



Suffolk Refugee Support Spring 2021 Newsletter

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38 St Matthew's Street, IPSWICH, Suffolk IP1 3EP

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Syria—10 years of conflict and displacement

In March 2011, the first pro-democracy protests took place in Daraa in southern Syria. Ten years later, after a decade of devastation, more than half the country's population have been forced from their homes by the brutal conflict, creating the world's biggest refugee crisis.

In 2015, Suffolk's public sector leaders agreed to take part in the UK government's resettlement scheme, and the first families arrived in Ipswich in March 2016. Since then, we have supported more than 125 Syrian refugees to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives here.

Many live with the scars of war and trauma on a daily basis. Some have close family members dead or missing, while nearly all have family and friends scattered across the globe and loved ones still in danger.

Shireen (pictured right) and her family arrived in Ipswich five years ago.

She has studied hard, passed exams, worked in an Ipswich pharmacy, and today studies pharmacy at the University of Reading. On the 10th anniversary of the Syrian war, she gave us her thoughts (**see page 2**).



Our support for vulnerable families

Family A were moved to Ipswich by the Home Office at the beginning of February. They knew no one here, and were particularly isolated due to lockdown. In addition the family had been given no ID and the card they needed to access financial support did not arrive. Repeated phone calls to various agencies to resolve this resulted only in broken promises.

Fortunately a neighbour who had volunteered with us previously heard of their plight and stepped in. She quickly got in touch with us and since then we have been in constant communication. Without ID it can be tricky to even get children into school. Fortunately the local primary school were very understanding with the two younger children, who couldn't wait to restart their education.

Whilst we still wait for the complex bureaucratic issues and Home Office mistakes to be resolved, SRS has given the family emergency financial support to buy food and school uniforms. We have lent Mum and Dad a computer so that they can attend online English classes and start building a life in Ipswich.

This is a frightening example of how processes have broken down, communication between agencies is poor and vulnerable people could slip through the net without our support and that of the community.

See our response to the recent Home Office asylum plans plus fundraising ideas to support families like this on page 4

With your support I will survive again. I can start to make my dream become truth.

You are my lovely family. (Message from one client on receiving leave to remain)

Supported by:



Shireen's story—in her own words

Before the war in Syria I lived a safe life with my family. I was a student going to school, I had lots of friends and all my brothers to support me. I had no clue that I will lose any member of my family or live so far from them. I remember I was revising for my exams at night to the sound of scary bombs and fights, but I thought it is far from us. At the beginning I thought the war will be for a few months maximum but here we are, it has gone ten years and no improvement at all!

It is hard to talk about memories as there is always that horrible feeling when we were forced to leave our home and knowing that going back could be impossible. When we had to choose between being at our home and dying or becoming refugees. Unfortunately, the picture of people on the floor dying in their blood, the children crying running in the street not knowing where to go and lots more painful memories will never be forgotten.

Two moments changed my life, first when I left my beloved home and realised that maybe it was the last time I could see my house. The moment my mom held my hand and we ran away from the shooting and death. We left in 2011, I felt scared and insecure. I had a lot of questions that it was hard to answer. Where will we live, will I be safe, will I be able to go to school, will I be able to make friends.

The second was the moment we were told by UNHCR that we have been accepted for resettlement. I did not know much about the UK or Ipswich to be honest. I only knew about coming to the UK 20 days before my flight. All I knew and really cared about was that I will have a safe life and a chance to finish my education.

When we arrived I really had mixed feelings—happy and curious about my new life, how it will be, and scared not to be able to integrate and communicate with people.

Maybe it is strange to say I am lucky after everything I went through, but yes I feel lucky to be here and meeting such incredible people from Suffolk Refugee Support that made me feel welcomed and loved. For me, this is the key to continue in life. Ipswich feels like home. It is the place where I began my new life and learned so much. It means so much to me.

Being called a refugee is a very big challenge—I always had to prove to others that I am like them, the only difference is that I had to leave my country to live. “Refugee” is a word that can change your life completely. Everything you are doing, you have to prove to people that you are a good person willing to do only good things. And if you are a refugee wearing a hijab this makes it even more challenging as you always seem different!

I am proud of myself for not giving up. I am proud that I am a pharmacy student after years of hard work beside looking after my mother, learning the language and new skills. I feel that I am a new person. Everything changed in my life, I learnt how to be responsible, got my first job, started studying what I love. I can say my life now is a normal life!

These ten years were a big challenge for me, I lost my childhood suddenly and had to deal with the challenges in my life as an adult where I should've played with other children, but I am grateful for everything I learnt and who I became.

Everyone now is living in different countries. Three of my brothers are in Iraq and one in Germany and thankfully they are safe. However, some of my friends and family are still in Syria and the life is so difficult for them. I hope that one day I can reunite with all my brothers and family. I would like to open a little place in Syria for those who can't afford to pay to get their treatment for free, and also to provide support to refugees in the UK.

Shireen's new business

I started a new business with my brother Dilbreen (see picture on page 1) to earn some extra money to help me with my studies during this pandemic.

We are providing a range of products such as perfumes, aftershaves, diffusers, fabric softener and many more things. The idea behind our perfumes is that we have alternative fragrances inspired by the high street brands but with affordable prices – “You don't wear the bottle”! We mainly work on Instagram [@scentsbydiloshireen](https://www.instagram.com/scentsbydiloshireen).

If we succeed in our business, I will put some money aside every month to help refugees who are going through what I went through as I know exactly how they feel and the amount of things they need to live a “normal life”.

Look out for more 10th anniversary stories and reflections from Syrian refugees in Suffolk in the Ipswich Star and on Radio Suffolk soon...

Supporting refugees to be vaccinated

It is vitally important that Covid-19 vaccines are made accessible to everyone in our communities, so we have been doing a lot of work to encourage vaccine uptake among our clients. We have been consulting with different communities, discussing vaccine issues in our online group sessions and disseminating translated information. We have found a high level of vaccine acceptance in our client groups, and where there is hesitancy we are able to discuss this openly and reassure people. We are very grateful to the NHS Integrated Care System for organising a vaccination session for our clients at Gainsborough Sports Centre recently. We contacted clients based on age and health issues, provided help with transport and crucially had SRS staff on hand to support and translate. Of 40 appointments booked, 39 people attended and were vaccinated successfully (while the other phoned to apologise!). There was really quite a joyful atmosphere at the session, and it was lovely to see some of our clients in person again! This success has had a knock-on effect, with more clients contacting us to ask when they will be able to have the vaccine, and we hope to organise another session soon.

Online ESOL cookery classes

We have been running a series of online ESOL cookery classes, which have been a great success and given clients the opportunity to practice their English while also demonstrating some of their amazing cookery skills. This culminated in a live online SRS cookalong, led by our clients, with mouthwatering results! This is a great way for some of those we work with to share their skills and knowledge and a project we are keen to explore further, so watch this space!



A tribute to our former Chair, Bob Tostevin

It was with great sadness that we learned of the death of Bob Tostevin, former chair of our Board of Trustees, from Covid-19 late last year. Bob was a lovely, gentle man who did so much for Suffolk Refugee Support in our early days and remained a committed supporter. His childhood experiences gave him a lifelong empathy for refugees—in 1940, along with other children fleeing from Guernsey before the German occupation, an eight-year-old Bob got on a boat to England not knowing where he was going or



who would look after him. A train took him to Manchester and then to a refugee centre in Eccles, from where a family looked after him as one of their own throughout the war. Bob returned home to Guernsey but he never saw his mother again. And he never forgot that when war or disaster cause people to flee their homes in desperation, their fortunes are dependent on the kindness of strangers. Spending his last years in Ipswich he was very proud to help Suffolk Refugee Support including as a Chair and Trustee. Bob will be greatly missed, but we will carry the memory of his kindness and compassion in all that we do. We're very grateful to Bob's family for choosing SRS as the charity to receive donations in his memory, and you can still [make a contribution here](#).

New UK asylum plans—our response

The Home Office recently announced plans to make major changes to the UK's asylum system. The proposal that would most affect those we work with would deny entitlements to asylum seekers arriving through irregular routes. Under the plans, no matter how strong their asylum claim, they would only ever be granted temporary protection, would be indefinitely liable for removal from the UK and could have their rights to benefits and family reunion restricted. As there are virtually no regular, legal routes to claim asylum in the UK, the great majority of the thousands of people we have supported over the last two decades arrived in the UK through irregular means. Today they are British citizens, doctors, teachers, carers and community leaders. Under the new asylum plans, none of them would have been able to permanently settle here, contribute to UK society and rebuild their lives with their families in safety.

Among the discussions and coverage of these proposals, a few key facts are rarely mentioned:

- ◇ There were 29,456 asylum applications in the UK in 2020 (excluding dependents), in the context of more than 80 million people forcibly displaced from their homes worldwide
- ◇ Asylum applications in the UK [fell by 18% in 2020](#), contrary to what you might have thought from media coverage of small boats crossing the Channel
- ◇ There is [no obligation](#) on asylum seekers to apply for asylum in the first safe country they reach. Whether someone has travelled through other countries has [no bearing](#) on their fear of persecution at home.
- ◇ Around [two thirds of all asylum decisions](#) in 2020, including initial decisions and appeals, resulted in indefinite leave to remain or other protection, meaning most asylum seekers arriving through clandestine means were able to prove a well-founded fear of persecution
- ◇ Refugee resettlement programmes—one of the few legal ways for refugees to reach the UK—are largely on hold at the moment, with [no targets set](#) for future numbers, and family reunion (another legal route) fell by 27% in 2020.

You can read the Refugee Council's response to the proposed changes [here](#), and some detailed analysis [here](#). The plans are currently at the consultation stage, so if you would like to have your say and take part in the consultation, we would encourage you to [do so here](#).

Fundraising ideas!

Would you like to harness the power of social media for good and make a difference to vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers in Suffolk? Or turn your unwanted books, CDs and games into donations? Facebook now allows you to create a birthday fundraiser for your chosen charity—one supporter did so recently and raised an incredible £700 to support our vital work. Find out more [here](#). And Ziffit allows you to declutter your house and donate the proceeds to Suffolk Refugee Support! Find out more [here](#).

SRS clients in the media

We're keen to give voice to our clients' experiences wherever possible, so a big thank you to the Belongings show on BBC Suffolk for featuring Selma recently in their Window into Your World series—you can listen again to her thoughts [here](#). We are also grateful to Suffolk Community Foundation for all their support over the past year, so we were pleased to speak about this on Radio Suffolk [here](#). Finally, we're delighted to report that our ex-client Osama's English-language journalism career continues to go from strength to strength, including [this piece](#) in the Guardian newspaper.

We hope you've enjoyed our latest newsletter—we'd love to hear from you with your feedback or if you'd like to find out further information. If you received this newsletter indirectly, and would like to join our mailing list, please email our administrator: mwalker@suffolkrefugee.org.uk

Thank you again for all your support, donations and volunteering - we really couldn't manage without you!