

Southampton and Winchester Visitor Group

launch of the “Investing In The Future” report

at the House of Lords, 7th November 2012

“Investing in the Future” is an independent report that evaluates the work of Southampton and Winchester Visitors group (SWVG). The report was funded by the Bromley Trust who suggested its commission.

The evaluation was carried out by 2 independent, external consultants, Stella Smith and Julian Powe. Julian has been a management consultant for some 25 years and since becoming independent in 2008, he has helped a number of different charities.

Stella specialises in third sector change management, organisational review and management development. As well as her previous experience in strategy and change and in user involvement she is an Associate Lecturer at the OU Business School and played a key role in shaping the Centre for Charity Effectiveness’s Tools for Success.

The Bromley Trust also generously funded the House of Lords launch so that the findings could be shared with others in the asylum world and potential funders. Lord Hunt of Kingsheath kindly hosted the event.

Teresa Elwes of the Bromley Trust introduced the report saying:

“In 2006 the Bromley Trust began supporting the work of SWVG. Originally we had been interested in their work supporting asylum seekers held in our local prison at Winchester. By the time we considered an application from them, asylum seekers were no longer being held at the prison and the work of the SWVG had changed to supporting asylum seekers living, at first in Winchester, and then in Southampton.

The type of organisation they had become no longer sat within our ‘detention’ focus area, but we decided to fund them because of the exceptional qualities of this particular group of volunteers and the organisation they had developed. It is these qualities that we were keen to evaluate and to showcase.

Funding the evaluation was two fold, the first was to help SWVG to learn from, and strengthen their own work, and the second was to build an evidence base, share best practice, and to encourage other groups to undertake similar work or to provide funds to support them. We could not have been happier with the results”.



Members of SWVG arriving at the House of Lords

Consultant Stella Smith’s speech included the following:

The process of compiling this report was a hands on exercise. Over the course of 5 months we were immersed in the work of the group, talking to many different people who know SWVG from different angles and who could give us insight and understanding as to how and why it works.

SWVG has a massive impact on individuals’ lives and our interviews with clients evidenced this. When clients come to SWVG they are at a very low point and are very grateful for the help to find accommodation, the basic subsistence support provided through ASSIST and the legal advice through the Legal Justice Project. These practicalities are a lifeline.

There is very close working and collaboration with other agencies working in this area. Partner agencies commented on the professionalism of SWVG and how the group complements other services and work. SWVG is completely volunteer led and managed. In financial terms, this allows the group to keep overheads very low and to deliver a remarkably high quality service for very low cost.

This is all grounded in firm but fair governance and processes. There are clear boundaries, and procedures within which the work with clients happens. There is a ‘lightness of touch underpinned with meticulous attention to detail’



SWVG Patron Bishop Michael talks to a Visitor



Steve Brine MP, Anne Leeming (Chair SWVG), John Denham MP and a former client.

Christine Knight, SWVG Co-ordinator, told the following story of a client who has recently been taken on by SWVG. Rebecca is not her real name.

Late one Friday very recently, Rebecca was found crying in the street. She had nowhere to sleep and no food. Rebecca is a Pentecostal Christian who lives in a country where her religion is banned.

One evening she and her family were attending a prayer meeting at a local house when the police arrived arrested her and her family. Rebecca’s father and husband were put in a very harsh men’s prison and there has been no word of them since. Rebecca was put into a woman’s prison where she was tortured. Her aunt organised her escape and, as it was no longer safe for her to remain, Rebecca had to flee the country. She was forced to leave her baby with her aunt.

She claimed asylum on entering UK but her claim was rejected; she had been unable to put together the evidence that was needed. All benefits ceased at this point and she was no longer provided with accommodation. Although she knew that she could get the evidence that was needed for a successful fresh claim, she was unable to do anything because she was destitute. She turned for help to someone who offered her help but this man exploited and abused her before turning her out on the street.

This is when Rebecca was found late on a Friday afternoon. The Red Cross were contacted and they in turn contacted SWVG. Between us we found an emergency B&B for the weekend and shared the cost.

SWVG then found her a room and agreed to pay the rent while the case was investigated. She moved in on Monday. She was provided with bedding etc. that she needed and gave her £25 for food and other necessities.

On Tuesday we arranged for her to see a solicitor who will take on her case; they think that she has a good case for a fresh claim.

By Friday she had been allocated to an SWVG visitor (and a backup) who will befriend her, meeting with her on at least a weekly basis. Her rent and financial support of £25 per week was agreed for a further 8 weeks.

The Visitor has helped her to find a GP (she is suffering from effects of torture, bereavement and separation from her child), enrolled her for some English lessons, and will assist her in gathering evidence for her fresh claim.

