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Herts Welcomes Refugees Trustees Report January - December 2022.

“You are such a successful organisation” we were told very recently and, judging by the number of volunteers we continue to attract, the increasing impact we are able to have on people’s lives and the fact that statutory bodies, including Herts County Council and local councils, are turning to us for help, we are ‘successful’. And yet we are conscious that there is always so much more to be done; also that the focus of our work has shifted quite dramatically in the past couple of years.

Whilst we continue to support refugee families arriving in the county, an increasing proportion of our time is spent on supporting asylum seekers in hotels and in dispersed accommodation.

The Management Team

This has expanded in the past year, reflecting our increased involvement with asylum seekers. Alison Wilkinson took on the role of Asylum Coordinator to lead the work in Dacorum and we welcomed Karen Cleaver (St Albans district), Birim Karakas (Hertsmere), Denise Beardshaw (East Herts) and Jane Collis (Dacorum) as part of their local Area Convenor team. Pippa Pearson joined us, with special responsibility for Educational funding and Andy Brocklehurst took over the Bike Scheme. Adrian Ball, whom we welcomed as our incoming Treasurer at our last AGM, took over the role on January 1st. The full list of Area Convenors can be found on our website.

The Management team meets once a month on Zoom, with occasional face to face meetings in between, and are in constant communication via various WhatsApp groups.

In February we held a Strategy Away Day with an external facilitator in order to consider our priorities and the future direction of the organization.

Thanks to a grant from the Postcode Lottery we were able to appoint a part time Administrator, Annabel Kirk, to work mainly with our Chair and our Volunteer Coordinator as well as other members of the team. Annabel is proving an immense asset to the organization - enthusiastic, efficient and extremely hard working. We are also grateful to Sue Johnson for her hard work and expertise in helping the charity to identify grant-givers and for applying on our behalf for grants from various funders.

Trustees

The Trustees of the charity are Irene Austin (Chair), Samah Alrahabi, Adrian Ball (from April 2022), John Borton, Catherine Henderson, Veronica Raymond, Kate Scott and Vicky Woodcraft. Mala Mulholland also served as a Trustee until March 2022. The Trustees met formally four times during the year, to consider matters of policy in the light of the Charity Commission’s guidance on public benefit, receive financial reports and take decisions regarding the strategic direction of the charity according to the constitution and the objectives for the year. All eight Trustees are also members of the Management Team, which meets monthly, and all attended the Strategy Day in February so they have very detailed knowledge of the charity and its operation.

According to our Constitution two Trustees, John Borton and Veronica Raymond, will stand down at this year's AGM. Both are willing to stand for re-election.

We aim to strengthen the Trustee body in 2023 by recruiting an additional two members, See **Objectives for 2023**.

HWR's Work during the Year

Refugee Families

Many of our original families had now been here for more than five years, the children settled in school, college and even Higher Education where in 2022 students were studying a variety of subjects such as Interior Design, Architecture, Pharmacy and Biomedical Sciences with one young Syrian studying, on a scholarship, for his Masters degree.

Many more of the adults entered employment and some increased in confidence to the stage where they were happy to help each other in times of trouble, to make newcomers welcome to their areas and to arrange their own activities. For example during the summer the Syrian families in North Herts organised their own picnics and trips to the seaside.

Many of the women were studying various courses in college, some helped at the Arabic School and the majority of the young people at college also had part time jobs. Several babies were born and HWR helped with clothing and baby equipment.

A number of gatherings, mostly outdoor picnics with children's games, took place during the year and we are very grateful to the churches and other groups who donated the use of their premises for indoor parties, and for their help with food and a variety of activities for both parents and children. Local donors also provided gifts of dates and other foodstuffs for Eid ul Fitr, after Ramadan. A small number of families applied for – and gained – British Citizenship with others in the process of applying.

However a few families who had been here for some time still needed significant support and during the year our Area Convenors or a family's befriender have had to help with journeys to hospital and other appointments, support during medical crises, benefits claims, eviction notices, house-swaps, safeguarding concerns and financial issues. Several of the older adults continued to have health problems and there was still a significant need for support with English Language.

During the year we were also delighted to welcome new families from Iran, Syria and Turkey, who were given our usual welcome package and support.

Afghan refugees

We welcomed a further 16 families from Afghanistan to permanent homes in Hertfordshire during the year. Welcome parties and other gatherings were arranged for them, extra furnishings from supporters' donations were provided for their new homes and they were introduced to HWR group sessions and events and helped to navigate their new surroundings.

However, many who were brought here after the fall of Kabul remained in hotels and during the year 230 hotel residents in Dacorum were supported by a team of around 35 volunteers.

This support included one to one or small group language sessions, a homework club for primary school children, driving theory classes, sourcing and distributing clothing, including school uniforms and shoes as well as introductions to the local area and the services available.

In addition our team organized a number of activities to help the refugees to cope with the challenges of living long-term in a hotel, with an uncertain future and concerns about the upheaval of moving to another new area.

Events included trips to Whipsnade Zoo, Waddesdon Manor and Ashridge, a children's magic show, art and craft sessions and participation in the Fly with Me festival which involved a picnic and kite-flying trip to Dunstable Downs, following 3 kite-making sessions. We are especially grateful to Kate Scott, Jane Collis and their team for their energy and commitment in this area.

Ukrainian Refugees

In the months following the Russian invasion, many Ukrainian families arrived in the county through the Homes for Ukraine and the Friends and Families schemes. Because they were staying in the homes of their sponsors and the Homes For Ukraine group were receiving financial and other support from Herts County Council, HWR's role in supporting Ukrainian families and their hosts was varied and focused on particular gaps and local needs. One of our trustees worked hard to identify all the Facebook groups of hosts across the county and make HCC and others aware of them - including new hosts who approached HWR for advice and support. The list of groups can be found on our website. Several Ukrainians looking for UK sponsors contacted HWR via the website and were directed to the local groups. HWR's lead in Bishops Stortford, Mione Goldspink, led the establishment of a group there and in other areas HWR volunteers supported local groups in running or supporting venues for newly arrived Ukrainians to meet up and establish their networks. As families and individuals move into their own accommodation, we are aware that we will be asked for more help and have some restricted funding that will be used. We also responded to requests for Language Support particularly for some of the young people and will be looking for volunteers to support more of these in the future.

Asylum Seekers

The number of asylum seekers in Home Office-contracted accommodation in the county rose dramatically during the year from just over 200 in three facilities at the start of the year to over 1,100 in nine facilities at the end of the year. Sometimes facilities were established without warning. During the year HWR took responsibility for supporting residents in three of the facilities and helped with several others. This has required a significant additional number of volunteers and the development of new ways of working alongside our usual support to resettled refugee families.

In Dacorum John Borton and Alison Wilkinson developed a team of volunteers that has been providing a wide range of support for those living at two facilities. Alison has now taken on the role of Asylum Coordinator. In Welwyn Hatfield a team led by Joyce Farnsworth, Caroline Herring and Annabel Kirk was developed to provide regular support at a contingency hotel. Support provided at the three facilities included provision of clothing and shoes – including vouchers for basic items such as underwear – as well as mobile phones and SIM cards, desperately needed so that newly arrived asylum seekers could contact aid organizations such as Migrant Help, look for legal advice and connect with family and friends. HWR volunteers ran free ESOL lessons for residents, homework clubs for the children and liaised with County Council teams on schooling for children and free school meals and with local councils on holiday schemes and sporting activities. Our volunteers linked with church and other groups to find venues for ESOL classes, Cooking Mornings and our very popular Free Clothes Shops, as well as helping with GP and college registrations.

During the year volunteer drivers have undertaken many tasks, driving residents to hospital appointments, bringing mothers with newborn babies back to their hotels, taking young people to football or other training. The list is almost endless...

It is easy to focus on the practical support provided but emotional support is equally important for people who have been through such traumatic experiences and, in the case of the two hotels in Dacorum, have no communal space to meet with others. Adults need to relax or talk about issues affecting them, children need to play and have some semblance of a normal life and the support given by our volunteers in helping them to feel valued and cared for has been - and continues to be - vitally important.

Communications

Lauren Frankel has managed our website, Facebook page and Twitter account for several years now, placing informative and eye-catching posts and tweets and increasing our social media presence. During 2022 the HWR website had almost ten thousand unique visits and nearly twenty-five thousand page views. We received about five hundred messages through the website's contact page. These included requests for - and offers of - help and referrals from other agencies.

The website was updated visually during the year, resources for Ukrainian arrivals and their hosts were added, a new page featured stories of refugees and asylum seekers and a page was created about HWR's volunteers, with their photos and quotes about their volunteering experiences.

Our Facebook group grew to almost fifteen hundred people and had well over two hundred followers and our Twitter account grew from two hundred to over three hundred followers with the most popular tweets making over a thousand impressions.

One social media success followed a feature on an asylum-seeking artist who was invited to collaborate with the Wellcome Collection and was given canvases by a supporter, who went on to become an HWR volunteer.

We are so grateful to Lauren for her time, her enthusiasm and her impressive writing skills.

Mark Kendal continued to circulate our regular Mailchimp newsletters to supporters - the November edition, which described our work with asylum seekers, helped to raise more than fifteen hundred pounds in donations. Mark also manages our email account and data storage system and is a valuable member of the team, especially in helping other members with IT difficulties.

Befriender volunteer network

During 2022 a hundred and four volunteers supported more than a hundred refugee partners, including 18 children, in one to one sessions or small groups. The number of volunteers increased during the year as did the number of refugees being helped and the number of asylum seekers and others accommodated in hotels.

Training sessions, face to face or via Zoom, have been held for all new volunteers, in addition to the regular Zoom meetings where all volunteers share good practice and discuss issues. These sessions cover such subjects as Mental Health, Wellbeing and Safeguarding as well as feedback from courses and conferences and have included presentations from HWR colleagues on such subjects as 'Answering Tricky Questions about Asylum Seekers and Refugees' and 'Life in an Asylum-Seeker Hotel.' Towards the end of the year volunteers were encouraged to take part in a Global English TEFL course for volunteers. Eighteen of them completed this and continue to meet to consolidate their learning.

An updated version of the Volunteer Handbook was completed during the year by a team led by the Volunteer Coordinator and every volunteer was given a hard copy for reference, in addition to the online version.

During the year volunteers had the welcome opportunity, after so many Zoom sessions, to meet up socially at three tea parties and lunches.

Most activities with refugee partners were able to return to face to face meeting during the year but Zoom sessions have still proved very effective, allowing us to match volunteers with partners according to need rather than locality, for example enabling tutoring sessions in specific subjects where a volunteer might not live close to the student.

An active WhatsApp group allowed volunteers to regularly and easily communicate and share information while the HWR Marketplace WhatsApp advertised appeals for specific goods and offers of donations – with

photos! In addition each area of the county and each of the contingency hotels now has its own WhatsApp group for volunteers and/or refugees

Before Christmas volunteers took part in checking and distributing about four hundred Christmas Gift boxes for Adult and Child Refugees and Asylum Seekers. Many were donated by our own supporters with others passed on by Church and other groups.

Volunteering with HWR can be emotionally – and sometimes physically – exhausting but can also be a stimulating and rewarding experience, offering the chance to meet people from a range of countries, to hear their stories and offer them help and friendship. It is also an opportunity to learn new skills, or use those you already possess, and to meet others who share your values. We are extremely grateful to our volunteers who give the organisation so much support. We could not function without this commitment.

Group Sessions run by HWR volunteers during the year included:-

- Tuesday afternoon Drop in session - activities and conversation for asylum seekers - Dacorum.
- Friday afternoon ESOL classes for asylum seekers -Dacorum.
- Tuesday morning ESOL classes for women, Letchworth.
- Fortnightly/monthly Men's group, Letchworth.
- Alternate Wednesday mornings, Women's ESOL, Stevenage
- 2nd and 4th Monday in the month, shared lunch, Ware.
- Tuesday and Wednesday Mornings, ESOL sessions for Asylum seekers, Welwyn Garden City.

We are so grateful to our Volunteer Coordinator, Caroline Herring, for her hard work and enthusiasm in recruiting, inducting and training our volunteers and for supporting so many of these initiatives. At the end of the year she announced that she would be retiring and we started to advertise for her replacement.

Comments from Volunteers

"I started volunteering with HWR about five years ago and I just love it! My main role is helping with the development of English language skills on a 1 to 1 basis, in person and online. It's so rewarding every time my refugee partner tells me they've passed the exam we've been preparing for together. It's more than that too as real friendship develops from these times spent together, including sharing meals, chatting over a coffee and sharing stories. I've even learnt to make falafels!"

"For many years now I have been working with ESOL for the Syrian refugees who came in the Vulnerable Persons scheme. I struggled initially but soon began to understand the difficulties they faced with language learning. Being with the families has helped me develop compassion and a more direct understanding of what it is like to be a refugee in a strange country with a completely different culture and language. The experience over many years has helped me and the families grow to understand and care deeply for each other."

"Every time I visit the family I befriend I'm welcomed with hugs from the children, the baby is lifted into my arms 'to be held by her English Grandmother' and we share delicious snacks – not why I go but they are lovely! It has been a joy and a privilege to be their friend."

Messages from members of refugee families we have helped to support...

“You have done great things for us that are indescribable and you brought great joy to our lives. I will never forget your help and kindness.”

“We feel like we are family for you all, always willing to help. You’ll always be blessed for all your good work.”

“Thank you for treating us with love and supporting us as part of your family.”

And from some asylum seekers...

“We learned more and when you come here we feel better psychologically.”

“All the teachers are very kind and lovely. Our teacher is xxxx. He’s genius and has a good heart. Every time he prepare important lesson for us to learn quickly. He tried very hard for us. The best teachers educate with their heart, not just their mind.”

“We were very grateful to the charity for the help they provide. We really appreciate weekly English classes with xxx. Thanks to them we are more confident in everyday life. We are also grateful to xxx for the help in other issues. All volunteers are absolutely friendly and always ready to help. We are grateful for the 3 bikes for the family. Now we can go shopping and take interesting bike rides. Many thanks to all the volunteers for their time and selfless work.”

Working with Partners

We continued to work closely with the Refugee Council to support families coming through resettlement routes, holding monthly meetings throughout the year.

During the year we also forged links with a growing number of other organizations in support of Afghan and other refugees and asylum seekers across the county. These included the British Red Cross, Goods for Good, Steps2Skills, Citizens Advice, Community Development Agency, Community Action Dacorum, Volunteer Centre Dacorum, Herts Sports Partnership, Flourish, Care for Calais, Hertfordshire Asian Women’s Association, One Impossible Thing, Alternatives Pregnancy Crisis and Support Centre, Help Children Now, StAR, JCore, Welcome Churches Watford and many other churches.

In relation to our work in one of the hotels housing Afghan refugees we worked closely with Herts County Council, and attended meetings set up by the council to discuss support for different refugee groups, including Ukrainians.

Bike Scheme

Our popular bike scheme continued to strengthen under our new Scheme Coordinator, Andy Brocklehurst, who worked so hard throughout the year.

This year 94 bikes, plus safety equipment, were delivered to refugees and asylum seekers across Hertfordshire and we continued to support both groups with repairs and ongoing maintenance. The majority of recipients were from Syria and Afghanistan but others came from an increasingly diverse range of countries, including Ukraine, Russia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Success in obtaining a grant from Hertfordshire Community Foundation allowed us to continue this important work enabling vulnerable people with very little money to meet people, get to school, college or the shops and to get valuable exercise.

Safeguarding

All volunteers with HWR are DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checked and given initial training on safeguarding. The Safeguarding Officer gave two update sessions during the year and received four reports of possible concerns, which were all followed up. In most cases the police and social services were also involved. Both the Safeguarding Officer and the Safeguarding Trustee attended training sessions with ThirtyOne:Eight, the safeguarding organization with which we are registered.

Our Objectives

Our Priorities for 2022 were:-

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

How Did We Do?

In February 2022 we held a Strategy Day, led by an external facilitator, to review and evaluate our work. Key outcomes of this day were to recruit an administrator, as the load for our existing Volunteer coordinator and team was not sustainable, and to strengthen our Area Teams. An Administrator was duly recruited, an Area Team is in place in East Herts and the teams in Dacorum and St Albans and Hertsmere have been strengthened. We now need to develop teams in Watford and Three Rivers and Stevenage and North Herts. We also agreed that we will only offer help in the increasing number of asylum hotels if we have sufficient capacity to do this effectively

We have not yet formally reached out for new trustees. This is a revised objective for 2023.

We worked with three local councils to help source additional housing,

We substantially increased the number of organisations that we worked with during the year - see **Working with Partners** above. We continue to work with other charities, church groups and local councils and this remains a priority for next year.

We have, as described in our treasurer's report, continued to support our refugee partners (including asylum seekers) through financial support, activities, gifts and vouchers.

Revitalizing the Advisory Group was difficult because of the size of the County and the diverse needs of our refugee partners. Our revised objective for 2023 is to capture their opinions via an online survey and focus groups. The Refugee Council are considering setting up an advisory group and we will hope to partner them in this enterprise.

Objectives for 2023

- To strengthen the Area teams and our volunteer base and to work with other charities and groups to support the increasing needs of refugees and asylum seekers in the county.
- To increase the diversity of our trustee body to include one trustee who can provide independent oversight of the charity and one who has lived experience of being a refugee / asylum seeker and/or links with other support agencies.
- To continue to support our refugee partners as their circumstances change whilst responding, according to local needs and our capacity, to the significant increase throughout the county, in numbers of asylum seekers accommodated in hotels and dispersed accommodation.
- To continue to work with organizations such as the Refugee Council and to explore closer working relationships with other organizations to support the growing number of asylum seekers as well as refugees who do not arrive via government schemes.
- To continue to help with access into employment by support and signposting.
- To continue to work with and encourage local councils to accept more families under government resettlement and other schemes.
- To continue to develop our support for children's education and integration.
- To obtain feedback on our work and opinions on possible future activities via focus groups and an online survey with refugee partners, asylum seekers and our volunteers.
- To revise the structure of our Safeguarding team and raise awareness among our refugee partners of safeguarding issues and ways of reporting concerns.
- To improve our reporting procedures to better capture the organisation's impact.

Thanks

No-one volunteers with Herts Welcomes Refugees in order to be thanked but the Trustees are aware of - and incredibly grateful for - the time, energy, commitment and sheer hard work which has been given by so many. Our Area Convenor teams, our Management team, Asylum Seeker teams, our Treasurer, all our Befrienders and ESOL teachers and everyone who has donated money, transported goods, visited homes or hotels or helped in any of the hundreds of ways we have tried to cover in this report all deserve our heartfelt thanks. Without you, our members, and our hundreds of supporters, Herts Welcomes Refugees could not continue to exist and we are so grateful to you all.

Treasurer's report

2022 was a record year in financial terms for HWR, reflecting our increased activity with families and our new support for asylum seekers in temporary accommodation. Our total receipts for the year were £106,188, up by 21% by comparison with 2021, which was already an exceptional year. However, our recorded receipts in both years are affected by the timing of significant grants, and the increase in our total payments is a better measure of growth. Our total payments in 2022 of £96,310 were up by 50% by comparison with 2021. Approximately half of this increase reflects charitable payments in support of asylum seekers. Around 40% of our charitable payments during the year were made in support of Afghan families, particularly the new arrivals.

The financial results of course only reflect one part of our activity: HWR relies on the time, effort and expertise given so generously by our volunteers, including the management group. This generosity is fundamental to the charity's character and operation, and we don't believe it is appropriate to assign a monetary value to it for the purposes of the accounts.

Support from the broader community is also fundamental to HWR, both from our members and registered supporters and from the general public. This includes significant financial support, and we would like to thank all those who have donated so generously to HWR in 2022, both for our general needs and in response to our specific appeals for asylum seekers and for Ukrainian refugees. We receive many direct individual donations as well as donations from congregations and members of community organizations, and significant contributions through individual and school fundraising events. Direct individual and fundraising donations in 2022 were just over £22,000, and with unrestricted donations from local churches and community organizations the total was over £29,000. As a result our unrestricted reserves at the end of this record year were only slightly lower at £24,794 (2021: £27,650)

2022 Payments

a) Charitable payments (75% of total payments)

Our charitable payments are largely made from restricted funds, supplemented as necessary from our unrestricted general fund. We are very grateful to all the organisations who have provided restricted funds for 2022 to support these payments:

- Very generous grants from Redmill Solutions supported the two Festival gifts which we were able to make in 2022, to families for Eid in the spring and to children at Christmas. These two festival gifts together were our largest category of charitable payment.
- Our support for Afghan families was funded by a grant from Hertfordshire Community Foundation (HCF) received in December 2021, which included support for welcome events and activities as well as household goods, by a grant from the Jewish Council for Racial Equality, and from the balance of HWR's own Afghan appeal as well as from our unrestricted reserves.

- Our work with asylum seekers in temporary accommodation has been supported most generously by grants from the Church of Latter-Day Saints, and from the proceeds of our own asylum-seeker appeal in November and December. We have also used funds from our unrestricted reserve in particular to provide basic mobile phones to asylum seekers.
- We received external funding for the first time for the bike scheme under a grant from HCF.
- Our Arabic school was again supported by COSARAF in the second year of its grant from 2021.

Part of our support for Afghan families in temporary accommodation came under a service level agreement and associated reimbursement arrangements with Hertfordshire County Council. These reimbursements are included in the accounts under Contract receipts.

b) Payments for volunteer coordination and administrative support, including salaries and related costs (23% of total payments)

These costs were funded in 2022 from two restricted grants, and we are very grateful to both organisations for their support:

- The volunteer coordinator part-time position, associated costs and volunteer support were funded in 2022 under the two-year grant from the National Lottery Community Fund covering the period July 2021 to June 2023.
- The new part-time position for the administrator is for a fixed term from September 2022 to February 2024, and is funded by a grant from the Postcode Lottery for the full term.

The volunteer coordinator and administrator are employed through Community Development Agency, and we maintain a reserve with CDA for this purpose.

c) General administration (2% of total payments)

General administration and governance costs were £1,897 in 2022 (2021: £2,051). This reflects the charity's reliance on the time and effort given so generously by the unpaid volunteers in our management group.

Timing of Receipts in 2022 and 2021.

Our Receipts and Payments accounts record receipts when the funds are received without reference to when they are available or due to be used. However, Receipts in 2022 include some significant grants which are intended to fund payments falling due in 2023 and 2024:-

- The grant of £21,379 from the Postcode Lottery to fund the new part-time paid administrator position: £16,757 of this grant relates to payments due in 2023 and 2024.
- The grant of £10,000 from Hertfordshire Community Foundation to support the bike scheme: the fund runs to August 2023 and there was a balance of £8,003 at the year-end.

- The National Lottery Community Fund grant for the Volunteer Coordinator part-time position and related costs: the final instalment of £8,500 was received in December 2022 but will fund costs from January to June 2023.

As noted above, HWR's Receipts in 2021 included the grant in December of £10,000 from HCF to help fund the welcome for Afghan families as they arrived in 2022.

Reserves Policy

Our policy is to have a minimum level of available reserves equal to three months' operating costs for the charity.

The Annual Accounts for 2022 and the Examiner's letter are attached. We are very grateful, as ever, to Geoff Harper, our Examiner, for all his support and professional expertise.

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



Irene Austin, Chair



Adrian Ball, Treasurer

28th February 2023

