



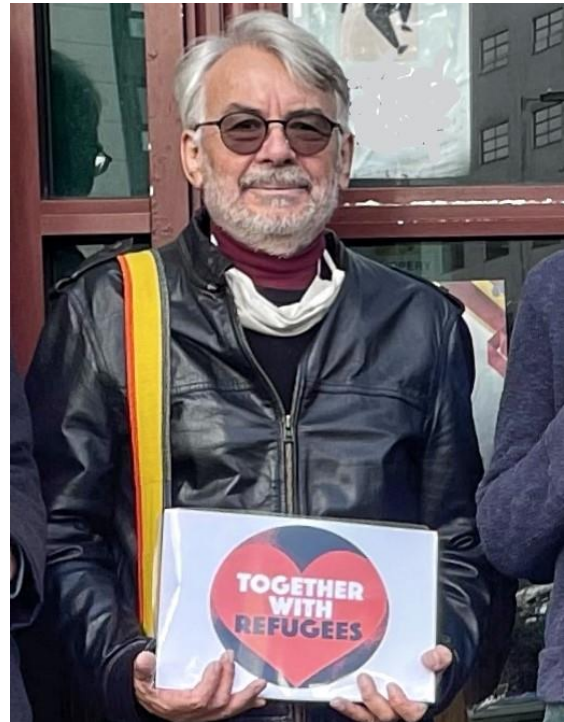
Newsletter Winter 2021/22

Introducing our new Chair of Trustees, Mark Courtice

In December, after three successful years, Chris Stevens left his role as chair of the trustees. I took over the reins and have been asked to explain a bit about me.

I have been a visitor for some time now. I started at the beginning of the 2000s, much like SWVG itself, by visiting men who were due to be removed from the UK and who were waiting in prison. In my case this was at the immigration removal centre at Haslar near to Portsmouth. It was difficult - a few won their appeals but for others we had to send them off with \$20 bills hidden in their shoes. At the time I was working in Portsmouth so it was convenient and when I moved my job to Winchester, I of course joined SWVG.

I went to university in Manchester where I took a degree in drama and qualified as a teacher. After a short time teaching I moved into theatre management, which is where I spent most of my career. Latterly I came to work in the South of England and managed theatres including the new Theatre Royal in Portsmouth, the Theatre Royal in Brighton, and the Theatre Royal in Winchester – for an avowed republican an awful lot of Theatres Royal! For 15 years I was Administrative Director of the Nuffield Theatre in Southampton, when the theatre was based on the university campus. I have also recently qualified as a teacher of English as a second or other language with a CELTA qualification. Since then I've really enjoyed teaching students, one to one, ranging from GCSE level to people without any English when they begin.



With SWVG I have been a visitor for several years; it's been my pleasure to work with lots of interesting people, many of whom have successfully moved to this country, and some of whom regrettably didn't make it. For most of us, the pleasure of this work is getting to know someone as an individual, understanding not only why they have come to the UK but the courage and imagination that it is taken to get here. The people who I've worked with have been the "best of the best" who have taken unimaginable risks, made unimaginable sacrifices and in many cases suffered incalculable loss in order to get here.

That doesn't mean I don't know the frustration of dealing with the Byzantine ways of the Home Office, but that just makes the pleasure of the moment when

someone gets leave to remain greater, and those "removals" all the sadder. The next three years look challenging for all of us with the new Nationality and Borders Bill, and a political scene in which the culture wars burn ever hotter.

It's not all bad, however. There's fun and excitement in working to hear a wider range of voices in SWVG, there's the anti-racist agenda, there are opportunities to expand the support that the organisation can offer by using the energy and talents of those who have lived experience as refugees and of the asylum system, and there are the possibilities that our expanded teaching and cultural activities are showing us.

When you think about it like that it's going to be a blast!

Mark Courtice

Winchester becomes a City of Sanctuary

In January councillor John Tippett-Cooper presented a motion to Winchester City Council, who voted unanimously to support the City of Sanctuary, the University of Sanctuary and SWVG to become a Council of Sanctuary. At the end of a marathon meeting which discussed the city centre redevelopment, councillors showed their hearts at 1am! Below is an abridged version of the successful motion that John put forward to the council (reproduced with his kind permission):

In 2020, the UK received applications for asylum for 37,550 people. This is around three times less than the number of applications received by Germany (124,380), France (103,370) and Spain (108,225). The UK is home to just 1% of the 26.4 million refugees forcibly displaced across the world. We can and should do more as a country. The stark reality is that the future will present bigger challenges with millions more people likely to be displaced by the increasingly devastating impacts of climate change.

And so how can we play our part in Winchester in this global challenge? Becoming known as a City of Sanctuary is just the start. Four families from Afghanistan have recently been resettled in Winchester following the devastation faced in that country in the summer of last year. Indeed, it was that crisis that showed me the very best of Winchester and for every venomous tweet made behind a cowardly anonymous account there were a hundred people in Winchester who donated clothes, money and skills to Afghan evacuees last Summer.

City of Sanctuary – a movement started in 2005 - is a network of community groups, councils, schools, universities across the UK working to provide support and welcome to people seeking sanctuary. Winchester City Council can now proudly add its name to a list of supporters of City of Sanctuary, becoming a place of welcome for all people seeking asylum and refuge.

Applying for asylum is a long, hard uncertain process. The people who do so have often suffered trauma. Almost all people applying for asylum are not allowed to work despite an often strong desire to do so - and are forced to rely on state support equivalent to £5.66 per day. Less than two cups of coffee on Winchester's High Street.

This motion seeks to continue and shine a spotlight on the hard work of wonderful community organisations like Southampton and Winchester Visitors' Group (which started in Winchester over 20 years ago) that supports people in Hampshire who are applying for asylum with practical and emotional support from over 150 volunteers. I want to thank SWVG for their support for this motion and for the kindness, humanity and decency of their work. In addition, I want to thank Elizabeth Flint of City of Sanctuary Winchester and the University of Winchester (already a University of sanctuary) who advocate, support and work with people applying for asylum and refugees in Hampshire.

To these organisations, I am pleased to say that this motion means that your City

Council will support you in your work and do all we can to support you in making Winchester and our District a more welcoming supportive place for people applying for asylum and refugees.

Finally, Madam mayor, I want to tell you a very quick story about a man called Mo.

He was an Iraqi citizen in the late 1970s in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Mo loved to write leaflets. Those leaflets contained ideas that we take so painfully for granted – for example, the idea that people should be able to protest when they oppose something their government is doing. This is not a freedom that Mo had. Fear stalked Mo every day, the fear that his objections to Saddam's regime could mean the end of his life. Mo fled Iraq in 1979 and found his way to the UK. He left everything he owned, everything he knew after his life was threatened. His childhood sweetheart Hana soon joined him, herself in real fear that her connection with him would mean she was also a target for Saddam's secret police. They applied for asylum in the UK and this was granted. Britain became their safe haven, their home, their sanctuary.

Mo and Hana worked 12-hour days to support their two children, became valued and loved members of the Hastings community and contributed in every way possible to British society, which they loved and cherished. Their daughters became NHS doctors, both spending years working in front line Hospitals and continuing to do so.

Their eldest daughter Amal had two children, the eldest son starting at St Bede's school in September, the other is at nursery near Peter Symonds college. Those little boys – Mo's grandchildren – are my sons. Mo is my father-in-law, Hana my mother-in-law.

I am deeply and profoundly grateful that Mo and Hana were able to find sanctuary in Britain for obvious reasons, but I am also so grateful to every person in their home city of Hastings – itself a City of Sanctuary – who showed them acts of kindness on the way.

This motion is an expression of hope, an expression of our City and our District's kindness and decency, an expression of a desire to do as much as we can to help some of the most vulnerable people. I know that in Winchester and in our District, people like my parents-in-law will find safety, kindness and sanctuary, and this motion aims to support these aims.

John Tippett-Cooper

Reorganising how we work together

Our workload is increasing to keep up with changes in the asylum process, the transition to Leave to Remain, issues with BRPs (biometric residence permits), Universal Credit, housing, schools and education, safeguarding, NHS access, mental health, contact with other organisations, the NRM (National Referral Mechanism), Health Visitors, etc. No single person can keep track of all aspects of our work, but at the same time it is important that visitors as well as teachers can access correct information and advice.

Increasingly the roles of teacher and visitor overlap. Many students do not want or need a visitor because they feel supported by their friends, often a group with the same nationality or language. Yet at times these students need a word of advice or reassurance.

Sometimes, visitors need to acquire knowledge and expertise in a certain area to help the people we support who are seeking asylum. Other members of SWVG bring useful experience from previous jobs or other roles they have within the group. These people now form a group of Advisors who can be contacted by visitors and teachers.

Just like the people seeking asylum whom we support, visitors and other SWVG volunteers have missed the more personal contact with each other, like the quick exchange of information with colleagues at AMC. I hope that the access to individual help from one of the Advisors will help to fill this gap. Of course, this does not mean that strong relationships between

visitor and back-up, where they exist, should be abandoned.

Apart from specialist advice, visitors, especially those who are new, need more emotional support. The coordinators, the conveners of the support groups and Jackie as leader of the training team are aware of this and maintain contact to offer the necessary support.

Claudia Glyn

SWVG Social Media

Many of you will be very familiar with social media, while others will feel they don't want to engage with it at all. SWVG, however, must have a social media presence to publicise the work we do, attract funding and new volunteers, and spread the word about the problems faced by those seeking asylum.

Most of you will be familiar with our website (<https://swvg-refugees.org.uk/>). This has been our main online presence for many years and is the route for many to find out about SWVG. We also have members' pages, with specific information for SWVG members. If you are an SWVG member but aren't familiar with these pages, do please take a look.

However, a website alone isn't good enough nowadays so we are now active on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. They each reach slightly different audiences. The links to them are:

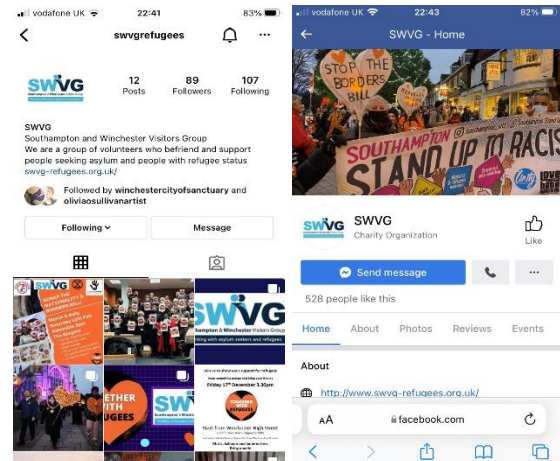
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/swvgrefugee>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/SWVGAction>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/swvgrefugees>

If you use any of these three media platforms, please follow us there, like and share our posts, and spread the word to your friends and followers. We currently have 572 followers on Facebook, 241 on Twitter, and 82 on Instagram, which largely reflects the length of time we've been using them. Our Instagram site was only set up at the end of last year, so to have this

number of followers already is quite impressive. But please spread the word!



SWVG on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook

It is important that we keep the website and social media up-to-date. If you have any stories or pictures about SWVG that could be shared, we'd really like to hear from you. We have to be mindful of confidentiality but please let us have anything you think we might be able to use. Pictures are particularly welcome but we do need written consent from any people in the photographs. Please send anything you can to news@swvg-refugees.org.uk.

Managing these media platforms takes a lot of work, so we are grateful to those who put so much time and effort into it.

Hazel Inskip

Together with Refugees – Campaigning Against the ‘Anti-Refugee Bill’

I'd like to give you this update on SWVG members' campaigning for a fair and humane asylum system in the UK.

The Together With Refugees coalition was founded by Asylum Matters, British Red Cross, Freedom from Torture, Rainbow Migration, Refugee Action, Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council and now has over 400 member organisations, including SWVG. This means we can work

together much more effectively, and it's good for local groups like us to be able to share news and ideas with similar groups around the country.

Ben Jackson - keynote speaker at our AGM last December - is director of the Asylum Reform Initiative, which runs the Together With Refugees office.

We've all been focused on promoting the Show Your Heart campaign which enables members of the public and community leaders to join in a simple positive message that they are "Together With Refugees". This builds on the widespread support for asylum that exists in this country and it attracts people who have not thought much about this before. This is both a long-term project to influence opinion and also a short term one to fight this government's damaging plans.

Thanks to all those of you who contacted churches, mosques and synagogues for Show Your Heart. We've really appreciated the support of the hundreds of people whose photos have been shared and made into an amazing video by Tharshan.

Our two headline events have been the Lantern Parade in Winchester in December and the march with Valentine's hearts through Southampton from the Bargate in February.



Jenny Corrick led the way in Winchester, teaching us how to make the amazing orange hearts out of willow withies and paper, discussing arrangements with the council, the police and the press, and getting a great line-up of speakers including the Leader of the Council and

our very own Jalal and Claudia. There was a full page spread in the Hampshire Chronicle.

Then on Saturday 12th February, we "descended in hundreds" (according to the Daily Echo) and marched through the centre of Southampton, making a lot of noise and getting plenty of positive response from the people there.



A great part of this is working with allies including Southampton Stand Up to Racism, City of Sanctuary, Southampton Action and the XR samba band. It's so important that we make friends with many and diverse organisations.

The Nationality and Borders Bill is being debated in the House of Lords. It is expected that the Bill will return to the Commons in mid-March. The Government will be seeking to move as fast as possible through sessions to consider amendments and receive Royal Assent for the Bill by late March/early April, in time for Easter recess. There have been many moving speeches from members of all parties in support of amendments and against the many divisive and pernicious clauses in the Bill – they are well worth reading in Hansard. The arguments from the government have been weak and one is left thinking that they are just relying on prejudice to push through their policies, in particular Bill clauses 11, 12 & 28, which will penalise people who come to this country in need of sanctuary.

Together With Refugees' report on the cost of these policies, estimated at £2.7 billion a year, highlights that they are not only shameful but are unrealistic and

unworkable. If the government were honest about "controlling our borders" it would work together with our European neighbours and would provide safe passage to people who have reasonable grounds for asylum in this country.

Do keep an eye out for news about this in our social media (thanks to Comms group).

Thanks to all those of you who have been writing to your MPs. Although they do not always send a personal response, it is worth letting them know your views. Now at last some of them are agreeing to meet with us this month, so it is worth chipping away. Join in when you see actions in Weekly Notices or on social media, it really helps when we all join in!

William Brook-Hart

Concert in aid of SWVG

The Conchord Singers, a small Southampton choir, gave a concert in aid of SWVG in February. The profits for the concert will be donated to SWVG once the expenses have been paid, and a bucket collection at the door raised just over £400 for us. The choir performed a mixture of music, some unaccompanied and some with piano, organ, keyboard, cello, trumpet and oboe. The main choral work was the Gloria by Vivaldi, a very joyous piece of music. Other pieces were by well-known composers including Bach, Mendelssohn, Finzi, Ireland, and Fauré.

One piece was composed by King Henry



VIII, a song expressing the need for good company and the notion that idleness leads to vice. Following the last couple of years, I'm sure most of us would agree about the value of good company, but

we hope those who have been forced to be idle during COVID haven't succumbed to vice as a result! The final item was an amusing song based on music by Mozart. It told the story of the boy Mozart converting his harpsichord into a go-kart and whizzing round Salzburg on it. All fiction of course, but good fun.

The choir would welcome singers of any type. If you are interested in joining them, do look at their website at <http://conchordsingers.co.uk/>. At each concert they raise money for good causes, mainly those promoting peace and humanitarian aid, but also smaller, local ones that do important work though often receive less attention. This time was the turn of SWVG.

Hazel Inskip

Art Unframed

The Art Unframed show on Saturday 11th December was a chance for four learner artist neighbours to move some of their endeavours on while raising money for SWVG.



We enjoyed organising the event, the weather was kind and all our guests behaved themselves... they wore masks, they socially distanced themselves, waited patiently outside until there was room inside the house and took SWVG fliers and Together With Refugees hearts. We raised £549.30 on the day and another £150.00 has arrived via Just Giving, so £699.30 in total.

Liz Statham

Reopening our Doors on Fridays

Friday mornings at the AMC (the Avenue Multicultural Centre) are a bit like a Tardis: bigger on the inside. Before Covid I used to teach five lessons in one morning, but my suspicion that my students weren't getting the best possible deal led me to move my teaching to other days and keep Fridays free for everything else that springs up.

It's giving myself more time to help that has given me a fuller view of how busy everyone else is too, how much is going on, how many cogs are turning all around me.

Having postponed our reopening in the summer, we were anxious once we opened in September to stay open, so started without fanfare to keep numbers low. Gradually the word has spread and the old buzz is coming back. Services have restarted bit by bit: first the SWVG and our partner organisation CLEAR advice desks, the SWVG teaching at well-distanced tables in the hall, and tea and coffee served by Viv and Richard from a trolley to avoid crowding; next the food, collected from Costco by Dave and his team and distributed by Leila and hers; now the Reading Round where stories and poems are shared; and starting soon, the games table in the concourse. We've hosted visits from BBC Radio Solent, Debbie Sellin the Bishop of Southampton, ex-Mayor of Southampton Parvin Damani MBE, and Southampton City Councillor Spiros Vassiliou, and have been proud to show them around.

Our opening hours have now changed slightly. We're opening at 9:30 and closing the doors at 12, so that we can squeeze even more into the morning.

Catherine Hartley

Funding

We gratefully acknowledge the following:

Donations

St Matthew with St Paul, Winchester £250

St Lawrence with St Swithun, Winchester £510

South Downs Gate Benefice £190

Southampton Womens Forum £99

The Jewish Chronicle £60

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

Fundraising

Proceeds of book launch for Tony Kushner's book *Southampton's Migrant Past and Present* £300

Stockbridge Community Cinema showing of the film *Limbo* £100

Art sale organised by Liz Statham £549

Phoenix Film Theatre showing of the film *Limbo* £270

Collection at the Lantern Parade in Winchester £72

Sponsored walks and Christmas Literary Quiz £1083 in December and January

Grants

Sheba Charitable Trust £400

Anonymous £20,000