

Suffolk Refugee Support Annual Report 2022-23



The last year has been the most challenging we have ever seen. The scale and pace of change, and the urgency of needs among refugees and asylum seekers in Suffolk has been unprecedented. Reflecting record global displacement, the number of people we supported in 2022/23 was more than double the previous year (already at a high level). Suffolk has welcomed around 1500 refugees fleeing the brutal conflict in Ukraine and we have stepped up with a range of support. We have responded rapidly to meet the urgent needs of growing numbers of asylum seekers arriving in temporary accommodation here, often at short notice and with few possessions. We have also continued to provide intensive support to meet the ongoing and longer term needs of refugees rebuilding their lives in Suffolk, including those who worked with British forces in Afghanistan, vulnerable resettlement clients or members of established refugee communities. We have expanded our services and our team, worked with new partners across the county, and responded flexibly to changing demands. We are proud of the achievements of our committed team of staff, volunteers and trustees in supporting and giving voice to those arriving here.

“It has been a privilege working with you all at SRS. You are an inspiration.” [Jamie Lowther-Pinkerton, High Sheriff of Suffolk 2022-23]

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Front cover image: Afghan and Ukrainian kite-flying event, Christchurch Park,
Ipswich [Image: Charlotte Bond/Newsquest]

Chair's report



For yet another year, SRS has faced enormous challenges in delivering its services to asylum seekers and refugees against an ever-changing backdrop. Much of the change and uncertainty over the past year has been driven not only by political changes and conflicts abroad, but also by political actions and decisions taken within the UK. In 2022/23, these include the increased rhetoric targeting asylum seekers and refugees, the government's refusal to offer safe routes to being granted asylum, and its use of hotels. Looking forward to the coming year, the government will be resorting to warehousing people in greater numbers, using potentially and actually unsuitable accommodation such as barges and former military bases for asylum seekers.

Regardless of the position taken, wrongly, by a vociferous minority that seeking asylum is a privilege, rather than a clearly recognised international and national right, SRS will continue to advocate for, and support, all asylum seekers and refugees who find themselves in Suffolk, no matter their origin.

Given that this is the third year of being buffeted by relentless change and pressure, the Board has worked hard with the SRS Management Team to try to find ways to exert some control over its work environment, shifting, where possible, from reactivity to proactivity. This has included trying to envision where SRS might find itself in two to three years' time and, critically, to position itself better to cope with any further changes. Key risks have been identified and an approach taken which models what potential services might look like, as well as recognising that SRS will need to have a "learning by doing" culture if it is to be flexible and responsive to future challenges. The constant pressure of the last year has left many staff members feeling understandably stressed and fatigued, so one of the key areas of work has been to identify ways of putting not only client well-being at the heart of our work, but also staff well-being.

The SRS staff team has continued to grow exponentially, from 20 to 32 (who are mostly part-time, which brings its own unique challenges) in the past year, reflecting the ever-increasing workload required to properly support clients. This has also resulted in a large increase in the SRS budget (from £520,000 in 2021/22 to £705,000 in 2022/23) to support this work—more detail in this regard is provided in the Treasurer's report (see page 17). To the whole team, including those who have left during the year, a huge thank you for all that you continue to do. Of course, this thanks extends also to SRS volunteers and donors, without whom the organisation would be much diminished in its offering to all clients.

I am also extremely grateful to my fellow Trustees, without whose experience and wisdom my role would be extraordinarily difficult to fulfil.

Finally, to all SRS clients—we stand with you in your efforts to build a new life in the UK and admire your courage, determination and fortitude as you set about achieving this.

Dr Felicity Szesnat, Chair
August 2023

Charity Manager's report



It seems that every year I write this report, I say it has been SRS's busiest year ever. This year is no exception! The numbers of asylum seekers, resettlement programme refugees and Ukrainians fleeing the war in their country have led to an enormous growth in the demand for both immediate practical support and longer-term development help for more than 1500 individuals (not counting family members) this year.

Our team has grown because of this demand to a current staff of 32 (full and part time staff) and over 60 active volunteers. We have speakers of seven refugee languages in our staff team and equal if not greater numbers amongst our volunteers.

We have helped people from a record number of countries this year—49 in total—with the highest being Ukraine, Iraq and Afghanistan. With the use of two hotels in the area housing asylum seekers and many people arriving after traumatic and dangerous journeys with few possessions, the need for clothing and footwear has increased. We have provided basic clothing and shoes to hundreds of clients, as well as transport costs to bring people from the more remotely located hotel into Ipswich for activities.

The levels of unhappiness and despair after long periods in hotels with no communication from the Home Office has increased, putting pressure on staff and services to try to provide meaningful activities to keep anxiety levels under control. Staff and volunteer led ESOL, football, music, art, play sessions and trips have helped alongside SRS's outreach advice staff spending time in the hotels. One big problem has been a lack of available immigration legal advice, which leads to much frustration among our clients despite our continued efforts to get this addressed by the Legal Aid Agency to no avail.

Difficulties with the Homes for Ukraine scheme which had to be implemented at short notice by the local authorities with little input from central government also put pressure on our services at the start of this period, although things are calmer now with many Ukrainians entering work and finding their own accommodation.

The lack of affordable rented accommodation in Suffolk is an ongoing issue and one which causes suffering across the whole population, especially those in lower paid or insecure jobs. We work hard to ensure that our clients know the situation and work with it as best they can, with an emphasis on increasing money saving skills and knowledge and supporting people to gain employment to become more independent.

Amid the doom and gloom, our staff and volunteers have seen remarkable successes this year which should be celebrated. We are proud that over 100 clients secured jobs with our support. All our many activities are well received and bring skills, knowledge and better mental/physical well-being to our clients. Hopefully this report will provide an insight into this.

I am grateful to the trustees, staff and volunteers for their dedication and tenacity during difficult and uncertain times this year. I would also like to thank all our funders, donors and supporters without whom the work would not happen.

Rebecca Crerar, Charity Manager
August 2023

Advice service

As the first port of call for many newly-arrived refugees and asylum seekers in Suffolk, our Advice Service has been extremely busy over the past year. We have seen a significant increase in asylum seekers arriving with fresh trauma and few possessions needing our support. In the depths of winter people have presented at our office in flip flops and with no warm clothes. We have provided clothing and footwear vouchers, guidance on asylum processes, assistance with vital documentation and support with access to health services, English classes and meaningful activities. We have seen an increase in housing-related enquiries, with our Housing Advice Worker supporting people to navigate cost of living issues and the lack of affordable housing locally. We also continue to encounter acute health needs, particularly around mental health and wellbeing, and issues in accessing medical services that are increasingly under pressure and moving online.



“It all shows your kindness and I really appreciate all you have done for us. We want to stand on our feet so that’s why we need support in this and thanks again.”

K was placed in an asylum contingency hotel for single male adults. When he first visited our office, our advice workers immediately recognised that he was distressed and seemed highly vulnerable. Our bilingual Advice Worker spoke to him, and he confessed that he felt suicidal and was very scared of being surrounded by “big men” as he was only 16, and that none of the Home Office officials had listened to him when he tried to tell them his true age. We immediately contacted the NHS Health Outreach Team, and it was arranged that a mental health nurse would visit K the next day, plus we contacted the hotel staff so that they could keep an eye on him and provide extra support.

We also made an age dispute referral to Suffolk Social Services, explaining our concerns about K’s wellbeing. Fortunately they reacted quickly and, after an assessment, moved K into specialist accommodation for young people. K is now a different person, telling us that he is much happier and attending college.

Our year in numbers

- 9583** individual client advice contacts delivered (**35%** increase on last year)
- 1503** people directly supported by our advice services (**143%** increase)
- 1000** people new to our services (the majority of them new to the UK)
- 376** Ukrainian refugees given direct advice/support (excluding family members)
- 267** people given employment support and **112** people secured employment with our help
- 150** people supported to learn English through our ESOL classes
- 60+** young people attended our Homework Groups in Ipswich and Bury
- 58** women attended our International Women’s Group, and **55** women attended our sewing group
- 49** different countries of origin for people we supported

Asylum work

We have long supported asylum-seeking families in 'dispersal' accommodation in Ipswich. However, due to backlogs in the asylum system and a lack of decision-making, the Home Office has increasingly resorted to placing people in hotels. As a result of two hotels locally becoming 'asylum contingency accommodation', the number of asylum seekers in Suffolk has increased significantly over the past 18 months. Many have endured horrendous experiences and arrive disorientated and with few resources. They then face the added anxiety of long periods in limbo, unable to move on with their lives. Over the past year we have provided intensive support to residents at both hotels, working closely with hotel staff and partners such as Sanctuary Day Centre and Copdock Village Hall, with a particular emphasis on supporting families, for whom long term hotel accommodation can be especially isolating and challenging.



Asylum seekers on a trip to Woodbridge

“Thank you for everything. As you know we don't have any amusement in the hotel just eat drink and sleep, it make us bored and tired. It affects our mental health as well.”

F is an asylum seeker from Syria placed in a hotel locally. He developed a serious eye condition when he was younger and it had been operated on in Syria but he had continued to suffer issues and needed a further operation to prevent him going blind. But he had to be residing in permanent accommodation before this could happen and, as the recovery time was so long, he could not be moved away from the outpatient unit that would perform the operation. The delays caused F to become depressed. To counteract this, we referred him to activities at The Hive in Ipswich and provided him with a laptop so he could study. We worked alongside the Health Outreach Team to obtain the medical evidence needed to argue his case with the Home Office and Migrant Help. F has recently been moved to longer term accommodation in Manchester and is waiting for his operation. He is much happier and grateful for the support he received in Ipswich.

Top countries of origin

These numbers reflect clients we recorded a service with over the year—they do not include family members or everyone we have reached through our groups or outreach work. They are all countries experiencing serious conflict, oppression or persecution that have high asylum success rates (over 80% for all but one country in 2022).

Ukraine	376	Syria	88
Iraq	276	Sudan	53
Afghanistan	237	Eritrea	40
Iran	103		

Client count by subject

These figures show the dramatic rise in asylum seekers needing subsistence support (e.g. clothing) or immigration advice from us.

Subsistence	476
Immigration	425
Job Seeking	367
Housing	285
Adult Education	283
Health	228
Parental Care	227
Benefits	210
Groups Attended	175

Ukrainian refugee support

A major new area of work for us over the past year has been providing specialist support to Ukrainian refugees arriving in Suffolk under the Homes for Ukraine and Ukraine Family schemes. In total, around 1500 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in the county since the Russian invasion, and across our services we estimate we have reached two thirds of those (including family members). We have put together a support team at short notice, including several Ukrainian-speakers, and have provided a range of advice and support to help people orientate themselves and settle into their new communities across Suffolk. Much of our focus has been on employment—we have run employment and training workshops, an [online bilingual skills course](#) and attended job fairs. But we have also provided support with ESOL, wellbeing, housing, schools support and benefits, as well as working with Community Action Suffolk, Suffolk County/District Councils and local Ukraine support hubs, establishing partnerships to ensure local groups are able to help Ukrainian refugees in their areas. Three of our staff team over the year have been Ukrainian refugees, two of whom [shared their stories](#) with local media.



Olena (see case study below) in the job we helped her secure

“I would like to express my thanks, as you have always written back to me, for your kind help, support, good advice, and willingness to help in all the matters I asked about.” [message from a Ukrainian family we have supported]

Olena is a Ukrainian refugee who arrived in Suffolk with her children seeking safety from the brutal conflict in her homeland. Like many who have come to Suffolk under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, she was living in a rural area not well connected to local towns or infrastructure. She was referred to our employment team last November as she had found a job in a duck factory but wanted something better for her future. We knew she was unhappy, and arranged a phone call on a Saturday as this was the only time that suited her.

She expressed how hard she found her current job. In Ukraine she had been an accountant, and she found factory work difficult to cope with mentally and physically. The biggest issue was the lack of opportunity to improve her English, which was not at the level needed for an accountancy job in the UK. Olena was keen to become fully independent and to start renting with her children and dogs. At weekends she visited Norwich to experience a city and have more social contact. We helped to job search and found a vacancy at Norwich City Football Club as a Pastry Chef de Partie, which Olena agreed would be a big improvement.

The application was long and, for a non-native English speaker, complicated. Olena needed our support to complete it. She did not have a CV, so we created one specifically for this vacancy. There were many detailed questions, and Olena needed help to obtain and upload her right-to-work share code. Job searching, communication, coordination and CV writing were all done remotely via WhatsApp and computer in a very intensive day, to meet the deadline. The application was submitted and ten days later Olena received an invitation for interview.

We prepared Olena intensively for the interview, with information, advice and encouragement. She was successful and messaged us to say she was excited and relieved that she no longer had to work in a place where she struggled with the cold and didn't have a personal development path. She told us her new team is friendly and supportive and wanted us all to know that she spent her days working with chocolate and making pastries! She has regained enthusiasm and confidence, and now lives with her family in Norwich where she feels happy and independent. She wants us all to stay in touch and share in her progress.

Improving physical & mental health

With the number of asylum seekers in Suffolk increasing sharply, we have worked closely with the NHS Health Outreach team to support this vulnerable group. We have liaised with health professionals on a range of issues, while our bilingual workers have assisted with sessions including vaccination clinics. Poor mental health and wellbeing is a particular problem, with people arriving with trauma, spending long periods in limbo and facing great anxiety over their futures. As well as referring people for specialist support, we have organised activities such as music and art sessions for asylum seekers to improve wellbeing and alleviate boredom. However, it has also become more challenging for our clients to access GP services—we support people to use online processes, but for those with limited English language skills it can be a struggle. Our exercise group for women at the Unity Centre—an innovative NHS-backed health project—has proved so popular that a second group has started in Ipswich town centre. As a key member of the Unity Centre consortium we have enjoyed working with partners and collaborating on joint projects. There is also a greater focus on giving people the tools to prevent health issues, and this is proving particularly popular with our female clients.



Keep fit session for women



Fitness session word cloud

“I have been feeling a lot better since working my body. I feel less stress and I don’t have pains as much as I used to. The teachers are very nice and make me feel comfortable on letting myself work out. I look forward to every lesson. All my thanks goes to you. Thanks for being a good teacher.”

L is a refugee from Albania who had been attending our group activities for a couple of years before she received a health check in our offices from OneLife Suffolk, which identified her as overweight. L had been aware of this issue—she was getting frustrated at clothes not fitting but accepted this as part of getting older and had not tackled it. The health check gave her the motivation to make changes—she started walking everywhere rather than taking the bus, and became a regular member of our fitness class at the Unity Centre. L was so enthusiastic about the benefits of the class that she was the only client to attend every single session. When schools were shut during one of the sessions, L was determined to still attend so brought her children along to join in too! The female only environment made L feel safe to ask questions regarding her fitness. The class also gave her the opportunity to meet other female refugees and asylum seekers, some of whom were parents at her children’s school. The sessions were therefore great not only for her fitness but also her general wellbeing. L went on to attend our weight management course and the changes she has made have really benefitted not just her but her whole family.

Employment & training work

Our Employment Team have been very busy working intensively with newly arrived Ukrainian and Afghan refugees in particular. Many are highly qualified and occupied skilled positions in their home countries. Our team work with individuals and groups to explain the UK jobs market and application processes, which can be very new—for instance, the layout of a CV in Ukraine is different to the UK. Online training courses have proved very useful when working with Ukrainians across Suffolk, including our own [employability skills course](#) in Ukrainian and English. This work extends to asylum seekers, who are not allowed to work except in specific circumstances, but with whom we are putting an increased emphasis on skills, job readiness, volunteering and consideration of future options. It is also heartening to see increasing numbers of young people who arrived in the UK with their parents accessing further education, and making the most of opportunities their parents never had.



1829 job seeking or adult education advice contacts given
650 clients supported with job seeking/adult education advice
179 people attended online training on employability skills
112 people gained paid employment with our support
23 clients secured work experience/volunteer placements

“The workshop was very motivational and I learned new things that I have never heard before, and they are very important, it was very helpful, thank you. I have understood what is CV and how to write it correctly.”

P is a highly qualified teacher and asylum seeker who was placed in a hotel locally. She wanted to volunteer but with limited English lacked the confidence and ‘know how’ to go about seeking a position. Our ESOL teacher working in the hotel recognised P’s commitment and enthusiasm and referred her directly to our employment team. We introduced her to a local charity shop in Ipswich and helped her apply as a stockroom assistant. Due to Home Office delays she had no ‘ARC’ card or standard acceptable identity papers so we used her Degree Certificate as photo identity and wrote a supportive reference with her application. She was successful and completed the entire online induction/safety training session on her phone the same evening in her hotel (with translation help from her teenage child). We offered the use of a computer in our office but she did not want to wait even one day. P’s attitude represents the desire of many asylum seekers to participate actively in UK society, not simply sit in a hotel room. Her wellbeing, confidence and self-worth have increased, and the volunteering role has improved her English.

N attended our Ukrainian employability course and subsequently received one-to-one support from our employment team. As a result she successfully gained employment at the University of Suffolk in an administrative role.

“SRS helped with the alteration of my CV according to UK standards. After the workshop, we continued to work on my application. The process required me to write a Cover Letter and fill out a few forms. I had help, moral support and encouragement from SRS every step of the way. SRS’ cover letter advice was essential, and their interview tips were very constructive. I most heartedly appreciate all that was done for my successful employment.”

Youth work



Climbing trip for young people

- 73 young people participated in football and street cricket
- 60 young people attended our Homework Clubs
- 53 young people received employment support
- 28 young people received one-to-one educational support

We have developed our youth services over the past year to support the record numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers in Suffolk, as well as the children of growing numbers of refugee and asylum-seeking families. In particular, we have seen an increase in young people from Sudan, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Our youth work provides support and advice on education, employment, health and wellbeing, housing and finances. We run weekly Homework Clubs in Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds, offering English and maths support to around 60 young people aged 11-19. Through these groups, two 15-year-olds—one Ukrainian and one Iraqi—secured scholarships at Ipswich School. Many young clients suffer with sleep problems, low motivation and PTSD, and we know improved wellbeing leads to greater academic success. Ten young people have had mental health referrals through us, and trips and activities such as a mobile phone photography course are geared to improving engagement and wellbeing.

“Homework club has helped me to prepare for my Science A levels. I want to study to become a doctor and I have received advice on this that I could not get anywhere else. I have produced a fantastic personal statement and applied to many universities. I have had interviews at 3 and am waiting to hear the outcome. Homework Club has helped me to prepare, feel more confident and get on track to achieve my dream!”

In October 2022, our Youth Coordinator was contacted by a YMCA support worker requesting urgent wellbeing support for X, a young asylum seeker. X had been in the country for 5 months but was completely disengaged with his life in the UK. Our coordinator saw that X was in a very low mood and unable to carry out normal daily activities. He explained he was unhappy and couldn't focus on things such as college. When asked what he wanted to do with his life, he said all he wanted was to feel happy. He sobbed throughout the appointment and told us he cries almost all day, every day. During the appointment X explained that he grew up with horses in Afghanistan and enjoys being around them. This was the only time he lifted his head and showed any enthusiasm. We contacted the local Riding for the Disabled (RDA) group to enquire about horse therapy. We secured and funded a weekly session for him. There was a huge improvement in the young man's mental health almost immediately. During the first session we saw him smile for the first time. X is now in a much better place—he is more positive about life, happier and more confident, and able to manage his emotions better. He has returned to college full time, moved to semi-independent accommodation and is engaged in other activities. X continues to attend RDA and we have funded this for a year. We are also exploring running additional activities with the RDA such as a group therapy session which might benefit others.

“X is loving the horse riding and we can see a change in him already. Thank you for all your help, the horse riding has been life changing.” [YMCA Support Worker]

Refugee resettlement work

We continue to work intensively with refugees housed in Suffolk under UK government resettlement programmes. At the end of the period covered by this report there were 228 resettled refugees here, including those arriving under Afghan schemes, the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) and the previous Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS, mostly Syrian). The Afghan refugees in particular are spread across Suffolk, with families in Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds, Stowmarket, Newmarket and elsewhere. Over the past year we have provided 3280 advice contacts to resettlement clients, welcoming families on arrival in the UK, ensuring that every person has access to basic services (GPs, schools, benefits etc) within 4 weeks of arriving, and promoting independence throughout our services. We are pleased to report that 94% of resettlement clients are now learning English through formal or informal ESOL, with some achieving high language levels; 90% are regularly attending integration events or other activities, with many women attending our sewing group and International Women's Group; 75% are either employed or actively training and improving specific skills; and 72% can now access mainstream services independently through our support.

"We've had 25 years of war in Afghanistan and that, of course, makes security and normal life very difficult. We wanted a second chance to reach our goals in a country with more facilities and more opportunities. I was working in UK embassy for 10 years and wanted the opportunity to come to UK, and we were very happy to have this chance. I have developed skills since moving to UK, I wanted a job in administration and when I first came it was difficult, they wanted experience. I worked in a warehouse job and got promoted to an admin position in the company. This is now giving the experience I needed and I am sure I will find it easier to get new job in this field. We have adapted to the culture better, and I have passed my UK driving license. I have had big successes! We have started the family we have wanted for a long time. Our son was born in the UK. We feel exceptionally happy here now. We are on the right track, it was very difficult in the hotel but now we are in the home we feel much happier. I am now working in a job I wanted. I want to carry on in my work. I want to complete a PhD in the future, in English literature. I have my master's degree from Afghanistan and I want to be a lecturer or work for a university as my big goal, or maybe work for the government." [An Afghan resettlement client describing his experiences in the UK]

English teaching

We have expanded our ESOL provision over the past year and currently run 16 ESOL classes per week (during term time) at asylum contingency hotels and other venues in and around Ipswich, with classes often split based on language levels. In total 150 people have attended our sessions over this period. We have also delivered regular one-to-one tuition and classes elsewhere in Suffolk, such as a bridging hotel for resettled Afghan refugees in Bury St Edmunds, which are often volunteer-led.

The knock-on effects of Covid made preparing for exams more difficult last year—seven people passed during this period but our emphasis was not on exam success. We have prepared more people to take exams this year, with students keen to gain certificates.



A group of ESOL students on an end of term trip

Women & families support work



International Women's Group Refugee Week picnic

"Many thanks for the support. It has made a positive difference to the child, which is fantastic." [from a local school]

300+ refugee and asylum-seeking children supported

58 women attended our International Women's Group

55 women attended our sewing group

28 women attended a weight management course

Much of our families work this year has been with asylum seeking families placed in contingency accommodation. Being in a shared hotel with little privacy and few resources for prolonged periods of time is highly challenging. We have worked with professionals to help the children access education and have also provided more enjoyable activities like sessions with Suffolk Artlink's clown doctors and trips, for instance to Jimmy's Farm. Working closely with schools has been vital in helping Ukrainian and Afghan families settle into communities across Suffolk where there is limited experience of pupils who have come from war zones and have English as a second language. One of our biggest successes has been seeing many newly arrived women participating in activities like the sewing group and International Women's Group this year. It has also been positive to see the growth in the number of women accessing support from our Employment and Training Team in order to gain employment or attend training courses.

We were approached by a social worker asking for help supporting an asylum-seeking new Mum in a town in rural Suffolk. The woman had recently given birth and her baby had born with a health condition which meant he'd undergone a series of small medical procedures. The health visitor became concerned when she realised the mother had no income and was reliant on intermittent support from friends. We contacted her using Language Line and were able to advise her on her rights. This was quite challenging as the mother was suffering from low mood and finding it difficult to comprehend. We visited her the next day, taking toys, baby clothes and money to check both mother and baby's wellbeing. Our Advice Worker then completed an application for asylum support so the family could be housed and given the regular Home Office support they were entitled to. We maintained regular contact with the mother and told her about free opportunities to socialise with other mothers at the local library. At the same time, we liaised with social workers until they were satisfied that mother and baby were doing well.

International Women's Group

Our International Women's Group is a weekly, female only space, with a crèche so that women with young children can attend. The group—in consultation with the women involved to ensure topics are appropriate—focuses on peer support, English language, and information and activities that promote successful integration. The group was attended by a total of 58 women in the last year, taking part in sessions on health and gentle exercise, art and mindfulness, plus police visits giving guidance on how to keep you and your family safe. We have also continued to run online sessions for the group, which have been particularly valuable for women living in different parts of the county.

Special projects

We have expanded our skills projects over the last year due to their success and positive impact. 55 women have attended our popular weekly sewing group, which helps women from different backgrounds to improve their confidence and English through sharing skills and working together on joint projects. The highlight has been a [display of traditional dresses](#) and items—mainly Kurdish and Afghan, as well as Rwandan and Iranian—at Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich earlier this year. 41 women have taken part in our cookery project, including using professional kitchens at Suffolk New College, and taking part in the New Wolsey Theatre Jubilee picnic, the Aldeburgh Food Festival and an event at Suffolk Food Hall. Our Special Projects Coordinator has also set up a regular new lunch club and a cookery exchange at an asylum contingency hotel. As a result of this project, three women have found paid employment in food/hospitality.



“Thank you very much for having me at the event. I love everything about it and I had a great time, met lots of wonderful people who really want to help and support us to succeed and grow together as a wonderful community”

Pictured above—Sewing Group items on display in the Tudor Rooms at Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich, and a dish prepared by refugee chefs for a sit down meal for 75 guests at Chefs’ Whites during Refugee Week.

Since she was a child G has always loved cooking and knows hundreds of recipes from all over Afghanistan. She knows subtly different versions of the same recipes, their health benefits, how long they take to make, and how to make them look and taste beautiful. However, she has two teenage children and a husband who is out at work every day. Although she has friends in the Afghan community, she spends a lot of time at home cooking and cleaning. She told us she feels trapped and has panic attacks. This is a common problem for the women we support, with isolation often leading to depression. We were keen to get G out of the house and involved in our cooking activities. She has really thrown herself into it and is now a regular attendee. She has helped prepare a lunch at Chefs’ Whites Restaurant (at Suffolk New College), was involved in advising a chef for the New Wolsey Jubilee Picnic, has prepared food for and spoken at an SRS party, and taken part in a trip to the Aldeburgh Food Festival. These activities have really cheered G up and made her feel that maybe it is possible to work with food after all. She is very well organised, an excellent cook and very popular among her peers. We continue to work with her to help her achieve her dream of working with food, but she has already learned how to organise a team of people, that people respect her judgement, and that she knows how to ensure that things get done beautifully and on time. She is incredibly proud of her culture and it fills her with happiness and confidence to be able to share her amazing food and knowledge with others.

Sports and wellbeing activities

We expanded our sports activities work this year to include a focus on wellbeing, reflecting increased need and the link between the two, especially for clients stuck in limbo for long periods. 73 young people took part in football and street cricket, enabling them to keep fit, meet new people from other countries and reduce isolation. Some also received coaching from the Ipswich Town Foundation as part of our joint [refugee football project](#), and had the opportunity to attend an ITFC match and [meet the team captain](#). More than 25 people attended one of our exercise classes, either at the Unity Centre in partnership with Active Suffolk, or provided by our own Health & Sports Coordinator. We have provided activities for people in asylum contingency accommodation, where sport and fitness can be a vital wellbeing tool for people with few resources and suffering anxiety for their future. We have set up circuit training sessions, provided bikes and cycle safety training and equipment, and linked clients to a local boxing club. We also delivered a wellbeing event for women and children, including fitness pilates, yoga and mindfulness, with children making beautiful ribbon flowers and origami animals.



“We enjoy and have fun from football, we play in peaceful weather all nations together. We find new friends, we feel energetic from playing football. That’s great to have a coach who motivates us all.”

Trips and outings

Coming out of Covid restrictions, we put an emphasis on supporting people to access the countryside and have different experiences. For our clients this brings both the therapeutic benefits of green spaces alongside the improved integration and sense of belonging from having the chance to explore their wider surroundings. Over the summer of 2022, we organised a visit to Jimmy’s Farm, a picnic and walk in Woodbridge, a visit to the Suffolk Punch Trust, and a walk around Rendlesham Forest. In total 88 adults and 38 children from 14 different nationalities attended. Each trip prioritised different client groups to ensure those most in need could benefit, including young asylum seekers, resettled Afghan refugees, people in asylum contingency accommodation for long periods of time, and those attending our women’s group. Feedback from the trips was overwhelmingly positive, and the benefits were significant, particularly for those with fewest resources or least access to recreational activities.



“It is my dream to be a firefighter. I loved testing the rescue equipment and dressing in the uniform!”

“Thank you for taking us. We had a fantastic day...it was great to meet someone else from the same village as me in Syria, this made the day special.” [Single father of two daughters]

“Thank you for taking me, my son and daughter on the trip. I don’t get a chance to have a fun day out and farm was really nice—my son enjoyed seeing the animals” [Mother of child with additional needs]

Volunteering

Volunteers continue to be a vital part of our work, adding value, passion and commitment across our services. We have more than 60 active volunteers who give at least one hour per week of their time. Our volunteers lead or assist with our ESOL classes, support our International Women's Group and crèche, deliver one-to-one English or Maths practice, lead online driving theory classes, support our reception desk, and assist at our football, sewing and music sessions. The majority of our volunteers work in or around Ipswich, while others continue to support families or individuals across the county or online.

D was an asylum seeker for 13 years. When he was finally granted status, he was understandably keen to get his life moving. He was homeless but with support moved into temporary emergency accommodation. We helped D to register at a training provider to start ESOL studies. He applied for a DBS and registered as a volunteer with SRS to support other Kurdish speakers. He also volunteered at the local college to support young people studying pre-entry and entry level ESOL. This gave him a great boost in confidence and he was very happy to be able to engage in an activity that had not been open to him as an asylum seeker. Subsequently, D has secured paid full time work and moved into private accommodation. He has the confidence, English skills and motivation now to be more independent and strive to achieve his goals.

Partnership and co-production work

With the significant increase in number and geographical spread of refugees and asylum seekers in Suffolk over the past year, it is critical that we work with both new and existing partners to ensure that people's needs are met while avoiding duplication of services. This has been especially true of support for Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers in hotels. In particular we have developed or expanded partnership working with Suffolk County Council, local Ukraine support hubs, Community Action Suffolk, The Hive, Sanctuary Day Centre, ITFC Foundation, New Wolsey Theatre, Suffolk Libraries, The Food Museum, Suffolk Food Hall, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and Suffolk AONBs, the last two reflecting our emphasis on the wellbeing benefits of green spaces. We are extremely grateful to all the organisations who have pulled together to ensure vulnerable people arriving across Suffolk receive the warm welcome and support they need.

Client Partnership Subcommittee Report

The Client Partnership Subcommittee's role is to lead and support SRS in the development of its partnership with clients to enable consultation, engagement and co-design of the services it offers. These are key tools for the quality assurance of SRS services and people's empowerment to have more control of their lives. During 2022/23 the Subcommittee developed two ways of gathering feedback from clients, one based on the Padlet app and the other a tablet based survey. Both will be implemented and evaluated in 2023/24. The Subcommittee also reviewed the way clients can raise issues by developing a more accessible complaints system, expected to be in place in 2024.

The Subcommittee has a plan of work for the next 2 years including: encouraging clients to volunteer with SRS; learning from feedback gathered informally; encouraging people who are, or have been, a refugee or asylum seeker, or who have close family links to these groups, to become Trustees; and the two listening approaches described earlier. SRS has recognised that it will require increased capacity through a dedicated worker to take these developments forward, with plans to move forward with this in early 2024.

Gerry Toplis, Chair, Client Partnership Subcommittee

Media work

Refugee and asylum issues have rarely been far from the news over the past year. Much of the media debate can be led by negative government rhetoric rather than the reality of human beings with powerful stories caught up in complex and dangerous situations. We have therefore used our platform as Suffolk's refugee charity to give voice to our clients' lived experience of the issues wherever possible, and to provide compassion, facts and understanding. Over the course of the year we were featured nearly 50 times across local radio, print and TV. We helped tell the [stories of Afghans](#) resettled in Suffolk, Syrians affected by the [terrible earthquake](#) in their country, [asylum seekers placed in hotels](#) locally, and Ukrainian refugees (who were also valuable members of our staff team) [one year on](#) from the Russian invasion. We have provided regular updates on [Suffolk's amazing welcome](#) to Ukrainians arriving here, [vital context](#) to government asylum plans and [reflections on the refugee situation](#) locally and globally. We have also sought to influence wider debate with opinion pieces published in [response to government plans](#) to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, and to [call for safe, legal routes](#) for people needing to seek protection in the UK.

'Don't forget about us' - two refugees in Ipswich who fled Taliban tell their story

Abygail Fossett

Published: 6:30 AM August 15, 2022 Updated: 12:15 PM August 15, 2022



As we mark one year since the Kabul airlift, Farida and Abdul Quryshe have shared what it was like when the Taliban took over Afghanistan, and how they came to Suffolk. - Credit: Archant

'Plan to ship asylum seekers to Rwanda is cruel and inhumane'

Martin Simmonds

Published: 2:53 PM June 25, 2022



Hundreds of people gathered for a vigil to support Ukraine on Ipswich Cornhill earlier this year. - Credit: Sarah Lucy Brown

UK and international context

Our work takes place in a [global context](#) where more people have been forced from their homes around the world than ever before, with a shocking 19 million people newly displaced and 8 million new refugees in just one year. The modest increase in people seeking protection in the UK should always be seen against this wider backdrop. Closer to home we have seen an increase in asylum applications, although despite the endless debate around 'small boat crossings', Germany, France, Spain and Austria all received more asylum applications than the UK in 2022 (with Italy around the same). The clear majority of people arriving here are proven to need our protection. We will [continue to oppose](#) the government's Illegal Migration Act, which seeks to undermine the right to claim asylum in the UK, and to call for faster and fairer decision-making and the establishment of safe and legal routes.



108.4 million people worldwide forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, and violence, **an increase of 19 million people in one year**

35.3 million refugees worldwide, up from **27.1** million, the **largest yearly increase ever recorded**

70 per cent of refugees are hosted by neighbouring countries

52 per cent of all refugees came from just three countries: Syria (6.5 million), Ukraine (5.7 million) and Afghanistan (5.7 million)

70% of asylum claims in the UK are granted protection at initial decision

136,000 asylum applications awaiting an initial decision (as of August 23)

Treasurer's report

With the grants and donations received in 2022/23, SRS continued to provide a broad range of services. Costs have been in line with our budget, and we are extremely grateful to our funders and private supporters who have donated regularly towards our work. As of March 2023, our reserves were in line with our stated policy of maintaining around 50% of annual running costs.

SRS's work has grown and changed again this year. Covid has become less of an issue, but the full impact of the Ukraine war has been felt and asylum seekers placed in hotels by the Home Office have brought acute new needs. To meet these needs, our budget has grown from £520,000 in 2021/22 to £705,000 in 2022/23. Much of this has been funded by new Suffolk County Council contracts to work with people from Ukraine but, in order to provide vital support to more than 400 asylum seekers, a substantial amount has had to be funded by local grant-making bodies and individual donors.

Taking on Ukraine contracts for new and innovative work was a risk to SRS, as the scale, type, cost and duration of the service could only be estimated initially, and the service has needed to be refined over time. By building on our experience and expertise, and 'learning by doing', we have been able to support these clients within the contractual funding made available.

We have used a similar approach to supporting the greatly increased number of asylum seekers accommodated locally. With no specific government funding available for this work, we are very grateful to the local funders and donors who have stepped in, and to Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council for recognising the greatly increased demands on SRS and the importance of specialist, on-the-ground support services. SRS has also forged new partnerships with community organisations, such as Sanctuary Day Centre, to ensure efficient use of funds.

As a charitable organisation, we rely wholly on contracts, grants, and donations. Many are rightly given with requirements around the services to be delivered and outcomes to be achieved within certain timeframes. Whilst these often fit with our overall objectives, some statutory funding can come with particular conditions. If and when the Illegal Migration Act is enacted, this issue could come into sharper focus and the balance between advancing our charitable objectives and meeting funding criteria will continue to be an important topic of discussion within SRS.

The Finance Subcommittee continues to regularly review our financial position in this challenging world. Of great benefit has been the ability to efficiently record and flexibly report on the accounts each month using the accounting software installed in early 2022. We thank our accountants, CAPlus, for their advice and support in this area. Looking forward to 2023/24, we are confident our finances are sound. The Trustees continue to closely and regularly monitor our position, to ensure that SRS can always meet its obligations and secure the long-term stability of the charity.

A final word of thanks goes to our volunteers. They represent the fine character of the Suffolk community and are a resource for SRS which no accounting mechanism can properly represent.

Keith Faull, Treasurer

We offer our heartfelt thanks to the many individual supporters and community fundraisers who give regularly or make one-off donations to our work. These unrestricted funds have been of vital importance to us over the past year as they have allowed us to meet some of the most urgent needs of asylum seekers arriving in Suffolk, often with nothing but the clothes they are wearing.

We are sincerely thankful to the following organisations for providing grants towards our work during 2021-22: BBC Children in Need; Garfield Weston; Building Better Opportunities Fund; Tudor Trust; Lloyds Bank Foundation; Nationwide Community Grant (via Essex Community Foundation); AMIF; AB Charitable Trust; Ipswich Borough Council; Mrs LD Rope's Charitable Settlement; Lovel Foundation; Limbourne Trust; Suffolk County Council Engaged Communities; Suffolk and North East Essex ICS Community Ambition Programme; Mulberry Trust; EELGA; Annie Tranmer Charitable Trust; Royal Warrant Holders' Association

We are extremely grateful to Suffolk Community Foundation and their funders for their guidance and the following funds: Realising Ambitions Fund; Suffolk Police & Crime Commissioner's Fund; New Anglia LEP Community Challenge Fund; Frank Jackson Fund; Healthy Heart Fund; Hopkins Charitable Fund; Pear Family Fund; RJB Fund; Maurken Fund; Suffolk Hardship Fund.

We continue to deliver refugee resettlement support on behalf of Suffolk County Council, including the UK Refugee Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), Afghan Relocations & Assistance Policy (ARAP), Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), and Ukraine work, and we are very grateful to them for their commission and supportive partnership working.

SRS Strategic Plan 2020-2023

SRS's Purpose (Mission)

Suffolk Refugee Support exists to ensure that all asylum seekers and refugees in Suffolk are enabled to live integrated, fulfilled and contributing lives in their new communities.

SRS Operating Principles: To guide Trustees, paid staff and volunteers

- ⇒ We are driven by a recognition that each person is unique, that every individual has intrinsic value and has a constructive role to play in UK society
- ⇒ We are always open, friendly and welcoming
- ⇒ We are respectful, reliable, honest and transparent in all our dealings with one another and with others
- ⇒ We direct all of our efforts towards self-determination and ultimate independence for our clients
- ⇒ Our work is always led by the needs and interests of our clients
- ⇒ At all times we work in ways that ensure the all-round safety and security of our clients and everyone who works for SRS
- ⇒ We always work to the highest standards; keeping ourselves fully informed and knowledgeable about every sphere of our work

SRS Strategic Aims: 2020 – 2023 (The following six aims have equal priority)

- 1) To ensure that refugees' and asylum seekers' basic needs for immigration status, housing, literacy, education, physical and mental health, employment and personal safety are met
- 2) To work in ways that lead to SRS' service users moving into independence from SRS' services
- 3) Through advocacy, lobbying and other means, ensure that statutory and other bodies meet their obligations to asylum seekers and refugees
- 4) To continue to mobilise volunteers' involvement in supporting the work of SRS, and further develop the volunteering contribution to the organisation
- 5) To continue to raise awareness and promote understanding of the refugee experience in the community
- 6) To ensure that Suffolk Refugee Support is effectively governed, led, managed and funded in order to maximise its impact, and that its work is informed by 'voices of lived experience'

HR Subcommittee report

The HR Subcommittee monitors SRS policies on equality, diversity, and protected characteristics in terms of employment, trusteeships, and volunteering; adopts and reviews policies to support the functioning of the organisation; and has oversight of staffing issues within SRS.

Regarding the first function, the Subcommittee and Board are satisfied that SRS continues to be an equal opportunities employer with a diverse workforce. We recognise our current offices can pose challenges in making reasonable adjustments for clients with physical disabilities, although mitigations are available when needed. Regarding the second, the Subcommittee has a rolling programme to review all SRS policies and is meeting its objectives in this regard. With the third, the Subcommittee is leading a review of SRS' staffing and salary structures, and also developing a staff wellbeing policy. These are large pieces of work (especially given the growth in staff numbers of in response to recent refugee schemes, and cost of living increases), which we expect to be completed in 2024. We are very proud of the work SRS does and will continue to do our best to honour that work by ensuring our staff are supported so that they can, in turn, continue to provide individualised, flexible support to refugees and asylum seekers in Suffolk.



Santa steam train trip to Mid Suffolk Railway for Ukrainian and Afghan families



Members of our sewing group at the Suffolk High Sheriff Awards ceremony



Our Health & Sports Coordinator with a member of our football group at the ITFC Foundation fixture



The SRS team with our stall at the One Big Multicultural Festival in Ipswich



'Seeds of solidarity' put together by students at Wood Ley Primary School, Suffolk's first School of Sanctuary

Staff team (as of 1st September 2023)

Charity Manager	Rebecca Crerar
Operations Manager	Ellie Roberts
Advice Service Manager	Liz Wood
Refugee Resettlement Programme Manager	Patricia Ferreira
Resettlement Coordinator and Advice Worker	Ashraf El Husseiny
Employment & Training Coordinator	Pippa Baker
Youth Coordinator	Sarah Templeman
Health & Sports Activities Coordinator	Rachel Bond
Resettlement Support Coordinator—Ukraine Programme	Leah King
Resettlement Programme Bilingual Advice Worker	Sharafatullah Danish
Resettlement Programme Bilingual Advice Worker	Shakiba Alizadeh
Resettlement Programme Community Liaison Officer/Advice Worker	Rosie Voller
Women & Families Advice Worker	Fatima Khan
Bilingual Advice Worker	Faizaa Ali
Housing Advice Worker	Olivia Brinkley
Trainee Advice Worker	Hasan Beshtawi
Employment & General Advice Worker—Ukraine Programme	Vida Zada
Employment & General Advice Worker—Ukraine Programme	Alona Kotova
Advice Worker—Ukraine Programme	Rita Fadieieva
General Advice Worker—Ukraine Programme	Cathy Gonzalez
Projects Worker	Sarah Cole
ESOL & International Women's Group Facilitator	Catherine Costello
ESOL Tutor	Michaela Freeman
ESOL Tutor	Kate Watson
International Women's Group ESOL Coordinator	Amna Smith
International Women's Group Crèche Leader	Shkurte Bejtullahu
HR & Training Officer	Marianne Walker
Volunteer Coordinator	Libby Ruffle
IT & Facilities Manager	Ronan Doorly
Finance Officer	Vanessa Ransby
Fundraising and Communications Officer	Martin Simmonds

Board of Trustees (as of 1st September 2023)

Chair	Dr Felicity Szesnat
Vice Chair	Gerry Toplis
Treasurer	Dr Keith Faull
Trustee	Will Atkins
Trustee	Amelia Whitworth
Trustee (co-opted)	Stuart Gordon
Trustee (co-opted)	Paul Reeves
Honorary Trustee	Alan Blackshaw
Honorary Trustee	Beteja Grajqevci Dovao

We would like to thank sincerely the following trustees who resigned during 2022/23 for their services to SRS: Greg Dodds, Mary Engleheart, Christina Sweet-Escott, Eddie Thompson



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