



'An indecent way' to house people who have suffered trauma

We have been shocked to learn about Home Office plans to construct a camp for asylum seekers on Ministry of Defence land next to the A303 at Barton Stacey, a quiet village north of Winchester. Despite widespread criticism, the Home Office is planning to house 300 people on a site which one Conservative councillor has described as 'akin to an open prison'.



The former Immigration Minister, Caroline Nokes, MP for Romsey and Southampton North, has described the proposals as “deeply worrying”. In an interview with the Independent she said: “We know these people are going to have had huge trauma. It fills me with horror that our supported asylum accommodation processes have gone so hideously wrong that they can’t even recognise that this is not a decent way to accommodate people.”

Why is the Home Office doing this? Government statistics show that the numbers of people waiting for an asylum decision has grown dramatically from 2018 to 2020, from 29,000 to 50,000. In the same period, the numbers waiting over 6 months for a decision has risen from 12,000 to 36,000.

Furthermore, there has been a temporary hold on evicting people from NASS accommodation during the pandemic. So private companies such as ClearSprings/Readyhomes, under contract to the government, have been using hotels and former army barracks as “temporary” or “contingency” accommodation. As we reported in our autumn newsletter, about 70 people were moved into a hotel in Southampton but are now being moved out to other towns and cities. Their hotel accommodation was reasonably good, but reports about former barracks and detention centres (Penally, Napier and Yarl’s Wood) show that residents there are isolated, overcrowded and without adequate facilities.

SWVG fear the proposed camp at Barton Stacey will not be temporary, that people will be kept there isolated and with inadequate health and legal support whilst the Home Office attempts to deport them under the new “inadmissibility” rules, before they are even considered for asylum. The fear is that the camp will become overcrowded like the prison estate, with management becoming more repressive and with a series of bad news stories and tragic events emerging.

We very much welcome people who are seeking sanctuary to live in Hampshire and there is widespread support for this in our communities. The government needs to ensure that people are housed in suitable accommodation, not isolated in large numbers in former barracks or camps which are inherently unsuitable for refugees.

We will campaign with local and national organisations for the fair and compassionate treatment of **all** people who are seeking asylum and against camps such as the one proposed at Barton Stacey.

William Brook-Hart

How the pandemic has affected those seeking asylum

by Claudia Glynn, SWVG co-ordinator

Think of all the ways the virus has affected our lives. Then add a few more issues affecting those who are seeking asylum in this insecure, unsafe, unsettled, worried and sometimes angry and hostile world.

At the point of publication, the Avenue Multicultural Centre has been closed for nearly a year. The weekly opportunity to attend the drop-in centre, to have the opportunity to seek help and advice, but also to spend time socialising with friends and to pick up a bag of food, was a central point of the week for many of Southampton's asylum seekers.

Whilst some have been able to maintain contact with friends, this is often limited by the cost of phone credit. In the autumn and up to Christmas we were able to distribute food vouchers and food parcels. Now food banks are under so much pressure that there is no surplus to share.

Amongst those with school age children a lack of English language skills and insight into the education system can mean that some parents are not necessarily aware what support their children are entitled to. Having someone in our group who is experienced in the world of educational needs and entitlement has proved invaluable to get children access to school or learning materials. Adults, too, continue to receive lessons from SWVG teachers and can access their college courses on the internet with support from our English teaching grant.

The most serious cause for frustration and concern amongst those seeking asylum is the lack of progress of their asylum case. The Home Office appears to have almost ground to a halt, building up an increasing backlog of substantive interviews to be conducted and decisions to be made. Desperate clients are wondering whether their papers have been lost or are convinced that there must have been a mistake. And yet, there have been occasional flashes of light: a sudden invitation for interview in October followed by a positive decision just ten weeks later for a young man, or the client who left our hostel and was granted her wish to be moved into NASS accommodation in Southampton rather than the other end of the country.

Everybody who attended the February General Meeting must have realised that those who have been put into hotel accommodation or, even worse, old army barracks, experience the worst of an

asylum system under extraordinary stress. Due to the lockdown those who had received Home Office decisions could not be moved out of NASS accommodation, causing a shortage for new applicants.

If something good has come out of this it is the following:

Admiration of those English teachers who made a 'Herculean effort' to provide purpose and friendship and inspired the rest of us to keep on fighting.

Renewed strength of cooperation with our partner organisations in Southampton. Contact with organisations in Manchester or London, who referred people to us who had been uprooted and moved to Southampton at short notice, and likewise other groups in Brighton, York or Stockton to whom we have referred those who were moved from the hotel.

A renewed impetus for the campaigning group to fight the plans for a camp at Barton Stacey and to demand an end to accommodating vulnerable, traumatised people army barracks and hotels.

Building on all of this let us hope that we can move to a better, more relaxed environment.



Nadia arrived in Southampton in November, knowing no-one here. She did this painting to thank SWVG for friendship and for Christmas food, winter shoes, knitting wool and a table at which to do her drawings and sewing.

Joining SWVG in troubled times : New visitors describe their experience.

Scott Chaussee joined SWVG in September

I had spent a summer, like many of my cohort of visitors, horrified at the state of discourse, normalised on the news, surrounding asylum seekers reaching Britain. I contacted SWVG to find out how I could add my name to the list of people seeking to create a supportive environment for refugees in this country.

I found the application, introduction and training process extremely constructive. I was not only given the right amount of information to begin work as a visitor, but I felt surrounded by the camaraderie and community that inspired further to succeed in that work.

I started visiting Abdul, who is from Egypt, in October. It was in-between lockdowns which was a blessing. He had undergone knee surgery and had also moved from shared accommodation to a managed flat. Most of my work with him has been negotiating his doctor's surgery, and organising technological solutions for things like physiotherapy appointments. I successfully applied to the Money Allocation Group (MAG) for funds to purchase a bicycle for his physical and mental health. His mobility has been reduced so the introduction of a low-impact mode of transport allows him to go further afield to a halal supermarket for food and reach the gym for physiotherapy.

Abdul has just been to London for an appeal hearing on his asylum case, and thanks to good communication with him and his lawyer I was able to prepare the necessary documents. This process was new to me, of obvious importance and urgency as well as challenging in the week after the holiday period and during a national lockdown. The cheerful helpfulness of my support group has been and still is absolutely crucial to being an effective visitor and pointing me to solutions within the organisation in order to achieve successful outcomes for Abdul.

LEILA'S WISHES AND HOPES FOR 2021

Stopping the wars, vanishing
violent, ending fleeing seem like a
morning dream.

But Coronavirus changed all our
dreams.

Now I just wish to invite my love
one into my place, sitting in
distance less than two meters,
showing our smile without wearing
the mask. Not be worry any more
about our breath or cough or even
sneeze.

Gail Johnston started visiting in July

I was due to attend my first training session on 7th March 2020 before lockdown; however, having just returned from Northern Italy, through Milan airport on 2nd March, I decided it would be irresponsible to attend. I was sad to cancel but thankful that SWVG quickly adapted to the times and I was able to attend my first training online in July followed by socially distanced group training at Highfield Church Centre in September.

Only a few weeks later, behind the relative safety of our masks, Claudia introduced me to the lovely lady in Southampton who I was to begin visiting. I was able to visit her at home for several weeks within the COVID rules, where I always received a warm welcome from her and her children. It was my first experience of English teaching, definitely a challenge but where words failed smiles were plenty in compensation. The last time I saw her we met for a walk and had our first real language break-through. We were both delighted by the progress. Sadly, as COVID numbers rose so high after Christmas and we went back into lockdown I have been unable to visit again and feel frustrated that any progress with English has come to a halt.

Now we only have minimal contact through email and messenger. Thankfully though members of SWVG have been a great support, helping provide resources for English lessons, clothing, food, phones and computers. So many organisations have contributed including the food bank in Bitterne and Scratch whose generosity meant the children received presents as well as a food hamper at Christmas.



A BAG FULL OF CHRISTMAS CHEER

Alison Risbridger of Above Bar Church in Southampton reports on a community effort to support hotel residents

When I first heard that there was a new cohort of people seeking asylum in Southampton, my first reaction was to want to get to know some of them – but how? On learning that they were staying in a hotel not far from where I live, I was even more keen to get involved. A few weeks and many emails later, I took part in a meeting which brought together representatives from SWVG, Love Southampton and a few local churches to talk about how we could work together to provide support.

It was great to hear from Catherine Hartley about English classes already being offered to the residents. A number of churches in Southampton run English conversation groups or more structured English classes but we are often working independently, without much connection. That initial zoom meeting and the regular contact we have had since have provided a welcome opportunity to hear more about the exciting work that's already happening across the city, share ideas and think about how we can work together more in the future.

Christmas is a time when people often think about giving, not just to their own families and friends but also to people in more obvious need. This year COVID limited what could be done on that front but it seemed to open up an opportunity instead to give something to people on our doorstep. I was inspired by a conversation I had with my brother about gifts being given to people in Nottingham who were seeking asylum, so I brought that idea to the group, asking whether this was something we could do in Southampton. We decided we would provide gift bags for each resident in the hotel. Each bag would have fresh and dried fruit, savoury and sweet snacks. We started to communicate the vision and ask

Phil Haigh completed his SWVG training in October 2020

I support a young Palestinian man, whom I'll call Jon. As a sign of the times, I still haven't managed to meet him. This has obviously brought some specific challenges, not least how to establish a rapport with someone electronically, but Jon is very comfortable in the digital world so we've been able to maintain good communication using WhatsApp and the like.

The timing was fortuitous in that, in the small window between being moved down from London and the start of Lockdown, Jon was able to attend a gallery visit arranged by SWVG which helped break the ice of being in a new town and largely stripped of his social support network.

Being unable to meet face to face has its downsides; not least not being able to go for a walk or have a coffee - which allow the emphasis to be on the activity rather than some perceived imperative to 'talk about things'. Video chats can feel a bit formal. On the flip side, it has allowed a gentle sort of introduction and perhaps engenders the feeling of being supported, without any pressure to engage more than the client is comfortable with.

Fortunately, Jon seems to be a very self-sufficient guy and after the inevitably tough first couple of weeks in Southampton he was able to start getting active again, running and arranging to play football (although the latter is likely another victim of COVID now). He's also registered with a GP and seems to be getting on well with his housemates. I've no doubt that many people in similar situations will be struggling a lot more.

for help from our churches, communities and SWVG and before long the gift bags started to come in, packed with delicious treats.

By 21st December we had gathered enough for every person in the hotel to have a bag of goodies with a card containing a personal greeting inside. When we arrived at the hotel, we sent word and people started to come out and receive their gifts. It was great to be able to have brief conversations with a few of them. It's only a small token and many of us wish we could do more to help but hopefully it at least communicated that there are people in Southampton who want to welcome, support and care for those who may otherwise feel isolated and alone in our city.

THREE NEW TRUSTEES

In December we welcomed three new trustees, Jackie, Tharshan and Momodou. They have written a little bit about themselves below. Jackie you will know through her work in leading the training, development and support groups. It is brilliant to have her as part of the team. Tharshan and Momodou bring their own insights and experience as they both have lived experience of the asylum process and again it is fantastic to have them as part of the team.

Why is this important? Self-representation at all levels of the organisation is about the ability and the capacity for refugees to influence decision-making, policy, programme and service delivery processes. It is also about democratic systems and institutions being open to genuinely engage with refugees.

In addition to the new trustees, asylum seekers and refugees are becoming teachers and visitors. Refugees are not passive story tellers and we believe their contribution will change SWVG for the better.

- **Chris Stephens, chair**

Momodou Bah



I am Momodou from Africa. I was a primary school teacher back in my country. Since arriving in England and after months of being homeless and looking for a place for sanctuary and being able to apply for asylum, I was put in touch with SWVG.

After having a meeting with the chair in 2008 I started receiving support through my visitor. I have also had some programmes in schools and universities to speak to students. I am at present settling with my family, working as a support worker and studying a social science degree with the Open University. I am happy to be part of the trustees to help develop the charity and increase the support to those vulnerable people the charity have been actively supporting to live independent lives.

Jackie Batchelor

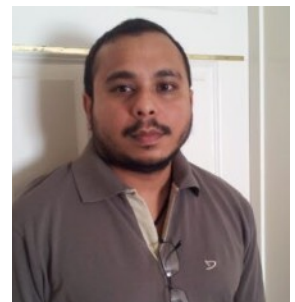


Since joining SWVG in 2008, I have been a visitor, co-ordinated the visitor support groups and been part of the training team, which I now lead. I have drawn on my experience as an educational psychologist, a job from which I have now retired. I grew up knowing about my

mother's persecution by the Nazi regime, subsequent displacement and the value to be placed on human relationships rather than material things. I wish to put this empathy to good use for the benefit of others in a similar predicament.

Jeyatharshan (Tharshan) Vettivel

Being born and brought up in a war torn country, I have experienced the pain and the sufferings of refugees and asylum seekers who are uprooted due to war and other kinds of political crisis in their own homeland. I have been a beneficiary of SWVG since 2013 following which I am able to recover myself from the irrecoverable loss. I am forever grateful for this opportunity to join with SWVG to serve the people, enabling them to make their life in a peaceful and independent manner.



Latest news on hotel accommodation

Asylum seekers housed in a Southampton hotel since the first lockdown are gradually being dispersed around the country. Some were told one night to be ready to leave in the morning for an address in Wakefield, with no time to say goodbye to friends they had made in the city. They disappeared - not to Wakefield but to York and Sheffield. Only a few people remain and SWVG understands that the Home Office contract with the hotel is ending.

SWVG members are sad to see them go but many will keep in touch, hoping at least to provide a bridge for them into their new lives.

“I want a passport and to see my children” - Hana’s New Year wish

A hard act to follow

After 13 years as treasurer, Andrew White is stepping down.

I became treasurer of SWVG in 2008 after being recruited by Elizabeth Prescott-Decie. I had no



knowledge of the asylum system or the difficulties that asylum seekers face so I needed to acquire some knowledge quickly. It became clear that membership of the money allocation group (MAG) was essential to know what was happening to the people

we were supporting. I have been the only member of MAG who is not a visitor which has allowed me to ask questions from a different perspective during discussions.

Its interesting to look back at the 2009 accounts covering my first full year. Our income has barely changed since then as it has fluctuated between £75 and £100,000. What has changed is the range of activities making up our expenditure. In recent years we have spent less on destitution and much more on travel costs, social activities (gym memberships, organised outings etc), English tuition and legal justice. The major changes that have taken place are accommodating destitute clients in our own hostel and transferring SWVG to a new type of charity.

You might wonder why I have stayed in this role for so long. Apart from enjoying supporting SWVG’s work, its volunteers and particularly the trustees have always wanted to ensure that we operate effectively. I hope I have contributed in some way towards this.

SWVG ACTIVITIES IN THE COMING MONTHS

We hope that soon it will be safe to resume SWVG activities in Southampton. We are planning a group trip to Sea City Museum, a tour of Southampton libraries and a day planting herbs and vegetables on the SWVG allotment.

Other ideas would be welcome. Contact Celia Cox at cox.hear@btinternet.com or Sue Jessup, at smjessup01@gmail.com

“Here’s hoping that members will be able to return to no. 86, the SWVG allotment on Wiggs Hill near Bitterne, this year. Fresh air, fine views and plenty of exercise, plus the satisfaction of growing and eating your own fruit and veg. Everyone’s welcome. No gardening experience needed.”

Jo Bailey SWVG Allotment volunteer



Donations

Miriam Margolyes £200
 St Lawrence with St Swithun, Winchester £510
 Members of Southampton Quakers £750
 HRA Martineau £300
 Eileen Gorrod £300

Our thanks to the many people who donate to us, often anonymously.

Grants

Tolkien Trust £20,000
 Lush Charity Pot 5,000
 Sheba Trust 400
 St Clare and St Francis Trust 500

Fundraising

Anne Leeming Christmas quiz £175