



Herts Welcomes Refugees Annual General Meeting. Thursday 25th
March 2021

There were 50 members present, including HM Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Robert Voss, CBE, CStJ, Deputy Lieutenants Kate Belinis and Penny Williams, HWR Trustees Samah Alrahabi, Irene Austin, John Borton, Mick Hayter, Mala Mulholland, Veronica Raymond, Kate Scott and Vicky Woodcraft and 9 Refugee Partners.

Apologies were received from:- Debbie Behrens, Mione Goldspink, Catherine Henderson, Shona Hill, Sarah Martinelli, Helen Singer.

1 Irene Austin, Chair of HWR, welcomed everyone and introduced our patron Robert Voss.

2 In his opening remarks the Lord Lieutenant commented that the significant word in the charity's title was 'Welcomes,' which was part of Hertfordshire's tradition. During the First World War, for example, Letchworth welcomed a significant number of refugees from Belgium and in the Second World War many refugees from Nazi Germany arrived in the county.

He recognised that the past twelve months have been very difficult and congratulated Irene Austin and her team for the way they have coped with the challenges and accomplished so much.

He said how proud he is to represent Her Majesty in the country's most diverse county as regards the number of different languages spoken and religious faiths represented as well as in types of businesses, schools etc. - a diversity which is reflected in this organisation. He looked forward to meeting members and refugee partners in person, once this is possible again - hopefully with refreshments!

3. **The Minutes of the last AGM, 23/06/20, previously circulated, were accepted unanimously,** with no questions.

4. Report from Trustees for 2021 - previously circulated. This was presented by Irene Austin, who highlighted the fact that Area Convenors and Trustees have continued to support refugee partners, maintaining contact and meeting needs, including providing financial and other help in cases of hardship, which have increased during the pandemic. The success of a Crowdfunding appeal meant we were able to buy Chromebooks for families to help with school and college work, which proved invaluable during lockdown, and a successful IT project helped many refugee partners to become more skilled in the use of their devices.

She thanked all Volunteers for meeting the very demanding challenges of lockdown and Caroline Herring, Volunteer Coordinator, for organising virtual meetings which have been very well attended, helping volunteers to share ideas and to overcome feelings of isolation and maintaining contact with the refugees. Maintaining our befriender network has been

extremely important during these difficult times. During this year we have had an increased number of referrals from other agencies including refugees not part of the original government scheme and asylum seekers, some held in hotels, some in dispersed accommodation.

The Bike Scheme has continued to prove popular and many thanks were due to Chris Rigby who ran the scheme for the year and to Adrian Ball, who has now taken it over. We are grateful to our incoming treasurer, Mala Mulholland, and her daughter, who have started a Book Scheme, whereby books are delivered to the refugee children, as well as Author Sessions, a Zoom opportunity for children to 'meet' authors of books they have read. A 'Storytime' group runs online sessions in school holidays, reading books and poems to younger children.

Another new initiative is the Educational Fund, providing materials for school and college students. This is mainly supported by funding from Redmill Solutions and we are grateful to Pippa Pearson, who has taken over the administration of this fund.

Many parents were keen that their children should not lose touch with their cultural heritage and would be able to communicate with relatives in Syria and Samah Alrahabi, helped by some of the refugee partners, started a Saturday Arabic school to address this need. Communication has become more and more important during the pandemic. We have continued to give regular newsletters and are grateful to Mark Kendall for his invaluable help with IT and Mailchimp and to Lauren Frankel for maintaining a lively website and Facebook page.

The charity's priorities for 2021 remain the same as last year's but in addition we hope to persuade local councils to accept more refugee families and may be asking for members' help with this. We are also keen to involve our refugee partners more closely in the development of the organisation and have therefore set a date for the first meeting of our Advisory Forum which will be held on May 23rd.

5 Treasurer's Report - previously circulated with the full accounts - was presented by Mick Hayter.

As this was his last report as treasurer, he started by giving a sincere thank you to everyone for their wonderful support over the past five years, support that has been generous beyond all reason both financially and in the time given to supporting the families.

He reported that, in summary, we made a surplus of £6,174, partly because activities were reduced due to Covid and because supporters continued to make donations and raise funds. Total Unrestricted funds, which can be spent as the trustees decide, are £16,317. Restricted funds, which must be spent in accordance with the donors' wishes, are £16,417. Total funds are a healthy £32,734.

We were delighted to receive a donation of almost £5,400 from the Ocado Foundation. This was designated as a Hardship Fund to help those affected by Covid or facing other financial problems and £4,920 was distributed during the year.

We are grateful to COSARAF, Herts Community Foundation and The Lottery Fund who fund our vital Volunteer Coordinator post and are grateful to Caroline Herring for undertaking this role so successfully.

It is important to note that HWR's old bank account is now closed and any deposits will be returned. Any standing orders or donations must be paid into the new account. Mick ended

by saying that he will continue to serve as a trustee and member of the management Committee. He wished HWR every success in the future and said he was sure that the new treasurer, Mala Mulholland, could rely on everyone's continuing support.

The accounts were unanimously approved. Irene Austin thanked Mick on behalf of the trustees and the whole organisation for his hard work and unfailing support throughout HWR's first years.

6 Election of Trustees. This was led by Kate Scott.

According to our constitution two trustees stand down every year but are eligible for re-election. This year Samah Alrahabi and Irene Austin stood down. **Both were re-elected unanimously.**

The new treasurer, Mala Mulholland, joined the trustees during the year. **At this meeting she was unanimously elected.**

7. Refugee Voices. Vicky Woodcraft introduced 9 of our refugee partners, who spoke movingly of the welcome they received, as well as the educational support, help with furnishing new homes, donations of IT equipment, social activities and/or Zoom groups and opportunities to develop their skills. All had been affected by the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns but had been helped to cope by their volunteer teachers and befrienders who maintained contact throughout.

HWR are grateful to Nadia and Sharaf, David and his family, Sana, Arwa and Samer for their excellent contributions, which were enjoyed by all.

Kate Wentworth spoke of the challenges and the great pleasures of volunteering and building friendships and Vicky Woodcraft showed some of the masks, made by Ahmad, a professional tailor, in thanks for the welcome and support he and his family have received, Sales of these have raised almost £550 so far.

The evening closed with thanks to Irene Austin for her energetic and inspiring leadership during a very difficult period and thanks to all members and volunteers for their continuing support.

The meeting ended at approximately 8.15pm.

Vicky Woodcraft. 26/03/21