



Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group

Working with asylum seekers and refugees

Summer Newsletter 2026



Charity Number: 1183558

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

Welcome

Catherine Hartley

This newsletter makes me proud, sad, and determined to continue doing what we are doing. In an intractably divided society, SWVG enables people to connect. Giving someone with no money the means to mend a bike is a small, practical act. A second-hand mobile phone can be a lifeline, and paying for a certified translation of evidence can be the difference between safety and being returned to danger. SWVG can help with these things, but individual members are involved on another level. We cook, eat, and play rounders together. We discover small things about each other – what people miss the most, who can run fastest, sing most soulfully, put on a brave face and keep smiling. We care about each other.

Leila writes about the patchwork 'blanket of care' as a symbol of community – people 'coming together but still keeping their own identity'. The metaphor can be pushed further – some squares are on the edges, some surrounded on all sides. There are many people we don't know, but by being open, accepting and welcoming, we might help someone find a place to fit in. One person might see a way to fulfil an ambition with the help of the Mark Courtice Fund, instead of waiting

numbly as Sharif describes, unable to make good use of their time. And volunteers might be lucky enough to dance to Iranian music, or taste injera or knafeh.

SWVG can't solve the root causes of resentment towards migrants, but we can listen to concerns, and we can use our voice in public and in private, meet politicians, faith leaders and school children, educate ourselves and protest the harsh new laws that keep Javad's family from him and tell Farzan that he doesn't belong.

We celebrate the achievements and qualifications of our new friends both in the newsletter and in reality. Of course we are proud and pleased when people thrive, but it's not success that means people deserve to stay in our country, any more than it is integration. Deserving, in fact, has nothing to do with it – what asylum recognises is need. You either need to escape danger or you don't. People are not worth saving because they might 'contribute'. They are worth saving because they're people. We don't all form instant bonds, but we don't see each other just as numbers, or as problems to be solved. My favourite words in this newsletter are Dalia's, describing the picnic in the park: 'We were equal. It was fun'.



Catherine and long-time SWVG member Sumi visiting a school in 2026

Contents

Welcome *Catherine Hartley*

- 4 Picnic in the park *Stewart Roberts*
- 5 'That's my shirt!' – A summer at Hampshire Cricket *Ian Douglas-Todd*
- 6 From a hotel to shared accommodation *Sharif Shaheer*
- 6 Trip to Mottisfont *Jiehui Yu*
- 7 Immigration policy roundup *Reuben Hey*
- 7 Waiting to belong *Farzan Morteza*
- 8 Interview: Separated by policy *Leila H*
- 9 Winchester MP Danny Chambers visits the Hub *Lesley Sheldon-Browning*
- 9 Tales from the bike shed *Keiren Phelan*
- 10 Reflections on Refugee Week *Atafa Tajik and Ayat Sabsaoub*
- 11 Community Takeover exhibition, John Hansard Gallery *Leila Karimi*
- 12 A journey *Anonymous*
- 14 Food, 'glorious food': The sixth Global Buffet
- 16 Recipe: Injera *Daniel Gabremariam*
- 17 Poem: It is hard *Dalia Benites*
- 18 Achievements and qualifications
- 20 How you can support SWVG *David Robertson and Catherine Hartley*
- 21 What can your donation make possible?
- 22 Mark Courtice Fund report
- 23 The Pianoman at Christmas: Sealed bid auction!
- 23 Donors

Picnic in the Park

Stewart Roberts

One very warm, sunny day, about 50 Winchester Hub guests, volunteers, friends and a lively bunch of children were led by Sue, Sue and Ginny on the short walk to River Park for an afternoon of games and picnic fun.

Some of us gathered in the new air-conditioned pavilion where Catherine and Kitty were ready with drinks, sandwiches, biscuits and cakes. Others spread their blankets and chairs in the shade of the trees on the boundary of the playing field.

The volleyball pitch was erected and a game was soon under way. A 10-a-side rounders match also began, and referee Jane was standing for no nonsense. Feats of athleticism ensued with mighty swings of the bat, brilliant catches and spills. Most remarkable was the launching of the bat at the square leg fielder when the batter let go. (Note: add that hazard to the risk assessment). Eventually, time was called, and the game was drawn at 10 all. Jane and Lesley awarded medals to the outstanding players.

There were more drinks and cakes for all before we cleared away and left everything as it had been.



Doris

It was a sunny day, but breezy. We sat under the trees and felt comfortable and relaxed. We talked together and watched the games.

Emre

I play rounders for the first time. I like it.

Tawalla

My baby son Zuhair loved it under the trees. He loves nature. I met new friends.

Ronald

Ronald: Miss Kitty made different dishes – sandwiches, fruit and many desserts. It was delicious. I enjoyed talking with Johnny from the Market Garden about life in the UK and about the summer season.

Dalia

My daughters felt very happy. They both did home runs! Sara showed them boules and I learned how to say 'YouTube' from Sue. I told Debra about Perú. We played rounders and volleyball with our friends. We were equal. It was fun.



'That's my shirt!'

A summer at Hampshire Cricket

Ian Douglas-Todd

If you ever wanted proof that sport can bring people together, our recent trips to Hampshire Cricket certainly did the trick.

Our students enjoyed two fantastic trips to the Utilita Bowl, first taking in the slower-burning drama of a County Championship match and then returning for the fireworks of a Vitality Blast fixture on a glorious sunny Sunday afternoon.

For the students from Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan, cricket was a new experience. The finer points of LBWs and fielding positions caused some puzzled expressions, but they quickly grasped the important things: if the ball disappears into the crowd it's a six, if it races to the boundary it's a four, and if everyone else is applauding, it's probably a good idea to join in!

Our students from Afghanistan, meanwhile, were in their element. Cricket is a huge part of life for Afghans, and they happily took on the role of unofficial coaches, explaining the game to their friends while enjoying the chance to watch cricket in England.

Thanks to a generous donation of sports clothes to Southampton Action, every student was proudly wearing Hampshire Cricket clothing. One shirt happened to have Brad Taylor printed across the

back. As we strolled around the ground, a gentleman stopped, smiled and said, 'Hey... that's my shirt!' It was Brad Taylor himself – former Hampshire player and now the club's Performance Coach.



After hearing how the shirt had found its way to one of our students, Brad spent time chatting with the group and making us feel welcome. It was one of those wonderfully serendipitous moments that nobody could have planned.

Another highlight came when one of our young students was given a behind-the-scenes tour of the commentary box, where he met BBC Radio Solent commentator Kevan James. Kevan couldn't have been more welcoming, chatting about broadcasting and cricket before inviting him to come back and visit again any time. For a young person settling into life in the UK, it was a special experience I know he appreciated.

These visits gave our students the opportunity to witness a new (if somewhat niche) part of British culture. They practised their English and were brave enough to speak to people they didn't know.

Huge thanks to everyone at Hampshire Cricket for making us feel so welcome, especially CEO David Mann, engagement officers Simon Jones and Abi Randell, coach Brad Taylor and journalist Kevan James. Their generosity, warmth and willingness to give up their time turned two enjoyable days at the cricket into memories our students can treasure.

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

From a hotel to shared accommodation

Sharif Shaheer

When I first arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker, I didn't know what to expect. Everything was new to me – the language, the people, the culture, and the future. Soon after I arrived, I was taken to an asylum hotel where I would live for almost a year.

During my first few days, I was frightened and anxious. I didn't know anyone, and I had no friends or family around me. The hotel manager asked if I was happy to share a room with another person. I agreed because I believed that everyone there, like me, was starting a new life and would treat each other respectfully.

My first roommate welcomed me warmly, and I thought we would get along well. However, we turned out to have very different habits. He talked on his phone for hours, sometimes late into the night, and he didn't pay much attention to keeping our room, the bathroom or the toilet clean. I politely asked him several times to clean up after himself, but unfortunately nothing changed.

My second roommate was from Afghanistan, my home country. I was happy because I thought I could learn from someone who had lived as a refugee for many years. Unfortunately our lifestyles were also very different, and it was just as difficult. Later I became friends with another resident. We respected each other and got on well. The hotel manager arranged for my new friend to move into my room. We shared a room for about ten months. During that time, we supported each other, and I gradually became friends

with people from many different countries. Living with people from different backgrounds taught me that respect, patience, and understanding are more important than nationality or language.

Because of the stress and difficulties I was going through, I wasn't able to make the best use of my time in the hotel. I wish I had studied English more and used that opportunity better. However, I believe that anyone who is motivated to learn and hopeful about the future can make good use of this period.

MOVING TO A SHARED HOUSE

After almost a year, I was moved into shared accommodation. I was excited but I was also a little nervous. Once again, I had to live with people I had never met before.

Luckily this experience was different. Having my own room gave me privacy and peace, and I was able to focus on my studies. Living in a shared house also helped me to become more independent. I had to cook, manage my daily life, and take more responsibility. I learned to cook by watching YouTube videos. The first thing I cooked was creamy chicken pasta.

THE PEOPLE WHO GAVE ME HOPE

One of the most valuable parts of my journey has been meeting kind and caring people. Organisations like CLEAR and SWVG have supported asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants for more than 25 years with practical help. You have given people hope, confidence, friendship, and the feeling that they are not alone. Today, I am still learning. My

English is still improving, and I know I have a long journey ahead of me. However, I no longer feel as afraid as I did on my first day in the UK.

I'm continuing to work on my English and build my new life in Southampton. I hope that in the future I can give something back to the community that has supported me so much, and offer the same kindness to other people who need it.

I hope my story encourages other newcomers not to lose hope. Thank you for reading it.

Trip to Mottisfont

Jiehui Yu

Our family of four had a wonderful time at Mottisfont. We really enjoyed learning about Mottisfont's history, taking in the beautiful scenery, spending a relaxing time together, and meeting new friends. A heartfelt thank you to Tony and Monica for taking us there!



Immigration policy roundup

Reuben Hey

DELAYED RIGHT TO CITIZENSHIP

The government has proposed extending the settlement route from five to at least 10 years (Home Office, 2025), with some people facing even longer waits. People who enter the UK via illegal routes will normally be refused citizenship under the 'good character' requirement (Home Office, 2026).

Several organisations argue that these changes will only result in people experiencing prolonged insecurity, making it significantly harder to secure stable employment and housing, to make long-term plans for the future, and to integrate into society (Salam Immigration, 2025; Scottish Refugee Council, 2025).

2.5-YEAR RULE

Under new immigration rules, people granted refugee status after 2 March 2026 will receive only 2.5 years of 'core protection' instead of five, as was previously the norm, before needing to reapply (GMIAU, 2026).

Critics argue that repeated renewals will increase financial struggle, administrative burdens and uncertainty, while increasing the risk that people may lose their legal status due to missed deadlines (Parliament, 2025).

There is also evidence that these new rules may limit access to family reunion – currently suspended – which can prolong separation and negatively impact refugees' mental health and well-being, resulting in isolation, anxiety, and depression (Migration Observatory, 2025; Katsampa et al., 2025).

FAMILY REUNION SUSPENDED

In early July, the High Court ruled that the Government's suspension of Refugee Family Reunion is lawful.

The organisation Safe Passage International, which uses the power of the law to help families torn apart by war and persecution reunite, and which took the government to court, says, 'It is a devastating decision for refugee families across the UK and beyond. The reality for families has not changed. Parents are still separated from their children. Partners are still apart. Families are still waiting – often in dangerous and uncertain conditions – for a safe way to be reunited. The need for a fair and safe family reunion route remains as urgent as ever'. Safe Passage has decided to appeal the case.

PROPOSED FAST APPEALS PROCESS

To reduce the high asylum appeals backlog, the government has proposed replacing immigration judges with adjudicators under a new Independent Appeals Body (Right to Remain, 2026).

This proposed new system risks weakening independence and fairness of the appeals system and worsening the already inflated backlog by not addressing existing issues such as poor Home Office decision-making and under-resourcing (Right to Remain, 2026).

These recent and proposed policy changes penalise vulnerable people escaping persecution and entering the UK illegally due to a lack of safe routes, despite the UK's commitment to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which states that refugees should not be criminalised for illegal entry (Scottish Refugee Council, 2025; UNHCR, 1967).

Waiting to belong

Farzan Morteza

I came to the UK as a refugee to save my life. In my first month in Southampton, I found SWVG. They welcomed me like family. Five years on, I have a job and a stable life. I owe this to SWVG's support.

But the constant changes in

asylum laws create constant fear. The new 20-year rule for citizenship makes me feel stateless. I am no longer Iranian, and I am still not British. I feel I am being told I do not belong anywhere. Being a person without an identity makes it very difficult to feel part of society and build a future. A

life of endless stress destroys ability and creativity and makes a person dependent on government assistance. How can we integrate when we feel like second-class citizens?

Thank you, SWVG, for giving me belonging. I hope the law will too.

Interview: Separated by policy

Leila H

When I met Javad at the AMC, he was wearing an apron, smiling and cleaning the kitchen after cooking soup. He has never given any hint of his sadness.

Javad arrived in the UK four years ago, alone. His wife and three children remain in Iran.

FRAGILE HOPE

For many refugees, the hope of being reunited with their family is what has kept them going. Recent changes to UK immigration policy have made that hope even more fragile. The dedicated, fee-free refugee family reunion route has been suspended, meaning many families must now try to navigate the standard family migration rules instead. These routes are far more expensive and difficult to meet. When I asked Javad how he was coping, he paused before answering.

'Because I am far from my family, I take medication and I am always visiting my GP. I think about my wife and my children every day, especially during the recent war. I constantly worry about them. So much has changed. I keep asking myself, 'When will we be together again?'

WE COULDN'T WALK FREELY

His first nine months in the UK were spent in a hotel in Slough before he was moved to the Bibby Stockholm barge.

'There were around 450 people living together. It felt like a prison on the water. We had fixed meal times because there were so many people. There was only one bus into town, and we couldn't walk freely because of the military

surroundings.'

Life there took its toll.

'Someone tried to take their own life, and another person succeeded. My mental health became worse. I suffered from sleepless nights, heart palpitations and anxiety. I was taking painkillers almost every day.'

After a long wait, his asylum claim was refused, and he spent nearly two years waiting for a court hearing before finally being granted refugee status.

LIVING ALONE

Today, Javad lives alone. He has severe knee pain and relies on benefits, but continues to volunteer while searching for paid work. He has completed Level 2 Food Hygiene training and gained certificates through SWVG, CLEAR and SCRATCH. Every Friday he cooks soup for visitors to the drop-in centre.

'Every day I look for a job. But

how can I find full-time work with a salary high enough to bring my family here? I cannot even go shopping on my own because I need someone to help me. If my family were here, they would help me. Instead, I am alone.'

His wife and children have had to leave their home in Iran and move to another city to live with relatives while they wait.

RULES CHANGED

As our conversation ended, Javad became emotional.

'I love my family. I only want to live together with my wife and my children. I hope the government will reconsider these rules, at least for people who were already here before the changes. I have spoken to my solicitor, and they agree with me. It isn't fair to change the rules after people have already arrived. Being separated for so long has damaged my health.'

He is right. It isn't fair.



Javad Roozitalab

Winchester MP Danny Chambers visits the Hub

Lesley Sheldon-Browning

When Danny Chambers, Liberal Democrat MP for Winchester, visited the SWVG and St Peter's Sanctuary Hub in Winchester with his Executive Assistant, Hayley Puddlefoot, he took time to listen to our guests. They spoke about their journey to seek asylum, their frustration at not being able to work, the length of time it is taking to receive a final decision, having to travel to Liverpool to submit fresh evidence, the problems caused by having to reapply for refugee status after only 30 months, and the impending threat of having to pay back asylum support when they are not even allowed to work.

SWVG volunteers raised the increasingly divisive public debate around asylum, including the way people seeking sanctuary can be caught up in political debate, but the guests themselves without exception declared how much they loved Winchester.



Danny was keen to work with SWVG, to hear examples of where he could help people seeking sanctuary, and to help fundraise. We will try to hold him to this.

Tales from the bike shed

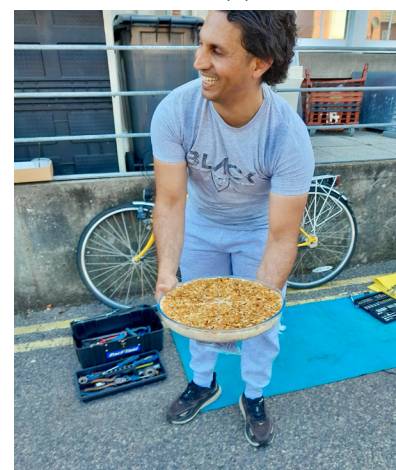
Keiren Phelan



The SWVG bike shed continues to service donated bikes so that people living on less than £10 a week can attend college and get around town without spending money on bus fares, but recent months have seen more people bringing their bikes along for repairs, new parts or often just punctures. Now, thanks to the cooperation of the hotel manager, SWVG

tools, repair kit and floor-pump are available at the hotel so that residents can mend their own punctures and keep tyres inflated. Next delivery of vital kit: a washing up bowl for the detection of leaks. The bike crew of John, Steve and Keiren can give guidance or instruction if required, but if any other member would like to lend a hand at the hotel, that would be greatly appreciated.

During one hectic and hot afternoon at the workshop, a bike recipient, Hamad, pedalled up with the gift of this classic Middle Eastern pudding, knafeh, that he'd made to help sustain the bike mechanics. To date, 192 men, women and children seeking asylum have received a bike from SWVG and they've all been immensely grateful, but no one else has yet demonstrated such delicious appreciation.



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

Reflections on Refugee Week

Atafa Tajik

The theme of Refugee Week this year was Courage. The pupils I met had spent time preparing for Refugee Week, learning about the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum, and this was reflected in the thoughtful questions they asked.

One of the highlights of the week was an inspiring art project that brought together pupils from schools across Southampton and Winchester. There were paintings, drawings and poems on the theme of courage.

As a refugee, I understand what it means to leave behind family,

friends, and everything familiar in search of safety. Starting again in a new country requires courage every day, not only to survive but also to build a new life, learn a new language, make new friends, and continue believing that the future can be better than the past.

The pupils were very open, curious and compassionate. One question that stayed with me was, 'What gave you courage when everything around you had changed?'

One child said, 'Everyone deserves to feel safe'. Another: 'Being kind can make someone feel like they belong'. This was genuine understanding.

I hope this is only the beginning. We should continue to work with schools on projects like this, creating more opportunities for students to meet refugees, hear their stories, ask questions, and learn from one another. Education is a powerful way to challenge stereotypes, and meeting real people is a natural and direct way to understand why people are driven to move across the world, and how they might feel when they do.

Atafa is a Postgraduate Research Student in British History, in the History Department and in Digital Humanities, at the University of Southampton.

Atafa (on the left) visiting local schools for Refugee Week



Ayat Sabsaoub

As part of Refugee Week, I had the privilege of visiting a local school and sharing my journey as a refugee. Although telling my story was emotional, I felt it was important. I wanted the pupils to understand that behind the word 'refugee' there are real people.

They listened with respect and curiosity, and showed kindness and empathy throughout the session. This gave me hope that the next generation will grow up with a better understanding of people from different backgrounds.

I would like to thank everyone involved in organising the

Refugee Week activities, and the school for creating such a welcoming environment. It was an honour to be part of this project, and I hope that by sharing my story, I helped inspire students to value kindness, respect, and the importance of standing with those who have experienced displacement.

Community Takeover exhibition John Hansard Gallery

Leila K

During Vanessa's workshop, we each created a fabric square. I used mainly printing, stencils and heat transfer.

I love that every piece of the blanket is different. To me, it represents the different people and communities in Southampton coming together but still keeping their own identity.

We all think about our home, family, love, health and life. These are the most important things for us, and we can see them in our art. I made a square for my cat, Roya for her children. Parisa wrote the word 'love', and her other square was a flower, because she loves giving flowers to the people she cares about. Love can be for our family, animals, friends, or people all around the world. These are examples of the feelings and ideas in our work.



Parisa, Leila and Roya with the Blanket of Care

After SWVG's visits to schools, children's artwork and creative writing was displayed in the ARC, Winchester, and Southampton Library.



Blanket of Care (2026)

Members of the Southampton Winchester Visitors Group (SWVG) Art Group in collaboration with textile artist, Vanessa Rolf.

This artwork expresses care for self and loved ones, for one's cultural heritage, and for the environment. Vanessa has guided the group through a series of workshops exploring a range of techniques, including stencil printing and fabric collage to create their 'patches of care'.

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A journey

Anonymous

There was war everywhere. I saw parts of bodies of people on the street after they were shot. I saw friends turned to ashes. The air smelt of blood. People were arrested for no reason. Military aircraft flew overhead and bombed without warning.

The story you are about to read is about me. Yes, it is true.

THE PLACE I LOVED

I was born and raised in Sudan, in a place called Kabkabiya, Darfur. As far back as I can remember, my country had been trapped in conflict. Even before I was born, Sudan was suffering from civil war. The militias arrive and take the power from the military, shooting, bombing, kidnapping people. The government leave ordinary people under siege without the most basic necessities, including food, clean water, and medical care.

Eventually I realised I had no choice but to leave. I had to abandon the place I loved with all my heart. You feel that there is no sunshine, always dark. I was awake every night searching for a way out. At different times I considered travelling through Libya or Tunisia, knowing that after reaching the coast I would have to risk my life crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

I had finally made up my mind, but there was another obstacle: money to pay a smuggler. I did not know how I could earn enough in less than two months. Winter was approaching, and if I failed to escape before then, I believed my chances of survival would disappear.

Eventually I discovered another route. I would travel to Morocco and try to climb the border fences into Ceuta, the Spanish city on the North African coast. I watched videos of people getting into Ceuta, including the disaster in 2021 when it was stormed. Some people died, and some were put in prison. Some of them are still in prison now.

My first mission was to escape my hometown. That alone seemed almost impossible because the militias monitored every road leading out of the city. During that time I met an older man who was as desperate to leave Sudan as I was. His name was Anwar, and together we decided to make the journey.

NARROW ESCAPES

In 2024, we finally escaped the city, only to fall into a trap. The driver of the van had to bribe some of the militia to accompany us, in order to get us through the border to Chad. They took the bribe, but in the middle of our journey they stopped and said they couldn't go any further unless the driver paid them more. The driver didn't have any more, so they made the passengers give them every possession they had. The other passengers gave everything, but I had nothing. I had been terribly ill with malaria from the beginning of the journey but I hadn't told anyone, because they wouldn't have taken me. Luckily, after seeing my condition, they eventually allowed us to continue. Most of the other passengers were women and children.

We reached the border town of Tina between Sudan and Chad. There, I bought medicine without a

prescription because we could not afford to see a doctor. Sometimes we survived three days eating only dates and drinking a little water.

Leaving Chad was almost impossible without paying large sums of money, but thankfully we met a man who had connections with a Chadian general. He helped us cross.

Then came five days in the desert between Chad and Libya. It was winter, and we had no jackets. All Anwar and I had was a sheet that we shared to keep warm. We slept wearing our shoes, and many nights we stayed awake until sunrise because the cold was unbearable.

When we finally approached Libya, the driver refused to continue. We realised he was a smuggler who wanted to keep us stranded so he could demand more money. Thankfully, we recognised his plan before it was too late. We just grabbed our stuff and ran.

AT LEAST WE WERE ALIVE

We found another driver who agreed to take us towards Niger for a reasonable price because his vehicle was in poor condition. We had no better option, so we accepted. I called a friend from home, who transferred the money to me.

That journey was one of the worst experiences of my life. I suffered from motion sickness so that I could barely breathe. Every few hours I asked the same question: 'Are we close to Niger?' The answer was always the same: 'Not yet'.

On the way, we saw robbers, endless deserts, huge mountains, and small, isolated communities

living in tents in remote places. It was hard to imagine anyone living there permanently.

We eventually reached Niger, but we knew we could not stay there. Our next challenge was Algeria. Entering Algeria illegally was extremely dangerous. We could be arrested, deported, or even killed.

We were fortunate enough to cross the border, but then our driver deceived us. He stole our phones and the last money we had left, and abandoned us. At least we were alive.

WORK IN THE MINES

From there we walked more than sixty kilometres, because nobody dared to offer migrants a lift. Finally we reached Tamanrasset, where we stayed for two weeks. We were exhausted, but more than ten cities still lay ahead, separated by endless military checkpoints. Every morning we heard stories of migrants being arrested and sent back to Niger.

At one point we had no money at all. We met a group of men discussing work in gold mining. To me it seemed like our only chance of surviving, but at first Anwar refused. Eventually he agreed. We spent more than three months in the desert. Instead of freedom, it was like slavery. That person brought us to the desert, and if we didn't accept work, he would leave us there with no food or water. We were 15 metres underground, digging in the desert, searching for gold.

After about two months, the smuggler took the gold to Niger to sell it, and gave us a small share of the money. We managed to escape, and continued our journey, walking across much of Algeria to avoid military patrols. Near one checkpoint we were

captured by Algerian government soldiers who boarded the van as we were being smuggled from one city to another. We were imprisoned for two weeks, and brought before a judge. I never imagined I would stand in a courtroom as a prisoner. It felt surreal, but somehow I managed to keep smiling. When we were released, the authorities took the last of our money.

KINDNESS

We refused to give up. From Béchar we planned one final crossing into Morocco. Three of us carried only 35 litres of water, two bags of bread, some sweets, and one phone with GPS. For three days we walked almost without sleep, navigating by the stars, mountains, and sometimes even the clouds. Against all odds, we crossed both the Algerian and Moroccan border security systems and finally reached Merzouga.

The people of Morocco showed us kindness unlike anything I had experienced anywhere else in Africa. They are really good people. Ordinary people waiting at the border gave us water and paid our tickets to Casablanca.

In Casablanca we worked for six months. But life remained difficult. We slept on the streets, had lice, often went hungry, and hardly ever had the chance to shower. I was exhausted and homesick.

RUNNING IN THE DARK

Eventually we tried to cross into Ceuta. Our first attempt failed, and the Moroccan authorities transported us to Taroudant. We returned to Casablanca, worked again, saved money for six more months, and prepared for another attempt.

This time everything had to be different.

During our final attempt I met two

Sudanese men named Abbas and Ab Shiba. We were asleep in the forest inside bushes and grasses when soldiers' dogs woke us. The soldiers sent trained dogs ahead of them to search for us. We spent hours running in the dark. I shouted Anwar's name but he wasn't there. He was lost.

We crawled silently towards the fence. Suddenly I realised I could not crawl any farther. I stood up and started running.

Someone shouted, 'What's wrong?'

I replied, 'I can't wait any longer'.

I climbed the first fence and jumped. Then the second. The others followed behind me.

One was caught. The other escaped for a few moments before he was captured too.

I reached the third fence, then the fourth. And finally... I made it. I had reached Ceuta.

This is only part of my story. There is so much more to tell.

IT WASN'T AS I EXPECTED

This story was shared with me by a young man I taught.

I talked to him to try to understand more, to picture his experience and fill in some gaps. He was cheerful and matter-of-fact. He told me that he needs to keep smiling.

I was slightly dazed by the number of countries he named one after another, and asked him whether he was heading for the UK from the start. No, he said. 'I hoped to find a safe place somewhere close to Sudan, but it wasn't as I expected'.

Catherine Hartley

Food, 'glorious food' The sixth Global Buffet

I liked dancing.

Thank you to the chefs
who did a wonderful job.
Everything was delicious.

A wonderful evening to
celebrate diversity.

I really liked the raffle
because I got to call out
the numbers and we
won something!



It was one of the most
fulfilling experiences I had in the
UK. Thank you for giving me the
opportunity to cook

Well that was a wonderful event yesterday! Congratulations
and thanks to you and all concerned. The food was terrific and
the atmosphere was warm and uplifting.

It was an amazing time to explain to other people what SWVG is doing for
asylum seekers. I personally liked singing and dancing with different people
from different countries, I loved foods especially Daniel's food btw. I love to
cook and be kitchen assistance, also huge thanks to all SWVG members.

Working all together to achieve a buffet for 80-90 people and seeing
the pride on everyone's faces when the event is underway makes it such
an enjoyable event. Everyone is equal, supporting each other and, most
importantly, having fun!

I cooked lentils which you eat with injera. I cooked silsi. I made salad.
I talked to all the people. I introduced myself. I said Southampton is good
and English classes are good, and charity cooking is good.

My husband and I enjoyed a wonderful time at the Global Buffet.
The glorious food, fine entertainment and lovely conversations
with old and new friends. We wouldn't miss it!



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

Injera

Daniel Gabremariam

In Eritrea we eat injera. My mother made injera for lunch and dinner. I helped her to make it. We ate it at every lunch and dinner. In my country that is what we ate. We didn't know anything else. We ate it with lentils, chicken or cheese. We don't always have chicken. Chicken is for a special occasion.

I like it when I cook at Cooking for Friends. At the charity they help me with what to do. I like that.



INGREDIENTS

(to make 7 or 8 large injera)

1 ½ kg teff flour
4 cups of water
Salt



METHOD

Put the water in the mixing bowl

Add the teff flour

Mix for 3-5 minutes

Season with salt

Leave for 24 hours to ferment

Put a little oil on the hotplate

Ladle some of the batter onto the hotplate

Cook for approximately 5 minutes

It is hard

Dalia Benites

It was hard to leave my country.
I was born there.
I left behind family, sisters, brothers,
Friends, two dogs and a cat.
I remember everything about them.
This saddens me.

But I have the right
To find safety
For my children.
I am their provider.

It was hard to leave,
But harder to stay there,
Fearful every day.
Afraid for me and my children.
I felt fenced in, imprisoned.
There society is cruel.
Our life was not normal.

To protect my family
I chose to leave.
We left with the clothes we wore.
All my memories and feelings about home
Were in my heart.

I only thought of fleeing.
How to prepare for the other side of the world?
I did not know.
I only knew I wanted safety.
I only prayed all would be well.

We arrived on a different continent,
Fearful.
Many good people helped us.
Some were not good.

We learned new customs,
A new language,
A new climate.
It is hard to live in this new place.

But this new place gives me
Peace, safety and freedom
And my children give me strength.
I want to do more for them
And for this place.
I begin again to build a future.



Achievements and qualifications

BETINHA, LEILA, ROYA, PARISA, SUMI, JAVAD, THARSHAN, SUBASINI, YASIR, and ADAM received the 2026 Southampton Volunteer 100 Hours Award from the Lord Mayor

STEWART gained the MiDAS (Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme) certificate

FATANEH was awarded best student in her E1 class at CLEAR and the Southampton Adult Learner Award for Outstanding Achievement in Adult Learning

SUMI was awarded certificate of achievement for completing 12-week ESOL for volunteering and community action

ENDALK and **HATEM** have passed the driving test and Hatem has passed E3 ESOL

SALAHELDIN gained a volunteering award from SCRATCH

GINNY completed IAA Level 1

RUNAK has completed Book 2 of English for Everyone

BUKONLA has achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1

AFI passed ESOL Entry 3 Skills for Life Speaking and Listening, and gained a Manual Handling certificate accredited by ABA and a volunteering award from SCRATCH

SANAZ has passed Entry 2 in reading, writing, listening and speaking

JOÃO has been invited by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust to become a Community Climate Change Champion. He also received a volunteering certificate from SCRATCH

NAZIR has got a job as an interpreter, and has passed his driving test

AHMED has passed his driving

theory test

ALI has passed RYA Powerboat Level 2 (Powerboat Handling & Boat Driving), STCW courses in Personal Survival Techniques (PST), Fire Prevention and Fire Fighting (FPFF), Elementary First Aid (EFA), Personal Safety and Social Responsibilities (PSSR), and Security Awareness Training (SAT), and attended an ESOL Digital Skills course, and has started a job as Quay Assistant

In his second year of studying for two Honours degrees simultaneously, **KENNEDY** has completed two modules of an Open University degree in International Relations and five modules of a Law degree at Winchester University

KINGSLEY passed his probationary period in his new job as a housekeeper in a care home

Pictured left to right:

Below: Leila, João, Roya, Ginny

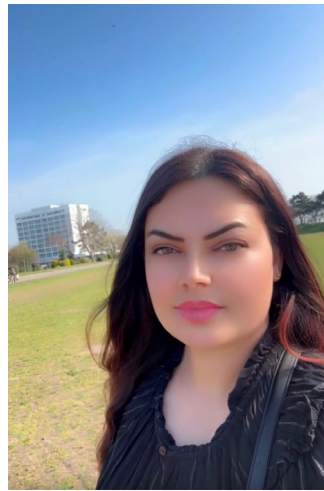
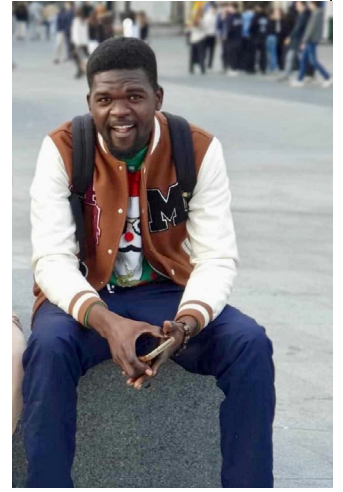
Facing page (top row): Fataneh, Bukonla, Parisa, Ahmed

(second row): Stewart, Sanaz, Runak, Afi

(third row): Endalk, Hatem, Kingsley, Salaheldin

(bottom row): Sumi, Kennedy, Nazir, Betinha





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

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 giving regularly through standing orders, as well as existing grant-givers stopping their awards to us. There are many reasons for this, but the cost-of-living crisis is challenging many people's finances, and grant bodies are receiving increasing numbers of applications from charitable organisations, given the pressures on services they provide.

SWVG currently has healthy reserves, but they are beginning to be eaten into. We need to take some action to support them,

and the Trustees are looking at other sources of income. The Big Give small charity event would have doubled any donation received in a specific week in June but unfortunately we were not successful in being chosen for this.

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.

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. See some examples opposite.

Our bank account details for standing orders or donations 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'.

Catherine Hartley

Everyone can bring their own talents and skills to SWVG, and there are almost as many ways to be involved as there are volunteers, from teaching or one-to-one befriending to serving tea and coffee. In particular, we would currently love to have some extra volunteers on our housing desk rota and other help desks; more teachers, especially in Winchester; one or two helpers to extend bike shed services to the hotel; some new blood in the campaigning team and the schools team; and a fundraising volunteer or two to liaise with donors.

Volunteering

Nearly all roles can be flexible – we have teachers who spend months each year in Australia, befrienders (and Co-chairs) who work as a team, people who are never free on Fridays and others available only on Fridays.

If you'd like an introductory chat

or to visit our drop-in, email hazel.inskip@swvg-refugees.org.uk. Hazel will be delighted to hear from you. Our volunteer application form can be found on the Get Involved section of our website, and our next training day will take place on 26 September.



The Welcome Team prepare for the Friday drop-in

What can your donation make possible?



£10 buys ...
a set of life-saving brake pads



£12 pays for ...
an English textbook



£30 feeds ...
nine people at Cooking for Friends



£70 can buy ...
a refurbished smartphone



£75 is the average cost of ...
translating a document
to support an appeal



£90 buys ...
a train ticket to the Appeal Tribunal
(not covered by the Home Office)



£150 allows us to ...
open our drop-in on a public holiday
when other places are closed



£212 covers ...
the hire of the drop-in premises
for one morning



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

Mark Courtice Fund report

The Mark Courtice Fund for Training and Education was set up with generous donations from SWVG members and supporters and Mark's friends and family, in honour of his determination to see people thrive and have a chance to fulfil their potential.

The things the Fund has paid for so far include a Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) manual and the cost of the CSCS

health and safety test required by construction workers; an introductory welding course for someone already qualified in his own country; and a diploma in website development with career support and follow-up.

Of course we have had to disappoint some people too; the Fund isn't equipped to cover university fees, for example, however much we would like it to, but it nevertheless represents really

practical support aimed at helping people succeed in this country.

WOMEN

We welcome applications to the fund, and would particularly like to hear from women, as we have received a very generous contribution from someone who would love to help women fulfil their ambitions – and of course we welcome donations too, using the payment reference 'Mark Courtice'.

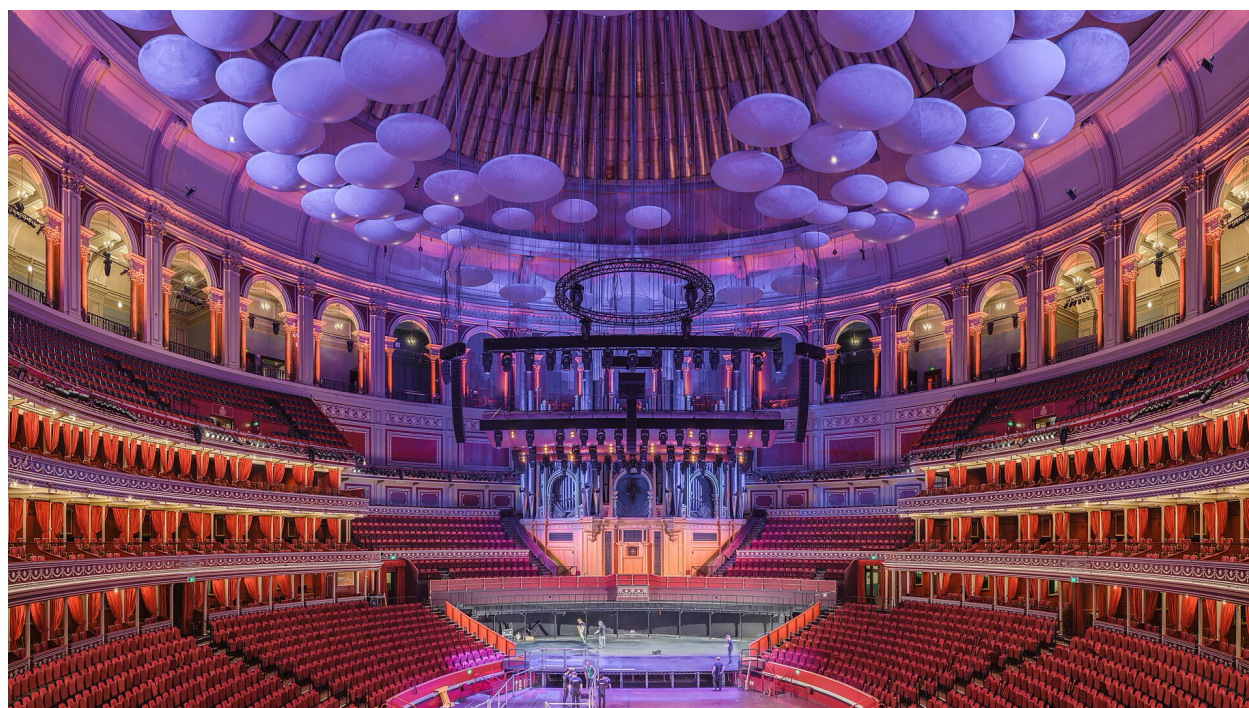
The Pianoman at Christmas

Sealed bid auction!

SWVG has received the generous donation of two front-row stalls seats to The Pianoman at Christmas: Jamie Cullum live at the Royal Albert Hall on 10 December at 7:30pm. The tickets would normally cost £99 each.

Please send bids to secretary@swvg-refugees.org.uk with 'Pianoman' as the subject.

Deadline for bids: 12 noon on 30 September 2026

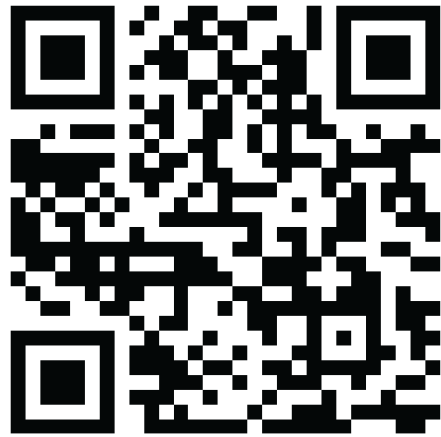


The Royal Albert Hall viewed from a central box
© User:Colin / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA-4.0

Donors

We are extremely grateful for the support we receive from funders, trusts and foundations, community groups and individuals. Among these we gratefully acknowledge: the Garfield Weston Trust; St Paul's Church in Winchester, and the MVM Charitable Trust. We thank Avenue St Andrew's URC for their continued support of the Avenue Multicultural Centre, St Peter's RC Church for their support of the Hub in Winchester, and Christ Church Freemantle for offering us a meeting room free of charge.

We are especially grateful to people who have made generous one-off donations over the past few months, or set up new standing orders, and we also thank everyone who has donated to the funding for the weekly football sessions in Winchester and those who support our Global Buffet events.



swvg-refugees.org.uk