


Annual Report

October 2023 - September 2024



Above:
Refugee Week Stall,
Lewes Precinct




Priory School: 2024

Why is empathy so important?

How can we welcome refugees and people seeking asylum to our school and community?

LOSRRAS
Lewes Organisation in Support of Refugees and Asylum Seekers



Top:
Delband at The Friends' Meeting House to celebrate Refugee Week



Top:
Walk With Us event

Bottom:
LOSRRAS Plant Sale at Linklater Pavilion

LOSRAS aims to promote the welfare of refugees and people seeking asylum in and beyond the Lewes District by:

- **Raising awareness of issues relating to refugees and those seeking asylum**
- **Providing practical help and responding to local issues as they arise**
- **Advocating and lobbying to improve the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum**

The group initially met in January 2002 for anyone interested in the issues of migration, asylum and safe refuge from a perspective of human rights and civic responsibilities.

LOSRAS became a charity and adopted its new name in October 2017. Membership is open to all who share these aims, irrespective of political affiliation or personal beliefs..

Overview of the year

Low points:

- The week of race riots in August 2024 was possibly the bleakest point in the year, with misinformation spurring the far-right to target people seeking asylum and those supporting refugees. The violence demonstrated during that week shone a very disturbing spotlight on close-to-the-surface racism, the pernicious influence of social media and the corrosive effect of hostile political narratives.
- The impact of the Illegal Migration Act (passed by the previous government in July 2023) has a perilous impact on anyone arriving in the UK through so-called irregular means: the right to claim asylum is removed and anyone caught with their 'hand on the tiller' while crossing the Channel in a small boat is prosecuted and imprisoned.
- People attempting to cross the Channel in small boats are not deterred by the former government's hostile policies: tragic and avoidable deaths continue. As we write, this year has seen the worst death toll to date with 51 people having lost their lives in the Channel since January, including babies and children.
- The Rwanda legislation is passed in April 2024.
- There remain no safe and legal routes. Resettlement routes that were provided for Syrians and Afghans have virtually come to a close: only 20,000 Syrians and 11,500 Afghans were given safe passage to the UK. Afghan refugees who were evacuated to the UK in 2021 have been forced out of their temporary hotel accommodation at no notice by the Home Office. Families were dispersed to areas where they have no connections or support, which has disrupted children's education and links with local community support. The Ministry of Defence has had to concede accepting responsibility for Afghan families who supported the Armed Forces and other government agencies in Afghanistan and who have been living a tenuous existence in Pakistan, and a re-settlement scheme is in force to bring them to the UK. Some of these are the families in the MOD camp in Crowborough that we have been supporting. Because the government has reneged on its commitment to resettle many Afghans through safe and legal routes, increasing numbers are arriving by small boats.

High points:

- The worst of the low points is also the mirror to the best of the high points – this being the utterly heartening response of thousands of ordinary people who took to the streets to counter protest the rioters and make it clear that refugees are welcome and racist hostility will not be tolerated.
- On election, the Labour government reversed some of the worst aspects of the Tories' immigration legislation: the Rwanda scheme was abandoned; The Bibby Stockholm barge will close in January 2025; and Labour has pledged to re-unite more Afghan nationals with their families. The government is also restarting asylum decision-making and addressing the massive backlog of claims. However, it appears that these changes reflect economic expediency rather than humanitarian values.
- Despite our small numbers and voluntary capacity, we continue to fight for the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum. We continue to support 10 families and other individuals across the Lewes District.
- We provide support to the Afghan families being temporarily housed at Crowborough Army Camp.
- Our outreach work in local schools has expanded to include Lewes Old Grammar School and Plumpton College; we provide local schools with resources for Refugee Week.
- The Foreign National Visitors Scheme at Lewes Prison continues to adapt to cope with the demand for support.
- We continue our involvement with the HfU scheme and Ukrainian families in the Lewes district, particularly with ESOL needs.
- A range of events were carried out to mark Refugee Week, including a very joyful evening of Iranian music and food – a definite high point!

Month by month

October 2023

LOSRAS provided 91 men seeking asylum, who were housed in Hailsham, with a full set of **winter clothes and shoes**.

November

Priory School **outreach work** with all Year 8 students.

LOSRAS stall at an open discussion event organised by Lewes Labour Party and other local organisations where we gained a number of new members and volunteers.

January 2024

Holocaust Memorial Day vigil and events in Lewes.

Two **assemblies** with Lewes Old Grammar School; Years 7 and 8.

February

Support to Afghan families housed at Crowborough army camp; attendance at a women's shura identifies various issues that we offer to support, e.g. provision of children's shoes; outings; educational resources; art therapy sessions; bicycles.

Open Meeting: Remembering Chile - 50 years after the coup. Sylvia Velasquez and Rossana Leal discussed their experiences of arriving in the UK as refugees from Chile and the Eco Memoria tree planting project.

Outreach sessions run at Plumpton College.

March

Anti-Racism Alliance protest **rally** in Newhaven to mark UN Anti-Racism Day

An **outing** to Sheffield Park with a group of Afghan women from Crowborough Army Camp is a success.

April

The **Walk With Us** event organised by LOSRAS members for Refugee Tales brings 45 people on the seven-mile circular walk in Lewes.

May

Open meeting: Susie Ballentyne presents her doctoral research on 'Identity, forced migration and wellbeing'.

June

Annual fund-raising **plant sale** at the Linklater Pavilion.

Celebratory evening of Iranian fusion music by '**Delband**' and Persian food, courtesy of **Gandom** restaurant, Hove.

A resource of photos - **A Refugee's Gift** - taken by Bill Knight for the Refugee Council is provided by LOSRAS for Depot to mark Refugee Week. The exhibition ran in tandem with Depot films which were introduced by LOSRAS committee members.

Precinct stall with the Lewes District Anti-Racism Alliance to mark Refugee Week, the focus being the '**Fair Begins Here**' campaign of the **Together with Refugees** coalition.

Storytelling and assemblies at Southover primary school to mark **Refugee Week**.

July

Open Film Night hosted by **LOSRAS** and the **Lewes District Anti-Racism Alliance** at the Hillcrest Centre, Newhaven attracted a large audience. Two short documentary films were shown: **Voices from Ipswich** and **We Depend on Each Other**.

LOSRAS members participate in the annual **Refugee Tales Walk**.

August

First meeting with **James MacCleary**, MP for Lewes, to discuss LOSRAS' aims.

18 bicycles are delivered to Crowborough Army camp for Afghan families.

Local support work

Support to families living in the Lewes district continues. Many are settled, in employment and children progressing at school but inevitably some require support which volunteers provide. There are also a number of new Afghan families who have arrived in the district and are being helped.

A large number of Afghan families who worked with the British armed forces prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021 arrived in Crowborough army barracks at the end of 2023. LOSRAS has liaised with the camp personnel and Mears to identify possible ways to support them. We provided funds to buy shoes for 90 children. We also organised and funded a day trip for a group of women and were able, with the help of LOSRAS members, to provide 18 bicycles for the families to use at the camp. This involvement was not without its challenges and the camp has recently been decommissioned, but LOSRAS' support was much appreciated.

Homes for Ukraine (HfU):

A short-term grant under the Homes for Ukraine scheme by the County Council for 2023/2024 has allowed us to provide continuity of support to the ESOL programme for Ukrainians living locally and to develop education outreach work. A third grant of £5k for 2024-2025 will continue this support. Ukrainian guests receive considerable support from the County Council in respect of housing, employment, children's activities so we focus on ESOL support and liaising with partner organisations.

Prison Visiting Project at HMP Lewes:

The project continues to grow in strength and in the last year we have seen about 50 foreign national prisoners at Lewes prison. Of these, six have been charged with 'illegal arrival' – a new development following the passing of The Nationality and Borders Act, 2022. Foreign national prisoners come from a range of countries including the EU, the Middle East, Albania, Africa, China and more. Most of these prisoners are initially seen at our fortnightly library drop-in sessions where we gather information about their case and situation and discuss ways in which we may be able to support them. This could be referral to another organisation, liaising with other agencies, providing books in relevant languages, gathering information, or offering a regular visitor.

Because remand prisoners are often moved after sentencing, or prisoners move on for other reasons, regular visits are not always possible. In this last year, our visitors group have supported ten prisoners with regular visits.

The visitors team has developed more knowledge and confidence in this last year. Monthly meetings enable sharing of information and problems and offer mutual support. Our relations with the prison have also improved, especially with the library, the Equalities manager and the Chaplaincy. We have also continued to collaborate with Sussex University Law department, accepting a student for a volunteer placement.

Awareness raising

Our website continues to generate interest, enquiries and requests for support, and we respond to all within our capacity. However, a significant number of requests relate to immigration or accommodation issues for which we have no practical or legal remit. We continue to provide quarterly newsletters, to hold open meetings and to run the Refugee Week stall in Lewes precinct as well as represent LOSRAS at other relevant events.

Educational Outreach work

In addition to our annual educational outreach work with Priory School Year 8s, we have this year extended this work to other local schools in the area. Lewes Old Grammar School asked us to provide assemblies for the Year 7s and 8s and ran a fund-raising school event for LOSRAS. Plumpton College invited us to support their PSHE work with Year 12s by providing a workshop and assembly. Assemblies for Southover school were given and an audio-visual resource made for Priory school to mark Refugee week. It is very heart-warming that local schools and children are so receptive and interested to understand more about what it means to seek asylum. This outreach work will continue in the 2024-2025 academic year.

Advocacy and lobbying for change

LOSRAS continues to work with key national campaigns:

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

Lifting the Ban on the right to work for those waiting for asylum claims to be processed.

The Illegal Migration Act makes it almost impossible for families to be reunited and so we continue to campaign for **Safe Passage** of UASCs to be legally entitled to reunite with family and for Afghan families to be given safe and legal routes.

We continue to campaign for **an end to detention without a time limit**. We have asked James MacCleary to forward a question in Parliament regarding the proposed re-opening of the Campsfield and Haslar Immigration Detention Centres.

We continue to be part of the **Lewes District Anti-Racism Alliance** which aims to raise awareness and promote racial justice within the district.

Funding

Short-term grants from ESCC (detailed above) to support the Homes for Ukraine scheme has allowed us to provide continuity of support to the ESOL programme. However, our funds typically come from membership subscriptions, donations, (we gain significant funds via Gift Aid) and fund-raising. We received a very generous donation from Resettle Sussex and are pleased to be able to continue our shared aim of supporting local refugee families. The annual plant sale raised £880. We are thankful to Holocaust Memorial Day-Lewes who invite us to collect donations at their annual events (a very generous £388 was donated). And of course, we are immensely grateful for the continued support and generosity of our membership.

Tributes and thanks

It is with great sadness that in 2024 we lost three staunch supporters of LOSRAS: **Joe Ross**, **Tom Walker** and **Howard Taylor**. They are greatly missed. Please see our newsletters for written tributes.

Our thanks to **Helen Winters** for all her work with the volunteers and families. Helen leaves the committee this year but remains within the LOSRAS family.

LOSRAS trustees would like to express our wholehearted thanks and gratitude to:

Michael Munday; Gill Lipson; Jean Gould; Jane MacIntosh; Pat Rigg; Val Simanowitz; Rachel Cole; Heide Chaffe; James Golding of Michael Bell One; Jane Foot; Tony Downmunt; Betty Skolnick, Summerly DeVito; and Charlotte Williams.

For help with the Plant Sale: Jane Andrew; Nick Bodimeade; Chris Burgess; Ken Caplan; Susan Yates; Judy Gable; Sara Foreman; Palo Almond; Michael Munday; Mick Davies; Dee O'Connell; and Barbara Abbs.

For help with the collection of toys, bikes and other supplies for the Afghan families at Crowborough MOD camp, Anja McLean and others from Resettle Sussex and many of our members. For the considerable effort that went into repairing and storing the bikes: Human Nature, Lobke Braspenninx, Chris Ettridge, Dan Cowan and Mike Bray. And at the MOD camp: Pip Grant and Simona Vait of Mears and the MOD personnel.

To all our volunteers and ESOL tutors, our thanks for your continued commitment to the families and individuals you support. We are grateful for our volunteer prison visitors who take on this challenging work, and also for the support of Will McCready at Sussex University and Gary Goddard at Law Stop. Thanks also to Lewes Holocaust Memorial Day Group; Staverton Nursery; Sanctuary Cafe Eastbourne; Lewes Society of Friends; Le Bureau; South Downs College; Linklater Pavilion; Depot; Christ Church; Lewes Town Council; East Sussex County Council; Ariane Plumley, 3VA; Voices in Exile; Brighton and Hove City Council.

Members

LOSRAS ended the year with seven new members bringing the membership to over 200 people and seven affiliated organisations.

