

West Midlands Immigration Network

2022/23 impact report



A partnership of: Refugee and Migrant Centre, Brushstrokes, Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke on Trent and Hope Projects

A partnership funded by



Partners



The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) is an award winning charity founded in 1999. It has offices in Wolverhampton, Walsall and Birmingham and works with clients from across the Black Country and Birmingham.

RMC have a team of qualified and experienced caseworkers, accredited to Level 1, 2 & 3 with the Office of Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC). The team offer a wide range of support to clients who include asylum seekers, refugees, EU migrants, undocumented people and those with uncertain immigration status.



Hope Projects helps people who have been made homeless and destitute by flawed refusals of asylum.

Our legal service makes sure that people understand why they have been made homeless by the asylum system and what they may be able to do to challenge this.

Our housing and destitution fund services provide safe housing and money for food and essentials for people who we believe have been made destitute by a flawed refusal of asylum



CASNS mission is to use advice work, capacity building and training to address poverty and inequality. Alongside providing advice to clients, CASNS provides:

- Training to frontline staff/ volunteers in third sector organisations.
- Volunteering opportunities.
- Awareness-raising on equality and community cohesion issues.
- Capacity building, coordination, and resource to local groups/networks.

CASNS has strong links with many residents and community groups, and has been providing immigration advice since the late 1980s and is currently registered at Level 3 with the OISC.



Brushstrokes in Sandwell is a community project which works with the whole of Sandwell's community, specialising in the needs of asylum seekers, refugees and newcomers to the UK.

Our holistic approach ensures that we cover not only early action integration and settlement advice, but also provide advice around securing housing, benefits, employment, health advice and multi-level English Education as well as practical resource support through our food bank and clothing bank.

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Introduction

The West Midlands Immigration Network was created in October 2022 by four non-profit organisations operating in the region with funding received under the Justice Together Initiative.

The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC), Brushstrokes, Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke on Trent (CASNS) and Hope Projects formed a partnership with the vision of strengthening immigration services in the West Midlands and working towards enabling marginalised migrants to better access free, regulated, legal advice to understand their options and ultimately settle in the UK.

At the heart of this partnership is a dedication to collaboration and support amongst immigration practitioners. In the first year of this partnership, the focus has been to develop and upskill immigration advisors, to improve recruitment and retention of qualified immigration advisors and invest in their well-being. The creation of the West Midlands Immigration Advisors Network, a network open to a range of non-profit organisations in the West

Midlands, has been an important product of this partnership.

Another priority for the Network is forging key partnerships. In the past year, the Network expanded the work with smaller voluntary and community organisations, particularly groups with lived experience with an aim to improve their understanding of the need for and how to access referral pathways into specialist immigration advice provision. Partners also expanded the geographic areas of their work and strengthened the sharing of expertise, mutual support and referral pathways.

This report aims to present some of the achievements of the Network in its first year of operation and highlight the importance of working in partnership to increase capacity, improve quality and build teams resilient and equipped to work in the challenging field of free immigration advice provision.

The West Midlands Immigration Network is a project with funding received under the Justice Together Initiative (JTI) designed to build the quality and provision of Immigration advice across the West Midlands. Four partners have come together to develop this support.

West Midlands Immigration Advisors Network

'The JTI Network run by RMC is essential to all who work frontline and in small charities. As legal aid diminishes, and legal deserts are created not for profit fill the gap. Having the peer support from this group, to discuss cases, pass on knowledge and experience is invaluable. Not only do we share knowledge, but we strive to raise the standard of Asylum and Immigration advice in the region'

Aliya Khan FCILEx OISC Level 3 – Head of Legal Department - Hope Projects

'I have found the advisors network very helpful to discuss current trends and to find solutions to problems outside of our internal structures. We are often required to give complex advice in circumstances that change quickly and having different perspectives has been helpful. It has also been good for developing networks to work together.'

Reece Colley, Casework Team Manager, RMC

As part of this partnership, in November 2022 we set up the West Midlands Immigration Advisors Network, led by RMC. The idea for this Network came from the partners' wish to have a regional forum tailored to immigration advisors' needs. A forum of sharing good practice, discussing cases and legal developments, providing mentoring opportunities and enhancing collaboration. The Network has brought together organisations from outside the partnership and across the region and has so far 23 members from 8 different organisations providing free immigration advice across the West Midlands.

Verbal feedback from the members has been positive with advisors noting that they feel more supported, less isolated

when doing casework and that the Advisors Network has made their teams more resilient.

The Advisors Network has also facilitated case referrals between members depending on capacity and expertise on certain areas of law.

'After many years of isolated working as a Legal Aid sole supervisor and caseworker, the JTI funding has given me two amazing teams. The first is my own team of two valued colleagues now funded to progress to level 2 OISC; the second is the team of our West Midlands colleagues with their combined support and wisdom'

Maria Harrison Immigration Contract Supervisor, CASNS



Question



Zarah Sultana

Labour

Coventry South



To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, whether her Department plans to provide indefinite leave to remain to Sudanese families in Coventry who were recently granted six-months leave to enter the UK.

Answer



Robert Jenrick

Conservative

Newark



Answered on

25 July 2023

Where a person has leave in the UK but is unable to return home they should apply for Leave Outside the Rules using the FLR(HRO) form [Application to extend stay in the UK: FLR\(HRO\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/forms/application-to-extend-stay-in-the-uk-flr-hro). Each case will be assessed on its merits.

If they are unable to afford the fee then a fee waiver application can be made here: [fee waiver application form](#)

Beyond being a forum for professional development, the Advisors Network is also developing as a forum to discuss social policy work and influencing.

In July 2023, after relevant discussions in our Advisors Network meetings, Central England Law Centre in collaboration with RMC took the initiative to ask Zarah Sultana MP to raise a question in Parliament regarding plans to grant settlement to Sudanese evacuees who were granted leave to enter the UK for six months. A written response was received to this question, which was shared with our networks, including ILPA and was included in the legal analysis on the issue at the leading website Free Movement.

Capacity building and development

The creation of this Network resulted in all partner organisations having the space and resource to invest in capacity building and upskilling of existing advisors. Training opportunities increased and training, external and internal, is now a priority for the teams.

As part of this Network, RMC set up monthly 'study groups' for members of all the organisations of the West Midlands Immigration Advisors Network. Aim of these hour long sessions is to provide regular training to immigration advisors in different areas of law and allow for a space to share knowledge and support each other.

13 advisors

Supported with one-to-one internal training



"I can honestly say the sessions with RMC have been excellent and have really helped to consolidate my understanding of all the different areas of immigration law"

Training participant

93.4%

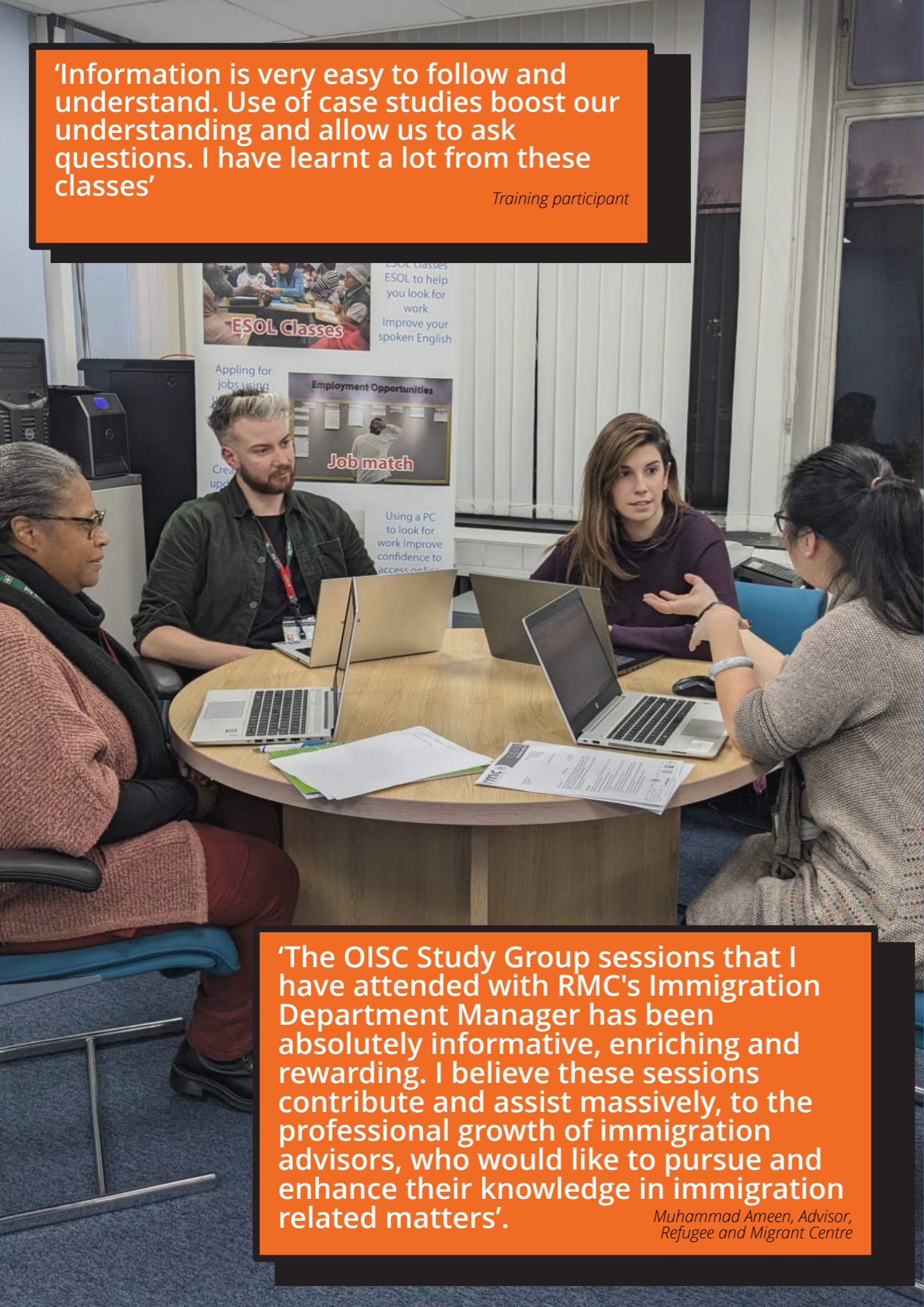
of participants found that their knowledge on the topics covered improved after attending training.

80%

of participants have found the sessions very useful

'Information is very easy to follow and understand. Use of case studies boost our understanding and allow us to ask questions. I have learnt a lot from these classes'

Training participant



'The OISC Study Group sessions that I have attended with RMC's Immigration Department Manager has been absolutely informative, enriching and rewarding. I believe these sessions contribute and assist massively, to the professional growth of immigration advisors, who would like to pursue and enhance their knowledge in immigration related matters'.

Muhammad Ameen, Advisor,
Refugee and Migrant Centre

'JTI funding has made it possible for me to progress toward OISC level 2, without which it would not have been possible. The partnership has provided me (as a trainee) with excellent resources including study groups, network meetings and of course a plethora of knowledge, support, and supervision from peer caseworkers/supervisors. All in all, this provides for a fantastic learning environment to enable me to achieve level 2 accreditation'.

Heidi Latala Immigration Caseworker; OISC level 2 Trainee,



5 new roles
Created by the project



8 advisors
Upskilled through the project



200 hours
Of external training provided



41 advisors from 7 different organisations took part in the projects external training

Partnerships & Outreach

The Network has enabled Hope Projects and CASNS to collaborate, expanding Hope Projects work from Birmingham, Coventry and the Black Country to also include Stoke and North Staffordshire. The two organisations set up a new referral pathway for CASNS to allow destitute refused asylum-seekers in Stoke-on-Trent to access specialist immigration advice and assistance provided by Hope Projects. CASNS are now participants in the Hope Steering Group meetings.



'The partnership with the Hope Projects offers a very welcome source of quality advice and support for often complex refused asylum cases; cases that we would otherwise have no resources to help.'

Maria Harrison Immigration Contract Supervisor, CASNS

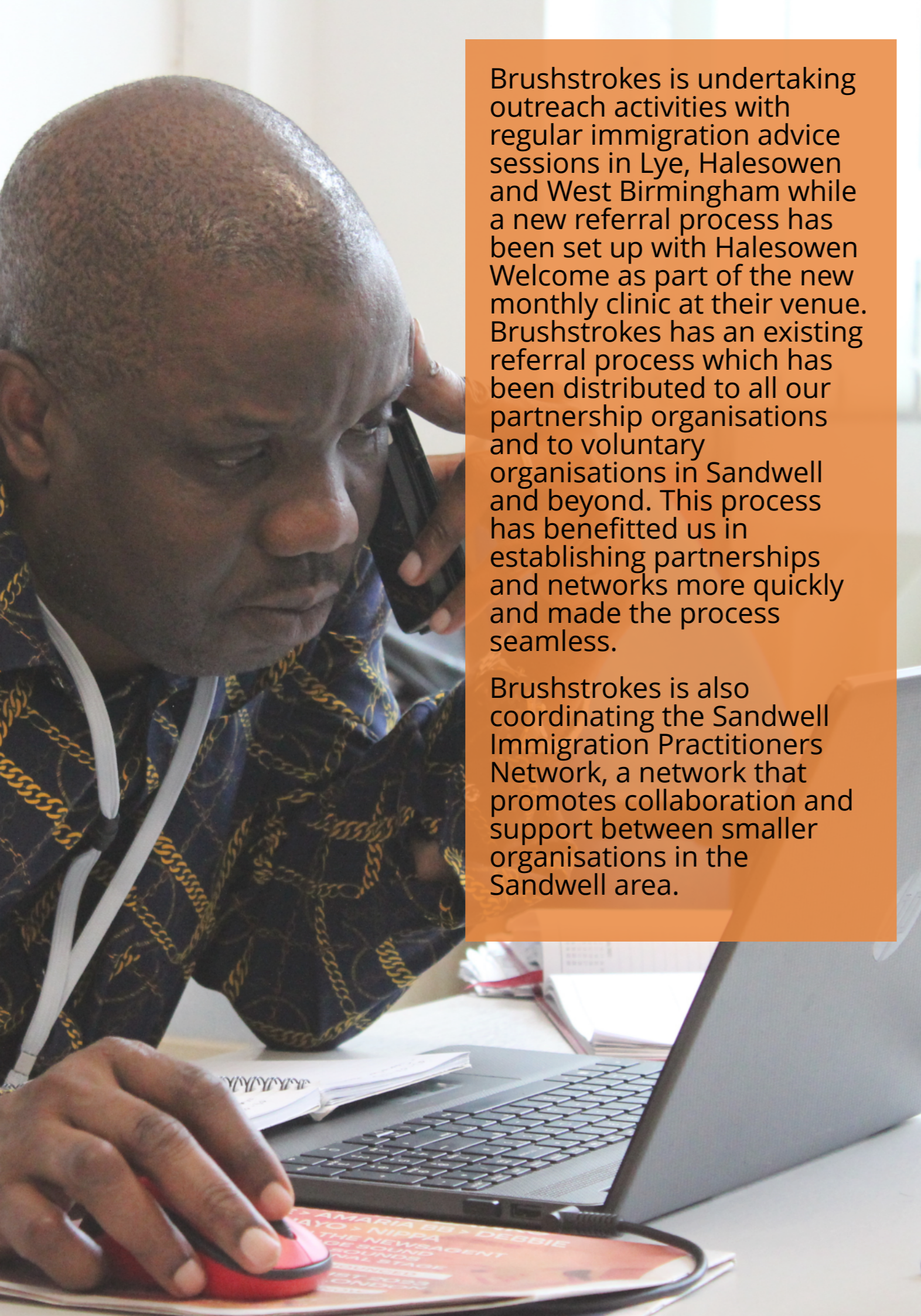
In May 2023, RMC and Brushstrokes started collaborating to provide a 6-month pilot, advice service in Dudley. The Dudley Refugee and Migrant Hub launched on the 22nd May and has been delivered from Provision House, providing drop-in advice sessions 4 days a week including; immigration advice, general advice, ESOL and employability. The pilot has been successful, and the partners are hoping to secure further funding. 144 migrants have been supported plus 150 dependents from 47 different countries in the first 16 weeks.

'Dudley lacked any non-fee charging immigration services, and the cooperation between RMC and Brushstrokes has given hope for vulnerable recipients in Dudley.'

Ghani Abou Alchamat, Caseworker, Refugee and Migrant Centre.

'Working with RMC at the Dudley Pilot Project has been a great experience. It has given me the opportunity to work alongside other great Colleagues like Jack and Mohammed in providing much needed assistance to multiple migrants in their quest to obtain to form of closure with regard to their application for a new life in the United Kingdom. The Project has been largely successful and i hope it continues'

George Amadi, Immigration Adviser, Brushstrokes Community Project



Brushstrokes is undertaking outreach activities with regular immigration advice sessions in Lye, Halesowen and West Birmingham while a new referral process has been set up with Halesowen Welcome as part of the new monthly clinic at their venue. Brushstrokes has an existing referral process which has been distributed to all our partnership organisations and to voluntary organisations in Sandwell and beyond. This process has benefitted us in establishing partnerships and networks more quickly and made the process seamless.

Brushstrokes is also coordinating the Sandwell Immigration Practitioners Network, a network that promotes collaboration and support between smaller organisations in the Sandwell area.

In the past year, CASNS established their North Staffordshire Immigration Network, a local network that enables small groups working with vulnerable migrants to make referrals to their immigration team. CASNS is working with these groups to enable them to understand the immigration system better and allow them to make effective referrals.

A referral pathway with two local community groups supporting victims of trafficking and migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NPRF) has been being piloted and these organisations are currently receiving training by CASNS on how to refer cases. CASNS is working on extending the Network to include more organisations and groups in the following year.



'It is hard to underestimate the difference that the JTI grant, and partnership has made to my team, our clients, and to CASNS as an organisation. Whereas our Trustee Board had begun to discuss closing down Immigration casework, that is no longer being considered so CASNS can continue to provide Immigration casework to the people of North Staffordshire'

Jude Hawes, Head of Specialist & Equalities Service, CASNS

Immigration Advice



Funding under the Justice Together Initiative has allowed all partners to recruit new advisors or support existing advisors to develop, which has enhanced the capacity to provide immigration advice, especially on complex cases (OISC Level 2 & 3).

This has helped migrants to access free legal advice on immigration matters where the alternative would be to represent themselves or spend thousands of pounds on solicitor fees, money that they do not often have. This has also helped clients to obtain their case files from the Home Office or previous representatives, which in turn empowered them to take back control of their cases and make informed decisions.

With the support of this funding and the partnerships that have been developed, the casework capacity has increased and expanded to new areas such as Dudley,

Stoke and North Staffordshire and Halesowen and has allowed partners to diversify their offer to meet demand in an everchanging legal landscape.

The funding has also given space to partners to focus their work on emerging issues. An example of this is Hope Projects' Sudan Project. After the unrest in Sudan in April 2023 that led to a change in circumstances in many Sudanese nationals' cases, Hope Projects ran a Sudan Project where they provided generic representations to Sudanese refused asylum seekers. Hope Projects undertook outreach into the Sudanese community and ran a workshop. They also developed their work around Sudanese cases and have contributed to the repository with Refugee Action, Clifford Chance Solicitors and Asylos on this issue.

The quality of advice has improved due to access to training, increased supervision and support, and the time available to research complex cases.



Conclusion

The Network has been running for one year and all partners are proud to be able to report on all these achievements.

All partner organisations will continue to invest in their teams and strengthen partnerships with the ultimate goal of contributing to build a more sustainable, accessible and collaborative sector where all migrants, irrespective of their financial circumstances, can access quality immigration advice, resolve their immigration matters and settle in the UK.

This report was compiled by **Danai Papachristopoulou**, Immigration Department Manager at the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) with contributions from:

Amrit Nandra, Immigration & Quality Assurance Manager, Brushstrokes

Jude Hawes, Head of Specialist and Equalities Services, Citizens Advice Staffordshire North & Stoke-on-Trent (CASNS)

Phil Davis, Director and **Aliya Khan**, Head of Legal Department, Hope Projects

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