

**Annual General Meeting
19 October 2009**

Item 5 – Chairperson’s Report

The ten months that have passed since the last AGM have been challenging for Refugee Services, for those charged with its governance during that time, and for staff and volunteers alike.

The 2008 AGM convened in difficult circumstances. I do not need on this occasion to elaborate in detail what those difficulties were. They related to the organisation’s Constitution, its membership, its senior management and its mainline funding. The key funding agencies were unhappy. The Auditor had made plain his unease over Refugee Services prospects as a going concern.

Arising from discussion on 11 December 2008 and by general agreement, an Interim Board was appointed with a clear mandate to bring about some necessary changes. The Interim Board was given until 30 June 2009 to fulfill that mandate.

At a Special General Meeting of members on 29 June this year the Interim Board submitted a revised Constitution. This was not a mere fine-tuning of the previous text but reflected a major makeover of the organisation’s founding document. The reason being that the Interim Board had quickly discovered the old text was incomplete and out of date.

As a matter of urgency the Constitution had to be brought into step with the more robust framework instruments that are now common among other not for profit, non-government agencies with a high level of dependence on public funding sources. The law firm of Morrison Kent supplied independent legal advice for this exercise, at no charge.

The Interim Board’s second point of main focus was on the senior management tier. This had created accountability issues and had become an area of serious tension between management and the previous board. The Interim Board disbanded the three-member ‘national management team’ structure, and following an internal and external search appointed a new chief executive, Heather Hayden. She has brought formidable skills and experience, high energy and impressive commitment to the job.

The Interim Board was also requested to reinvigorate Refugee Services membership in order to enhance the organisation’s profile, credibility and relevance. On the Board’s recommendation the Special General Meeting endorsed full member status for an additional eight agencies in the Ordinary membership category, thereby doubling the number of sister agencies associated with Refugee Services. Importantly, six of the new members are refugee-driven and managed.

If those three areas of major concern – the Constitution, management structure and membership – were not worrisome enough, the Interim Board had to deal with the stark reality that Refugee Services had been living well beyond its means. This situation had become very evident to the Auditor and underpinned his qualified opinion.

Fortunately from the standpoint of Refugee Services immediate future, the reforms initiated by the Interim Board and supported at the Special General Meeting, were sufficient to give renewed comfort to the principal funders. Their support has been obtained for the 2009-2010 financial year. I wish to acknowledge the constructive and helpful relationship that now exists with the responsible officers in the Ministry of Social Development and the Department of Labour, Immigration Division, and has consolidated since Heather took up her appointment.

Having said that, Refugee Services cannot now sit back with any sense of complacency about its long-term financial position. There is further work to be done in this area.

I will add only three additional points. The first is that more rigorous external monitoring of Refugee Services financial and operational performance will have to be accepted as a fact of life. This should be welcomed, not be a cause for apprehension.

The second point is that the organisation must strive to reduce the level of its dependence on public funding sources. This will not be easy and will not happen quickly. Especially in the existing tough economic conditions that has put pressure on the discretionary dollars available to likely benefactors. The plain message is that new ways of attracting non-core funding have to be identified. New means of profiling Refugee Services as a value proposition have to be explored.

My final point relates to Refugee Services role as one element in the network of organisations, public and private sector, that operate in the broad field of refugee settlement, care and advocacy. A number of them are Ordinary members of Refugee Services, and are valued partners to us in that capacity. Our emphasis moving forward and working with those other agencies will be very much on maximising opportunities for collaboration to mutual advantage.

I will leave Heather to speak in more detail on these particular issues in her CE Report.

It remains for me to thank my fellow-members of the Interim Board for the journey we've been on together since January, and to the success of which they have all applied unstinting effort: Druis Barrett, Love Chile, Diana Crossan, Margaret Griffin, John Lumsden, Arif Saeid, Carol Stigley and Mahad Warsame. And to Carla Wild who served admirably in the role of Minute taker and scribe.

The permanent board that will be elected at this AGM will inherit a modern Constitution, a strengthened membership base, an improved management framework, more secure funding, dedicated staff and volunteers, and a topflight chief executive. We wish the new board well as it assumes responsibility for the delivery of Refugee Services critically important settlement programmes.

Brian Lynch
Chair
Interim Board
Refugee Services Aotearoa