



working with refugees to build new lives

CHOICES

Impartial advice & information for refugees and asylum seekers
considering return

In Partnership with the
International Organisation for Migration

Annual Review

1st March 2003 - 29th Feb 2004

Choices, Refugee Action
The Old Fire Station, 3rd Floor, 150 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8SB
Tel 0207 654 7700 Fax 0207 401 3699

CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	3
Staff & Capacity	3
Advice Work - Statistics and analysis	4
• Number of Enquiries	4
• Activity / Casework	4
• Outreach	4
• Regions	5
• Nationality	5
• Status	5
• Motivation for Return	6
• Means of Support	6
• Referral Source	
Section 4 Support	7
Health and Safety	7
Afghan Programme	7
Afghan Women	9
Iraq	10
Development Work and Policy Issues	10
• RCO consultation	10
• Outreach Work / Partnership Working	10
• Unaccompanied Minors	11
• Reaching Vulnerable Groups	12
• Staff Training	12
• Quality	12
• Future work	12
APPENDICES	14
• Appendix 1 - Staff & Capacity	
• Appendix 2 - Generic Statistics	
• Appendix 3 - Case Study	
• Appendix 4 - Afghan Statistics	
• Appendix 5 - Outreach	
• Appendix 6 - Iraqi Statistics	

Introduction

This report covers the 12 month period from 1st March 03 to 29th February 04. It begins with a look at our staff capacity, and an analysis of the advice work we have undertaken over the last twelve months referring to statistical data and noting emerging trends. This is followed by consideration of the Afghan Programme and a review of some of the development and policy issues with which Choices has been involved during this period. Lastly, the report will touch on issues for the year ahead.

Staff & Capacity

The year under review has been characterised by staff changes, and team expansion. The composition of staff and capacity of the team changed during this period is as illustrated in **Appendix 1**. In March 03 there was 1 Manager Post and 1 Deputy Manager in London; 3.5 caseworker posts based in London (1) Leeds (1) and Manchester (1.5). Confirmation of funding for revised total of 5 caseworkers was received in July 03 and we recruited further permanent staff to this end with new staff starting in November 03. We decided to consolidate our Manchester staff and increase our presence in Leeds to reflect the increased demand for our service in the regions. By the end of the year the team had increased further following negotiation around the 'Afghan Programme' posts. While these posts were originally to be focussed on advice and information to the Afghan community, the delays of introducing the programme and slow take up of the programme by Afghans, coupled with the increase in generic enquiries resulted in the agreement for these posts to be generic. The posts currently funded for 6 months are as follows: one Deputy Manager; two Advice and Information posts, one part-time Team Administrator. The last of the new staff will have completed their inductions by March 04.

What is noticeable in the statistics over the years is that the majority of clients are based near to where we have caseworkers based. While to some extent this is to be expected, it is clear that there is demand for advice about voluntary return in other parts of the country as well. It was decided to base new Advice And Information workers in the Midlands where there is currently no presence - where there is both a long established refugee community and a newly emerging community that is the result of the NASS dispersal system.

Choices staff in Manchester and Leicester benefit from being based in Refugee Action asylum advice offices. While our London staff are based in Refugee Action's head office in Waterloo, we have recently moved offices in Leeds in order to house our expanded team and to ensure the facilities are appropriate for the health and safety of staff and clients.

Advice Work - Statistics and Analysis (See Appendix 2)

Numbers of Enquiries

The total number of new enquiries over this 12 month period is 1468 and this represents an increase over last year (1157). This period has seen a steady increase in the amount of advice work with clients over the first half of the year peaking in August with staff responding to 171 enquiries, our highest figure since the project began. The statistics show that over the second half of the year the numbers decreased slightly each month. To some extent this reflects IOM's figures. Factors for the decrease include: reduced Choices capacity during re-location of the Leeds office; the onset of winter when the figures are lower; staff spending more time on outreach work; new staff undertaking comprehensive inductions involving shadowing work before seeing clients on their own. There has been, however, an overall increase in demand over the last twelve months and this is due to a combination of factors including greater awareness of the project, more staff, and changes in the national and international environment.

Activity / Casework

In terms of activity, staff have undertaken 3126 casework interventions over the last twelve months. Clients accessing the service typically present with multiple and complex problems. Interviews will therefore involve lengthy 3 way telephone interviews with an interpreter or several visits to the nearest office to discuss options. **(See Appendix 3 - Casestudy.)**

Outreach

Choices staff continue to do outreach visits to clients. It is sometimes more convenient for clients to be seen at a different office for example a CAB in a nearby town. In addition there are clients who have special needs and/or who are unable to come to the RA's office. In terms of special needs, clients have presented with a wide range of issues. Examples have included: a single woman with newborn baby, a women in late pregnancy, a blind person, several clients with serious mental health problems, victims of racial harassment, and terminally ill people. There were 95 outreach visits in the period covered in this report.

Regions

The statistics show that we are dealing with enquiries from a broad range of regions. The high number from the North West reflects our more established (and larger) staff presence, and the fact it is a both a large dispersal area and has long established refugee communities within the population; the recent employment of 2 additional part-time staff in Leeds in addition to moving to suitable premises has increased the opportunity for agencies and individuals in the North East and Yorkshire and Humberside to access our service there. The relatively high number of enquiries from the Midlands suggests our new staff based there will be much needed as these clients

have been dealt with by phone from other offices thus far. Our London office dealt with 321 enquiries over the period although much of this work was telephone interviews with clients from outside the London area. The decrease in enquiries from clients based in London may be explained by the fact that for part of the year we were short staffed in that office; outreach /information/ skill sharing sessions in the past have concentrated in London and so other agencies are dealing with enquiries and clients themselves are perhaps more likely to know the options available; the NASS dispersal system. We are aware that we are perhaps not reaching clients needing advice in many other parts of the country where we do not have a presence.

Nationality

Looking at the statistics it is notable that the numbers of Afghans approaching Choices for advice about return has risen significantly during this period - 123 enquiries compared to 36 for the whole of the preceding twelve months. This is also the case more recently for Iraqis with 123 enquiries during this period compared to 40 the preceding 12 months. In terms of nationality, however, those seeking advice from Choices about return continue to be highest from Iran -149. The numbers of Czechs has decreased to 37 in the last 6 months compared to 92 in the six months previously. The most highly represented African nationalities include DRC - (31), Somalia (46) and Zimbabwe (64).

Status

With regard to status, the majority of our clients continue to be asylum seekers waiting for a decision. However, an increasing number of clients are failed asylum seekers. It should be noted that the statistics did not include a separate item for *failed* asylum seekers until January 04.

Motivation For Return

The statistics around motivation for return are problematic. We introduced new categories to replace existing ones we felt were not ideal, such as 'time waiting' and address problems with the high number under 'other'. Although we do have figures recorded for various categories the high number of unknowns reflect either that the client does not wish it to be recorded or that it is a combination of issues. We have redefined the area as 'primary' motivation; we hope as a result of these changes the statistic will be more meaningful in due course. However, to some extent the stats illustrate the complex nature of each individual's reasons for return. Indeed, recent research suggests the decision to return is a complicated and deeply personal one. What remains clear from interviewing clients is that it is not often a positive decision to return. More often than not family reunion decisions are due to a difficult situation back home such as the death or illness of a close family member. In other cases, women waiting for a decision have felt compelled to return to be with children back home. As highlighted elsewhere in this report, destitution and unhappiness in the UK are also significant push factors. However, we believe that initiatives such

as the Reintegration Fund, available through IOM will improve the opportunities available to people in their country of origin. In addition it is hoped that in time nationalities will have the opportunity to take up 'explore and prepare' options and so will perceive the process of return as a more positive experience.

Means of Support

The majority of clients are either surviving on NASS support or increasingly, are destitute. At 20% the figure for destitution is twice as high compared to the previous 12 months and we believe that the 'unknown/other' figure includes many more clients who are also destitute.

Referral Source

Over time there has been an increased awareness of the services that the Choices team provides. Apart from clients approaching us having heard of the service through family, friends and 'through the grapevine', this is also reflected in the broad range of referral sources including other refugee agencies, IOM and NASS accommodation providers. Along with IOM, Choices continues to undertake presentations and regional visits to raise awareness of the service and the options available and this is discussed further below.

In terms of referring on, around a third of the clients we see are referred on to IOM having come to the decision to return.

Section 4 Support

As anticipated in the last annual report we have seen an increased number of destitute clients in this period. The Home Office provides full-board accommodation to destitute failed asylum seekers registered with them for voluntary return. Refugee Action is concerned that within the refugee sector and across the advice sector clients are not being appropriately advised about voluntary return due to pressure to access accommodation for people in desperate circumstances ie: to fill in the voluntary return forms as soon as possible. This questions the voluntariness, and therefore, the credibility of return programmes.

Where a client has decided to return and is eligible for Section 4 support, we have experienced various difficulties in accessing that support for them. For example, up until recently the Section 4 team required a paper copy of the stamped Voluntary Return forms and this could delay support being provided. There has often been a backlog of Section 4 applications so that clients were left destitute even though they were eligible for support.

We remain concerned at the plight of clients from, for example, Iraq who are without support having received negative decisions, but for whom return is currently not an option, either because there is currently no safe route home, or the security situation at home remains dire.

Health and Safety

Part of the asylum legislation in 2002 and 2003 restricted asylum seekers access to housing and subsistence. With the increasing numbers of destitute clients approaching our service, we are seeing more clients experiencing extreme poverty and distress. This has implications for health and safety for staff and clients.

There has been a serious incident at the Manchester office resulting in the tragic death of a destitute asylum seeker seeking Section 4 support and this has raised the need to re-visit health and safety across all refugee action offices. Refugee Action is currently undertaking this exercise with a view to strengthening our policies and procedures around this issue. Staff have received training on dealing with difficult situations. There is a counselling service for staff in view of the stress of some of the client work. We have introduced an appointment only system in the offices for health and safety reasons and to address pressures around the volume of work. We are developing a formal client referral system within offices housing more than one advice team, and between Refugee Action offices to ensure a seamless advice service to clients.

Afghan Programme

The Returns to Afghanistan Programme consists of several schemes with each of the four schemes having different eligibility criteria.

- Resettlement Grant (the payment scheme announced in August 2002)

- Return of Qualified Afghans (EU-RQA: an EU-funded programme aimed at qualified Afghans who wish to contribute to the reconstruction of their country for 6-12 months)
- Explore and Prepare (From Oct 03 - allowing Afghans with status in the UK to return temporarily to Afghanistan without affecting that status)
- Voluntary Assisted Return & Reintegration Programme (VARRP: the generic programme available to all nationalities)

While new Refugee Action Afghan Programme posts were originally funded to provide advice to Afghans, these were re-negotiated and they are now assimilated into our generic advice team. As mentioned above this is because while we have seen demand for our service increasing, fewer Afghans than originally anticipated are seeking advice on return while at the same time clients from other countries, such as Iraq, have considerably increased in number. We feel that emerging needs and the ever-changing external environment is currently best met by a generic advice team that can respond to the needs of clients as appropriate. The posts are initially funded for six months until July 04 and we hope that they will be funded on an ongoing basis. This is particularly important to us since we have located two of the posts in Leicester thereby providing a service to the E. Midlands.

Statistics for our Afghan clients are included in **Appendix 4**. Choices responded to one hundred and twenty three enquiries during this period. Clients were for the most part single males; waiting for a decision on their application or having received a negative one; supported by NASS, or destitute.

There has been lower than expected take up of voluntary return. Various Factors have been raised here such as the level of security continued influence of the warlords, continuing ethnic strife, the state of the Afghan education system, lack of employment opportunities, lack of suitable housing, large amounts of unexploded ordinance.

The lower than expected numbers of Afghan clients approaching us for advice and information about return also confirms the experience of the community meetings held during the period under review, where participants felt that Afghanistan was not yet safe to return. The commencement of forced removals of Afghans at such a critical time may have damaged trust in the programmes for a lot of people. We welcomed the Home Office decision to extend the Resettlement Grant for Afghans in October 03 and hope it will be continue to be available after March 04.

In addition, we hope over time there will be increased interest in the various voluntary return options, not least Explore and Prepare. We believe the Explore and Prepare model is a template that can be applied to further voluntary return programmes and furthermore is the basis for more creative thinking about other ways in which the diaspora community can be assisted to contribute to reconstruction.

Along with partner agencies Refugee Action wants to be more effective in publicising the programme and all the various other options such as reintegration opportunities, and this is something we are addressing presently.

In addition to the communications work of Refugee Council, Choices visited Afghan groups in London, Bradford, Southampton to discuss the issues and options in more detail. We have also raised the opportunities for Afghans at all the other outreach presentations and skill sharing workshops detailed below in **Appendix 5 - Outreach**.

Afghan Women

Choices staff participated in three meetings with Afghan women organised by UNHCR, and chaired by the Refugee Council. Two meetings were attended by Home Office representatives (CIPU and Policy Officer for VRAP).. The meeting aimed to give a space for to Afghan Women to raise their voice and concerns regarding voluntary return. Participants represented Afghan Women Organisations in London, as well as from the regions.

An overview of services was provided by agencies attending and Afghan representatives were able to express concerns about return and discuss the issues involved. There was anxiety about forced returns and how these were being carried out. There was concern about the security situation in Afghanistan, in particular for women. For example, there are ongoing reports of sexual violations, and restrictions on movement. Security concerns meant that women could not access education, employment, health care. It was stressed that adjusting to life in Afghanistan would be difficult for women who have been away for any length of time. There was concern about the lack of housing, employment opportunities, and women's rights. The women welcomed the opportunity to discuss their concerns. We hope this will be an ongoing consultation structure.

Choices arranged a further meeting with the London Afghan women's group in February 04 to discuss voluntary return issues further.

A formal and comprehensive review of RAP is currently being undertaken by the implementing agencies shortly within the remit of the VARRP Implementation group.

Choices is represented on both the Voluntary Returns to Afghanistan Steering group and Voluntary Returns to Afghanistan Implementation group attended by refugee agencies, the Home Office and the Foreign Office.

Iraq

Statistics on Iraqi clients are included as a separate **Appendix 6**. As mentioned this year has seen an increase in Iraqi clients. The statistics illustrate that currently the typical profile is single young men from the Kurdish areas, waiting for a decision or having received a negative decision on his asylum application.

We anticipate this increase in enquiries from Iraqis to continue, although this depends on how events unfold in Iraq. We are discussing with the Home Office and partner agencies the introduction of Explore and Prepare and other programmes where Iraqis could contribute towards Iraq's reconstruction. We look forward to these progressing once the security situation in Iraq improves. We are very disappointed, however, with the recent Home Office statement that forced returns will commence in April 04.

Development Work and Policy Issues

RCO /Home Office Consultation

Along with our partner agencies Choices attended several consultation meetings set up by the Home Office with representatives from both Afghan, and Iraqi RCOs in London and the regions.

We welcome these new developments over the last twelve months. We hope for these meetings to continue as part of an on going commitment from the Home Office to form constructive relationships with Refugee Community Organisations in order to build trust, share information and hear about return issues from refugees themselves.

Outreach Work / Partnership Working

One of the main recommendations of the HO research into effectiveness of VARRP in 2001 was the need to publicise the programme more effectively in order to reach a wider audience. Certainly this is borne out when looking at the stats on where client enquiry comes from as these suggest that currently our service is not sufficiently accessible to clients in all regions. During 2003/4 we have invested a great deal more resources into providing information to a wide range of other organisations and undertaking skill sharing work to other advice workers.

In particular, we have worked closely with IOM in this respect alongside IOM's Information staff, and have undertaken many joint presentations. A list of presentation work is outlined in the **Outreach Appendix** below. Choices was involved in the recent IOM conference on Information and Outreach where we delivered a presentation of our work and discussed accessibility and partnerships in a broader context.

In terms of partnership working, we have agreed with IOM that both our separate and jointly organised outreach work would benefit from being

more systematically organised and reviewed and to this end we have established quarterly outreach work meetings, the first of which took place in February 03.

Choices staff have visited the Reintegration team at IOM to better understand their work and IOM staff have attended Choices team meetings for example, to discuss the Afghan Programme in detail to all staff.

In addition, we have benefited from the fortnightly 'Exchange' - a structure where casework issues, policy and procedural updates and information is shared between each partner by email.

There has been an increase in numbers approaching services for advice on voluntary return and Refugee Action welcomes the development of IOMs new partnerships, YMCA in Scotland and North England Refugee Service in England. Choices staff from Manchester provided assistance in the form of intensive training to Glasgow YMCA to set up the voluntary return project called "Options". We have also offered to be a link with 'Options' to provide guidance to their caseworkers on an on-going basis and to visit the project again in the months ahead. The Options team visited the Choices Waterloo in November 03. IOM has also recently formed a partnership with staff from the NERS. We will be chairing regular meetings between NERS/Options and Choices in order to share information and good practice. The first meeting is scheduled for May 04.

Unaccompanied Minors

During the period covered by this report Choices and IOM have been working with Social Services Leaving Care Services to provide advice and information around return issues. A recent development is the Home Office pilot scheme to identify for removal minors who have just turned 18 and who have been refused an extension to their ELR. As per recent legislation Social Services are also legally prevented from offering any form of assistance to youngsters who have been refused asylum and who have just turned 18.

We anticipate an increase in the numbers of 17 and 18 year olds being referred to our services. The young people we have seen are distressed at the prospect of return. So far, those young people we have seen have had further avenues for legal representation, but this will not always be the case. We have noted some confusion among social workers regarding the different types of leave children are granted and the different avenues of support in place at 18 and concern about provisions on return for vulnerable young people entitled to Leaving Care Services.

In response to these developments, we have undertaken mail outs and presentations to Leaving Care Services and Family and Children Services across the London area raising awareness of our services and VARRP. We are also exploring with individual LCS teams and the Task Force for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children a standard referral procedure to Choices that could be set up to help young people explore their options, and to prepare 17 year olds who have been refused asylum for the possibility of

return. The Choices project has been invited to join the Task Force on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

Reaching Vulnerable Groups

Choices work with minors has been highlighted above.

As part of Refugee Action's commitment to reaching women we are currently trying to make our services more accessible to women. In order to raise awareness of Choices among women we have produced a leaflet explaining the particular issues that may affect women and how our service can assist. We are planning a strategy for disseminating this leaflet, which will be translated into a number of languages.

Staff Training

Choices staff attended various training during this period including: Roma & Asylum in Britain Conference, Managing Diversity, Challenging Discrimination; NIA Act 2002 training; Working with Roma clients; Working with Young Separated Refugees. Advanced support and supervision; dealing with angry and aggressive client situations; Human Rights.

Choices was represented at the European Council for Refugees and Exiles conference in Geneva in September 03.

Quality

We have prepared a comprehensive induction pack to assist in the induction of new workers, given the large expansion of our team over a short period of time. This has been distributed to teams in all offices where there is a Choices presence. Choices continues to be involved in Refugee Action Quality Mark group to ensure we are complying with Community Legal Services standards.

Future work

Additional activities planned for the next 12 months include:

- Undertaking a systematic User feedback exercise.
- Organising a seminar on Voluntary Return
- Completing work on and distribution of a Handbook for Voluntary Return Advice Work

Overall, the last 12 months have seen a steady increase in workload for Choices in terms of client work and outreach presentations to agencies. The profile of clients approaching the service, with more destitute clients presenting with multiple needs has been a challenge that looks likely to continue as we see the impact of restrictive legislation continues. To meet the needs of more clients requiring advice and information Choices also needs to maintain the increase in publicising what is available to other

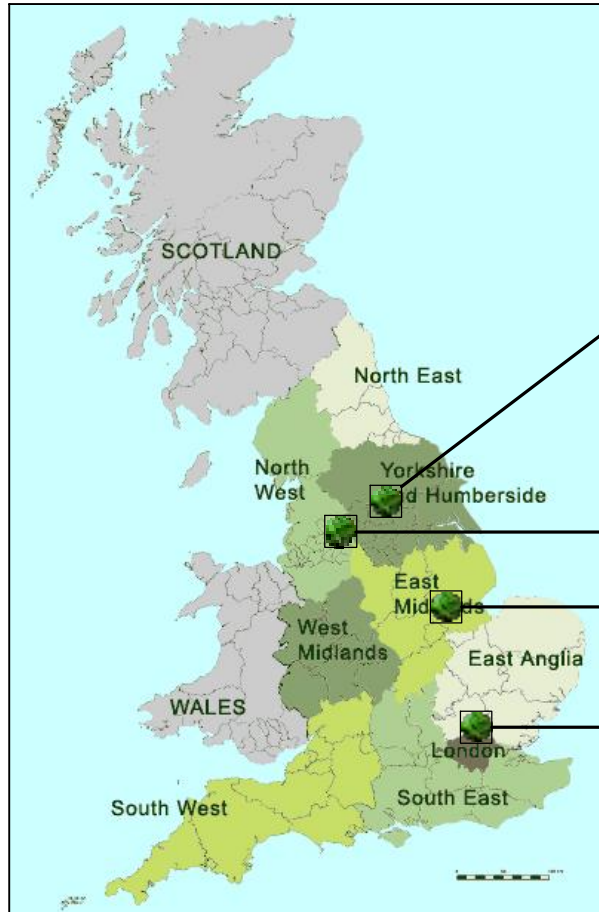
agencies working in the refugee sector, and wider advice sector. In order to achieve this we look forward to consolidating our staff resources through a newly negotiated budget for 2004/5 enabling us to continue working at our present capacity; we look forward also to continued close working with IOM and our partner agencies in the year ahead.

Mel Pickett
Manager, Choices

APPENDICES

- ✓ Appendix 1 - Staff & Capacity
- ✓ Appendix 2 - Generic Statistics
- ✓ Appendix 3 - Case Study
- ✓ Appendix 4 - Afghan Statistics
- ✓ Appendix 5 - Outreach
- ✓ Appendix 6 - Iraqi Statistics

Staff & Capacity



LEEDS NEW GENERIC: 2 Caseworkers, 0.5 Team Administrator

MANCHESTER : 2.5 Caseworkers, 1 Deputy Manager

LEICESTER : 1.5 Caseworkers

LONDON : 1 Caseworker, 1 Manager, Deputy Manager, 1 Team Administrator

Appendix 3

CASE STUDY

Abdul is from Afghanistan. He arrived in the UK with his wife and four young children in January 2000. The family were located in Essex. They were referred to Choices through their solicitor.

Choices organised an interpreter for the interview. At the interview the advisor explained the role of Choices and gained the basic information from the client in order to build up a picture of the situation. There was the anxiety of waiting for the outcome of the asylum application. Also Abdul informed the advisor that he felt safer returning after the fall of the Taliban. He was keen to restart his carpet and textile exporting business in Kabul, which had proved successful. The family's asylum claim was pending. Abdul said he wanted to return to Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan, explaining he wanted to go via Pakistan because it was safer. His passport was already stamped with a visa for travelling through Pakistan. The advisor explained the regular procedures, the various options, and discussed the security issues in detail, with the family. He was offered advice on up to date country information, as well as information on human rights. During the interview he confirmed that wife and children were happy to return to Afghanistan. The advisor suggested he return for a second interview together with his wife.

In due course they came back. The advisor noted his wife was anxious and distressed, and was unable to express herself clearly. The advisor was able to organise a separate interview in another room with his wife to discuss her situation. It appeared that she was unhappy with her husband's decision. She showed signs of distress, following which she admitted that she was anxious about return, that she did not want to return, and that her children were also against the decision. She was then provided with advice and information and her options, including that she may want to seek further legal advice around pursuing her own asylum claim. She was further advised on the relevant immigration procedures and her entitlement for support. After initial indecision, she was given time and space to discuss the issue with her family first. She was offered further support and reassurance after expressing worries for her children's future declaring that she would ideally like them to stay in UK. She also said she does not want to separate from her husband.

Both parties were brought together and advised about the disagreement and were encouraged to discuss it further together. Later the husband contacted the advisor to say they had reached an agreement and wished to return. The advisor offered another appointment for them both to come in to the office to go through the procedures again and hear about the opportunities in Afghanistan. However, he did not want that and was happy to talk over the phone. He was provided with information about the VARRP, VRAP, and the RQA Programmes and the role of IOM. He was also advised about other future government schemes for Afghans. He was not interested in waiting in the UK, and wanted to return to his business as soon as possible. The clients were then referred to the IOM scheme, for which they were approved and travel arrangements made. In due course IOM informed the Choices advisor that on the day of travel the wife had refused to go to the airport with her children. Her husband then contacted Choices requesting the advisor to persuade his wife to return. He was advised about the role of Choices and the code of impartiality. The family was offered another interview by the advisor, with a separate interview for the wife, if required, to which Abdul refused. It was agreed that the couple would phone for an appointment in the future if needed.

Abdul contacted IOM independently and the family returned to Afghanistan shortly afterwards.

Appendix 5

Outreach Presentations / skill sharing 03/04

- Croydon Leaving Care Services
- Camden Leaving Care Services
- Children's Panel Ref Council
- Directors of Social Services and Home Office Task Force on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (Association of Directors of Social Services and Home Office)
- Refugee Umbrella Group, Southampton
- Afghan groups roadshow, Bradford
- Inter-agency group, Dudley
- Multi-agency group - unaccompanied minors, Kent
- Kurdish Cultural Centre - London
- IOM Information and Outreach conference - London
- Refugee Working Group in Plymouth
- Afghan Association of London
- Save the Children regional conference (info stall)
- OISC national conference (info stall)
- M&Q Accommodation providers - Manchester
- Asylum Seekers multi-agency forum - Exeter
- Nottingham RA Asylum Advice Team
- Liverpool RA Asylum Advice Team
- Afghan Association - Southampton
- Scottish Refugee Council and the Scottish Asylum Seekers Consortium
- YMCA Scotland
- Refugee Council - Leeds
- Yorkshire & Humberside consortium
- Hillside Induction Centre - Leeds
- Volunteers Day Workshop - Refugee Action
- Bradford Action for Refugees
- Tamil Communities meeting - London
- Leicester Refugee Action Asylum Advice

Up to Feb 29th 04