

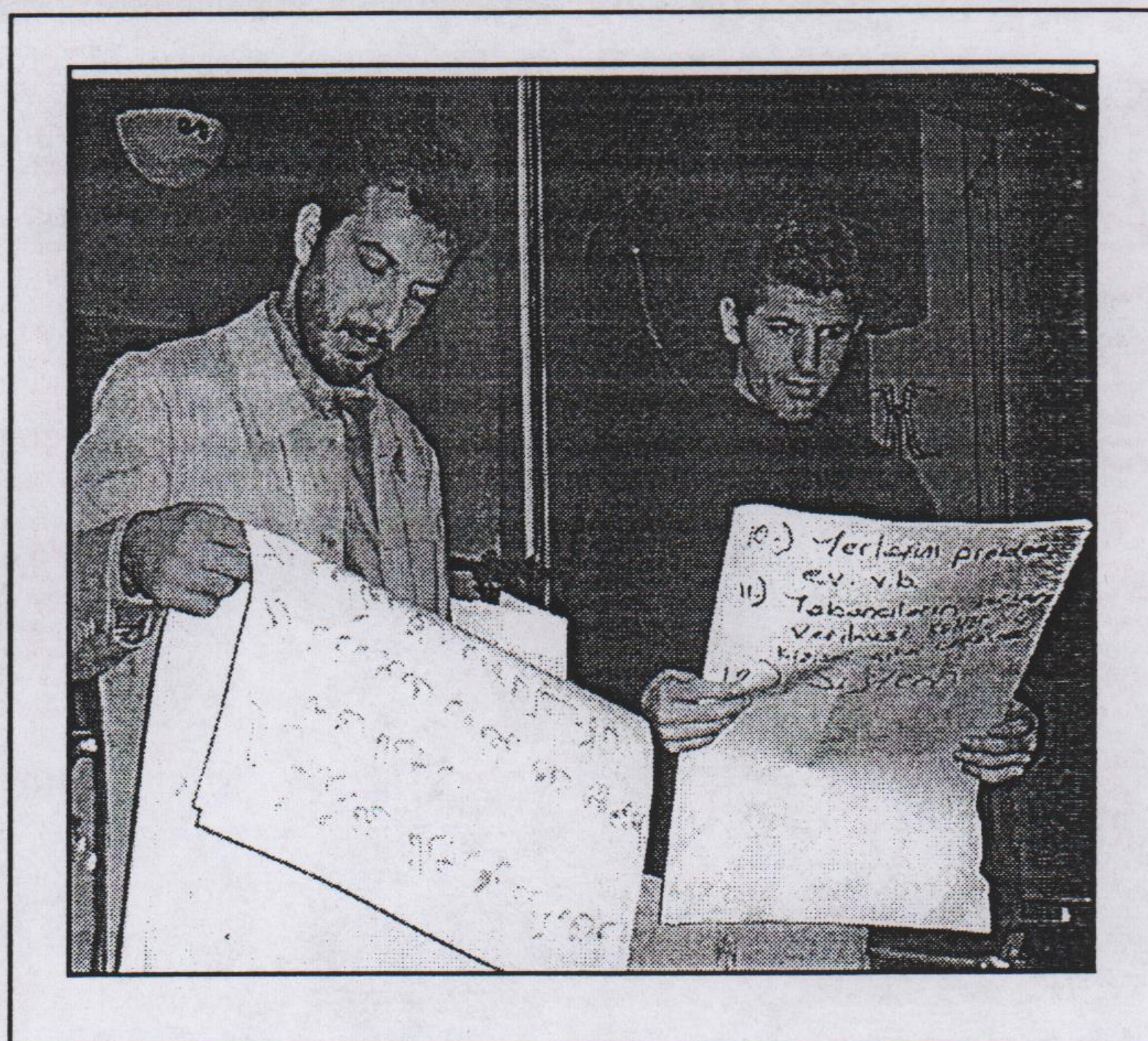
# Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

**WORKING WITH REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS**

## First ever refugee conference in Nottingham

■ An astonishing 150 refugees living in Nottingham attended a conference on 17<sup>th</sup> February to discuss common interests and problems. The conference was organised by a planning group of refugees and supporters from Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum. The aim was to help to develop networks which would offer mutual support, campaign around asylum issues and discuss ways of pursuing shared interests, for example sport and voluntary work. The conference was for refugees only and was followed by a meal and then a social event in the evening to which supporters of NNRF were invited.

The organisers initially expected about 40-60 people, then, since there seemed to be a lot of interest, expectations were raised to 100. They were astounded when 150 streamed into the Italian Community Centre where the event took place. Iranians, Iraqi Kurds, Turkish Kurds and Kosovans were the largest groups and there were also people from Angola, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Syria and Russia and Roma from the Czech Republic. After initial introductions, discussions took place in language groups and notes were made so that a report could be made of



the day's events. *See inside for a summary of the report and a transcript of the speeches made by 3 of the refugees to introduce the proceedings.*

When the talking was over, spontaneous singing and dancing began. First it was a group of Iranians with a small drum, then a group of Czech Roma musicians who had come with their instruments and finally, a local band, Mas-Y-Mas, who had been booked to appear, playing Latin American music. The dancers continued tirelessly all evening, and when Mas -Y- Mas finally stopped they received a rapturous ovation.

The Italian Community Centre coped wonderfully with catering for nearly three times the number expected, producing plate after plate of food. A follow-up meeting took place in early March to discuss how to pursue some of the issues raised. It was then agreed to continue meeting on a weekly basis.

---

## Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

67 Lower Parliament Street, Nottingham NG1 3BB, Tel 0115 958 6515

---



# Asylum seekers and refugees conference, 17th Feb 2001

## Mohammed, age 33, Iran

I am from Iran and have been living in Nottingham for the past eleven months. I left Iran much against my wishes, after practising as a General Practitioner (GP) for three and a half years. I am not going to say very much about the difficulties of life in Iran and the lack of any human rights. My departure, including the hazardous journey which I had to undertake to reach somewhere safe, in itself highlights that a person in my position, a doctor wishing to serve people, had to flee and leave my country.

I would like to speak about life in Britain, a country supposedly with laws and regulations safeguarding human rights and freedom. But we sadly find that asylum seekers are denied the most basic

months, I have been taking part in many meetings relating to refugees and asylum seekers. This has led to my meeting many different people who are trying to help refugees and asylum seekers in Nottingham, and I would like to thank them all.

Despite all the effort, asylum seekers are still struggling to cope with the variety of totally unnecessary problems such as vouchers, which isolate and segregate us from the rest of society. The language barrier, which the lack of sufficient (teaching) resources has compounded, causes further isolation, and the lack of decent accommodation (in some cases, no heating and hot water) has led to much misery and stress). I hope that by participating in meetings such as this one we will get to know each other better, manage to highlight our problems and work out how to solve them with greater success



The conference was introduced by 3 refugees talking about their own experiences of leaving their countries and arriving in Nottingham. The following is the text of their speeches:

rights and amenities. For the past seven

## Mustafa, age 23, Kurdistan

I am from the East of Turkey, the place Kurdish people call Kurdistan, where I was a professional footballer and student. I have been living here since 1998 as a refugee. I had ethnic and political problems with the Turkish government. I was not safe in Turkey. Before I came here, I had been detained a lot of times by the Turkish authorities because of my ethnic origin and beliefs. The last time, I was arrested by the police for no reason and I was threatened with death. I was being forced to join the Turkish army – if not, I would be killed. I had no choice but to decide to run away from Turkey.

I had no passport so I had to choose an illegal way. I found a smuggler who was a driver and travelled to the UK. I paid him £3000 to take me to the UK in the back of a lorry. I travelled for six days without seeing anything. When the lorry arrived at Dover, I got out and looked for a policeman. I was so scared, and did not know what to do. I



saw a police vehicle and went over to it. I could not speak English, but I managed 'no passport.' The policeman shook his head and understood that I was a refugee. I was a little bit happy after I found the police but they treated me as if I was a very guilty person. I was shocked, because I had run away from this sort of treatment but I was facing the same thing as I had faced from the Turkish police. I was kept in the police cells until a lawyer and interpreter arrived. They took me to London, where my sister was waiting for me at the train station. I was over the moon.

I thought I had left all my problems back home in Turkey, but it wasn't as I thought. I knew nothing about the UK and how the system works here. English was always a big problem. I had never spoken to any professional advisers about what to do in these new circumstances. I get benefit, which is not enough to cover my weekly expenses. I am lucky because I get support from relatives and friends who are working, but I know a lot of people don't have this kind of help.





## Helai, age 17, Afghanistan

I came from Afghanistan with my family nearly eight months ago. I came here because of the bad situation we were facing and because I wanted to continue with my education. I couldn't do this in Afghanistan because of the Taliban regime which came to power about four years ago. They stop girls from going to school. The other reason that made us escape from our country was not having the freedom we wanted. By this, I mean the freedom to work, to study, to make our own decisions. Women, especially, were under a lot of pressure most of the time. For example, they were not allowed to work nor were they allowed to outside their homes. Not even women doctors were allowed to go out except in an emergency. Women could only go out with their male relative – if they were alone, they were beaten. So these were the reasons why we decided to leave our country.

After we came, we lived in London for two weeks and then we were sent to Nottingham. We were given less than a day's notice and we knew nothing about the place. When we came to Nottingham we didn't know anything about Refugee Action or ways of getting into education for almost three months. We thought maybe we would receive a letter that would tell us where we could get some help, but the only help we got was from our neighbours.

We moved to our new house when we were given leave to remain. We had problems with the electricity, gas and water as well as a leaky ceiling. For one month, no one came to see if we had any problems in the house. I think that wasn't right, because what would have happened if we hadn't known any English? Beside this, we had problems with the vouchers we were getting instead of money. We had to go to special shops to buy things, and after buying we could not get any change. All of our vouchers were in my father's name, so sometimes shops would not accept the vouchers unless my father was there.

A report of the points raised at the conference has been drawn up and will be circulated to key local and national organisations and local MPs. The following is a summary of the issues.



### ■ Vouchers

Using vouchers is embarrassing and shaming, and makes refugees feel different from everyone else. Asylum seekers want money, not vouchers. There have been problems with some people not even receiving their vouchers, and it is unfair that shops give no change. Getting round the city is a problem, as vouchers cannot be spent on transport.

### ■ Local services

Local service providers such as GPs and hospitals, the police, social services and solicitors often do not seem able to arrange interpreting and translation. Asylum seekers are finding it hard to get into English classes at local colleges, which have growing waiting lists. A number of people are not happy with the service they are getting from their solicitors. Important information is not being passed on and there are serious delays, sometimes resulting in refusal of the application for asylum.



### ■ Work and leisure

Lack of a permit to work legally can add to the attractions of the 'black market', where refugee labour is seriously exploited (e.g. working for 50p an hour). People cannot get involved in sports such as football or boxing on such low incomes. As one asylum seeker put it, 'we are dying of boredom.'

### ■ Accommodation

Some accommodation is of a poor standard, with as many as ten people are sharing a house, three or four in each room. The equipment is old and inadequate – there are not enough chairs or kitchen utensils. Some houses have water coming in, or no heating. Landlords often promise to provide equipment or carry out repairs, but often fail to keep their promises. People of all nationalities, languages and cultures are placed in shared houses, which leads to misunderstandings and stress.

### ■ The Home Office 'system'

The dispersal system is so inflexible. Asylum seekers are not given any choice, even when there are places where they have family or know people who can help them. For example, there are asylum seekers in Nottingham with family in Manchester, while one Nottingham refugee's aunt has been sent to Hull. Many asylum seekers are being refused permission to remain in the UK although they have not attended an interview with the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND).

Continued on page 4



## Asylum Seekers and Refugee Conference report

Continued from page 3



The IND often send important letters to the wrong address – and not attending an interview means automatic refusal. Refusals seem to be made for no comprehensible reason and with no explanation. Many asylum seekers feel that the Home Office's understanding of the political situation on their home countries is very limited, or that human rights problems are deliberately ignored.

### Action plan

- ☐ Hold a follow-up meeting for asylum seekers and refugees interested in doing further work on the issues identified at the conference.
- ☐ Arrange for a group of asylum seekers to meet local MPs to advise them on the problems they are experiencing.
- ☐ Make representation to local immigration solicitors.
- ☐ Circulate the report to all agencies working with asylum seekers in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire and ask for specific responses, e.g. around access to leisure or English language education.
- ☐ Circulate the report to appropriate national organisations.
- ☐ Seek funding for further social and cultural events at which asylum seekers, refugees, friends and supporters can enjoy each other's company.

## Money

Our bids for funding are now being considered – and the news so far is (fairly) good. We've got some of what we want from Comic Relief and we're keeping our fingers crossed for the Lottery.

If we get at least a good part of our Lottery bid - we should know soon – we could get on with renting a building for our Drop-in Centre and office. In the meanwhile if you know of anyone with a few thousand going spare....

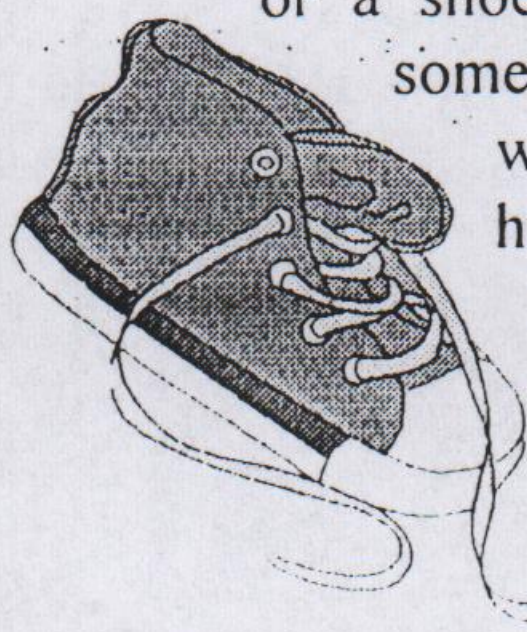
More realistically, smaller donations will also be of great value. As a follow up to the refugee conference and a short term measure until we have our own premises, NNRF is going to start renting a meeting room so that refugees can begin to get together on a regular basis. We would also like to fund larger social events since the conference party was such a success. All donations help, however small, so if you would like to contribute, please contact Linda, our secretary at the NNRF address.

## Shoes

We all wear them, trainers, stilettos, brogues, courts and plain old lace-ups. Imelda Marcos had mountains of them; most of us have a few pairs.

Refugees, however, generally only have the pair they arrived in, and what with having no money for bus fares and having to walk everywhere in all weathers, they don't last forever. Buying new shoes just isn't possible on the Government's meagre allowance so this becomes a real problem for most refugees.

So what's the answer? It might help if some of the gift vouchers donated could be redeemable in shops that sell shoes. Or, if you send us cash instead, NNRF can make sure that it goes towards the purchase of shoes or "shoe vouchers". Better still, if anyone owns a shoe shop or a shoe factory (or knows someone who does) and would be willing to help out, please do get in touch and you will definitely feature in the NNRF New Year's honours list.



# NNRF

## Campaigning

We have been so busy recently dealing with the voucher crisis that we haven't had much time to organise local campaigns challenging some of the iniquities of the Government's asylum system. We are now beginning to plan some campaigning activity.

Bill Morris, the first (and only) black leader of a British trade union was invited to speak, but is unable to do so since being president of the TUC this year keeps him too busy. Since he has often spoken out in defence of asylum-seekers when others wouldn't risk it this is a real shame but he has sent us a message of support: *"I am delighted to have the opportunity to send my very best wishes to everyone associated with the NNRF. Please keep up the good work."* Which we will – thanks Bill.

Most of the

## Housing

accommodation currently being provided for dispersed asylum-seekers in Nottingham is in the private sector, through contracts signed with the Home Office by consortia of private landlords. At the time of writing, the East Midlands accommodation agreement (with the local authorities in the East Midlands) is at the point of being signed. 2-3 months will then be needed to organise suitable accommodation so it is expected that it will be May or June before asylum seekers are housed by the council. We hope that there is not any further delay since it is clear that local authorities are much more likely to provide for people's support needs than the private sector.

## Media

While coverage in the local press on the issue of non-arrival of vouchers was sympathetic, we need to continue to monitor local press and radio so that we can respond to negative articles and letters. If you notice any, do take up your pen and write in or ring the 'phone-in programme.



# News

## Allotments

A group of Kurdish refugees has expressed interest in taking on an allotment. St. Ann's allotments association have been extremely helpful and it looks as though they could be digging and planting very soon. All they need is something to dig and plant with. So please can you investigate your garden sheds and if you find any spare forks, spades, rakes and clippers please can you let us have them. Offers and enquiries to NNRF at 958 6515 (and ask to leave a message for Myra or Barrie).

## Backgammon

**We're on the scrounge again....**

The weekly meeting of refugees is going to be an opportunity to relax and chat as well as to plan, discuss and support each other. A few games of backgammon and chess would really help to establish a congenial atmosphere. Now that you have looked in your sheds for tools (and disturbed that mouse which was cosily snoozing in the corner) can you now look in your

cupboards to see if you have any old chess and backgammon sets which are no longer required. If you do, let us know on the above number.

## Benefit

P O P E held a benefit for NNRF at the Palm Tree and raised £150. Our thanks to them and anyone who can tell us why His Holiness has moved to Nottingham.....

## Clothing

Good quality clothing is still needed – including footwear if possible. The majority of asylum seekers in Nottingham are young single men, so appropriate items for this group will be especially helpful. The clothing store is currently at the Link-Up shop (corner of Berridge Road and Burford Road in Forest Fields) so if you have any items to donate, you can either take them in there or ring NNRF and we will collect.



## Voucher crisis in Nottingham

Early in February, we discovered – purely by chance – that up to forty local asylum seekers had not been receiving their vouchers to buy food and were completely without any means of support.

The blame lay with the incompetent and bureaucratic system set up by the Government, combined with a very obvious indifference as to whether or not people were starving. Forum supporters immediately swung into action. Volunteers ensured that food was available over that first weekend and after that, an emergency food store was set up by the Southwell Diocese Social Responsibility Group and is still running. The trade union UNISON donated £100 for supplies.

Interested local MPs (Nick Palmer and Alan Simpson) were contacted and began to put pressure on hard-line Minister Barbara Roche and a major publicity campaign was set in motion, with the aim of forcing an immediate solution and preventing any recurrence.

Media interest was enormous and the NNRF did interviews with the Nottingham Evening Post, Radio Nottingham, Radio 5 Live, and the BBC World Service. The "Post" did a sympathetic 2-page spread and Barbara Roche was forced to try to defend the National Asylum Support Service on various prime-time news programmes.

One particularly alarming fact to emerge is that this is also happening elsewhere – so it was especially good that the NNRF was able to highlight a national problem and (hopefully) get something done about it. But we're not holding our breath....

**Mike Scott, Chair, NNRF**

## "When I meet refugees in Nottingham picking through the clothing store in St Catharine's,

our little Church in St. Ann's Well Road, it brings home the desperate plight that so many have been through. Most arrive in this country with nothing. They are given vouchers to redeem at specified stores. They are received with suspicion and hostility ... or at best a kind of grudging hospitality.

Thank God for those in Nottingham who are attempting to give a more hearty welcome. Most of those who get through our barricades are people

who desperately need a little warmth of heart. Some of them are people who have been to hell and back, as your reports indicate. Our country will be enriched by the insights and gifts that they bring.

Congratulations to the dedicated group from all the different faiths and from secular groups who are setting out their stall to bring warmth to the welcome to this City. One of the classic tests of true religion is how we treat, 'orphans and widows and he alien in our midst'. In our global village we are going to find that the barricades are unsustainable. We shall have to learn new ways of living and loving our neighbours."

**Canon Eddie Neale, Vicar of St. Mary's and St. Catharine's Nottingham**



## FIGHT VOUCHERS WITH VOUCHERS.... (AGAIN)

The position of refugees and asylum seekers in Nottingham and the surrounding area is desperate.

Having fled political, religious or racial persecution in their homelands, they have to endure months or years waiting for a decision on whether they can stay. While waiting, they aren't allowed to work (for at least 6 months) and are expected to survive on just over two thirds of the Income Support breadline.

Rather than give them cash, the Government gives them Vouchers, which can only be exchanged for food (not clothing or toys), can't be saved up to buy larger quantities more cheaply and must be spent in certain shops (which can't give change). The Voucher system is extremely expensive and incredibly bureaucratic, and as we in Nottingham know from recent experience, unreliable.

To help out this group of people who are now the poorest of the poor, NNRF is organising a Spring Holiday Gift Voucher collection. Any amount will be welcome, as will any type of voucher (Boots, Wilkinsons, Sainsbury's, Argos etc.) – we'll see that they get to someone who can use them. Please fill in the form below and send it with your vouchers to NNRF, c/o 67 Lower Parliament Street, Nottingham, NG1 3BB. And thanks very much.

### Gift vouchers for asylum seekers and refugees

I enclose gift vouchers to the value of £\_\_\_\_\_ (or cash to be exchanged into vouchers)

Name.....

Address.....

.....

## Membership Form

Please tick as appropriate

■ I would like to become a member of NNRF. ☐

(Membership is £5 waged and free for those who are unwaged/low waged.)

■ I do not wish to become a member at present but would like to be kept informed. Please put my name on your mailing list. ☐

■ Please send me information about how I can help refugees and asylum seekers in Nottingham. ☐

■ I would like to make a donation to NNRF and enclose a cheque for £\_\_\_\_\_ ☐

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

..... Postcode.....

Tel. No.....



Cheques should be made payable to: NNRF-

Please return this form to: Linda East, Secretary, NNRF,  
c/o 67 Lower Parliament Street, Nottingham NG1 3BB

## Fighting Vouchers with Vouchers

Early last December, the forum launched an appeal for Gift vouchers, to go to both refugee families and individuals in the run-up to Christmas.

Despite the short time-scale, we were bowled over by the response. Hundreds of pounds-worth of vouchers and cash were donated; all of which went out with time to spare – just!

The appeal, which featured on Radio Nottingham and was circulated by Notts County UNISON to its members, also encouraged people to join the NNRF. All in all, a great success – and one which squarely nails the lie that Notts people are hostile to refugees and don't want them here. The tone was set by one woman who wrote: "I heard about this scheme on Radio Nottingham; what a wonderful idea. I sincerely hope the enclosed will help someone have a happier Christmas."

So thanks to her and to everyone who sent in cash or vouchers. In fact, now we're organising an Easter appeal as well.....!

## Website

There is an excellent website on asylum in Nottingham. Anything you ever wanted to know on the subject can be found at:

[www.nottas.org.uk](http://www.nottas.org.uk)



**Organisations supporting NNRF:-** Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council; Refugee Action; Refugee Housing Association; Nottingham City Council; Student Action for Refugees; Diocese of Southwell Social Responsibility Group; Notts County Unison; Nottingham City Unison; East Midlands Socialist Party; Lady Bay Baptist Church; Jewish Socialists' Group; Notts Socialist Alliance; Oxfam;

