



Newsletter - July 2023



Wishing you all a
wonderful summer!



In the first half of this year the climate in which we operate seems to have become more hostile than ever to people seeking refuge. We've had legislation that seeks to criminalise those who have no option but to come to this country through irregular means; an agreement through which the UK will provide another 200 million euros to France to stop boats setting off from there; the introduction of a temporary measure to exempt asylum accommodation from HMO licensing requirements, opening the door for unscrupulous operators to provide under par housing; an increase in the immigration health surcharge to £1,035 per year for family members of migrants; and new ways of 'containing' asylum seekers, on barges or in unprecedentedly large camps in rural locations. In the meantime we find as ever that the government's scapegoating of refugees – particularly those who arrive on small boats – only seems to galvanise others who abhor the divisive rhetoric and who take a stand through protesting, volunteering or supporting with donations.

You know who you are and we thank you for it!

A fond goodbye!

We are enormously sorry to share the news that our longtime RAMA family members Zaenab and Laith, and their 4 delightful children, are leaving Colchester for new adventures in the north. We are SO sorry to see them go! They will be hugely missed by us and by the extended community.



The family has been associated with our organisation almost since the beginning, with both beginning as volunteers supporting our community evenings and welcoming countless newcomers to Colchester. Latterly Zaenab worked in the team as caseworker and interpreter: her warmth and intuition about people put them immediately at ease, and her compassion meant she was regarded as a 'mother figure' by many. Laith has brought his own expertise and wisdom to RAMA through serving as a director for the past 3 years, a role he will continue in, while simultaneously being a senior lecturer at a university in Scotland and running several important research projects. In addition to these considerable talents, it is the joy and laughter that they brought into every situation that we will remember most fondly.



We envy the community they are moving to, and we know it will not be long before they are as indispensable there as they were here. We wish them very much good luck and happiness, and we look forward to hearing about the wonderful new initiatives they are bound to be involved with in their new home. Thank you both for everything!

Tendring site emergency

Tendring District is home to a site where there are now around 50 asylum seekers with multiple disabilities. These residents have been identified by the Home Office as having either a high-level physical disability and/or a mental health disability. This includes non-verbal people with no ability to consent, paraplegics, many with prosthetic limbs, and others so seriously unwell or disabled that they need almost constant care. The site, however, has no grab rails, no automatic doors – meaning many cannot get from one space to another through heavy fire doors – and no specialist equipment. There is no hoist on site, nor weighing scales to monitor weight loss. The food is the same as provided in all asylum accommodation, largely highly salted, fatty and unsuitable for many. The staff at the site do their absolute best to assist. They are in the main security staff. They have no ability to lift somebody if they fall, to administer first aid or to assist somebody to eat.

One of the residents who arrived soon after the site opened was an elderly Iranian man. He became a popular resident, always helping others and trying to remain positive. He had suffered two massive strokes and shuffled rather than walked. We got him a walking stick, clothing, and many other items. We also made a wheelchair assessment for him as this had not been done. Sadly the waiting list for automatic chairs is around 18 months. There was nobody to push him if he used a manual chair and he had no strength left to propel himself. He died on the 18/06/2023, far from his wife and two sons. Thanks to amazing the efforts of the Kurdish community and the site staff, he has been returned to his home country.

After Diane Taylor, a remarkable journalist, [highlighted](#) the story in the *Guardian* there has been an outpouring of interest.

There have been follow-up pieces by Human Rights Watch and many disability rights groups have also [called](#) attention to the case. You can see some of the residents speak for themselves in this [link](#).

As well as these groups, two amazing law firms have come forward to offer support. Deighton Pierce Glynn joined us and others in presenting Letters Before Claim (pre-action protocols) to both the Home Office — for breaching the rights of these individuals, and their own lack of protocol — and to Essex County Council for not pushing social service assessments for all vulnerable residents, and for not providing them with advocates nor interpreters. This will proceed to Judicial Review if there is no answer from the legal team at Home Office and ECC.

Duncan Lewis has started case for some of the individuals and it looks as though all the residents will now have the best representation possible.



In the meantime, we continue to visit the hotel. As well as attending to the complex casework and advocacy needed by each person, we have funded clothing, underwear, white canes, specialist cushions, hospital tables, wheelchairs, zimmer frames and much more. There is no agreement around who should fund these items and most people cannot wait.

With enormous efforts from: Joint Council on the Welfare of Immigrants; Disabled People Against the Cuts; Migrants' Champions Network of Local Councillors; and local campaigners, a letter has now been signed by 162 organisations in just 5 days and is bringing in more offers of support for the residents each day <https://forms.gle/uih3Tmwc6aBGiG2B8>

Cultural issues in parenting in the UK

We are currently finding there is a rise in clients having their children placed in foster care, temporarily, while a police investigation is taking place. The reasons for this vary, but it is common for children from cultures other than British to be disciplined or parented in a much stricter way than is the norm in modern Britain. Some types of discipline can be regarded as law-breaking in our society (or at the least a grey area), so it can come under scrutiny for safeguarding reasons.

Clearly where there are significant concerns these must be addressed and, in some cases, laws may have been broken. However there also needs to be an understanding as to the specific context. What might be considered completely acceptable to some families may not be appropriate to us, but the question is whether families understand the difference in culture and laws between their home countries and this country. There is a clear need for parents and wider families to be educated about both these areas, and this is not automatically addressed when people arrive in the UK.

If and when parents are under investigation there is a need for bail conditions to be in place which often restricts parents from having unsupervised contact with their children. Then, because most families do not have other family members here in the UK who would be able to take care of the children temporarily, the children are placed for a period under the care of social services, ie foster carers. We are seeing the impact of this situation on families in a whole range of ways. For example, we currently have a father who is street homeless as he is not allowed back in the family home, possibly until mid-September. He cannot afford to pay for extra accommodation as the family is only in receipt of universal credit, which just about covers rent and bills for his wife and children to live. Social services will not help him, so he is left sleeping in his car.

Incidentally he is also under investigation because the police were concerned that he might take his family abroad so his daughter can undergo FGM. The police, social services, and RAMA have concluded this is *not* a risk. In fact the police are holding the passports for all the family, but because these of the bail conditions, the investigation is very slow, and the father's mental and physical health is suffering greatly through having nowhere to live. Furthermore, the children are traumatised, both as a result of their short stint in foster care - bearing in mind the youngest was still breastfeeding and removed from his mother for 3 nights and days - and because now they are back with their mother, their father is not present. Whilst we appreciate the need for these investigations and safeguarding of children, we also understand what it feels like from the families' perspectives, the impact it has on children and parents, and the stigmatisation the families feel in their own communities, and with authorities.

We have another family who have now been without their 3 children for over one year. There were investigations around child abuse relating to the way the mother was washing the children, again this is cultural and something that is completely normal where she was brought up, but not here in the UK. The fact that the investigation has dragged on for so long has had a lasting impact on the three children, the youngest of whom was only 5 at the time. This family and another we work with have had children moved from foster carer to foster carer, several times. There is also a shortage of host parents; and sometimes a lack of understanding from foster carers as to the cultural needs of the children, be it skin care, hair care or appropriate foods. It's all very difficult for all parties involved.

We are continuing to work closely with them and to make sure we advocate for all: children and parents. There needs to be a massive piece of work done within communities to help them understand the British legal system and British parenting, and what is acceptable and lawful in this country. To have lasting impact, this must be delivered by community leaders and peers.

SBO

English lessons

This term we've been delighted with our new **ESOL** lessons co-organised by Clare Hawkins of EEO and Elizabeth Curry at the Co-op Dome Room. An excellent start has been made with about 20 clients involved. Initially this was to cater for students of a similar level registered to begin at the institute in September, but as ever it did not quite work out that way. But we're nothing if not adaptable. Teachers Clare and Michele run a formal class on Fridays, and the informal Tuesday sessions are staffed by a pool of 10 volunteers. It's wonderful for the students to have individual attention or to work in small groups, and some good relationships have formed. Over the summer only the Tuesday sessions are running, and in September Clare will launch a new EEO course to which RAMA clients will be invited.

Seeking asylum: recent developments

According to Home Office figures, there were 74,751 asylum applications made in the UK in 2022. This compares to 244,000 made in Germany and 131,000 made in France during the same period. In that period, Germany made 230,000 initial decisions and France made 134,000, with first decisions delivered in 4/5 months. Compare that to the 18,699 first instance decisions made in the UK, where first decisions take on average a year and a half. The vast majority of asylum applicants in the UK are found to be in need of international protection, with a protection rate of 76% at first instance.

Reducing the backlog

The slow pace of decision-making has resulted in a huge backlog in asylum claims: now around 170,000. And this is the reason the government is forced to house asylum seekers in hotels, rather than the dedicated multi-occupancy housing that has been sufficient up to now. Claims are being processed at less than a quarter of the rate previously. Critics lay the blame on excessive pressure, lack of training and lack of status on those who do the job; and antiquated IT systems. In its effort to clear the backlog of *legacy claims* – those made before 28 June 2022 – by the end of 2023, the H.O. has now doubled the number of asylum caseworkers. It remains to be seen how effective this is, when staff are still leaving in the face of the demands to make life or death decisions with inadequate training, limited evidence, and with concern about the lawfulness of the Illegal Migration Bill. As one employee shared with a journalist at *The Independent*, he and colleagues [feel that](#) “plans to detain and deport asylum seekers without considering their claims would break international law”.

To achieve its aim of clearing the backlog of legacy cases (92,601), the H.O. has introduced a ‘streamlined asylum process’. Instead of the need for every individual to have a substantive interview (face-to-face with a H.O. caseworker), certain asylum seekers have instead received an asylum claim questionnaire (ACQ) to provide additional information which can potentially lead to a positive decision. An asylum claim at risk of a refusal will trigger a face-to-face interview. In the first tranche, since February, these ACQs only went out to nationals of high-grant countries: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria and Yemen – countries that on average have a 95% positive decision rate. A second tranche, since May, has included those from Iran and Iraq - the two highest nationality cohorts of outstanding claims – and to those from Sudan. To be clear, the questionnaires are difficult to complete. The questions are alternately complex or vague, or just unnecessary; they require some legal understanding; they are only produced in English; and they put the burden of proof on the claimant. Recipients have 20 working days to return questionnaires; they can complete them alone but are advised to seek the help of a solicitor. To date, it’s been [reported](#) that only 10% of ACQs have been filled in correctly (*The Times*, 9 May 2023).

See article on page 6 about the difficulties clients have finding legal assistance.

The only solution in reducing numbers waiting for decisions is for the Home Office to dramatically speed up processing through simplifying requirements, and providing far greater resources at the Home Office.

OISC registration

As you may know, an important element of RAMA’s upskilling as an organisation is to have staff qualified through the Office of Immigration Service Commissioner. This will give us lawful permission to provide immigration advice and guidance to clients, and will reduce our reliance on external partners, who are increasingly difficult to find. Ayse is currently studying to take the first exam, and if she is successful this will mean RAMA will become an OISC-registered organisation. Our director Simona, who practices as an immigration lawyer, is already qualified to level 3 as an OISC adviser, so has been providing invaluable help as a mentor. Our plan is to provide these services free of charge to our clients. There is great potential for us to expand into this, as there are NO legal aid providers in Essex, so there is likely to be high demand for these services from other partners. At a later date we may be able to accommodate external clients too. Depending on funding and capacity, we would like a second caseworker to complete this training next year.

Ukraine Report



Since the advent of the war in Ukraine, many countries have offered sanctuary to fleeing Ukrainians and the UK is no exception. As at 8 May there have been 173,500 Ukraine scheme visa holder arrivals in the UK; 51,100 under the Ukraine Family scheme, and 122,400 under the Ukraine Sponsorship scheme, more commonly known as the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Although we would much rather **all** those fleeing to the UK were offered the same welcome and resources offered to our Ukrainian visitors, we nevertheless have been proud to be part of the national programme offering refuge to our European cousins.

RAMA was commissioned by our very forward-thinking Communities team at Colchester City Council last spring, to support all those fleeing Ukraine holding visas under both schemes, in the wider Colchester Borough. Within Essex we are not aware of any other town, borough or city council which has specifically commissioned an organisation like ours to work in this way.

Under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, guests are housed by hosts for six months to a year, sometimes longer. Hosts receive a modest payment and, for the most part, these arrangements are working well. The family scheme works in a similar way, but no payments are offered. Initially our support to our Ukrainian friends comprised mainly visiting the newly arrived Ukrainian refugees in their hosts' homes, passing on the government's £200 emergency payment to the guests, sharing a wealth of information about life in the UK (and more specifically Colchester), and answering questions from both guests and hosts. On average we were making 6 or 7 visits to host families per week. Our work did not stop there. We helped make applications for Biometric Residence Permits, essential to extend our Ukrainian visitors' visas from 6 months to 3 years; we helped make applications for benefits such as Child Benefit and Universal Credit; we helped apply for school places, and so on. We have a client base of over 400 Ukrainian nationals. Although not technically part of our commission, we also regularly support Ukrainian clients who would be classed as out of area, for example from Chelmsford, Tendring, Babergh, Braintree... And our remit is wide: we not only provide practical help, but offer warm, friendly, emotional support whenever it is needed; our door is always open and the kettle is always on.

A year on, our work has changed. Hostings are coming to an end, either naturally at their planned six or 12-month limit, or because the host family's circumstances have changed and they need the room for a family member, or sometimes because the relationship between host and guest has deteriorated. We now find ourselves making homelessness applications to the Council; mediating between host and guest, and working really hard to re-match guests to new hosts. Our Ukrainian visitors are struggling in the same ways as UK residents. It is difficult to access social housing, rents are high, local housing allowance is low, energy bills are high. Our Ukrainian friends are without guarantors, resulting in huge difficulties accessing the private rental market.

But they are a resilient bunch. My colleague Natalie and I have met literally hundreds of mothers with children, separated from their partners and families and support networks, managing brilliantly under the circumstances. They may be missing their country, but they are doing their best to adjust, to settle here, to create a new life: finding jobs, learning English. And they are talented too! We have many gifted Ukrainian clients, proficient in badminton, football, archery, all forms of art and handicrafts... guitar, piano, clarinet, singing, dancing, the Bandura (the national instrument of Ukraine if anyone was wondering!).

Our Ukrainian friends may be constantly learning, but so are we; **we** have learned from **them**, exploring the culture that has been shared with us all at the varied events arranged by the now very well established Ukrainian community here in Colchester.

MMC

We continue our series of events at Cannock Mill with our second **Summer Supper** on 10th August at 7pm. Come along and share an evening with RAMA staff and volunteers in a lovely setting! The cost is a **£20** per person, and there will be two courses of **vegan delights**. Please bring along whatever you like to drink. There will be a raffle, and possibly live music. Click on this link to reserve a spot: [summer supper](#)



Foodbank

We have seen a lot of change recently to how we operate our Foodbank and from basically being on the brink of total closure, with the generous support of Colchester Foodbank and the Trussell Trust, we have been able to continue providing our clients with what is a lifeline for many of them.

We officially launched the new system in conjunction with CFB on 24 May and although it is a very different system from what our clients are used to, where they could choose their own food items on a weekly basis, they are now provided with pre-packed food parcels on a fortnightly basis. We currently have 132 clients registered with us (including several families), all of whom are not allowed to work or have no recourse to public funds due to their immigration status.

We have had a few teething problems which are mainly down to the specific contents of the parcels as our clients are not familiar with processed or tinned foods and like to cook from scratch, specifically asking for staples such as cooking oil, flour, salt, sugar and eggs. The weight of the parcels is another issue we have found, as most of our clients walk to the food bank, sometimes 3 miles each way, and with lots of cans these can be very heavy. In an ideal world, if we could tailor the parcels to suit our own clients' needs this would be wonderful, but in the meantime we are working with what we have.

Items proving not so popular are tinned soup, tinned potatoes, rice pudding, tinned peas, jam, tea and pasta sauce. This means we now have shelves laden with surplus food which we can offer to clients in between their fortnightly parcels, or to other clients who are struggling to make ends meet. We do top up with donations of fruit, vegetables and bread twice weekly from Marks & Spencer and we collect donations from Aldi. We are still receiving plenty of donations from the local community and in the last month have taken in bicycles, baby equipment, towels, curtains, bedding, kitchenware, clothes and shoes. Our main problem at the moment is lack of space as the food parcels are bulky, but this should only be a temporary issue until we move into our new premises.

SD



Problems with legal aid for asylum-seeking clients

Legal aid is a government-funded scheme that helps individuals who are unable to afford the costs of legal advice and representation. In the UK, legal aid is available to some asylum seekers, and to individuals who have been granted refugee status or humanitarian protection. Asylum seekers require a lawyer for a variety of reasons, including appropriate legal representation, understanding their legal rights and entitlements, and navigating complex legal procedures. It is essential for asylum seekers to have a lawyer who specialises in immigration law and can provide guidance and support throughout the asylum claims procedure. Additionally, a solicitor can assist asylum applicants with document preparation, communication with the Home Office, and court representation.

However, due to a lack of funding, the majority of law firms have been limiting the number of legal aid clients on their caseloads, which has had a negative impact on our clients. The government's introduction of ACQs has increased the burden on solicitors who feel they cannot meet the deadlines, making the situation even worse for our clients. Some of our clients have had their scheduled appointments cancelled, followed by letters terminating their legal representation, leaving them without hope and causing them anxiety about the outcome of their asylum claim. Some clients have not even had their first interview, while others have, but are still awaiting representation in court.

In response, our devoted team has worked assiduously throughout the past month to ensure that the justice and human rights of our clients are protected. They have made sure that clients do not miss out on the legal access that is crucial to their cases by combing through hundreds of law firms across the country to locate a solicitor for each client. This effort has been fruitful, as we have now had a small number of clients accepted. As a result, our clients' confidence has been restored, and their anxiety has been significantly reduced.

SN

Community Activities



As **Community Coordinator** I coordinate and organize activities for all clients, past and present, with whom we are still in touch and who are making a life in Colchester. Within this there are smaller communities around the activities that are appropriate for different cohorts of clients. Interestingly, within this there are groups specifically for women, such as the **Coffee Mornings** and **Sewing Group**, whilst many groups, which started for men's mental health, now welcome women. These include **drumming, table tennis** and **Together We Grow**. Sometimes we must limit numbers because of

equipment and location, or we have specific clients in mind, but any problems that arise can usually be sorted out... the key is good communication with me by phone or email!



In the past few months our groups have thrived and, once again, if anyone has a client or friend who would like to join the Sewing Group they should contact Geraldine Grundy via the office. The Sewing Group provides use of machines, tuition where needed and a friendly atmosphere in which to work.

The Table Tennis Group which is based at the Sixth Form college has had to navigate college exams and events, and sometimes meets at the RAMA office. Clare Smee, Peter Lawes and Pete Newell make people very welcome and have got to know the regulars very well. The Drumming Group can no longer meet at Firstsite, owing to the new opening hours, but Hassan and the drummers have successfully transferred to the office TC room. And our activities at Together We Grow's Big Garden continue to be lively and enjoyable with gardening, cooking, bicycle maintenance and therapeutic chat all on the menu.

Some of the items made in our **Afghan Creative Sewing Group** were displayed at the Mercury Theatre during Refugee Week and the theatre treated the women and their families to a freshly cooked Afghan meal. The plan is currently that the Home Office contract with the hotel is coming to an end in August and our friends will be put into whatever emergency accommodation the Council can find. It is an unsettling situation for all concerned. These are people who have served the British well and include engineers, a teacher, translators, a dentist, and the Minister for Internal Security whose home and car are now used by the Taliban.



As well as regular activities we have had a number of one-off events. Although the Folk Club at the Arts Centre is on holiday, clients have attended concerts by a French folk group from Avignon (a Colchester Twin Town) and by an Indian group. Both were great fun and had lots of us up dancing and joining in the singing. These are advertised through clients' social media and tend to be attended by groups of about 25 clients who have been in Colchester a long time. I try hard to extend our reach and each time a new person may turn up... last week a bumper 6 new people came. Ten clients also attended an opera, *The Elixir of Love*, at Layer Marney Tower recently. Most really enjoyed it, though 3 appreciated the setting, but did not return to watch the second half!

We are also occasionally given tickets by the Colchester Symphony Orchestra and the St. Botolph's Music Society and these classical, concerts are enjoyed too.





A very different one-off activity was a walk from Langham Church to East Bergholt, entitled 'Walking with Constable'. This was an invitation from The Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and digital researchers from other university departments. An initial 10 clients became 6 for the walk. The researchers wanted the reactions and opinions of non-English people to the views and also to the use of their technology, which involved looking at a view and then seeing a digital overlay of what Constable had painted. It was a very pleasant day, the company was good and an Iranian/German woman got on very well with the 4 Iranians with us. Saad as usual took great pictures and videos and the stars of the walk were the llamas we encountered on the way. What this trip showed was the thirst for getting into the countryside and we do have lovely country walks within the Colchester boundaries which we should explore.



Last but not least, the Sixth Form College Friends Not Foes and Alison Shelley took children and parents from their homework group to see *The Lion King* in London, with funding from a recent charity award.

I hope this gives you another taste of our Community activities and what is going on out of the RAMA office.

EC

The original Slow Cooker Club

In our last newsletter we shared news of some funding we had received for 'food education' which was put to excellent use in our Slow Cooker Club. This time – and belatedly – we'd like to acknowledge the inspiration behind that initiative.

The awesome Les Nicoll has been a driving force in voluntary work in north-east Essex for many years. In 2006 he established NEST (www.nestassist.co.uk), which supports needy families in the community in countless ways, including providing furniture and household items, warm clothing, Christmas hampers, and other practical help, all free of charge and free of judgement. As an organisation, RAMA has already benefitted on countless occasions from NEST's generosity, as they have delivered beds, washing machines, bedding, crockery and cutlery – all without cost to our clients. Two years ago, NEST introduced a new project it had secured funding for: its own slow cooker club. The format NEST uses is to deliver to identified families a brand-new slow cooker plus a comprehensive starter pack which includes basic ingredients, seasonings and utensils. Then, every week for six weeks, they deliver to each family the fresh ingredients for one recipe in an accompanying booklet. This initiative has reached over 250 families struggling to manage rising prices for food and fuel. In response to the winter cost-of-living crisis this past year, and together with Independent Age, they extended the project to over 80 vulnerable older adults.



As we were already a partner, and in his desire to meet the needs of all parts of the community, Les arranged to include in the project ten of RAMA's most disadvantaged families. Moreover, being respectful of different cultural backgrounds, and "*wanting our new clients to be able to enjoy the foods they ate before being forced to flee and not necessarily be made to follow our traditions,*" he sought advice on including alternative recipes. Thereafter NEST provided funds for the weekly purchase of ingredients from appropriate shops and delivery to our client families. Needless to say, the chosen families were absolutely thrilled to be included in this community initiative at such a difficult time. They were delighted to share with RAMA news and pictures of their successes and were inspired to adapt the recipes and to share new ones. Since the project ran, the participants have continued to prepare nourishing, healthy meals for their families.

We are so grateful to NEST for including us, and for providing cost free the equipment these families can use again and again. We thank them for reaching out to us specifically for this project. It is testament to the genuinely inclusive outlook of Les and his team and their desire to offer support *wherever* it is needed. We are very proud of our association with an organisation that does such incredible work locally, and we look forward to the partnership continuing as long as we both are necessary.