



In this Issue

- *What's on your mind, Mark?*
- *The Bibby Stockholm*
- *Volunteer photographer with the RSPCA*
- *Cooking for Friends*
- *Tharshan's citizenship ceremony*
- *The evolution of SWVG volunteer support over 15 years*
- *Campaigns update*
- *SWVG website update*
- *Musiko Musika at the AMC*
- *Activities and outings*
- *Achievements and qualifications*
- *Recipe: Coconut sambol*

What's on your mind, Mark?

Mark Courtice is Chair of SWVG and has been a visitor since 2012. Here he looks at SWVG's unique approach, as well as recent challenges, successes, and plans for the future.

How are things, Mark?

Just over 20 years ago SWVG was born. Since then, we've been true to our founding principles of working one-to-one with people seeking asylum and refugees, and seeking to make a difference by supporting others in the field. If you're a new arrival in Southampton, you'll find we can visit if needed and we now have over 30 one-to-one English tutors to help you integrate in your new community. With SWVG you can grow food and flowers in our allotment, join conversation groups or an art project. Specialist volunteers cover families and schooling, accommodation, and liaison with Universities of Sanctuary.

In the past year we estimate that about 400 people have chosen SWVG to help them.

So, why worry? We're bigger, but we're still making a difference...

Well, up to a point. As I write this,

- a "legal aid desert" makes it really difficult to find solicitors willing to take on poor and desperate clients (remember, our volunteers can't offer legal advice unless they are qualified by OISC);
- at least 7 people who have reached the holy grail of "Leave to Remain" are in danger of sleeping rough in Southampton tonight;
- they're doubling up people in the rooms at the hotels – so that's twice as many phones, SIM cards, solicitors' appointments, gym memberships, clothes, shoes and lessons, that we and



our partners at CLEAR and Southampton Action need to find;

- the Supreme Court has ruled the Rwanda scheme illegal but the Government still plans to enshrine its casual cruelty in law;
- the Bibby Stockholm is open for business and some of the people we know are already there;
- a far-right thug posted a video of himself confronting staff and residents at one of Southampton's hotels last month.

Where do we start?

That Legal Aid desert:

A small team is working on several options, including

- hiring a qualified immigration advisor (solicitor or OISC Level 2 qualified) on a part-time contract;
- paying for more legal support from local law firms;
- training current volunteers to become OISC Level 2 qualified;
- seeking pro-bono support from law firms;
- working with local universities to offer immigration advice services.

People sleeping on Southampton Common tonight:

We are working with Southampton City Council and other groups to tackle the problems caused by the acute housing shortage in the city for people newly given Leave to Remain.

A group of volunteers has agreed to be ready to make a spare room available over a very short term to tide people over.

With our own particular connections, we are working with hostel providers and other emergency accommodation services.

How do we tap into the skills and determination of the asylum seekers and refugees that we work with?

A number of SWVG volunteers bring lived experience of the system to our activities. Ranging from reception staff to representing SWVG on external bodies, to being part of the Trustee board, to running the food bank, empowering people who are going through the system enables us to tap into talented, useful, and interesting people. After all, if you've travelled 3500 miles across the world, you've already proved yourself resourceful and determined.

Our next ambition is to combine volunteering with training, so that those who wish have experience, qualifications and references to take with them into the next step of their lives.

Training might include:

- Reception – hospitality qualification
- Café – food handling
- Crèche – child care
- First Aid
- Maintenance and cleaning

So what can I do about all this?

I can't speak too highly of the impressive volunteer team across all the activities we undertake. If I'm talking about you – my sincerest thanks and congratulations. You're part of something extremely special. If you would love to help and don't have the time, can you give a regular donation, however small? Go to <https://swvg-refugees.org.uk/get-involved/make-a-donation/>

If you're wondering whether this is for you, just look at some of the things that are taking place and consider what you'd like to get involved with.

- Could you volunteer for the advice desk?
- Could you help research the legal minefield?
- Could you take on becoming OISC qualified, giving frontline advice from a legal perspective?
- Have you got a spare room that you could use for emergency accommodation?
- Could you help someone learning English with one-to-one lessons?
- Can you see something we haven't thought of that would make a difference to the welcome we prepare for Southampton's newest residents?

If so, don't wait. Contact me now, come to the AGM and volunteer, talk to the team at AMC on Friday. Spending time with people who are changing their lives, you might just change yours too!

This is an edited extract from Mark's article, available in full [here](#) on the SWVG website.

The Bibby Stockholm

by Hilary Preece

In April of this year, the government announced plans to use the Bibby Stockholm barge at Portland in Dorset to house people seeking asylum. Despite protests from campaigners and NGOs including the Refugee Council, the concerns of the Fire Brigades Union, and a reported lack of life jackets, the barge was deployed on 7th August, and the first 15 men were taken there by taxi from hotels around the UK. Also on 7th August, Dorset Council informed the barge's Home Office contractors that Legionella bacteria had been found in the water supply on the barge. Nevertheless, a second group of men arrived on board the next day. Three days after that, they were all evacuated and driven to another hotel, where they waited for nearly three months to be returned to the barge.

On Saturday 6th August, two of my SWVG English language students received the Bibby letters. One managed to get himself a lawyer on Saturday morning to plead his case, though he didn't know what organisation he had contacted to arrange this. The second received his letter in the late afternoon. He sent me WhatsApp messages late on Sunday night expressing his confusion and fear, and ended with the plea: "help me please help me!"

I drove down to the hotel on Monday morning and took both students for coffee. To be honest it's all a bit of a blur, but what stands out in my memory is that student two in particular was absolutely petrified. He had not eaten or slept since receiving the letter and he told me that his hair came out in handfuls in the shower. What was also clear was that I was grasping at straws

trying to find positive things to say.

The taxi had arrived that morning to take them to Portland but they had been told that they could refuse to get in. Even the taxi driver advised them not to go! We got student two to phone Care4Calais and eventually he too managed to speak to a solicitor through an interpreter. Brilliant! They told him that everything would be okay, not to worry and that he wouldn't have to go, but to go to his GP and get a letter to say that he was suffering from stress. I went with him to the surgery to insist on an appointment and then joined him at the given time to support him. He didn't get a letter, but the doctor gave him a prescription for sleeping tablets which we went to the pharmacy to collect. Before I left we went for another coffee. I was concerned that he had still not eaten. He took his flapjack back to the hotel. He told me he was fine, and I left.

The next morning the taxi came again. This time he had been informed that if he didn't get in all rights to accommodation and any aid would be withdrawn. He sent me a video from inside the taxi. I guess that there were no words. Later he told me that he was fine. I very much doubted that.

In a twist of fate that must have given hope of a reprieve, the barge was in use for only five days before a report of Legionella bacteria in the water saw all the men transferred off the barge again, and moved on to another hotel.

The reprieve was not to be, and on 24th October the Bibby Stockholm was reopened with 50 men being moved there. It is easy

now to forget them. They are not in the news at the moment, but if over 500 bored, stressed, anxious men are indeed to be housed in accommodation designed for 222, with limited access to the exercise and activities of normal life, we can only hold our breath in fear of what incident might next put them back there.

Since this article was written, another 12 men from one of the Southampton hotels have received letters telling them they will be moved to the Bibby Stockholm.

We have advised them that they risk losing their accommodation and their asylum status if they abscond or refuse to go. It is frustrating, sad and without logic that people already settled with accommodation, GPs, college classes, volunteering opportunities, friends and a support network should be moved with little notice to another area of the country and so have to start the process of trying to establish their lives in the UK once again.

Volunteer photographer with the RSPCA

Mohammadreza, who used to be a photographer, recently applied for a volunteer photography opportunity with the RSPCA. He travelled to Southsea on 15th October this year to photograph the RSPCA runners in the Great South Run. His amazing photos will be used by the RSPCA in their publicity.



Cooking for Friends

by Jayne Morris

It is often the case that refugees face loneliness and isolation and, in the case of people living in the hotels in Southampton, food they can't choose and don't always enjoy. This project is designed to enable residents of the hotels to share delicious warm food, friendship, conversation and laughter, music and games: a few hours to leave their worries behind.

Avenue St. Andrew's Church is familiar to most of us at SWVG. It has a big kitchen with great cooking facilities and an eating area that we are able to use most Saturday evenings from 6 to 10:30pm.

We invited the men who liked to cook to take an online course: Food Safety and Hygiene, Level 1. We hope that some will move on to Level 2 and gain a recognised qualification, enabling them to work in cafés and restaurant kitchens if and when they receive Leave to Remain.

Around 20 men have signed up so far, and they all have their favourite dishes that they can't wait to cook! Every Saturday two of them will each invite up to six friends and be given £3 per head to spend on ingredients. Thanks to the kindness of Dr Parvin Damani MBE at the food bank at the Medina Mosque, we have bulk supplies of staples such as rice, pasta, oil, tinned tomatoes, pulses, salt and spices.

We have a great list of volunteers from SWVG and from Southampton Student Action for Refugees keen to get involved and support this exciting project. We aim to have three volunteers at each meal to ensure a successful evening. Projects like this one are already up and running around the UK and are proving very successful.



Cooking for Friends was kicked off by Charlie and Jayne cooking jollof rice and chicken, fish stew, and flatbreads for 12 men who braved the heavy rain and wind to join us. We wanted to try out the equipment and become familiar with the kitchen along with some of the men who will be using it. Mary and Mark arranged the tables and left the men to organise everything else. We had a really great evening and thankfully no disasters! The food was delicious and plentiful, and the

men were able to take some away in containers. We couldn't stop them from washing up, cleaning, mopping and hoovering afterwards!

Finally, we were so touched when after the meal some of the men, in turn, stood up and thanked us. They had so enjoyed coming out and eating together like a big family, and it had helped lift their spirits and stop their anxious thoughts for a while.

And that, of course, is why we are all here, and why SWVG is here.

OISC qualification

by Tharshan Vettivel

Every asylum seeker needs legal assistance throughout their asylum process. People think that asylum seekers only need legal support once they apply for asylum. The reality is that it takes from the time they decide to leave their motherland until they settle in as a citizen of their final destination and even beyond this.

Put simply, the legal assistant is one of the most influential persons who help them every step of the way to begin their new life without violating Immigration Law. As a charitable organisation, we start helping with what we can at the first point of contact.

An asylum seeker can get free legal support called Legal Aid, or from a private law firm or charity like us. As you may know, it is really hard to get support from Legal Aid because of inadequate numbers of Legal Aid law firms and the long waiting list. In Immigration, law is constantly changing. If they cannot present their case within the Home Office's legal guidelines, asylum seekers cannot succeed in their case, even if they have strong grounds.

Going through the immigration system is incredibly complicated; if you go down the private law firm route, good quality legal advice can be very expensive, but your future is on the line. A colossal business model has been built around the asylum legal system. And there is not much transparency in this area. Asylum seekers may already have a lawyer before we meet them, but have trouble getting the right support from them. Many people are in a very vulnerable position and in need of advice. Unfortunately, unscrupulous people seek to exploit this vulnerability by providing poor-quality advice and charging huge amounts of money.

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 makes it illegal for a person or organisation to offer immigration advice or services without the correct qualifications, even if the advice is provided free of charge, including by charities working with refugees. To provide immigration advice, a person must be registered either with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) or the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA).

What is the OISC?

The OISC is a government body established by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, that regulates the provision of immigration advice and services across the UK. The OISC was set up to try to prevent migrants from receiving poor quality or dishonest immigration advice. Tackling poor immigration advice is seen as critical not only for refugees in vulnerable situations but also for the public good.

How can you qualify as an immigration advisor?

To become a legal advisor under SWVG's roof, you must apply to the OISC and show that you are a fit and competent person, and that you can manage client files and confidentiality. The important part of this application process is passing a test of your immigration law knowledge.

Fortunately, SWVG is already registered with OISC, and we have some members with the Level 1 qualification. A few more members are waiting for the training in December, but in light of the current situation, we need more.

Refugee Action runs the FIAP project (Frontline Immigration Advice Project). SWVG has partnered with them to provide

our volunteers with access to OISC training. Through this programme, we can get all the training and support to become an advisor successfully. This is a fully online course. They provide an online learning platform that contains all the learning material and practice questions for all levels, and is very informative. You can start learning any time straight after the registration.

There are three stages to becoming a fully qualified OISC legal advisor. Each has two categories: Asylum & Protection, and Immigration. You can apply at one of three different levels in each category. Level 1 is fundamental and limited; we can only provide basic support. So, we aim to get at least Level 2, which gives us a bit more

room to help those in need. In the current situation, we need to be a Level 2 advisor in order to help complete the Preliminary Information Questionnaires that many of those we are supporting are now getting. You should demonstrate appropriate understanding and skills in subjects relevant to our work. We can advise you on this.

Your help is desperately needed in this area. As a group, we will provide you with all the support you need to become a qualified OISC legal advisor. We look forward to seeing many of you.

For more details on OISC training through the FIAP project, please visit this link, <https://www.ragp.org.uk/fiap/oisc-training>

Recipe: Coconut Sambol/Coconut chutney

by Subasini Arumugakurukkal

Sri Lankan Coconut Sambol is the unofficial national dish of Sri Lanka. Coconut is an essential part of Sri Lankan cooking. We use thick or thin fresh coconut milk to make our curries, and freshly grated coconut to make the spicy Coconut Sambol. The dish is also a South Indian traditional food, but they call it Coconut Chutney. There are many variations of Coconut Sambol. I'm giving you the traditional basic version of Coconut Sambol.

We can make white or red Coconut Sambol. For white Coconut Sambol, which is a little easier to make, only add green chillies. It's gluten-free, vegan, and so good!

There are endless dishes you can pair up with Coconut Sambol: Warm rice, Bread, String hoppers, Roti, Chapati, Vadai...

Traditionally, we use a mortar and pestle to make Coconut Sambol, which makes it even tastier. But you can use a blender. It can be done in two ways, either make it crunchy by not adding water, or achieve a smooth consistency by adding water. This recipe is very forgiving and can be made any way you like and in any quantity you want. The basic recipe requires only coconut, chillies, salt, and lime. It could be red chilli or green chilli; it depends on how hot you like it. The key to a good Coconut Sambol is balancing those flavours.

Ingredients

- 1 Cup Fresh Coconut (cut into small pieces)
- 3-4 Dried Red Chillies / Green Chillies.
- 1/4 Onion (medium size – chopped) or 2-3 Shallots
- Salt as per taste
- 2 tablespoons Tamarind Paste or fresh – If you can't get Tamarind, you can use Lime.

Charity Number: 1183558. Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, Miriam Margolyes OBE, John Pilkington

- Oil for frying
- Water as needed (to grind the chutney).

For tempering the chutney (Thalitham or thalippu)

- 2 tablespoons Sesame Oil or any oil
- ½ teaspoon Mustard Seeds (black)
- ½ teaspoon Fennel Seeds
- Half an Onion – medium size (chopped)
- 2 Sprigs of Curry leaves
- 1-2 Dried Red Chillies chopped larger.

Coconut:

Shredded coconut is best; you can get a fresh coconut and grate it using a coconut scraper, which is the authentic way. But we can chop the coconut into small pieces using a blender.

You can use frozen coconut too. If you are using frozen shredded coconut, add some hot water while grinding, or microwave frozen coconut for a few seconds. This will get the right chutney consistency.

Chilli:

Red chillies – fry the red chillies in any oil until they turn crispy. You can see the colour change when you fry. Red chillies' colour and spiciness vary with the variety. Modify the spice level as per your preference.

If you use green chillies, use them directly; there is no need to fry.

Onion:

Traditionally, we use small shallots that look like pearl onions and can be added directly without chopping. For other onions, chop them into small pieces.

Tamarind Paste:

This adds that much-needed tanginess to the chutney. If you use fresh Tamarind, take a walnut sized ball and soak it in a little bit of water for about 5-10 minutes, then squeeze out the juice. If you can't get Tamarind, you can use Lime. Lime is perfect when you make white chutney with green chillies.

- In a blender or mixer-grinder add red chillies and salt, close the lid and grind well.
- Add all coconut, tamarind, and onion, close the lid, and blend them together; use water a little at a time until you get a smooth chutney of the desired consistency.

Note: If you like to make it crunchy without adding water, the only thing you should avoid is Tamarind or Lime, and add a little more onion at the end of the grinding.

- Transfer the blended chutney to a bowl.
- Heat 2 tablespoons of sesame oil in a small pan. Once the oil is hot, add mustard and fennel seeds - let it splutter.
- Add chopped onions. Fry until it just starts picking up a golden colour.
- Add curry leaves and dried red chillies and fry for another few seconds only.
- Pour the tempering (Thalitham) over the prepared chutney and mix well.

Storage:

Coconut chutney is best used within a day. Store leftovers immediately in the fridge and use within 2-3 days.

Tharshan's citizenship ceremony

The day that Tharshan became a citizen of the U.K. must many times have seemed like a dream too far. It's a tribute to his determination, guts and quiet persistence that he's put persecution at home and serious illness behind him since he came here, to reach this important milestone both for him and the community that surrounds him. He's now studying at university, and with his friends Suba and Gowry has created a self-sustaining family unit in Winchester bringing the very best of qualities to the city – they're even allotment holders!

He's an unassuming but key member of the Trustee team at SWVG, concentrating on legal support and supporting mental health amongst the SWVG community. He's often seen at our events. Since first contacting SWVG in 2013 he's given far more than he's taken, and we are very much the richer for this new citizen.

Tharshan writes, "After such a long time, I feel that I have permanently planted my roots in a peaceful land and feel a great sense of relief. I no longer have to bother with the bureaucracy of the Home Office regarding my visa application. It is very comfortable in my mental well-being. However, I do have surviving guilt in a corner, and I feel deprived of the rights of my motherland. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude. None of this would have been possible without all of your help and support – a million thanks indeed to our SWVG family, especially those who have travelled shoulder to shoulder with me on the journey. I am pleased to say here is an outcome of your hard work. More people are waiting for your hand than ever before."



The evolution of SWVG volunteer support over 15 years

by Jackie Batchelor

In 2008, I was lured into joining SWVG by a friend. Knowing I was a psychologist, she thought I might help the organisation support its visitors. Before I knew it, I was visiting someone from Zimbabwe on a weekly basis 'to make sure I understood the visitor experience'. This involved a rollercoaster of emotions, not least the anger at and frustrations of the incessant waiting and the injustices of the 'hostile environment', experienced by so many people seeking asylum.

We still reminisce about our winter road trip to Liverpool to hand in a fresh claim in person, as the Home Office required. The support required was often for financial, bureaucratic or housing issues that did not stop once Leave to Remain was finally granted. A helpful landlord helped set up a bank account and applied for Housing Benefit, but I was still needed to advocate in the Job Centre. All these experiences helped to inform the training I later came to deliver.

One of my first tasks was to survey members about their experiences of and emotions involved in visiting, what support they were receiving and what they would like. This led to a strengthening of the support group and back-up systems for visitors and acknowledgement of their value for the wellbeing, confidence and competence of visitors. Over time, teaching became a core function of SWVG. It soon became apparent that teachers and visitors needed to work closely together.

For both visitor and teacher, listening and empathy are vital. Relationships develop and bring tensions as well as joys. Teachers, and indeed all members, are now invited

to join support groups, which benefit from the diversity of input and experience. I ended up coordinating support groups to support conveners, allocate new members and maintain cohesion. This was especially vital during Covid, when we had to meet online instead of in person.

When I joined SWVG, there was little training on listening and communication skills. One member asked for more training on assertiveness both for people seeking asylum and for those who act as advocates. Initially, I offered these training modules at General Meetings, but having joined the training group (eventually leading it), I introduced these into the introductory training programme.

As SWVG evolved, we invited people seeking asylum to be trained, so they might also become volunteers. The training already included refugees relating their experiences to potential volunteers, but recruiting people seeking asylum as volunteers themselves added a further dimension, not only to training, but to the organisation itself. An example of this is the increased and conscious focus on supporting the mental health of those seeking asylum.

Trauma is inherent in seeking asylum, so we developed training on creating a trauma-aware environment. We were, therefore, in a good position to offer this to local people welcoming Ukrainian guests, and again when an isolated Winchester hotel became accommodation for people seeking asylum. SWVG continues to evolve in response to need, both for those seeking asylum and in the support it offers its volunteers.

Campaigns update

by William Brook-Hart

**UPDATE: On 15th November, the Supreme Court ruled the government's Rwanda plan was unlawful, and dismissed the Home Secretary's appeal. Reacting to Rishi Sunak's decision to introduce emergency legislation following on from the decision, The Bar Council noted "with grave concern the Prime Minister's suggestion that legislation might be introduced the purpose of which is apparently to deem Rwanda to be a safe country to which to return asylum seekers. [...] "If parliament were to pass legislation the effect of which was to reverse a finding of fact made by a court of competent jurisdiction, that would raise profound and important questions about the respective role of the courts and parliament in countries that subscribe to the Rule of Law."*

The Illegal Migration Bill and Rwanda The Bill became law on 20 July 2023. Anyone crossing the Channel in small boats or other 'irregular' ways after 20 July 2023 will have their asylum claims declared 'inadmissible', meaning they will not be considered under the UK's asylum system, and the Home Office will not process their claims. The Government then intends to "detain and swiftly remove" these people.

This directly affects several people that we help in Southampton who have received 'Rwanda' letters from the Home Office, which threaten them with detention and removal, regardless of whether they have suffered war, torture or persecution.

The plan is, however, facing legal challenges. Although the High Court found the Rwanda policy lawful in December 2022, the Court of Appeal ruled in June 2023 that Rwanda is not a safe country for people to have their claims processed.

It moved to the Supreme Court in October and a judgement is expected before Christmas. (* see UPDATE)

Rwanda has said it has capacity for up to 5,000. Even if the Rwanda Agreement were to go ahead, over 25,000 people will be left in limbo as they cannot be returned to their home country or removed to Rwanda due to limits on its processing capacity.

According to the Home Office's own statistics, three in every four people who have crossed the Channel this year would be recognised as refugees if their claims were processed. It is simply unfounded to say these people are economic migrants. 54% came from just five countries, including Afghanistan and Eritrea which have asylum grant rates of over 97%.

For the majority of people who need asylum, there are no safe routes because these have been blocked by this government. We need safe routes so that people who really need sanctuary in the UK can get here without risking their lives in the Channel.

The present government's asylum policy will not achieve its stated objective: it is irresponsible, wrong and highly damaging.

SWVG and political activity:

According to government guidance, charities can take part in political activity that supports their purpose and is in their best interests. So SWVG can engage in activities and campaigning to change or influence policies that affect asylum seekers and refugees. Whilst SWVG must remain independent of any political party, we can support or challenge particular policies.

The great majority of people in this country want a sensible and humane asylum system and we look to the policies of all the main parties at national and local level to support this. Please discuss these issues with your local and national political representatives.

This article has used the following website sources: 1. The Refugee Council 2. Free Movement 3. Gov.uk guidance for charities 4. The Mirror quoting Home Office statistics. Please visit these for more detailed information.

Some statistics

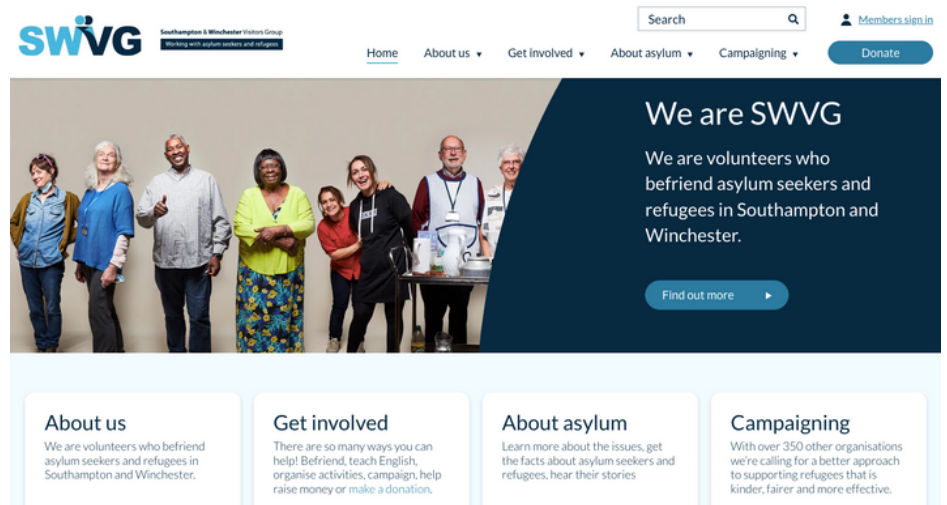
At the end of June 2023 (compared to June 2022)

- 175,457** people waiting for an initial decision on their claim (up 44%)
- 139,961** people waiting over 6 months for an initial decision (up 57%)
- 23,702** initial decisions made on asylum applications: (up 61%)
- £140m** UK payments to Rwanda for the Rwanda scheme so far
- 0** people sent to Rwanda to date

SWVG website update

The SWVG website has had a facelift! It now looks much more professional, modern and appealing. We also hope it's easier to navigate; it's now a better resource for asylum seekers and refugees as well as volunteers and potential donors. There is always room for improvement, however, so we welcome your suggestions!

Please visit the site at www.swvg-refugees.org.uk



Musiko Musika at the AMC

by Jacob Hartley

On Friday 8th September, three performers from Musiko Musika, the outreach arm of Anglo-Chilean band Quimantu, visited us at the Avenue Multicultural Centre (AMC). The band was formed in 1981 by Mauricio Venegas-Astorga, who visited us with singer Laura, his daughter, and violinist Rachel. Mauricio was himself a refugee, having fled Chile during the regime of Augusto Pinochet. They played three beautiful songs for us, and then invited members of SWVG to join in a musical project: a performance of Mauricio's *Miners' Mass*, a project demonstrating joy in solidarity between miners, and by extension, between workers everywhere, and between all people. After their performance, they talked to many interested members of SWVG, and I asked them some more questions.

Can you tell us about the project you're inviting people to join, and how that came about?

Rachel: In 2021 we started working with the Andover Museum Loft Singers, and we performed with them a work called the *Missa de los Mineros*, and through that we got to know Juliet, and a couple of other people who work with the choir who are volunteers here. We heard a little bit about the work that happens down here [of SWVG and the AMC], but the next thing that happened is we were invited to perform

as part of a fundraiser in Whitchurch in July of this year, for SWVG. We met Catherine [Vice-Chair of Trustees] there and heard about SWVG's work, and that gave us the idea to work with other choirs to perform this work in other locations, and that gave us the idea to invite SWVG to be part of that. Doing an activity like that is a really good way of involving people from different communities, using music as a bridge. The idea of involving a group like SWVG is then to extend that into a community that has generally not got so many contacts with the wider community, to increase understanding



in both directions. As well as that, we know music is a really positive activity to be doing in and of itself. One purpose is that we think people here would really benefit from music, but there's also this wider thing of building bridges.

Mauricio, why is this the piece you've chosen to share with people?

Mauricio: The main reason, I would say, is to do with community. The Mass was born out of a tradition that takes place in Latin America. We took the religious structure of the Mass, but it's not a religious piece. It's about mining communities, who express themselves, all over the world, through music, but also through solidarity, through caring, through education. That same spirit, coming to England, prevails, and that's why the piece is important. It's not all about the suffering of people going down in the pit, but also about the outside world, where they get together, they sing together, they eat together. And also the joy. That's very important, because we forget about the joy in life. It's not all about suffering, it's about celebrating as well. In this case, celebrating not only people that have come seeking sanctuary here, but also you and your culture, that is to say English culture. You have a tradition of helping; I'm an example of that. We would like to put something back into the community, and this idea came to us while we were doing the charity concert, and we very much believe in following that instinct. And that is why we are here.

Can you tell us about the project you're inviting people to join, and how that came about? You said something about England having a tradition of helping people. Could you say something about that?

Mauricio: Unfortunately, the word 'refugee' has got a negative stigma now, and I think that that is to do with having a Conservative government, and a conservative view of things, and that is ironic, because if we look at the present government, it's full of people

whose families are not from England, so I don't find the connection there. We need to be able to overcome that. I'm hopeful, because that tradition is not dead, it's very much alive. We need to be able to appeal to people. And that means going out and visiting communities, talking to them, showing that tradition.

And that's part of what you're trying to do?

Mauricio: Yes, education. We could easily make a living out of music: out of what we do and what we write. But we've got a duty (especially me, because I'm thankful to England for what England has given me) and a way of putting something back is doing this.

Rachel: Was it in 1977 that you came here?

Mauricio: Yes, so I've been here for a very long time!

Rachel: Our perceptions are that people sit at home, like you're going on holiday, with a brochure. But you didn't choose to come to England.

Mauricio: No no, I didn't have a choice.

Rachel: You needed to leave the country, and you were given an opportunity, and you were told, 'this group, you're going to England; this group, you're going to France'. It's very arbitrary.

Mauricio: And I was 19 when I left Chile. I think it was Callahan, the Prime Minister, and he gave a lot of Chilean people the opportunity to come here, and they saved the lives of a lot of people. And coming back to you, your point: it's good that a young chappie like you cares about refugees, because people sell you the idea that refugees are dodgy, and, unfortunately, that's what the press tell you. We've got a duty to clarify that. You know, refugees have a lot to contribute to the country.

Activities and outings

by Amanda Caspari

SWVG has been developing partnerships with local organisations and businesses to provide more activities for asylum seekers – sometimes fully funded by those organisations and sometimes funded in partnership with SWVG. Just getting out of Southampton into the countryside or doing activities outside their accommodation is so important, particularly during the time when asylum seekers are not allowed to work or attend college (six months before they can attend college and a year at least before they can get permission to work). Families also enjoy taking part in activities together, which they cannot always afford to do.



The New Forest National Park Rangers have worked hard with us to think of ideas for enjoyable activities in the New Forest. We have cycled at Ashurst with the Rangers and PedALL, walked in the Forest learning about the animals and plants, and had picnics which are greatly appreciated, provided by the Rangers. SWVG gives back by volunteering in the Forest – this year's project was a "Pine Pull" with Forestry England.

MoreBus offered to take us on one of their famous New Forest Tours in the open top bus. We went on the Red Route to Burley where a picnic and activities were organised. Thank you to the Queen's Head in Burley who organised hot drinks, and MoreBus who brought us a surprise picnic.

Our yearly trip to Bournemouth beach had to be delayed because of train strikes and terrible weather. We try to organise our activities without rain and mud, as many people do not have suitable shoes or wet weather gear. We did two trips this August, taking 70 people including families, children and pushchairs to the beach for the day.



Winchester Ramblers contacted us and we have discussed a guided walk in Winchester. This is a new partnership for us and we hope to do our first walk this November, again having had to cancel in August because of the terrible weather.

We also provide indoor activities, and hope to do more as we meet new friends and organisations. CityEye ran a new digital day for asylum seekers in June – demonstrating how to take videos and edit them and allowing use of their very expensive camera and video equipment for the day. Some of the people who attended now visit CityEye for their monthly film network evenings.

We try with our limited budgets to provide sports and gym activities. Solent University has partnered with us and runs a free afternoon session once a week for a group of asylum seekers. The university also runs a programme called Health 4 Her which is available to women in Southampton, and allows them to be part of a women-only health and exercise programme. Solent is working toward becoming a University of Sanctuary and has been very helpful and proactive in allowing use of its facilities and developing new ideas for activities.

A big thank you to everyone who has helped us this past year working with us to provide these lovely events and activities for the people we help.



Achievements and qualifications

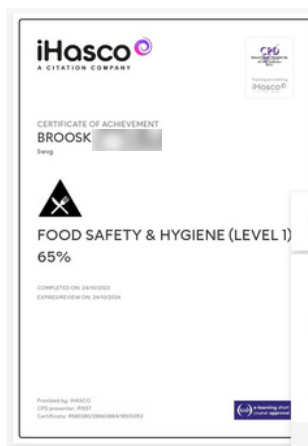


Abel achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.

Alfy passed his driving theory test.

Brook achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.

Ali passed his ESOL Entry 2 in all skills and Maths Functional Skills Entry 1 at City College.

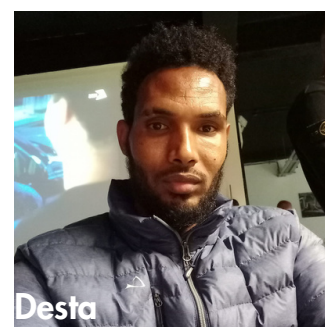


Elyas passed ESOL Entry 1 at CLEAR.

Dest achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.



Erfan passed his Level 3 Diploma in Plumbing at Highbury College Portsmouth.



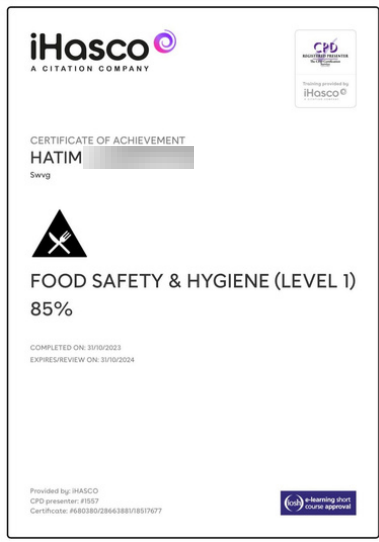
Fatima, who won the Sanctuary Scholarship at Solent University in 2021, gained an MSc in Sustainable Building Design in spring 2023. She is now working in her chosen field.



Endalk achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.

Habibah passed ESOL Entry 2 at Eastleigh College.

Hatim achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.



Idriss passed ESOL Level 1 in all skills at Itchen College. He has re-enrolled at Itchen to take Level 2 and also Maths Functional Skills Entry 2. He hopes eventually to get an NVQ in welding.

Kolawole achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.

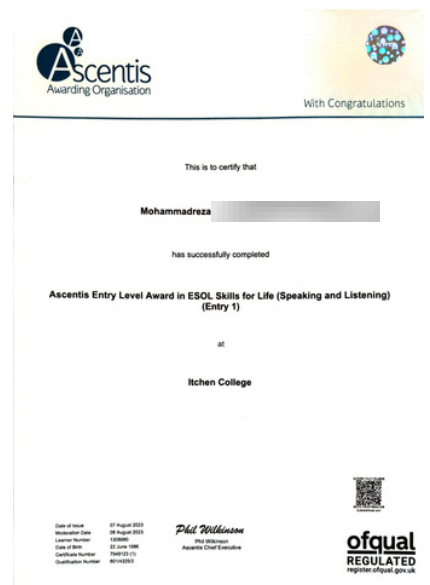
Maryan is learning to read, and has finished Turning Pages manual 3.



Metehan qualified as a London bus driver and now drives a double-decker bus.

Mickel passed Functional Skills English Entry 2 at City College.

Mohammadreza passed ESOL Entry 1 in Speaking and Listening at Itchen College.



Mohsen passed ESOL Entry 3 in Speaking and Listening at CLEAR, and achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.



Mohosina passed ESOL Entry 3 in all skills at the Lewis School, and gained certificates in Safeguarding Awareness, Prevent Awareness, and Fire Safety in order to volunteer with Tools for Self Reliance, CLEAR, and SWVG.



Mohosina



Mojtaba

Mojtaba passed ESOL Entry 3 in Reading at CLEAR.

Monica and Sunila passed ESOL Level 2 and English Functional Skills Level 1.

Mouaz achieved Level 1 Food Safety and Hygiene.

Ragida passed ESOL Entry 1 at City College.

Nargis and Maysam both passed ESOL Entry 1 at City College, and both learnt to read, finishing all 5 Turning Pages manuals.



Mouaz

Tohami passed ESOL Entry 1 in Speaking and Listening at Itchen College.

Tharshan achieved A3 in Blood Science, securing top marks in the class, A4 in Anatomy and Physiology, B2 in Microbiology and Immunology, A4 in the Group project and A2 in the Practical exam.



Tohami

Zebib passed ESOL Entry 1 in Speaking and Listening at Itchen College.