



Newsletter Autumn 2021

The Orange Heart Campaign



Brighton shows its heart

October has been busy for the team at Orange Heart HQ, as we continue the work of contacting MPs, councillors and faith groups, as well as working with other partner groups and planning future events. There was a week of action called nationally by Together with Refugees and across the UK hundreds of events took place. Whole cities have joined the campaign and numbers are rising.



The London rally (photo credit: S.S)

Our ever-busy Super Snapper (I am sure that moniker will annoy him!) was stolen by the national HQ to record the London rally on 23rd October while a group of us joined a coalition in Southampton at Bar Gate, also on the 23rd, for a local rally and stall with speakers including Victoria Ugwoeme, Chair of Southampton *Stand Up To Racism*, Nikki Walters from *Southampton Action* and our own William Brook-Hart from SWVG. It was great to have an event with a range of disparate groups working together. While a choir sang, we talked and took photos with many of the interested passers-by.



Victoria Ugwoeme at Bar Gate

We've had great success in forging alliances with local faith groups and institutions, including Medina mosque in Southampton and St Peter's catholic church in Winchester, both of whom have volunteered to support the campaign. Of the over one hundred churches on our local list more than half have so far been contacted.



Meanwhile, the 2000 leaflets, stickers and flyers have been working hard (alongside those distributing them!). Please ask if you need any yourself, whether it's stickers for your car window, leaflets for friends and neighbours or posters for local notice boards.

Lots more is planned, so please ask for more information if you'd like to get involved.

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SWVG welcomes new recruits, Claudia Glyn

Despite, or rather because of, Priti Patel's actions an increasing number of people felt moved to investigate how they might help asylum seekers and refugees in this country. The evacuation from Afghanistan raised awareness of refugees' plight still further so interest in our work has increased. As has always been the case, some discover who we are and what we do through our existing members. But more than ever people have searched the internet, found our website and applied to offer their support. During lockdown, it was doubtful whether training online and via zoom meetings would be appropriate and prove to be useful, but in the end the training team decided to have a go.

So in autumn last year we began with the first part of our training sessions, where people follow a power point presentation online in their own time and then take part in a follow up zoom discussion. Then in September we made use of a short window and managed to run the all-day second training session face to face. This year we ventured further and conducted even the second part via zoom. No, it was not ideal, but it was better than nothing and we didn't want to lose contact with potential new members. To our delight we were also able to run two real life sessions in October and November this year.

What strikes me most about our new recruits is the variety of skills, knowledge and experience they bring to SWVG: work in refugee camps, film producing, publishing, financial management, event planning, business management, teaching,

nursing, digital communications, social work and many more feature.

The recruits are encompassing all age groups. Apart from students at Winchester University and those who are looking for something useful to do with their retirement, we now find increasingly that people in work or those busy with raising families, or even both, feel encouraged to contribute what they can to our work. It is fantastic. We are not just recruiting visitors and teachers but have discovered a number of people who can support other groups, such as campaigning, communications and fundraising. SWVG as a whole is becoming stronger than ever, supporting local asylum seekers but also taking part in national campaigns to raise awareness and to fight the government's hostile policies. To all new recruits reading this newsletter, a big welcome and thank you for joining us.

Activities in the community

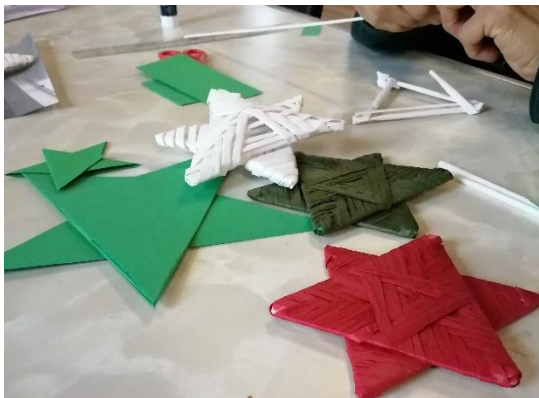
Thanks to our local partners, SWVG has been able to widen its range of engaging activities. For some people, it means being able to revisit things that they've enjoyed before, for others an opportunity to try something new. More than that, it creates opportunities for making friends in Southampton. These partnerships help to spread awareness of the lives of refugees and those seeking asylum as well as offering more activities than SWVG would be able to provide alone.

Do you recognise these local landmarks which were created at our recent clay modelling course? Southampton City Council supported the course, funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency.



In the run up to the Women's Euros in 2022, Hants FA approached SWVG because they wanted to support women's recreational football and provide inclusive safe spaces for women to take part in physical activity. The result was our *Find Your Feet* sessions, involving coaches Hannah and Jane, Anita from Action Asylum Project, SWVG English teachers and women from SWVG and CLEAR. You can watch a video of these brilliant sessions in action, here: <https://youtu.be/Y0FlnyDsEls>

Find Your Feet has now branched out to work with Katie and colleagues from MAST Mayflower Studios in offering creative activities to decorate the foyer for their Christmas shows.



We hope to continue extending our work with partners in future and are always interested in hearing suggestions for new activities, so if you have any ideas you are happy to share, please contact Sue. sue.jessup@swvg-refugees.org.uk

The Cultural Conversation Group

Every Wednesday for the past five weeks, a group of visitors, teachers and students have been meeting up in a secluded corner of the library. In no time at all the sound of chatter and of people exploring new vocabulary starts to make its way across the lower ground floor. In the old days talking in the library would lead to being told off - in Southampton on Wednesday lunch times it's positively encouraged! The Cultural Conversation group has been designed to give learners of English the chance to talk together with those whose English is good, and

at the same time allows all of us to explore the cultural life of Southampton.

We went on a 'treasure hunt' looking for books across the central library, and everyone got a library card – it's good to know they have a special system for people who are seeking sanctuary and may not have a fixed address.

We've been to Sea City Museum where there are things to touch, maps to follow and journeys to imagine as well as talk about. Last week in the library itself we had a lively session talking about the music that we most love. The choices ranged from Mazhar Khalequi's moving song chosen by Mohammed and Mahmoud so we could hear the sound of their homeland, to Thiago's choice - alternative rock, young and urgent, from The Red Hot Chilli Peppers. Asmaa played us the beautiful A Reverence for Isis by Egyptian opera singer Amira Selim, which accompanied the recent journey of the mummified Pharaohs to their new museum in Cairo. Stephen and Lynda's choices, Jackson Browne and the Lighthouse Family, both sing of the power of the human spirit.

Still to come are a City Gallery tour and a session at the John Hansard Gallery. We benefitted from a grant from the National Lottery Community Celebrate 25 Fund so each session has had a buffet provided by the catering team at Sea City. As student Sibonginkasi Mpofi put it, "...Don't just feed your eyes and brains, there's a lovely lunch too!" We can also cover travel expenses for those who need it. We've relied heavily on the goodwill and willingness of our partners in the arts organisations across the city. These range from Katie and Holly at MAST studios who printed us personalised tickets in record time, through the

endlessly patient staff at the central library (including librarian Allison, a staunch supporter, and Abdul, welcoming us each week at the door) to the hard working team at Sea City who have kept up the supply of food, and Alex who worked on a tailor-made session about those who have travelled across the world, ending up in our welcoming city of Southampton. Stephen, Hilary, Celia and Lynda have been staunch supporters from the volunteer and teacher side. Their thoughtful contribution means no one need feel left out. People don't have to book; all ages and levels of English are welcome and it's all very informal. For more details call Mark on 07769975351

The One Per Cent grant in action

Since Covid, some of the SWVG English teachers stopped teaching in person because they are in vulnerable categories. The mobile data the grant pays for has enabled people to continue English lessons with these teachers online. People who have had to isolate after contact with someone who has tested positive for Covid have also been able to continue with their lessons. Several teachers now teach twice a week because they can fit in a lesson more easily than if they had to travel to Southampton.

Not only has the One Per Cent grant facilitated lessons from SWVG, and indeed attendance of other online classes and conversation groups, but it has given people all the other benefits of internet connectivity. Students who receive data are able to watch videos, visit language-learning websites, and make contact with friends and family in their home country. Children and other housemates have also been able to benefit.

The Nationality and Borders Bill (aka The Anti-Refugee bill) - an update

Thanks to all of you who have been writing to your MPs to tell them about the damage that the bill will do to the asylum system and to the people that we help. It is important that our MPs hear from us, even if they do not always want to listen. If you have not written recently, then please do so.

You will find helpful guidance on the SWVG website's campaigning pages, including sample letters, links to Refugee Action's new report about the bill, All Punishment No Protection: why the Anti-Refugee bill should be scrapped, and to Amnesty's #BordersBill Fact Checker which explains eight ways in which the bill will achieve the opposite of its stated aims.

So far, most of our local MPs have made little response to us beyond sending standard Home Office text extolling the bill or stating their concerns about foreign national offenders, which are not really relevant to asylum. A notable exception is Caroline Nokes MP, former Minister for Immigration, who has been highly critical. We believe that MPs have a duty to listen carefully to their constituents and we will continue to seek constructive meetings with them. Maybe it's unrealistic to expect that the bill will be scrapped but it needs serious amendment if the government doesn't want to end up in the ditch again.

For example, this government wants to control the UK's borders and in particular to stem the number crossing the Channel by boat. There is no evidence that the bill will achieve this. The Home Office should instead

provide humanitarian visas for people who have reasonable grounds for asylum in the UK to travel here by safe routes from the continent.

The bill has been going through the committee stage in the House of Commons and the committee will soon publish its report. Powerful evidence was heard from many witnesses including the leading refugee support organisations, which can be read on the website, *Theyworkforyou.com*. Each clause of the bill was discussed and many amendments were tabled; however whilst the five Labour and two SNP members voted for the amendments, the nine Conservative members voted against them.

Next, the bill will have its third reading in the Commons. Then it will go to the Lords for readings, debates and a committee stage there too. Any amendments agreed by the Lords would then ping pong with the Commons until a final version is sent for Royal Assent. This process may take quite a while - we can anticipate many more powerful speeches in the Lords and the Commons - so we all need to continue to vigorously support the *Together with Refugees* campaign for a decent asylum system.

Further thoughts on the Bill, Judith Martin

The Refugee Council, in a new report* using Home Office data, has found that over 90% of those crossing to England in small boats are fleeing countries where human rights abuse and persecution is commonplace. Even on first application, over 52% of the total are deemed eligible for asylum while for the top 10 refugee-generating countries the figure is 61%. From countries such as Yemen and

Eritrea the percentage is higher, at 70% and 84% respectively. After that initial Home Office decision, 59% of appeals from these 10 countries are granted. The figures come from before this year's catastrophic fall of Afghanistan.

All this casts doubt over the government (and popular press and social media) refrain of economic migrants and scroungers seeking only a comfortable life on benefits in the UK.

Home Secretary Priti Patel has nevertheless been endlessly inventive in her ambition to refuse entry to the migrant boats, asking her civil servants to investigate everything from water cannon to repulse the dinghies to a wall in the channel. Another suggestion was to have detention camps off the shore of Africa (perhaps she's forgotten Britannia no longer rules the waves, or indeed has an empire to direct in such a way). Ms Patel is not alone in this imaginative inhumanity. Most recently Justice Secretary Dominic Raab proposed sending refugees to Albania. The cost was estimated to be £100,000 per asylum seeker. Why Albania? It appears no-one has bothered to explain. Just another poor country expected to welcome the dirty work of the rich ones. Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama swiftly replied that his country would 'never receive refugees for richer countries'.

While bodies like the Guardian and Liberty criticise the Home Secretary from the left, the Daily Mail is critical from the opposite side about ministerial ineptitude. It reports that the proposal this summer to insist that Border Force should 'push back' dinghies to France once they crossed the mid-point of the Channel required several barristers before one agreed it

could be used legally. Since then it has proved unworkable and has been used only once. Officials apparently told the Mail Ms Patel's behaviour is erratic and self-serving.

This is the dysfunctional department seeking to implement its Nationality and Borders Bill, with the backing of the dysfunctional prime minister who refused to sack his Home Secretary when she was found to have broken the ministerial code.

The bill is too long to examine in detail here, but the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants notes that the two-tier system, depending on the arrival method of the migrant, replicates elements of the 'Detained Fast Track' process that the High Court declared to be unlawful in 2015, finding it to be 'structurally unfair'.

The same JWCI briefing quotes a study by Dr Jo Wilding on Legal Aid Droughts and Deserts which found that between 2005 and 2018 there was a loss of 56% of legal aid providers and 64% of not for profit advice providers in asylum and immigration.

The Law Society believes the bill to be incompatible with international law, and that lawyers will struggle to implement it.

The bill is currently at the Report stage in the House of Commons; there are several more stages before it becomes law. Meanwhile the Home Secretary is quietly inserting additional clauses, most recently to speed up the removal of citizenship. The Home Office cares more for headlines than humanity. SWVG and other similar bodies will continue to campaign against it.

*An analysis of Channel crossing & asylum outcomes, November 2021

Donations

St Matthew with St Paul, Winchester
£100

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

Fundraising

Sponsored walks: £1,630 between September and mid November

Grants

French Huguenot Church: £5,000
Society of St James (Big Lottery):
£6,635

DECEMBER AGM

This year's guest speaker at the AGM is Ben Jackson from Together with Refugees, a coalition which brings together people and movements including SWVG to stand against the divisiveness and hate directed at refugees. The coalition is calling for a kinder, fairer, and more effective approach to supporting refugees in the UK. Ben is also Director at the Asylum Reform Initiative (ARI), which was set up in 2019 by six national organisations (Asylum Matters, British Red Cross, Freedom from Torture, Refugee Action, Refugee Council, Scottish Refugee Council) to develop a strategy to drive long-term, deep change in Britain's approach to asylum seekers and refugees.

The AGM will be on Monday, 6 December by zoom.

<https://zoom.us/j/93192013994?pwd=RDh3QThzbmx4OGhxOW1YaGZqREhmQT09>

Meeting ID: 931 9201 3994

Passcode: 424351