

Dear members,

It was pleasing to see so many of you starting the new year by coming to last month's meeting. We trialed a new scheme for those of you who find the meeting difficult because of visual impairment or hearing difficulties. After positive feedback, we've decided to continue. If you would struggle to see or hear the talk when seated further back, there will be reserved seats at the front. Please feel free to occupy one.

The central u3a organization has asked us to circulate two further documents about the proposal to set up a Council to provide the Board with a better understanding of members' needs. You will find these documents also attached to this email should you wish to read them.

Liz Ouldrige (Chair)

Important dates

February 20th Monthly coffee morning for all at 'The Hayloft' Mole Avon Country Store from 10:30am

February 21st Open Meeting at the Boniface Centre: Brian Fernley 'The Battle of Britain outside London: Exeter's role in the conflict.' Refreshments from 9:30am, the talk starts at 10:20am

March 19th Monthly coffee morning for all at 'The Hayloft' Mole Avon Country Store from 10:30am

March 20th Open Meeting at the Boniface Centre: Deborah Reader 'Medical Detection Dogs, Super Sniffers'. Refreshments from 9:30am, the talk starts at 10:20am

News from the Groups

The new dance group is faring well, however there will be no meeting in the first week in February and the timing of the group has moved time to start at 12:30pm. We have been contacted by several people who are interested in language conversation groups in French or Spanish. They would be aimed at beginners or intermediate levels. If you might be interested in joining such a group, could you either sign one of our sheets at the open meeting or contact Jo Penning via the website.

January's Talk: Ian Gasper 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK'

Ian is a trustee with the charity 'Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support', DCRS. He came to talk to us about the plight of asylum seekers and refugees. He told us that more than 100 million people were displaced worldwide, however most (80%) of those displaced move to another part of the same country or to a bordering country. Of those people that come to Europe, relatively few come to the UK. Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden all receive more than we do. Even so, our asylum seeker system is unable to cope with the number of people who arrive.

Ian made the distinction between a refugee/asylum seeker and an illegal immigrant. (For example, the small boats migrants are largely considered as illegal migrants rather than refugees.) Only about 5% of migrants to the UK are asylum seekers. In 1951, the UN convention on refugees defined a refugee as, 'someone who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, cannot return safely to their own country. It also states, 'a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.' The UK was an original signatory to this convention but since then has narrowed the range of this definition by defining the countries that are considered unsafe by the UK government.

Those people who are eligible for asylum applications face long periods (sometimes years) living in poor conditions; unable to work. Ian explained the complicated process they have to go through before, or even if, they gain the right to remain in the UK. Asylum seekers have to prepare and present their case to the legal system with no help from the government. This is where DCRS comes in. They provide support for asylum seekers including legal advice, and medical and mental health support.

Ian only briefly mentioned the proposed link with Rwanda. But in his view, the link could make the asylum system worse. Ian gave a thought-provoking talk. Thanks so much to him for sharing the plight of asylum seekers with us.