



West End Refugee Service

strength through support



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Welcome to the April edition of the WERS newsletter!

WERS secures continuation funding for Volunteer Project

The Henry Smith Charity, which has funded WERS since 2008, has generously awarded a third grant to enable us to continue and further develop our volunteer project. A grant of £34,400 for Year 1 will be followed by £35,200 in Year 2 and £36,300 in Year 3 (subject to satisfactory reviews and to funds being available).

We have always been proud that our volunteering scheme is highly regarded throughout the city and we are especially pleased when the praise comes from our volunteers themselves. Recently one of our volunteers wrote a blog about her experience at the project. An extract is included below:

Several years ago I was given the chance to have some time off work each fortnight to volunteer. I jumped at the chance. I wanted to get involved with a group of people I'd never worked with before and I chose Newcastle's West End Refugee Service (WERS).

I enjoyed what I did, but after a few months I changed jobs and could no longer find the time and so, reluctantly, I left WERS. Just recently I found I had more time to volunteer again. I had no hesitation in getting back in touch with WERS to see what I could do for them now. Why? Because my first experience of volunteering with them had been so positive:

- They always responded quickly. I went from initial contact to volunteering in just a few weeks. They had clear information on the roles available and what commitment each required, but they were also flexible when I could only volunteer once a fortnight not once a week.

- I was invited for an interview. I was a little scared. The volunteer coordinator was friendly, reassuring, had loads of time for me, answered all my questions and set me at ease.
- I was given a pack with all the policies and procedures in as well as some tips of what to do and what not to do when working with refugees. This was really valuable to me.
- They provided training that helped me understand the situation of those I was working with and the value of what I was doing. The training fitted in around work, and there were several opportunities to attend it.
- All expenses were paid as a matter of course, and were paid very promptly. I never felt bad for claiming expenses, it was just assumed that volunteers would do.
- On leaving I was sent a card thanking me for my efforts, signed by the office staff, even though I had only been there for a few months.
- After I left I was sent the regular e-newsletter, which helped me stay connected.
- When I got back in touch they treated me like an old and valued friend.

I learnt a lot from my experience at WERS, and it's something I have carried with me to the organisations I've worked with since then. Sadly, I've found very few that couldn't learn something from the list above.

So I'd like to say thank you to WERS for giving me such a positive experience.



Northern Rock Foundation to close



The news that Northern Rock Foundation is to close at the end of the year was greeted with dismay by everyone at WERS and, I would imagine, by numerous other voluntary sector agencies in the north-east.

In a statement NRF said:

"We hoped to agree with Virgin Money a viable long-term solution to secure the Foundation's future.

Following wide ranging discussions it is now confirmed that Virgin Money cannot commit funding to ensure this and will not continue the previous funding agreement between us.

The Foundation's closure is now inevitable, as it receives no income from any other source."

Over the last 16 years, Northern Rock Foundation has supported a wide range of projects in the region with more than £215m, often championing work with the marginalised and disadvantaged. In the north-east, an area which has often struggled to attract the higher level of funding enjoyed by many other areas of the UK, the Foundation's contribution has been outstanding.

NRF's approach has been exemplary, developing close working partnerships with funded organisations and regularly consulting with them as how best to meet the changing needs of the region and how to use their resources to the best effect.

NRF has funded WERS since 2001 and, in addition to funding some of WERS' core activities, has provided the organisation with opportunities for management training, media training and to develop better finance management processes. Recently it brought together projects, all currently funded by NRF, which are all working with asylum seekers and refugees. This has been a most useful forum which has met regularly.

WERS would like to express its gratitude to NRF for the magnificent support it has given us over the years. The good news is that our latest grant has another 2 years to run.

A voluntary sector in the north-east without NRF is unthinkable and I envisage that much of the great work done by so many agencies will be under threat once the Foundation has closed its doors.

A telephone call better than face to face advice? We don't think so!

For many years the North of England Refugee Service has provided advice to those going through the asylum system through its One Stop Service (OSS) contract.

Last year, a consortium bid was submitted by the group of Asylum Support Partners (ASP) across the UK – Refugee Council, Refugee Action, Northern Refugee Centre, North of England Refugee Service, Scottish Refugee Council and the Welsh Refugee Council - for the new contract due to start in April of this year, which was a much reduced version of the service previously provided by these organisations.

However, it was announced in January that the successful bidder was instead Migrant Helpline Ltd, which was currently providing advice and support to asylum seekers and refugees in South London, Kent and Sussex. This was very disappointing news. The clue is in the name – Helpline - and it was clear that for our region this was to be a telephone advice service. WERS believes that a telephone service is not appropriate for asylum seekers. All our work over the last 15 years has clearly shown that people need people, not a conversation on the phone. Although there are different languages available, there has been little to change our view so far. Of the range of problems that have already arisen, here is just one example. It is now much more difficult for those whose support has been stopped to appeal against that decision. North of England Refugee Service had a success rate of around 80% in appealing termination of support decisions and the fear is that there will be a sharp rise in the numbers of asylum seekers made destitute. That would, of course, have a big impact on our work at WERS.

This severely reduced service offered by Migrant Help seems to me to be yet another way of making the lives of those seeking sanctuary in our country even more difficult. The UK should be removing barriers to those fleeing persecution, not erecting a succession of new ones.

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