

# RAINBOWS ACROSS BORDERS



## ANNUAL REPORT

January 2013 – March 2014

# Rainbows Across Borders

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## **1.0 Background**

Rainbows Across Borders is a voluntary self-help group for lesbians, gay, bisexual & transgender (LGBT) asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution of oppressive homophobic/transphobic regimes. The group was established in January 2013 and is based in Croydon.

It is open to LGBT people who are applying to the United Kingdom for asylum on the grounds that they have faced or fear persecution and harm in their countries of origin because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The group pursues policies of integration with LGBT Groups in Croydon and elsewhere. It provides a secure and safe space for members to share experiences as LGBT asylum seekers and to mutually build confidence and knowledge about the asylum process as it affects the individual applicant. It is supported by those who have already been granted leave to stay in the United Kingdom.

## **2.0 Introduction**

It's important to record how a small number of LGBT friends put their heads together in January 2013, and decided to form a group for those seeking protection from harm and persecution suffered in their countries of origin.

It was from regular meetings based on a realistic understanding of the persecution suffered by LGBT people in their own countries, and on the kind of reception they had received from the authorities when they arrived in the UK, which led to a set of objectives being drawn. It was thought that if these were implemented it would go some way to ease the harm caused by the persecution, and ill treatment inflicted on this group of people by the authorities because of their sexual orientation.

These objectives were agreed by the membership and adopted in February 2013. The group decided to name the group 'Rainbows Across Borders'. It should be put on record that the objects agreed by members in February 2013 have now been incorporated into the group's formal Constitution and that they will continue to be the guiding light for the future.

## **3.0 Organization**

It was decided at an early stage of development that the group should be owned and controlled by LGBT people seeking asylum together with those that had already been granted refugee status. This decision being based on the understanding that collectively they had the experience and knowledge of why they had to leave their own countries, and since arriving in the UK had gained considerable understanding of the asylum process. Therefore on this basis it was acknowledged that this was an effective way in which members could support one another and influence developments in the future.

The importance of networking and learning from the knowledge and skills of the LGBT and wider community was acknowledged as essential for any future developments to take place.

### **3.1 Meetings :**

The group has now established an organization that is being increasingly recognized by LGBT people seeking refuge. It regularly attracts 20-30 members at its meetings which are held at the CVA Resource Centre with additional LGBT asylum seekers requesting advice and support and wanting to enlist as members.

### **3.2 Publicity :**

The group has established a website with details about the group's activities and how to make contact. In addition information about the group and its activities have been advertised on the Croydon & London LGBT website and elsewhere.

### **3.3 Chorus :**

In June 2013 it was decided to create a Chorus. This initiative was undertaken for various reasons. Primarily it was seen as being therapeutic, enjoyable and a nice way to make newcomers welcome and cohesive in bringing members together. In addition, the Chorus was seen as a means of presenting their stories to a wider audience and in the process gain sympathetic support for what the group was trying to achieve.

Since June the Chorus has performed at the Silver Sunday Event at the Croydon Minster; at the Anniversary and Harvest Festival Celebrations at the Unitarian Church and at their Pride Service. They also performed at the Croydon Clocktower during Black History Month; the Civic Reception and Launch of LGBT History Month and at Greenwich University. The Chorus will be performing at Croydon's IDAHO (International Day Against Homophobia/Transphobia) Event in May this year.

### **4.0 Black History Month October 2013**

Supported by the professional library staff and Roger Borg of Croydon Area Gay Society the group mounted a display during Black History Month in October 2013 at Croydon's Central Library illustrating the part played by the LGBT Black community and individuals who were actively engaged in the Black Liberation Movement. It addressed the fact that most lesbian & gay activists had been airbrushed out of the contribution they had made in their struggle to support black liberation. The display also depicted and paid tribute to the courage of LGBT BME individuals that had paid the ultimate sacrifice for LGBT justice and equality with their lives, and to those that continued the struggle to have the rights of all LGBT people protected from harm and persecution.

### **5.0 Liaison**

#### **5.1 LGBT History Month Steering Group**

The group has had members attend the Council's LGBT History Month Steering Group to represent the views and ideas of Rainbows Across Borders. This has enabled the group to be identified as a new addition to the local LGBT community, and in consequence be involved in LGBT History Month Programme of Events. In addition, the Steering Group has been engaged with discussing LGBT representation during Black History Month and for the Annual Pride Celebrations. This involvement has given members access to professional staff of Croydon Council and given them the opportunity gain knowledge and learn about its policies and services provided. We would record our appreciation for the work undertaken on the LGBT History Month Steering Group by Herbert Bulindi, Sarah Bangi, Maria Kakoosa and by Susan Ddamulira.

#### **5.2 Croydon Area Gay Society (CAGS)**

Croydon Area Gay Society was established in 1972 and has been active in providing services for the local LGBT community since that date. It has during its existence been keystone in helping new LGBT initiatives to get started. When Rainbows Across Borders asked for their advice and help it was given unconditionally. Information about existing groups, background history and about developments in

the local and wider LGBT community being provided. Plus practical support with the design of the group's website and the mounting of displays to promote the work of the group and gain an understanding for its purpose. This and much else was provided by CAG's and appreciated.

### **5.3 Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA)**

CVA Resource Centre is now the base for our monthly meetings. This arrangement has been made possible because CVA had a policy of helping new groups to get off the ground. This policy has enabled the group to have their monthly room hire free of charge for six months, then at £10 per session for six months and then after at a rental of £31 per session. This arrangement has made it possible for the group to leave the confines of a quashed corner of the Clocktower Café, and to meet at the CVA Resource Centre. This financial arrangement has also given us time to raise some funds to cover the continuing hire costs, and more importantly to have access and gain advice about the voluntary sector from CVA's professional staff that are housed at the Resource Centre.

### **5.4 Other Networking**

Links on mental health issues affecting LGBT asylum seekers have been developed with '**Off the Record**' who have provided training for members on the subject. Plus links with **Croydon's BME Forum** and the '**Hear Us**' NHS Group again concerning mental health.

### **6.0 London & Black Pride 2013**

The banner of Rainbows Across Borders was for the first time carried on the London Pride Parade by an excited band of members who were experiencing their first ever Pride Parade. This being followed by their attendance at Black Pride Celebrations in Soho Square.

### **7.0 Campaigns**

**7.1 Worldwide** : Members are aware that human rights in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity are at last reaching the statute books of many nations. However they are also aware that 78 states worldwide continue to criminalise same-sex behaviour, and due to the legal legacies of the British Empire, 42 of these are in the Commonwealth of Nations.

**7.2 Colonial Inheritance** : They are acutely aware from their own personal experience of persecution and harm received in their countries of origin that many states have recently adopted policies leading to increased enforcement of colonial laws against gay men and new criminalisation of sex between women and transgender people. These policies and the inflammatory anti LGBT statements made by leading politicians and establishment figures giving tacit approval for personal and mob violence to take place against their LGBT communities.

**7.3 Protests** : It is the policy of the group to be fully engaged with protests against homophobic/transphobic regimes and institutions that persecute and unjustly punish people solely on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This policy of activism being based on the conviction that homophobia and transphobia must be challenged, denounced and made public. Members have taken part in protests with their sister organization the 'Out Loud and Proud Diamond Group' during 2013 at the Cameroon High Commission : Jamaican High Commission : Ugandan High Commission : The Gambian High Commission and the Russian Embassy plus others.

## **8.0 Planned Developments 2014/15**

- 8.1** It is planned to consolidate and improve on the services already being provided.
- 8.2** To identify methods of fundraising and charities that could be approached for grant aid.
- 8.3** To increase the number of meetings to enable additional services to be developed.
- 8.4** To improve communications and administration by centralizing the office function.
- 8.5** To develop educational and training programmes to cover:-
  - (a)** Mental health issues.
  - (b)** Preparation for work.
  - (c)** Education about the asylum process.
- 8.6** To strengthen the outreach and therapeutic role of the Chorus.
- 8.7** To undertake research based on the personal experience of members applying for refuge.
- 8.8** To further develop the group's methods of evaluating the services provided.
- 8.9** Identify whether it would be possible to produce an anthology of short stories based on the personal experience of members.

## **9.0 Conclusion**

The group has achieved much during 2013/14. This being more than we had anticipated when we started. It has been hard work and members have all played a part in this achievement. We now have a new period with many of our objects still to be developed.

It should be noted that we have also attracted many newcomers requesting help, advice and support. Therefore, this year and into 2015 we need to consolidate what we've achieved whilst at the same time developing an organization capable of meeting the new demands being made.

At the moment we have no surplus funding and if we are to develop new services and improve on what we presently provide we will need to successfully apply for grants to enable us to make these improvements a reality.

Finally we've all learned much from one another during the past year. In many ways being able to share ideas has been the basis for all the work and developments undertaken by the group. We should remember this fact when we think about how to respond to the future needs of LGBT people seeking refuge in the United Kingdom in the years and years to come. Bravo and a big thank you to all members and friends of Rainbows Across Borders.

Co-Convenors Fred Kivumbi

Sarah Bangi