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Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group

Working with asylum seekers and refugees





FACT: In 2016/17 SWVG supported 45 clients with regular weekly contact. Between them they had 27 children. 27 other clients were in occasional contact. In 2017 we took on 17 new clients.



FACT: In 2016/17 our clients came from 30 different countries. The main countries of origin were Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Iran.



THIS IS THE STORY of a typical asylum seeker and it illustrates the life events of many of those who we help and support. Whilst it is not the story of a single client, all the events described have really happened to at least one of our clients and many are common occurrences.

Hamid was a teenager living in Sudan when his father was killed by rebel forces. His mother and younger sisters begged him to flee because his life was in danger. He arrived in the UK in 2013, aged 20, and made a claim for asylum. While this claim was being assessed he was provided with NASS (Home Office) accommodation in London. In 2016 his claim was refused and he had to leave his NASS house. He travelled to stay with his cousin in Southampton, but when his cousin returned to Sudan Hamid found himself homeless.



FACT: NASS support is provided for an asylum seeker who has submitted a claim for asylum. The support consists of a room (sometimes shared) and a weekly subsistence allowance, currently £36.95 for food and all other necessities. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work.



ALERT: When an asylum seeker's claim is refused they are usually given just 21 days to leave their NASS (Home Office) accommodation and all financial support stops. They are then totally destitute with no means to buy anything.

Hamid was referred to SWVG by the Red Cross. He met one of the SWVG co-ordinators who chatted with him and learnt a little bit about his situation. Hamid said that his asylum claim had been submitted in a hurry and that it did not include evidence from his country that would have helped. He wanted to make a fresh claim.

Hamid was allocated an SWVG visitor (his befriender), Sarah. They met for the first time at the Avenue St Andrew Multicultural Centre (AMC) in Southampton with another experienced visitor who would act as back up, to support Hamid's befriender and to be there for Hamid if Sarah was away. After the first meeting Hamid and Sarah would meet about once a week either at AMC, in a café, or during the summer in the park.



CLIENT'S PERSPECTIVE: "I met my new visitor Alan at AMC. Alan was so kind, he sat with me and speak to me slowly. He was like he knows everything in my mind. I was expecting him to give me sweets or something but he gave something more important. I was really confused and everything was difficult for me to access, after I met Alan living in Southampton became very smooth and easier. It was like he gave me the key of Southampton door. Many thanks to SWVG & Alan too." *Imad*



FACT: Every client is paired with a visitor, an SWVG trained volunteer, who befriends the client by meeting regularly to offer friendship, emotional support and practical help.



FACT: The SWVG Friday team, a small group of very experienced members, is available at the Multicultural Centre hosted by Avenue St Andrew's Church in Southampton every Friday to meet new clients and visitors, accept referrals and to troubleshoot urgent problems.



FACT: SWVG works closely with a number of local organisations including CLEAR, the Red Cross and local GPs who all refer clients to us.



FACT: SWVG continues to recruit around 20 new volunteers each year to work directly with clients, or in other supporting roles, such as working on the website or the newsletter, campaigning or running events. All volunteers receive a half-day's initial training and those who will become visitors attend a further day's intensive course. This training is supplemented by occasional courses and updates on legal and other topical matters. General Meetings, which are held every two months, are open to all members.



FACT: Every visitor is supported by an experienced colleague who acts as their 'back up', a mentor to provide advice and support. Visitors also attend monthly support group meetings which provide a chance to share issues and experiences within a safe, small group environment.



Because Hamid was street homeless the most urgent matter was to find somewhere for him to stay. Sarah made an emergency application to the SWVG Money Allocation Group (MAG) for ASSIST. The MAG group agreed to give Hamid £35 per week to cover his living expenses and provided him with a room in the SWVG hostel in Southampton. SWVG helped him find essentials such as bedding and cooking equipment.



VISITOR'S PERSPECTIVE: "As a newly trained visitor, I met Imad, at AMC. His lawyer had recently put in a fresh asylum claim for him and he was awaiting the result. Imad was newly in Southampton and had lost all his networks but he had already organised three sessions a week of voluntary work, joined the library, and found out about training in customer service and marketing. His main priority was to get gym membership and a bicycle." *Alan*



FACT: SWVG supports clients who are street homeless. Previously we would pay the rent for a low-priced room in a shared house in Southampton. However, the Immigration Act 2016 made it an offence to rent premises to adults with no right to remain in the UK. After taking legal advice, SWVG took on the lease for a six-bedroom house to operate as a hostel. This enables us to support our clients legally.



FACT: The ASSIST scheme attempts to improve the lives of asylum seekers who are trying to put together a fresh claim, but are currently destitute with no other means of support. For asylum seekers who are in this position we provide a weekly subsistence payment of up to £35.



FACT: The Money Allocation Group (MAG) meets monthly when the provision of ASSIST money to each client is reviewed in the light of any changing circumstance and new requests are dealt with. Urgent requests such as Sarah's can be dealt with between meetings by a telephone conversation between group members. This enables the group to respond immediately to help a destitute asylum seeker.



FACT: Some of our clients stay with friends or relations. MAG can allocate them 'sofa money', a small weekly amount, so that the asylum seeker can make a contribution to the household expenses and buy personal items such as toiletries.

Hamid was grateful to have a secure place to stay and enough money for essential food and some clothing. However he was keen to pursue his claim for asylum and Sarah found him a solicitor to put in the fresh claim.



COMMENT: Jo Renshaw of Turpin & Miller, our legal advisor:

‘This year has been a tough one for our clients, particularly those who are seeking to make fresh claims on either asylum or human rights grounds. The measures designed to create a ‘hostile environment’ for this group have gradually been rolled out so as to prevent those with no status from opening bank accounts, holding a driving licence or renting a property. Making working illegally a criminal offence for the first time is likely to have an even bigger impact.

For those seeking to make applications on human rights grounds Home Office fees continue to rise, meaning that clients who have successfully obtained leave in the past are struggling to extend that leave. The presumption that leave will always be granted without access to any benefits has made life very difficult for many clients, including those who are struggling to care for young children alone.’





FACT: Many asylum seekers who are referred to SWVG have received inadequate legal advice that has led to a poor initial decision to their claim from the Home Office. In such cases the visitor will help the asylum seeker to find a good solicitor and will often help them to put their papers in order before accompanying them to a meeting. Jo Renshaw, a respected immigration solicitor, works closely with SWVG. With the permission of the client she will review their case on SWVG's behalf. She will then advise whether any further action can be attempted or whether the client has come to the end of the road with their asylum claim.



ALERT: Any new evidence for a fresh claim now has to be delivered, in person, by the asylum seeker to an office in Liverpool. Some have interviews there, but most have to make this journey simply to hand in paperwork. For a destitute asylum seeker this is impossible without financial support and we have helped several clients to make this trip.



CAMPAIGN: SWVG has joined a national campaign 'Fairness Not Fares' organised by Refugee Action to persuade the Home Office to allow new evidence for fresh claims to be submitted by post. This work is being organised by SWVG's Campaigns group.



Sarah realised that Hamid had a number of health problems, but had not received any medical advice since fleeing Sudan. She went with him to register with a GP in Southampton so that he could get some help and medication for TB.

Hamid's spoken English was reasonable but he sometimes struggled to understand, had difficulty filling in forms and at times could not follow a conversation. Sarah arranged for him to attend English lessons at City College in Southampton.

Hamid was meeting Sarah every week and usually went to AMC on Fridays, where he could chat with others over coffee. He soon got on the kitchen rota, helping to prepare food and drinks.

However he still felt lonely and depressed at times and so Sarah encouraged him to take part in some of the activities run by SWVG and other groups. He enjoyed joining in with the badminton and football sessions.



ALERT: Asylum seekers who are putting together a fresh claim are called failed asylum seekers by the Home Office and are not entitled to free secondary health care. They can be sent bills amounting to several thousand pounds if they need to be admitted to hospital. With the efforts of SWVG and support of NHS Southampton Clinical Commissioning Group, several clients have had such debts written off by the hospital trust.



FACT: A number of our clients have health issues. Some suffer from PTSD or depression. Many are lonely. Helping them to register with a GP is the first step to getting the help that they need, whether it is medication, a referral for counselling or dealing with other problems.



FACT: We can help clients by paying for short courses such as English lessons and we have supported several clients to make applications for funding for longer or vocational courses. Some clients have gained first and masters degrees with our support.



FACT: SWVG has a group of members who can teach English and, when necessary, literacy. This work is carried out on a one-to-one basis.



FACT: Loneliness, isolation and boredom are problems for many clients. We arrange activities such as outings, walks and barbecues to help tackle these issues. We also make payments for individual clients to pursue personal interests such as crafts and fitness, thus improving their wellbeing.



FACT: We work closely with City Of Sanctuary in Southampton which supports asylum seekers in a number of ways. Several of our female clients attend a regular sewing session and others have worked with one of our Members to produce short plays based on their experiences.

At last Hamid's fresh claim was accepted for consideration by the Home Office and he was entitled to apply for NASS support. He came along to AMC where a member of the Red Cross team helped him fill in the application form. He knew that he may have to move elsewhere, but to everyone's surprise and delight he was granted accommodation in Southampton. Sarah continued to meet regularly with Hamid as he still needed emotional support and friendship and they both waited anxiously to hear the result of his fresh claim.





FACT: A voluntary group, Southampton Action, collects clothing for refugees and asylum seekers. As well as taking supplies to European camps, the group brings a suitable selection to the Avenue Multicultural Centre once a month. Our clients can select items that will be of use to them.




FACT: Applicants for NASS support must be prepared to live anywhere in the UK – there is no choice and many clients are forced to move away from friends and family in order to receive the support to which they are entitled.



FACT: While clients are waiting for their NASS application to be processed, which can take several weeks, SWVG continues to support them with accommodation and living expenses.





After 10 months Hamid heard that he had been granted refugee status, meaning that he was allowed to work and had access to public funds. He was over the moon and when he met Sarah he couldn't stop smiling. However this was not the end of his journey. He needed to get a National Insurance number before he was allowed to apply for a job, apply for jobseekers allowance (JSA) or get help with housing. Sarah helped him make the application and SWVG continued financial support until all was settled. Sarah kept in occasional contact with Hamid as he became increasingly independent and settled into his new life.



FACT: The alternatives:

- 1.** Sadly, some clients have their fresh claims refused and this is usually as far as they can take their case. The only options open to them are to live 'underground' in the UK or to take voluntary return to their country. SWVG continues to support clients as they struggle to make this difficult decision.
- 2.** Some of our clients fail to gain refugee status but are awarded limited leave to remain (LTR) on humanitarian grounds. In the past, clients with this status could work and receive benefits. Current policy gives limited leave to remain on human rights grounds, but with no recourse to public funds. Such clients need to reapply for leave to remain, usually every two and a half years.



ALERT: Every person who has leave to remain with no recourse to public funds must pay an annual health levy of £200.



ALERT: The cost of an application to extend leave to remain on humanitarian grounds is currently £811 per person. Together with the NHS contribution paid in advance this means that clients have to find over £1,300 to renew their LTR (normally for two and a half years).



ALERT: When asylum seekers who currently receive funding and accommodation from the Government have their claim approved, they are given just four weeks to secure an income and somewhere to live before they are forced to vacate their accommodation. However, there is often a gap before the receipt of their NI number. SWVG offers temporary support for clients in this situation.



CAMPAIGN: SWVG Campaigns Group is supporting the Refugee Council's 'Out of the fire into the frying pan' campaign to address the issue of the destitution of many who have just received Leave to Remain.



FACT: During the year five clients have been granted Leave to Remain, one has taken Voluntary Return and two have been given NASS accommodation away from Southampton.



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VOLUNTEER'S PERSPECTIVE: "I've long been keen to help SWVG, but knew that work commitments meant I couldn't become a visitor. Instead, following the very helpful introductory training, I got involved in fundraising and communications. So far I have drafted several applications for funding from large charities and have helped prepare a number of publications, including this one. It's great to be involved in such a brilliant charity." **Helen**



In the background

The core work of SWVG, befriending clients, is supported by a range of vital activities. We need to raise an average of £80,000 to £90,000 each year. Our **Fundraising Group** deals with grant applications and manages donations from individuals. Their work is supplemented by **Events Groups** in Southampton and Winchester, who run fundraising events such as concerts, dinners and football tournaments. The **Communications Group** looks after the SWVG website and Facebook page, and prepares publications. We also have a **Campaigns Group** which is very active in campaigning for better treatment of asylum seekers and a more efficient and humane asylum system.



How can you help?

- Join us!
- Attend an event
- Run an event of your own
- If you order goods on-line, join www.easyfundraising.org.uk with SWVG as your chosen charity. Companies you buy from may make small contributions for each purchase.
- Make a one-off or regular donation either on-line at www.justgiving.com/swvg or by emailing our treasurer: treasurer@swvg-refugees.org.uk



With thanks

We are grateful to all the organisations and individuals whose generous grants and donations make our work possible. Many thanks also to our members, patrons and supporters for all the work that they do for us. And finally, to our professional advisors who are so generous with their time: Stefan Lipa for support to the Fundraising Group, Jo Renshaw of Turpin & Miller for legal advice, Peter Casson for auditing our accounts and David Hyde for the design of this brochure.



Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group:

Patrons

Shirley Firth
Miriam Margolyes OBE
John Pilkington

Chair

Anne Leeming

Treasurer

Andrew White

Secretary

Jessica Hasan

Administrator

Xanthe Hackett

Address

Southampton and Winchester
Visitors Group
PO Box 1615
Southampton
SO17 3WF

Charity number

1103093

Telephone

0750 317 6350

Email

info@swvg-refugees.org.uk

Website

swvg-refugees.org.uk



ALERT: Asylum seekers face a hostile environment and even those with refugee status struggle to establish a stable and secure life here. We will continue to work hard to support all our clients, meeting new challenges as they arrive.



Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group

PO Box 1615 Southampton SO17 3WF

Telephone 07503 176 350 **Email** secretary@swvg-refugees.org.uk

Website www.swvg-refugees.org.uk **Charity number** 1103093

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