

Newsletter - March 2025

Happy spring to you all



Who could have predicted everything that has happened in the first three months of the year already! Doubtless you're as dismayed as we are at the global picture. However here at RAMA our motto keeps us focused—Action is the antidote to despair—and we continue to tackle the individual issues, large and small, that can make such a difference to people's lives.

As ever, this newsletter gives just a glimpse of what has occupied RAMA for the past few months. On the national level the government recently announced that anyone who enters the country through irregular means will *never* be eligible for citizenship, however long they are in the UK (see Ayse's article, p6). In more positive news, we have learnt that [Napier barracks](#), one of the first large sites used to accommodate asylum seekers, will be closed in September. Open for several years, the site became notorious for its miserable conditions, overcrowding, a mass Covid outbreak and far-right protests. This follows the similar fate of the [Bibby Stockholm](#) barge berthed in Portland, which closed in January after similar controversy and a huge amount of wasted money. Both of these were steps committed to by the new Prime Minister just before the last election, but a similar promise to close the camp at [Wethersfield](#), near Braintree, has yet to bear fruit, despite reports by both [Doctors of the World](#) and [Helen Bamber Foundation](#) detailing the extent of mental and physical ill-health suffered by residents there. With regard to resettlement, a [report](#) from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees highlights the inadequacy of existing safe routes to the UK, including official resettlement schemes and family reunion processes. The UK Resettlement Scheme, established with a remit to bring 5,000 refugees to the UK each year, has regularly failed to meet this target, with recent statistics revealing that only 435 people resettled in the year to September 2024! We hope the APPG will put pressure on the government to improve—and expand—the opportunities for people to come here safely instead of putting their lives at risk in the Channel.



RAMA client and marathon runner **Mohammed Elbayan** ran in the Colchester Half Marathon on 16 March and finished **5th** overall in 1hr 10mins. An amazing achievement for anyone, let alone somebody surviving on minimal income without funds to pay for a decent diet, training or equipment. Given that he has simultaneously been fasting for Ramadan, and was unable to take on any liquid during or after the race, he clearly has extraordinary reserves of strength and determination. RAMA staff and volunteers were proud to cheer him on to along the route. You can read the report in the local Colchester Gazette [here](#). Mohammed is now training for his fifth marathon in Manchester in April, and has secured a VIP entry start alongside the professional athletes thanks to RAMA.

Robin's run for RAMA! We were delighted to learn that local RAMA friend **Robin Alderton** has decided to run this year's **London Marathon** on our behalf.

It will be his first marathon, as he only took up running in the past year... What a champion! We'd love all our allies to support him [here](#) in the significant challenge he has set himself.

Thank you so much and good luck Robin!



On the organisational front, since our last newsletter we have said two sad goodbyes and one welcome hello.

Our Admin Lead, **Ruth**, had to leave after almost three years to attend to family matters. We were very sad to see her go: with her professionalism, hard work and faultless management of administrative processes (and much else) she kept our office running like a well-oiled machine, making all our jobs easier. She was a real asset to the team and we hope, when she has time, she may return as a volunteer.

Thankfully her shoes did not remain unfilled for long, as an equally organised individual, **Paula**, stepped in to take over the role. Paula had amply demonstrated her compassion for clients while volunteering on the reception desk, and her previous experience in a busy solicitors' office makes her well qualified to handle all the usual - and unexpected - challenges. She is definitely another safe pair of hands and has already had a positive impact.

And finally we had to let go of our newest caseworker, **Katie**, who had only been with us a few months but hit the ground running and was amazingly calm, competent and reliable from the start. Both she, and we, were extremely sorry she had to go, but equally excited that her new career will see her training with the Police Force to become a detective! We know it won't be long before they realise how lucky they are to have her.



The **Compassionate Communities Network** instituted by St Helena Hospice and supported by Colchester City Council has given out another round of awards to individuals and groups deemed to be going above and beyond in their support of others in Colchester. The awards give members of the community an opportunity to express their admiration, and recipients a moment to enjoy the spotlight (even though, predictably, most would rather it were not on them!).

We know this firsthand, as RAMA was a winner of the **Compassionate Community Champion Award**, nominated by our good friend Todorina Hammond of C360. We felt honoured to be acknowledged in this way by our partners in the community. In addition, Operational Lead Maria was nominated for an individual award by Emma Howe, Director of The Minorities. This came for her dedication to serving the underprivileged and her tireless advocacy for vulnerable migrants and for making RAMA the effective organisation it is.

The ceremony took place in the Town Hall, with a few words from winners and nominators, certificates and badges handed out, and photos all round. The experience was a reminder of how lucky we are to work with so many wonderful organisations in this city that really does embody compassion in so many ways.

An example of health equity and partnership working

Many of our clients live on a fraction of the income that statutory benefits would give them. Taking care of their appearance can be difficult as they cannot afford many of the products and services we use. Four of our clients offer a free **barbering** service once a week at RAMA. It is hugely popular and the barbers see up to 40 clients per session. We also put out chess, backgammon, music and refreshments to provide a lively hub for socialising.


Separately, we were approached by **Provide** who offer health checks, and so we added that to the mix. Around 200 clients have now accessed basic health checks and, as a result, seven have been fast tracked for urgent GP attention. Five more have been able to access 1:1 support/coaching to improve their health. Now **Essex**

Sexual Health Clinic is also providing HIV and other testing services alongside the barbers' sessions. An advantage is that the barbers speak a variety of languages and are happy to interpret as necessary. As part of our peer volunteer programme they have access to all our training; there is now a waiting list for this service.



The wider determinants of health and creating resilience

It is increasingly known that our health is not only determined by our genes or lifestyle choices, but also the environment in which we find ourselves. While many of us can mitigate the effects of a poor environment, our clients face a range of barriers to accessing what they need to be healthy and resilient. At RAMA we try to address some of these.

Determinant of health	Challenge for client	Action/Mitigation by RAMA
Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Most clients subsist on £9 or £40 a week in the asylum support system. •Many clients with domestic abuse (DA) issues linked to immigration or human rights cases most often have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). •Applying for Universal Credit, housing benefit, pension credit, child benefit and all other state benefits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Clothing/Footwear •Foodbank on site •Destitution payments of £40 a week •Applications for Change of Conditions - lifting the NRPF •Applications for the right to private and family life •MVDAC (for victims of DA).
Education & Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Asylum clients can only access ESOL and basic maths/ICT and Essex has one of the lowest allocations of free hours available in the UK. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Help with applications for college, travel to assessment (not funded by college) •Set up free courses in CSCS, carpentry and navigate free high level ESOL for access to work and university.
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •There is NO housing for those with NRPF, even victims of DA. •Newly granted single refugees are NOT housed by the Local Authority except in exceptional cases, and ONLY if they have physical or extremely high-level mental health needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Without our intervention, homelessness would be MORE THAN TRIPLE the current figure in Colchester. •Working with local GP and mental health teams to provide evidence to satisfy housing organisations of eligibility. •Working with partners/ businesses we now have routes that mean we approach the Councils across NE Essex only rarely for help, and also we can find suitable and affordable homes for those with status.
Neighbourhood safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Far right and local racism and prejudice, in particular an increase in far-right activity last year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •We are a Hate Incident Reporting Centre and have worked with Colchester Police to make sure their responses involve intervention when reports are filed; we have also given training to all 116 members of the first response teams at Colchester police station. •We have a 'safe' room at our offices where staff and clients can retreat if needed. •We liaise with Integrated Neighbourhood Teams and Council wardens.
Access to healthy food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Low income or no income means food and healthy food is a priority. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •We have our own foodbank here at RAMA & we distribute foodbank vouchers. •We run a slow cooker club and have excess fresh food from five supermarkets distributed to those in need. ALL new arrivals get a bag of basics.
Social inclusion / community / digital access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Asylum clients have no choice about where they are sent and are often dispersed here at night in a shared house where nobody speaks their language or shares their religion. Sometimes clients do not feel confident to practise their religion or to reveal their sexual orientation, gender identity/expression (SOGIE) which can undermine their mental health. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Our activities bring people together in a way which promotes friendship and inclusion. We have an LGBTQ+ group offering a safe exclusive space. •We have football twice a week with 2 teams and as many as 50 per session. •Table tennis / sewing & repair shop / ESOL & conversation class / Walking for wellbeing, Yoga for trauma, calligraphy for mindfulness. •Gardening with a mental health session included and OT input. •Free Barbershop (in excess of 40 people coming) – a space also used to bring in health services. •Over 2,000 SIM cards distributed, 42 devices and extra data.

Help shape the life of a young person *Essex County Council fostering team*

Offer a home to a young person and support them on their journey to independence. We need **Supported Lodgings Carers** who can offer young people both emotional and practical support and help in building their confidence and developing their life skills such as shopping, cooking and budgeting.

Most young people are aged 16 –18 and have a positive attitude about living with a supported lodgings carer. All our young people will have experienced some trauma, have diverse backgrounds and experiences and need someone who has an understanding of the issues faced by young people and an interest in helping them.

Karen became a supported lodgings carer and is encouraging others to do the same: "I was a single parent at the time, I had two young children and I lived on my own. I had a spare room and I thought, yeah, I could give a young person a home."

"It's just added family. For me one of the most important things is giving them a safe haven. You get a lot of support and a lot of help. It's the best thing, it changes your life. It's wonderful."

You can continue to work flexibly and Essex County Council will provide everything you need to succeed. Fees for carers have increased by 16% and people who become a supported lodgings carer in 2025 will get a £2000 welcome bonus.

Young people are carefully matched to your family, support is 24/7 and training is local. As a supported lodgings carer you will receive a weekly fee per child that you care for and each young person receives a weekly personal allowance.

Find out more by calling Essex County Council fostering team 0800 801 530 or by visiting www.essex.gov.uk/fosterwithEssex.



Supported lodgings carer Karen and young people she has taken in



RAMA was recognized again in January, being invited onto the panel at an event organized by **Cranfield Trust** in the beautiful Mercer's Hall in Ironmonger's Lane, London, in the presence of their patron, **HRH the Princess Royal**. The event was part of Cranfield Trust's 35th anniversary celebrations, and brought together trustees, funders and charitable organisations with which it has worked over the years. Cranfield Trust supports and nurtures small to medium-sized organisations that provide critical services in their local or regional areas. This enables such organisations, which have limited management resources and little opportunity to invest in organisational and personal development, to increase resilience, address challenges and focus on future strategy.

Last year RAMA benefitted from support via Cranfield Trust's **Thrive programme** (outlined in a previous newsletter), a year-long programme of peer-group workshops and 1:1s with a business mentor, which enabled us to draw up a 3-year business plan.

At this event, entitled **Championing small charities: Our national asset**, the panel spoke and answered questions about the challenges currently facing small charitable organisations. RAMA Partnerships & Programmes Manager Elizabeth focused on the difficulty in finding multi-year funding and funding that pays for core costs such as salaries. Given that the other speakers included the Chair of The National Lottery Community Fund and the CEO of Essex Community Foundation, RAMA felt honoured to be chosen as 'the voice of the charitable sector'!

The panel discussion was followed by a presentation by the Princess Royal who was clearly well versed in these issues, then a much appreciated opportunity to enjoy drinks & canapés and to mingle with the funders, trustees and other charity workers in attendance.

Staff from **Colchester Institute** who recently visited RAMA on their 'Back to the Floor' Day. They sat in on a team meeting, listened to several presentations and took on the challenge of a quiz about the sorts of obstacles our clients face and wider migration issues. It was a long day with a lot to take in but we *think* they enjoyed it!



We are delighted to report that our **Ukraine Club** has been a great success since it began in January. The idea was to create a space where our Ukrainian visitors could meet up to socialise, speak their own language, share food, drink, stories and advice, and participate in a range of enjoyable activities. The club runs every Saturday afternoon at the RAMA office, and is attended by between 25 and 40 individuals of all ages. Nataliia, who is in charge, has laid on various crafts, from collaging to painting to flower arranging, with different activities for children, while teenagers are kept occupied with games, particularly something called *Mafia* which they all seem to adore! We are grateful to Essex County Council for generous funding for this club.

What next for our Ukrainian guests?



Since April 2022, RAMA has been commissioned by Colchester City Council to welcome and support all Ukrainians arriving to the Colchester borough under the government's Homes for Ukraine scheme. We have supported 400+ Ukrainian visitors, a large caseload of mostly women and children, plus an ever-increasing number of men joining their families. Approximately half remain with their original sponsors/hosts and the remainder have either moved to privately rented accommodation or into social housing; others have even returned to Ukraine.

Some of our Ukrainian clients are keen to stay in the UK and consider themselves fully settled here, not in immigration terms, but in terms of their lives. They have secure employment, their children have school and/or university places and are sitting exams; they have nursery places, tenancy agreements, routines, commutes; they know the postman, their neighbours, they belong to the gym... and yet the early arrivals are unable to see or plan beyond the next 18 months (the additional length of time they are permitted to stay under the Ukraine Permission Extension scheme). Some have children who will have spent longer here than they did in Ukraine.

None of the schemes under the umbrella 'Ukraine Scheme' (Homes for Ukraine, Family, Extension, Permission Extension) are currently routes to settlement in the UK. It's important to note that a Ukrainian visitor arriving under these schemes is not officially a refugee, an asylum seeker, under humanitarian protection or under temporary protection. Although we refer to 'Ukrainian refugees' – so-called universally as they are fleeing war and seeking refuge – they are in the UK under a specially created Ukraine visa scheme, with leave to enter for a maximum of 4.5 years. To apply for indefinite leave to remain in the UK, you need to have lived here for five years on a route that leads to settlement. Our Ukrainian visitors fall short of this period by six months, and in any case their time spent here under the Ukraine Scheme does not count, as the scheme is not a route to settlement. So, what do they do from September 2026? There is no clarity from the government about what happens next.

Understandably our Ukrainian guests feel disenfranchised and powerless in this situation. Some are even considering seeking asylum. The political issues around this are complex but this is not a route to be recommended. They would have to give up their jobs, accommodation, school places and benefits, and would have to live in Home Office dispersal houses with no choice in their location while their claim is being assessed. If our government intends to send people back to Ukraine, irrespective of where in Ukraine they are from, this would indicate Ukraine to be a safe country and such asylum cases could be refused.

It's difficult to manage their expectations. Ensuring they do not make rash decisions is also hard when we offer no alternatives except those for which there is currently a competitive struggle such as the sponsored work visa. A seasonal worker visa is another option but again it is time-limited. And if they apply for a student visa, they will be charged overseas student fees and not be eligible for a student loan, so this is a costly route, with no options for the remaining family members.

Discussing a large cohort of individuals with varying needs is problematic and depersonalises their individual situations, but we estimate 70% of our Ukrainian clients have always had one eye on returning home when it is safe to do so. The future of the remaining 30%, who may wish to settle here, lies in the hands of our government.