

**Annual General Meeting**

**26/10/2016 St Peter’s Community Centre**

**Chair’s Report**

It has been quite a journey since the first meeting of what was then Bromsgrove Welcomes Refugees in late September 2015. When Janet King first spoke to me about the SVPRS in June 2015 and we had initial talks with the Malvern Welcomes group, we had no idea that we would be able to make such a difference as we have. At that stage Worcs CC had refused to accept any Syrian refugees because the Government was not funding the scheme to their satisfaction. We felt that our first job might be to lobby the County Council and Government to accept more refugees.

Because of tragic events and the photo of the body of Aylan Kurdi and his brother washed up on a Turkish beach, a groundswell of public opinion not only forced the Government to increase the numbers accepted on the scheme to 20,000 and fund the scheme properly, but persuaded the County Council to accept 200 Syrian refugees over 5 years. Our first public meeting at St Peter’s was much better attended than we had expected with over 60 people there and we began to set up a database of supporters. We also set up a website and a Facebook page and applied for a bank account.

We had a further public meeting in Feb 2016 at Parkside in Bromsgrove, where we attracted around 150 people. We were amazed at people’s compassion and willingness to help. After this meeting, we realised that we had to marshal the help that we had into specific areas, so that people’s effort was used effectively. We set up specific teams – practical donations, friendship, fundraising, English language teaching, interpreters and publicity. We had originally thought that we would require buddies to work with each family and help them settle in. However, the Council decided that they would appoint a non-governmental organisation to deal with this. We attended all the meetings with the various contenders for this job, so that they would know we were there and could help them out in a lot of areas. Eventually Refugee Action was appointed to the position.

While this was going on, it became obvious that Redditch was more likely to receive the refugee families than Bromsgrove, because private sector rented accommodation was cheaper there. It was government policy that it should be private sector accommodation, so that nobody could complain that people waiting for public sector accommodation were disadvantaged. Bill Hartnett, Leader of Redditch BC, approached us to ask if Redditch could join up with us as there wasn’t time to set up a separate group. A public meeting was held in Redditch Town Hall in May and a further circa 150 people attended and joined our database of helpers. We then changed our name and became Bromsgrove and Redditch Welcomes Refugees.

This was followed by a training day in June for our supporters in Barnt Green. This again was well attended and people chose one of the above groups to join. Our practical donations team were given a list of items required to furnish all the houses of the refugee families by the Red Cross and managed to procure almost all the items in a very short timescale. Our first 3 refugee families arrived in early July and were invited to and attended our Welcome Dinner at the Town Hall in Redditch. This was a very successful fundraising and welcoming event, attended by Joe Baker, the Mayor of Redditch, Bill Hartnett and various other councillors.

A further 2 refugee families arrived in late July. Refugee Action would not give us any personal details of the refugees families including addresses, so we were unable at first to give the help that we wanted to give. However, RA were prepared to pass on invitations to the refugees and we invited them all to a welcome lunch at Sandycroft in Redditch in mid-August. With the help of interpreters, we managed to speak to and get names and some addresses for the refugee families. With help from members of the friendship team, we managed to find a football team for the teenage boy Ousama (now called Sam) and a hockey team for his sister Bara’a. We have also encouraged the ladies to walk to various places like Arrow Valley Lake and Morgan Stanley Park with the British Asian ladies on Wednesdays.

Some of the families attended the Srebrenica memorial service at St John’s and gave readings in Arabic. We also held a successful Eid celebration in September at the Ecumenical Centre in Redditch, where the Syrian families cooked and brought traditional dishes (which were very tasty!). Yesterday, Redditch volunteers arranged a bring and share lunch, with a ‘Swish’ rail for exchanging clothes and various activities to join in. This was quite informal and very successful. RA now trust us to give lifts to the families as transport can be a bit of a problem getting to things like hospital appointments. If you would like to give lifts, please speak to Janet King, head of the friendship team about it.

We have given each refugee £100 as a one off gift to spend as they see fit. We have also asked them what else they need in their houses as the original list of items provided is quite basic. The practical donations team is providing some of the items on the list and others have been donated. We have been given generous monetary donations and have also organised a fair amount of fund raising activities. Naeem will be telling you in his report next how all our funds have been raised.

The week after next, we will be starting a conversation café for those members of the families not already receiving formal English lessons. This will hopefully enable them to pick up some colloquial English in a non-academic setting. We are also setting up a team to give awareness talks about refugees in schools. We have already done a couple of these for Bromsgrove and Redditch schools. We are expecting another couple of families in Worcestershire in November, but are not sure yet where they will be going. We will let you know once we have the information.

Separately from the Syrian refugees, we have been collecting clothing and other items for the camps in Calais, Dunkirk and elsewhere. This is done via People in Motion, who take the clothes to the relevant camps. Three of these collections days were in Bromsgrove and another four have been in Redditch. The next one will be on Nov 5th at the Memorial Hall in Headless Cross in Redditch. We have also been asking for funding to purchase hygiene packs for refugees in camps.

I hope that I have covered the majority of things which have happened since I have been Chair. Apologies if I’ve missed off someone’s favourite item or activity. I am standing down now as Chair, but will still support the group by taking up the hopefully less hectic job of treasurer. I want to thank all the committee members for their hard work over the last year and also the leads and members of the various teams. I also want to thank all our supporters and all those who’ve donated money to this cause. Please continue to support us in the coming year as more refugees come to our area.