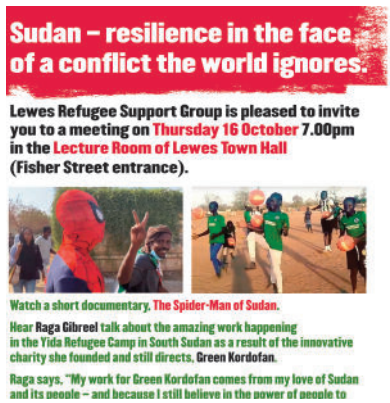
Annual Report

October 2024 - September 2025

Above:
LRSG Plant sale

Top:
Hamsey School class work in Refugee Week



Above:
Protest rally against invited speaker Matt Goodwin

Top:
Books donated to schools in Refugee Week

Bottom:
Sudan: the open meeting presented by Raga Gibreel

LRSG aims to promote the welfare of refugees, people seeking asylum and other vulnerable migrants in and beyond the Lewes District by:

- **Raising awareness of issues relating to refugees and those seeking asylum**
- **Providing practical help and responding to local issues as they arise**
- **Advocating and lobbying to improve the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum**

The group initially met in January 2002 for anyone interested in the issues of migration, asylum and safe refuge from a perspective of human rights and civic responsibilities.
Lewes Organisation in Support of Refugees and Asylum Seekers became a charity and adopted its new name in October 2017. In 2024 agreement was reached to shorten the name to Lewes Refugee Support Group (LRSG) and to propose a number of constitutional changes to the Charity Commission to ensure we are protected by the constitution to carry out the objectives of the charity (see minutes of AGM 2024). These changes were approved in August 2025. Membership is open to all who share these aims, irrespective of political affiliation or personal beliefs.

Overview of the year

It has been a year of further hostility and violence towards refugees; people seeking asylum; people of colour; and 'othered' individuals. Violence and aggression perpetrated by far-right groups has increased with an ugly confidence whereby individuals, hotels housing people seeking asylum and refugee charities are targeted, raising the threat to new levels of danger: witness the arson attack on the mosque in Peacehaven in October. That this level of racism is becoming normalised is deeply worrying. As reported in the AGM Report for 2024-25, on election, the government reversed some of the worst aspects of the Tories' immigration legislation - and these were hopeful signs.

However, policy changes towards refugees this year include: a longer route to settlement (increased from five to ten years); the permanent scrapping of automatic family reunion rights; and new rules that prevent irregular migrants from receiving British citizenship.

In September the 'one in, one out scheme' was introduced (see newsletter) which whilst offering safe passage to the UK from France for those deemed admissible, also displays a worrying lack of transparency and ethics about how the Home Office decide who is to be deported.

The language of immigration and asylum from the government is as toxic as that of the right - highlighted by Starmer's statement that 'we are becoming an island of strangers'. A moral rebuttal by the government to the orchestrated levels of violence by the far right has been slow, or arguably absent.

What has this meant for LRSG as a charity?

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of the current political climate is the fear it is engendering in organisations that support refugees and people seeking asylum. Threats, harassment and intimidation are the new reality. As a charity, we have had to be very mindful of how we promote our local events and the need to safeguard trustees, speakers and the membership.

However, we continue to do what we can to defend the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum. We continue to support families and other individuals across the Lewes District both those with whom we have long-term relationships but also those newly arrived and in need to support.

Our educational outreach work continues to expand and is a joyful reminder of the empathy and fresh minds children have towards vulnerable people.

The Foreign National Visitors Scheme at Lewes Prison continues to adapt to cope with the demand for support.

Our involvement with the HfU scheme and Ukrainian families in the Lewes district continues primarily via ESOL support.

A range of events over the year enable us to represent and promote our core values and objectives.

Local support work

Support to families living in the Lewes district continues apace. In total, LRSG currently supports 13 families, (representing 57 adults and children) from a range of countries primarily Syria, Afghanistan and Iran: some are long-standing families who are settled in the district, with employment and their children progressing at school, but who nevertheless require ongoing or periodic support which our volunteers provide. In the last year we have been approached to support four 'new' families (from Syria, Vietnam and Iraq).

Our local support responds to a wide range of vulnerabilities and a range of practical, language, social support and other assistance is offered to families. We continue to assess what is needed for each family and/or individual and how to meet need within our capabilities and resources. This support can be very intensive, especially on first arrival in the district and while some families have local authority or voluntary sector support, some have none and, in the latter scenario, LRSG may be their primary source of help.

The website has become one of the key tools for these referrals, usually from statutory bodies e.g. Local Authorities and/or other voluntary organisations. To create capacity for new referrals we have recruited several new volunteers to focus on English language support to adults as well as to the children in their education. However, we are always looking for more volunteers, especially - but not solely - those with current knowledge of the exam curricula for STEM subjects. We also have requests for one off support, for example, we funded travel for a disabled asylum-seeking elderly women and her accompanying family member, when she was required to attend an interview in Croydon for her asylum application.

Homes for Ukraine (HfU)

Two further short-term grants from the Homes for Ukraine scheme by the County Council has allowed us to continue supporting Ukrainian guests via the ESOL programme in particular more advanced courses leading to qualifications which are the entry to higher education and employment. We are able to fund resources for courses, exam fees and course related events and, when needed, we offer travel costs and expenses that allow Ukrainian guests to attend training courses if they would not otherwise be able to do so.

Prison Visiting Project at HMP Lewes

The Foreign National Prisoner Project volunteer group has remained generally consistent. We continue to provide two drop-in sessions each month in the library at HMP Lewes, supplemented by follow up one-to-one visits as and when appropriate. In the last year we have supported about 45 prisoners of which 40% have been seeking asylum or other forms of humanitarian leave. Countries from which we have seen three or more people in the last year are China, Lithuania, Iran, Iraq, Albania, Poland and Portugal.

The vast majority of prisoners we see are on remand, awaiting trial or sentence. As well as the critical role of listening, we provide an informal advocacy service to some prisoners; liaising with their

solicitors, with police, probation or social services and raising queries with the prison over various issues, particularly concerns about healthcare – especially mental health.

We are prohibited by law from providing legal advice but occasionally obtain advice from the Sussex University Immigration Law Clinic with whom we are working to develop some self-help materials, which will be available in several languages, in the library. Legal aid immigration lawyers are almost non-existent in this part of the country.

Despite the frustrations of the bureaucracy and the logistical difficulties in the visits scheme, we have a good working relationship with the prison and would like to extend our thanks to the library staff, the Chaplaincy and to the current Equality and Diversity Lead, whose responsiveness and support enables us to work more effectively. Above all we are indebted to the unstinting efforts of the volunteers.

Awareness raising events and activities in 2024-25

- **Outreach work** with all Year 8 students at Priory School Lewes; and at Plumpton College.
- **Holocaust Memorial Day** vigil and events in Lewes
- Anti Racism Alliance **rally** in Newhaven to mark UN Anti-Racism Day
- 12 LRSG members attended a Stand Up To racism (SUTR) **protest** against Matt Goodwin at Lewes Speakers Festival
- Annual fund-raising **plant sale**
- Refugee Week **precinct stall**
- **Storytelling and assemblies** to mark Refugee Week at Hamsey, Plumpton, Southover & Wallands primary schools.
- **LRSG stall** at an open discussion event organised by Lewes Labour Party
- **LRSG summer celebration event**
- **LRSG representation** at Modern Day Britain study day at Depot
- **LRSG stall** at a SUTR public meeting on how to counter the rise in racism.
- **Open meeting** on ‘Sudan – resilience in the face of a conflict the world ignores’, with Raga Gibreel of the charity ‘Green Kordofan’.

Our **website** continues to generate interest, enquiries and requests for support, and we respond to all within our capacity. We continue to provide a regular newsletter and to run the Refugee Week stall in Lewes precinct as well as represent LRSG at other relevant events.

Educational Outreach work

Our annual educational outreach work with Priory School continues and we ran classes with all eight-year groups of Year 8s. We also ran sessions at Hamsey, Plumpton, Southover and Wallands primary schools during or near to Refugee Week and distributed books to these schools (and Priory School) for their libraries. It continues to be one of the most positive and heartwarming activities we do, and we are always struck by how empathetic and interested the children are to understand more about what it means to seek asylum. We aim to continue developing this outreach work in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Advocacy and lobbying for change

LRSG continues to link to key national campaigns:
Together with Refugees (TwR) the national coalition of 500+ grassroots community and refugee-led groups, international development charities, trade unions and faith groups, to which LRSG is affiliated.

Lifting the Ban on the right to work for those waiting for asylum claims to be processed.

We continue to campaign for **Safe Passage**'s call to restore and expand family reunion, including by letting children join families in the UK.

We continue to campaign for an **end to detention without a time limit**.

We continue to be part of the **Lewes District Anti-Racism Alliance** which aims to raise awareness and promote racial justice within the district.

Funding

Two short-term grants from **ESCC** (detailed above) to support the Homes for Ukraine scheme has allowed us to provide continuity of support to the ESOL programme. However, our funds typically come from membership subscriptions, donations, (we gain significant funds via Gift Aid) and fund-raising. The annual **plant sale** raised £1,125.00. We are thankful to **Holocaust Memorial Day-Lewes** who invite us to collect donations at their annual HMD events and of course, we are immensely grateful for the continued support and generosity of our **membership**. In addition to the finance of all our charitable objectives, we were also able to give **grants to the value of £12k** to ten organisations with an emphasis on those providing support locally.

Tributes and thanks

It is with great sadness that in 2025 we lost three key members of the LRSG family: **Diana Andrew, Annabel Cole** and **Anni Rehin** - each in their different ways were ardent advocates for humanitarian values and they are greatly missed.

Marta Paluch leaves the committee this year and we thank her for her work there, and her continuing work with the Prison Visiting Project.

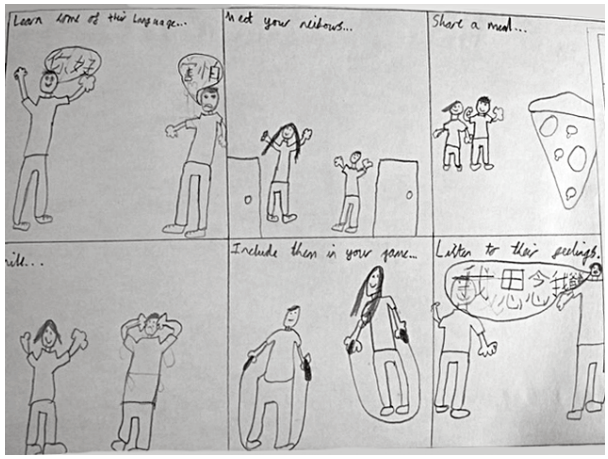
LRSG trustees would like to express our wholehearted thanks and gratitude to:
Jane Andrew; Barbara Abbs; Gillian Broad; Chris Burgess; Ken Caplan; Heide Chaffe; Patricia Cockerell; Rachel Cole; Summerly DeVito; Sara Foreman; Judy Gable; James Golding of Michael Bell One; Jean Gould; Nicole Griffin; Jane McIntosh; Michael Munday; Dee O'Connell; Sarah Rideout; Pat Rigg; Gretel Scott; Betty Skolnick; Janet Ward; Charlotte Williams; Susan and Dennis Yates.

To all our volunteers and ESOL tutors, our thanks for your continued commitment to the families and individuals you support. We are grateful for our volunteer prison visitors, for the collaboration of Jo Wilding and Lucy Welsh at Sussex University and Naomi Blackwell for her support and advice to the Prison Visiting Project. Thanks also to Lewes Holocaust Memorial Day Group; Lewes Society of Friends; Le Bureau; South Downs College; Depot; Christ Church; Lewes Town Council; East Sussex County Council; Ariane Plumley, 3VA; Staverton Nursery; Voices in Exile; Brighton and Hove City Council.

Members

LRSG ended the year with seven new members bringing the membership to over 130 people and seven affiliated organisations.

losras.org



Above:
Hamsey School class work in Refugee Week: 'How can we welcome refugees into our community?'

Above:
Raga Gibreel, founder of the charity Green Kordofan, presenting her work

Left:
Members of LRSG out campaigning