

LEWES ORGANISATION IN SUPPORT OF REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS

www.losras.org

February 2024

Hostile Housing

A number of recent, alarming news items and reports have highlighted the tragic consequences of the appalling and precarious nature of housing for people seeking asylum in the UK in the 2020s.

In November 2023 Hounslow Borough Council's Public Health Report concluded that: *"Many of the asylum seekers in our borough who are living in hotel accommodation are facing conditions that are detrimental to their physical and mental health. Their lives are on hold while decisions are taken about their future. If we do not act now, the situation will only worsen, and the cost will be far greater."* (*On Hold: The Lived Experiences of Asylum Seekers in Hounslow's Contingency Hotels.*)

The report details examples of poor-quality food and the inability to cook, leading to some women becoming pre-diabetic or developing gestational diabetes. The report also describes both adults and children becoming distressed, depressed and having suicidal thoughts. The tragic death of Leonard Farruku, a 27-year-old from Albania, held on The Bibby Stockholm Barge in Portland, Dorset, bears a stark and terrible witness to the impact on a vulnerable person of isolating and stressful accommodation.

On January 15th *The Guardian* reported on the exemption of Home Office asylum accommodation from the inspections and

remedial imperative to be placed on landlords for damp and mould issues. These new rules are known as 'Awaab's Law': the irony is brutal since Awaab was the child of a Sudanese refugee family, who died from illness attributed to the mould in his home in Greater Manchester.

Care4Calais and *The Big Issue* have also flagged up the growing number of sudden 'short notice' evictions from Home Office accommodation. This is happening both during the time that people's cases are being examined, and when a case has been concluded and the person is given refugee status and the right to remain.

It also appears that some of the asylum claims that have been 'withdrawn' in an attempt to clear the backlog of 90,000 historic cases, can be attributed to administrative errors in the records of where people are living. If an asylum seeker does not attend an interview they are classed as absconders, but the reality is that the government department dispensing eviction notices is sending paperwork to the wrong address – hence the summons to interviews is being missed.

It is also clear that forced homelessness has been exacerbated by the changes to the "move-on" period being reduced from 28 days to a mere 7, as detailed by *The Big Issue* on 27th November, 2023.

It is more evidence, if it was needed, that people's lives, health and talents are being threatened and degraded by this

Government's callous and careless treatment of people who deserve our protection and welcome.

Unfortunately, as a small charity, LOSRAS has neither the resources nor the capacity to match people up with hosts. That commitment comes with many duties and responsibilities for both parties and needs careful oversight. However, the two organisations which *are* set up for this work are:

Refugees at Home <https://refugeesathome.org>
Thousand 4 £1000:
<https://thousand4thousand.org.uk>

Together with Refugees: launch of new 'Fair Begins Here' campaign

Together with Refugees (TwR) is the national coalition of 500+ grassroots community and refugee-led groups, international development charities, trade unions and faith groups, to which LOSRAS is affiliated. A new national campaign, **Fair Begins Here**, was launched on February 14th with the goal to ensure that the next UK government commits to a fair new plan for refugees.

The fair new plan for refugees has three key asks:

- Protection for all people seeking safety in the UK by restoring the right to asylum, upholding our commitments under international law and ending the Rwanda scheme.
- An integrated welcome strategy for refugees ensuring they have their asylum claims heard fairly and effectively and can rebuild their lives with fair welfare support, a decent

home in the community, the right to work and language skills.

- Stronger international collaboration to forge positive, proactive responses to the global drivers of forced migration, increased responsibility-sharing and providing complementary safe routes for people fleeing war and persecution.

This means gathering and projecting united, visible support by people and organisations from across society and in every corner of the UK to show political leaders that it is not just the refugee sector who want a kinder and fairer plan for refugees – it is people from all walks of life and corners of the UK who support this new approach.

Sabir Zazai Chair of Together with Refugees and CEO of Scottish Refugee Council writes: *“When I look at the direction our government has been going on refugees, I understand the temptation to despair. It can seem hopeless - that the division, cruelty, and hostility is winning and can't be stopped. But while I am under no illusions on the scale of the challenge we face, I am hopeful because [...] I know the majority of people in this country support us. Despite what the government tells us - most people in Britain support welcoming refugees, they want us to do the right and decent thing.”*

HMD – January 27th 2024

Holocaust Memorial Day was marked by a range of film and live events in Lewes under the theme: *Never again: Holocaust lessons for forgetful times*. Guardian journalist Rafael Behr and Paris schoolteacher Eric Malandain spoke and there was wonderful music by Klezmer

band, She’Koyokh. The memorial day ended with a vigil to remember victims of the Holocaust and other genocides with readings on the theme of the **Fragility of Freedom**.

Our thanks to the HMD-LEWES group for inviting us to collect donations at their events. A generous £388 was collected.

LOSRRAS Open Meeting: Remembering Chile - 50 years after the coup

On 11th September 1973, Chile's Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende was overthrown in a bloody military coup. Over 3000 people were killed or disappeared under the dictatorial regime of General Pinochet. 50 years later, Chilean refugees from across the diaspora have created a project to remember the victims: ECOMEMORIA.

Sylvia Velasquez (Latin American community worker) and Rossana Leal (Founder and CEO of the Refugee Buddy Project, Hastings, Rother & Wealden) discussed their experiences of arriving in the UK as refugees from Chile. Sylvia described the tough reality of living in Chile after the coup with food shortages, the imposition of laws and the inability to trust anyone – even family and friends. Rossana, a second-generation refugee, described their escape out of Chile to Argentina and then to the UK where the family was welcomed into the mining community of Fife, Scotland. The friendship and solidarity of the Scottish community was Rossana’s inspiration to set up the Refugee Buddy Project.

Sylvia presented the Ecomemoria tree planting project and ended by saying how important it is to “fight for a new world and show it is possible.”

For more information <https://ecomemoria.cl/>

What it means to be a volunteer

Sometime in November 2022 I got in touch with LOSRRAS having seen an appeal for volunteers to support families resettling in this area. I was matched with an Afghan family who had very recently been moved here after having been in hotel accommodation for eighteen months. My role is to help the settling in process, to chat and provide general support at what can be a confusing and anxiety provoking transition time for the family.

The family I visit are lovely and I look forward to meeting them weekly or fortnightly, whenever suits them. We laugh **a lot** while we chat. They are all learning English and conversations are in English and Pashto, with help from google when all else fails!

Little gifts can be very welcome when everything has been left behind. A game of Ludo, which they used to play in Afghanistan, has been much used by all the family. Sometimes we go on outings: to discover the route to college or how to navigate the railway system; or a trip to the pier at Eastbourne; or to Brighton to swim, for fairground rides or to look at shops, particularly those that sell familiar foods such as “Taj” on Western Road.

It has been wonderful to be a friend to the family as they get to grips with life in our area and I hope our friendship will continue for many years.

LOSRAS' educational outreach

In addition to our annual educational outreach work with Priory School, Year 8s, we are very pleased to report that we are extending this work to other local schools in the area. This was suggested by the membership at a recent AGM and is also in response to the committee discussing how to best prioritise our time, energy and resources!

Lewes Old Grammar School contacted us with a request to speak to the students who are reading 'The Bone Sparrow' and learning about the importance of empathy towards refugees. They are planning a letter writing project to refugees and a 'Book and Bake' sale to raise funds for LOSRAS. In response, Alison has held two assemblies for the Year 7s and 8s and will continue to support their learning. Plumpton College has also asked us to support their PSHE work with Year 11s and a workshop and assembly have been scheduled. It is very heart-warming that local schools and children are so receptive and interested to understand more about what it is to be a person seeking asylum. We will continue to develop this work.

The annual plant sale!

To all our green fingered LOSRAS members, please nurture those seedlings and cuttings for our annual fund-raising Plant Sale on June 1st at the Linklater Pavilion, Lewes, 9-12 noon. Plant drop-off prior to the event can be arranged. Please email: belinda.kirbyte@gmail.com

LOSRAS aims to promote the welfare of refugees & those seeking asylum in and beyond the Lewes District.

Address c/o: Town Hall, Lewes, BN7 2QS

Co-chairs: Alison Bell & Gill Tipping

A tribute to Josiah (Joe) Ross

We are very sad to tell you that Joe Ross died peacefully on January 11th.

We would like to extend our heartfelt sympathy and kind thoughts to Helen - his wife, their sons, and grandchildren and all of Joe's many friends.

Jan Hoy who worked with Joe for many years as part of the LGSRAS then LOSRAS Prison Visitors Group, has written the following tribute:

Joe, with his wife Helen, were founder members of the LOSRAS prison visitors group, formed 20 years ago. During this time, Joe regularly visited foreign national men in Lewes Prison. His compassion for and belief in humanity provided hope and friendship in what would otherwise have been very bleak, lonely and dire circumstances.

Joe's own words to describe his choice of the opening music at the celebration of his life (J. S. Bach's Double Violin Concerto in D minor, BWV 1043, 2nd Movement) are a fitting tribute to him:

"What particularly appeals to me about this work is that the two violins feature equally, illustrating the values of co-operation and mutual respect as opposed to competition and conflict. It is also, of course, very beautiful".

Thank you, Joe. A life well lived.

Membership Secretary: Belinda Kirby
belinda.kirbyte@gmail.com

Committee Members: Annie Ralph, Marta Paluch, Helen Winters & Teresa O'Brien.