



“Welcoming, Supporting and Helping with Integration”

(Registered charity No 1172687) www.hwsf.org.uk



Patron: Robert Voss CBE CStJ HM Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire

Herts Welcomes Refugees Trustees Report January 2021 – December 2021

Firstly the trustees would like to thank our members, volunteers and supporters for all you have done over the past year. You are the heart of our organisation and we would not be able to function without you.

Trustees met three times during the year – in February, May and August – for an overview of our policies, strategy and finances. All trustees are members of the management committee which meets regularly, are involved in the day to day running of the charity and therefore aware of current issues and activities. However one of our priorities for 2022 is to strengthen oversight by recruiting at least one trustee who will have a more independent viewpoint.

2021 has been an exceptionally busy year in which we have had to respond to some major changes. At the start of the year all our activities had to take place online but as we began to come out of lockdown we had to consider carefully how we could safeguard our volunteers and our refugee and asylum seeking partners and some activities remained online. In August, following the terrible events in Afghanistan and the mass evacuations of refugees, we offered our services to Herts County Council and started to provide some support in one of the hotels accommodating Afghan refugees. We also increased our work with asylum seekers living in hotels – all in addition to welcoming families moving into Hertfordshire.

Management changes and activities

There have been several changes over the year.

- Mala Mulholland has now handed over the role of treasurer after some excellent work updating our financial procedures and policies and enabling most of our transactions to the families we support to take place online.
- Mala will also be standing down as trustee but we are pleased that she will continue to be involved with the HWR library.
- We are pleased to welcome Adrian Ball as our new treasurer from the 1st January 2022 and at our AGM we will be asking our members to endorse him as a trustee.
- Michael Hayter, who remained as a trustee to support Mala and the management committee, has now stood down and we would like to thank him for the very valuable work he has done for the charity from its beginning.

- We now have one vacancy on our trustee board and are considering how we should best fill this.
- The management committee (MC) has been very active throughout the year. The committee continued to meet on Zoom every three to four weeks and has a very active WhatsApp group. MC members have worked tirelessly responding to the needs of families and individuals.
- Kate Wentworth has joined the MC as joint area convenor in East Herts and Mione Goldspink has also joined the East Herts team as HWR's lead in Bishops Stortford. Kathie Martins is now part of the North Herts team supporting in Stevenage.
- All other area convenors remain the same and their details are on our website.
- Our enquiries line has been increasingly busy with around 500 enquiries over the year. The increase was partly due to an increased awareness of HWR's services among other organisations as well as the tragic events in Afghanistan.

Afghan support, resettlement programme and work with asylum seekers

- During 2021 there was an increase in the number of families we support with 7 new families arriving in Hertfordshire as part of the various resettlement schemes. 5 of these came from Afghanistan – 1 settling in Three Rivers, 2 in Dacorum and 2 in Stevenage. The other 2 families came from Syria and are related to families already settled here. We also supported another Afghan family who arrived early and families from other countries who were referred to us by other agencies.
- We have also been working to support Afghan refugee and evacuee families and individuals housed in bridging hotels in the county, focusing our efforts on one hotel, where our work started in August, since when 21 volunteers, including 3 of our trustees, have been providing a reliable, friendly presence 4 days a week, providing language support, helping with the distribution of clothing and other goods and with activities for the children. We are so grateful to them for all their work, especially Kate Scott and John Borton who, as well as spending so much time at the hotel, planned and coordinated the work and liaised with Herts County Council and other volunteer groups. Kate Scott has also helped HCC Education Service in getting children into local schools and equipping them with uniforms and shoes. We would like to thank Goods for Good for all the items they have donated. These bridging hotels are temporary hotel accommodation while people are awaiting the offer of permanent accommodation anywhere in the UK and in a handful of cases in Hertfordshire. Initially it was only intended that residents would be there for a couple of months but this has now been extended and some families will be there much longer.
- In December, we were inundated with offers of gifts for the hotel residents and asylum seekers and were able to give out large bags to all the families. We

worked closely with Community Action Dacorum on this but we were very grateful to the team of volunteers who put these gifts together.

- We would also like to thank our supporters who responded so well to our appeal for mobile phones. We are now purchasing reconditioned phones, a system which seems to be working more effectively. We were very grateful to Bamboo Distributions who donated a large number of mobile phones to give to both refugees and asylum seekers.
- John Borton and another volunteer have also been working closely in support of asylum seekers in a hostel. In November, thanks to a local church offering their premises and support, we were able to start weekly sessions offering coats, vouchers, mobile phones and other vital items to the residents, many of whom had no warm clothes or ability to communicate with supporting organisations and authorities. The donation of more than 50 Primark vouchers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was particularly valuable. The weekly sessions are continuing and now include an English conversation group.
- All in all we have supported over 400 people during 2021. This has been a challenge for our charity and has led us to review how we operate.

Befriender network

- During 2021 85 volunteers have supported over 100 refugee partners, including 22 children, in one to one sessions or small groups. This is an increase from the previous year, particularly in the number of children needing help during and following lockdown.
- Training sessions have been held for new volunteers as well as Zoom meetings held every 2/3 weeks for all volunteers to share good practice and discuss issues. These sessions cover topics such as Padlet training, trauma-informed ESOL, wellbeing and safeguarding and have included presentations from the Refugee Council manager and feedback from relevant conferences.
- There is also a very active WhatsApp group for volunteers.
- Some activities with refugee partners are now face to face but Zoom sessions have been very effective and have meant that we can match volunteers with partners according to need rather than locality.
- In August we received a huge response from potential volunteers keen to help the newly-arrived Afghans – in one week we received over 100 emails! We have not been able to use all these volunteers but Caroline Herring, our volunteer coordinator, has been working hard to match them appropriately.

Group activities

- The 'Hertswomen' group has been meeting regularly on Zoom. There is not always a large attendance but there are always 2/3 attendees, which means

maximum participation is possible. Activities include yoga, cookery club, conversation and reading.

- A volunteer runs a weekly class for Letchworth women on zoom.
- A group of male volunteers and refugee partners In North Herts meet fortnightly for coffee and conversation.
- A group for women, run by two volunteers, runs every week in Stevenage.
- In Welwyn Hatfield a men's group, consisting of volunteers and partners, meets once a month for coffee and chat.
- The Ware women's group resumed its fortnightly meetings at St Mary's Church for a shared lunch, conversation or other activities.

We have been careful in all these activities to adhere to Covid regulations in order to protect both our volunteers and our refugee partners. We are so grateful to the volunteers who have run these different sessions and groups.

Caroline Herring has done an excellent job in quite challenging circumstances in recruiting, inducting and supporting our volunteers, organising meetings and training sessions and feeding back to trustees and the management committee. Her role is central to our refugee support project and in August we were delighted to secure two year's funding for her post from the Community Lottery Fund.

Some comments from our volunteers.

"I've been working with L for about 18 months and her confidence and English ability has soared. She's so much more able to self-correct and she just seems at ease with the language. She enjoys sharing stories about her culture and her life and so do I. We've struck up a lovely bond. Working with her isn't just about English. It's so much more, as I've tried to help her in a small way when she's needed a little bit of extra help navigating life in the UK and she's helped me to understand Syrian culture."

"My refugee partners and I really look forward to our weekly meetings. We go over the lessons and homework for the English classes they take at college, and some other English exercise. Their ability to speak and understand English and their confidence has increased noticeably in the last four months - and I've learnt some Arabic!"

Other activities

- Although lockdown eased in the summer we took the decision not to hold any indoor events but arranged a number of outdoor activities. These included summer picnics in different parts of the county, when the families really enjoyed meeting up and having fun together. One popular event in St Albans was arranged with in conjunction two other organisations, HAWA (Herts Asian Women's Association) and Active Lifestyles, and involved sharing different types of food and learning about each others' lives and cultures.

- Our first indoor event for 2021 was held towards the end of the year in a church in Stevenage. This was attended by over 100 people from Stevenage, North Herts, Welwyn Hatfield and East Herts who enjoyed food, games and a variety of activities, including a talk from a member of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust.
- Every Tuesday in June and July, courtesy of a very generous café proprietor in Ware, three refugee partners, supported by local volunteers, cooked and served lunches to the public who gave donations to HWR in lieu of payment. It was hard work but, after deducting the cost of fuel and ingredients, around £500 was donated to HWR and our refugee partners gained valuable experience. We are very grateful to the café proprietor for this opportunity.

Arabic School

Thanks to funding from COSARAF we were able to continue with the Arabic school, which resumed in September. There are now 35 children attending and 20 on a waiting list. The children have enjoyed coming together to learn the language and about their culture and the school provides excellent experience for the Syrian women who have acted as support teachers.

“Working as a volunteer in the Arabic school gave me such a wide range of experience and developed my skills in different aspects.”

“I am working as volunteer teacher at the Arabic school and I have really improved my skills and I am looking forward to becoming a full Arabic teacher. We are really looking forward to developing and extending the school.”

Bike Scheme

- Since February this year our coordinator, Adrian Ball, has delivered and repaired 75 bikes for various refugee families (including 10 for newly-arrived Afghan families) and delivered 36 to young asylum seekers under the care of the County Council, as well as 7 for adult asylum seekers.
- This has enabled people with very little money to get to the shops or college and to get exercise, and is invaluable to them. As the scheme has evolved and become larger than we can comfortably manage, Adrian has arranged for Herts County Council to take responsibility for the bikes for young asylum seekers through their partnership Herts Disability Sports Foundation, (DSF), a charity which has qualified bike mechanics. We will also work with DSF to source bikes and have donated bikes repaired, which will make the work of the bike coordinator more manageable.

We are very grateful to Adrian for all his work and are pleased to report that, since he gave up this role on becoming treasurer, we have found a well-qualified, new coordinator, Andy Brocklehurst, who took up the role in February 2022.

Library, author sessions and Tesco Book Club.

- Last year Mala Mulholland arranged online sessions with children's authors Sue Hampton, Jane Porter and Tim Pearce, but later sessions were discontinued as audience numbers dwindled and the emerging Afghan situation required more time.
- We applied for and received a grant of £1,000 from Tesco, for our children's book club and 115 books, signed by the authors, were purchased, wrapped and distributed to children aged 5 – 16. 125 book club leaflets were printed as well as 1,000 book marks designed by four children from refugee families.

Many thanks to Mala and her daughter for leading on this project and to the volunteers who helped with distribution. We are pleased that Mala will continue with this work.

Education fund

- Thanks to the generous support of Redmill Solutions and the publisher Harper Collins we have been able to supply GCSE and A-level revision books to support our network of volunteer teachers as well as stationery and other equipment for students starting secondary school. We have also made contributions towards sports club fees and equipment and towards the cost of a revision course for a potential medical student.
- Pippa Pearson has taken on the role of coordinator for this fund which is likely to be well used in future years.

Communications, Website, newsletters and Facebook

- We would like to thank Lauren Frankel, who manages our website, encouraging us to write stories and updates, and also our Twitter account. She also helps monitor our enquiries.
- The website is very popular – its busiest day being 23rd August when we had 274 unique visits and 782 page views because of our news updates on the Afghan arrivals. Our Facebook group has more than 1,200 members and our Twitter account has 201 followers.
- We would also like to thank Mark Kendall who circulates our newsletters and updates our statistics. He now also manages our Zoho account and will be working on our storage system, Box, in the next year.

In 2021 Herts Welcomes Refugees had 351 members and 197 supporters – a significant increase on the previous year.

Safeguarding

HWR takes the issue of safeguarding extremely seriously as we work with so many children and adults at risk.

- Vicky Woodcraft remains our Safeguarding Officer and has done three presentations on safeguarding to our volunteers. She will continue to do these regularly.
- In 2021 we joined the safeguarding organisation Thirtyone:eight, who process DBS checks on all volunteers as part of their induction with Caroline Herring. We also have access to their training and twenty-four hour helpline.
- Our trustee with responsibility for safeguarding is John Borton, who has attended two training sessions with Thirtyone:eight.

Vaccination Roll Out

We promoted the vaccination process through all our group sessions and via our volunteers. Area convenors held sessions on Zoom and our Syrian trustee held a session with a doctor to talk to those who were concerned.

We produced leaflets for volunteers to use with their refugee partners.

Some volunteers went to vaccination centres with partners who were nervous to go on their own.

“ F was very reluctant to take up the vaccination and really didn’t want to go on her own. I said I would go with her and we went together for both her first two jabs. She was very pleased in the end and had no bad reactions.”

Fundraising

Annabel Kirk liaised with the Sports Partnership and successfully bid for funding for swimming lessons for children. 9 children in Welwyn Hatfield started lessons, with a further 3 planned for January, and several children are on the waiting list for lessons in North Herts when there are vacancies. The children were all delighted with these lessons and have continued.

Another volunteer with expertise in fundraising bids helped us with our bid to Herts Community Foundation for Afghan Support and is willing to do further bids for us.

We are very grateful to both and to everyone who has raised money for us in this year.

Our Priorities

We have met many of our priorities for 2021 and those for 2022 will be similar, although the increase in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers and in our own activities means that we cannot continue with the same structure.

In 2021 we continued to support both refugees and asylum seekers.

We held far fewer face to face events because of the Covid pandemic but have managed to enable groups to get together and held many activities on Zoom.

We have continued to give out IT equipment – especially phones – during this year, in order to enable people to connect with each other and to access online

learning, meetings and other activities.

We have increased our work with both asylum seekers and Afghan nationals, actively supporting asylum seekers in a local hostel since November as well as working with some dispersed in the community.

The number of children we support has increased and the support is targeted to individual needs.

We have continued to support employment through informal discussions about work and referrals to the Wellbeing and Work Refugee Integration Project.

We have had two meetings of an advisory group, aimed at involving our refugee partners more closely in the the organisation. The first was very well attended, bringing out, among other issues, a real need to support children's education. Fewer people attended the second meeting and, because of the Afghan situation, we did not have the time or capacity to arrange a third session. We will be rethinking how we organise these in the next year.

As regards fundraising with other partners, one outcome of the Afghan situation has been our developing relationship with Herts County Council in terms of both bidding for money and raising our profile.

Our Priorities for 2022

1. To review the structure of the organisation as we respond to growing and changing demands in ways that are sustainable.
2. To increase the diversity of our trustee body.
3. To recruit one trustee who can provide independent oversight of the running of the charity.
4. To explore how we work with other organisations to support refugees not coming through the government schemes and with asylum seekers.
5. To continue to support our refugee partners, in response to changing needs.
6. To continue to help with access into employment.
7. To continue to encourage local councils to accept more families under government resettlement schemes.
8. To continue to develop our support for children's education and integration.
9. To consider how to revitalise the advisory group given the changing partner demographic.

On behalf of all the trustees of Herts Welcomes Refugees we would like to thank you all for your continued support.

Irene Austin, Samah Alrahabi, John Borton, Catherine Henderson, Mick Hayter, Mala Mulholland, Veronica Raymond, Kate Scott Vicky Woodcraft,

