

Omagh Ethnic Communities Support Group

Annual Report 2023-24

Overview

The period 2023-2024 has brought some much needed political stability to Northern Ireland with the return to normal activity of the Executive and the Stormont Assembly. This is very welcome, especially for the voluntary/community sector of which we are a part. However, the pressure on budgetary allocations continues to have a negative impact for many organizations dependent on the Executive Office for their continuing work and this inevitably manifests itself with the delayed transfer of approved funds. Thankfully, OECSG has been managing to deal positively with this issue as we strive to provide the best possible service to our members.

During this past year we have had a significant increase in demand for immigration advice and support and this is clearly the result of a lot more people seeking residency status here, with many of those new arrivals coming in through Dublin and then deciding to travel on to Northern Ireland, very often to join family members or friends.

Important events that were organized by our group included the visit of the Hungarian Ambassador to the UK to Omagh where he was greeted by a large contingent of the Hungarian community residing in the Omagh District Area who prepared a special welcoming programme.

Another important event was the Polish Consulate requesting OECSG staff member, Karolina Wenta, to coordinate Omagh Community House as a voting centre for the Polish parliamentary elections held on with almost 600 eligible voters availing of the opportunity to exercise their franchise.

We are grateful to all the volunteers and people who continue to support our work, especially our Management Committee who help to keep our organization strong. Special mention must be given to our Chairperson, Jimmy Law, who works incessantly to guide us in the right direction.

Advice & Advocacy

Our advice centre is the focal point of our work and is providing our members with the support they need in every aspect of their immediate needs, including employment, housing, health, education, access to public services and social welfare entitlements. This year we have assisted more than 200 people with immigration and residency support in partnership with South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP).

The total number of recorded enquiries dealt with through our office for the 2023-2024 was 2073, an increase of 10 percent over the previous year. It must be remembered that the great majority of our clients do not have English as their first language and were provided with interpreter support to ensure the optimum outcome for their needs.

Activities & Events

Over the 2023-2024 period OECSG organized a wide range of social and cultural activities and events including:

- Ethnic Halloween in Community House with 120 attendees
- Christmas gathering in St. Joseph's Hall with 300 people
- Chinese New Year in Community House with 120 in attendance
- Family outing to Mela Cultural Festival Belfast
- Hungarian Saturday School organized for 20 children Sept 23- June 24
- 8 Cultural Diversity presentations
- Organized elector centre in Community House for Polish parliamentary elections

Training/Capacitation

OECSG organized a wide range of training and skills courses during 2023-24 to provide our members with better opportunities to access employment. This support is vital to help them to integrate more fully into the local community. These included:

- 4 ESOL courses benefiting 55 students funded by Radius Housing
- 4 wellbeing courses delivered: 2 Pilates courses with 38 participants;
1 Yoga course with 18 people and 1 Recreational Spanish course with 12 participants
- Food Hygiene training with 13 people receiving certificates.

Networking

To ensure that the rights of ethnic minorities are respected and upheld, OECSG networks with different groups within the community/voluntary sector locally and regionally. This helps us to make maximum use of the resources available from both the statutory and community sector and this collaborative work has enabled us to identify the wider needs of ethnic groups and offer practical responses and make important referrals to other bodies when required. The principal groups we network with include:

- STEP Dungannon in the provision of immigration advice and support
- Radius Housing in the delivery of training and cultural activities
- Good Relations Team Fermanagh & Omagh District Council supporting project work
- Chinese Welfare Association, Filipino Community Association promoting cultural outreach.

Funding

In April we completed the second year of our 3 year funding award from the Minority Ethnic Development Fund which runs until April 2025. We completed all the requisite progress reports and final claims to ensure that we availed 100% of our award amount which covers 3 staff salaries and our utility and rent expenditure.

During the 2023-24 period we received project grant awards from different agencies for a total of £22,966 to carry out a wide range of training courses as well as social and cultural events. This included £15,046 from Radius Housing; £3900 from Halifax Foundation; £775 from Fermanagh & Omagh Council; and £3245 from donations.

Under a service level agreement with STEP Dungannon we also received £12,373 to provide immigration advice and support, which we are continuing to do.

Looking to the future

We expect 2024-2025 to be a challenging period due to budgetary constraints from our core funders at The Executive Office, but we are confident we will face those challenges with the same determination that has allowed us to provide invaluable and vital support and service to all ethnic minority communities in the Fermanagh & Omagh District.