

## What are we for and where are we going?

### The NNRF has changed ...

NNRF was *formally* launched in 2001. It has grown substantially since then. When it started, it was purely voluntary, without premises and no budget. Now, it employs 12 full- and part-time workers; is in its second premises; and has a budget of some £370,000 a year.

Things have moved on in other ways too. New people have joined – as volunteers, activists and workers; others have left. Some asylum seekers who were dispersed to Nottingham have been given refugee status; increasing numbers of 'failed' asylum seekers are being left destitute, reliant on handouts or on insecure and criminally low-waged 'illegal' work.

Of course, not everything has changed. Nottingham remains a dispersal centre. Asylum seekers are still waiting for decisions; still unable to work legally; and still managed, marginalized and suspect. If the heat has gone out of the asylum debate, this is partly because it has become even harder for refugees to enter the country and partly because xenophobia has found new targets in Eastern European migrant workers.

Six years on, things *have* changed; and now is as good a time as any to reflect on what this means for us. Can we draw up a balance sheet: changes for the better / changes not for the better? Do the things that motivated us to launch the NNRF still motivate us? Is it possible to hold on to what made the Forum special given these changes? Do we agree what it was that made the Forum *special*? Is the NNRF simply *different now*?



### So there's much to be proud of ...

Certainly there's much to be proud of. The NNRF has maintained a presence in the City for six years. Currently, close to 100 people visit the Centre weekly for support and advice. We have campaigned over that time for refugee rights and against the voucher system, unacceptable housing provision, and anti-asylum hostility. We still draw in volunteers and activists from refugee and 'host' communities. We have maintained a supportive network amongst faith groups, trade unions and community organisations.

### But still much to learn ...

At the same time, we are aware of salutary lessons from the wider voluntary sector. Voluntary organisations often start out on a wave of enthusiasm, committed, like the NNRF, to being practical (relevant to the lives of those they work with) **and** political (campaigning to change the conditions that make those lives difficult); **and** to being innovative and participatory. These organisations have faced dilemmas and tensions ~ including, how to be both professional **and** participatory? Often the price paid for delivering funded services has been a loss of political focus and innovative practice. Those once seen as potential allies or activists become clients, with files and numbers. Fewer people are involved in decision-making. Organisations lose their radical edge, and settle into comfortable middle-age as reliable multi-agency partners, kept alive by the funding drip-tube.

As NNRF has grown, it has begun to feel fragmented. People have talked about 'them' and 'us' (although who 'they' are and who 'we' are depends on who 'you' are!). Others have said that campaigning has felt separate from the daily business of the Centre; and that incremental decisions have been made that over time add to up to changes in policy. There have been tensions about accountability, responsibility, and how much autonomy different parts of the Forum should enjoy. Others have wondered just how seriously we take the notion of refugees and asylum seekers having an effective 'voice' in the organisation. And yet, the NNRF continues to maintain a presence in the City, attract volunteers and donations, and, most importantly, people still come for support . . .



### **Where we began: four aims ...**

When NNRF was set up we set ourselves two aims: 1) to *provide practical support* for those seeking asylum and for refugees; 2) to *campaign* for asylum and refugee rights.

We also talked about 3) working *with and for* refugees and people seeking asylum; whilst identifying ourselves as 4) a *volunteer led* organisation.

If these four aims are still define the Forum's the broad strategy, what do they mean in practice? How do we square being a service *provider* with wanting refugees and asylum seekers to be *participants* in our work? How do we reconcile being a *funded* organisation – meeting targets and quality standards – with *advocacy and campaigning*, which should make us a spiky presence in the multi-agency 'partnership'? And, importantly, how do the different – funded and voluntary – parts of the NNRF fit together? And what is the role of the management committee in all this?

These four aims raise questions about *what we do*; about *how we do it*; and about *the relationships we want to develop* between people who come to the Centre for support or advice and those who work in the Centre, paid or unpaid, or belong to the Forum.

### **So we need to think about these issues:**

#### ➤ 1. Providing practical support.

What does 'providing practical support' mean? Who provides 'practical support'? Is 'practical support' something we associate with the centre and its advice sessions? With the provision of food? How effective are we at giving 'practical support'? How effective can we realistically expect to be? How can we know how effective we are (user surveys are notoriously unreliable here)?

#### ➤ 2. Campaigning for the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum

What does campaigning mean? Is campaigning different from advocacy? Is it something the Campaign Group does? Or, should a campaigning *perspective* touch every aspect of our work? How do the issues people present at the Centre get turned into campaigns? Is campaigning an add-on to the essential work of providing services? What do we mean by the 'human rights' of refugees and asylum seekers, and what implications does this have for us as workers, volunteers and activists? Is there a difference between being a 'charity' and being a 'campaigning' organisation?

#### ➤ 3. Working with and for

What's the difference between 'with' and 'for'? Are we open to those who might want (or might be encouraged) to get involved? Do refugees have a real voice in the organisation? Do all refugees want to work 'with' us? How effective are the network meetings, the centre volunteer meetings, the management committee and the campaign group in providing that voice? How do we see the self-organisation of refugees? Do we see refugees and asylum seekers as clients or allies?

#### ➤ 4. Volunteer led

What does 'volunteer led' mean? ~ being participatory? ~ not being governed by government policy? ~ having a volunteer management committee? Are we 'volunteer led'? How do the workers fit in with this idea of being 'volunteer led'? Which volunteers are doing the leading ~ the centre volunteers? refugee volunteers? management committee volunteers?

### **And where we want to go ...**

At the end of the Annual General Meeting we want to have a series of agreed points that can be used as the basis of an **Ethos Statement** that we can all share and that will guide our decision making as NNRF continues to develop.