



South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group

Annual Report 2021-22

1. We began our last Annual Report (December 2020) by noting that the Conservative Government elected in 2019 'has openly reneged on its international commitments under the Refugee Convention and has fanned racism and hostility to migrants'. Since then, we have had the Afghan crisis and the opening stages of Ukraine War . We face a global refugee crisis. The Johnson Government's main response has been to intensify their hostile environment policies through the Nationality and Borders Act and the new policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda. These policies have been widely condemned, with mounting resistance among migrant and human rights groups, in which SYMAAG has played a prominent part.

2. SYMAAG's aim is to campaign for action by Government and others to improve the position of refugees, asylum seekers and exploited migrant workers. The need for such campaigning is greater than ever. We are a migrant led organisation, drawing on the ingenuity and energy of people from all over the world as well as people born in the UK.

The pandemic and its legacy

3. The pandemic continued into 2021 and has had no clearly defined end. Even now, Covid 19 remains widespread, but in July 2021 the Government began to dismantle the various precautions apart from vaccination and this process was completed in February 2022. This relaxation has enabled us to resume organising demonstrations and other face to face events.

4. **This Report covers the period between two SYMAAG AGMs – on 1 December 2020 and 26 July 2022.** The Covid 19 pandemic disturbed the normal pattern of our meetings. We can now revert to our normal pattern of holding our AGM fairly soon after the end of our financial year in April.

5. During the pandemic, we held fortnightly meetings on zoom. Early in 2022 we reverted to monthly meetings still on zoom. We now need to decide whether to continue on zoom or to go back to face to face meetings. Zoom has been beneficial in some ways. It has enabled people who are away from Sheffield to join meetings and has avoided transport costs for locally based people. It has been excellent for 'Talks for Change' (see below). But zoom does not generate as great a sense of involvement or commitment as face to

face meetings do. One does not 'get to know' other participants in the same way. Nor do new members feel integrated into the organisation.

The changing organisational context

6. SYMAAG has now existed for 15 years. For most of that time, it was the only group in South Yorkshire focused on campaigning on behalf of asylum seekers and other migrants. In recent years, however many other campaigning organisations have appeared on the scene. Some are offshoots of national organisations. For example, Right to Remain/These Walls Must Fall employed Rosie Huzzard here as local organiser. Other national bodies reaching into Yorkshire include Migrants Organise (whose Regional Organiser, Sarli Nana, based in Leeds joins in our meetings) and Asylum Matters. In addition, there is now a national umbrella organisation - Solidarity Knows No Borders . There are also smaller local organisations addressing a particular issue, such as Voice for the Voiceless (set up by Rosie Huzzard), Justice for Simba (see below) and Sheffield Against Asylum Evictions.

7. Our policy is to collaborate with these organisations, so long as their objectives and ours coincide. In this way, we can involve far more people and draw on their ideas and enthusiasm. People from other organisations join in our meetings and initiatives and we join in theirs. This collaboration is now central in our campaigning. It means that responsibility for some of the actions described in this Report was shared between SYMAAG and other organisations. It also means that on some occasions, eg the Carnival for Simba, we can mobilise an impressive mass movement.

The Nationality and Borders Act and Rwanda.

Priti Patel

8. By far the most significant development affecting asylum in these 18 months has been the introduction by the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, of policies that are even more hostile to asylum seekers than those introduced by Theresa May when she was Home Secretary. In the past, the UK Government was an international leader in upholding human rights. Now shamefully it is giving a lead on their suppression.

9. Priti Patel's new policies were embodied in her **New Plan for Immigration** published in March 2021. Despite predominantly negative reactions in the 'consultation', in July 2021 the **Nationality and Borders Bill** appeared. Patel's plans were based on a distorted analysis of refugee issues and were inhumane, unworkable and condemned by the UN High Commission for Refugees as failing to comply with the UK's commitments under the Refugee Convention.

10. In order to stop asylum seekers crossing the Channel in small boats, the Government proposed to criminalise them and move them 'offshore'. The bill contained many other threatening proposals. In liaison with other asylum organisations, we embarked on a **major campaign**, including the following:

We produced a briefing note on the bill.

We co-ordinated a letter from leaders of local asylum organisations to local MPs asking them join our campaign against these proposals and oppose them in Parliament.

We had separate meetings with Olivia Blake MP, Clive Betts MP and Paul Blomfield MP, all of whom strongly agreed with our line.

We persuaded the Bishop of Sheffield and other faith leaders to write to local MPs challenging Patel's new policy from a faith viewpoint. This letter was featured on the front page of the Sheffield Weekly Telegraph.

We joined in a protest demonstration in October 2021.

We organised an email writing campaign to more than 150 members of the House of Lords. The emails were written by some 50 people from a variety of organisations in South Yorkshire and beyond – including members of the lively refugee support group in Bakewell.

11. Our email campaign led to fascinating correspondence with some pro-active Peers and may have helped to persuade the majority in the Lords to press strongly for drastic changes to the Bill. We were disappointed when in April 2022 the Lords eventually backed down and the Bill became law. If other regions had been as active as South Yorkshire in opposing the bill, it might have been stopped.

12. The new Act gave legislative backing to the policy of 'offshoring' asylum seekers, an approach pioneered by Australia and condemned by UN HCR and other bodies concerned with upholding the 1951 Refugee Convention and the human rights of asylum seekers. Even so, there was general astonishment when Priti Patel reached an **agreement with the Rwandan Government** that the UK would send asylum seekers to Rwanda with no return ticket in return for £120 million. The UN HCR condemned the scheme as 'unlawful'. Prince Charles apparently called the policy 'appalling'. We joined with other organisations in a big demonstration outside the City Hall in Sheffield on 18 June 2022 to mark the 10th anniversary of the hostile environment and to condemn policies like the Rwanda scheme. Meanwhile, interventions by UK Courts and the European Court for Human Rights prevented the first plane from taking asylum seekers to Rwanda.

13. Despite this setback, we expect the Home Office to persist with implementing the new Act. This may be the biggest challenge facing activist organisations like SYMAAG. We have already made contact with people in Linton on Ouse who are resisting Home Office plans to create a large accommodation centre for asylum seekers on a disused airport nearby.

Afghanistan

14. In the summer of 2021, we shared the general sense of shock as the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan led to a rapid Taliban takeover. We feared that Taliban rule would be similar to the rule of Khomeini and his successors in Iran in its disregard for human rights, particularly those of women. Fear of the Taliban immediately caused a massive refugee crisis.

15. In August, we wrote to Sheffield MPs urging them to call on the Home Secretary to change her asylum policies to enable the UK genuinely to welcome Afghan asylum seekers, including those already in this country. Paul Blomfield MP and Clive Betts MP replied very positively.



16. We also discussed the Afghanistan situation with Olivia Blake MP, who reported 'absolute chaos' as regards the plight of Afghans, with Government Departments not responding or contradicting each other. Olivia agreed to go on pressing the Home Office. On 27 August, with Afghans and others, we held a demonstration of more than 200 people calling for respect for the rights of Afghan asylum seekers (see picture).

17. In November, we held a highly informative panel discussion at Sheffield University on 'What next for Afghanistan' with two politicians (Olivia Blake MP and Natalie Bennett) and two Afghan experts.

Ukraine

18. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was another huge shock. It quickly generated the worst refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Some 9 million people (predominantly women and children) left the country. We and many others felt that the UK Government was far too restrictive and slow in its response in comparison with EU countries. In March 2022 we wrote to local MPs to this effect. Eventually, the Government came up with two schemes – one for refugees with relations already here and the other for those who had found a UK household willing to accommodate them. Other European countries were much less restrictive and readier to provide visas and support. The British public's response to the Ukrainian crisis has been very generous with many families inviting Ukrainian refugees into their homes. One of our goals must be to encourage comparable generosity towards refugees from all over the world, not just those from a European country.

Challenging reporting requirements for asylum seekers

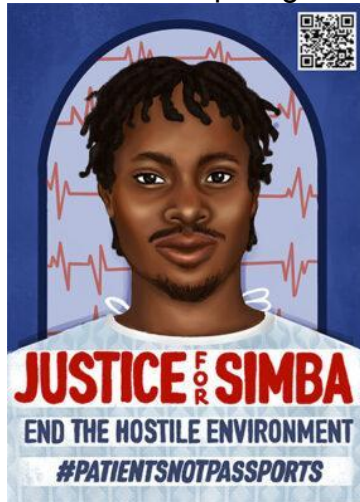
19. Asylum seekers who have been refused by the Home Office are required to report regularly at a Home Office centre such as Vulcan House in Sheffield. Asylum seekers find these reporting visits extremely stressful as they fear that they will be arrested and threatened with deportation. At Rosie Huzzard's suggestion, we joined These Walls Must Fall's national campaign about these reporting arrangements.

20. On 18 June 2021, we and other organisations held a day of action outside Vulcan House calling for an end to mandatory reporting. We submitted a letter addressed to the officer in charge. We later received a reply from an 'HM Inspector' based in Leeds, who was in charge of 'immigration enforcement' at Vulcan House. He was willing to meet us. This led to SYMAAG's first meeting with a Home Office official for over 10 years. Our team (representing both SYMAAG and These Walls Must Fall) consisted mainly of people with lived experience of the asylum system, who explained how vulnerable and powerless they had felt when reporting and how staff could be over bearing and disbelieving. The Inspector seemed genuinely concerned by what he heard. We talked about the criticisms of Home Office culture made by Wendy Williams following the Windrush scandal. He thought the culture was improving.

21. Subsequent correspondence with the Inspector has been disappointing. We took up with him the concerns of 'accompaniers' from ASSIST who, since the pandemic, have been excluded from entering Vulcan House with asylum seekers although this had been accepted practice for years before the pandemic. The Inspector referred us to central Home office instructions which exclude 'accompaniers' unless there are 'exceptional circumstances'. At our request, Paul Blomfield MP has taken this up with a Home Office Minister.

Justice for Simba

22. Under the 'hostile environment' policies, many refused asylum seekers are expected to pay for secondary care in the NHS, although they are often destitute. At the age of 14, Simba Mugakachi had come to the UK with his father, now a member of our Executive. Despite strenuous efforts, he was not given refugee status. Aged 29, he was put off getting hospital treatment for a blood clotting condition by a demand for £6000. He then had a life threatening stroke, was in a coma for two weeks and paralysed on his left side. Hallamshire Hospital gave him good treatment but he received a bill for £93,000.



23. Simba, his family and his friends and sympathisers set up 'Justice for Simba' to draw attention not only to this case but also to other asylum seekers treated in this way. On 18 September 2021, they, along with SYMAAG and other organisations, held a **Carnival of Resistance** to the hostile environment in the NHS. A huge procession wound its way round central Sheffield ending at the Hallamshire Hospital. However, the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust declined to meet representatives of the demonstrators or to withdraw their financial demand. Some time later, things improved. Simba was given leave to remain. Later on, the NHS Trust withdrew their financial demand. But the hostile environment still exists in the NHS, so 'Justice for Simba' is continuing its campaign.

Asylum Accommodation

24. Ever since asylum accommodation (asylum houses and the Initial Accommodation Centre (IAC) at Urban House) was privatised and outsourced to for-profit companies and corporations in 2012, SYMAAG has worked alongside people in the asylum system to expose abuse, poor quality housing standards and breaches of the Home Office contracts. In recent years, the Home Office's accommodation provider in South Yorkshire has been Mears Ltd. Our accommodation work has been led by our indefatigable housing expert, John Grayson.

25. By 2021 scrutiny of the accommodation and experiences of people in the system had to shift to hotels being used as IAC's in and around Sheffield. This scrutiny and support involved the invaluable work of volunteers in the South Yorkshire Refugee Foodbank organised by our Co-Chair, Manuchehr. SYMAAG's campaigning on Urban House throughout 2020 meant that when it reopened improvements had been made (e.g. no shared rooms for unrelated residents) and many fewer complaints were passed on to us.

Metropole Hotel, Sheffield



Later from the summer of 2021 the Home Office contracted hotel accommodation for refugees fleeing Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the Home Office does not seem to have carried out adequate checks of the safety of rooms in the hotel. This may have led indirectly to the tragic death of an Afghani child who fell from a hotel window in August 2021.

26. Support for people in local hotels was taken over by the Council and other volunteer groups. SYMAAG did receive a few complaints from the hotels and took them up with the Mears hotels concerned.

27. Only fairly recently have advice services started to open fully in Sheffield, Doncaster and Rotherham after closure during Covid. This has meant that people in the asylum system have not been reporting cases of very poor housing to local agencies and then on to SYMAAG.

28. Very recently we were contacted about a really filthy neglected Mears asylum house in Sheffield. With a joint effort by local councillors, and the Council's Environmental Health Department swift and very effective action was taken. Hopefully these partnerships will continue in 2022 to deal with the inevitable poor accommodation issues which will be reported to us.

SYMAAG Talks for Change

29. If SYMAAG is to campaign effectively, it has an important educational role in informing its supporters and a wider public in some depth about asylum issues. It is heartening that during the Covid period we successfully introduced 'Talks for Change'. This was a series of evening talks by a variety of expert speakers. They were on zoom which made possible participation from far and wide. They were skilfully chaired by [redacted] For example in February 2021 we held a meeting on asylum housing attended by 75 people and raised £105 in solidarity tickets which was donated to ASSIST. Other sessions were held on such themes as the right to work, legal issues and Afghanistan.

SYMAAG Governance and Finance

30. We are most grateful to our **Co-Chairs – Manuchehr and Phillis** – for their able leadership in a difficult period. We thank **Violet Dickenson**, our Vice Chair, for her big contribution over the years; she has no longer recently been able to participate in our work.

31. We are also grateful to **Robert Siamtinta** who has nobly acted as our Treasurer for many years. Our finances are in a healthy state. Our Independent Examiner checked our accounts and reported positively on them. One innovation has been the provision of laptops to some of our most active members.

32. We owe a special debt of gratitude to **Stuart Crosthwaite** who was our Secretary for 14 years. Understandably in December 2021 he decided to withdraw from this role. Knowledgeable and resourceful, he has been central to SYMAAG's progress for many years. We send him every good wish as he now has more time to devote to other causes.

Being Secretary of SYMAAG is an onerous role and we have been looking at ways of spreading the various aspects of the job between different people. We are grateful to Otto Wolf for stepping in to fulfill parts of the role after Stuart's departure.

Miscellaneous

33. We cannot record all the other activities in which SYMAAG has been engaged but here are some of the more important items:

We submitted evidence to Sheffield's **Racial Equality Commission**.

Our Co-Chair, Manuchehr has taken money, food and clothing to Calais and Dunkirk under the auspices of **Care4Calais**. He has reported on large numbers of people, who are victims of harsh evictions by the French police.

Violet and Stuart have represented us in national anti-deportation campaign meetings. In August 2021 we held a demonstration outside the **TUI** shop in the Moor protesting about their company's role in deportations. In February 2022 TUI said they would end this work.