**PORTSMOUTH DIOCESAN SYNOD, March 2017**

**Presentation by Michael Woolley, Friends Without Borders**

Do you all know the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee? It’s caterpillar and butterfly, the asylum seekers are trying to get officially recognised as refugees – at which point they become butterflies and have almost all the rights and support of a British person.

About 20 years ago most asylum seekers in the UK were living in London and the South East and this led to the policy known as “dispersal”. Today asylum seekers are sent to areas of low-cost housing while their claims are processed. Portsmouth is a “dispersal” city and hosts about 140 asylum seekers who are waiting for their applications to be dealt with.

In practice dispersal means a fairly bleak bedsit in a small house shared with three or four others all sharing a common kitchen and bathroom. The government pays the rent and gives £36.95 a week per person for food and living expenses while the asylum claim is considered.

Friends Without Borders is a secular Portsmouth based refugee charity which, together with the Red Cross, runs a drop-in for asylum seekers and refugees on Monday and Thursday mornings at All Saints Church in Commercial Road. Though we meet in church premises we help clients of all faiths and none.

Entry is free and open to all. There is a pleasant social atmosphere, the room laid out like a café with free drinks and rolls, advice workers to hand, often bags of food to take away, sometimes other things on offer – toiletries and nappies for example. These days we pass most donated clothes to a charity shop and give our clients vouchers to collect what they need from there.

For people new to this country we hope the drop-in is a haven where they feel welcome, can meet their countrymen and other friends, can get sound advice and help with a whole range of everyday problems from water bills to registering with a doctor.

Friends Without Borders also run Access to Justice, an office in which trained and registered advisers give free legal advice on immigration law. It is the only place in the Portsmouth area that gives this free help.

I explained earlier that asylum seekers get £36.95 a week while their claims are being considered. Our drop-in though gets a number of other people. Roughly half the people who ask for asylum eventually get some sort of leave to remain, at least temporarily, in the UK – often that means that their lives take off and we don’t see much of them again. But some do continue to come to the drop-in, either seeking advice or meeting friends, and we’re pleased to welcome them.

Another group which continue to come to the drop-in, and who pose a considerable challenge, are people who have applied for asylum and lost their claims, gone to appeal and lost their appeals. When you lose your asylum appeal you get a letter telling you to leave Britain and are almost immediately expelled from your bedsit. You lose the £36.95 a week.

Being told to leave Britain isn’t as easy as it sounds if you’re from countries like Iraq or Libya, or Somalia. Or Eritrea the North Korea of Africa. The Home Office knows this because they make no attempt to deport you to those countries, though they don’t let you work (employers now face fines of up to £20,000 for taking on undocumented workers) They don’t let you work and they don’t offer any support. You don’t have the right to rent accommodation, even if you have money (landlords who let accommodation to undocumented migrants can be fined £3,000 per tenant). You don’t have the right to drive even if you have a licence (since the 2016 Immigration Act you committing an imprisonable criminal offence if you do).

So what do you do if you’ve lost your claim, your accommodation, your money, but are from some country to which you cannot return? Some of course try and get some “black” work, baby-sitting perhaps or decorating. But ordinary employers will not take the risk these days.

You may have a girlfriend or a boyfriend prepared to put you up. Or some other goodhearted friend. A surprising number are invited by asylum seekers to share their bleak little rooms – but this can become stressful after a while so quite often the utterly destitute are moving around in order not to put too much strain on any one benefactor’s patience.

We give money to people in these situations provided they’re launching a fresh claim – this is a lengthy business which cannot be done without having fresh evidence. The Home Office doesn’t help – they can take months to reply to letters. The money we give is normally £15 a week. We do talk through their situations and sometimes raise the possibility of return - but that is a very big decision, and people often need time to take it, so we give them cash while they’re thinking things through, trying to find fresh evidence or waiting for the bureaucratic wheels to turn.

If the Home Office does allow you to make a fresh claim the asylum-seeker has to go in person to Liverpool to deliver the letter. Travel expenses aren’t paid so we buy them their coach tickets – one week we bought three at a cost of £172.70. I must say that week was exceptional - but we are currently supporting over 20 people, and spending over £400 a week doing so.

The Portsmouth Food Bank and Cosham Churches supply us with food vouchers for our clients and we offer them a voucher as well as the cash. This is very good of the food bank though the vouchers aren’t altogether appropriate for the people we serve (for example the food is not Halal). So not all our clients accept the vouchers and it is certainly my ambition to give more cash - which is more dignified and can be spent more flexibly (for things like bus fares, to visit QA for example, or to sign on in Fareham).

I hope I’ve said enough to illustrate some of the problems we face. Our client group overlaps but is in some ways different to that of the Rural Refugee Network who are dealing with people brought in under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme. The Syrians are not applying for asylum - they already have it, and with it the right to work and the right to benefits. Our clients are often not allowed to work, not allowed to rent, not given any public funds. If they do manage to lodge a fresh claim or an appeal, they ARE let back into the system and given some official support BUT starting either can be a very lengthy business. Two of our clients have, despite reminders, waited over eight months for an information request. One has waited three years for a decision on his application - the average waiting time before an appeal is heard is eight months.

**How can you and your churches help?**

We are more or less up to strength with volunteers but can always use more, especially if they are committed. We’ve got an eye out at present for someone to help with the crèche.We do keep a stock of toiletry and sanitary products at All Saints but these days send on clothes to a charity shop and give our clients vouchers to shop there, where they have much wider choice.

The top three ways you can help are, in reverse order

* You can let your congregations know about the very real challenges faced by asylum seekers. **They are the poorest people in Britain today, with no access to the welfare state and not allowed to work.** They are generally not very articulate and need people to lobby officials, MPs and councillors on their behalf. Remember MPs consider ten a large post bag so if ten of you write from your churches you can be a real influence.
* You can see whether anyone in your parishes would take an asylum seeker into their home. I was delighted when I recently learnt of a charity called Refugees at Home which has a database of people offering free accommodation. We don’t yet know much about them but they seem bona fide and well organised and I’ve sent them an application for a homeless man. I’d like to be able to send them the details of one or two hosts as well. Hosts would not be able to charge and should not expect any benefit in kind, as this would be against the law, but it would be a way that some people can do their Christian duty. In the nature of asylum claims a guest won’t be with you for ever but might stay some months. By all means put people in touch with me if they want more information.
* And finally: the most important thing you can do for us is to find new supporters, prepared to make regular subscriptions. **We can only give out the money we get in and £15, even when supplemented with a food voucher, is simply not enough to live upon.** For our part we send supporters an email of Occasional News about once every eight weeks.

Friends Without Borders is not some national monolith; it is a very local charity which needs local support and local subscribers. Please remember our clients, and us the volunteers, in your prayers.