



Suffolk Refugee Support
Minutes of the 25th Annual General Meeting
2nd October 2024 at 6:00 pm
Museum Street Methodist Church, Ipswich

Attendees

The AGM was attended by eighty-one people. Thirteen of those present were members with voting rights. Since this represented more than 10% of the total membership, the AGM was deemed quorate.

Apologies

Apologies received included those from: Councillor Elango K Elavalakan, the Mayor of Ipswich; Cat MacDonald; Peter Wintgens; Sue Youngs; Mary Swainson; Lois Williams; Kat Saunders; Denise and Kevin Burton; Chris Jay; Sue Liddell; and, Anne-Marie Williams.

1 Welcome

Felicity Szesnat (FS), Chair of the Board of Trustees, welcomed members, staff, volunteers, Trustees and, in particular, Clients of SRS to this special AGM held in the year of SRS's 25th Anniversary. FS noted that His Worshipful, the Mayor of Ipswich, Councillor Elango Elavalakan had sent his apologies but that SRS was honoured to welcome the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Lynne Mortimer to the meeting. Special mention was made of other honoured guests including: Councillor Elizabeth Hughes - Ipswich Borough Council (Labour); Councillors Inga and Tim Lockington - IBC (Liberal Democrats); His Honour Judge Martyn Levett; Hugh Jolly - Trustee of the Mrs L D Rope Charitable Settlements; and, Jodie Rendell – responsible for the Resettlement and Ukraine contracts at Suffolk County Council. FS also welcomed SRS's new Patron, Sir Nick Young.

After briefing the meeting on 'housekeeping' matters, FS explained that voting is restricted to SRS Members and would be conducted by a count of Members' voting cards.

Before asking Sir Nick Young (NY) to address the meeting, FS expressed her delight that SRS had persuaded NY to serve as its first Patron. She mentioned his vast experience in working with the Red Cross and other charities, his deep knowledge of the refugee/asylum seeker landscape, and his winning personal qualities.

2 Opening Message by SRS Patron, Sir Nick Young

NY thanked FS for her introduction. He then stressed the importance of the work that SRS had done over 25 years in helping some of the world's most vulnerable who had often endured ghastly journeys to reach the UK. He praised SRS's fantastic effort in affording asylum seekers and refugees 'a proper welcome' and offering them support to re-establish their lives.

NY said he was particularly impressed by the fact that SRS achieved so much even though it was operating 'on a shoestring'. He added that he believes that there are hundreds of people across the county who would support SRS if they knew of its work.

NY finished by thanking people for venturing out on a wet evening and by reiterating his pride at being Patron of SRS.

3a Minutes of Previous Year's AGM (4th October 2023)

No amendments to the Minutes of the 2023 AGM were suggested. Paul Reeves (PR) proposed that they be approved and Stuart Gordon (SG) seconded the proposal. All 13 members present approved and so the Minutes were adopted.

3b Chair's Report by Felicity Szesnat

The Chair's Report was circulated to all as part of the SRS Annual Report 2023-2024 and is reproduced as Annex A of these minutes.

3c Charity Manager's Report by Rebecca Crerar

The Charity Manager's Report was circulated to all as part of the SRS Annual Report 2023-2024 and is reproduced as Annex B of these minutes.

4 Updating the Articles of Association

FS reported, with regret, that it had not proved possible to present new Articles of Association to this AGM. She is continuing to work with the Charities Commission (CC) which has asked for further evidence to support the latest submission. As soon as the revised Articles are approved by the CC, the Board will either call an Extraordinary General Meeting for the purpose of adopting them or it will move to submit them to the next Annual General Meeting (2025). FS stressed that the existing Articles of Association are in place and remain fit for purpose.

5 Annual Accounts 2023-2024

5a Treasurer's Report by Stuart Gordon, Honorary Treasurer

Stuart Gordon (SG) explained that the Finance Sub-Committee meets monthly to review expenditure against the agreed budget whilst Vanessa Ransby, Finance Officer, takes care of the day to day accountancy. SG expressed his thanks to Vanessa for the work she does.

SG reported that it had been a difficult year which, from the outset, held a great degree of uncertainty. Against this backdrop, the Board had agreed that, for the year in question, SRS should continue to deliver the services it had put in place. As a result, planned expenditure exceeded income requiring use of some of the organisation's reserves. However, the reserves at the end of the financial year were still within agreed limits. In other words, expenditure and the maintenance of reserves were still 'going to plan'.

SG drew attention to a restatement of the previous year's accounts amounting to a downward adjustment of ~£34,000. The original discrepancy was inadvertently introduced when SRS was changing its accounting software system. This was only detected and reversed after the 2022-2023 accounts had been prepared hence the need for a restatement in the current year's accounts.

5b Appointment of the Independent Examiner

SG proposed that Community Accounting Plus be reappointed as the Independent Examiner. Gerry Toplis (GT) seconded the proposal. 13 members voted in favour and, there being no votes against, the proposal was approved.

5c Acceptance of the Annual Accounts 2023-2024

SG proposed that Annual Accounts for 2023-2024 be approved. Keith Faull seconded the proposal. 13 members voted in favour and, there being no votes against, the Accounts were approved.

6 Election of Trustees by Members

FS reminded those present that those co-opted to the Board of Trustees after an AGM had to be formally elected at the following AGM. This year, two co-opted members were being nominated: Olena Kushakovska whose expertise and personal experiences have made a fantastic contribution to the Board's work over the past year; and, James Wellesley Wesley whose extensive expertise has already strengthened the Board's financial and fund raising capacities.

In addition to the election of co-opted members, SRS' Articles of Association require a third of serving Trustees to stand down each year and, if willing, to stand for re-election. In line with this requirement, two serving Trustees were nominated for re-election at this AGM: Stuart Gordon, the current Honorary Treasurer, and Keith Faull, a longstanding Board member and former office holder.

(Descriptive biodata for all those nominated for election to the Board was included in the AGM materials for members.)

Voting

- Olena Kushakovska was nominated by FS and seconded by SG. Members present voted unanimously in favour and, hence, Olena was elected to serve as a Trustee.
- James Wellesley Wesley was nominated by GT and seconded by Paul Reeves (PR). Members present voted unanimously in favour and, hence, James was elected to serve as a Trustee.
- Keith Faull was nominated by FS and seconded by GT. Members present voted unanimously in favour and, hence, Keith was elected to serve a further term as a Trustee.
- Stuart Gordon was nominated by GT and seconded by PR. Members present voted unanimously in favour and, hence, Stuart was elected to serve a further term as a Trustee.

Following the election/re-election of Trustees, FS encouraged anyone present interested in serving on the Board to talk to her or to any of the other Trustees.

7 *Personal Achievements and Client Stories*

7a *Interview with Abbas*

Anna Girling, SRS Client Partnership Worker, interviewed Abbas, a young Client, about his experiences as an asylum seeker.

Abbas described the long and arduous journey that he, his mother, and his young siblings had endured travelling from Afghanistan to the UK. He told of their arrival by boat, being met by the police and then housed temporarily in a hotel. Eventually the family was placed in a hotel in Cambridge where they stayed for about a year during which time Abbas began to settle to his studies in college. Then, almost without warning, the family was told that they were being moved to Ipswich. Abbas' sense of humour shone through as he informed the audience that 'although Ipswich is OK, I much prefer Cambridge'!

On arriving in Ipswich with little support for the family, Abbas found SRS via a Google search and made contact. He said that SRS had offered him and his family a lot of practical support including vouchers for food and advice on housing. When offered help around his education, Abbas reported that he'd already taken the initiative and applied!

The interview allowed those present to see the resilience and resourcefulness that Abbas, in common with many other young Clients, displays in spite of the immense challenges faced.

7b *A series of short films*

Martin Simmonds, Fundraising and Communications Officer, introduced a series of short films showcasing some of the positive achievements of SRS and its Clients.

The first film focussed on the involvement of young SRS Clients, who attend weekly football training sessions, at Ipswich Town Football Club's 'Community Day'. The Club has been very supportive of SRS's young footballers and the impact of playing on the Portman Road pitch and meeting top flight players cannot be overestimated. The highlight of the film showed young Clients meeting the Ipswich star Ali Al-Hamadi whose family fled his home country of Iraq when he was very young. It was great to see the interaction between young men with shared journeys.

Martin thanked Rachel Bond, the SRS Health and Sports Co-ordinator and Sam Oakley, the Ipswich Town Football Club Health & Inclusion Co-ordinator, for their dedication, time and hard work.

The second film featured two young SRS Clients – Mohammed from Iran and Nikita from Ukraine. They explained how they had forged a friendship at East Bergholt school even though they initially shared little language. Bound together by their love of music, the desire and ability to do well in their academic studies, and their shared sense of humour, the strength of their friendship was obvious to all. The film also served as a reminder as to how much this country has to gain from welcoming such talented young people.

The third film was shot at the 25th Anniversary Celebration Night held at the DanceEast space in Ipswich. The highlight was a spectacular fashion show with clothes designed and produced by the SRS Women's Group and modelled by students of Suffolk New College.

Martin thanked Ahmad Abdallah, SRS Employment Advice Worker for filming the event and editing the footage into a fitting tribute to a special evening.

7c Musical performance

To conclude this section of the AGM, some members of the Youth Group performed a musical piece with percussion and vocals. Those involved had been working with local charity Ipswich Community Media and Status Creative CIC. The performance was arranged and supported by Status Creative's George Fothergill.

Against percussion rhythms provided by Said and Walidien, Daryas sang a traditional song in Sorani Kurdish which held the audience transfixed. It was an amazing performance which fittingly drew sustained, enthusiastic applause.

8 Questions, Observations and Any Other Business

Paul, a Client, expressed his thanks for all the help that SRS has offered him.

A participant asked whether the new MP (Jack Abbott – Labour) has expressed any interest in the work of SRS. The Charity Manager said that it was very early in the new Parliament but SRS would be keeping him and others fully aware of the organisation's work.

RC was asked whether SRS was kept informed of the number of new refugees and asylum seekers arriving in the county. RC explained that, as an organisation in the voluntary sector, there is no statutory obligation on the authorities to keep us informed. Indeed, a family of seven including a young person with special educational needs (SEN) was recently rehoused within Suffolk without warning. RC stressed that SRS takes steps to ensure that when potential housing is identified, our information leaflets are made available and that other signposting to SRS services is in place.

A participant, referring back to the sudden relocation of Abbas' family from Cambridge to Ipswich asked who is responsible and how is the process organised? RC explained that the closure of hotels and the rapid granting of refugee status to clear the backlog of asylum applications had created a very difficult situation. SRS cannot control this and simply does its very best to react to issues as they arise.

A Client from Ukraine explained how she had visited the Job Centre because she wanted to support herself but was told that the Job Centre focusses on helping people with benefits claims and that it can't help with finding jobs! Instead, the Job Centre suggested that she approach SRS for help for which she was grateful.

Finally, Nikita, thanked SRS for all the help offered and singled out the social trips organised by staff and volunteers as being particularly 'wonderful'.

9 A Personal Statement: Councillor Lynne Mortimer, Deputy Mayor of Ipswich

The Deputy Mayor started by offering her thanks to SRS for offering 25 years of 'immaculate service'.

She reflected that she, like many of us, has been lucky enough to have enjoyed a relatively peaceful and settled life. She also pointed out that we are fortunate to live in a relatively tolerant society where we are allowed to hold different views and to live our lives in different ways without persecution. As a consequence, she finds it almost impossible to imagine the hardships faced by those forced to leave their homes and to undertake unbelievably arduous journeys to seek asylum here. That is why she is most grateful that SRS has, for 25 years, responded in 'such an incredible way' to support those in need.

10 Close

The Chair thanked the Deputy Mayor for her kind remarks and then closed the formal part of the meeting. Finally, everyone was invited to chat informally whilst enjoying the wonderful food prepared and served by members of the Women's Group and others.

Annex A: Chair's Report

This has been a hugely important year for SRS as we celebrate its 25th anniversary. From very small but ambitious beginnings in 1999, to an organisation which today employs 31 staff members and has grown to meet greatly increased needs. However, the challenges posed 25 years ago mirror closely those of today: the waiting period for a decision on refugee status was 27 months, recently it was around 21 months; 80,000 asylum seekers per year then, now ~67,000; asylum seekers arriving in Ipswich, Harwich, and Felixstowe, today refugees similarly scattered around Suffolk. Whatever daily challenges arise (and there are many), the overall landscape in this sector remains largely unchanged.

This report is also written in a week in which there have been riots across the UK, targeting asylum seekers and refugees in particular. Yet, there is hope in that people across the country have been standing up in their tens of thousands in support of them, and that the new government appears to be moving away from the more draconian policies enacted by the previous government. Against this difficult-but-normal backdrop, SRS has continued to deliver an excellent service for its clients. Feedback from clients is overwhelmingly positive, and a Client Partnership Officer has been recruited to build on a strong foundation of engagement with clients, continuing to seek to centre their voices and needs within the services SRS offers.

I am privileged to work with a group of very dedicated and skilled Trustees, two of whom have been recruited since the last AGM: Lena Kushakovska, and James Wellesley Wesley. The Board also has a new volunteer Administrative Assistant, responsible for minute-taking: I'd like to express our gratitude to George Bethell for taking on this role, and for his innovations in it. In addition to its usual work reviewing policies and processes, the Board has also focused on supporting the SRS management team in making further refinements to its financial reporting and modelling to ensure - as best it can - that SRS remains on a solid financial footing. You, our members and donors, are essential to achieving this, and we thank you for your generosity and commitment to what can sometimes be an unpopular cause.

Earlier this year, the Board was delighted to confirm the appointment of Sir Nick Young, as SRS' first Patron: he has brought a huge amount of passion, wisdom, and energy with him, and we look forward to collaborating further with him in the coming years.

The Board of Trustees has also focused on making sure that there is a scheme in place to ensure that decision-making between the Board, Charity Manager, and management team is smooth and seamless. Furthermore, the risk register has been re-designed to improve the process of identifying and managing the risks SRS faces. Finally, there has been a focus on improving staff retention, including through revising the staffing salary scale structure and adopting a well-being at work policy.

Which brings me to the SRS staffing team: I'd like to pay tribute to Rebecca and her team, whose willingness to get up every morning and take up the struggle afresh always inspires me. Thank you! Finally, we continue to stand in solidarity with each and every client SRS works with, and with asylum seekers and refugees across the UK.

Dr Felicity Szesnat, Chair of the Board of Trustees

August 2024

Annex B: Charity Manager's Report

They say that the only constant is change and this rings very true for the year we are reporting on!

Throughout 2023-24 we witnessed sudden changes to the numbers of asylum seekers housed in Suffolk - with asylum contingency hotels housing 400 people, some singles and some in family groups. Many had experienced the terrifying journey by small boat to the UK to be met with negativity and distrust fuelled by the government's decision to deem asylum applications inadmissible and threaten to send anyone arriving by boat to Rwanda (a country ironically which produces its own refugees). There was no warning that Suffolk was to host asylum seekers in hotels and SRS had to adapt rapidly to meet the needs of these people alongside its usual clients, with little extra funds/staffing.

Along with this sudden rise in our workload, we continued to offer support to over 1,000 Ukrainian refugees who had arrived in Suffolk because of the invasion by Russia of their beloved homeland. Just as we geared up our services and reallocated resources to support the asylum seekers in hotels with clothing, shoes, English classes, sports and health activities, access to medical appointments, access to immigration solicitors and emotional support, the Home Office closed the hotels, again at very short notice.

Working in the refugee and asylum field we are continually having to adapt our services to meet the ever-changing needs of our client groups and support them to cope with uncertain futures and an unwelcoming legal environment. We are very grateful to everyone who helps to make our services and activities happen, from larger funders such as the National Lottery through to generous individuals who donate funds, essential items and their time as volunteers and supporters. Without this support many asylum seekers and refugees would face real hardship in Suffolk.

I am proud of the 31 staff and over 40 volunteers for their unfailing dedication to our clients, even when times are tough and good news is in short supply. To witness our clients receiving a warm and kind welcome at our services and to see them relax, grow as individuals and start to live their lives in a positive manner with renewed hope for the future makes the everyday stresses worthwhile.

I am very grateful to the trustees who have led us through the tough times and continue to provide professional guidance. They give their time for free and often with little acknowledgement - we are extremely grateful to each of you for your contribution. A special thank you to Dr Felicity Szesnat for her leadership of the board and her support to me. I am also delighted that Sir Nick Young has become our first ever patron and I look forward to working with him going forward.

Funding is always the biggest worry for SRS - there is growing competition for funding as many charities bid for the same monies. At the same time demand for our services continues to grow and the needs of our clients become more complex as other support services are reduced or withdrawn entirely. In an unsettled and tragic world, where lives continue to be ripped apart by conflict, we are determined to provide a place of refuge and hope here in Suffolk. Thank you to everyone who makes this possible.

Rebecca Crerar, Charity Manager

August 2024