



Suffolk Refugee Support
Minutes of the 26th Annual General Meeting
8th October 2025 at 6:00 pm
Museum Street Methodist Church, Ipswich

Attendees

The AGM was attended by fifty 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: Maha Elnahhas, Marion Lanyan, Beverley Levy, Gerry Toplis, Carolyn Crabb, Lisa Hilson, James Wellesley Wesley, and George Bethell.

1 Welcome

Felicity Szesnat (FS), Chair of the Board of Trustees, welcomed members, staff, volunteers, trustees and clients of SRS to the AGM. A special welcome was extended to High Sheriff Gulshan Kayembe, Ipswich Mayor Councillor Stefan Long, and SRS Patron Sir Nick Young.

FS briefed the meeting on 'housekeeping' matters and explained that voting is restricted to SRS members and is conducted by a count of members' voting cards. FS invited Sir Nick Young (NY) to make the opening address.

2 Opening Message by SRS Patron, Sir Nick Young

NY reflected on his 18 months serving as Patron. He said that he had been impressed with the support that SRS provides to its clients. He stressed the importance of that support to the local community in the context of current debates about refugees and asylum seekers. NY pointed out that the support that SRS receives from its members and other supporters is vitally important.

NY thanked all those present but expressed a special message of thanks to the Sewing Group for making his amazing waistcoat!

3a Minutes of Previous Year's AGM (2nd October 2024)

No amendments to the Minutes of the 2024 AGM were suggested. Paul Reeves proposed that they be approved and Stuart Gordon seconded the proposal. All members present approved and so the Minutes were adopted.

3b Chair's Report

FS reported that the previous year had seen both good and bad news for refugees and asylum seekers and those working in the field. On the negative side, there had been changes in policy and law to address the 'pull factors' for refugees and to make it harder to obtain British citizenship. There remain few legal routes for immigrants and the right of family reunion has been removed. For those granted refugee status, 'move on' support has been reduced to just 28 days. On the positive side, the Rwanda scheme has been stopped in its entirety and in response to anti-immigration protests, there has been a wave of counter protests in support of refugees and asylum seekers. There has also been an increase in registered charities supporting refugees.

FS suggested that there were things that individuals can do including: become a trustee of SRS; donate to SRS and/or support SRS in other ways; and, in particular, challenge the false narratives surrounding refugees and asylum seekers. FS paid tribute to Martin Simmonds (MS) for his 'facts and figures' sheets on this issue.

Over the past year, several SRS policies have been updated. These include the 'Aims and Values' of the organization, the policy on financial reserves, and membership policies. The trustees have also supported database developments.

Over the next 12 months, we will be considering a new, strategic three-year plan including a review of fundraising policy. The plan will continue to keep our clients at the heart of what the organization does.

FS thanked her fellow trustees and the SRS team for their hard work over the year.

The Chair's Report for 2025 published in the Annual Review is included with these minutes as Annex A.

4 Charity Manager's Report

Rebecca Crerar (RC) presented her report on the challenges and achievements of the past year.

The scale and scope of SRS's work was presented (~1200 people from 47 countries helped and 41 resettled families receiving support. Key challenges include significant financial pressures across the charitable sector and the increasing dispersal of potential clients across new locations in Suffolk. This places great pressure on the advice team to reach and support dispersed families. The main concerns of our clients are money, housing, education, training and employment, English classes and accessing meaningful activities. In addition to advice services, SRS continues to offer a women's group, English classes for speakers of other languages (ESOL), a homework club, football sessions, a sewing group, a monthly youth club, and other Client Partnership work.

RC explained the difficulty of working in a climate where anti-immigration feeling is rising leading to hatred, civil unrest and protests. SRS is in touch with the police and receives updates on the security situation. Thankfully there have been few protests locally, but clients are fearful and the staff are exercising greater vigilance. RC stressed the need to stand up to hatred and to be unafraid of showing compassion for those unlucky enough to have been born in unstable environments, fearful of violence, imprisonment for political convictions, and of being kidnapped or murdered. In this climate, we need to uphold the right to claim asylum and for asylum seekers to be treated as human beings and given a fair and timely hearing. SRS supports resettlement programmes and safe passage.

Finally, RC displayed SRS' current 'Aims and Values' for attendees who were also given paper copies for future reference.

The Charity Manager's Report as published in the Annual Review is included as Annex B to these minutes.

5 Annual Accounts

Annual accounts were presented by Honorary Treasurer, Stuart Gordon (SG) who reported that in the financial year 2024-2025 costs were maintained within budget. Total costs were just below £1 million. During the year, reserves were reduced by £37,000. This was a planned reduction and in accordance with the reserves policy. Going forward, reserves will be maintained at 25% of contract costs (i.e. costs relating to contracts) and 50% of other costs. The Finance sub-committee continues to have a good understanding of the financial health of SRS.

Appointment of Community Accounting Plus as the independent examiner: proposed by SG, seconded by FS and passed by a vote of 11 members.

Proposals to accept the Accounts: proposed by SG, seconded by Paul Reeves (PR) and accepted by a vote of 11 members.

6 Election of trustees to the Board by members

Before turning to the election of trustees co-opted since the last AGM, FS paid tribute to two trustees who had resigned since then: Gerry Toplis and Keith Faull. In particular, FS thanked Gerry, who had been a trustee for the past eight or so years, two and a half of which had been as Chair of the Board, and the following three years as Vice-Chair. Gerry's work first, in ensuring that SRS' governance structure, policies, and processes are robust, and, second, his championing of a client-centered approach, have been critical to SRS' success.

FS explained the process and drew attention to trustee's biographies included in the meeting papers. FS briefly introduced the new co-opted trustees - Caroline Crabb, Louisa Hilson, and Emma Sheppard. The co-option of trustees was proposed by FS seconded by PR and passed by 13 member votes. Caroline, Lisa and Emma were declared co-opted trustees.

FS and PR were standing for re-election. Their re-election was proposed by SG and seconded by Olena Kushakovska. FS and PR were elected by 13 member votes.

FS extended thanks to Keith Faull and Gerry Toplis who resigned during the year.

FS finished by informing those present that the Board will be seeking two new trustees in the near future.

7 Personal Stories and Achievements

Videos

Martin Simmons introduced two short videos. The first showed coverage on ITV News of the work of the SRS sewing group. The second concerned an event where SRS supported access to green spaces.

A Personal Story

Fazal, an 18 year old in the UK under the resettlement scheme, gave a very moving account of his experiences of leaving his home in Afghanistan and his hopes for the future.

Performance

The meeting enjoyed songs performed by Olena, here under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Olena sang in both English and Ukrainian and revealed what an exceptional talent she has.

8 Questions and Any Other Business

- A member asked how many refugees make it to Suffolk and what is SRS's capacity to help. RC said that asylum seekers are in Suffolk on a 'no choice' basis and often SRS are not immediately made aware of where they have been placed. Increasingly they are spread more widely across Suffolk compared to the past when they were largely accommodated in Ipswich. This makes it harder for SRS to support families.
- A participant asked if SRS does talks. RC confirmed that SRS does do talks but would like to do more. We are considering putting together a pack for schools to get accurate information out to younger people.
- The High Sheriff asked if there had been a coordinated approach across Suffolk. RC said that lots of good work is being done by various agencies but overall there is no fully coordinated approach.
- A member expressed the importance of good communication of information and thanked SRS for its efforts in this regard. The quality of the Annual Review document was praised.

9 Closing Message by Councillor Stefan Long, Mayor of Ipswich

The gave a short message of thanks and reflected on the events of the evening. He extended particular thanks to Fazal and Olena for their brave and entertaining contributions.

10 Post Meeting Refreshments

After the meeting had been formally closed, participants enjoyed excellent food prepared by the SRS Women's Group.

Annex A: Chair's Report from the Annual Review of 2025

SRS's 25th anniversary year has now come to a close – and a very successful year of celebrations it was too! A major highlight was our Sewing Group Fashion Show at Dance East, attended by clients, staff and trustees past and present, including founding members of SRS. I'd like to thank our Patron, Sir Nick Young, for his ongoing support, all those who attended the anniversary events, and Becks, Martin, and the whole SRS staffing team for all they did to make this year memorable.

Trustees

In February, Dr Keith Faull, who served on the Board for many years, resigned to focus on his retirement. We thank him for his service and, in particular, for his skill in coming at complex issues from different perspectives. In December 2024, Paul Reeves resigned as Honorary Secretary, and Lena Kushakovska was elected to replace him. Our thanks to them both.

During 2025, the Board co-opted three new members, all of whom are standing for formal election during this AGM. Please take a moment to read their "pen pictures" on our website, for they are a remarkable group of women:

Caroline Crabb (co-opted at the March 2025 Board meeting)

Emma Sheppard (co-opted at the March 2025 Board meeting)

Lisa Hilson (co-opted at the May 2025 Board meeting)

This brings the total number of serving Trustees to nine, an increase which was sorely needed, given the Board's workload.

The Board of Trustees' work during the period under report

This past year, the Board has mostly focussed on fundraising and financial reporting. The charity sector continues to be asked to do more and more with less and less, and SRS is no exception. As such, the Board supported the development of better and more detailed financial reporting to inform its decision-making. As part of this process, it became clear to the Board that the management team was under-resourced for the number of employees and the large range of activities SRS delivers. As such, the Board decided that an additional manager was required and, subsequently, an Evaluation & Programmes Manager (Sam Vinyard-Jones) was recruited, whose role it is to improve the collection and reporting on the impact SRS's work has, both for its clients and the wider community.

Other key activities this year have been:

- Leading on revising SRS's strategic values and aims document, which will be presented to you at the 2025 AGM;
- Streamlining the work of the three sub-committees whilst continuing to provide scrutiny and support; and revisiting the membership of these sub-committees to ensure the skills of those Trustees sitting on them align well;
- Supporting the ongoing work of partnering with SRS's clients to determine what activities should be delivered, and how. A particular success has been the launch of Client Advisory Groups: my thanks to Anna Girling, Jodi Peck, and Gerry Toplis in particular; and,
- A continued focus on staff well-being.

I'd like to end by noting that, in July this year, Rebecca Crerar celebrated her 20th anniversary with SRS. Please join me in congratulating Becks on this milestone!

Dr Felicity Szesnat, Chair of the Board of Trustees
August 2025

Annex B: Charity Manager's Report from the Annual Review of 2025

It feels just a short while since I wrote my report for the 2023-24 annual review, and yet when I reflect on SRS's activities over the past year, I realise how much has happened. Since my last report, asylum housing has been extended into towns other than Ipswich across Suffolk. This has happened with little and often no notice being given to the local authorities, health service or SRS. We are working hard to ensure we contact every new asylum seeker as they are housed in Suffolk, to ensure they have essentials such as money for food (not always given even though they are entitled), access to a GP (excellent support from the Health Outreach Team with whom we share information about new arrivals) and meaningful activities such as English classes and sports. This can be challenging.

We have experienced cases of asylum seekers without food, heavily pregnant women without access to health services, children with special needs without specialist support and asylum seekers sleeping rough after receiving a positive asylum decision but having nowhere to live. Our advice staff have picked these clients up and linked them to the appropriate support and provided essential emergency help in the meantime. We advocate for improvements to the systems serving asylum seekers and for mainstream services to recognise the unique and difficult circumstances our clients are in.

The dedication of the staff at SRS is enduring and I am proud of the difference we are making in so many people's lives. We are working not only with asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim for protection in the UK, but also with Ukrainians still uncertain of their futures and living in limbo in Suffolk whilst the war rages in their homeland; resettlement refugees mainly from Afghanistan who have fled the Taliban regime; young unaccompanied asylum seekers with little life guidance or understanding of what is happening and many other needy individuals for whom life in their home countries has become untenable. The move to the UK is a difficult process and as systems struggle with resource limitations and fast paced technological change, the people with the least experience of accessing help, suffer the most.

We watch with horror and sadness as the world's leaders use human lives as payment for power and control. We are angered by the way those who have fled, risking their lives in the process, are criminalised and blamed for our country's problems. Little credit is given to the enormous and vital contribution that people from abroad bring to our hospitals, care settings, building industry, hospitality industry and more.

I am proud of SRS's unwavering support to help people rebuild their lives here – we work hard to get people into work, speaking English, following the UK's rules, helping one another and contributing positively to our beautiful county. There are hundreds of people responsible for SRS's achievements this year which I hope you will enjoy reading about in this review. Great thanks go to our amazing team of volunteers, our wonderful staff, our expert board of trustees, our generous supporters and funders large and small. You all play a vital role in making Suffolk a place where asylum seekers and refugees can experience safety and hope. A heartfelt thanks you to you all.

Rebecca Crerar
Charity Manager

August 2025