



SWVG pulled out all the stops to assist sanctuary seekers housed in a Southampton hotel during the pandemic, as vice-chair Catherine Hartley now reports.

In September, SWVG teachers were still teaching about 30 people, some students having fallen by the wayside during lockdown. In the two hectic months since then, we have added 51 more students.

In a reflection of the situation in cities all over the country, 70 people seeking asylum were moved into a hotel in Southampton. This brought home how the asylum system had almost completely seized up. No cases were being processed, nobody could be moved out of government (or any other) housing, but people seeking asylum were still arriving in the UK.

Local charities and other organisations, led by Mike Brown of CLEAR, met to co-ordinate a response, and SWVG was invited. Southampton Action, another small local charity, was first off the mark. They met hotel residents and delivered clothes to those who were still wearing what they'd worn in Calais and had crossed the Channel in. They recommended their own method of communication, which had been to distribute flyers at the hotel. SWVG flyers were created (with minimal teenage assistance) and handed out. Replies began to pour in, with conversations through Google Translate by people desperate for contact.

'I am sorry because I take your time, it may be busy. We here feel bored, and whoever says hello to us, we stick to him and leave him no room to breathe from the frequent correspondence. You send me a word I send a million to you in return because of the loneliness that we live in. I hope that I did not feel pain in your head because of the many messages sent to you.'

Our plans were delayed when a member of the hotel staff tested positive for COVID. Security measures were immediately tightened and arrangements became more formal. Somewhat surprisingly, the single case was contained and the atmosphere at the hotel remained relaxed. Once permission had been granted by the management, we were welcomed by staff and residents alike.

Two of us made a first visit in October, to carry out basic assessments and sort students into groups. We planned to offer more advanced students online lessons with teachers and teach those with very limited English in a small group. We hadn't planned to be at the hotel for over 7 hours, assessing, teaching group after group as more and more eager learners turned up, and returning home dazed by the level of need and the number of requests for help.

The benefits of being a group of disparate volunteers have become clear. SWVG is able to respond on an individual level, each volunteer offering what they can, in a way that they are comfortable with. Some are teaching groups, some one or two people. Many who are unable to teach in person

have offered to take extra students online, and people who have never taught English before, including residents, are volunteering.

When we discovered that many of our students had no phone at all, let alone a smartphone, because these had been 'retained' by the Home Office, we were bewildered. One teacher, particularly enraged, changed her plans on the spur of the moment, whisked her three distressed young students to the local library to use the public computers, and created email and Facebook accounts for them all in the hope of helping them make contact with their families again.

We've now been given updated information on how to recover confiscated phones. Since that involves emailing the Home Office, which is tricky without a phone, the same teacher has thrown herself into that too.

Other SWVG volunteers have stepped in to help in other ways, meeting hotel residents for a walk and a chat, until lockdown curtailed that, and providing clothes, toiletries, and games. A whirlwind mission the day before lockdown delivered two second-hand table-tennis tables and a pile of footballs.

The chaos of our first visits has abated somewhat, but new students still turn up every week, and old ones turn up late, join the wrong group, attend classes with three different teachers in one day, or none at all for two weeks. If that's challenging for us, it's nothing compared to the uncertain life of hotel residents. A few weeks ago, 15 people were told they were to be moved in the morning to an unknown destination. They've been waiting ever since, sometimes being told to be ready to move, then being told nothing again. One young woman, not one of the 15, was then actually moved, alone, with no explanation, 300 miles away.

Having new problems to solve on every visit keeps us on our toes. One solution has unfortunately proved temporary, but in

the best way. An Arabic-speaking resident with excellent English offered to help in my classes, and turned out to be a natural teacher. She helped discreetly, stepped in only when I needed her, and enjoyed the general hilarity, epitomising the supportive team spirit of the group. The next day, we heard that she had been given Leave to Remain, so won't be there much longer: a wonderful reason for leaving.

Our students should not have to feel gratitude, but appreciation is encouraging. One student who understood nothing of his first lesson messaged again, through Google Translate, after his second:

'The method of presenting the lesson to the students made everyone participate, and this is something that encouraged me. I also break the barrier of fear of saying words in English.'

And that is just what we were hoping to achieve.

LETTER TO MY SWVG TEACHER

by Sibonginkosi Mpofo

I know he wants me to go as far as I feel able. I used to think I would only go to GCSE but now I feel like I want to go to the university.

I felt as if I am learning something every day and my mind is growing bigger and bigger ever lesson.

He is a very patient man and willing to make me understand everything he is teaching me.

I find the book we are reading now very interesting. I learnt about the rabbit proof fence in Australia and the way the government treated the Aborigine children, taking them away from their homes and families.

I would like to say thank you for everything and I appreciate the opportunity I am getting all the time. I will be forever grateful.

STRONG LEGS AND PEDAL POWER

The annual sponsored walk had to be more flexible this year so we chose our own routes, distances and modes of transport - raising over £10,500 for SWVG.



Not to be outwitted by the pandemic, SWVG members were determined to do their bit, whether it was walking two miles like Hazel's 4 year-old granddaughter Liza or cycling 227 miles to Chepstow and back like Mike and Jackie (see Jackie's account on p.6).

Andrew walked a 2.5 km route round his village eight times; Ase and her family walked the St Swithun's Way from Alresford to Winchester Cathedral; Jenny celebrated her 70th birthday with a 70 km bike ride on the Isle of Wight; and Liz celebrated hers by walking 70 miles over the course of several weeks - only a few of them spoiled by heavy rain. Jane walked 100 miles in total and Sue and Steven covered 120 miles.

They would all like to thank their sponsors whose generosity proves that there is huge support and compassion for people seeking sanctuary in the UK.

'SOMETHING HUGE IS HAPPENING'

At our AGM on 16th November, members voted to change the constitution of SWVG, paving the way for a more inclusive organisation. Mark Courtice explains.

It seems dry as dust: we're changing the constitution of SWVG. So what's the big deal? Pretty much all we want to do is swap "a volunteer" for "a person" in the membership definition*. It doesn't seem like much, just a couple of words - but actually something huge is happening.

Before, you could only be a member of the SWVG if you were a helper. Those who were using our services couldn't join.

That's what's going to change.

Refugees and asylum seekers often have energy, skills and knowledge which they cannot put to use due to the restrictive laws about employment. But now they are going to be fully part of SWVG. New ideas, imagination, energy and enthusiasm will help to make our response to the refugee crisis more effective and the ways that we help more focused. New people will help run the organisation.

In the last 20 years SWVG has developed expertise that ranges from the rules about asylum to running a hostel for the homeless. Now we are going to add *experts by experience*, people whose direct lived history can bring fresh insights.

What does this mean in practice?

Already a new group that includes these experts has come up with masses of exciting new ideas to

- increase membership,
- expand activity,
- communicate the importance of our mission.

The AGM also voted to create two more trustees. Trustees oversee SWVG - aims, services, finances, people, campaigning and volunteering - on behalf of us all. Now we hope that they will represent all of us who care so much about SWVG too. At least two and hopefully in the future more members will be experts through life experience.

Who would have thought that changing two words might make such a difference? Just watch as things start to take off...

** The changes:*

From "A person who is an active volunteer for the Group, supports its objects and has completed such training as the trustees shall require, shall be entitled to become a member."

To "A person who supports the objects of the group and has fulfilled such other requirements to be decided from time to time by the trustees shall be eligible to become a member."

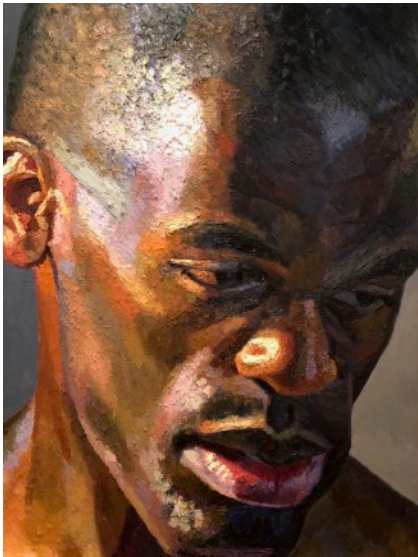
Chairing SWVG's first 'electronic' AGM, Chris Stephens thanked members for keeping things going in such a difficult year. He said the asylum system was effectively frozen. However, as we eventually come out of lockdown, more people are likely to get negative results from the Home Office, leading to homelessness and destitution.

Guest speaker Beth Flint shared some of her experiences working with trafficked women, Freedom from Torture and the Association of Visitors to Immigration.

THE FACE OF BRITAIN

A visit to Southampton City Gallery to see an exhibition created by artist Nahem Shoa prompted this appreciation from two SWVG members.

On the 29th October 2020, I visited the art gallery at the city centre with my family and some members of SWVG. I really enjoyed the trip, seeing the different works of art, both works of old and recent times.



Giant Head of Ben, by Nahem Shoa.

It was brilliant how some of these paintings were basic but created vivid images in the mind of the viewers. Some other paintings told stories, like the story of the lady whose family wanted

her to remarry because her husband was long gone. She played tricks on them by undoing her art work each night as she had promised to remarry once she was able to complete the piece.

Furthermore, there were little notes by the sides of each painting or art piece which informed the viewer of the artist and the date the work was done and the purpose of the piece.

My favourite painting was that of a guy slouching on a seat done by the artist Nahem Shoa, a lovely painting.

Overall, I had a wonderful time looking around the gallery of incredible pieces of work. It was an amazing experience and I strongly recommended it to everyone. E.A.

There were several art exhibitions all of which were equally brilliant. There were particular sets of self portraits and the like done by an African artist, Nahem Shoa, to represent the face of Britain which were very nice to see.

I had lots of fun and particularly enjoyed the hospital bedroom exhibition. This was done to help with mental hospitals, enabling them to look more colourful than gloomy. I thought it was great and that the artist did a fantastic job.

Despite the wet weather I enjoyed my time. R.A.

ASYLUM LAW

Home Secretary Priti Patel has announced a complete overhaul of the asylum system. She declared; "Those defending the broken system, "traffickers, the do-gooders, the lefty lawyers, the Labour Party - they are defending the indefensible".

40,000 applicants for asylum are reported to be waiting for interviews. Home Office screening interviews are still being conducted by telephone but substantive interviews have been paused due to COVID-19. A pilot programme has been announced 'outsourcing' interviews to private contractors.

A few decisions have been made on applications where clients were interviewed prior to the pandemic.

At present, it is still possible to lodge further submissions by email although very few decisions are being made.

Cat hitches ride with marathon cyclists

by a saddle-sore Jackie Batchelor

We made it, completing 227 miles from home to Chepstow and back on our tandem, with a few navigation deviations stretching the estimated mileage, but no discernible overstretching of the muscles.

Despite the pessimistic weather forecast and other people's experience, the only rain we had was an hour of misery after lunch on the first day and another of drizzle, but we had a hot shower once we arrived at the B and B in Warminster.

The second day's challenge was the chain jamming every time we tried going uphill. We took a pit stop in Bath, finding a friendly repair shop where a young man diagnosed and fixed the problem of compressed sprockets on a chainwheel. New chainwheel in place, we made it to Nic and Sarah's where we received a royal welcome from the whole family. Two year old Molly waved her maracas as we came round the corner into view. We used our two day stay to order and replace the other two chainwheels in an attempt to get rid of the groaning noise the tandem made under pressure. Whereas this needed doing and made us more confident about our return journey, it did not get rid of the strange noise. We have a few theories to test out, now we are safely home again.

On the return journey, our first surprise was the closure of the Severn Bridge going east, but luckily they permitted bikes to travel both ways. Our second was meeting Sarah's sister and her partner as they happened to drive past and spot us struggling up a steep hill.

We did meet two other tandem pairs on our outward journey and got into such lengthy conversations with them that we are now in email contact and they both sponsored us for our



One of the highlights of our outward journey was our hitchhiker, namely Molly's cat, Pumba, who had been mistakenly left at our house. She provided us with plenty of amusement and smiles from strangers, as we photographed her at various waypoints en route.

We definitely missed her motivational presence on our way home.

Donations

W Draper £750
 St Peters Church £1,000 for food vouchers.
 St Matthew with St Paul £100
 Anonymous £2,000

Our thanks to the many other individuals who donate to us. Many of them do so anonymously.

Grants

Migration Exchange Respond and Adapt Programme £8,000
 National Lottery Community Fund £8,820

Fundraising

Natasha Groom plant sale £442
 Sponsored walk and ride (with gift aid) £10,516