



Newsletter - March 2024

Opening this newsletter is the delightful news that for the first time RAMA has a patron! We are thrilled that **Nick Butterworth**, our longtime supporter and renowned author and



illustrator, has agreed to take on the mantle.

Nick Butterworth is a best-selling author and illustrator of children's books, most famously the Percy the Park Keeper series, which have sold in their millions across the world. His books have made their way across the Atlantic, and in every other direction, including to Europe, China, Australia, Africa and South America. Percy has even been spreading the message for a kinder world in both Russia and Ukraine!



Nick's books are now used as part of the reading and writing curriculum for many schools in the UK, so Nick – or at least Percy – is a household name for children everywhere. The author has won numerous awards including the top award from the Society of Illustrators and the Nestlé Gold Award. *In a career spanning over forty years*, Nick has written and illustrated many more books for children including *The Whisperer*, *Thud!*, *Albert Le Blanc*, *Trixie the Witch's Cat*, *Tiger*, *Jingle Bells*, *Amanda's Butterfly* and *Q Pootle 5*. The children's animated TV series about Nick's friendly alien, Q Pootle 5, has been broadcast in over a hundred countries.

Nick Butterworth was born in London, but moved at the age of two, to Romford, Essex, where his parents took over a corner shop, or as Nick likes to call it (revealing his own priorities) a sweet shop. Having initially intended to go to art college, he instead took up a role as an apprentice typographic designer at a printing company. He quickly progressed to working with major London design consultancies before founding his own graphic design business. He has also worked as a children's television presenter, signwriter, carpenter and college lecturer. He has written illustrated stories for a national newspaper. He is in demand as a speaker at conferences and book festivals – where he often spends hours signing books after presentations that include storytelling and live drawing – and also in schools where he continues to inspire new generations with a love of stories and books.

His phenomenal success makes Nick one of the most popular author/illustrators working today. At RAMA we are honoured that he is to be our patron. He has been a supporter for a number of years: donating boxes of books and signed copies – distributed to many clients' children – and supporting us via his own social media channels. We are

excited about this new partnership and look forward to welcoming him to all the upcoming local and RAMA events that he has time to attend.

Nick says...

"I feel very honoured. RAMA It is an organisation that truly puts people first, helping those who are in most need in a great variety of practical ways. They are wonderfully kind and genuinely care about the plight of those who, for whatever reason, find themselves spiralling downwards with no safety net or parachute. They have helped countless individuals and families to successfully get back on their feet. It's a privilege to be asked, and I'm delighted to accept, the invitation to become a patron."



With this newsletter appearing only quarterly it's impossible to include ALL our news, but for a snapshot of recent activity, read on...

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We were honoured again in February when we received a visit from the **High Sheriff of Essex**, Charles Bishop, and his wife, Nellie. They joined us for an informal Friday lunch during which they listened with great attention to the team's descriptions of their work. It was a real pleasure for us to host such curious and thoughtful guests, who asked pertinent questions and were clearly sympathetic to the difficulties our clients face. We thank them for their time and interest. RAMA staff also learned that the High Sheriff is the sovereign's judicial representative in the county. The word *sheriff* is a contraction of the term *shire reeve*, denoting a royal official (*reeve*) responsible on behalf of the King for law and order in the county (or *shire*). The office, held for one year, is one of the oldest in the country, possibly dating back to the tenth century. Nowadays the High Sheriff's functions are largely ceremonial, and include attendance at royal visits and proclamation of a new Sovereign, as well as acting as a returning officer in county constituencies during elections.



Charles Bishop (4th from right) with RAMA staff

Supporting volunteers

When RAMA (formerly Refugee Action-Colchester) was founded in the summer of 2015, everyone on the team was a volunteer. As the work done by RAMA was noticed by local and national authorities, funding was provided to support full-time and part-time staff. However, the work done by volunteers has always been the core of RAMA and its principles.

The things volunteers do at RAMA include, but are not limited to, being at the reception, food bank, interpreting and translation, befriending, running social activities, and accompanying clients to appointments. As volunteers are on the frontline, they also need support and training. Therefore, in 2023, a **Reflective Practice Group** was created for volunteers, especially those in the office.

Reflective practice aims to help with questions without easy or straightforward answers and encourages us to ask more questions in complex situations (Kurtz, 2019). Even though the term "Reflective Practice" was coined in 1980 by Donald Schon, its rationale can be traced back to the Socratic method (Schon, 1983).

Similarly, before the Volunteers' Reflective Practice Group was set up, some volunteers would come together casually and try to learn from each other's experiences. What we did was to create a structure around this and add a facilitator to the group. The group meets once a month and tries to find ways to tackle the difficult / complex situations volunteers face at the office. They share experiences and learn from each other, with Dr Mehmet Demir, the facilitator of the group, providing training and practical tips when necessary. A further positive impact of these meetings is the chance for volunteers to meet each other, since with 70+ helpers on the RAMA register, in and out of the office at different times, it is not easy to make connections.

Dr Mehmet Demir, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Lead

Following the government's announcement at start of the year in which the PM and Home Secretary claimed to have

processed the c100,000 asylum claims in the 'legacy backlog' (you may well ask whose legacy they are referring to!) the number of **Home Office (HO) decisions** has slowed considerably for dispersed asylum seekers in the Colchester area. Whilst we, along with our local partners, are still supporting many clients to find suitable accommodation once they receive the happy news that they have been accepted as refugees in the UK and their HO support ceases, the homelessness crisis of the final few months of 2023 has eased somewhat. However, the mass evictions from HO dispersal accommodation in late 2023 and early 2024 have resulted in a backfilling of dispersal accommodation and RAMA caseworkers are welcoming new clients to Colchester on an unprecedented scale. This, along with the casework around those who appear to have slipped through the net of the recent initiative to process 'legacy backlog' cases, is keeping all at RAMA very busy but also allowing us to make new friends and offer all the support we can to those most in need. **CM**

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The month of **Ramadan** holds significant spiritual and cultural importance for the global Muslim community, serving as a period of intense self reflection, heightened devotion, and increased acts of charity and compassion. Beyond the physical act of fasting from dawn until sunset, Ramadan is a holistic experience encompassing various dimensions of personal and communal growth.

Muslims view Ramadan as an opportunity for spiritual purification and self discipline, in which they foster a sense of empathy for those who are less fortunate. Charity, or *zakat*, plays a crucial role during this month, as Muslims are encouraged to share their blessings with the less fortunate. This often includes providing meals for those in need, contributing to charitable causes, and supporting various community initiatives. The spirit of Ramadan encourages Muslims to reflect on their privileges and actively to engage in acts of kindness and social responsibility such as reaching out to marginalized groups and advocating for inclusive policies that address the unique challenges faced by these communities.

In the global context, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges faced by Muslim communities, including refugees, in different parts of the world, such as in the United Kingdom. Refugees often encounter unique struggles related to displacement, cultural adjustment, and socio-economic integration. During Ramadan, the sense of community becomes even more crucial as refugees may find solace in connecting with fellow Muslims, sharing the traditions of Ramadan, and receiving support from local communities. In the UK, Muslim organizations, charities, and individuals frequently come together to organize events, *iftars* (breaking of the fast), and other initiatives to ensure that refugees feel welcomed and supported during this sacred month. As well as addressing immediate needs such as meals, these foster a sense of belonging and solidarity within the broader Muslim community.

In essence, Ramadan serves as a time for Muslims worldwide to strengthen their connection with God, cultivate empathy for others, and actively contribute to building a compassionate and supportive community. Through acts of charity, community engagement, and reflection, Muslims aim to deepen their spiritual connection while positively impacting the lives of those around them, including refugees seeking solace and stability in their new home. **LA**



We are enormously grateful to the wonderful Jenny Moss, **National Landscape for All Officer**, who has provided our clients with several opportunities to visit the countryside in north-east Essex. These day trips out usually involve a

guided walk, lunch and train transport to and from a starting point. Our clients have hugely enjoyed discovering the geography and history of our area. Most recently, a group visited the pretty hamlet of Flatford to walk in the footsteps of painter John Constable through the places that inspired his most famous paintings, to share a meal, enjoy a craft activity and roast marshmallows over a bonfire. All participants (and our accompanying staff and volunteers) have come back glowing from these active days out in the fresh air, and delighted with what they have learnt.



www.coastandheaths-NL.org.uk www.dedhamvale-NL.org.uk

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Social Media

At RAMA, we are thrilled to share how our digital platform has been supporting asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in north-east Essex, thanks to the incredible support of our community. Since our social media relaunch in 2023, our online presence has blossomed into a hub for education, action, and empathy. Our posts celebrate good news, share real-life stories, and provide valuable information about the challenges faced by our clients. They also allow us to express our gratitude for your generous donations.

The wave of support we have received has been truly uplifting. Our online community is growing day-by-day and becoming a space where people can learn more about RAMA's work and how they can contribute. Each *like*, *share* and *comment* reflects the unity and kindness that defines our online community.

Our social media appeals and requests are answered by many generous individuals. Our Local Giving page is our main source of financial donations which we use to support our clients: from paying for a night in a hotel to making someone safe from domestic violence, to paying for interpreting services. We also use donations for destitution payments and to buy resources for clients in hotels. In an appeal for two Honduran women to assist them with their education and transport we raised over £900 with the help of the community. We have also been able to highlight the generosity of local businesses such as Dr Chippy's Restaurant and Takeaway, which offers free meals during Ramadan, to individuals of all faiths or none, with donations as small as £5 from community members.



Looking ahead, we remain committed to enhancing our social media presence and reaching even more people. The support from those online helps us to make a real difference in the lives of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in our area. We extend sincere thanks to every one of you for the continuous support that enables us to fulfil the mission of

RAMA. Big things have come from our social media: please keep *liking*, *sharing*, and *commenting* on our posts!

OL

Operations

When the global scene is so full of conflict, it is important to keep alert to injustices closer to home. It is often such injustices that, in other countries, spark rebellion or crises. One that needs addressing locally in Essex is causing destitution and ongoing suffering for a growing number of RAMA clients. **No recourse to public funds – NRPF** – is a condition usually attached to somebody's immigration status. It means the individual or couple cannot access benefits nor, in most cases, work, which can spiral into homelessness. Essex County Council has NO funds for supporting anyone, except children, with this condition in place. Separately, we are working with Together Free and other statutory and voluntary partners determined to end modern slavery in Colchester, Chelmsford and Southend. Yet there is an intersection here that is counterintuitive. Homelessness is one of the greatest causes of exploitation and abuse. If, as a society, we have no funds to support those who are at risk of destitution, and if we are not prepared to invest in assisting them to find alternative means of existing, then we cannot be shocked when individuals in this group become so vulnerable they succumb to exploitation.

RAMA and other voluntary groups are often the *only* organisations whose policies do not exclude these people from support. But we have little, if any, funding to provide accommodation, food and clothing while we work on resolving complex and often challenging cases to find a route for a person who may have nothing left. The most urgent of these cases relate to domestic violence/abuse victims who are on a spousal route. For those who leave their British partner (and thus their right to support as a spouse) taking their children but often no belongings, there is no access to public funds or accommodation – even a refuge is out of reach. We all assume these cases are supported by statutory agencies or charities but nationwide there are only a handful of beds available for victims with NRPF. Last year we spent £23,000 on supporting such victims while our immigration team made applications to get temporary leave and ultimately Indefinite Leave to Remain for these victims. Funding for issues like this is a challenge as most people do not understand how this shocking situation could arise.

We are grateful to our Integrated Care Board for providing us additional funding for the immigration caseworker to make sure we continue to support these people at a time when nobody else can.

MW
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Our **Slow Cooker Club for 2024** began with the first of six sessions on 12



February with good attendance and a positive, fun- filled atmosphere. Many of our clients were already eager and waiting for the classes to start.

In the

class we showed them how to use a slow cooker and its advantages, the most important of which are energy efficiency and the ability to leave it cooking, knowing that with minimum effort, you will have a healthy nutritious meal at the end of the day.

Each session begins by giving participants an opportunity to taste a dish that I have prepared beforehand and this is followed by a demonstration of the preparation and cooking process. They are then provided with the same ingredients as I have used and after this they are able to replicate the dish for themselves. Finally, everyone is encouraged to share a photo of their work on our WhatsApp group.

I recently attended a series of cooking classes organised by Jamie Oliver's 'Ministry of Food' and I have been able to apply and incorporate some of the skills that I learned on the course. For example, I was able to pass on what I had learned about knife skills and safety and also helpful nutritional information. I am hoping to apply more of what I learned in the future.

Each session also includes what we consider to be the most important ingredient of all - fun! We have music and a good dose of spontaneous dancing, as well as laughter. The dancing is an opportunity to encourage our clients to showcase their culture through dance.

Impact

The feedback from our clients has been really encouraging and for some clients especially it has had a particularly positive impact on their mental wellbeing. All those who have participated have shared that they always look forward to the classes. We are taking a break during Ramadan.

**Joyce McIntyre, Food
Education Lead**

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Complex casework

This past month we were excited to see the fruits of our efforts in helping **victims of domestic abuse**, as three such clients received their own status, removing their dependence on their perpetrators' visas, and allowing them their freedom and a pathway for them to remain in the UK. We would like to emphasise that domestic abuse is an issue affecting all genders, and we have found that to be true for our clients. For one of our clients there was an issue of child abuse as well as domestic violence, and it was a tricky bit of business to work with both of these claims and find refuge, accommodation and care for this client and her three children as she fled from her perpetrator. For these clients the support they have experienced is quite literally life changing. It is the same story for each: we see them emerging from victimhood with new confidence and hope, taking control of their lives, and moving beyond the trauma they faced. The client who shows up at our office now is not the same one we first met, standing taller, radiating a newfound sense of peace and joy. **NN**

A collection made by our loyal supporters **Friends Not Foes** at **Colchester Sixth Form College**, with wonderful boxes of toiletries and other items prepared specifically for disabled clients in living in difficult circumstances in a Tendring hotel.

The **RAMA football programme** has steadily grown and now has up to 50 participants per week. We have added an extra day to the weekly schedule to accommodate the growing numbers and now play on a Monday evening with an additional session on Thursday evenings where we enjoy the company (and competition!) of teachers at the **Colchester Sixth Form College**. RAMA remains extremely grateful for the generosity of the college in providing its facilities for our football programme; without this we would not be able to continue. In further exciting news, with the help of our partners at **Colchester United Community Foundation**, the RAMA team have secured an away day fixture at the end of April against a refugee/asylum-seeker team attached to Premier League club Fulham FC. All are looking forward to a fantastic day out and a gripping encounter at Fulham's training ground in London.... Come on you RAMA!!!! **CM**

Hate Crime: Firstly, a reminder that RAMA is a HIRC [Hate Incident Reporting Centre]. From January 2023 to January 2024, according to statistics released by Essex Police, there

were 102 racial incidents reported in the town centre area [Castle Ward], making it a hate crime hotspot. RAMA is located in the town centre and some of these racial incidents will have been reported by our clients. Racial incidents run at almost double the next highest category, homophobia, which saw some 52 incidents recorded in the Castle Ward area. Other incidents relating to protected characteristics, eg victims abused because of their religion or for being transgender, were also reported at lower rates. These incidents affect victims, their families and the community as a whole. RAMA continues to work closely and collaboratively with Essex Police to maintain a safe community and prevent further incidents.

Colchester Carnival: RAMA is delighted to be participating once again in the upcoming carnival on 13 July. We are involved in the pre-planning meetings and preparing well in advance to make it another spectacular event. It is a multinational, diverse and amazingly colourful day and a couple of our talented clients are gearing up to perform on stage. We will of course have our RAMA stall for you to visit, and many of our clients will be attending, participating or offering support, as we hope you will too! **HU**

RAMA clients spent a day in Walton to sample the local fish & chips and participate in an art work shop at the Nose Bookshop & Cafe. It was every one's first attempt at **pyrography** but the quality of the work produced was exceptional and the experience was thoroughly enjoyed by all.

Immigration Law: Recent changes for victims of domestic abuse

There have been numerous changes to UK immigration law. These frequent revisions have adverse effects on clients, not only due to the alterations themselves, but also because of the dearth of legal aid and competent legal services. One recent change is the **destitution domestic violence concession (DDVC)** application, which previously provided access to public funds and granted victims of domestic abuse/violence three months' leave to remain. Victims could also apply for *indefinite* leave to remain (ILR), before the end of this three-month concession, under the Appendix Victim of Domestic Abuse.

To apply for permission as a victim of domestic violence (even if their visa has expired), migrants must be in the UK as the spouse or partner of a British citizen, a member of the armed forces, someone who is settled, someone with leave to remain as a refugee, or an EEA national with pre-settled status (provided that this leave was not granted as a joining family member). Recently, this concession was expanded to include victims of domestic abuse who have had,

or last had, leave as a 'partner of a person with permission to enter or stay on a work and economic route or as a student or graduate'. This broadens the scope to include a wide range of dependant partners. The newly introduced acronym for this concession is the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC).

However, the newly added group of dependant partners of workers/students/graduates are **not eligible** to apply for ILR as victims of domestic abuse under the new Appendix Victim of Domestic Abuse. They will have no leave at the end of the three months' concession leave; thus, we strongly oppose this change as an organisation regulated by OISC. We are also deeply concerned about the potential negative consequences of this amendment.

Many clients struggle to obtain competent immigration advice, and some have been advised by organisations or individuals who are not regulated by, or registered with, OISC or another approved professional body, even though providing immigration advice without regulation is a criminal offence. These situations can lead to severe problems in the clients' lives, with some overstaying their visas/leave as a result. In these circumstances, victims of domestic abuse may make ill-informed decisions to apply for three months' concession leave, unaware that they have **no right** to apply for ILR. Given this change, it is more crucial than ever for victims of domestic abuse to seek specialist regulated legal advice before applying for the concession. **AUD**

The National Audit Office (NAO) has revealed that the UK will pay at least £370 million to **Rwanda** to relocate asylum seekers to the country. The NAO states that the UK has already paid £220m since April 2022 and will pay an additional £50m per year for the next three years. Moreover, the UK will make a further one-off payment of £120m once 300 people have been sent to Rwanda, and £20,000 per 'relocated' person. In addition, the UK is due to pay up to £151,000 per person to cover 'asylum processing and operational costs'. If any asylum seeker sent to Rwanda then decides to leave the country, the UK will pay £10,000 to 'help facilitate their voluntary departure'. All of these costs are on top of the estimated £20m 'direct costs in setting up and operating the partnership'. **EL**

Source: National Audit Office Report: "Investigation into the costs of the UK-Rwanda Partnership"

Flash Academy is an interactive English language learning app. Thanks to the generosity of Colchester City Council, we can now register (up to 300) RAMA clients to use it. For people from refugee backgrounds who have recently arrived in the UK or the local area and may have limited English, learning the language is fundamental to integration and functioning independently in everyday situations. With ESOL classes at local FE and Adult Community Learning colleges limited, Flash Academy provides an excellent alternative to teacher-led lessons, allowing clients to work independently at their own pace and their own level. Flash Academy can be accessed on any mobile device, computer or laptop and the app includes fun activities which help learners with new vocabulary, pronunciation, reading and listening skills. Working without a teacher, learners can select their home language to make independent learning easier and more convenient and there is even an 'object translator' to translate objects in real time. Early feedback from the app is promising, and in the coming months we look forward to registering more RAMA clients with it, particularly those who cannot currently access ESOL classes. **JW**

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Venues of Sanctuary

In the past few months RAMA had the privilege of being asked to vouch for two local venues as they were appraised by the organisation City of Sanctuary as part of their Sanctuary award scheme. Both venues have been working towards becoming welcoming spaces for ALL individuals in the community. They have now received accreditation: the Mercury Theatre is a **Theatre of Sanctuary** and Essex Libraries are **Libraries of Sanctuary**. The awards come in recognition of the extensive work each has done to cater to the needs of different visitors. RAMA clients have been generously looked after in these venues, and we are proud of our ongoing links with both.

The development of the Mercury theatre as a more inclusive

space has been a collaborative process with a significant role played by RAMA community coordinator Elizabeth Curry,

along with other community groups, to ensure that access and enjoyment is available for everyone. The Mercury Theatre has laid on events exclusively for different groups of sanctuary seekers, notably Afghans living in Marks Tey, in response to discussions with us as to where there is a particular need for support and what they can realistically provide. At all times it has been a co-operative venture showing the theatre personnel's willingness to work alongside us. There have been activity days for families, the

creation of a new choir—Global Voices—and the theatre has also displayed the handiwork of the women's sewing group in their foyer. Each year our client families with children are welcomed to watch the pantomime dress rehearsal; tickets to other performances, about issues clients can relate to, have also been distributed. In addition, a warm space has been opened throughout the winter months for clients to sit comfortably with a hot drink. We thank the Mercury for also choosing RAMA for their Christmas Concert bucket collection which raised £520.38. We look forward to further collaborations that will benefit all in the community.

We have a brand new **QR code**! This will take you straight to RAMA's Local Giving page for donations — all amounts very gratefully received. (And if you pay tax please don't forget to fill in the Gift Aid section.) Such donations are an invaluable resource for us: money that comes from funding bids is usually restricted to a particular project, while any that comes from your generous donations via Local Giving can be used for clients' destitution payments, travel costs for HO appointments, accommodation if homeless, equipment for disabled clients, extras for the Foodbank—the list is endless... So thank you!

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