

Issue 25 April 2006



Welcome to the April edition of the WERS newsletter - reaching parts that previous newsletters did not reach!

You may be reading the WERS newsletter for the first time – if so, we hope you find it interesting. Over the years the newsletter mailing list has grown steadily due to requests from churches and individuals to be added. This has resulted in somewhat patchy and haphazard coverage in the region. We are now trying to rectify this, particularly by making the newsletter more widely available electronically. If you currently receive a hard copy of the newsletter and would prefer to receive it electronically please email Helen and remember to include your current postal address.

In addition we hope that our website, currently under construction, will soon provide easily accessible information to a much wider audience. Visitors to the project are always most welcome. It is helpful to give us a little warning to ensure that someone is available to show you round and answer any questions you might have. WERS runs an awareness-raising programme and offers talks and presentations to any interested group in the region. The project director, Lindsay Cross and project worker Musa Hassan Ali may be booked separately and jointly by contacting the office. Ali, who is a Rwandan refugee, tells the harrowing story of surviving the 1994 genocide and his life as a refugee in Newcastle.

Comings and goings

Margaret Young retired just before Easter, having worked at WERS since September 2000. During the years at WERS, she helped and supported many hundreds of clients and she will be much missed. Her impressive French language skills enabled her to communicate easily with clients at the drop-in advice sessions, during home visits and at the weekly drop-in sessions held locally. At her retirement party, Margaret was presented with a book of photos and messages from many clients and their families. The messages were written in a variety of languages and Margaret will have her work cut out to discover what they all say! Margaret and her husband John are to move to France in June and we all join in sending them our love, thanks, and good wishes for a long and very happy retirement.

We are delighted to welcome Ruffine who has come to work as a volunteer in the office. She has already proved herself to be an enormous asset to the team, particularly in the field of ICT.

One of our counsellors David Goodacre has just embarked on a six week trip to Africa. His hectic itinerary will take in South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana and Zimbabwe. We are most grateful to Katy and Alan from the north east office of the Medical Foundation for covering David's absence so that the counselling service can continue as normal.

Destitute in our city

The following is an extract from a talk given by Lindsay Cross at a recent briefing meeting on asylum issues chaired by the Bishop of Newcastle. The presentations highlighted the current situation in Newcastle where around 300 asylum seekers, whose cases have been turned down by the Home Office, are living without accommodation and support.

'For the last 7 years, West End Refugee Service, based in a vicarage in the Arthur's Hill area, has welcomed those fleeing persecution from many countries across the world. The organisation, which began with a small group of volunteers distributing clothing and food parcels from a garage in Fenham, has grown with an extraordinary and alarming rapidity as it has struggled to meet the ever-increasing needs of its clients. The picture at WERS is mirrored in every refugee support organisation across the city. We are currently supporting some 130 destitute clients. All we can offer is a £5 weekly payment, a bag of food and toiletries when we have them to give.

At WERS we see how the physical and mental health of those evicted from their accommodation rapidly deteriorates. Sleeping rough under bushes, in telephone boxes or on building sites or trying to find a floor on which to spend the night is exhausting and debilitating. Many of our clients become depressed and some suicidal. The extraordinary courage and resilience that they have shown in surviving the torture, rape, beatings, imprisonment and bereavement often cannot be sustained when their hopes for sanctuary in the UK have been shattered. We have seen that the fear of being returned to the self-same danger from which they fled in the first place result in suicide and self-harm.

Accessing health care is becoming increasingly more problematic with some front line staff in the Primary Care Trust confused regarding patients' entitlement. The government's decision to lump together unsuccessful asylum seekers with so-called 'health tourists' is deeply offensive. We are concerned that increasing numbers of clients are unable to access the treatment they need. WERS established its own counselling service 2 years ago as a response to a growing need for such a service for depressed and traumatised clients.

If clients whose cases have failed were able to stay in their accommodation until such time as removal to the home country was possible, we suspect that many of the health problems, both physical and mental, would be considerably lessened.

Clients would not be forced into prostitution to get a bed for the night, risking pregnancy or health problems. They would not be at risk of being lured into illegal working or facing further exploitation by going underground.

Immigration would know where people were living and so from the Home Office point of view removal would be more straightforward. Perhaps most important of all asylum seekers would be allowed to retain some dignity. The way in which asylum seekers, whose cases have been refused, are treated is nothing short of a disgrace. I cannot help but think that were any other section of society treated in this inhuman way there would be universal outcry and condemnation of the system that causes such treatment of our fellow human beings.'

If you would like to make a donation to the WERS hardship fund or set up a standing order, please contact the office.

And finally

Thank you to everyone who responded so brilliantly to the appeal for football boots and strip. Mark Oliver was delighted to receive the donations.

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Office & Clothing Store Opening times:

Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri: 9.30am – 1pm

Wednesday: 11am – 1pm