



Working with asylum seekers and refugees

Afghan family's case raised in parliamentary debate

by Jenny Cuffe

The last few weeks have been agonising for Sonila and Monica, SWVG members who arrived in the UK with their father two years ago. Every day the sisters wake to more distressing news from Afghanistan, where their mother and a younger sister have gone into hiding.



It is clearly impossible for them to return, yet the Home Office has still not responded to their request for asylum. But anxiety about their own future is now overshadowed by fear for their loved ones back home.

As the Taliban gained control of Afghanistan, the sisters appealed to the MP for Romsey and Waterside, Caroline Nokes, for help. As their visitor, I followed up with an e-mail asking for their case to be given urgent consideration.

Caroline Nokes, a former immigration minister, responded almost immediately. Two days later, when Parliament was recalled for an emergency debate on Afghanistan, she called on her government to grant asylum to those who had already fled to the UK and to be generous when considering refugee family reunion.

EXTRACT FROM MP CAROLINE NOKES'S SPEECH TO PARLIAMENT ON 18 AUGUST

I want to talk briefly about the experience of my constituents, Monica and Sonila, who are still waiting after two years for a decision on their asylum claim. Now is the time to grant all those claims, because they cannot be returned to Afghanistan. They are educated women who have been active in society and are journalists. They would be at risk, but what of their mother and their younger sister, who are still in Afghanistan? I argued at the Dispatch Box for refugee family reunion to allow teenage girls who are over 18 to be allowed to come here. Our children do not suddenly become independent because they pass a day over their 18th birthday, so refugee family reunion in this instance has to ensure that those girls are able to come here. Would we leave our daughters in Afghanistan, with 12 year-old girls taken from their homes? I will not use the term "forced into marriage"; they are abducted and raped by men old enough to be their grandfathers.

We have to do more and we have to do it quickly. The scheme that the Government are putting in place is a good start, but it is just a start. This needs to be the fastest resettlement that we have seen since Uganda or the Kindertransport, so that we can continue to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that we have a proud history of being a safe haven for resettlement.

(Taken from Hansard)

Since the debate, the Home Office has refused a blanket amnesty to Afghans already in the UK and suspended existing Afghan asylum cases while it updates its country guidance,

Asylum hotel opens again to new arrivals

by Catherine Hartley, SWVG vice-chair

On 19 July, not five months after the Home Office abruptly closed the hotel in Southampton where people seeking asylum were temporarily being accommodated, it was re-opened and 52 people from Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, El Salvador, Libya and Vietnam were moved in. Apart from two women in a family group and two unaccompanied minors who were subsequently transferred back to London, they were all young men. Three are disputing the age the Home Office has recorded for them.

Southampton Action was quick off the mark with the distribution of much-needed clothes, and SWVG delivered footballs and other sports equipment. One of our volunteer teachers was able to visit early on with Southampton Action, and in mid-August SWVG officially met residents out of doors in the sunny car park. We carried out basic assessments of the level of English of over 30 residents, but lessons were held up by the need for remedial works in the conference rooms where we had taught (with a bucket under a leak) last year. Having built a great relationship with a network of Southampton churches during that time, SWVG was able to make contingency arrangements to teach in Portswood Church until the hotel could accommodate us. We were extremely grateful for their flexibility and eagerness to help.

Two wonderful SWVG teachers, for whom nothing is too much trouble, have taken their students to the library, where at least 12 are now borrowing books, and they and other SWVG volunteers have taken residents out for walks and conversation. They have held small classes in the church hall for three weeks, and are looking forward to being able to teach in the hotel itself, where we've just been given the all-clear. SWVG is hoping to help some of the students join more advanced college classes, although the precarious nature of 'temporary' accommodation may make this complicated.

Initially there was some hostility from neighbours, but the hotel manager was at pains to avoid confrontations, and there seems to be no discontent inside the hotel. COVID vaccines have been offered, and there has been a good take-up. Home Office rules now allow two people to a room, so we are expecting numbers to rise dramatically, but our experience so far shows that

the charities involved can react quickly and each offer whatever they can to welcome people to Southampton.

Chris Stephens, SWVG chair, pays tribute to our retiring treasurer

I wanted to thank and pay special tribute to Andrew White who is standing down as our treasurer after 14 years. Andrew has been a brilliant treasurer - a chartered accountant who has also worked at the Citizens Advice Bureau and nationally with City of Sanctuary. As well as taking care of the finances, he has advised the trustees on charity rules, been a member of the fundraising group and a member of the Money Allocation Group.

Andrew has done so much to support SWVG. He explored the legality of setting up a hostel and in 2020 we worked with the Society of St James to get lottery funding to allow them to purchase and manage the current new hostel for us. He always gave sensible advice in a supportive way, making sure we have explored all the options. He keeps us out of trouble! Andrew completes this year's accounts in August which will be presented in the AGM on 6 December and then will step back.

So, Andrew, thank you so much for all you have done, and I hope you will continue to be involved in SWVG.

A worthy successor



"I'm very pleased to be joining SWVG as treasurer and to be able to help in a small way with improving the lives of people seeking asylum."

David Smith joins SWVG after an international career as financial consultant to a number of charities. After moving to Ropley from Dorset, he welcomes the opportunity to work with a local organisation where members are personally known.

He is a keen cyclist and a volunteer at Winchester Cathedral.

Jenny Corrick reports on a great start to the Orange Heart Campaign



A cheery band of a dozen from the SWVG met with our first public supporter in the Orange Heart Campaign, Caroline Nokes MP, who has represented Southampton North and Romsey for 11 years and has personally supported the efforts of individual constituents to navigate the tortuous asylum seeking system.

We asked her to choose a location that she loves locally, one that makes her feel good, and publicly commit to wanting refugees and people seeking asylum to feel good there too. Caroline chose the beautiful Sadlers Mill in Romsey and signed the Orange Heart, posing for publicity photos by the river with some SWVG members. A big thank you to Stephen Sizer for the photos. After Caroline had to rush on to her next meeting, the rest of us explored the riverside walk and had coffee and cake in a park in the sunshine. Certainly a very happy way to spend the morning!

This simple message is actually extremely important and powerful as it speaks to the majority of people who believe that everyone has the right to live in safety and peace, and that we all owe a duty of kindness and care for those forced to seek a new life far from their home. Let us shame the people who would create negative views of refugees and people seeking asylum by showing how strong public support is for creating a fair and caring system in the UK.

The Orange Heart Campaign has been created by Together with Refugees, an umbrella group of over 300 groups and organisations across the UK. The symbol uses a heart and the colours of the refugee flag to symbolise kindness and compassion. We are actively seeking as wide and diverse a range of people as possible to engage with the campaign.

Snapping a selfie with the Orange Heart, or getting your local group or activity to sign up to wanting a fair deal for refugees and people seeking asylum is such a positive statement. You can download your orange heart from Together with Refugees [heart artwork](#) and print it out, or make your own.

Please send your photos and, if possible, the actual physical signed heart to SWVG. Email to jenny.corrick140257@gmail.com, or send to Gail Johnston, Keeper of the Hearts, Spindle Hill, Love Lane, Twyford SO21 1FB. We are dreaming up an event to gather all the hearts together towards the end of the year - ideas and suggestions very welcome. It would be good to include some street theatre or music, anyone fancy doing a flash mob?

This is a crucial step in changing the proposed new immigration bill, currently being put forward by the Government.

The SWVG is working on many fronts to persuade local MPs not to back the bill in its current form, to encourage local and national figures to voice their opposition to the bill and to support the creation of a fair system, and in the mass involvement of as wide a group as possible to demonstrate the huge public support for a kind and fair system. Currently we are seeking sports people and musicians, bishops and skateboarders, book groups and pigeon fanciers, you get the idea... .

You can really help by joining in and taking a photo of your Orange Heart, posting it on social media, sending it to us, and sharing the good will. The terrible events in Afghanistan have focussed the media on our duty to refugees and people seeking asylum, and we need to act now to show the Government that their proposed immigration bill is not the right answer, and that refugees are welcome here.



Chris Stephens, SWVG chair, and trustee David Retter with the Bishop of Southampton, the Rt Revd Debbie Sellin. They met to discuss ways to support people seeking asylum and refugees in Southampton. (Photo by Stephen Sizer)

AMC opens its doors again to SWVG members

by Claudia Glyn, co-ordinator

We are intending to re-open Avenue Multicultural Centre at Avenue St Andrew's Church on Friday 17 September from 10.00am till 12:00pm.

This will not be the AMC of old, but a trial-run based on an additional risk assessment which seeks to protect everyone from COVID as far as that is possible. As neither the Red Cross nor CLEAR will be present, this trial opening will be restricted to SWVG members and is not advertised to the wider community in order to ensure that we can manage the building and keep everyone safe.

We won't be distributing food bags, but hope to offer light refreshments. There'll be a play area for small children in the hall and English teachers will hold some classes. We would like people to wear masks, particularly those who have not been vaccinated, and hand sanitiser and disinfectant will be widely available.

Many clients and students, visitors and teachers have asked about the re-opening of the AMC because we all have missed the personal contact with others in the group. Please let me know if you plan to come and ask the people you support whether they would be willing to help set up or clear away at the beginning and end of each session. We look forward to seeing everyone and hope to have a successful reunion on the 17th.

Funds given to SWVG

We are very grateful for the grants, donations and fundraising listed below. Our thanks go to the many other individuals and organisations who donate to us. Many of them do so anonymously.

Donations

St Clements Surgery, Winchester £1,000

Legacy

Anonymous legacy £20,000

Fundraising

Plant sale organised by Natasha Groom
estimated proceeds including gift aid £700

Grants

Knight Charitable Trust £400
St Peter's Church, Winchester £500



This handsome Raleigh bike, kindly donated by Simon Tanner, has been given a safety check and made roadworthy by SWVG member Miguel and is here being handed to Anna, the tenth member to have received a bike.

(Photo by Anna's father, Thiago)

REFUGEES - A POEM BY BRIAN BILSTON
from "You took the last bus home".

(to be read from top to bottom and in reverse)

**They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us
Build a wall to keep them out
It is not okay to say
These are people just like us
A place should only belong to those who are
born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way**

WE NEED YOUR HELP TO SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT ASYLUM AND SWVG

The Communications Group is currently looking for new members with enthusiasm for generating news and messages about SWVG's work. Depending on your skills, we'd like you to assist with social media, the website, leaflets and/or this quarterly newsletter.

No specific skills are required for joining the group, but a commitment to engaging in this work is important. Also, if you like writing and copy editing and have a bit of time to spare, we would love to hear from you. In particular, we need people who enjoy and are active on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

If you want to know more, please contact Hazel hazel.inskip@gmail.com; or Jenny jennycuffe@icloud.com

Find your feet with soccercise



Hampshire Football Association worked with SWVG and CLEAR to provide six sessions of soccercise, English and IT skills and other training for women in the summer. Watch the video to find out more.

<https://wetransfer.com/downloads/062c17c09174b78d0a8abf4e99a6c7b220210902093100/6d6116>
<https://we.tl/t-mF6tAGzixh>

Sessions will continue from November onwards in the run up to the Women's Euros in July 2022, when some of the football matches will be played in Southampton.

At the final session in mid July, many women expressed great appreciation of the opportunities they had been given and said they wished to return in the autumn. Some of the the women would also like to have swimming lessons. Others would like to know more about volunteering opportunities.

Day Trip to Lymington



Lymington is a small historic market town, an ancient seaport, fishing and yachting centre near Southampton.

On 18 September we will visit the market and the quay where we will see boats and seabirds and where we can try catching crabs. We will visit a playground, have a picnic and walk along the river and sea wall together. This trip is for members seeking asylum and is suitable for children aged six and over.

To book places on the trip and for further information, please contact Sue at sue.jessup@swvg-refugees.org.uk or Celia at coxhear@btinternet.com, giving name and mobile number as well as names and ages of any children.

Please book places as soon as possible and definitely by Monday 13 September.



PLEASE COME AND JOIN OTHER SWVG MEMBERS FOR A POP-UP PICNIC ON SATURDAY 2 OCTOBER AT 1PM - A CHANCE TO RE-CONNECT WITH THE GROUP AND PUT FACES TO NAMES AFTER NEARLY TWO YEARS OF ISOLATION.

WE'LL MEET AT THE BANDSTAND IN PALMERSTON PARK, SOUTHAMPTON, SO14 1ND. BRING FOOD TO SHARE IF YOU WISH.

Contact jennycuffe@icloud.com for more details.