



Supporting refugees, asylum seekers &
those with no recourse to public funds

Voices in Exile

Strategic Plan 2022-2026

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Introduction and background:

Voices was established in 2005 partly in response to the findings of a comprehensive local needs assessment that found there was an urgent need for practical support and legal advice for refugees and vulnerable migrants in Brighton and Sussex. Beginning as a small, informal and volunteer-led organisation that acted largely as a safe point of contact, advice and practical support for those who did not know where to turn, Voices became registered as a charity in 2009. In 2011, partly in response to the impact of legal aid cuts in the area, the organisation became OISC-accredited to deliver immigration advice and casework up to Level 2.

Our charitable aims as set out in our governing document are to work with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with no recourse to public funds to:

- Relieve financial hardship and provide support to secure accommodation
- Provide legal advice and support
- Support the physical and mental health and wellbeing of service users and their dependants
- Enable access to education and training
- Educate the public about the issues affecting our service users
- Provide social, cultural and leisure activities and support to improve people's wellbeing

Voices has gone through many changes over our 17 years, often in response to external events, opportunities and challenges. The focus of our work however has always been on migrants at risk and how best we can support them to move out of crisis into safety. We have now reached a critical growth point, and the profound impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on our work over the past two years has led us to a point where we want to consolidate, reflect and plan strategically for a sustainable future.

Vision:

Our vision is social justice, positive wellbeing and improved quality of life for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants at risk.

Mission:

Our mission is to improve access to justice, housing, healthcare, education, employment and other services and entitlements through the exercise of rights, advocacy and social inclusion.

Values:

Our work – both what we do and how we do it - is rooted in our core values. These include:

Respect – We aim to treat all those with whom we work, whether clients, colleagues or partners, with respect, compassion and dignity.

Justice – We believe in access to justice for all and will strive to secure it and to challenge injustice with and on behalf of our clients wherever we can.

Inclusivity – We want our services, activities, staffing and organisational culture to reflect the lived experience, views and voices of our clients and service users.

Openness – We want to build a work ethos and environment that is welcoming, transparent, reflective, and that models the world we want to see.

Solidarity – We stand in solidarity with all those who have been subject to the UK immigration system and hostile environment.

Professionalism – We believe in the importance of working to the standards of best practice and integrity at all times.

Strategic aims:

Our current strategic aims reflect and refine our charitable aims. They are to:

- Support people to access and exercise their basic legal rights and entitlements
- Support people to access services, build community, develop their own agency and fulfil their own potential
- Support local organisations to develop more inclusive policy and practice
- Develop local knowledge and partnerships to identify key issues and advocate for change
- Become an organisation that is robust, responsive and sustainable

Achievements & activities:

We are incredibly proud of what we have achieved since our last strategic review was undertaken in 2017.

We have increased our staff team from 4 to 15, strengthened and improved our infrastructure and governance, broadened our funding base and more than doubled our annual turnover. We are well-known and well-respected as a safe community space for migrants in and beyond the city and as the only provider of free, accredited out-of-scope immigration advice in the region.

We prioritise those who would otherwise be unable to access justice, including those with no recourse to public funds and those whose additional vulnerabilities or circumstances put them particularly at risk. Our clients reflect patterns of global migration and conflict and of established and emerging migrant communities in East and West Sussex. They present with needs including legal and specialist immigration advice, practical integration support, destitution, food poverty, ESOL and digital poverty, social isolation and access to services. They also present with significant skills, experience and insights.

We offer practical and legal support including generalist advice and specialist immigration casework; a weekly food and toiletries bank for those who are destitute; advocacy and

accompaniments to enable people to access services; and a range of social, learning, creative and volunteering activities to support people in building community, participating in our work and developing their own potential. We work with Brighton & Hove City Council to welcome and provide casework support to resettled refugee families in the city; have developed a pilot training programme to improve awareness of migrant needs among mainstream providers; and have built a reputation as a well-known and respected organisation in the local landscape, with an increasingly influential voice in relation to policy and practice affecting our client group.

Covid 19:

The Covid pandemic has brought new challenges but has also shown us just how resourceful, flexible and creative we can be. Over this period we have:

- Prioritised the role of digital inclusion in our work, ensuring access to kit and connectivity for our clients and transforming our working practices to embrace tech and enable us to continue to deliver our work remotely;
- Transformed our independent food bank into a bespoke delivery service providing healthy food parcels to destitute families and individuals;
- Increased our internal capacity to provide generalist advice and casework;
- Co-devised and created an online immigration toolkit to support clients to identify and gather the evidence needed for their applications;
- Been commissioned by our local authority to support newly resettled Afghan families in the city;
- Explored the potential of strategic litigation and secured a significant judgment in the High Court case of *Ncube v BHCC*, establishing the powers of local authorities to accommodate migrants with NRPF during the pandemic;
- Developed existing and created new working partnerships with agencies both in and beyond the migrant sector;
- Conducted and implemented an organisation-wide pay review and created a transparent process for pay and reward;
- Prioritised collective care and staff wellbeing, ensuring that we create time to acknowledge and address the impact of our work on ourselves and each other;
- Prioritised the participation of our service users in all areas of our work and the aim of becoming an organisation better informed by lived experience.

Note on context:

The pandemic has multiplied the vulnerabilities and support needs of migrants. People without secure immigration status are at risk of worse clinical and indirect health outcomes and have suffered disproportionate financial and economic impact, increased barriers to support and legal entitlements, and increased social isolation and digital exclusion. The

barriers that Voices in Exile works hard to address - insecure asylum status, having English as a second language, living in poverty, interrupted education, trauma and PTSD, precarious housing and employment, racism and a hostile environment - have been exacerbated, meaning that the inequalities already faced by these communities are increased.

At the same time the external landscape and environment for migrants has become ever more hostile and challenging. If passed in its current form the Nationality & Borders Bill will fundamentally curtail refugee and migrant access to justice and to long-term integration; and local and regional developments affecting migrants will significantly impact on our work over the next year and beyond. The asylum dispersal estate and use of 'contingency' hotels along the south coast has increased hugely, while the asylum support system is increasingly broken. Thousands of Afghan evacuees remain in temporary hotel accommodation. A large number of EEA migrants still have not regularised their status and will now fall foul of hostile environment measures. The risk of homelessness is high and guidance on powers to accommodate people with NRPF beyond limited pandemic provisions remains unclear. The south coast remains an immigration advice desert with a growing crisis in legal advice capacity.

It is against this background that we want a plan in place to ensure that we have both the vision and the resources we need to deliver our strategic key priorities over the next few years. This plan will be regularly reviewed and amended as needed and as circumstances change.

Strategic Priorities 2022-2026:

1. Support people to access and exercise their basic legal rights and entitlements

We want to support people to:

- Feel respected and listened to;
- Work towards long-term secure immigration status;
- Have their basic needs met, including access to appropriate food, housing, financial support and healthcare;
- Secure and improve their knowledge of rights and entitlements.

To achieve this we will:

- Create a safe, welcoming and respectful environment for people to get the support and advice they need;
- Recognise the full range of needs, difficulties, strengths and skills that people bring;
- Continue to provide specialist support and high-quality legal advice and casework on issues including immigration, destitution, benefits, homelessness and access to healthcare;

- Develop our collaborative group work and volunteering programmes to help increase people’s knowledge of their rights and entitlements;
- Develop effective ways to measure the impact of what we do and help us build a sound evidence base to influence and improve policy and practice;
- Develop referral pathways and work in partnership with other statutory and specialist service providers where needed to help people move safely out of crisis, including in the fields of homelessness, mental health and trauma, employability and training.

2. Support people to access services, build and connect with communities, develop their own agency and fulfil their own potential

We want to support people to:

- Improve their English language and communication skills;
- Increase their knowledge, understanding and take up of local services;
- Build friendships and improve community support networks;
- Be digitally equipped and literate;
- Make progress towards personal goals and opportunities including employment, education and learning new skills.

To achieve this we will:

- Create and support the building and connection of communities through group work and activities to reduce isolation, improve wellbeing and develop people’s skills, strengths and commonalities of experience, identity and interest;
- Develop an active volunteering programme that includes group work, one-to-one support and support for our key services; and that looks to involve and to create opportunities for people with lived experience
- Source digital kit and connectivity, and support access to ESOL and digital skills training;
- Work with service users to ensure that all our work is informed by, and is in collaboration with, those with lived experience of migration.

3. Support local organisations to develop more inclusive policy and practice

We want to work with local statutory and voluntary sector partners to:

- Increase knowledge and awareness of needs of people from refugee, asylum seeker and migrant communities and backgrounds;
- Increase awareness of and support for policy and practice changes that would make their organisations more inclusive;
- Recognise and respect the strengths of diverse communities and cultures and their contributions to creating a more inclusive city and region.

To achieve this we will:

- Actively participate in local and regional stakeholder groups to raise awareness of key issues affecting our client group;
- Contribute to publications and provide speakers at meetings and events where there is an opportunity to increase awareness;
- Develop and deliver a training programme for voluntary and statutory agencies to raise awareness about migrant support needs and barriers to access in mainstream services;
- Share and model learning and good practice to encourage joined-up, cross-sector approaches to common issues.

4. Build local knowledge and partnerships to identify key issues and advocate for change

We want to:

- Use our casework to build a strong evidence base;
- Share our learning and knowledge with key partners;
- Influence and effect changes and improvements in law, policy and practice.

To achieve this we will:

- Listen to our stakeholders to improve our understanding of key issues and effective ways to address them. This includes current and former service users, people with lived experience, staff and volunteers, local and national delivery partners, funders etc.
- Develop and improve the ways we collect data and measure the impact of our work;
- Use our own evidence and learn from others to identify areas of poor policy and practice and possible solutions;
- Identify key partners and build our capacity to work together on key issues;
- Pursue strategic litigation where appropriate;
- Develop and improve our use of communications, digital and social media to strengthen our advocacy work and broaden our reach;
- Listen to those with lived experience to improve our understanding of the issues that affect them, and work in partnership with those with lived experience of the immigration system to campaign on the issues that affect them.

5. Become an organisation that is robust, responsive and sustainable

We want to become an organisation that:

- Has in place services, infrastructure and governance that are robust, fit for purpose and that meet the standards of best practice at all times;
- Has a clearly articulated strategic vision and realistic operational plan;
- Is recognised by funders as a charity worth investing in;
- Prioritises and makes time for learning, reflection and wellbeing;

- Manages growth responsibly, so that we can remain agile, flexible and able to adapt and respond quickly to changing circumstances without compromising our core services and values.

To achieve this we will:

- Invest in our infrastructure, resources and people (including staff, volunteers and trustees) to ensure resilience, good governance and staff wellbeing;
 - Improve our use of digital resources and continue to develop our digital learning from our experience of working in a pandemic;
 - Develop a robust internal framework for monitoring our progress against goals and assessing and anticipating risk;
 - Develop our fundraising strategy and ensure a sustainable, diverse range of funding sources to help us deliver our key priorities.
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