

## Annual for Report Leicester City of Sanctuary 2014-15

This has been a challenging year, largely because of the enormous increase in numbers of asylum seekers being dispersed to Leicester. We have seen numbers attending our drop-in centre and English classes more than double, compounded in the latter case by the fact that Leicester College now charges for many of the courses asylum seekers used to access for free. We are also becoming much better known amongst the asylum seeking community and are now seeing people who have been in the city for years but have only just discovered us.

Nonetheless, the organisation remains in good shape, with loyal, dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers supporting our increasing client base in a variety of ways. We remain solvent, with a workable reserve, even if it is a rather smaller one than we would have liked.

### Funding – grant officer, Shali Bullough

We have received various grants, including ones from Near Neighbours (£3000), Roger Hickinbottom (£500) the Big Lottery Fund (£9000+), Leicester Rotary (£600) and the Yapp Foundation (£2,500 a year for 3 years). We have also had a number of generous donations (notably £1300+ from the Catenians) and participated in various fund raising events – for example, a jazz concert, a ceilidh and a ‘fun run’ in Loughborough where one of our members was the first ever black Santa to join the run!



### Governance

In October we appointed a new Board of Trustees. There have been some teething troubles but we are hopeful the new system will ultimately help LCofS to improve and develop. The list of trustees can be found on the Charity Commission website. They are currently exploring the possibility of incorporation which will reduce the personal liability of individual trustees.

In November we began a new phase in LCofS by acquiring an office, rented from the Race Equality Centre. For the first time in several years we now have a base to call our own, where we can store papers, work and meet people in a private space.

Work on Pqasso (the Programme of Quality Assessment for Small Organisations) is also ongoing.

### Drop-in centre – project leader, Jenny Westmoreland

Roughly 100 people attend our drop-in centre each week – though of course, not everyone attends every week so our ‘client base’ is probably around 400. We have outgrown our premises in St Martin’s House and, at the time of writing, are seeking alternative accommodation. We do not know what our new look facilities will be like. However, there is no doubt at all that the drop-in fulfils a range of needs, both social and practical, and we have no intention whatsoever of closing. Indeed, the current plan is to outsource some of our provision to other organisations so that our users can access social activities and support in their own neighbourhoods, though we propose to retain a city centre presence for people living centrally, new arrivals, and people in need of our advice.

We provide a meal – at present this is cooked for us by staff at SMH. The quality is excellent and much appreciated by members, some of whom are genuinely hungry when they come to us. We have adult games like chess and carom balls, toys for children, a sewing group, laptop computers with internet access and volunteers who can offer signposting, referrals and advice on a whole range of issues – such as filling in forms, writing letters, school admissions, bills sent in error, finding same-language speakers who will help with trips to a doctor, dentist or solicitor, and so on.

### **Open Door – project leader, Shali Bullough**

This is a new project to introduce new members to the drop-in centre and our other activities. We have around 18 members on the Open Door team. They have completed a comprehensive training programme, including 'confidentiality and boundaries' run by Alison Birch, 'LCoS and signposting to partner organisations' run by Pam Inder and an introduction to the food bank delivered by Jack Westaby from SMH. The volunteers are a very dedicated team and between them they speak 23 different languages. Since the middle of February Open Door has welcomed nearly 50 people and made around 20 referrals to Open Hands and/or the food bank

### **English classes – project leader, Catriona Mowat**

We run classes on Monday and Tuesday evenings and a women only class on Wednesday mornings.

Monday – coordinator Catriona Mowat. Numbers have fluctuated widely – from 4 to 40+ and the period has seen a considerable turnover of teachers and students. The Booth Hall is not an ideal teaching space with three groups trying to learn at the same time and each group containing students of differing abilities and aptitudes – and we are considering alternative venues. A highlight of the year was a project about making Christmas cards which included planning and shopping for materials and culminated in a real workshop for members shortly before Christmas (see website for details) which proved very popular.



Tuesday – coordinator, Michael Tully. Numbers at the Tuesday English class have varied widely, from 8 at the lowest point to 48 plus 8 children at the highest. Being also of widely varying abilities, the students are now divided into two sets, one small set of 'advanced' students taught by Keith Hibberd and the larger one of those with more basic skills to learn tutored by Isabel Hibberd and Michael Tully.

Wednesday – coordinator, Hilary McNeil. We all (members and volunteers) feel that a women's group is really important. Women's issues (health etc.) often arise and can be discussed freely. And we do laugh a lot!

Attendance changes every week, with new people coming and going, and older members appearing on odd occasions. There were about 17 attending each week, but numbers dropped when bus fares were reduced. Numbers went down to as low as 5 over Easter, and are now picking up again – up to 11 in mid-April. Levels of spoken, and written, English range from absolute beginners to just about fluent. Many members are Arabic speakers and we have acquired a number of Arabic-English/ English-Arabic dictionaries which are proving really useful. We've had a bit of a problem with little children getting noisy and bored. We worry about their safety, although we've talked to their mothers about the children being their responsibility. Having toys is helpful, but having someone to concentrate on entertaining the children would be even better.

We currently have 4 volunteers – the relatively high number means that we can split the class into very small groups, which is really useful, given the range of levels of English.

### **LGBT group – coordinator John Ssenkindu**

This is a new initiative to support asylum seekers whose claim rests on their LGBT status. There are still a great many countries in the world where it is illegal to be gay and many more where it is considered a source of shame. The Home Office makes unreasonable demands that people in this group fleeing those countries 'provide proof' of their sexuality, something which is clearly both difficult and humiliating. The group therefore provides support and advice for LGBT asylum seekers – within three weeks they had attracted 15 members (we suspect there may in fact be 100+ potential members in the city) and they have had one spectacular success in helping a member get LTR by finding a sympathetic solicitor to represent him. They work very closely with both the Leicester LGBT organisation and the Leicester Aids Support Service (LASS).

### **Hello Leicester – coordinator, Alison Birch**

This scheme is temporarily on hold. A number of volunteers were recruited and trained and some new arrivals were introduced to the city and their surroundings. However, there were various difficulties pairing volunteers

with new arrivals (mainly to do with a mis-match of language skills and genders) and the coordinator ran out of paid time to administer the scheme. However, we believe that the project has considerable merit and we hope to reinstate it when we have more time and personnel to do so.

### **Bicycle scheme**

The bicycle scheme has found an innovative and lively new partner in the shape of the social enterprise, Community Cycles, based very conveniently under the Bishop Street Methodist Church. A grant from the Greggs Community Foundation allowed the scheme to continue slowly, with 26 bicycles lent out since April 2014. A successful bid to the '£300 scheme' from the City Council enabled it to supply baby seats, helmets and fittings to allow three mothers with small children to become mobile.

### **Appealing4 – project leader, Indira Nath**

Appealing4 was very active last year, mainly with requirements for babies and small children, and with small electrical items. We saw people who had been helped themselves, bringing in items, particularly for babies, which they had finished with, to pass on to newcomers. There have been no appeals since Christmas as storage problems have created some difficulties. Nevertheless we have been able to help at times, two baby gates in one case, one to stop the toddler climbing up and one to stop the baby falling down the stairs! In the future we plan to return to the initial idea behind Appealing 4, requesting items for immediate need and delivery; unfortunately we are not able to accept some of the very generous offers we receive because we have nowhere to store items, and we now redirect donors to Open Hands.

### **Shopping Buddies – coordinator, Jenny Westmoreland**

Like Appealing4, Shopping Buddies operates through the drop-in centre. It is a way of helping those asylum seekers whose benefit is paid in the form of an Azure card (a limited use debit card which can be used in the four major supermarkets and Boots). A volunteer and an asylum seeker shop together, usually once a month but more often if the volunteer is willing. The volunteer selects items they need for their own use, the asylum seeker pays with their Azure card and the volunteer then reimburses them in cash for the money they have spent – thus enabling them to shop for cheaper goods on the market, in Halal or other specialist shops – or simply to pay their bus fare home. We currently have 17 sets of Shopping Buddies but we always need volunteers for the scheme – if you would be willing to be a buddy, please contact us on

[leicester@cityofsanctuary.org](mailto:leicester@cityofsanctuary.org)

### **Bus fares**

One of our main costs is bus fares. Many asylum seekers do not get their benefit paid in cash and all are on a very low income. This makes access to public transport unaffordable – and many people are placed in accommodation some miles outside the city centre. Until recently, our policy was to pay people's bus fares to enable them to attend our activities. However, as numbers rose, this became less and less affordable. Consequently we introduced a new policy whereby we pay full fares to those asylum seekers with no access to cash, half-fare to those whose NASS is paid in cash and nothing to those recently granted leave to remain who are able to access the benefit system. This has been a resounding success – the fare bill is now roughly a third of what it was at its height in October 2014.

### **Hardship fund – administered by Mick Walker and Pam Inder**

This is a notional fund, using unrestricted funding (mainly donations) to support people in need. Originally most claims were from people whose NASS support had dried up because their claim had been refused and there was a delay in re-instating it when a new claim was submitted, or people who had got LTR but could not yet access JSA. However, increasingly requests are for fares to visit solicitors in other cities when people have been relocated to Leicester, and, since March 31<sup>st</sup> 2015, help with fares to Liverpool. Since that date, all appeals and new submissions have to be submitted, by the applicant, in person, at Liverpool, regardless of where in the country they live. It is undoubtedly easier to get to Liverpool from Leicester than it is from – say – Swansea or Southampton, but it is still a long and expensive journey (the standard return rail fare is £71. Split booking can reduce this but advance booking is difficult as people only get 5 or 6 days' notice of their interview time).

### **Outings – project leader Julie Burnage**

We have not had any funding specifically for outings this year. However, we received a generous donation in memory of one of our supporters, Dan McEwan, who died in 2014, and that funding was used to take a bus trip to Skegness. We have also taken a party to Rearsby Convent. This is a trip we have done several times; the group use public transport, the sisters provide coffee, lunch and tea, and participants can go for a guided walk or just relax in peaceful surroundings. We have also taken people from the drop-in on city walks and to the museums. This was originally intended to ease the crowding at the drop-in centre but has actually proved remarkably popular and it is something we shall continue.

### **NEST – project leader Bessie Hayes, soon to be replaced by Mark Wilkinson**

Inspired and supported by Piotr Kuhlczak at Red Cross, we started the NEST (New Evidence Search Team) at the end of August 2011. Our aim is to help people whose claim for asylum had been refused, but who wanted to collect evidence for a new submission.

After almost four years, Bessie Hayes is soon to step down from her role with NEST, and Mark Wilkinson, who is a member of the academic staff in the Department of Astronomy and Physics at Leicester University, is going to take over from her. Mark has volunteered with NEST for over a year and has had some remarkable successes with his clients.

From May 2014 to April 2015 NEST took referral of 28 cases, of which 20 have been completed and closed and 8 are still ongoing at the time of writing.

At its height we had 31 case workers but now (April 2015) the number has dropped to 17, so we are actively recruiting. We lose people who take up work and we tend to lose students in the summer when they have exams or complete their courses. However, we retain a core team of able, dedicated and experienced workers and seldom have difficulty in allocating cases.

The cases we take are often the difficult ones where the client has limited chance of success or has in some way damaged their chances by their own behaviour – working illegally, not telling the whole truth, etc. We measure NEST's success not just by the number of people who get leave to remain – that is a lengthy process and only now are some of our 2011 clients being granted refugee status – but by the number of clients for whom we find enough evidence for a legal aid solicitor to be willing to take them on (i.e. evidence that offers a 50% chance of their case succeeding).

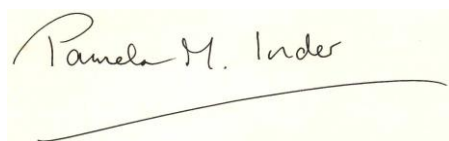
*"It's a mystery to me why this excellent initiative has not been picked up more widely across the country."* (Maurice Wren, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council)

### **Volunteers – coordinator and recruiter, Hilary McNeil and Tarjinder Gill**

LCofS is entirely volunteer-run and we currently have roughly 80 active volunteers. The volunteers are the lifeblood of the organisation and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for their commitment to what is sometimes sad and frustrating work.

We always have a turnover of volunteers - inevitably, many of our younger volunteers are only with us for a short time until they find paid work but nonetheless, we miss them when they go. It would normally be invidious to single out individuals – but I have to note that we are particularly sad this year that one of our longest standing and most tireless volunteers, Bessie Hayes, is leaving us. She was 81 years young in March 2015 and feels that it is time to 'slow down'. Bessie was a founding member of LCofS and was Vice-Chair for three years – she will be a hard act to follow.

**In conclusion** – this will be my last annual report. I am stepping down as Coordinator at the AGM, though I still hope to remain involved with the organisation but in a less demanding role. My place will be taken by Mick Walker, currently Deputy Coordinator, who has volunteered with LCofS almost since the beginning. He was for several years a Trustee of National City of Sanctuary and is highly experienced in the sector and well-known to most of the volunteers. I am confident that LCofS will be in safe hands and will continue to grow and develop. The organisation is – sadly – still just as necessary as it was when it was founded seven years ago.



Coordinator