



Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group

Working with asylum seekers and refugees

Summer Newsletter 2025



Charity Number: 1183558

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, Miriam Margolyes OBE, John Pilkington



The Mark Courtice Fund for training and education



- **Do you have a dream?**
 - **Is there a training or educational course that you would like to do, but can't afford?**
 - **Do you need equipment for a course you have joined?**
- If so, and you are seeking asylum or have recently received Leave to Remain, you may be able to get financial help from the Mark Courtice Fund.

To apply, speak to Catherine, Hazel or Tharshan:

catherine.hartley@swvg-refugees.org.uk

hazel.inskip@swvg-refugees.org.uk

tharshan.vettivel@swvg-refugees.org.uk

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Southampton Refugee Week 2025

William Brook-Hart

Refugee Week is an annual worldwide festival, and in the UK this year the theme was "Community as a Superpower", highlighting the strength and contributions of refugees and the importance of community support. In Southampton, SWVG got together with many other community organisations to plan a wonderful series of events from 14 to 21 June.

In the weeks leading up to the celebration, our Schools Team had visited a dozen local schools. Our volunteers talked to the children about their experiences of seeking asylum in Southampton. The pupils took part in a competition to decorate tote bags to give to people seeking asylum. We connected with a large number of children and had very positive responses from them about what they had learnt.



Photo by Julian Benjamin

Saturday 21 June was the big day, and started with our stall at Above Bar Street, which displayed many of the tote bags decorated by local schoolchildren.

At the same time, the Ukrainian Association put on a sparkling performance of songs and dances in traditional costume. The Lord Mayor

of Southampton joined us and led the Refugee Week carnival parade through Southampton.

In the afternoon we had a lovely time chilling out in Palmerston Park for our annual picnic and stalls organised by the Persian Cultural Centre and CLEAR, listening to a line-up of fantastic live musicians from many different countries.



Photo by Julian Benjamin

A WEEK OF MUSIC, THEATRE, FILM AND GOOD FOOD

The week of events started with the wonderful SWVG Refugee Week lunch, where we also enjoyed some theatre and live music. On Saturday 14 we were welcomed to Southampton Park Run where 1000 people heard our message of "Together with Refugees".

At the Central Library we watched a film and talk by the Ukrainian Association and a

drama by World Stages Now.

Saints Foundation organised a tour of St Mary's Football Stadium, followed by a 5k Run for Refugees. Mayflower MAST Studios invited us to show a series of short films, including one about Iran by our very own Leila.

BBC South Today led their evening news bulletin by featuring the excellent community

involvement in Southampton Refugee Week.

In all, we achieved our objectives for the week: enjoyable community events led by or including people with lived experience; positive media messages about our communities, asylum and refugees; and fantastic involvement of our local schools.

Photo by Julian Benjamin



Mohosina Sumi

A few weeks ago, we Celebrated Refugee Week.

First, I met our City Mayor James Baillie. He was a very wonderful and friendly person.

Then, all gathered together for the parade at the entrance to West Quay at 11:30. I led the

parade while helping to hold the banner. It said "Refugees Welcome". We walked to Bargate with the band playing. We passed the Cenotaph and crossed the road into the park.

I showed the mayor the stalls in the park and introduced him to the stallholders. Everyone was very happy because he

was open to new ideas and new cultures. Mayor Baillie gave a speech introducing himself and welcoming everyone.

After that, we shared food and drink. We were singing, dancing and playing music all afternoon. We enjoyed it very much.

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Visiting schools for Refugee Week

Salwa Samara

During my time volunteering for SWVG, one of the most emotional and unforgettable experiences was when we explored the topic of refugees with the pupils in primary and secondary schools.

We spoke about what it means to leave your home behind, the struggles people face when starting over, and why it's so important to treat every person with dignity and kindness.

The children's questions were honest and touching;

some shared stories of their own families' journeys while others asked how they could help.

Conversations reminded me of the deep capacity children have for empathy.

It was emotional not only because of the subject matter, but also because I realised how early values like acceptance, respect and protection can and should be nurtured.

Watching the pupils grow in understanding and compassion left a lasting impression on me, and it strengthened my belief in the power of education to shape a more inclusive and humane world.

Photos of Nuria and Lesley visiting Newlands Primary School by Holli Kalina



Sean Taylor

At Foundry Lane, community is one of our most important values. Everybody in our community is important and we try to teach the children about the different lives that they are living, despite being part of the same school.

Refugee Week was a powerful way of explaining the lived experience of one of our families and giving the children insight, and hopefully understanding, of the life of one of their peers and of the wider community of Southampton.

Sean Taylor is Headteacher of Foundry Lane Primary School

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

Refugee Week film screening: New Beginnings

Emma Preedy

As part of Refugee Week, SWVG hosted a film night on Thursday 19 June at MAST Mayflower Studios. The event brought together around eighty people for an evening of powerful storytelling, reflection and connection. Together, we explored six short films on the theme of New Beginnings, each offering a unique and deeply human perspective on the journeys of people who have migrated to the UK.

The films touched on themes of identity, resilience, sanctuary and the search for belonging. *Yellow*, a BAFTA-nominated and Oscar-shortlisted short set in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, was selected by SWVG volunteer Nazir. It was a favourite among

many attendees, who spoke of how deeply moving and thought-provoking they found it.

Al-Sit, an award-winning and internationally acclaimed film from Sudan, explored family dynamics, tradition and change. We are especially grateful to Elham Ehsas (director of *Yellow*) and Suzannah Mirghani (director of *Al-Sit*) for kindly granting us personal permission to screen their films in support of SWVG.

IRAN: A NATURAL WONDER

Another highlight of the evening was *Echoes of Iran*, a moving montage created by SWVG volunteer Leila, who spoke about compiling the film and about the challenges currently facing the Iranian community. Many attendees commented that they had no

idea how beautiful and varied the Iranian landscape was, and said the film really opened their eyes to its beauty.

COMMUNITY COOPERATION

The event was made possible thanks to the generosity and teamwork of many SWVG volunteers. William Brook-Hart spoke on the night, offering thoughtful reflections, and Elly Kilroy provided vital support in helping to organise the evening. We are also deeply grateful to MAST Mayflower Studios for hosting the event, and to all their staff and volunteers who supported us and helped ensure everything ran smoothly.

Thank you to everyone who attended the event and made the evening such a joyful success.

Photo collage by Jonathan Cruz



Reflections on the role of music in Refugee Week

Dr Chi Ying Lam

I recently joined the University of Southampton's Music Department and have also just moved to the Southampton community. It has been wonderful to work with our students and the University Sanctuary team.

Refugee Week in Southampton was a powerful and uplifting celebration of community, culture, and solidarity.

The Saturday 21 June event brought together a vibrant mix of performances, activities, and conversations that highlighted the strength and creativity of

diverse communities, including our students.

CELEBRATING OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES' RICH TAPESTRY OF MUSICAL TRADITIONS

As part of the Public Engagement Research Unit (PERU) funding support, we organised several singalong workshops on 20 June, including one at Turner Sims. The workshop, led by John Barber and musician and pop singer Mehdi Ahmadpour, featured songs collected from our community.

It was heartwarming to see participants of all ages and backgrounds joining in—

singing, listening, and learning together. Everyone appreciated the resonance and respectful celebration of diverse cultures.

This singalong workshop culminated in a free performance at Turner Sims on 10 July.

We are really looking forward to continuing working together for many more events!

Dr Chi Ying Lam is Lecturer in Community Music and Social Justice at the University of Southampton.



Photo by Chi Ying Lam

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

The 5k Run for Refugees at St. Mary's Stadium

Elle Merkushyna

The 5k held at St. Mary's Stadium was more than a sporting event — it was a powerful symbol of unity and resilience.

Refugees from different nations

came together, supporting one another, sharing their experiences, and reminding the world that the challenges in our home countries deserve attention and solidarity. Sport, especially in a team setting, plays a crucial role in supporting mental health. Events like this foster

a sense of belonging, encourage connection, and offer healing through movement and community.

A huge thank you to the Saints Foundation for the organising the run and the free tour of the stadium.



Photo by Holli Kalina

The importance of education in the lives of refugees

Mohammed Abdalazeem

Education is a vital tool in empowering refugees and improving their lives, providing knowledge and skills needed to build a better future to live productive and independent lives, and enabling them to contribute positively to their new communities.

Education provides a stable and supportive environment, helping refugees deal with the psychological trauma resulting from

their past experiences.

Education improves refugees' chances of finding suitable jobs, contributing to financial independence and economic integration into the host community.

Through this explanation I would like to express my sincere thanks to all teachers at SWVG for the great role they play in educating asylum seekers and refugees by providing us with the learning opportunities through enabling any of us in colleges

to learn English, daily classes in our place of residence, classes held at the AMC on Friday, and the reading club at the Welcome House on Saturdays.

In class, I felt grateful when the teachers corrected me in grammar without getting bored, and I liked my teacher Hilary's sentence when she told me to take advantage of every opportunity. Thank you again for the great attention you have given us to help us become active members of society.

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SWVG: A door to hope and kindness in Southampton

Leila Hashemi

My name is Leila, and I am now a refugee in the UK after spending two years as an asylum seeker. I have been living in Southampton for those two years, and I remember clearly how lost I felt at the beginning. I didn't know the city, the people, or where to start rebuilding my life.

One of the first things I looked for was a place to improve my English. That's how I found the Central Library—and that's where I met the late SWVG Chair of Trustees, Mark Courtice. He was teaching a class, and he kindly guided me to join SWVG's Friday morning drop-in offering support to people seeking asylum.

On my first day there, I met Catherine. She warmly explained all the different English classes available in Southampton and helped me join Jenny's class.

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

Oh, Jenny! What a wonderful lady. She didn't just teach me English—she taught me how to live and grow in a new culture. Every week, I looked forward to Fridays, just to see her. She helped me solve problems, big and small, and gave me confidence and hope.

To me, Friday mornings at AMC felt like a door to heaven. The room was always full of kind people—people who were ready to listen and help with anything, from housing issues to food needs.

COMMUNITY THROUGH SHARED FOOD

SWVG doesn't just help with learning English—they also teach life skills. I joined their "Cooking for Friends" project, where people living in hotels come together to cook dishes from their home countries. It's not only about food; it's about sharing culture, joy, and

friendship. It's like a celebration every time.

OUTREACH TO SCHOOLS

I also joined SWVG's schools group, where we help children understand that the UK is a diverse society, with people from all over the world.

During Refugee Week, we saw the kindness, the strength, and the courage in this community.

I often ask myself: what would I have done without SWVG? Without Jenny, Catherine, and all the kind people who helped me and my daughter survive—mentally and physically?

VOLUNTEER!

If you can, become a volunteer and help welcome refugees who are trying to rebuild their lives.

With SWVG, no one feels alone.



Photo by Holli Kalina

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

Friday afternoon photography group

Holli Kalina

SWVG has partnered with Holli Kalina and Southampton charity In Focus Education and Development to run photography workshops on Friday afternoons.

The workshops offer an opportunity to learn about digital cameras, explore ways to enhance your photography, and discover new ways to express yourself through photography.

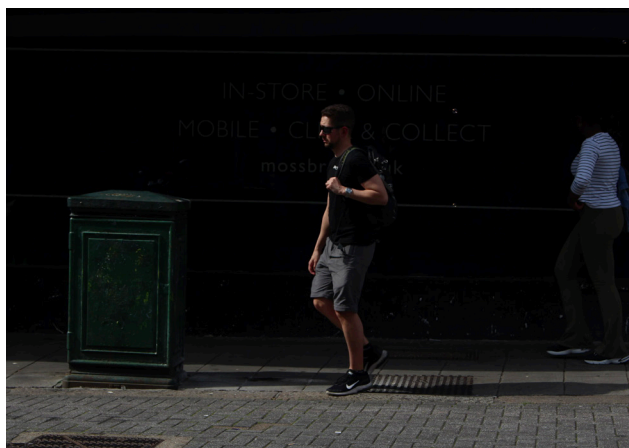
The workshops have been running for six weeks and will continue through the summer. I am enjoying every moment of delivering these sessions. Each week we have a new theme and we look at how famous photographers have approached it. We learn new techniques and then go out into the city centre to practise. The group is a pleasure to teach, and we have so much fun.



Over the past weeks, I've learned how to use a camera and explore many functions and techniques that were completely new to me.



The photography workshops have been a truly wonderful experience. The sessions are held in a friendly and productive atmosphere, which makes learning both enjoyable and inspiring.



We have learned about the history of photography and famous photographers, which gave us valuable insight and inspiration.



I have learned to use the camera with confidence, take better photographs and also to see my surroundings in a different way.



I found these lessons very interesting and inspiring. I truly appreciate everything I've learned and look forward to practising more in the future.



This workshop offers a safe and relaxing place to socialise, learn and have fun with a lovely group of people.

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

Surtierra concerts: When music is home

Miriam Jones

In June, SWVG choir members went on tour with Anglo-Chilean band Quimantu for the final part of their Surtierra project.

Quimantu invited us to sing with them at their concerts in Portsmouth and London. The second concert, at St Paul's Church in Covent Garden, took place on 20 June during Refugee Week.

Together with two other choirs, we performed the beautiful Misa de los Mineros (Miners' Mass) written by Quimantu's founder, Mauricio Venegas-Astorga.

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Mauricio left his home in Chile in 1977 to escape persecution by the Pinochet regime. The Misa de

los Mineros expresses his deep love for his country and culture, and solidarity with refugees.

The concerts were the culmination of a nine-month project to create a sense of community and connection through music.

THRILLING EXPERIENCE

Parisa, a member of the SWVG choir, said: "If I want to talk about my experience this time on stage, I have to say my confidence was much higher than before. As you know, the songs are in Spanish – which is neither my native language nor English – so that alone is a big challenge.

"Another thing that was really exciting for me was the concert tour itself. Travelling to different cities and performing was such a unique and thrilling experience.

"I'm truly grateful to SWVG for giving me the opportunity to join the professional team of the Surtierra concerts."

SOLIDARITY WITH REFUGEES

Quimantu said: "We'd like to say a big thank you to all the SWVG singers who sang with us in Portsmouth and London. Their involvement in the final concerts of the project was a real joy for us. It gave added depth and meaning to the project.

"For Mauricio, working with the SWVG group took him back to his own arrival in the UK as a refugee. We were delighted that feedback from the audience showed they connected with the theme of inclusion and solidarity with refugees."

Photo by Andy Paradise



The hatch

Richard Harris

While our drop-in, the Avenue Multicultural Centre (AMC), is now run solely by SWVG, inter-agency work has always been at its heart.

Avenue St Andrew's church members play a central role in providing refreshments, and indeed, the idea of a multi-agency day centre originated with church members. In 2008 Professor John Mellor; Chris Ramsden, the community minister; and I visited a church in Portsmouth that provided a drop-in centre for refugees and people seeking asylum.

We certainly thought such a day centre was needed in Southampton. John, already an SWVG volunteer, and Chris, liaising with both CLEAR and SWVG, persisted, contacting CLEAR, SWVG and the Red Cross. By 2010, terms were

agreed between the agencies. The AMC was established.

Church members readily took on roles in the kitchen and at the Welcome Desk. Fifteen years on, the church volunteers have become SWVG members. Viv organises the kitchen rota and Mark plays at the games table. Others in the



Photo of 'the hatch' by Julian Benjamin. Richard, left.

kitchen include John, Sarah, Parisa and Javad. A big thank you goes to Azalia, who has moved from her Red Cross role at AMC to being in the kitchen every week. She is the first to arrive and the last to leave. Mention should also be made of the soup-makers – currently Javad, Parisa and Brian,

and before that, Atiq and Nazir.

Never underestimate the value of a friendly face at the hatch with a drink or sandwich as a bonus. Someone being sent to the Bibby Stockholm barge asked to speak to us on his last morning in Southampton. He gave us each a hug and a thank you. Recently another SWVG volunteer now with Leave to Remain said "you are always smiling, you make me feel good", and we have learned to greet Doris from El Salvador in Spanish!

Sometimes people seeking asylum come to the Sunday service at Avenue St Andrew's. That is where Viv and I met Saeed, whom we have had the privilege of supporting over the last 6 years. We are very proud to have just attended his British Citizenship ceremony.

We get more from the visitors to the hatch than we can ever give back and wouldn't miss it for the world.

London to Brighton bike ride 2025

John Barker

It was a beautiful day, with just enough cloud cover and breeze to keep things cool.

Ben's and mine were the only bikes aboard the 06:55 from Southampton, but Clapham Common was awash with them as we lined up for our start.

As a river of bikes snaked their way through South London I felt sorry for any drivers out that morning. We stopped at all five checkpoints along the way, to

hydrate and have a break.

After about 40 miles came the steepest climb, Ditchling Beacon, rising like a green wall in front of us. Ben ground his way up, while I got cramp and had to push. The view from the top was panoramic and from there it was all downhill to Brighton seafront.

We were elated to cross the finish line, receive our finishers' medals, celebrate with beer and chips, and raise £1400 for SWVG.



Photo by Jenny Cuffee

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

The database

David Rees

The request for the database came originally from Mark. He was concerned about the plethora of spreadsheets SWVG was using and specifically the fact that the same information was being added multiple times in different documents.

Not only was this inefficient but the data was often inconsistent. For example, there was often no easy way for someone on the Desk Team to know for certain that they were looking at the most current or correct information for the person they were talking to. Knowing the history of interactions an individual has had with SWVG can often dramatically speed up the time it takes to help with a new query on a Friday morning.

He asked me because he knew of my long experience creating, writing and designing databases. We brought Andrew and Gopi on board. Once the right online system had been identified, we were trained, and created the initial system. The idea of the system was to be as useful to the AMC Desk Team as possible

without being onerous to use. The aim of a database should always be to make you more efficient, to allow you to do more of what you are supposed to be doing rather than updating the database.

Once we'd written it, we had a few people on board to train it. There were no major errors found, so we went live with a soft launch, which effectively meant that the database was there just for reference and people would continue to update the spreadsheet as they had before. After a couple of weeks, we turned off the spreadsheet and moved completely over to the database.

MORE EFFICIENT

We only started the soft launch at the beginning of May, so we're just two and a half months into this project and already it's clear how much time it saves, how much more efficient it makes us. Information is entered once and can easily be updated or amended. Desk Team members can see at a glance whether the history they have in front of them relates to the person they are currently helping.

Multiple functions can be accessed with a mouse click, whereas previously different spreadsheets had to be accessed and updated. We have the best possible assurance that the data we are dealing with is accurate. I was able to add 20 guys who've just moved into the hotel to the database and issue them all with a SIM card in just one AMC session as well as seeing the other folks who had admin requirements, which was marvellous.

FEEDBACK

I get feedback from the Desk Team, identifying duplicate entries and asking for amendments or additions, all of which is most welcome. Juliet has asked for the Visitors to be brought into the system now. The great benefit there is linking the Visitors to the AMC information so that the Desk Team can see who has a Visitor. We are already seeing the potential being explored by members of SWVG. I cannot wait to see where we go with the database and what it enables SWVG to do.

Donors

We are extremely grateful for the support we receive from funders, trusts and foundations, community groups and individuals. Amongst these over the last six months we gratefully acknowledge St Clare and St Frances Trust; St Peter's Catholic Church, who donated from their Covenant with the Poor fund; the Hilden Charitable Fund; the One Percent Scheme; the Girdlers Company, who continue to support Cooking with Friends; the Misselbrook Trust; AIM Community Bournemouth, who chose SWVG as one of their charities; Romsey Rotary; St Lawrence with St Swithun Parochial Church Council; and Winchester College, who took a collection at their end-of-year piano concert.

Moi-Moi recipe

Kolawole Adigun

Moi-Moi is a traditional Nigerian meal made from beans, onions, peppers, spices, and other ingredients. It is delicious, easy to make, and inexpensive. The Moi-Moi pudding should be blended as finely as possible because a grainy pudding will affect the appearance and texture of the Moi-Moi, making it unpleasant to eat. Common additions to the base recipe are chopped fish, liver, or hard-boiled eggs.

INGREDIENTS

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup West African brown beans or honey beans
 1 Scotch bonnet chilli
 1 vegetable stock cube
 1 onion, finely chopped
 1 teaspoon curry powder
 1 cup water
 Salt and pepper (to taste)



HOW TO MAKE MOI-MOI

Soak the beans. It would be best to soak your beans for about 10 to 20 minutes.

Peel your beans. You can peel your beans manually by rubbing them together between your palms (see photo).

Sieve the skin of the beans out. After peeling, wash your beans and sieve out the skin until you get clean beans. The skin would float itself while the seed would go down. You can soak the beans for 10 minutes more to make them softer.

Blend the beans and other ingredients. Add the beans into the blender with pepper, spices and onions. Add stock cubes and salt. Add a cup of water to blend.

Turn the batter into a bowl, add the oil, and mix.

Prepare the bowls. Use tin foil containers with lids for this recipe. Oil the bases.

Portion the batter to the bowls.

Put the pot in a bain marie on the stove. This can also be done in the oven.

Arrange the Moi-Moi in the pot and cover. Allow it to steam for about 45 minutes. If you notice that the water in the bain marie has dried up, carefully add more water.

Carefully remove the Moi-Moi from the foil container and slice into portions.

Enjoy with dodo. A good recipe for dodo can be found at seriouseats.com.



Photo by Parisa Nazaripour

Achievements and qualifications

OLUTAYO achieved the NCFE CACHE Level 2 award in Understanding Children and Young People's Mental Health.

HAMZA achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1.

FAHD achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1.

JUSTINE passed Hard Hat Ready and will start a bricklaying diploma in the autumn.

IDRISS passed the 'Life in the UK' test.

MJ passed the CSCS Health, Safety and Environment test, and his driving test.

THARSHAN achieved a BSc (Hons) in Biomedical Sciences, First Class Honours, University of Southampton.

HATIM passed the driving theory test.

BALJEET achieved ESOL Entry 3 in speaking and listening.

LEILA achieved ESOL Level 1 in reading and writing and Food Safety & Hygiene Level 1.

AMIR passed his driving test, and ESOL Entry 3 in reading, writing, speaking and listening.

OKLEH achieved Food Safety & Hygiene Level 1.



Pictured left to right: (top) Olutayo, Hamza, Fahd, Justine, (middle) Idriss, MJ, Tharshan, Hatim, (bottom) Baljeet, Leila, Amir, Okleh

Achievements and qualifications

DORIS achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1.

SUBA has started a job as Property Accounts Administrator with Continuum Ltd, and achieved First Aid at Work Level 3.

SAFA achieved First Aid at Work Level 3.

FAHAD achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1.

MASTOOREH achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 2.

NICHOLAS achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1.

MOHOSINA achieved Food Safety & Hygiene Levels 1 and 2, Emergency First Aid at Work Level 3, and Health and Safety in the Workplace Level 2, and completed the 3-day YMCA course 'F.I.T. to Work'.

MOHAMMED achieved First Aid at Work Level 3 and Door Supervisor Level 2.

JAVAD achieved Food Safety & Hygiene Level 2.

YASIR achieved ESOL Entry 3 in speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and Health, Safety and Welfare for Workers, V4.4.

ABDULAZIZ was recognised with a 2025 Southampton Volunteer 100 hours award.

ABDULRAHMAN obtained Food Safety & Hygiene Level 1;

MELAT (no photo) achieved Functional Skills Level 1.



Pictured left to right: (top) Doris, Suba, Safa, Fahad (middle) Mastooreh, Nicholas, Mohosina, Mohammed (bottom) Javad, Yasir, Abdulaziz, Abdulrahman

Cover photo by Julian Benjamin

swvg-refugees.co.uk



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