The RAMA/Colchester Monday night football team had its first win against the SRS/Ipswich team at Shrub End on a crisp, sunny day in February. We had lost 3-2 to the same opponents in an 8-a-side encounter in Ipswich towards the end of 2022 but our determined and classy performance produced an emphatic 7-3 victory in this 11-a-side full 90-minute match. Everyone was thrilled and overjoyed and extremely proud of our first victory and we all celebrated with food provided, *gratis*, by Wagamama in the town centre after the game. We were also met by the Colchester United PR team and two of the players at the restaurant where photos were taken. The two players were very friendly and asked many questions about the guys and seemed very interested in our venture. We will be arranging another fixture against the Ipswich Team (a decider!) and Ed (Colchester United Foundation) and I are looking at arranging another against an asylum/refugee team associated with another club for a day trip in the near future. Watch this space.

Also.... on the back of our football event I have met with David Simmons of Changing Lives who has resources and the intent to create another football event for our clients that we are slowly getting off the ground. He has offered all our clients free gym membership and commenced Thursday afternoon sessions of gym/football/cricket skills at his space on Colne Bank Avenue.

Through our connection with David we have also seen our star player, Liubov, sign a five-year contract for Sudbury Womens' FC which we hope will be the platform for an even brighter football career for her!

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Contributors: Colm McDonald, Natalie Uzumlu, Joyce McIntyre, Maria Wilby, Elizabeth Curry, Elizabeth Long

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