

Refugee Support Group

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting

Wed 15th Nov 2023, 7.00 pm online and in person at the Oakwood Centre, Woodley, Wokingham.

RSG Trustees:

Present (in person)

Mike Martin (Chair)
Mary Richardson
Sam Lee

Online Attendance

Simon Price

RSG Staff

Nick Harborne CEO (mins)
Maria Baker
Alison McQuity
Kathy Roper
Ellie Moore
Soha Hafez
Tatiana Miller
Sorrel Bullpit
Flora Roshi
Bronte Makepeace

Hadil Tamim

Total no invited	228
Total Registered	49
Total attendance	43
Members attending	15
Trustees attending	4
Staff attending	11
Cllr attending	7
VCS charities	5

All voting was done by members, and every vote was quorate.

1. Chair's Welcome

Mike welcomed everyone, explained the voting procedures for members, and noted the meeting was being recorded.

2. Apologies for Absence

Fiona Zeneli
Andrew Linell
Liz Terry
Mark Keeping
James Moore
Tony Carr

Jon Yates
Ellie Emberson
Jess Tyrell
Fiona Zeneli
Andy Dickens

3. Minutes of the AGM Wed 16th Nov 2022 at 7 pm

- a. There were no points of accuracy raised.
- b. There were no matters arising.
- c. The minutes were accepted without amendment.

Proposer: Sam Lee

Twelve members voted for the proposal, with no one voting against it.

4. Presentation of the Annual Report CEO's Report

Nick Harborne introduced the annual report and spoke of the challenges of asylum seekers living in hotels and HMOs. Nick Harborne welcomed Cllrs from West Berks, Wokingham and Reading, noting it was vital for Unitary Authorities to work together to protect asylum seekers and hold private sector agencies to account.

Nick Harborne noted the achievements of Reading City of Sanctaury, including UoR's recent University of Sanctaury Award. Nick Harborne asked Marie Baker to give a quick summary of her engagement with the Maternity Department at Royal Berks Hospital, where RSG was able to get excellent services for 9 expectant Afghan mums bringing services together with translators including physio, midwives, nurses, doctors, stopping smoking, leading to mums being prepared for and after their first delivery in the UK. This was a brilliant project to be involved in. It has been written up as a case study recognising good practice, which the NHS may roll out nationally.

FR thanked all the staff, trustees, and volunteers for their hard work.

Nick Harborne gave 2 accounts of asylum seekers being let down by support from accommodation providers commissioned. Nick Harborne's call for great cross-authority working was noted by Leader of West Berks Council Cllr. Lee Dillon (online) highlighted the need for a person-centric approach, which is sadly missing from the central government approach.

There were no questions.

5. Presentation of the Accounts

Mike Martin presented the financial report in the absence of the RSG treasurer.

Mike Martin referred people to page 42, the statement of financial activities and gave a brief overview of the highlights.

The year saw an income of £570,220 and expenditure of £628,634 a year, resulting in a deficit of £58,414. Whilst not great, RSG is fortunate to have sufficient reserves so we can cover the deficit without impacting our policy of maintaining enough unrestricted reserves to cover three months' running costs.

Mike Martin noted the simple explanation of the deficit is that we did not generate enough income to cover our outgoings. However, digging a little deeper it was clear that insufficient funding for our most in-demand service, the Casework service whereby refugees and asylum seekers can make an appointment to see a qualified adviser and get help, was the main cause of the deficit. The RSG had effectively been subsidising the service out of reserves. Trustees were well aware that this state of affairs could not continue indefinitely.

Mike Martin also noted that the accounts had been 'restated' this year. Mike Martin explained that when we employed a professional firm of charity accountants to take over the financial management, we found there had been a misallocation of funds to the headings that were either restricted or unrestricted. These errors had been corrected, so the accounts were restated.

Nick Harborne explained that RSG has been aware of the deficit and has invested in its fundraising team. With the help of a volunteer who had researched grant-making trusts, we have a timetabled grant application programme in place. We are also talking with three local authorities about further contract opportunities. So, whilst the deficit is being treated very seriously, RSG is confident all is being done to turn it around without reducing services and support.

The Annual Report and Accounts 2022 – 23 were accepted by members.

Proposer: Aisha Malik

Fourteen members voted for the proposal, and no one voted against it.

6. Election of New Trustees

Mike Martin asked Mary Richardson - Vice Chair, to take over as Chair for the rest of the meeting.

Mary Richardson explained that the constitution required one-third of the board to stand down each year. This quota has to be made up of the longest-serving trustees, which this year included the Chair Mike Martin.

We have eight trustees, so to make up the third, also stepping down are:
Charlene Wattley
Emily Lloyd

Mary Richardson informed the AGM that Charlene Wattley was not re-standing for election but Mike Martin and Emily Lloyd were both standing for re-election.

The board of trustees has also appointed one new trustee, Simon Price, during the course of this year. Such appointments need to be ratified by the membership.

Mary Richardson asked members for permission to have a block vote. There were no objections to this.

Emily Lloyd and Mike Martin were re-elected. Simon Price was confirmed as a trustee.

Proposer: Aisha Malik

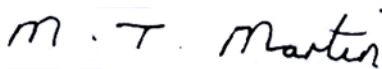
12 members voted for the proposal
No one voted against it.

Mary Richardson welcomed new trustees to the board and thanked CW for her contribution over the past 6 years.

7. AOB

None

Mary Richardson closed the formal part of the meeting at 7.35 pm.

Signed:  **Mike Martin, Chair.**

Mary handed the Chair to Nick Harborne, who hosted the remainder of the evening.

Two asylum seekers and one refugee gave their testimonies. They spoke about their journeys to the UK and their problems and challenges living in hotel accommodation. They also expressed gratitude for the support from RSG and the local authorities.

The Leader of Wokingham Borough Council Cllr. Stephen Conway spoke, thanking the previous speakers for their presentations and acknowledging the challenges people face and the need for organisations and local authorities to work closer together. Recognising the financial difficulties of charities like RSG, Stephen Conway noted that local authorities also faced those same challenges. Stephen Conway noted the motion passed by Wokingham Borough Council to start the process of gaining City of Sanctuary status.

Stephen Conway informed the audience of the Leaders group that drew together CEOs and Leaders of Local Authorities to discuss community issues of interest and encourage greater collaboration, which is improving after recent political changes.

Mike Martin asked if discussions had taken place at the Berkshire Leaders group around important issues like the hotels, which is a problem across Berkshire. Stephen Conway replied not yet, but the group was in its early days. Simon Price joined the discussion, noting the need for local authorities to look outwards at organisations like RSG with operational and strategic levels of experience. He hoped this collaboration would lead to other things whereby we're engaging with RSG more across the Berkshire area. Lee Dillon (online) supported the move for closer joint working. Cllr Tony Page supported this and talked about the importance of marshalling evidence to collectively use to support asylum seekers and hold private sector companies to account.

Mary Richardson noted RSG is good at evidence gathering but noted that's not our remit. If we are to gather evidence that can be used effectively, we need financial support to gather that evidence.

There were questions from online attendees distinguishing the difference between a hotel with very long-term residents and an House of Multiple Occupation in relation to council powers under Housing and Environmental Health law – could these be used to bring pressure to bear upon the housing providers? There was an online response from Lee Dillon as the Chair of the Public Protection Partnership in West Berkshire to follow this up.

Fundraising Manager Ellie Moore gave details of future fundraising events, after which the meeting was closed.