

# THE HARBOUR PROJECT

We aid refugees and asylum seekers across Swindon.  
We give friendship, advice, practical help and hope.  
We are The Harbour Project.

## Our History

2000 - 2018

Over eighteen years The Harbour Project has evolved and helped hundreds of asylum seekers and refugees who have passed through Swindon. Its focus on friendship and practical help remains unchanged.

## **i) Origin and early years**

The Harbour Project was born in May 2000, when Kosovar Albanian refugees fled the fighting in former Yugoslavia. It was founded with funds from the Baptist Church and help from other churches and groups.

Early members included: Vernon Griffiths, Rev Guy Donegan Cross, Elaine Long, Faith Mitchell, Elspeth Woollen, Dorothy Leith, Stephanie Glennie and Andrea Hughes.

The Harbour's focus was on providing friendship, free refreshments and emergency help with food and clothing. It also gave basic advice and signposted people to appropriate agencies.

In 2003, The Harbour Project for Swindon Refugees and Asylum Seekers was registered as a Charitable Trust: Reg. Charity No. 1097227. Its annual income in 2004/5 was around £30,000. It employed a member of staff and with The Evaluation Trust identified current impact and areas for development. Inevitably, with limited funding and prioritisation of Visitors' welfare, organisational development was gradual. A 2-year Capacity Building award from the Big Lottery in 2005/06 supported an office in John Street, and an Administrator; and in 2006, a pilot scheme to employ a Drop-In Coordinator was effective and popular with Visitors. Fluctuating income, however, meant both posts were lost temporarily. In 2006, the Home Office designated Swindon a 'dispersal town' for Asylum seekers; and a 3-year grant (instead of annual awards) from Swindon Borough Council from 2006/7 offered welcome stability, and recognition of this status. A web site was launched, and laptops were provided for study. Annual income in this period was around £70,000. Annual fundraising events were put in place and by 2007/08 a Lunch Club was established, together with activities for families and young children.

In 2008/09 a new Administrator was appointed and additional office space was made available in the same building as the Drop-In; then in 2009 a new Drop-In Coordinator post was established and filled. Together these changes significantly increased efficiency and enabled growth.

## **ii) Consolidation**

By 2009/10 a new contractual arrangement with Swindon Borough Council enabled some short term (2-3 years) planning, and The Project steadily expanded its services. The Drop-In was open for an average of 21 sessions per calendar month. Trustee Ira Muir took on a role as Events Coordinator, beginning an expansion of leisure and recreational activities for Visitors. Office equipment and internet access were upgraded. The next year, sewing and jewellery making classes began.

A step-change in development came with an award of £197,000 from the Big Lottery Fund for the period 2012/2017. Nan Bains was recruited as Project Manager. The award not only enabled rapid expansion and a wider range of activities but also provided medium-term resilience around which other initiatives could coalesce. More classes were offered, most

significantly in English (providing access for asylum seekers who would otherwise be unable to access such education) and in computing, cooking and keep-fit. Social events increased to include annual 'away trips', local visits, and seasonal celebrations. Five-day a week opening was fully established by now.

A 'virtuous circle' was created: stability enabled growth, which engendered confidence leading to more outreach, which in turn attracted more supporters and more funding. It became possible to fill vacancies with people already committed to The Project. In 2012/13 former Volunteer Giles Matthews became Drop-In Coordinator, introducing new procedures around Home Office liaison, accommodation, access to healthcare etc. and improving data collection and recording. In 2013/14 Annie Vickers, also a former Volunteer, became Project Administrator as the support base widened and budgetary control became more sophisticated.

Visitor numbers rose from an average of 25 per session in 2009/10 to 35 by 2013/2014, supported by Volunteers from a cohort of around 25-30.

Although it could not have been foreseen, these parallel changes of increased services for Visitors, especially around social integration, and increased operational efficiency and community outreach, were to be crucial in enabling The Project to meet unprecedented challenges in the years ahead.

### **iii) Growth, new challenges and development**

By 2013/14 annual income topped £100,000 for the first time. The welcome visit by HRH The Princess Royal in 2013 symbolised growing recognition of The Project in the town. Despite a national squeeze on local authority budgets, Swindon Borough Council committed 3-year funding from 2014/15, albeit at a reduced rate.

In 2015/16, there was an unprecedented rise in the number of asylum seekers dispersed to Swindon. (An ongoing issue for The Project is that it is not privy to Home Office dispersal plans and so cannot accurately predict future needs.) Around the same time, and affecting refugees, there were significant changes to the Benefits System. This period could have become a 'perfect storm', but The Project had robust procedures and sufficient flexibility to meet the challenges without losing its important 'family' atmosphere of support and practical help. In May 2015, Mindy Sandhu was appointed to a new post as Assistant to the Drop-In Coordinator, thus strengthening The Project's 'first responder' capacity. The winter of 2016/17 saw another major challenge when a significant number of asylum seekers were given Leave To Remain almost simultaneously at a time close to the Christmas/New Year Season when public and other services can become overstretched. Again, The Project's procedures proved resilient.

Throughout these challenging years growth continued, with more English classes, a Women's Group, a monthly Free Shop, and a Language Lounge in partnership with New College that linked sports and games with learning English. Another innovation was provision and maintenance of bicycles for Visitors, giving much need independence, especially for those placed in accommodation on the outskirts of the town.

This growth was possible because of increased support and funding from Trusts, corporate and individual donors, and The Project's own fundraising activities. Volunteer numbers rose

steadily to around 60 by 2016/17, with several working in specific areas such as help with English Classes, bicycle repair, and art therapy.

Organisational developments underpinned not only the widening range of activities but also the core befriending and practical settlement work of the Drop-In. These included a more cost-efficient telephone system, laptop upgrading, use of additional space for now daily English classes, appointment of a Receptionist in 2016 (Suzi Magness, and later Yazmin Taylor) to help prioritise help and to relieve the workload on other Drop-In staff, increased training for Staff, Volunteers and Trustees, and enhanced performance evaluation through Focus Groups (from 2015) and formal Evaluations (from 2016).

In 2016/17 The Project changed its legal status to that of a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, Reg. Charity No. 1171368. New procedures were being developed in areas such as risk management, policy development and communications, aided in 2017 with an independent review of structures and governance, by consultant Felicia Willow, which took forward the Strategic Plan of March 2017 towards planning for the next phase.

By 2016/17 annual income had risen to over £155,000.

In 2017, the Big Lottery Award was renewed with funding up to 2022, and key areas of focus including one-to-one services to support Visitors' psychological wellbeing and a programme of preparation for refugees to seek and find employment and so reduce reliance on Benefits.

#### **iv) Latest developments**

The Harbour Project is in good heart in its 18th year. Its founders may not have envisaged a future of daily English classes, trips to the seaside, therapeutic art, bicycle maintenance and a homework club, but they would surely recognise the realisation of their aspirations to provide friendship and help to enable people to rebuild their lives.

We have recently launched 'Steps2Work', an integrated programme of learning, advice and mentoring that aims to help our visitors into work or volunteering through engaging with the Swindon Business community.

This year, we are delighted to have received civic recognition by being one of the Mayor's sponsored charities for the year, and we are making significant organisational changes to reflect our growth.

In June 2018 we appointed our first CEO, a part-time role for a 12 month term of office. Claire Garrett, a former volunteer and Trustee secured this position, following a national recruitment campaign. The key task for Claire and the team is to diversify the funding base, and make sure that the charity continues to build upon its strong foundations. With this aim, keeping our visitors needs at the heart of everything that we do is fundamental. At the same time as Claire's appointment, Annie Vickers, our business manager for the last 5 years, decided to move on to pastures new. Annie is replaced by Yazmin Taylor, former Drop-In Co-ordinator. We hope to fill the remaining vacancy created as a result of these changes in July 2018, to stabilise the team and allow us to remain focussed upon our core business.

We look forward to a new phase of development.

In some ways the story of The Harbour Project mirrors that of the metaphorical journey taken by asylum seekers.

Initially, everything focused on the Drop-In with its initial welcome and immediate support on essentials such as help with complying with Home Office rules, emergency provision of basic food and clothing if needed and help with access to healthcare, or with accommodation or transport problems. This is equally true today where the Drop-In remains the crucial first step for new arrivals.

With the basics in place and as funding became more secure, The Project has been able to offer additional services, just as new Visitors are able to progress by making new friends, learning new skills, (especially in English) and acquiring the confidence to integrate into the local community.

Over its history, The Project has typically welcomed Visitors from 40 or more countries at any time, though relative numbers from different countries have changed, reflecting the chronology of conflicts and oppression around the world - a high proportion from Kosovo/Albania, being followed by more people fleeing Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq etc. and more recently those seeking refuge from Syria.

Throughout its history The Harbour Project has relied on the goodwill and longstanding support of many organisations and individuals in Swindon and beyond. Details of supporters, funders and the Annual Accounts and Annual Reports are available.

The Project is, and has always been, an independent, non-political and non-religious organisation.

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