

Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group

Working with asylum
seekers and refugees





Statistics

In the past year SWVG supported 40 people with regular weekly contact. These people had 19 children between them. Thirty-eight other people were in occasional contact and we supported 60 with one-to-one English lessons.

In the past year the people we worked with came from 22 different countries. The main countries of origin were Iran and Iraq. Twenty-one people received financial support from SWVG's 'ASSIST' scheme for part or all of the year. Ten people have been granted leave to remain in the UK.

From someone who uses SWVG's services

"Hi everyone, I'm a student of SWVG my Teacher is Catherine and Jenny. I give them big thanks because they give me life and how to read. Before I called myself a blind woman because if you cannot read you missed everything in life but now that I'm very happy because I read all the books, I'm a happy woman now. My advice is if you want to be happy in your life please learn how to read you will be very happy for life all my Teacher are great thanks once again for you and God bless you all my name is OLUTAYO ODEYEMI."

Faisah's story

This describes a fictional person seeking asylum. It illustrates the types of challenges faced by people who seek asylum here. Although it is not the story of a single person, the events described are typical of people's experience.

Faisah is from Sudan, where she prompted her journalist husband to write an article in support of women's rights. The article received a lot of publicity and he was kidnapped and later killed. Faisah received threatening letters and fled. She eventually reached England where she quickly submitted an asylum claim. She was given accommodation in Southampton and a weekly subsistence allowance from the Government. By this time, she was six months' pregnant. ▷



From one of our visitors

“I always looked forward to meeting Idriss over coffee each week. I learnt so much, from the quirks of the asylum process to how just finding somewhere to live can involve unexpected challenges when you’re a refugee; and about Sudan too. A lot of the time things were quiet and I’d just help with his English, but then something would happen and a hundred things would need doing at once! I could always count on SWVG’s support though.”

Government support

People seeking asylum are not allowed to work. Once they have submitted a claim for asylum, they receive Government support (sometimes referred to by its former name, NASS Support) which comprises a room (sometimes shared) and an allowance of £37.75 to cover food and all other living expenses.

Faisah was referred to SWVG by the Red Cross. She met an SWVG co-ordinator who listened to Faisah’s story and chatted with her, though Faisah’s English was rather limited.

Faisah was allocated an SWVG visitor, Janet, and they first met at the Multicultural Centre in Southampton with another experienced visitor as back-up to act as a link to the co-ordinators, to support Janet and to be there for Faisah if Janet were away. Faisah and Janet then met about once a week in a café near Faisah’s accommodation.

Antenatal care for Faisah was urgently needed. Janet was able to help Faisah register with a GP and to arrange maternity care. ▷



SWVG – working with people

We work closely with a number of local organisations including CLEAR, the Red Cross and local GPs, who all refer people to SWVG. Every Friday a team of experienced SWVG volunteers is at the Multicultural Centre, hosted by St Andrews Church, to meet people who come to us for help and troubleshoot urgent problems. The volunteers who meet people regularly are referred to as ‘visitors’.

SWVG – volunteer teachers and visitors

We recruit around 20 new volunteers annually to work with people seeking asylum or in other supporting roles. All teachers and visitors undergo one and a half days of intensive training and then attend regular support group meetings. Training is supplemented by occasional topic-based updates and general meetings held every two months. Every SWVG volunteer befriender is supported by an experienced colleague who acts as a mentor and back-up if they are away or unavailable.

Faisah was then distraught to find that her asylum claim was rejected. Her solicitor immediately appealed against this decision, but when the appeal was rejected Faisah was told that she would have to leave her Government accommodation and that her subsistence allowance would be stopped.

As soon as Janet heard the news, she spoke with the SWVG co-ordinators, who were able to find Faisah accommodation in the SWVG hostel as, fortunately, another person had recently moved out. The other occupants were all men and from a number of different countries, but Faisah had her own room and the hostel was clean and warm.

Janet asked the SWVG Money Allocation Group for support for Faisah through the SWVG ASSIST scheme. She was quickly awarded £40 per week to be assessed monthly.

Faisah’s solicitor suggested that Faisah should make a fresh claim to the Home Office. Due to Faisah’s limited English and her traumatised state on arrival in the UK, many details had been omitted from her first claim, so there was more evidence to submit.

Meanwhile, Faisah delivered a baby girl in the Princess Anne Hospital in Southampton. Fortunately all was well, and Faisah named her daughter Amira. ▷



Practical help with healthcare

Many people seeking asylum have ongoing health issues. As well as physical problems, some suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. Many are simply lonely. We help them to register with a GP, which is the first step to getting whatever help they need, whether it is medication, a referral for counselling or a hospital appointment.

The implications of a refused claim

When an asylum claim is refused, all financial support stops and people are usually given just 21 days to leave their accommodation. They are then destitute.

SWVG – providing support in a hostile environment

SWVG supports some people seeking asylum who are street homeless. The 2016 Immigration Act made it an offence to rent premises to adults with no right to remain in the UK. After seeking legal advice, SWVG took on the lease of a six-bedroom house which we operate as a hostel, enabling us to provide accommodation legally.

Faisah's fresh claim had to be delivered in person to Liverpool. SWVG paid for Janet, Faisah and Amira to travel by train to Liverpool to submit the claim.

SWVG also helped provide essential items for Amira and Janet arranged for Faisah to receive one-to-one support from the SWVG language teachers to improve her English, which was a pressing need. ▷



SWVG – providing financial support

Our ASSIST scheme supports people who have been refused asylum and are destitute, while they are trying to put together a fresh claim. The SWVG Money Allocation Group meets monthly to review each case in the light of changing circumstances and to deal with new requests. Urgent requests such as Faisah’s can be dealt with swiftly between meetings by the group communicating by telephone. Some people who are refused asylum stay with friends or relations, and in such cases we allocate “sofa money” so that they can contribute to household expenses and buy personal items such as toiletries.

SWVG – helping to access legal advice

Many people seeking asylum who are referred to us have received inadequate legal advice, which can lead to a refusal of their initial claim. In such cases we will help them find a good solicitor and will often help them put their paperwork in order before accompanying them to a meeting.

We also have a legal advisor, Jo Renshaw of Turpin and Miller, who provides advice on difficult cases and runs annual training sessions for our volunteers, updating them on the increasingly complex legal system on asylum matters.

After submitting a fresh claim, Faisah was again entitled to apply for Government support for herself and Amira. This was done with help from Janet. Faisah and Amira continued to stay in the hostel and receive ASSIST funds while she waited to hear the result of the application. Faisah knew that she might have to move elsewhere, but fortunately she and Amira were granted accommodation in Southampton.

Janet and Faisah continued to meet regularly. Janet encouraged Faisah to come to the Multicultural Centre to meet other people seeking asylum and join in the outings and visits organised by SWVG. Faisah was still anxious and traumatised by her experiences, but began to feel supported and make friends who helped her with Amira. ▷



Faisah was worried about her asylum claim, knowing that if it were rejected she could be sent back to Sudan where she would be at serious risk. Now that she had a daughter this frightened her even more. She waited for more than two years before she heard that her claim was approved. She was given leave to remain for five years with refugee status. This was good news, but she had to make a trip to Croydon with her young daughter to have their biometric details registered. Once her Biometric Residence Permit had arrived, she had to leave her accommodation within 28 days. This was very challenging for Faisah, with a small daughter, but Janet helped her make the applications and SWVG provided some financial support until all was settled.

The hostile environment – health care

People who have been refused asylum, referred to by the Government as “failed asylum seekers”, are not entitled to free secondary health care.

The hostile environment – travelling to Liverpool

Any new evidence for a fresh claim has to be delivered in person by the person seeking asylum to an office in Liverpool. Some have interviews there, but for most this journey has to be made simply to hand in their paperwork. For a destitute person this is impossible without financial support and SWVG helps people to make this trip.

SWVG – teaching English

SWVG has a group of members who teach English, literacy and occasionally other basic skills, on a one-to-one basis. We prioritise learners who cannot access or benefit from classes or who need extra support and, when they are ready, we try to guide them to suitable classes.

Faisah and Amira are now establishing a life in Southampton and Faisah’s English is improving. Amira is mixing with English-speaking children and learning the language too.

Government support

Applicants for Government support must be prepared to live anywhere in the UK. There is no choice, and many people seeking asylum are forced to move away from friends, family and community groups in order to receive the support to which they are entitled.

SWVG – well-being

While they wait to hear the result of their asylum claim, many people seeking asylum feel isolated and suffer from loneliness, boredom and low self-esteem. We arrange activities such as outings and walks to help tackle these issues. We also pay for some people to pursue personal interests such as crafts and fitness, thus improving their physical and emotional well-being and rebuilding their confidence.

Bridging the gap – after leave to remain is granted

The Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) is a digital ID card, which also includes information about the duration of leave to remain and a National Insurance number. This allows those with leave to remain to apply for Universal Credit, open a bank account, get help with housing and apply for jobs.

Extending limited leave to remain

To extend leave to remain, those with refugee status have to re-apply after five years but they do not have to pay a fee. Some applicants are granted just two and a half years' leave to remain, based on Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. These people are allowed to apply for a further two and a half years' leave to remain but each of them, including children, has to pay an application fee of £1052.20 and a health service payment of £1000 in advance (equivalent to £400 per year).

Alternative scenario – refusal

Sadly, some people seeking asylum have their fresh claims refused, and this is usually as far as they can take their case. The only options are for them to take voluntary return to their country (a scheme operated by the government that provides air fare and some financial support to start a new life in their country of origin) or to continue to live in the UK 'under the radar'. SWVG supports them while they struggle to make this difficult decision.

SWVG – campaigning

At SWVG we campaign to improve things for the people we help. We support the national 'Lift the Ban' campaign for people to have permission to work in any type of job (if they are able) six months after submitting an asylum claim. This would substantially help their well-being and speed up the integration of those subsequently given leave to remain. We have also been working with Southampton City of Sanctuary to arrange more affordable bus fares for people who are seeking asylum in Southampton, and we have lobbied the government to reduce the costs of people having to go to Liverpool to submit fresh evidence.

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 & Winchester Visitors Group

Address 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 until 2020

SWVG was registered in 2019 as a charitable incorporated organisation: 1183558

Patrons Shirley Firth, Miriam Margolyes OBE, John Pilkington

Chair Chris Stephens **Treasurer** Andrew White **Secretary** Jessica Hasan

Administrator Xanthe Hackett

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