



Herts Welcomes Syrian Families (HWSF)

Welcoming, supporting, integrating

Information Note

How did HWSF start?

In response to widespread public support for the UK to do more to help Syrian refugees displaced by the Syrian Civil War, in September 2015 the UK Government launched the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (SVPR) Scheme aiming to bring 20,000 Syrian refugees to the UK over a five year period (2015-2019).

With the success of the scheme being dependent on the participation and support of local councils, Herts Welcomes Syrian Families (HWSF) was formed to encourage local councils to participate in the SVPR Scheme. Working collaboratively with other organisations, HWSF's lobbying and public speaking efforts were successful – nine of Hertfordshire's ten District and Borough Councils committed to receiving Syrian families through the Scheme. Broxbourne District Council (Hoddesdon, Broxbourne, Cheshunt and Waltham Cross) chose not to participate.

By August 2016 it had become apparent that HWSF's effectiveness and ability to raise funds would be enhanced if it were formally registered with the Charity Commission. HWSF achieved charitable status in April 2017 (Registered Charity No. 1172687).

HWSF now has a network of over 400 Supporters, Members and Volunteers providing support to the families in Hertfordshire. HWSF works with other voluntary groups supporting refugees in Hertfordshire and is working to improve coordination amongst them. In March 2018 HWSF's work was recognised in the Hertfordshire High Sheriff's Annual Awards where HWSF was Runner-Up in the Social Justice category.

What are our objectives?

To provide support to refugees and asylum seekers in Hertfordshire, particularly Syrian refugees, by operating as a co-ordination and action network, that will:

- (1) Encourage local councils and the County Council to accept refugees under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme;
- (2) Work with local councils, the County Council and relevant organisations to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers have access to, and are provided with, appropriate services;
- (3) Welcome refugees and asylum seekers to our area and offer ongoing practical support;
- (4) Connect organisations and individuals wishing to support refugees and asylum seekers to create a supportive and enabling environment for integrating them into the local community;
- (5) Advance the education of the public in all aspects of the refugee situation, with particular reference to refugees of Syrian origin.

How do Syrian Refugee Families come to Hertfordshire?

Families go through a rigorous selection and vetting procedure overseen by the UK Home Office. They are granted five years' Refugee Status. If after five years in the UK, a stable peace has been achieved in Syria, the families can return to Syria. Alternatively, they may choose to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK.

Accommodation is found mainly through private landlords and housing associations. The first family to come to Hertfordshire through the SVPR Scheme arrived in Stevenage in March 2016. Currently (July 2019) there are 54 families in Hertfordshire. Additional families are due to arrive through 2019 and early 2020.

How are the families supported?

Eight of the nine councils participating in the SVPR Scheme in Hertfordshire commissioned the Refugee Council to support them and the arriving families for their initial 12 months. The Refugee Council's Hertfordshire Resettlement Project provides advice and support to help newly arrived Syrian families to access services and mainstream provision. HWSF works closely with the Refugee Council's Resettlement Team. During the families' second year local

authorities have commissioned a reduced level of support from the BRC and consequently in these areas HWSF's role becomes more important to the families from month 13 onwards.

The ninth council participating in the SVPR Scheme - Dacorum Borough Council – did not join in the commissioning of the Refugee Council. Here HWSF's Dacorum Branch is providing significant and direct support to the families and to the council support team from an earlier stage in the process.

Where are the families? (As at May 2019)

District/Borough Council	Main towns	No. Families (July 2019)
Dacorum	Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted, Tring	7
East Herts	Ware, Hertford, Bishops Stortford, Buntingford	7
Hertsmere	Borehamwood, Bushey, Radlett, Potters Bar	2
North Herts	Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston, Knebworth	10
St Albans	St Albans, Harpenden, Redbourn	12
Stevenage	Stevenage	5
Three Rivers	Rickmansworth, Abbots Langley, Chorleywood	2
Watford	Watford	6
Welwyn Hatfield	Welwyn Garden City, Hatfield	3

What does HWSF do?

HWSF provides a range of assistance to arriving families that complements the assistance and support provided by the local councils and the Refugee Council. Typically the support provided by HWSF to families includes:

- Providing a welcome meal on the day of their arrival and
- Provision of items of furniture and home furnishings that may not be present in their allocated property, such as radios, TVs and TV licences, kitchen equipment and garden tools. Children's toys, school uniforms, books, dictionaries and information on the UK are also provided as needed.
- A Bike Scheme set up in 2017 has so far provided 120 bikes and safety equipment to family members.
- Linking arriving families to supportive communities and providing support to the Refugee Council and local council case workers
- Organising social events to bring the families together and activities for families during the school holidays
- Awareness raising talks to local groups and communities on the situation of refugees and asylum seekers.

The ability to speak English is vital for families and their ability to find employment and to integrate. HWSF is working with the local councils, the Refugee Council, colleges and other ESOL providers (English for Speakers of Other Languages) to complement the formal ESOL provision. An informal network for ESOL and language support volunteers was established in 2017 and a part-time paid Coordinator Language Support Volunteers began work in February 2018. Currently 40 volunteers are providing 1:1 language support across the county.

Key HWSF contacts

Irene Austin – Chair of HWSF - email: chair@hwsf.org.uk

Veronica Raymond – HWSF Membership Secretary - email: membership@hwsf.org.uk

Mick Hayter – HWSF Treasurer - email: treasurer@hwsf.org.uk

Donations towards HWSF's work would be greatly appreciated. The most preferred method is by BACS transfer. Payment details can be obtained from Mick Hayter. Alternatively donations can be made via the donate button on the website using Virgin Money Giving. Cheques can be made out to 'Herts Welcomes Syrian Families' and posted to Mick Hayter 'Hollybank', Common Lane, Kings Langley, Hertfordshire, WD4 8BL.

Further information on HWSF is available on the website www.hwsf.org.uk and via the HWSF Facebook Group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HertsWelcomesSyrianFamilies>