***HERTS WELCOMES SYRIAN FAMILIES (HWSF)*  *Trustees Report for 2018***

*Welcoming, Supporting, Integrating*

*ww.hwsf.org.uk*

*Reg Charity 1172687*

It has been another busy year for HWSF, our second as a charity, and we thank you all for your continued donations and support, which are much appreciated.

There have been some changes during the year. Gary Sutcliffe, who helped us a great deal in formalising our policies and procedures, resigned as a trustee and we thank him for all his support. In his place we appointed John Borton and we hope you will welcome him and formally vote him in as a trustee at this AGM. As we are now supporting 48 families in Hertfordshire we have strengthened our local Area Convenor network and now have a convenor in each area of the county. In Watford and Three Rivers, John Borton is serving as Acting Area Convenor until such time as a locally-based convenor is identified.

Details of our Area Convenors are on our website.

**ESOL/ Language Support & Volunteering.**

Because of the size of the county we recognised the need for a county-wide co-ordinator for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and Language Support Volunteers and secured sufficient funding through bids to appoint Caroline Herring for 9 hours a week to fill this role. Caroline now recruits, inducts, places and supports volunteers who work 1:1 with families to help them practise their English and has also organised some family learning activities during the holidays. We are grateful to volunteers working with informal groups to supplement the existing, formal language provision, although sadly this is still patchy in some areas of the county.

The full ESOL project report for 2018 can be seen on our website.

At the end of the year, in partnership with CDA (Community Development Action), we were successful in winning a bid for a women's project to operate in 2019 across Hertfordshire. We also gained additional funds for the Volunteer Coordinator role.  This means Caroline will now have 18 hours a week split between the two projects for the whole of 2019.

There are now over 70 volunteers who have completed their DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks with HWSF. They are working in a variety of roles, such as helping with English, running and helping at informal conversation groups, general befriending, gardening, driving, helping with employment and organising and supporting events. One volunteer has set up a group to help with passing the driving theory test, one has started an informal women’s group and another has set up country walking activities.

**Supporting and welcoming families.**

Supporting and welcoming families is still one of our main objectives as a charity. With 48 families in the county - and more expected in 2019 - Hertfordshire now has the highest number of refugee families from Syria in the East of England and we continue to provide them with a welcome package on arrival, whilst Area Convenors maintain contact with them and try to meet any additional needs and requests. This is particularly important for families who are now in their third year, when support from the Refugee Council and local councils is reduced, and one area where families no longer receive any support from the Refugee Council for their Year 3 families. Accommodation continues to be a concern for some families for whom benefits changes and caps on housing credits make it increasingly difficult to find affordable accommodation.

In 2018 we were also able to offer support to refugees from other parts of the world who were referred to us and not just those coming through the resettlement scheme.

Social events continued to be held in all areas during the year, organised by the Area Convenors and volunteers and supported in some cases by Caroline.  Activities included monthly lunches, shared meals, walks in the country, barge trips and parties. Some of these were in response to requests from families such as a picnic in the park and games for the children. These are all recorded on our website.

**Website.**

We are thankful to Lauren Frankel, our webmaster, who has been working on improving our website, and have appreciated the work of those volunteers who suggested changes.  Lauren keeps our Facebook and website updated and ensures that stories from events are regularly recorded.

**Cycle Scheme**

Our cycle scheme continued to be very popular. In 2018 63 bikes and 5 scooters, all with safety equipment, were delivered across the county and ongoing maintenance work carried out on a further 10 bikes.  A big thank you to Vicky Woodcraft and Catherine Henderson who run this scheme and the volunteers who help with bike repairs and deliveries.

**Working with other groups.**

We continued to work closely with the Refugee Council and local councils to provide a cohesive approach to supporting the families. We also worked with a range of other voluntary organisations such as People Not Borders, Soul Survivors and the University of Hertfordshire Refugee Support Group. Contact was made with the Baldock Community Sponsorship Scheme, (the first in Hertfordshire), whom we helped with inductions for their volunteers. We include the family they support in our social events.

**Awards and Fundraising**

This year we were runners up in the Social Justice Category in the High Sheriff’s awards, the money we received from this going towards funding our ESOL / Language Support provision. We were also nominated in the Herts Advertiser awards in the Good Neighbour category for our shared event with the Masorti Synagogue in St Albans and one of our area co-ordinators won the Service to the Community award in her local area.

We are grateful to all those who organised fund-raising events during the year to support our work. These included cake sales and cycle rides, with particular mention for the Rev David Munchin, whose Welwyn to Rome cycle ride raised over £5500. We are also grateful to Mark Evans, Director of Games to Get, for choosing us as their Charity of the Year and for helping us run a very successful fundraising evening using his company’s ‘Sussed’ game. We hope to repeat this in other parts of the county. Many thanks also to Enas, who once again designed our fund-raising Christmas cards.

Priorities for 2019

* To continue to support the families and other refugees and respond to changing needs.
* To continue to run events that support wellbeing and integration.
* To continue with our Language Support/ Befriender network and bid for further funds to maintain this.
* To set up and pilot women's groups in different parts of the county.
* To explore how we might support refugees not coming through the Government scheme.
* To give additional help with access to employment.
* To consult with the families on how they can be more involved with our organisation.
* To strengthen our Volunteer Driver network across the county.
* To continue to fundraise and to encourage other organisations to help us with this.

We will continue to need your support and involvement to achieve all of this.

Once again we thank those individuals and organisations who have given their support by volunteering, fundraising, making donations, offering their premises and helping us to organise and run events.

Please do keep working with us.

Irene Austin (Chair), Samah Alrahabi, John Borton, Michael Hayter (Treasurer), Catherine Henderson, Vicky Woodcraft.