

# Newsletter - November 2023



## The King's Award for Voluntary Service

*The MBE for volunteer groups*



We are thrilled to announce we have been awarded the **King's Award for Voluntary Service**, given to volunteer groups to recognise exceptional service within communities.

It is the most significant accolade we could be given.

We would like to say a big **THANK YOU** to all our valued volunteers for their commitment, passion, and hard work in helping RAMA grow.

We could only have achieved this with their support, and can only continue to provide our services because we are so ably assisted. In a climate that is becoming increasingly difficult, the non-judgmental helping hand our volunteers provide in so many ways - such a big part of who we are - brings welcome relief in very challenging lives.

It's a sign of our times that there's more negative than positive in this newsletter. Please don't let that put you off: it's all the more important that the challenges confronting refugees and asylum seekers are widely understood. On the plus side, there are some great photos to look at!

You will have heard of the government's determination to close 'asylum hotels'— fifty across the country by January – to reduce spiralling costs. What is not so well known is that these costs actually result from private housing contractors' excessive charges. One local company made £62 million profit to Jan 2023 ([see article](#)). The closing of the local hotel by mid-December has brought much anguish about what comes next for residents. Most will go elsewhere and lose the friends and connections they have made in the town and at Colchester Institute. It is very sad for our team, for other services who have been involved, and for volunteers who have developed relationships with them. We can only hope they find at least something positive wherever they are taken.



The British Red Cross recently issued its '**State of the Nation: the UK asylum system**' report, which can be found via its website with this [LINK](#). Here are some headline figures:  
(for the year ending June 2023 unless otherwise stated)

- People seeking asylum made up under 7% of the 1.16 million people migrating to the UK in 2022.
  - 97,390 people applied for asylum in the UK. In the same period, 905 people were resettled here safely (ie on official government resettlement routes).
  - 4,671 family reunion visas were granted, the lowest number in a 12-month period since 2014.
  - The asylum backlog is 175,457, the highest ever recorded, and a 450% increase in the last five years.
  - In 2014, nearly 9 in 10 people who applied for asylum received a decision within six months. At the end of 2022, just over 1 in 10 did. In June 2023, 80 per cent of the people in the asylum backlog have been waiting more than six months for an initial decision.
  - There were 13 asylum applications for every 10,000 people living in Britain in 2022, compared with 22 applications for every 10,000 people in the EU.
- Sources: UNHCR Global Trends 2022, Home Office, ONS*

## Refugees facing homelessness

**The British Red Cross predicts as many as 53,000 individuals who have been newly granted refugee status will be homeless on our streets this winter.**

Huge numbers of people are being granted refugee status in Colchester and around the country. It's wonderful news. However, new Home Office procedures mean that they are often given less than a week from receipt of their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) to make the move from supported asylum accommodation. They have historically needed the BRP before they can claim Universal Credit and open a bank account etc. Without benefits, which can take upwards of 5 weeks to arrive, and with no housing in place, we are now seeing as many as 25 people a week becoming street homeless. This is a shocking figure, replicated around the country and clearly designed to make life as hard as possible. Some have lived here for years awaiting decisions that should take 6 months. They may have attended college, found work, have friends and volunteered in the community, and at the point of getting status they face destitution. ONLY those with serious vulnerabilities will be deemed by the Council to have a priority need; this means the Council is unable to assist the vast majority of people. You might think being a newly granted refugee would qualify somebody as vulnerable, but that is not the case. This extends even to clients with positive conclusive grounds decisions showing that they are a victim of trafficking, modern slavery or even torture. It is both shocking and absolutely heartbreaking.

Beacon House, the Rough Sleepers team, CENS, YES, Emmaus, YMCA and others work with us where possible and can make a huge difference. But these numbers mean we are now having to find other routes, including covering costs of the most vulnerable to have a short stay in a hotel/ hostel/ B&B. We would sincerely welcome any donations that come in to help with this (see below). The Communities Team at the Council have a Lead for Refugees and Asylum Seekers who makes our lives immeasurably easier. It means that they actively consult with us in their efforts to use the money granted to the Council for these residents in the most meaningful way.

Saying no to up to 28 people a week is impossibly hard. One example is a young man from Eritrea - Alyas (name changed for privacy) - who has been tortured and has lost the use of an eye. Although he has lived here awaiting a decision for over 2 years, Alyas has not yet had a mental health assessment. This is in part because he has been an amazing participant at the local college and in our activities, both of which have a therapeutic value. However, it in no way negates his need for support. It is a requirement for the Council's housing team to have sight of mental health or physical health reports, and although Alyas has physical health reports, he did not automatically qualify for assistance when he became homeless with 3 days' notice on getting refugee status recently.

Alyas had found a job. He was earning £400 a month on a zero-hours contract but his bosses liked him and encouraged him, and in time he might have been able to earn more. We managed to apply for Universal Credit in advance because the letter granting him status arrived before the BRP card. However, landlords require full-time work, no benefits and, most often, a guarantor. So Alyas was trapped between having a job or being eligible for housing support... and had to stop accepting work. That makes him eligible - in 4 weeks' time - for housing benefit. In the meantime, we are paying £44 a night for those four weeks, and he is using his leftover wages for food and transport and phone etc. When he is destitute, he will be able to access the night shelter with housing benefit. He also contributed much of that towards his accommodation. It's not perfect but it's one less person with vulnerabilities on the streets.

If you feel able to sponsor a night for him (£44) – and at time of writing we have 22 left to cover – please do consider making a donation through our local giving page: <https://localgiving.org/charity/rama/>

Ironically, Suella Braverman's statement about living on the streets being a lifestyle choice appears to have been in anticipation of this crisis. It's dismaying that the work we did several years ago in the Calais 'Jungle' may be what we end up doing here on home turf – when people are forced onto the streets during the winter months with nothing but a tent and sleeping bag. From what we have heard, this is already become a reality for over 100 newly-granted refugees in another part of Essex.

For further information on this crisis please see

<https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/migration-and-displacement/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/move-on-period-more-than-50000-refugees-could-be-homeless-by-end-of-year>

### Staff changes

We're hugely sad to have lost our very experienced and committed senior caseworker **Shelley**, who is - temporarily we hope - busy with her family. We look forward to seeing her back again sometime in the future.

We are delighted to welcome on board a new caseworker, **Nathan**, who is new to the town and has survived a very intensive first fortnight in the RAMA office. He will be training in complex casework, and will continue to work alongside Ayse and director Simona on immigration cases.

As you may know, we recently qualified to be registered with the Office of Immigration Services Commissioner or OISC (thank you, Ayse, for passing the exams with flying colours!). Now we can provide increased immigration advice and services to our clients - an important development for RAMA as we operate in a county where there are NO legal Aid providers.

The team now benefits from the addition of **Jenny** 2 days per week focusing on education. Jenny, who spends the rest of her week in Colchester Institute's ESOL department, has several years' experience with our clients at the Institute.

And finally **Leena** and **Bado**, who began as volunteer interpreters but now assist with casework (f-t and p-t respectively).

More details to follow in another newsletter.



### The Bibby Stockholm Barge

Following the government's announcement that 50 asylum hotels will soon be closed, early November saw seven RAMA clients, accommodated at The Holiday Inn, served Notices of Relocation to the Bibby Stockholm barge. Understandably, this was deeply unsettling and distressing news for those who received the letters. We have all seen reports in the news about the controversial container ship and many organisations have voiced serious concerns regarding the conditions on board. It is only recently available again after the first residents had to be temporarily evacuated owing to an outbreak of Legionnaire's disease. The Fire Brigade Union has described the container a "potential death trap", while the Home Office continues to claim that the "health and welfare of asylum seekers remains the utmost priority". However as yet there is no commissioned health service team working with those on board. Portland has just one doctors' surgery serving 14,000 local residents and its dental and secondary services are already stretched since the closure of Portland Community Hospital.



*Home Office coach with 8 staff arriving to escort two asylum-seeking residents of The Holiday Inn to the Bibby Stockholm barge on the morning of 07.11.23.*

While debates surrounding the use of the Bibby as temporary asylum accommodation are widespread, the history of the company that owns the barge, Bibby Marine, is less well known. The organisation One Life To Live recently researched and uncovered that John Bibby, the company's founder, co-owned three slaving ships which, between 1805 and 1807, transported 737 people from Africa to the Caribbean. Bibby used the resulting profits to set up the Bibby Line. As One Life To Live points out: "In 2023, it cannot be right for this company to be holding people of colour, against their will, on one of its vessels." Given that some of those to be housed on the barge may already have faced conditions of modern slavery at the hands of traffickers during their voyages to the UK, the irony of placing them on what has been described 'a floating prison', founded on the proceeds of slavery, seems particularly inhumane.

Despite the Notices of Removal, the RAMA team has worked tirelessly to challenge the removals. Thanks to the dedicated work of the team, 5 out of 7 of the removals have been postponed while two are under Pre-Action Protocols (PAPs) which may lead to judicial review, in which we will be supported by specialist civil rights solicitors Dayton Pierce Glynn. Although we were very sad to see 2 of our clients escorted from The Holiday Inn, we will continue to challenge these removals and future notices.

Alongside other groups and organisations also voicing complaints about conditions on board the barge, we at RAMA will always campaign for those who come to the UK to seek sanctuary to be appropriately accommodated and treated with dignity and compassion.

## Clients in dispersal accommodation

In the last three months we have had plenty of work to do serving our dispersal and asylum-seeking clients. We have seen a massive increase in those being granted refugee status, which is always a joy for us to hear...

However the celebrations are only for a brief moment, for the reasons discussed in the previous article, and most of our attention is on working with vulnerable clients in crisis situations: mainly single men and also families living in Colchester and Tendring district.



At the same time there has been a flurry of new arrivals. We take time to register them and make them feel welcome. RAMA is the first service they come to on arrival in Colchester, and quite often they have problems they cannot comprehend owing to language barriers and the lack of access to support.

The pressures of finding legal representation have eased slightly after a local solicitors' firm took on some urgent cases. We are, however, still in the early stages of ironing out problems and making arrangements so that referrals can be made for all our clients who need legal representation, both urgent and non-urgent.

GP registrations are another ongoing issue. A number of GPs have closed their registrations for quite some time now, and new patients who live in the catchment area are not able to register. Finding a dentist also remains a big challenge. We have many clients suffering in agony from tooth pain: one client pulled out his own teeth after it became unbearable. To see him in our office in so much pain was incredibly hard.

We are also now seeing asylum seekers from the large base at Wethersfield. Technically this location is out of our area, but there is no similar organisation based nearby, so we need to help where we can. We have heard various reports about conditions there, perhaps the most significant being the lack of wifi. The residents have been dropping into our office – sporadically at first, but in recent weeks there have been days when it's been over 100 — hoping for SIM cards (for internet data), supplied by our partners at UK Databank and The Good Things Foundation. We try our best to manage such large numbers when they come in; they only have a short window as the bus drops them off and leaves again an hour later. The cards are a lifeline for them, enabling them some relief and independence, such as the chance to contact another charity for basic needs like clothing and footwear as most have arrived with only the clothes they are wearing and no other possessions.

In September the RAMA football team travelled to Oxford to play a much anticipated fixture against a refugee team local to the city, Oxford Phoenix FC. The match was won by the visitors (RAMA) in dramatic fashion having to come twice from behind to claim a 3 - 2 victory in the closing minutes. It was a wonderful day out for all involved and we even managed to take a brief minibus tour around the city of dreaming spires prior to kick-off!



Finally, we have the best and amazing partnership support from across the board. Thanks to their generosity and kindness, our RAMA football team were offered tickets from the British Red Cross to watch Colchester United play at the Colchester stadium. Colchester won the match 5 - 4 which made the day even more memorable. The group that attended had never had the opportunity to attend such an event. We received really positive feedback and appreciation from our team who said they felt much love and had a fantastic time together.

**HU & CM**