HRSG | HORSHAM REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP

Chair's Report 2024-2025

This may come as a surprise to you, but I enjoy writing the Chair's report for the HRSG AGM. This is because it gives me an opportunity to sit and reflect on the previous year and how we have grown and changed as an organisation.

Now in our ninth year, we are supporting more people than ever before in both the refugee and asylum-seeker communities. As always, we continue to respond to need, developing our offers and activities to tailor to our clients. We have trialled and adjusted many activities this year, which Sue will describe more fully in her report. A huge thanks goes to our fantastic volunteer team, which is full of people who are willing to take risks and try new things, but also can be open and honest when things aren't working and help us to move in a different direction as and when this is needed.

We are supporting over 300 clients at any one time, but the level of turnover in the asylum-seeking community means that we are supporting many more than this number on an annual basis. Our client base includes:

- Refugee families from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, here under refugee schemes
- 1 family from Sudan (Repatriation)
- 40-45 asylum-seeking families in hotel accommodation
- A small number of families who have transitioned from asylum-seeker status to refugee status, but without the support of a government scheme. These families need more from us than others, as they don't have a case worker from the WSCC Migration Team who has duty of care.

Strategically, we have had a fair bit of work going on behind the scenes. A lot of admin time was spent transitioning to a new bank account, since on becoming a registered charity and changing Treasurer, we needed a new type of account and new signatories. This took some time to be resolved but everything has been working well for some months now. You'll hear more about our finances from our Treasurer, Nick, in due course, but this year has been very different for us in terms of expenditure as we took over providing clothes for local asylum seekers after the closure of Sussex Aid for Refugees. We're very grateful to volunteer Chris Aldridge who works closely with the core team to find and apply for grants. The Volunteer Sector Support team at Horsham District Council have also been very supportive in helping us to find funding options. We are also very grateful to our financial supporters for giving regular or

one-off donations that help us to fund clothing and activities for our clients, as well as our many supporters who donate items that we need. Thank you so much for your support.

There have also been many meetings happening about the growth of the charity and how we manage the administration and volunteer co-ordination well whilst we continue to operate as an entirely volunteer-led organisation. Again, the team at HDC has been very supportive and I have met with other charities to learn from their team structures. We're very glad to have some additional volunteer admin support this year, initially from Eileen and now from Tess and Simon.

My huge thanks go to Sue and Polly (my right-hand women!) and to the rest of the Core Team for the unwavering support and hard work that goes into running this organisation. Some of our clients have had complex issues and circumstances to deal with this year so we've had to change policies and work closely with WSCC, which has entailed extra meetings and thought as well as late night worries about individual clients! Thank you to all of you: Sue, Polly, Nick, Sally, Jane, David, Lis and Carole.

It's been a very busy and fruitful year, as you will hear from Sue. Our clients continue to be very grateful for the support they receive and on their behalf, I wish to thank everyone involved with HRSG. You are all making a huge difference to refugees and asylum seekers in our community.

Secretary's report AGM of Horsham Refugee Support Group

23rd April 2025

Sue Pannell

The HRSG Core team

- Jo Eames – the Chair and trustee – main point of contact for the Council, public, volunteers and the families and overall coordinator.
- Polly Hobbs – Trustee and main contact for the local Asylum Seeker hotel, co-ordinator of the Facebook pages. Polly also sources, buys and organizes most of the clothing and equipment donations and purchases. She sometimes helps with employment issues and research and also liases with UASC.
- Nick O'Riordan – Treasurer and Trustee, helping with employment support and problem solving.
- Sue Pannell –Secretary, trustee and involved with volunteer training and supporting.
- David Casey – a volunteer involved with problem solving, house moves and events.
- Jane Casey – volunteering with families, individuals and at the Asylum Seeker hotel.
- Carol Knight – ESOL teaching to asylum seekers and refugees in groups and individually. Also befriending families.
- Lis Clegg – newsletter and other publications and the website. Also volunteering with families and individuals.
- Sally Wrenwood – safeguarding and best practice advisor and trainer.

Activities throughout the year

We now have a team of 48 active volunteers doing a wide variety of roles – befriending, teaching English, homework support, running sewing and holiday clubs, trouble shooting and helping with employment.

Over the year we have had several new families move into the area. Some into rural locations or villages outside Horsham – making their lives even more difficult. Some have needed extra support with journeys to appointments because public transport is so limited. Also some of them have felt especially isolated – having been moved from more urban locations where they have started to get to know a few people.

We have needed new volunteers to support these people and also join the already busy teams doing other activities. So we have run three rounds of recruitment over the year. We have created a small team of volunteers who are based around Billingshurst, and also added several people to the general volunteer team.

At the Asylum Seeker Hotel

- New arrivals at the hotel often have quite urgent clothing needs. We provide basic clothing for them. We have to buy this new as there is no practical way of ending up with the right quantity of the right clothing second hand. This is a very high financial burden at the present time.
- Throughout April to October the Monday English class continued at the local asylum seeker hotel. This then closed due to lack of available volunteers and poor attendance by residents.
- The Wednesday afternoon class ran from April 2024 to January 2025. The attendance here was higher but again gradually trailed off as residents moved away and very few new people became regular attendees.
- We trialled an after school homework club in the Spring. We had thought that children would need support with homework and reading practice. However only a very small number of children accessed this support but the fun and craft side was quite well attended and enjoyed by the children.
- On balance it was concluded that this is not the best use of time and so it closed after a couple of terms with the idea that we offer more specific one-to-one tutoring sessions to children whose parents really wanted their children to receive support. This has now been running successfully for several months and a small number of children are coming regularly and receiving focussed support and learning.
- We started a weekly sewing club after we were donated some sewing machines. This has been a great success with many ladies coming most weeks, making and mending clothing, and making bags, hair decorations and other things.
- We explored the idea of residents having small garden plots at the Asylum seeker hotel. We were given permission and several residents seemed keen, so we sourced tools and some sundry equipment and seeds and helped them get started.

  The few residents who were keen got going straight away and created small plots to grow in. However over the weeks the plants were eaten by wildlife, some residents moved on and it was difficult to achieve successful growing of crops.

  So gradually the idea faded and the plots were cleared and we retrieved some of the tools and equipment – to hopefully use in another situation.
- Yoga classes are being run by an independent provider through our recommendation

- We trialled some singing sessions called 'Baby Rhyme Time' aimed at mothers with babies and young children. The first couple of weeks were quite well attended but then trailed off until no one came so we gave up on the idea. We will try again in the spring aiming at slightly older children too and running it after school.
- We decided to try offering support in schools for asylum seeker or refugee children for whom English is a barrier to learning. We approached a couple of schools and one seemed open to the offer. So a team of three volunteers started going in weekly to work with a small number of children that the school felt needed extra support. Unfortunately the sessions were fraught with a wide variety of difficulties and it was concluded after several weeks that it was not an effective use of volunteer time. So we have let go of that idea for now.

In the local community

We have run a weekly drop-in in the town centre throughout most of 2024. This has been well attended by a small number of asylum seekers and intermittently by other refugees in the community. The use has dropped right off – mainly due to people being moved away out of area and so it became an ineffective use of volunteer time and we decided to run a drop-in specifically at the hotel instead. This has been running for a few weeks and seems to have been useful for several people so far.
Several of our newer families need high levels of befriender support, with small teams around each family working together in a variety of ways.
Several children of other families continue to have regular after school support with homework and reading practice.
Some adults continue to have regular one–to–one English lessons
A few families that have more settled status continue to be supported by volunteers, including a Ukrainian family living in another part of Sussex.

Over the summer

We ran a variety of activities at the asylum seeker hotel:

- Wednesday afternoon English classes continued most weeks
- A weekly craft and fun session happened on Friday mornings
- A weekly decoupage class on Tuesday afternoons
- A drumming workshop, a sports afternoon, a Marty Wilde magic show and a visit by the brick bus were also arranged as one off events.

In addition we ran our weekly sessions in the Barn in Horsham Park each Wednesday afternoon for our town based families and individuals.

All the activities were enjoyed by a large number of adults and children.

Christmas

At the local asylum seeker hotel we held a Christmas party for the residents - fun, games and craft activities. Approximately sixty residents took part.

Two local churches had made Christmas gift bags for each child under 18 and adult bags for ladies and men. These were distributed at the end of the party and were welcomed by all.

In addition we held our usual Christmas party at Wesley hall for town based families and individuals. Many of the families brought food and volunteers provided cakes and drinks.

We had a 'real' Father Christmas this year and were able to give a named gift to each child present. Families were each given a box of biscuits. It was a great success!

The refugee and asylum seeker population continues to grow in our area, with people coming from a wide range of countries and situations. They are housed in an increasingly varied range of accommodation and we continue to adapt to the needs that seem to be most obvious, adding new activities or closing things that are no longer useful.

Fortunately our volunteer team continues to grow bringing a wide range of skills to the group.

Core Team meetings held

17th April 2024 AGM

5th June 2024

17th July 2024

1st August 2024

18th September 2024

10th October 2024

6th November 2024

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9th December 2024

15th January 2025

12th March 2025