



## *“Welcoming and Supporting Refugees in Hertfordshire”*

<https://www.hertswelcomes.org.uk/>

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

### **Herts Welcomes Refugees - Minutes of Annual General Meeting 17<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

Held at the Vineyard Church, St Albans, and preceded by a period of socialising, with refreshments provided by some of our refugee partners.

#### **Present: 110 people, 63 were members of HWR**

His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Robert Voss

The Right Worshipful the Mayor and Mayoress of St Albans City and District, Councillor Anthony Rowlands and Annie Stevenson

Irene Austin, Chair of Herts Welcomes Refugees

Adrian Ball, Treasurer

Other Trustees: John Borton, Veronica Raymond, Kate Scott, Andy Gregg

Members of the Herts Welcomes Refugees Advisory Group and other refugee and asylum seeker partners

Supporters included representatives from Alexandra Road Congregational Church, Amnesty International, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Communities First, St. Albans City & District Council, North Herts Council, Herts Help, Refugee Council, St Barts Conversation Group for Asylum Seekers, Viewpoint.

#### **Apologies:**

Samah Alharabi, Trustee, and a number of other members and supporters.

#### **1. His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Robert Voss.**

Irene Austin welcomed everyone and introduced the charity's patron of six years, His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Robert Voss.

Robert Voss stated what a great honour it was to be the patron, continuing that he believes Hertfordshire to be a most diverse county, in all aspects including age, religion, gender and wealth. There is great wealth but also great poverty in Hertfordshire. One of the county's strengths is its diversity and refugees can only enhance this further.

Robert Voss's parents made Hertfordshire their home after coming here as refugees escaping the Nazis. Their son became the King's (and Queen's) Representative, showing that for refugees coming to Britain, anything is possible.

Refugees have been coming here for centuries and the wealth of their knowledge and education is essential. Escaping wars over the years, they have found refuge here. Robert Voss thanked refugees for bringing knowledge and culture to our country.

Robert Voss closed his speech by giving thanks to the trustees and volunteers at Herts Welcomes Refugees and he acknowledged how much our volunteer base has grown and how the charity would not exist without them. He feels proud to have refugees living here among us.

## **2. The Right Worshipful the Mayor of St Albans City and District, Councillor Anthony Rowlands**

Irene introduced Anthony Rowlands who welcomed everyone to the district. He thanked HWR volunteers and the local faith and community groups for their hard work, the breadth of their activities and facilities for asylum seekers.

Anthony Rowlands acknowledged the amount we can learn from refugees about connecting families and generations together.

## **3. Arad Bahmani**

Irene introduced 13 year old Iranian Arad Bahmani and his befriender Alison Wilkinson. Together they read a moving [rap written by Arad](#) about his life in the UK and his hopes for the future.

## **4. Approval of the minutes of the 2023 AGM**

Approval for the minutes was proposed by Andy Gregg and seconded by John Borton. They were put to the vote and both were carried unanimously.

## **5. Election of Trustees**

- Andy Gregg was elected as a Trustee during the year and now stands for re-election.
- Vicky Woodcraft and Catherine Henderson, both founding members, stood down. Thanks was given for their hard work over the many years.
- Samah Alrahabi and Kate Scott retired and were re-elected.

Re-election of trustees was proposed by Penny Williams and seconded by Alison Wilkinson, put to the vote and carried unanimously with no objections.

## **6. Resolution to change the Objects of our Constitution**

The proposal was made to change the Objects of our [Constitution](#) removing the particular reference to Syrian refugees as it is now not just Syrian refugees who are the main group coming into Hertfordshire as it was in 2019 when the last amendments were made.

Proposed by Karen Cleaver and seconded by Debbie Behrens, and carried unanimously with no objections.

## **7. Trustees Report**

Irene presented highlights of the extensive work undertaken by HWR volunteers during 2023. She gave thanks to the refugees and asylum seekers who took part in the video which was shown at the AGM. More information, including our list of priorities, can be found in the [2023 Annual Report](#) and [the video can be found here](#).

HWR has increased its support of asylum seeker hotels from two to eight. Over 100 Afghan evacuees arrived in the UK last year so we have also increased our support to families settling into the local community.

2023 has brought many new challenges. There has been an increase in asylum seekers receiving their leave to remain status, but with just 28 days to find somewhere to live, open bank accounts and find work, there is a danger of homelessness. We need to consider how we can work with other organisations to help with this move on process.

Irene thanked all of the funders and organisations who have supported us. She thanked the HWR volunteers who are the heart of the charity and also thanked the asylum seekers and refugees who inspire us.

#### **8. Treasurer's Report – Adrian Ball**

Adrian Ball gave a brief overview of the 2023 financial year. It has been a very difficult year financially for those we support and this will continue during 2024.

Adrian thanked the HWR members and the public for their generous voluntary donations.

Acceptance of the trustee report, the treasurers report and accounts was proposed by Kate Belinis, seconded by Veronica Raymond and was carried unanimously with no objections.

#### **9. Advisory Group**

Irene welcomed seven members of the HWR Advisory Group, each member introduced themselves and shared their background.

John Borton gave an overview of the Advisory Group. We have a long-held wish to involve the refugees and asylum seekers that we support in the decisions about what we prioritise and how we operate. John outlined the issues the charity faced in setting up the group including confidentiality, language barriers and the ability of members to give their time.

The panel meet with HWR trustees regularly on zoom. Today was the first time everyone was able to meet face to face.

Two key issues have arisen from the meetings held so far, namely, the cost of living and getting into employment.

#### **10. Presentation by Imtiaz Sharifi**

Imtiaz gave a short presentation about the work of the Afghan British Council. The organisation was established in 2017 with the aim of helping all aspects of Afghan life.

#### **11. Presentation by Aaron Suazo**

Introduced by Joyce Farnsworth, Aaron Suazo, a graphic artist, spoke movingly about his reasons for leaving Honduras and seeking asylum in the UK. He emphasised that asylum seekers come here to save the lives of their families, not to take jobs away from local people.

#### **12. Irene closed the AGM by thanking everyone for their support over the last 12 months.**