

SWiVG

Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group

Working with asylum seekers and refugees

Spring Newsletter 2026

Charity Number: 1183558

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



Contents

Education as liberation	Tharshan Vettivel	4
Memories of David	Lea Hayes, Leila H, Nikki Walters and Maysha	6
Interview at the hotel	Catherine Hartley	8
Friends old and new	Photography by Julian Benjamin	10
Mark Courtice Fund	.....	12
I thought of you	Leila H	12
Southampton Test MP Satvir Kaur visits AMC	Patrick Stevenson	12
The asylum and refugee system: SWVG policy asks	.....	14
Together Alliance march	Miriam Jones	16
Interview with Ronald, volunteer at the Market Garden and St Catherine's Hill	Ginny Allain	18
Purpose after loss: my journey in the UK	Gowry Arumugakurukkal	19
Voices of our newcomers	Asgedom Atnafu	20
Recipe: Palestinian musakhan	Salwa Samara	20
Winchester walk	Miriam Jones	23
Achievements and qualifications	.....	24
How you can support SWVG	.....	26
Donors	.....	27

Education as liberation

Tharshan Vettivel

IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Oppressive regimes and discriminatory systems often target education first. They fear what people who understand the systemic nature of oppression might do. They fear the confidence that comes from literacy, the solidarity that develops in classrooms, and the critical thinking that allows individuals to challenge harmful narratives. Education develops the ability to ask “Why?” and, more dangerously, “Why not?”

For people seeking sanctuary, this reality is deeply personal. Many have fled places where education was used as a tool of control,

where schools were segregated, underfunded, or subject to violent police control. Others escaped environments where learning was a privilege reserved for the powerful. When arriving in a new country, the chance to study freely is not just an opportunity, it is an act of liberation.

EDUCATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a legal entitlement, but because it is not equally accessible to everyone, we have had a long battle to secure this basic right in our country. And in many ways, the battle continues in different forms, as we strive to prove ourselves in a new country.

My passion is in the medical field; it is a pure service to people, but now it has drifted from its primary purpose. This situation is worse in my country. Access to quality healthcare is largely reserved for the wealthy, and the medical sector is heavily influenced by business interests, corruption, and deeply entrenched power structures, and has become a mafia. Its impact is well rooted in the medical education sector, and of course, the whole education system has lost its primary purpose.

A CAREER INTERRUPTED BY WAR

These realities shaped me from a young age. My father was a Siddha meditation practitioner, and the experiences I observed growing up inspired me to study medicine to serve people, especially those living in such a war-torn country where healthcare is a fundamental need, and the quality of its service is not equally accessible to everyone. But the civil war disrupted my career path, and the political situation pushed me to pursue a career in the media instead.

FRIENDSHIP IN DARK TIMES

A life-changing disability following a spinal cord operation in 2012 sparked my fascination with medicine again. The years that followed were filled with significant health challenges, physical disabilities, and mental struggles. These difficulties deeply demotivated me. I was fortunate to be surrounded by friends who cared for me, and the kindhearted friends from SWVG who helped me find myself again and rediscover my sense of purpose. Their encouragement gave me the strength to pursue my passion for



making a meaningful difference in people's lives.

Starting a degree course was a difficult decision. Due to my health condition and the high levels of opioids and psychiatric medications I was dependent on, I made this decision against my GP's advice. However, I received constant support from my friends and lecturers throughout my studies, and I ultimately achieved a first-class honours degree. I am now preparing to advance my career by pursuing a PhD, and am awaiting funding approval.

Yet I still ask myself: Have I achieved my goal? Have I fulfilled myself with the original purpose behind my passion? Has my purpose changed along the way?

EDUCATION CAN TRANSFORM YOU

Education plays a transformative role in everyone's life, especially for people seeking asylum, offering stability, dignity, and a pathway to rebuilding a future. It also serves as a powerful tool for social integration and long-term empowerment.

For anyone uprooted by conflict, persecution, or disaster, arriving in a new country can feel like stepping into a new world where every familiar marker has vanished. Education helps rebuild that sense of stability; it offers structure, purpose, and the reassurance that growth is still possible, even after profound disruption.

For children, it is especially vital. A classroom can be the first safe space they encounter after trauma. It offers routine, friendship, and the opportunity to imagine a future beyond survival.

For adults, learning can reopen doors that displacement seemed to close, reviving careers, sparking new ambitions, or simply helping them feel at home again.

CHALLENGING INJUSTICE

More than this, education is one of the most powerful tools for challenging injustice. It's a weapon to fight for freedom and social justice, empowering people to challenge and reshape the institutions that control them.

In many parts of the world, access to education is deliberately restricted. Entire communities are denied education because of class, race, gender, caste, religion, or political identity. These exclusions are not accidental; they are strategic. Most dangerous is that this is happening even at this very moment. When people are prevented from learning, they are also prevented from participating. They are prevented from understanding their rights, from uniting, from demanding fair treatment, and from imagining alternatives.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

For those who are displaced, we shoulder an additional burden; we must constantly demonstrate our ability. We face many barriers to overcome: language, cultural differences, lack of

documentation, financial hardship and psychological trauma. Among these challenges, language and psychological trauma stand out as weighing most heavily to prove our ability to progress. But can these challenges truly define an individual's knowledge and potential?

RECOGNISING STRENGTHS

Ultimately, education is not a luxury and is not only a path to employment. It is a fundamental right and a vital part of healing, empowerment, and belonging. Education is not just the classroom subject of study. It's tailored to each individual, recognising their needs, strengths, and capacity.

Even the language classes and professional skills give sanctuary seekers the tools to navigate their new environment with confidence. These opportunities allow them to express themselves, participate, and be recognised as capable individuals, rather than being treated as victims of circumstances.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

SWVG has always had learning as a primary objective. Now we have some dedicated funds, the "Mark Courtice Fund" (see p12) to help people in need. Mark's unwavering support made a huge impact on my life. From his initial role as an SWVG volunteer, he became a friend, a member of the family. Many SWVG volunteers are making a similar impact on lives, which keeps this momentum going.

When we protect the right to learn, especially for those who have been denied it, we invest in a future where justice is not a privilege but a shared foundation.



Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

Memories of David

Our devoted administrator, David Rees, died on 30 March. He had been ill for a long time, but was determined to continue working. Here, four of his closest friends and colleagues pay tribute to him.

Lea Hayes

Guinea pigs, Formula 1 and sky blue Doc Martens, what do they have in common?

Meet David Rees, SWWG administrator.

My first impression of David was of a big man with a crazy shirt, a hat with a long pheasant's feather, and sky blue DMs. He was friendly and funny, with a love of all things related to technology. I found this intimidating but he found it useful: "Lea, it's always best to test a system on someone who knows nothing."

I started helping on the admin desk when David was having his chemo sessions, and we quickly became friends. We worked together on a spreadsheet system that would eventually become our database and we giggled a lot! I loved his roll-out case with different coloured fountain pens that he used for note-taking, sometimes writing in a beautiful turquoise ink to match his Doc Martens. My own black biro never quite cut it in comparison.

One of the special things about David was that he always gave time to people. No matter what he was doing, no matter how awkward it was, he gave people the opportunity to talk about themselves. People who felt they had been treated as a number throughout their interactions with officialdom found that their opinions, their problems and their lives mattered. He listened patiently



and often diffused difficult situations through his calm approach. I learned a lot about patience and personal relationships through sitting next to him at the desk.

David's kind heart led him to volunteer with Southampton Action, and he also worked for CLEAR before taking the administrator role at SWWG. He was passionate about human rights, particularly concerning refugees, and showed that by giving practical support however he could. Many of you will have seen him manning the door at Southampton Action events, fixing phones at AMC, giving out sweets at the Refugee Week picnic, helping people with their Universal Credit claims and moving people into accommodation. Sometimes doing this tired him out enormously, but he still did it because it was the right thing to do.

David retained his humour despite his failing health, telling us he had hoped to save money on haircuts during chemo but was furious that his hair continued growing.

As David became more ill he still attended support meetings when he could, often waving to us via Zoom as his sister Debbie drove him back from hospital treatment. He was determined to be actively involved for as long as possible.

About six months ago David moved into a flat in Ocean Village with a fabulous view. He loved having enough space to keep some guinea pigs, pets that he and Debbie had looked after and loved as children. The view, the guinea pigs, a huge TV screen to watch F1, and visits from Debbie made his last months happy.

I last saw David on 3 March when he came to my house to give an update on the database project and to tell me that there was no longer any treatment available for him. He was so matter of fact and dignified, it made it easier to listen to. I'm sure it wasn't easy to say.

I will miss his quirky dressing, his Monty Pythonesque humour, and his encyclopaedic knowledge of all things computer-based. The asylum seeker and refugee support network and community we have built in Southampton is strong, and part of that strength comes directly from David.

David's funeral will take place at Southampton Crematorium on Wednesday 29 April at 12:00. Debbie thinks that David would have wanted people to be comfortable and colourful at the funeral. I will be wearing blue DMs.

Leila H

How can we talk about you?

You thought about every little detail, always looking for ways to make things better. I used to say you were a mastermind, and you would simply smile and say it was because you loved your job.

You told me many times about your work as a visitor, how you had done it for years, and how much happiness it brought you. You shared your knowledge so generously, from the history of wars when I was worried about my country to everything you were planning to teach all the helpdesk team next month, sharing your creative ideas to help everyone work together more easily.

How can we speak about you without remembering your strength? You once said the battle continues, and you were a true fighter. I still wonder why you couldn't continue, but I know you gave everything you had.

I didn't know you for long, but you taught me so much. Your kindness, your gentle smile, and the way you supported others will stay with me always. You will not be forgotten, David Rees.



Maysha

There will truly never be anyone like him. Even though we knew he was ill, nothing prepared us for this loss. Words will never be enough to describe how much I love him or how I'm feeling. He was always there to support and lift me up, like a dad in every way, and no one will ever love me quite like a daughter the way he did. I chose History A-level for him, and that will always stay with me.



Nikki Walters

I first met David when he volunteered at CLEAR, joining our little Wednesday crew of people in the office and spending his lunchtime debating everything from sport (we shared a love of Formula 1 and football) to politics. He later became my colleague at CLEAR for a number of years.

However, it was when David became involved in Southampton Action that we became closer friends. He helped Southampton Action move into our storage back in 2021, travelling to and fro with me in a van moving everything from the myriad of locations we had it all into one place. He joined me to deliver clothes to the guys at the hotels, helping me make sure everyone got what they needed, as we did deliveries out of my car in hotel car parks. He enjoyed chatting to them all, sharing a laugh over some of the clothes items they loved and hated!

When he joined SWVG, I worked alongside him at AMC and I know how much he loved it. He always talked about feeling part of the community there, and enjoyed supporting the people accessing help to get what they needed – be that a phone, a gym membership or some financial support. He was especially passionate about SWVG getting a database implemented and I know how pleased he was that this was brought in.

Whether it was through his work at Southampton Action, sorting clothes and helping at events even through his medical challenges, his work with SWVG, or getting to know him through shared interests, it was a privilege to be able to call David my friend and I miss him deeply.

Interview at the hotel

Catherine Hartley

There have been angry protests outside the hotel where they live more than once a week since long before they arrived in the UK, but if this has bothered my four students, they don't think to mention it today.

We often wonder what young men recently arrived in the UK make of their new surroundings, what they hope for, and what they fear. I ask Salman from Somalia, Daniel from Eritrea, (only 17 years old, though the Home Office has assessed him as 24) Masood from Afghanistan, and Bohlool, 'a mix! – no, I come from Afghanistan to Iran. After 16, 17 years, I'm come to Sweden. Eleven years there. And yes – today here.' They are relaxed and open, but so upbeat that at first I'm not sure how much they want to think about their own situation. They've been in the UK between one and five months.

'I'M FEELING SECURITY'

I expect at least some ambivalence towards their accommodation, but no:

DANIEL: UK is... good. Class good, every day class, every day charity, every day eating, every day exactly like a good.

MASOOD: Class, hotel good, sleep – good sleep, and... uh...

BOHLOOL: GOOD SERVICE!
(laughter)

SALMAN: It's very good place, UK. I feel happy. Security in UK. Good relation with people. It's very... I'm happy, I am feeling happy. I'm feeling security. I'm feeling in... good place.

DANIEL: And.. good teacher.

BOHLOOL: And this country is the

best country of world... Yeah, I think so! If other people have a problem in another country, UK take care of them, know what I mean? And UK gave good life, you know? You have everything, you don't have a need, you're not homeless. This good. And after you have a visa, if you work very hard you can have good life, after three or four years in the UK.

'UK OR DIE'

So the question everyone asks: what's wrong with France? Nearly twice as many people claim asylum in France as in the UK. Why didn't they stay there? My students are very clear about their answer:

DANIEL: I was in France. France is... danger. France is... no sleep. France is... house, no. Very very danger. Blanket. Homeless. No good.

BOHLOOL: But UK very, very good. You get... clothes...

SALMAN: France is not good for refugees. But UK is good for refugees. Good... welcome.

BOHLOOL: In Dunkirk everything can happen, you know? You are not safe. If something happens, you are not safe. Many people... die. You know... die or UK – so we don't have a choice. UK or die. If we were safe in another country, we wouldn't need to come to you. We wouldn't need to take this risk, you know what I mean? I was... very, very close to that, to dying. I think about this time. I was in the sea, I can't touch the ground – the ground under the water. And the boat is gone. He don't think about me. I'm not in the boat, but behind, off the boat. But he don't give a shit. But another came, and two guys helped me come up – but it was not easy.

'POSITIVE FOR US, AND POSITIVE FOR THE UK'

And the rest of you, what have you found difficult?

DANIEL: UK no difficult!

MASOOD: Speaking is difficult!

BOHLOOL: Difficult... to get a visa, I think! They don't give a reason. Until you have a visa you can't think about your life.

So waiting is difficult?

BOHLOOL: Waiting is... time is good. Because if I miss, I can't take back this time. You know what I mean? Time is good. Because... you can't buy time, with money. You must... do something good. I think migrants must think about this time. Use it for good.

So how can you use your time?

BOHLOOL: Learning English.

Salman: English!

BOHLOOL: Thinking, can we stay in the UK or not? Can we get visa?

And what if you can't? What would you do?

MASOOD: Don't think about it. Try again.

SALMAN: Try again. Try again. My country is not good. My country is... many wars. People at war. But this country, I have been in this country. I'm not go another place.

DANIEL: Africa is danger, Eritrea is danger. Eritrea is hungry. Hungry. Very very wars. No good.

I understand. So while you're waiting for your visa, what do you enjoy doing? What hobbies? What sports?

MASOOD: Sports, gym... we must do something positive. Positive for us, and positive for UK. This is good. Give, take – give and take.

SALMAN: I watch films in English. I read books of English. I love

English language, reading, and writing. I feel love. Because... English language is the most important language in the world. I go other country in the world, I speak English, and people understand. Sometimes no understand but... use dictionary, understand a little.

'IT'S NOT EASY TO SHARE PROBLEMS'

Have you made new friends in the UK?

MASOOD: All in the hotel. Good communication. Good community in the hotel.

BOHLOOL: Yes, me too. I've found good people, I think I've found good friends – from the UK, and, you know, mixing. Some in the charity, and some here, from other countries. So, we are not so close, but we are friends.

Yes, I understand. So do people support each other in the hotel?

BOHLOOL: I don't know. Everyone has problems, but I think it's not easy to share problems. We have people to talk to, to say hey, how are you, goodbye, but we don't have someone we can talk about every problem.

SALMAN: Charity. At the charity.

BOHLOOL: We take help and we give help. But if anyone shares problem together, this is big problem, more stress, more stress.

SALMAN: Charity is good people. Everything I want – you solution. Good, good people in charity.

That's good, I'm glad.

'EVERY PERSON HAS ONE DREAM'

And what are your goals for the future? What are your dreams?

SALMAN: My dream is running. But I have not help with my dream. Every person has one dream. My

dream is running.

BOHLOOL: Do you want to run for sport or for job? I think if you run too much, maybe it's like work.

SALMAN: Me, for job. I want to do many competitions.

MASOOD: I want to live in the UK. And I dream of becoming a mechanic, working with cars, having a business.

BOHLOOL (to me): What is your dream?

My dream? My dream has come true. My dream was to live on the Isle of Wight, and now I do.

BOHLOOL, delighted: Ohhh! You know, you can find your dream, if you think about your dream.

Can I ask you something? You work like farmer, too, or no?

No, I'm not a farmer.

BOHLOOL: There is very much farmer around. I want to be a farmer. I come to you, we work together, ok?!

Haha! I thought you wanted to work with old people?

BOHLOOL: Yes, I want to, I love this work, but farmer is like... business, you know? I have a very, very big dream in my heart.

I think, after very, very, very hard situation, you find your life better, you start your career better, you know? It's easier. You learn a lot.

SALMAN: UK is a good country.

'ARE WE ON THE INSIDE, OR OUTSIDE?'

DANIEL: Dream is Africa. Africa is Mama, Papy, brothers, sisters.

MASOOD: When I am sleeping, I have stress. Stress in my head.

DANIEL: Exactly. Stress. Mama, Papy...

BOHLOOL: Stress. We have... many, many years for us to live, to live together. But now, we don't know.

MASOOD: We don't know.

BOHLOOL: We don't know where we are, you know? Are we on the inside, or outside, you know? Many many stress come to you, thinking, how has this happened? How can I do it? Many many stress in the heart.

'THINK POSITIVE AND LEARN ENGLISH'

If somebody new comes to the hotel, what would you say to that person, the new person? What advice would you give?

BOHLOOL: Well, we say... think positive. And... don't have a stress. And we say, God bless you. I had a friend. When we said goodbye, he tell me, God bless you. So, yeah, you say, have a good luck, bro. And... learn English!

SALMAN: A lot of English.

BOHLOOL: And we say, look, bro... we can do it, we can do something!

SALMAN: And... charity.

BOHLOOL: We tell him where the charity is. When I came, I had nothing. But come one guy, tell me, you can go to charity. There is people can help you, with clothes, everything you need. And I've come to charity two times. Very nice, take care of us like this.

I don't think Salman, Masood, Daniel and Bohlool are consciously hiding their troubles, but they don't dwell on them. Daniel dreams of his mother and father, and remembers hunger and war; but they are all glad to be in the UK. Being hopeful and looking to the future is the only way to get through this uncertain time. If they are given Leave to Remain, this country will gain four caring, hard-working and positive new residents. I very much hope that will happen.

Friends old and new

Julian Benjamin set up his photo booth at AMC again to offer us free portraits with family or friends. As you see here, we talked about the precious friendships we had made.

**"He didn't become just my friend,
he is like my brother.
Always we are together here."**



**"Today, she and me, it's the first day!
She is from Colombia, I am from El
Salvador. She and me speak Spanish.
Today friends! She living alone, I am
living alone. Yes, it is a good!"**



**"We cook together, in the kitchen,
we always coming to have a Saturday
cook. We know each other from in
the kitchen, and that's how we
meet one another."**



"Very nice, good friends, very kind"



'You cannot share some things with your family, but you can comfortably share with your friends'

Mohosina Sumi

"I envy him his barnet. I also envy his support for Arsenal; I support Newport County -he finds that quite amusing."



"The first time we met was 12 years ago in the AMC. We choose volunteer with the Red Cross. After that we worked together, and.. we made close friends."



"I've been in Southampton for a month, I've been looking for a friend."

"Same as me, for seven months!"



"The priceless asset that we earned through this journey."



Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes



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

I thought of you

Leila H

When the daffodils opened, I thought of you. When I saw the blossoms in the garden, I thought of you again. It wasn't a long time ago, but when I remembered you, my mind turned grey and tears fell down my face.

It was one of the best days we ever had in our life. We talked about the next day, about our future dreams and wishes. You told me about the new city you had to move to, and I felt a deep

sadness, thinking that once again I would be alone. Once again, I wouldn't have a close friend to talk to everyday, to walk, to shop and to laugh with.

What made our friendship special was how close we felt in such a short time. We understood each other without needing many words. We shared our worries and our hopes, and even our silence was comfortable.

Our hearts were close, in the same place at the same time. When you leave your home, your country,

and your family and friends, you can feel lost and alone. A true friend can give you courage to face a new life, help you feel anchored in a strange place, and give you hope for the future. Finding someone who understands your feelings, your past, and your fears gives you a sense of safety and belonging again.

I believe the greatest thing in the world is friendship. At first, it may take a long time to find the right person and trust. But when you lose them, you truly understand that they were a gift.

Southampton Test MP Satvir Kaur visits AMC

Patrick Stevenson

In the challenging and constantly changing political environment of recent years it has become increasingly important for SWVG to do what it can to influence the direction of policy on refugees and people seeking asylum. The change of government in July 2024 gave us an opportunity to establish and foster close relationships with new, and continuing, Members of Parliament representing constituencies in Southampton, Winchester and the surrounding area.

We have had cordial and constructive meetings with several MPs, listening to their views on ways to improve the UK asylum system, setting out what we see as the key priorities, and offering concrete proposals. We hope that by engaging with Westminster politicians in this way we may be able to provide them with a clearer understanding of the issues confronting people seeking asylum in this country and with ideas, grounded in our years of local experience, on what an effective and humane asylum system might look like.

Most recently we were very pleased to welcome Satvir Kaur, Labour Member of Parliament for Southampton Test and Parliamentary Secretary in the Cabinet Office, at AMC on a Friday morning in February. Satvir has lived all her life in Southampton, studied at both universities in the city, and been Leader of Southampton City Council before entering parliament in 2024. She therefore knows the city well and she has taken a close interest in the situation of refugees and asylum seekers here.

Satvir was very keen to meet volunteers and people seeking asylum in order to find out at first hand about the most pressing current issues and the many different kinds of support offered by SWVG. She talked to many people during the morning and was clearly impressed by everything she saw and heard. At the end of her visit, Satvir met a small group of volunteers, listened to our concerns and undertook to pass our ideas and suggestions on to Mike Tapp MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Home Office (Minister for Migration and Citizenship).

Photos by Jennifer German



After her visit to AMC, Satvir posted this message on social media:

Recently it was my total privilege to visit @swvgrefugees at a drop-in session, where they provide support to people seeking sanctuary in our area.

The number of dedicated, local volunteers taking part in supporting this hugely vulnerable group of people was staggering, and for me it was a demonstration of the very best of humanity and what makes our city the great place it is.

From supporting people through cooking together, to providing English language tuition aiding integration, the session was abuzz with energy and enthusiasm for helping people at what is often a particularly difficult and lonely time.

Great to meet old friends and new, and also to take away important insights shared by SWVG. Enormous thanks to the team for hosting me and showing me around.

You are the very best of us!



Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

The asylum and refugee system: SWVG policy asks



SWVG POLICY ASKS

STRENGTHENING THE UK ASYLUM AND INTEGRATION SYSTEM

01. PROMOTE RESPONSIBLE AND CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Ask: The Prime Minister and Home Secretary should avoid negative or stigmatising rhetoric about refugees and promote balanced, accurate messaging that recognises the UK's humanitarian commitments alongside the need to manage migration effectively.

Impact: Constructive political messaging supports social cohesion, improves service delivery, and reduces community tension, while still allowing government to demonstrate control over immigration¹.

02. IMPROVE QUALITY OF ASYLUM DECISION-MAKING

Ask: Build on recent progress in reducing processing times by improving the quality of initial asylum decisions through enhanced training, guidance, and supervision for Home Office decision-makers.

Impact: Higher-quality initial decisions reduce costly appeals, minimise delays, and shorten periods of uncertainty for applicants².

03. A NATIONAL INTEGRATION STRATEGY THAT STARTS EARLY

Ask: Develop a national integration strategy that begins before individuals are granted Leave to Remain, including *early access to English language (ESOL) provision, cultural orientation and rights awareness, skills development, volunteering, and work experience*.

Impact: Early integration supports employment, mental health, and independence, reducing long-term public costs and improving outcomes once status is granted³.

04. REDUCE POLICIES THAT CREATE INSECURITY AND DELAY INTEGRATION

Ask: Review policies that prolong instability and prevent integration, including *repeated 30-month renewals of limited leave to remain, delays and barriers to settlement and citizenship, and restrictions on family reunion*.

Impact: Stability enables people to work, study, and contribute, while family unity improves wellbeing and integration outcomes⁴.

05. EXPAND AND PROTECT SAFE ROUTES

Ask: Commit to providing safe and legal routes to the UK from Europe and beyond.

Impact: Safe routes reduce dangerous journeys, disrupt smuggling networks, and allow for better-managed migration⁵.

The Government is in the process of reforming the asylum and refugee system. We believe that much more emphasis is needed on helping people to participate fully in our society. Here are the “Policy Asks” that we are putting to our MPs, and through them to the Home Office ministers.

KEY MESSAGES



- **Recent reductions in asylum decision times show that improvement is possible.**
- **Quality training and assessment, early intervention, and stability** are essential for reducing costs, appeals, and long-term dependency.
- **Integration** is most effective when it starts early and is supported by coherent national policy.

References

¹Knappert, L., van Dijk, H., Yuan, S., Engel, Y., van Prooijen, J.-W., & Krouwel, A. (2021). Personal contact with refugees is key to welcoming them: An analysis of politicians' and citizens' attitudes towards refugee integration. *Political Psychology*, 42(3), 423–452. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12705>

²JUSTICE. (2018). Immigration and asylum appeals: A fresh look. JUSTICE. <https://files.justice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/06170402/JUSTICE-Immigration-and-Asylum-Appeals-Report.pdf>

³Refugee Council. (2025). New Roots, New Futures: The need for a national refugee integration strategy (June 2025). Refugee Council. https://www-media.refugeecouncil.org.uk/media/documents/New_Roots_New_Futures_-_Refugee_Council_-_June_2025.pdf

⁴Refugee Action. (n.d.). Lift the Ban: Give people seeking asylum the right to work. Refugee Action. <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/>

⁵Refugee Council. (2024). Safe routes: The need for an ambitious approach. Refugee Council. <https://www-media.refugeecouncil.org.uk/media/documents/Safe-routes-the-need-for-an-ambitious-approach-Refugee-Council-January-2024.pdf>

Together Alliance march

Miriam Jones

On 28 March, SWVG members joined the Together Alliance march in London – the UK's biggest-ever show of unity against the far right.

The Together Alliance is made up of hundreds of organisations, representing 15 million people. They include local and national refugee charities, anti-racism campaigners, environmental organisations, trade unions and faith groups.

We were proud to be part of this joyful event, which showed that love and community are stronger than the forces that seek to divide us.





Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

Interview with Ronald

Volunteer at the Market Garden and St Catherine's Hill in Winchester

Ginny Allain

At the Market Garden, soil is all-important. The volunteers load up wheelbarrows full of compost, trundle them to the various beds and spread it in layers 20 cm thick. Last week, they trowelled more compost into pots ready for tomato seedlings. Because no synthetic pesticides or fertilisers are used, they spend time on their knees forking up weeds.

Sometimes it's cold and rainy, but Chris always has hot mugs of coffee for them while he sketches out the day's work – in English, which Ronald understands better these days. Although the work is hard, they enjoy a rest over lunch, Debbie's freshly made soup, her labrador Roxanne and a chat together, again in English.

"Dalia, my wife, and I feel very excited to work there as volunteers," says Ronald. "At half term, our children visited

and played with the sheep and chickens."

NEW FRIENDSHIPS

At St Catherine's Hill, the aim is conserving habitat while keeping access open for walkers. The volunteers lop branches, treat tree stumps and cut back brambly scrub. A chat about the day ahead is given by Tom, who lives not far from Ronald and has become his friend.

Although the volunteers bring drinks and packed lunches, biscuits are always provided at breaktime. Ronald says he is grateful for the gloves provided as he shows me his bramble scratches.

"I very much like being there learning many new things and helping all who visit St Catherine's Hill to enjoy its beautiful downland," he concludes.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Setting up both the Market Garden and Wildlife Trust to welcome

people seeking asylum and refugees as volunteers required thoughtful planning. SWWG volunteer Catherine Kickham liaised between SWWG and the Hub and worked in partnership with Winchester Rotary, who helped with transport and supported guests, the Hampshire Market Garden, and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust teams, who could not have been more welcoming to our guests and volunteers.

The Hub team came forward with wellies, jackets and hats, and Catherine distributed Screwfix boots of correct sizes. Lesley Sheldon-Browning ran training courses for all three organisations, focussing on asylum issues, safeguarding and roles in relation to supporting, protecting and empowering the volunteers, boundary-setting, what to talk about, and how to stay 'within role.'



Purpose after loss: my journey in the UK

Gowry Arumugakurukkal

To escape the war in my country, I migrated to the UK in 2010, in order to study here. I came here on a student visa, hoping to return when things improved. After I arrived, the situation in my country deteriorated. I sought asylum and was granted it in 2018 after a long battle of waiting, setbacks, and emotional exhaustion. When I left my home country, I carried with me not only fear and uncertainty but also hope. During that time, I was studying with my family's support.

As my circumstances changed, so did my career path. I shifted from my original field into accounting, a decision driven not by preference but by necessity. It was a difficult transition, made even harder by the reality. I held on to the belief that perseverance would eventually lead me somewhere meaningful. It was quite a challenging decision I had to make. It took me quite a long time, but I succeeded after much struggle.

GAINING WORK EXPERIENCE IN A NEW COUNTRY

I found it very difficult to find a job, even after gaining my asylum status, because of a lack of experience in the UK. This is a major challenge the displaced community faces, even though you had all the qualifications and experience back in your country. Your past achievements become invisible, and you must start again from the beginning, and I was not exempt from this. Therefore, I had to be flexible

and willing to move anywhere in the UK to gain experience.

Eventually, I found a job in London, though it wasn't the right fit. Later, I joined an accounting firm where I worked for two years before finally securing a position in Winchester. Now, I have obtained my fully qualified ACCA membership, and am working at an accountancy firm. In the first job, I may not have landed the exact role I wanted, but I'm grateful these experiences shaped my career path.

All these years, I have learned that every step of the way in our lives, even when the work is not exactly relevant to our career, no matter how unrelated it seemed at the time, has taught me something valuable. We can gain experience with patience and perseverance, which takes us to the place we want to be.

SHAPED BY SURVIVAL

As asylum seekers, our careers are not built solely on professional milestones; they are shaped by survival, adaptation, and the countless challenges we have faced since the beginning of our lives. They are built on the resilience forged through displacement, loss, and rebuilding our lives from the ground

up. Everything turned into an experience and shaped our future careers, which others can't easily get. All those losses we have faced are countless and irreplaceable, but I take this as a positive note to go beyond the challenges.

The civil war in our country completely destroyed our lives. My displacement journey began when I was seven years old and finally ended in the UK. Now I call this our home after all these years of struggle, uncertainty, fights and rebuilding. I hope this sense of belonging will remain unchanged for the rest of my life.

I can say my part of this story isn't just about career progression, it's about determination. It is about finding purpose after loss and about believing that, with courage and determination, even the most difficult paths can lead to a future worth fighting for.



Voices of our newcomers

Asgedom Atnafu

This section is dedicated to giving refugees the space to speak in their own voices. Here, three community members generously share messages written in their mother tongues.

Abdulqudoss Omer from Sudan, Abdirahim Ahmed from Somalia and Zekarias Workneh from Eritrea offer words to us and to the loved ones they carry in their hearts.

We have provided English translations on the facing page opposite their original texts to honour both the authenticity of their voices and the accessibility of their stories.

إلى عائلتي، وجيراني، وأصدقائي، وبلدي،

أثناء كتابتي لهذه الكلمات، شعرتُ بغصةٍ في قلبي. أشتاق إلى كل تفصيلٍ صغير: اللعب معًا، والتجمع خلال المهرجانات، والذهاب إلى المدرسة، وزيارة الوديان، والحديث معكم جميعًا. للأسف، لا أملك حتى صورةً لكم، لكنني أحمل الذكريات في قلبي.

أؤمن بأنه في يومٍ ما سنلتقي مجددًا، وعندما يحين ذلك الوقت، سيكون لقاءً جميلًا لا يُنسى.

عبد القدوس عمر

Mararka qaar qalbigeyga waxaa si xoog leh u taabta xasuusta noloshii aan hore u soo maray, gaar ahaan dhadhankii hilibka geela iyo macaanidii caanaha geela. Waa wax aan si dhab ah u jeclaa, waana qayb ka mid ah dhaqankeyga iyo nolosheyda. Markaan joogay dalkii hooyo, maa-lin kastaba way fududeyd in la helo, waxayna ahayd cunto iyo cabitaan nafaqo leh oo aan ku farxo.

Hadda oo aan joogo UK, runtii aad bay u adagtahay in la helo hilib geel ama caanihiis, taasoo sii kordhisa xiisaha aan u qabo. Mararka qaar waxaan is iraaahdaa Haddii aan hal mar oo kaliya mar kale dhadhamin lahaa, sababtoo ah ma aha oo kaliya cunto sido kale waa xasuus, waa dareen, waa qayb iga mid ah.

Xiisahaas iyo hilowgaas wuxuu i xasuusinayaa meel aan ka imid iyo nolol aan jeclaa. Inkastoo aan hadda meel kale joogo, haddana qalbigeyga weli wuxuu la jiraa dhadhankii hilibka geela iyo caanihiisa oo aan waligey ilaawi doonin.

Cabdiraxiim Axmed

ይድረስ ለምወዳቹ እና ለምትናፍቁኝ ውጂ ባለቤቴ የልጄ እናት ኮዜት አበበ እና ነፍሴ ለሆንሽው ውጂ ልጄ ማክርያና ዘካሪያስ ዓመታት እንደቀልድ አለፉ ብዙ ዓመት በዓላትን እና የልጄን ልደት የደስታ ቀኖችን አብረን ማሳለፍ እንዳንችል ስደት ከላከለን መጪው የፋሲካ በዓል ያለ እናንተ እናንተን እያሰብኩ እንደምውል ሳስብ ስሜቱን ከባድ ያደርግብኛል ነገር ግን ተስፋ አለኝ ከጠንካራ እምነት ጋር ተለያይተን የምንኖርባቸው ቀናት እንዲያጥሩ እና ብዙ በዓላትን እና ልደቶችን አብረን በሰላም በደስታ በፍቅር እንደምናሳልፍ ተስፋ አለኝ እምነቴም የፀና ነው

የሚወድሽ ባልሽ ዘካሪያስ ወርቅነህ

ማኩ አባትሽ በጣም ይወድሻል.

ዘካሪያስ ወርቅነህ



Abdulquddos



Abdirahim



Zekarias

To my family, neighbours, friends and my country. While writing this I felt a lump in my throat. I miss every little detail — playing together, gathering during festivals, going to school, visiting the valleys, and talking with all of you. Unfortunately, I don't even have a picture of you but I carry the moments in my heart. I believe that one day we will meet again, and when that moment comes, it will be beautiful and unforgettable.

Abdulquddos Omer

Sometimes my heart is deeply touched by memories of the life I once lived, especially the taste of camel meat and the sweetness of camel milk. They were things I truly loved, and they are part of my culture and my life. When I was back home, it was easy to find them every day, and they were nourishing foods and drinks that brought me joy.

Now that I live in the UK, it has become very difficult to find camel meat or its milk, which only increases my longing for them. Sometimes I tell myself: If only I could taste them once more, because they are not just food — they are memories, they are feelings, they are a part of who I am.

This longing reminds me of where I come from and the life I cherished. Even though I now live somewhere else, my heart still holds on to the taste of camel meat and camel milk — something I will never for

Abdirahim Ahmed

May this message reach you, my beloved: the one I love and long for, my dear wife, the mother of my child, Kozet Abebe, and to you, my soul, my daughter Makriyana Zekarias.

Years have passed like a flash. Because of the displacement that separated us, we have been unable to celebrate many holidays together, nor share the joyful birthdays of our child side by side. As the coming Easter approaches, the thought of spending it without you — while thinking of you constantly — weighs heavily on my heart.

But I still have hope. With strong faith, I believe that the days ahead will be brighter, and that we will celebrate many holidays and birthdays together again — in peace, in joy, and in love. My faith remains firm.

With love,

Your husband, Zekarias Workneh

Maku, your father loves you very much.

Zekarias Workneh

Palestinian musakhan

Salwa Samara

Musakhan is one of the most famous traditional dishes of Palestine. It is known for its rich flavour of sumac, generous olive oil, caramelised onions, and roasted chicken, served over taboon bread.

To me, this dish is more than food, it is a beautiful reason for our family to come together. The preparation itself becomes a special moment. As we gather in the kitchen, sharing stories, laughter and little jokes, every step is filled with warmth and connection. When we finally sit down to eat, it's not only about the taste, it's about the love and memories that we create around the table.



INGREDIENTS

Serves 4 – 6

- 1 whole chicken, cut into pieces
- 4–5 large onions, thinly sliced
- ½ cup olive oil (preferably extra virgin)
- 3–4 tablespoons sumac
- Salt, black pepper, mixed spices
- 3–4 pieces of taboon bread (or thick pitta bread)
- Pine nuts or almonds for garnish (optional)

METHOD

Season the chicken

Season with salt, pepper, spices, and a little olive oil. Roast in the oven until fully cooked and golden brown.

Prepare the sumac onions

In a large pan, cook the onions in olive oil over medium heat until soft (not deeply browned). Add the sumac and salt, and mix well so the onions absorb the flavour.

Prepare the bread

Lay the taboon bread in a baking tray and spoon some of the olive oil and onion mixture over it.

Assemble

Arrange the roasted chicken pieces on top of the bread. Spread the remaining onion mixture over the chicken.

Final step

Bake in the oven for 5–10 minutes to lightly crisp the bread. Garnish with toasted pine nuts or almonds and serve warm.



Winchester walk

Miriam Jones

On 18 April, more than 30 SWVG members came together for an eight-mile walk around Winchester. The walk took in the cathedral, the water meadows, St Catherine's Hill and the Hospital of St Cross, where we stopped for the Wayfarer's Dole.

The purpose of our walk was to show solidarity with refugees and

people seeking sanctuary. It was a chance to share stories, make new friends and enjoy a beautiful spring day together in the Hampshire countryside. Volunteers from the United Church and St Peter's Church in Winchester kindly offered us refreshments at the beginning and end of the walk.

Our walk was modelled on Refugee Tales, an outreach project of the Gatwick Detainees

Welfare Group. Refugee Tales started in 2015, inspired by Canterbury Tales. They have held annual multi-day walks ever since. They aim to increase awareness about immigration detention in the UK and the fact that the UK is the only country in Western Europe still allowing indefinite detention. They have collaborated with many well-known writers, poets and musicians and published a number of books.



Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

Achievements and qualifications

NABIGHA has passed all the requirements of the GMC to practise as a doctor (Dr. Nabigha Rafiqullah) in the UK, including English language proficiency through OET, PLAB 1 (theoretical) and PLAB 2 (practical) examinations

DORIS passed Functional Skills Level 1 in English

SHOAIB won gold medal in the Hampshire Closed Judo Championships

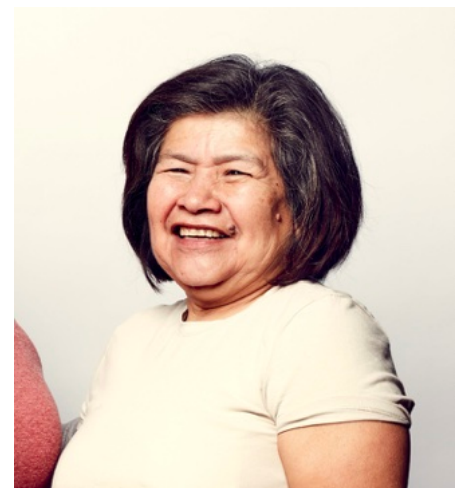
MASTOOREH passed English Language GCSE Equivalency with Grade 4, and Mathematics GCSE Equivalency with Grade 7

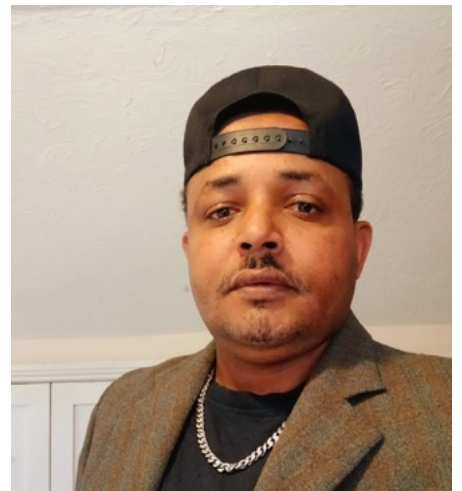
HAZEL, CHRIS, SARAH and **JANE** passed IAA Asylum and Protection Level 1

ALI, TITILAYO, FARZAN, TADLO, ABEL and **DANIEL** passed Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1, and **GABER** passed Levels 1 and 2

GUESH, ABRAHAM, LAUREN, ALI and **MOHAMMED** passed their driving test, and **LAUREN** has accepted a place at King's College, London

Pictured left to right: (top) Nabigha, Shoaib, Titilayo (bottom) Hazel, Mastooreh, Doris (facing page top) Mohammed, Ali, Lauren (second row) Guesh, Abraham, Tadlo (third) Farzan, Sarah, Jane (bottom) Chris, Daniel, Gaber





Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

How you can support SWVG:

Donations and regular giving

David Robertson

Over the past year or so we have seen a drop off in the number of people regularly giving through standing orders as well as existing grant holders stopping their awards to us. There are many reasons for these changes, but the cost of living crisis is challenging many people's finances and grant bodies are receiving increasing numbers of charitable organisations applying given the pressures in services they provide.

SWVG currently has healthy reserves; however, they are beginning to be eaten into and we need to take some action to support them. The Trustees

tightly manage our resources and as a volunteer-led and staffed charity we are able to focus our funds on those we support rather than paying management and unnecessary overheads.

We have applied to be part of the Big Give small charity event which runs from 22-29 June 2026. If we are successful, any donations received in that week will be matched by a partner, thus doubling any donation. We will hear more about this nearer the time but if you are considering donating to SWVG, that week would be an excellent time to do so.

One of the best ways to support us is through a standing order. This means we receive a regular flow of income for our work.

If you are able and willing to support us in this way, we would be very grateful and any amount will help us in our work.

Our bank account details for donations or standing orders are:

Account name: Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group

Sort code: 40-40-14

Account number: 12318695

If you are able to donate to us, and have not completed a Gift Aid form, please consider doing so, as this increases the donation for us by 25%. The form can be found on the SWVG website. Search 'Gift Aid' or 'donation'.

Volunteering



TEACHERS

If you're wondering whether to get involved with SWVG, and think volunteering to teach English might be for you, or you just want to know more about our work, don't miss Julian Benjamin's moving new short film on our volunteer teachers and their students and the friendships formed in the classroom, through hard work and a lot of laughter.

<https://swvg-refugees.org.uk/swvg-teachers/>
or search 'teachers' on the SWVG website, or 'SWVG teachers' on YouTube.



Donors

We are extremely grateful for the support we receive from funders, trusts and foundations, community groups and individuals. Amongst these we gratefully acknowledge: St Lawrence with St Swithun Parochial Church Council; the Clarsach Society for their carol concert held in Whitchurch Methodist Church; St Paul's Church in Winchester; the Roupell Family Trust; the St Clare and St Francis Trust; the Misselbrook Trust; the Immaculate Conception RC Church; Christ Church Freemantle; Winchester Cathedral; the Phoenix Film Club who took donations at a film screening; Avenue St Andrews URC for their continued donations to the Avenue Multicultural Centre; and St Peter's RC Church for their support of the Hub in Winchester.

We would also like to thank Marilyn Taylor's family members (above) who ran the Kilimanjaro half marathon, Chris Stephens (above), whose 70th birthday appeal raised £739, and Julie Greer, who collected donations to the value of £161 to buy books. We would also like to thank all the individuals who contributed to the memory of Mark Courtice by donating to SWVG.



swvg-refugees.org.uk

Cover photo by Julian Benjamin

Charity number: 1183558