

This was held at the Vineyard Church, St Albans, and was preceded by a period of socialising, with excellent refreshments provided by some of our refugee partners.

Present:-

Kate Belinis, Deputy Lieutenant, representing His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire.  
Irene Austin, Chair of Herts Welcomes Refugees.

Adrian Ball, Treasurer,

Other Trustees - Samah Alharabi, John Borton, Catherine Henderson, Veronica Raymond, Vicky Woodcraft.

Management Group Members - Trustees plus Karen Cleaver, Jane Collis, Birim Karakas, Sobia Razzaq, Helen Singer, Kate Wentworth and Alison Wilkinson

Annabel Kirk - HWR Administrator

33 Members in addition to all the above and a number of supporters, including Representatives from Alexandra Church, Amnesty International, St Albans and WGC groups, Bosnian Community, Care4Calais, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Communities First, Dacorum Borough Council, East Herts Council, Goods for Good, Hertfordshire Asian Women's Association, Herts Mind/Flourish, Herts Sports Partnership, Oaklands College, Refugee Council, St Barts Conversation Group for Asylum Seekers, Viewpoint.

Apologies:-

Robert Voss CBE, CStJ, His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire

Kate Scott, Trustee and Management Group member, and a number of other members and supporters.

1 Irene Austin welcomed everyone, thanking members of the Vineyard church for their help and hospitality and the talented refugee partners who provided the delicious refreshments. She introduced Kate Belinis, His Majesty's Deputy Lieutenant of Hertfordshire.

2 Kate Belinis read the following message from Robert Voss CBE, CStJ, His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire

"I am sorry not to be with you this evening for the AGM but when the date was changed it clashed with another long-standing event.

I know that the challenges for refugees have increased significantly over the last 12 months and with it the workload of the charity. However it is wonderful to see how hard everyone has been working to cope with this situation and for that I must express my heartfelt thanks to Irene and the whole team who have stepped up to the plate with ongoing support for so many. As the son of two refugees to this country I am well aware of the pressure on both the refugees and those supporting them.

I was delighted to have met a number of Afghan families who have been living in hotels around the county for some time and how good to see that a number of those families have now been able to settle here in this great county and you are all most welcome, and I thank you for your contribution to the diverse and colourful fabric of our diverse community. And how inspiring to see some of the young members of those families flourishing in school and in further and higher education. The contribution that these young people make to the

society in developing their future here in Hertfordshire cannot be overestimated. Sadly the flow of refugees to this country has not slowed down at all and with the war in Ukraine still raging after 12 months and with the terrible earthquake in Turkey and Syria and the ongoing situation in Afghanistan the pressure on organisations such as Herts Welcomes Refugees continues unabated.

But the word is “Welcomes” and I consider it a great honour to be your Patron and to be able to welcome people forced to flee their own land for whatever reason-as my own parents did- and to be associated with HWR offering support and comfort to those arriving in Hertfordshire.

I hope to meet many more families and in thanking you all once again for your hard work I wish you a most successful AGM.”

Best wishes

Robert

### 3 Annual Report from Herts Welcomes Refugees - 2022

Irene Austin presented highlights of the organisation’s work, January to December 2022, from the Annual Report, previously circulated. (This is available online to anyone who has not received it - email [annabel.kirk@hwsf.org.uk](mailto:annabel.kirk@hwsf.org.uk))

During the year HWR supported increased numbers of arrivals including 18 resettled families mainly from Afghanistan, other families and individuals referred by other agencies and Afghan refugees accommodated in a hotel in Dacorum,

HWR also gave regular support to asylum seekers in two hotels in Dacorum and Welwyn Garden City and others in shared accommodation and helped groups supporting asylum seekers in Stevenage, Hatfield, Hitchin and Cheshunt.

This was in addition to the organisation’s normal activities with resettled individuals and families across the county.

The presentation included pictures of social activities such as picnics and kite-flying, ESOL language classes, provision of school uniforms, shoes and clothing distribution of over ??? Christmas gift parcels, children’s homework clubs and many other activities.

(The presentation can be viewed online - email Annabel Kirk - [annabel.kirk@hwsf.org.uk](mailto:annabel.kirk@hwsf.org.uk) )

Irene thanked HWR’s Area Convenors and other team members and supporters for their hard work and enthusiasm throughout the year, as well as members of other groups and organisations with whom we have cooperated.

HWR’s objectives for 2023 are to:-

- Strengthen the Area Teams and Volunteer base and work with other organisations to support the increasing needs of refugees and asylum seekers.
- Increase the diversity of the Trustee body to include one trustee who can provide independent oversight and one with lived experience of being a refugee or asylum seeker and/or links to other support agencies
- Continue to support our refugee partners as their circumstances change whilst responding, according to local needs and our capacity, to the significant increase in numbers of asylum seekers in hotels or dispersed accommodation

- Explore closer relationships with the Refugee Council and other organisations in order to effectively support asylum seekers and those refugees who do not arrive via government schemes
- Continue to aid access into employment by support and signposting
- Continue to work with local councils and to encourage them to take more families under government resettlement and other schemes
- Develop still further support for children's education
- Obtain feedback on HWR's effectiveness and opinions on possible future activities via focus groups and an online survey and refugee partners, asylum seekers and our volunteers
- Revise the structure of our Safeguarding team and raised awareness among our refugee partners of safeguarding issues and ways of reporting concerns
- Improve our reporting procedures to better capture the impact of our work.

The Minutes of the 2021 AGM and the Annual Report for 2022 were put to the vote and both were accepted unanimously.

#### 4 Accounts and financial report for 2022. (Previously circulated and available online)

Adrian Ball gave a short introduction to the accounts and the Treasurer's report which included details of the charity's major donors and thanked these and all the private individuals for their very generous support which came in direct regular and one-off donations in response to different appeals as well as through other groups, including churches, community associations and schools. All these meant that HWR were able to maintain a good level of general reserves, which is so important for an organisation needing to respond to many and varying needs.

There were also many very successful fundraising efforts, some of which involved a real challenge. These included 10 year old Lucie's commitment to run 120 miles between New Year and February half term and Refugee Council's Tomasz Glinski's bold decision to ride his bike across the width of Southern England from Southend to almost the Welsh border. Adrian ended by encouraging supporters planning fundraising events to let us know so that we can help with the organisation.

There were no questions.

The Accounts were put to the vote and were accepted unanimously.

#### 5 Refugee Voices.

Ghazal and Mohammed, asylum seekers from Iran, introduced by Joyce Farnsworth, Area Convenor for Welwyn Hatfield.

A video of Ghazal's paintings was shown and her husband, Mohammed, who trained as an architect, gave a brief account of their long, frightening and very expensive journey from Iran to the UK after they were forced to leave the country because of their Christian beliefs. They had no other route than that offered by traffickers and have now been living in one room in a hotel in Welwyn Garden City for 11 months. This has taken a toll on their mental health but Ghazal is able to achieve some sense of calm through her painting after being given art materials by HWR.

More details can be found on the Wellcome Foundation website - <https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/ZAi0fxQAACcGB3-5> - as they have some of Ghazal's paintings on display.

S, also introduced by Joyce, described her journey from Afghanistan and her relief at being able to bring up her two young sons in a country where everyone can be accepted. S has been volunteering with HWR, helping others who are newly arrived. Her hope, she said, for all countries is peace, love and acceptance.

H, introduced by Karen Cleaver, was working as a BBC journalist in Afghanistan when the Taliban took over. He described his flight from Kabul with his wife and small son, his parents and youngest sister. They had been living in a hotel in Leamington Spa and have now been housed in Hertfordshire. His message was that it is important to continue to tell these stories.

Arwa and Narjar from Syria, introduced by Sobia Razzaq, Area Convenor for Watford and Three Rivers, described the two courses they have recently completed to help them to gain qualifications as doulas.

They both enjoyed the courses, although the second course, in English, was very challenging. They feel that they have greatly increased in confidence and are looking forward to starting work as doulas and helping other women - and their partners and families.

B, a doctor from Afghanistan, was introduced by John Borton. He described the suddenness of the Taliban's arrival, the evacuation, and how his life has now improved. After 11 months in a 'bridging' hotel in Hertfordshire, where he was supported by HWR, the family are now living nearby. Having passed his English qualification exams, B is now studying for a medical conversion course that will enable him to practise as a UK GP. Meanwhile he continues to befriend and support those still living in the nearby hotel where he and his family spent so many months.

A aged 11 and S aged 21 from Iran. who are now accommodated in an asylum seeker's hostel, were introduced by Alison Wilkinson, who told the meeting of the lack of amenities in their present accommodation. Residents share bedrooms which are too small for more than one person to dress or undress at a time and no tables or chairs are provided so that food has to be eaten on the bed or on the stairs.

A told the meeting that, because he speaks Farsi, Greek and English, he often translates for other residents. He described how he had to wait several months before he was given a school place but is now delighted to be studying again - and is learning French and Spanish, to add to his other languages.

S, who has a bachelors degree in Genetics from a university in Iran and is anxious to start work and to be able to contribute to society. She has been in the UK since September 2021 and has been waiting since then for a decision on her application for asylum.

Both S and A are very worried about the situation in Iran.

6 Finally Irene Austin thanked everyone for their contributions to the meeting and for their support throughout the year.

The meeting closed at 10.35

Vicky Woodcraft. Secretary to Trustees. 03/03/23