Village of Hope Trip 2026

This year's visit to the Village of Hope felt like a turning point — not just for me and Sangeeta, but for the entire Hope Foundation team. What began as a small idea two years ago has grown into a collaboration with Cardiff Metropolitan University and resulted in a group of 12 of us volunteering this year. It comprised of 3 podiatrists (me, Sangeeta and Lucy-Blue), Dr Jane Lewis (Senior lecturer/researcher in Podiatry) with three 3rd year Bsc podiatry students, and David-John Jarvis (Lecturer in Product Design) with 4 MSc Product Design students.

Team 2026 with Apem (Village of Hope Coordinator) on far left and his wife Anamika (Counsellor) on far right.

In 2024, Dr Jane Lewis, researcher in podiatry, from Cardiff Metropolitan University approached me with a request to volunteer. After much discussion, we came up with a simple but powerful question: *Could we find a way to provide our patients with easily accessible, affordable, bespoke footwear to protect their feet and prevent ulceration?* The lack of appropriate shoes has always been one of our biggest challenges, and her suggestion that we work with the university's product design team presented an opportunity that we had long hoped for.

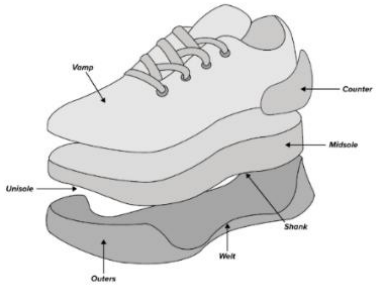
A feasibility study conducted in December 2024 at the Village of Hope by myself, Jane, Dr Steve Gill (Head of Product Design and Research) and Dr Clara Watkins (Senior Lecturer/Researcher in Product Design) confirmed that it *was* possible to create simple, custom footwear on-site.

Jane with Steve and Clara.

The following February, during my annual visit, I identified appropriate nine patients and collected casts, photos, and videos to help the design students begin their work.

One of the patient's feet, negative casts, and foot with small ulceration.

Fast forward to January 2026, and four product design students working towards their master's degrees arrived in India with 2 tutors, carrying the prototypes they had produced. Their brief was ambitious: create a generic shoe or sandal base that could accommodate a bespoke orthotic insert, cost no more than £10, and be made start-to-finish in one or two days. Seeing them fit their designs to our patients — and watching the patients' reactions — was one of the most hopeful moments of the trip.



Generic shoe and layers

Students fitting their prototypes and choosing strap styles

Dr Jane Lewis returned as well, bringing three third-year Bsc (Hons) podiatry students. Although they were not permitted to treat patients, they carried out detailed vascular assessments, using Doppler ultrasound, blood pressure measurements, ankle pressures, and simple ECG (electrocardiogram) checks. The rationale for this, is that "there is a clear need to better characterise cardiovascular health in people affected by leprosy, particularly those presenting with foot wounds in order to assess the link between cardiovascular health and wound healing in individuals living with leprosy." More information about their work and their collaboration with the product design team can be found in this article written by Dr Jane Lewis for the Cardiff Metropolitan University news.

See link. [2026 | Cardiff Met students bring hope and healing to leprosy village in India | Cardiff Metropolitan University]

Taking ankle pressures

The podiatry students had also prepared a presentation which they shared with the nursing students at The Village. This was with reference to neuropathy (loss of sensation), its effects on feet, the role of a podiatrist in helping manage and prevent foot ulceration and what patients can do for themselves.

Podiatry students after their presentation to nursing students.

While they worked, the product design students ran a joyful workshop for local schoolchildren, challenging them to build the tallest and strongest structure they could from spaghetti and playdough.

School children

Meanwhile, our podiatry team — Lucy-Blue, Sangeeta, and I — ran a busy clinic. Sangeeta moved effortlessly between interpreting for and supporting the design students, as well as helping patients understand and consent to the tests being performed by the podiatry students. Lucy-Blue treated patients and supervised both nursing and podiatry students with her usual calm and kindness. I photographed, documented, and supported wherever needed.

Despite the noise and the fact that so much was going on we all worked seamlessly together.

Outside the bandaging unit

Lucy-Blue at work

Sangeeta in clinic

In addition, thanks to generous donations, we found time to distribute clothing to children, and Crocs, sandals, files, and moisturiser samples to patients. These small items make an enormous difference to comfort, dignity, and daily life.

Clothes, Crocs and files.

And in the midst of all this, we celebrated a vibrant World Leprosy Day, distributing 20 tricycles and countless blankets — each one a reminder that mobility and warmth are not luxuries, but essentials.

Tricycles and blanket distribution on World Leprosy Day

There is still much to do.

The bandaging unit is due to be demolished and rebuilt to create more classroom space, and we are working closely with the Hope Foundation to ensure the new design includes dedicated space for proper decontamination facilities, a separate waiting area, and a treatment room large enough for three clinicians.

And of course, we will continue our partnership with Cardiff Metropolitan University. The dream of an on-site footwear clinic — a place where patients can receive protective, custom-made shoes without delay — feels closer than ever.

None of this would be possible without your support. Every donation, every message of encouragement, every shared belief in the dignity and potential of our patients helps move this work forward. Thank you once again

With warmest regards,
Ali, Sangeeta and Lucy-Blue

PS

On my return to the UK I was invited to Cardiff Met Universtity to hear the MSc Product Design students' presentations and see their final creations.

It was extremely encouraging to hear that they had produced footwear that took into account cultural, aesthetic and practical considerations. For example, one student had used goat leather rather than cow, another had created a closed-in upper since his client did not want to expose his deformities. They had all used MCR (micro-cellular rubber) for the insole material as this was a preferred by all patients due to the fact it is a natural material, does not heat up in summer but dries quickly during the rainy season.

I have attached photos of the shoes/sandals in a separate document because the some of the photos show foot ulceration and may be found to be disturbing.