



Fiona Bawdon, a freelance legal affairs journalist and LAG's Immigration and Asylum Law (IAL) Project's research and communications director, looks at the work of the Southampton

and Winchester Visitors Group (SWVG), a refugee befriending service, staffed almost entirely by volunteers and run on a shoestring, which has been praised by independent management consultants for doing 'a quite outstanding job' of helping destitute asylum-seekers and providing a model for other groups to follow.

A practical and emotional lifeline for asylum-seekers

Support for the 'otherwise destitute'

Set up in 2001 to befriend refugees held in Winchester prison, SWVG now offers a range of legal and financial support to asylum-seekers living locally. An independent report into SWVG says that it provides a 'practical and emotional lifeline' to refugees who would otherwise be destitute.* Christine Knight, SWVG co-ordinator, who has been with the group since its launch, says that for people in this situation, even small amounts of money can be enough to save them from having to turn to crime or prostitution to survive.

SWVG can pay rent for a small room and up to £25 a week subsistence to clients who have lost entitlement to state benefits after being refused asylum. It can also cover small, one-off expenses, such as for new shoes or repairs to a bicycle, as well as giving 'sofa money' to clients who are staying with friends so they can pay towards the host's expenses.

Although it is almost entirely run by volunteers, SWVG can act more swiftly where the situation demands. Christine Knight tells of a young woman who arrived at its weekly drop-in centre one Friday afternoon, a few weeks ago. 'She was very, very distraught. She had nowhere to sleep that night and had no food – and she asked for our help.'

It emerged that the woman had fled her home country, leaving her baby in the care of an aunt, after being imprisoned and tortured for her religious faith. Her husband and father had also been taken and she now feared that they were dead.

Christine Knight says: 'Separated from

her baby, fearing the death of her relatives, traumatised by what she had been through, with no proper portfolio of evidence, she came. She asked for sanctuary, but she was refused asylum. That meant the support she was getting with accommodation and money for food was stopped and she was completely destitute. She knew that she did have the evidence, if she could get the documents she could put in a fresh claim for asylum and that she stood a good chance, but how could she do it, when she was destitute?'

Faced with a client in such desperate need, the SWVG machine swung into action. A place was found for the client in a 'cheap but reputable' bed and breakfast that night and over the weekend (with SWVG and the Red Cross splitting the cost between them). On Monday SWVG moved her into her own room and, after a flurry of telephone calls and e-mails over the weekend, had agreed to pay subsistence. She was also put in touch with a compatriot: a former SWVG client who was able to give 'much needed friendship and support'. By the Tuesday she had an appointment to see an immigration solicitor, and by the end of the week she had been allocated her own personal SWVG visitor, who has seen her at least once a week ever since. Just a few weeks on from her initial contact with SWVG, the client has her own GP, a broken tooth has been fixed, she is having English lessons and, crucially, her legal case is being looked at afresh.

As well as good links with a local immigration law practice, SWVG also runs a Legal Justice Project, which means clients with particularly complex cases or

where all legal avenues appear to have been exhausted can seek help from Jo Renshaw, a partner at Oxford-based Turpin & Miller. (Turpin & Miller was the winner of the 2012 Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year award for firm of the year.)

A model to emulate

Over 80 per cent of SWVG's £94,000 annual income – made up of grants, donations and proceeds from fundraising events – goes directly to clients. The group has around 60 volunteers, of whom 49 act as befrienders, and just two paid, part-time staff (who work a total of 20 hours a week).

Despite such limited paid resources, the report praises the group's core leaders for putting 'extraordinary care and attention' into its day-to-day stewardship. Its governance 'combines lightness of touch with meticulous attention to detail. There is an underlying sense of order and structure that is not overbearing and restrictive, and a strong focus on keeping the group's work financially and managerially sustainable'.

** Investing in the future. An evaluation of the work of Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group, Julian Powe and Stella Smith, SWVG, report funded by the Bromley Trust, 2012, available at: <http://swvg-refugees.org.uk>.*

Legal Action Group's Immigration and Asylum Law Project, launched last month, aims to monitor and, where possible, mitigate the impact of legal aid cuts in this area and promote a more balanced debate about immigration and asylum in the media. Readers are encouraged to submit evidence and concerns relevant to IAL to: fbawdon@lag.org.uk.