

NORTHERN IRELAND COMMUNITY OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Report of the Trustees (incorporating the directors' report) for the year ended 31st March 2016

The trustees are pleased to present their annual directors' report together with the financial statements of the charity for the year ending 31 March 2016.

The financial statements comply with the Charities Act (NI) 2008, the Memorandum and Articles of Association, and Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2015).

REFERENCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS

NIC Charity registration number: NIC103701
HMRC charity number: XT38527
Registered office: 143a University Street, Belfast, BT7 1HP

Advisors

Auditors	Finegan Gibson Ltd, Causeway Tower, 9 James Street South, Belfast, BT2 8DN
Bankers	Bank of Ireland, University Road, Belfast, BT7 1NH

Directors and Trustees

The directors of the charitable company (the charity) are its trustees for the purpose of charity law. The Trustees and officers serving during the year and since the year end were as follows:

Trustees	Justin Kouame	Chairperson
	Issa Altom	Vice Chairperson
	Miliani Unamoyo	Treasurer
	Sabah Hasaballah	
	Nomzamo Mahlangu	
	Adekanmi A Abayomi	(appointed 25 February 2016)
	Debra Leso	(appointed 25 February 2016)
Secretary	Eric Koungou	

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Significance of Volunteers

Volunteers continue to play a very important role in the running of NICRAS.

Volunteers contribute to the daily administrative and reception tasks, policy and research team, advocacy, lobby and campaign, PR, social media and website. Without the dedication and commitment of our volunteers, we could not have achieved the level work, policy changes and positive contributions this year. In addition, this year we have attracted volunteer placements from France (Master student) and from Lagan College, Belfast and Holland. We have developed partnership with Queen University School of Law and Ulster University School of Politics and Social Policy for volunteers and interns placement.

We believe that volunteering both within and external to the organisation supports community cohesion, builds mutual understanding between those from different ethnic and the host community background and support the development of good relations. We value our volunteers and recognise their significant role and contribution to the organisation. We believe that the presence of volunteer within the organisation has encouraged more members to volunteer elsewhere.

Our newsletter is entirely written, edited and designed by our volunteers.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

Our main activities are described below. All our charitable activities focus on support for asylum seekers and refugees and are undertaken to further our charitable objectives.

Volunteer development:

NICRAS continued to encourage members to volunteer with NICRAS along with volunteers from the host community. Members regularly support the day-to-day operation of the organisation through covering administration duties, co-ordination of activities, reception duties, cooking for festival, workshops and celebrations, cleaning and building maintenance. Seven members including other volunteers on a regular and occasional basis in NICRAS and 25 volunteers from the wider community provides help with English Language tuition, Food collection, the Homework Club, Interpreting, Orientation, the Youth Group and the Women Group.

We have developed a volunteer placement with Queen University Belfast, School of Law and Ulster University School of Politic and Social Policy to help with Social Policy research and briefing papers.

We have developed a volunteer handbook and updated our volunteer policy.

NICRAS volunteer activities are divided in the following areas: donation and fundraising; events and social; English language; training and employment; campaigning; PR, social media and communication; research and briefing paper; advice and legal support.

We also support members in sourcing external placements and continued to refer some people directly to organisations which have previously offered volunteer placements including Urban Soul Cafe, South Belfast Food Bank and Common Grounds Cafe, British Heart Foundation and Save the Children.

Education:-

NICRAS has successfully campaign for Free ESOL Class for all refugees in Northern Ireland.

NICRAS continued to apply for funding for course fees that do not attract funding from the Education & Library Boards and fees for transport for members with disability. We also continued to apply for funding for travel and books through the Ruth Hayman Trust and Prince's Trust. The changes in the rules for access to Further Education courses enabled more people to attend college.

We have developed a partnership with SOS Bus, who provided free transportation to Belfast Metropolitan College for asylum seekers.

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NICRAS continue to seek funding for childrens' school uniforms. And we also make application for school uniforms for asylum seekers and refugees children.

We successfully partnered with Paula Bradshaw MLA, who made an appeal and received a great amount of school uniform for refugee and asylum seeker children

Educational grants for fees, books and travel were applied for and received this year. Educational grant applications have been submitted for individuals for the new academic year (covering fees, books and travel) with grants awarded being in the region of £250. The majority of funding was also secured for some courses including Business Administration, IELTS, Marketing, IT, Sport, Cookery, Access Course, Human Rights Law and Security Training, Community Development.

NICRAS has successfully campaigned Queen University Belfast who has offered two undergraduate places to asylum seekers free of charge.

Refugee Week:-

Refugee Week was organised by a steering group led by NICRAS including members and external organisations. This enabled planning for many more activities throughout the week and also for activities to take place outside Belfast (Londonderry, Dungannon, Ballyclare). The theme this year was 'Welcome'.

Advice and Support Service:-

NICRAS extended the opening hours of the specialist advice service to 8 sessions a week: 4 appointment-only and 4 drop-in.

The advice and support service continues to operate daily on a drop in and appointment basis from Monday to Friday, with appointments made for more complex extensive support and advice. Legal advice is being provided on a seasonal basis by solicitors, pro bono upon request. On average 50 people a week are attending the advice service, including 10-15 people for emergency support and for South Belfast Food Bank Voucher (monthly).

Members have been supported with applications for Income Support, Housing Benefit and Job Seekers Allowance, DLA, ESA, CV, crisis loans and integration loans, as well as references for accommodation, volunteer placements and referrals to various agencies. There has been an increase in application of disability related benefits due to the mental and physical health issues endured by members from the countries of origin.

During the year 120 new people accessed the service. Of these, 55 per cent had been granted Refugee Status and 42 per cent were still waiting for a decision. Nearly 70 per cent were male, with 44% between the ages of 25 and 50 years and just under 75 per cent single people. Almost half of those accessing the service are in receipt of some form of mainstream benefit or waiting for benefits.

This year has seen significant increases in the number of Somali and Syrian nationals coming to NI with new arrivals also coming from Sudan and Zimbabwe. The increased demand is partly due to an increase in numbers of those coming to NI to seek asylum, some quicker decisions by UKBA, an increase in family reunions.

Key Issues

In terms of the issues dealt with in the advice service, 33% were related to provision of Emergency Support; 19% related to accessing educational or welfare funding; 19% concerning benefits and 10% were relating to immigration issues. The key issues for members are destitution, delays in benefits, funding for education and welfare needs, debt and homelessness.

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Advocacy & Community Development

The Advocacy and Development project has been running since the summer of 2016, supporting members of the refugee and asylum seeker population in Northern Ireland. The advocacy service operates five days a week on an appointment based system. Members are provided with the opportunity to discuss issues they requiring support with and a number of options are then explored together to decide upon the best course of action for the individual involved. The Advocacy Service has deals with a wide range of issues, from housing, to benefits, to employment rights and access to services. We have specifically worked on a number of cases on NASS (National Asylum Seeker Support) accommodation supporting members to access appropriate accommodation and to address an on-going issues, the service has also supported a number of members challenging their entitlement to benefits, supporting members access to healthcare and education, as well as providing additional support to members with physical and/or mental health needs.

We have also been working both on larger structural issues facing refugees and asylum seekers, through our own work and in partnership with other organisations, we are developing resources to support our members to access good quality legal services, we have worked on preventing on-going issues blocking access to health care provision and challenged the standard of accommodation provided to asylum seekers.

The project has also worked with NICRAS member community associations related to NICRAS, mentoring and supporting these groups to further develop their existing skills and capacity. This has been done through an focused training programme- Equip and Explore, a practical skills based programme- and through on-going support provided to the groups in terms of support with funding applications, guidance on committee governance/structures access to outside support/training as required.

Preventing Homelessness and Destitution:-

The reduction in waiting times for Child Tax Credit has been reduced through the Fast Track process. There are significant delays in UKBA processing applications for Section 4 support. There are also a number of people who are in the process of submitting fresh claims who have been supported for significant periods. Assistance is a mixture of one-off, short-term and longer-term. The Emergency Support provides food from Storehouse and SOS Bus weekly, while working with the individual to resolve their situation. This can include: finding legal representation, sourcing fresh evidence, liaising with benefits offices and social services and looking at options for the future.

Embrace, St Vincent de Paul, Simon Community, All Souls Church, Storehouse, SOS bus and the Red Cross have continued to provide support for those in need, including emergency accommodation. Accommodation for those without support is now becoming a serious problem. It has become increasingly difficult to source spaces in hostels. NICRAS has met with two organisations to look at possible ways of addressing this issue. Our links with Storehouse, South Belfast Food Bank and SOS Bus enable provision of weekly food as well as referral for clothing and household goods.

English language support:-

ESOL classes for adults continue on a twice weekly basis at an introductory and intermediate level. Class attendance averages 10 people and can rise to 20. Classes are run by volunteer teachers. They provide an opportunity for those who are not able to access mainstream education provision to attain informal ESOL classes at a level suitable to their needs, in either group work or one-to-one lessons.

The removal of the 6 month waiting time before mainstream classes can be accessed has meant more people are able to attend college on arrival here. The NICRAS classes provide additional support for those who are unable to access the 5 day a week courses and for those who cannot attend the College.

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Providing social opportunities and supporting integration:-

Youth Group: The youth group works in partnership with the Inclusion and Diversity Team from the Education Authority once a week. There are both on and off site activities, including arts and crafts, drumming, swimming, visits to the cinema and community groups and a residential.

St Patrick's Day: Members took part in a workshop to make costumes and in took part in the Belfast parade organised by LORAG, followed by a celebration in Shaftesbury Recreation Centre.

Christmas: The Executive Committee organised the Christmas party this year and funding was provided to buy small gifts for the children who attended. Food hampers were provided by East Belfast Mission, gifts were applied for through the St Vincent de Paul/Salvation Army Christmas Appeal.

Summer Residential: Members were offered the opportunity to attend a residential in Corrymeela.

Volunteers: This year we organised during the summer a thank you party for our volunteers.

The building has continued to be made available to groups for meetings, activities and training events.

Women Group:-

This year we were able to secure a small grant to organise a Refugee and Asylum Seeker Women Integration Project. The project aimed to empower women and give them a voice. The project activities were designed by the women themselves.

Peer Orientation and the RAS Ultimate Guide:-

This year we successfully secured a small grant from the Community foundation NI to train ten members to assist new members and developed a Handbook entitled: The Ultimate Guide for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland

Representing refugees and asylum seekers:-

Our Chairperson represented NICRAS on the All Party Assembly Group for Ethnic Minorities at Stormont, sat at the South Belfast Community Support Group, and supported other Committee members in attending external meetings and consultations, ensuring that NICRAS provided a 'Refugee Voice' in Northern Ireland.

NICRAS sat on the Strategic Migration Partnership. We also sat on the Immigration Sub-Group of the Racial Equality Forum and this provided opportunities to raise key issues directly with Departments responsible for education, health and immigration.

NICRAS sat on the Strategic Partnership, the Community Support Group, the Migrant Forum, the Race Equality Sub group, Belfast Food Network, The NI Human Rights Consortium. We are also a member of Lower Ormeau Consortium and Migrant Forum.

NICRAS sat at the Syrian Operational Planning Group. We gave evidence before the OFMDFM and International Development Committee regarding the arrival of Syrian refugees in Northern Ireland.

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Social policy work:-

This year we produced two reports:-

1. The Effects of Destitution on Refugees that describe the enforced destitution faced by new refugees in Northern Ireland due to the delay processing welfare benefits and housing claims.
2. Home Sweet Home? To highlight the hardship faced by Asylum Seekers living in NASS Accommodations

The Home Sweet Home? Report earned the organisation an invitation to present the report finding before The Northern Ireland Executive Committee; a meeting SERCO. The report was also discussed at the Home Office accommodation Advisory Group meeting.

The production of the two report mentioned above is the result of our internship and partnership with Ulster University and the Centre For Effective Service.

Another success was the decision by the Department of Employment and Learning that English (ESOL) classes would be free for those in the asylum process, including those who have been refused but hold 'temporary admission' and those who have been here less than 6 months. Additionally, eligibility has been extended to other Further Education courses, although these attract a fee. This has been a major breakthrough and may be the first time the Assembly has taken a different line to Westminster in areas related to immigration.

We are currently working on a number of reports including: the effect of destitution on refused asylum seekers and the refugees and asylum seekers skills audit.

Achievements

NICRAS has been successful in many of its campaigns, gaining some significant achievements.

- 2010: NICRAS was able to have English for Speakers of Other Languages classes made free of charge for asylum seekers.
- 2010: NICRAS obtained access to leisure centres in Belfast for refugees and asylum seekers at the same concession rate as for people on benefits.
- 2015: NICRAS successfully campaigned for free access to healthcare for all asylum seekers, including destitute asylum seekers whose asylum claims had been refused.
- In July 2015, NICRAS were able to get the NI Assembly to recognise the migrant crisis in a debate in the Assembly.
- NICRAS convinced the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to change their application procedure to allow refugee I.D. cards to be accepted as a primary form of identification.
- NICRAS has partnered with UNISON to provide free IELTS classes refugees and asylum seekers with medical qualifications who are seeking to work in the medical professions. The union also allows our members to avail of their immigration clinics and to access training courses.
- Family Reunification: NICRAS successfully championed with other organisations to ensure the Legal Aid for Family Reunification was not cut. We demonstrated that the total cost to the government was small, but it would have a big impact on people's lives.
- In June 2015 successfully campaigned the Health Committee to extend free access to healthcare to refused asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland
- In December 2015 and January 2016 NICRAS successfully campaigned the Minister of the Department of Education and Learning on behalf of its members to extend free ESOL classes to all refugees.

