

## Cllr Alex Coley: Refugees in Epsom and Ewell

25 April 2022



Imagine living in a place where nowhere is safe. Soldiers are on the streets, the threat of violence is everywhere and just leaving your home means risking your life. If you even have a home left. As a teenager in the 1990s, I became friends with Bosnians that arrived here as child refugees, escaping the most appalling persecution. Later, as an adult, I lived in Croatia where I was shown the greatest warmth and kindness, just as people fleeing the Yugoslavian civil war were shown warmth and kindness here in the UK.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has helped the most vulnerable refugee households fleeing war and violence to resettle in a safe and stable community. We have done this by seeking private landlords, partnering with local voluntary groups and administrating funding from the central government. We do not use properties intended for local families in housing need.

We have also supported 'Community Sponsor' status for the Epsom Refugee Network. They help refugee families to live independent lives, learn English, access schools, healthcare and employment and participate fully in the community. We are very lucky to have them. Work began in October 2015 when the Council passed a motion considering refugee assistance. Since then the Council has participated in four government schemes to help refugees from three countries; Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine.

The first, in November 2016, was the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Most of what we have learned about supporting refugees came from this experience, particularly how we work with partners. Considerable work has been undertaken by the Epsom Refugee Network to provide wrap-around care within the framework operated by the borough council. This work is crucial to integrating refugees into our community.

In September 2021, just after the allied withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Council agreed to participate in the Afghan Locally Employed Staff refugee scheme, recognising the extraordinary contribution of those who supported our troops and diplomatic staff. In March 2022 the Council extended its offer by participating in the Afghan Citizen Resettlement Scheme, which benefits vulnerable and at-risk individuals under the evacuation programme.

In April 2022 the Council unanimously agreed to support the Homes For Ukraine programme, following the Russian invasion. This scheme is different to the others, with sponsors who open up their homes to host Ukrainian refugees. This will require a unique approach to making sure that households meet safety standards and that hosts pass vetting checks. Most of the arrivals are expected to be women and young children, many of them traumatised by their experiences.

We will help them. We will work with our partners and deliver support where it is needed. With this community-led scheme, our efforts will focus on signposting sponsors to information and support while coordinating the work of government agencies and voluntary groups at a local level. It's unglamorous work but necessary for safeguarding and financial probity.

If you would like to get involved with the Epsom Refugee Network or you are a private landlord with available property you can find out more on their website <https://epsomrefugeenetwork.org/>.

**Alex Coley is a borough councillor and Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee. He proposed the motion to Council for the first Afghan scheme, brought the committee recommendation to join the second Afghan scheme and proposed the Stand Together With Ukraine motion to the Council. All were passed unanimously.**

**Want more from us? You can read more about the motion Cllr Coley proposed [HERE](#) and read an interview with Nataliya Irvine from SSWU (Surrey Stands With Ukraine) [HERE](#)**

## All's well that ends well for the Wells Centre

25 April 2022



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is to transfer the running of the long-mothballed Wells Community Centre, located at the end of Spa Drive, The Wells Estate in Epsom, to Epsom Wells Community Association (EWCA). EWCA is a charity newly registered in December 2021, whose stated aims are: "..... to reopen The Wells Community Centre. The centre will be available to the community for hire purposes. We also aim to run classes that fulfil our values of education, wellbeing, environment and community." The Charity has a nine-strong Board of Trustees chaired by Vanessa Marchant, all residents of the Borough.

The Strategy & Resources Committee of EEBEC agreed at its meeting on 29 March 2022 that the community group would take responsibility for the building and put it back into use for hire, a café, and a range of community-led activities. The Council will grant a lease of the site with an initial two-year rent-free period after which the rent payable will reflect the community use of the building.

EWCA have produced a viable business case that sees the existing building renovated, and long-term managed by the Wells residents at no short or long-term costs to the Council and council taxpayers. The business case proposal is for a "reimagined centre" which will mix community group use, private hire, a business hub and hot desk space with a community café.





*The Wells Centre – Image © Alan Becken*

It plans to reinvigorate the offering on the premises to deliver a modern, forward-looking, multi-generational community centre. The centre will support Epsom & Ewell’s “Future 40” plans, helping to make the Borough an even better, brighter place.

EWCA proposes to be responsible for the Wells site in its entirety and release the Council from any ongoing financial responsibility. In addition, the Council would receive rental income from the commencement of the third year of the lease.

Councillor Colin Keane, Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee said “We have listened to the local community and worked with EWCA to enable them to develop a business case to run the centre.

“The Council is committed to enabling and encouraging EWCA to succeed and a revived facility would support the principle that enhances the Cultural and Creative opportunities in the Borough where people work together for all the community.

“Crucially, this plan will also remove any financial call on the Council’s resources to enable the Council’s other key priorities for residents to be pursued”.

The decision of the Council was a culmination of a five-year campaign by local residents to re-open the centre.

The plan to close the Council owned and run Wells Centre first came to light during the November 2015 County Council bye-election when the Labour Party candidate Kate Chinn brought it to light.

The Council had decided the decision should be made in secret. The minutes of the Strategy and Resources Committee for September 2015 indicate that an item was shielded from public scrutiny on the dubious ground of “*Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)*”. It would be very odd if this right to exclude the public could be used to hide information about the Council’s own finances.

The Council eventually called a consultation meeting at the Wells Centre when every suggestion that residents advanced was stonewalled.

When the Wells Centre originally closed, a small group of locals decided to find out exactly what local residents thought of the closure. It became clear that there was not just a desire for the centre to re-open, but also a desperate need.

The group found isolated lonely people, families with nowhere to go within walking distance, entrepreneurial returning-to-work mothers who now had no premises, young people no longer able to access youth groups, and many more.

This core group formed EWCA and was supported by like-minded residents from elsewhere in the Borough and after petitioning, marching, canvassing, and researching, they were satisfied that a reopened centre was a viable business idea.

Supported in particular by Borough Councillors Kate Chinn (Lab), David Gulland (Lib), Bernie Muir (Con) and Nigel Collin (RA) and helpfully advised by council officers the business plan was finally presented to the Council.

The business plan is over 80 pages long. In essence, the plan is for an integrated centre offering activities that fall into the following categories; wellbeing, education, fitness and environment. For a more in-depth overview visit <https://indd.adobe.com/view/73d5b9e9-62ae-40ae-a457-282ada7246fa>

Vanessa Marchant adds: “Post pandemic we are all more aware of what is on our doorstep, our communities rose to the fore and many don’t want to return to the commuter corridor lives they were living previously. With approx 70% of commuters now having a flexible week, activities within a 20-minute neighbourhood are due to get a real boost according to multiple news stories. So our already strong business case has been made stronger by the turbulent times we are living through. We will create a shorter version of the plan to share with people in the coming months.”

On funding, she said to the Epsom and Ewell Times – “We will not receive a subsidy from EEBC. We intend to apply to any and every fund we can, but primarily we are looking to YourFund, the National Lottery, CIL, local philanthropists and community fundraising initiatives.” In conclusion, EWCA thanks and appeals – “We are extremely happy with the Council decision. This result is the culmination of many years of hard work on the part of the local community, the members of the charity Epsom Wells Community Association (EWCA) and our council member advocates from Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservative and the RA. The hard work of fundraising now begins and we will need help from the local community to make this happen.

Vanessa Marchant said, “That we won the vote is still sinking in but the real work in bringing the Centre back to life is just beginning.”

**If you would like to be involved please get in touch via the EWCA website at <https://epsomwellscommunityassociation.org/contact/> or via Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/savethewellscentre>**

## Epsom Hospital Radio - A New Future Online

25 April 2022





Epsom's hidden radio gem, Epsom Hospital Radio, is looking forward to a new future online. EHR was founded in October 1978 by two mobile DJs who raised funds to equip a second hand 10 feet by 6 feet garden shed with some crude broadcasting equipment. The studio was placed in an exposed area on the roof of the then Epsom General Hospital. In the depths of winter, it was a hostile working environment with presenters regularly broadcasting in heavy coats, hats, scarves and gloves on colder days.

Life President Presenter Trevor Leonard is EHR's longest-serving presenter. Starting in 1981, Trevor became the Programme Controller in 1983, overseeing EHR's first awards for the standard and variety of its programming. An ardent Elvis fan, in August 2021 Trevor celebrated 40 years of continuous service by hosting a breakfast for current presenters at The Haywain pub, Epsom.



*The Early Days; Trevor Leonard: 40 Years Presenting*

Today the station broadcasts 24 hours a day, every day of the year, staffed by a team of volunteer presenters, from two studios opposite the X-Ray Department. Says station manager, Ian Daggett: "We are here to keep you amused, entertained and informed during your stay. You can find us on the radio section of your Hospedia terminal - **and all our services are completely free!**



*Ian Daggett, Station Manager*

*Our programmes carry regular information about the wide variety of services available to you during your stay in Epsom Hospital. We also provide the latest local, national and international news, plus sports coverage and a wide variety of music styles and genres.*

*We play familiar songs and favourite artists across six decades from the 50s to the 2000s - and in addition, we have regular specialist programmes covering classical, jazz, drama, comedy, interviews with hospital staff and local community groups and personalities, and more."*

Epsom-based designer Stuart Lythgoe recently asked the station to read out a birthday message to his father Viv: "This is a massive 'Happy Birthday!' thank you for being a wonderful Dad and Grandpa - from Jo, Stu, Oscar and Poppy. We love you loads xxx". Stuart asked for the 1967 single Miss Pinkerton by guitar player Viv's band Cuppa T to be played as a birthday song.





*Dr Abhay Bajpai, Clinical Lead for Arrhythmia Services at Epsom Hospital*

Dr Abhay Bajpai, clinical lead for Arrhythmia Services and Kathy Maskens, community matron for the Alexandra Frailty Unit, regularly feature on the station. Dr Bajpai visited EHR's studios pre-Covid and was featured in an EHR Test Match Special in an interview recorded at local pub The Jolly Cooper's where Abhay waxed lyrical on his love of the red ball game.

Kathy Maskens is the inspiration behind The A team, a Friday afternoon 2-4pm patients and staff requests show on EHR. Ed Sheeran's The A Team and theme from 80s US TV show The A team double as musical themes for the show. Kathy has featured in an EHR 8GR8 Songs episode with an interview about her career as a nurse and some of her favourite music.





*Kathy Maskens, Community Matron at The Alexandra Frailty Unit*

Marie Measures, head of Nursing for Medicine at Epsom and St Helier University Hospital NHS Trust, used the station to send a message of thanks for the resilience of her nursing team during Covid. *"Thank you to all of Medicine's matrons and to their teams for continuous hard work and dedication in very challenging times."* Marie appropriately asked for Billy Ocean's When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Get Going to be played on the station as a musical tribute to her team.

Having weathered the impact of Covid on the station – halting in studio broadcasting for over a year, ward visits to gather requests still on hold, the loss of a number of presenters coupled with the financial impact on a shoestring budget – the station is now looking to a new online future.

EHR is looking for a new crop of talented presenters to add to its roster of live in studio broadcasters. The station is also fundraising to assemble the equipment and licenses needed to reach a broader audience in Epsom and Ewell, and beyond, outside the walls of the hospital.

Says Ian Daggett: *"In our 40 years of broadcasting there has never been a greater need for a dynamic local hospital radio station. Going online will help us to bring light relief and a sense of community to the hard-pressed staff at Epsom Hospital and to the people of Epsom and Ewell when they, or their loved ones and family or friends, are in hospital."*

**You can donate to the station's Going Online Fund, or generally support EHR's activities via: [www.epsomhospitalradio.org.uk/donate](http://www.epsomhospitalradio.org.uk/donate).**

## Happy returns for Epsom's talking newspaper

25 April 2022



Photo above is Judy Sarssam, Chair of EETN.

A happy group of Volunteers has returned to their recording Studio at Swail House after an absence of two years, while the virus held its sway, to continue



recording the Epsom and Ewell Talking Newspaper (EETN), a free local news and magazine service for Visually Impaired residents of the borough.

Since the end of the first lockdown, a local team of dedicated Volunteers have been producing the EETN from their homes. The complicated procedure required careful management and organised deadlines, to enable the free service and free postal distribution to continue.

Every two weeks, Visually Impaired People (VIP) receive a wallet containing the Talking Newspaper on a memory stick, for which the charity can also provide an easy to use audio player.

People with a visual loss especially those who live alone, frequently feel and are, isolated as loss of vision results in loss of confidence to navigate the world outside their familiar home surroundings. The Pandemic has, of course, increased the isolation of everyone who lives alone and the restrictions have filled some elderly people with macular degeneration with so much anxiety that even now they remain imprisoned through fear of catching Covid.

Hence the good, kind efforts of the EETN Volunteers to bring the outside in by providing local news, magazine articles and Podcasts to entertain and absorb our many Listeners.

The team are hugely proud of the independent, volunteer-run, completely free service which has been available for nearly fifty years. Wallets are still sent to Listeners who have left the area but continue to take an interest in where they once lived and of course, they continue to enjoy the information and entertainment on offer.

Judy Sarssam, Chair of EETN and herself visually impaired said: “Being unable to read any longer is a huge loss and happily audiobooks are available but unless the VIP is computer literate the whole world of print is not accessible. The EETN reflects the different interests of those who choose the articles and thus there is always something of interest for every Listener. The youngsters so engrossed in the digital world cannot appreciate that even provided with a screen reader, one has to have not only skills, which many of the older population do not have, but a good amount of residual vision and time, to navigate that world. For the present elderly visually impaired VIPs it is wonderful to have instant access to such a rich pageant of material which the EETN offers.”

One Listener said “It is like welcoming old friends into their home regularly as the familiar voices are heard once again.”

**If you have a family member, friend or neighbour whom you could tell about the EETN free service, please do so. Recipients of the EETN do not need to be officially registered as Blind or Partially sighted, they just need to have reached the point of sight deterioration when reading is no longer possible to do with ease. Bear in mind that they will not be able to read these words as you can.**

**If you know of anyone who would like to receive Epsom & Ewell Talking Newspaper please call 01372 721519 and leave a message and your call will be returned.**

**To learn more, visit <https://eetn.org.uk>**

## Age Concern Epsom and Ewell’s 75th

25 April 2022



Surrey Brass Friday 8th April entertained over 100 in the magnificent main hall of Epsom College in aid of local 75 years old this year charity Age Concern Epsom and Ewell. The charity’s mission statement is: “Empowering older people in Epsom & Ewell to live the most fulfilling lives they can.” The charity has an army of volunteers who befriend their clients with regular visits, help with DIY, drives to medical appointments, support for a foot clinic and a free hearing aid clinic, advice and information and other services. With demands on its services ever rising this Epsom and Ewell based charity can be proud of its year on year growth with income rising from £125,000 in 2017 to £258,000 year end March 2021. However, the Charity’s Chief Officer Dorah May explains that the challenges of the Co-Vid pandemic are placing a strain on finances with reserves being used up. “Public support is needed more than ever to keep current services going.”



As their 75th year continues Age Concern Epsom and Ewell will combine its celebration with the Platinum Jubilee and recycle old hats that will be part of their Jubilee themed stall appearing in the Epsom Market Square on Thursdays throughout the month of May. Marie Thackwell, the charity’s fundraising and marketing coordinator, said “I’m really looking forward to establishing some fun events and we already have a few great things lined up for the year ahead – after all it’s Age Concern Epsom and Ewell’s 75th anniversary – now that’s something worth celebrating.”

The Charity’s monthly Sunday teas at Stoneleigh Methodist Church continue...



## Epsom and Ewell gears up for Ukrainian refugees

25 April 2022



Tuesday 29th March over 160 local citizens converged on St Joseph's Church Hall for an information evening about hosting Ukrainian refugees. Half the hands in the room went up when asked who is willing to host refugees fleeing the war. There was overwhelming enthusiasm for the aid the community can bring to the urgent need for hosting Ukrainian refugees.

Joanna Sherring of the Epsom Refugee Network chaired the event and introduced local refugee supporters with experience of hosting and teaching English. Nina Kaye spoke about her experiences of opening her home to no less than 30 Syrian refugees since 2015. It is a big but rewarding commitment and friends for life are made. The important point was made that most refugees want to return home. Making them welcome here is a small way to meet the trauma of forced displacement.

The Government rules about hosting were explained including a requirement that hosts undergo a "Disclosure and Barring Check" (DBS). Basically this means a check about any criminal record. Apparently these rules are welcomed by Ukrainians especially as men are required to remain in Ukraine and the majority of guests will be women and children.

You can find out more information and guidance on the Epsom Refugee Network website [here](#).

## "Local Pride": an evening with Epsom Chess Club

25 April 2022



The Epsom Chess Club was launched in 2018 by Marcus Gosling and Ravi Sharma, the successor to the original Epsom Chess Club, founded in 1929. Meeting in MccAfferty's Irish pub's function room on Monday evenings, a large group of players sit in quiet concentration in a warm room adorned with 1940s-era metal whiskey adverts, flags and old newspaper front pages, juxtaposing the battlegrounds of white and black spread through the room.

Marcus, President of Epsom Chess Club, tells me that restarting the club was, "*a Matter of local pride, really*", having lived in Epsom all his life (apart from 2 years in Russia) Marcus wanted a community based and, more importantly, community ran Chess Club the town could be proud of, "*I wanted to build something from nothing.*", and he certainly has. With nearly 50 members available for games, the club is large and bursting with talent, having won their division in 2020 just before lockdown came into effect, like all of us, the club was hit just hard by COVID.

Chess is for everyone, big, small, young, not so young, plebeian or patrician, and in the Epsom Chess Club, these groups are represented well. I spoke with one member, who at 15 was the youngest present. He was in a position most kids his age dreamt of, let into a pub with no ID and no parental supervision, but instead of drinking as many pints as he could get away with, he was beating people twice his age at the world's most sophisticated game. Matches can last minutes, hours and even seconds. In one match I counted 30 minutes before the first capture, between the cautious shifting of pawns and knights, you could almost hear the gears turning in the heads of the players. Chess can be tense, relaxed, fun and frustrating all in the space of 5 minutes, denoting how it can be so widely enjoyed by so many different people across the world.

What makes Epsom Chess Club special? Why do people keep coming back? "*It's for the love of the game*", Club Secretary David Flewellen tells me while they're setting up their session, "*It's satisfying to come here every week and end up playing a better game*". What makes the club special is that it's a place where you can relax with a drink and let chess consume you for a few hours, an escape from the problems of everyday life. When you're in there, all that matters is the board, the pieces and the person sitting opposite you, with their hand placed thoughtfully under their chin, plotting your metaphorical demise. Ego's are muted, friendly advice is given over drinks post-game and players observe each other's games stoically, before respectfully congratulating/commiserating the winner/loser. There's no gloating, no under or over estimation, just pure chess. In a place meant for drinking, revelry and out-of-tune sing-a-longs; a company of like minded men and women meet week-in week-out on a monochrome 8x8 square battlefield, if that isn't enough to show that Epsom Chess Club is special, then I don't know what is.

The atmosphere of the club is fun, friendly and familiar, with the same faces (and a couple of new ones) showing up week in week out at MccAfferty's pub. Whether they're playing a Blitz (speed chess) tournament or playing ranked games against each other, the love of the game is clear, as is the fact that we should all be very proud of our local chess club.

**Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Epsom Chess Club are no longer able to hold their sessions in MccAfferty's pub, and are looking for a new permanent home. The Epsom Chess Club is a fun, talented and welcoming community based club, if you or anyone you know is aware of a new venue that can host the ECC, please contact Marcus Gosling via email at [marcus94gosling@gmail.com](mailto:marcus94gosling@gmail.com) or David Flewellen at [davidflewellen@gmail.com](mailto:davidflewellen@gmail.com).**

## A Matter of Faith: St. Barnabas Church

25 April 2022





The world’s largest religion, Christianity, is based on the life and teachings of Jesus. The origins of Christianity dates back to AD 30-33 in Jerusalem. The belief that God is one eternal and supreme being led billions of people to follow this religion. 53% of England’s population in 2018 were identified as followers of Christianity. There are thousands of churches around England that follow different principles with some of them being, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Church of England and the list goes on.

Epsom and Ewell alone accommodates 29 churches that observe worshippers on a regular basis. The diverse followers practice their religion wholeheartedly. St Barnabas Church in Epsom believes in one true God who lives eternally in three persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The hundred-year-old building welcomes people from any age, race, gender and religion for worship and in their innovative sessions such as *Alpha* and *Barneys*. Alpha course is more focused on young people with curious minds who want to explore the big questions of life, faith and meanings. This free session is open for all and helps people understand the Christian faith in a friendly, open, and relaxed environment. Barney’s session targets babies, toddlers and their parents and carers. The session involves lots of toys, songs, bible stories and refreshments for all which is an innovative way to connect little ones with church and God.

According to Christians, Jesus Christ came in human form to teach people to love God and love their neighbour. Churches aim to spread this teaching through their Sunday prayers. Associating itself with Epsom primary schools, St Barnabas Church takes informal lessons either in schools or church itself where they educate young ones about the Christian faith and belief. Harry Lamaison, deacon of the church, says: “We’re currently exploring the ways we can engage with the local community and its evolving process. We have links with charity organisations such as Love Me Love My Mind and Sunny Bank Trust which helps people with their mental health issues and offer solutions for the same.” The church has linked itself to offer help and support from people who are dealing with mental health issues, breakdown of a relationship or a shock from death in a family.

St Barnabas follows one of the greatest messages of Jesus Christ “Don’t forget to do good and to share what you have because God is pleased with these kinds of sacrifices.” Church extends its hands to people in the community who are going through financial hardships by providing advice on how they can plan their expenditure and savings. Advice is offered by a financial adviser and is often done by setting up a private meeting with the person. St Paul’s Howell Hill and St Barnabas are working in partnership towards making the local community better by offering support to families in need. The local community is encouraged to take part in church activities that help in bringing the neighbourhood closer and stronger.

To support each other is what God has taught us all. How do we support each other is the big question. The church helps anyone in need and is looking forward to collaborating with local artists who are often unnoticed. Combining prayers with artists is a great way to promote local talent and to draw the attention of locals towards the church. With musicians, dancers and other artists, prayers can be more fun for youngsters as well. Moreover, the church also gives out space for weddings, birth or death. A nominal fee is charged for decorations and upkeep of the church. Artists can also take part in these functions as per people’s choice.

Sunday prayers are the heart of any church, where worshippers gather and worship for the betterment of their lives. Any religious establishment is incomplete without people and followers. Growing westernisation has kept many apart from the creator of the world. Remembering that god even once a day gives no harm and helping others is an act of God. Every culture or religion tells us how humans should live in harmony and respect each other’s decisions. Be it Jesus *Christ*, *Allah* or *Bhagwan*, all of them are with us, teaching the way of life and how to achieve peace in life.

## A Visit to Stoneleigh’s Hindu Temple

25 April 2022



Scintillating festivals and folk songs that are sung in Hindu culture bring nothing but life to Surrey. With the houses adorned like a bride, and temples flocked by those who follow the religion, Hinduism is a way of life. Our country is a multicultural state, where people from different beliefs, cultures and backgrounds have settled. Spreading its idea amongst people, Hindu belief is now popular all over the world because of its festivals and traditions. To be more precise, there is no month without a festival.

Hindu belief has no specific founder, however, 95% of Hindus around the globe are known to live in India. Hinduism primarily has two symbols, one of which is OM and the other one is Swastika. Many recognise swastika used by the Nazis, however, in Hindu culture, it’s a symbol of divinity and spirituality in varied religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

Established in 1994, the Sri Raja Rajeswari Amman temple lies in the heart of Stoneleigh, Epsom. The presiding goddess of the temple is Sri Raja Rajeswari Amman who is known as the mother of love and grace and showers her blessings upon all and develops the goodness within humans. The temple is hailed as an eternal place of devotion, purity and peace. Timeless statues of Hindu deities such as Sri Ganapathy, Sri Murgun, Sri Venktaeshwarar, Sri Pathmavati adorned with jewels and embroidered clothes are kept inside the temple.

The architecture of the temple comprises two rooms one of which is the area where devotees pray and perform pooja and the other one is for functions such as marriages, festivals and childbirth. Vibrant and beautiful carvings are echoed in its art and architecture. The mandir (Temple) is a lively and peaceful place for worshippers who often come in for their evening prayers. The usual opening hours for the public are from 8:30 AM- 1:PM and 5:30 PM-10:30 PM. With just two Hindu temples in Surrey, this temple attracts devotees from across the county on Tuesdays and Fridays.

The temple witnesses thousands of devotees every day forming long queues outside the temple right from the early hours. “It’s very good to see people follow their culture even after coming abroad. Festivals are celebrated with full enthusiasm and exuberance. Many worshippers even offer donations to the temple for better functioning ” says the temple priest, Visvnathan Sarma, who has been working at the temple for 25 years now. He added, “I enjoy working for the god, it’s always peaceful and soothing for me to spend my time here at the temple and I wish to devote my rest of the time here only”.



Worship is considered an important part of daily life. The majority of Hindu families have their own shrines where offerings are made and prayers are said to the deities. Worshipping involves all five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. Washing hands, bathing before the prayer, removing shoes before entering the shrine or temple are a few of common rules which must be followed. During the prayer, some offerings such as sweets, flowers and money are made to gods and goddesses. It is important for some men to wear a sacred thread over their left shoulder and hang it to the right hip. This thread is known as *Janeu* which means shouldering the burdens of life with patience.

There are various cultures in Hindu tradition and rules, marriage rituals, separation rituals might differ from each other. North Indian marriage rituals differ from what South Indian or Sri Lankan weddings perform. But you can expect that marriages traditionally involve a great number of guests, are bright, and colourful. A Hindu wedding is usually a week-long festival consisting of different functions every day which has deep philosophical and spiritual significance. During the wedding, the groom and bride take seven rounds around the fire (*Agni*) which binds both the couple to the seven promises of their married lives. *Sindoor* (*Vermilion Powder*) on their forehead and *Mangalsutra* worn by Hindu brides symbolises a woman's marital status.

The caste system is one of the main reasons which divides Hindus according to their *karma* (work) and *Dharma* (duty). It is believed by many scholars that this system dates back more than 3000 years. The four main castes in Hindu belief are *Brahmin* (the intellectual leaders), *Kshatriya* (the protectors of the public), *Vaishyas* (the skilful producers) and *Shudras* (the unskilled labourers). The system forces individuals to follow the rule and only marry within a specific caste. Even though there are mandatory laws that protect so-called *low caste people* from violation and discrimination, there are only a few who treat everyone as equal.

Hinduism is enriched with wonders and shocks, it is widely followed and practised by people around the globe. The beauty of festivals, the joy of celebration, the taste of sweets and the bitterness of ancient customs are what constitutes Hinduism. Every belief comes with its rules and traditions, what matters is how it is passed on from generation to generation.

## Epsom and Ewell stands with Ukraine

25 April 2022



**Epsom accountant Nataliya Irvine is among 350 volunteers working tirelessly to collect essential items at the Ashley Centre in the town to send to Ukraine where her family are currently living in the war zone.**

They operate under the name Surrey Stands With Ukraine

"It's good to be doing something", Nataliya tells me as we sit down in a coffee shop to speak with each other about the incredible work that she and others are doing on behalf of Ukraine. Nataliya, since Sunday, has been organising local people in Epsom to collect donations of essential items, for those suffering from the current conflict. The vital and impassioned work she's doing is supported by a network of amazing volunteers, whose numbers have swollen from 4 to 350, in one month.

Nataliya, who is Ukrainian, approaches the task with an almost sombre necessity. Her mother, sisters, brother and step-father, are all in Ukraine as we speak to each other, she worries about them day and night. I ask whether they're collecting as much as they expected and she tells me that it's more than they ever imagined. Nataliya emphasises just how supportive the local community has been, just how many locals have been willing to give up their possessions, and even their time, to help the people of Ukraine.

"It started independently", she says, when I ask about the genesis of the idea. Nataliya tells me that it was just her, speaking with her family on the phone and sending them money for vital medical supplies, that were then being given to hospitals in Lviv. Nataliya began to reach out to friends and organise couriers to deliver supplies directly to the Polish-Ukrainian border with assistance from her local gym, FitnessTheory, who provided a vital place to store the items before they were sent off. What started as 4 people looking to make a small difference to the humanitarian effort, has expanded to a 350-strong group, with a committee and community hub, generously given by the Ashley Centre in Epsom, organising donation efforts on a much larger scale. Locally based registered charity Harrop HR Missions Ltd was able to step up and provide the legal entity to facilitate the operation. To have achieved all this, while worrying about her family in Ukraine, all a person can do is admire the strength and bravery of Nataliya and the many other Ukrainians working with her.

The charity has raised over £80,000 and sent over £450,000 worth of supplies to Ukraine in 11 van runs.

At the Drop-Off point in the centre, boxes upon boxes of supplies are piled high, but the spirits of the volunteers are higher. I was lucky enough to be able to spend a little bit of time observing the operation during one of its few quiet moments, and I was blown away by the compassion, focus and drive that pushes these selfless volunteers to go above and beyond for a country that most of them have never been to. They're laughing together; they're supporting each other mentally, physically and spiritually, drawn together and emboldened by a shared sense of duty, to deliver the help that Ukrainians dearly need right now. The whole time I was there, one word kept going through my head: Community, and that's what I saw; a united community, together for a common purpose, selflessly working together to achieve it.

Many individuals have made what Nataliya and her fellow volunteers are doing possible. David Barnes, the lead volunteer, sits at the front desk all day greeting all those who wish to help with a smile. The volunteers I spoke with all told me that David's work is above and beyond, and his contributions are truly vital. David Meadows, the general manager of the Ashley Centre, has also enormously supported them, allowing the group to use an unused unit of the centre, as their operations hub and donation point. Other individuals that gave both resources and time to help this cause are numerous: Councillor Neil Dallen facilitated contacts, Steve Moore's guidance on marketing allowed them to tap into social media, James Brook, an architect also working out of the Ashley Centre, provided vital organisational support.

The team members I spoke to were full of appreciation for one another, people like Roy and Kim Deadman, Jess and Pinch Tarrant, Zoe, Ross and Luda, among many others. On top of each and every local Ukrainian who set aside time to help their country get the vital supplies it needs. This appreciation should also be applied to every single person who has donated food, money or any other item to this cause, their help is invaluable and is making a positive difference in the lives of people in need. Epsom should be truly proud of how it's come together in a time of great melancholy for Europe and the world, to provide hope and more crucially material aid, for the citizens of Ukraine who are unable, or unwilling, to leave their homes.