

Notes from the Bybrook Refugee Crisis Support Network Meeting

7:30pm on Friday 11th March at Yatton Keynell Village Hall

Part 1 – Sandie Lewis (Head of Communities and Voluntary Support, Wiltshire Council)

- Sandie updated us on current provision for refugees by Wiltshire Council. There are currently 27 people (8 families) in Wiltshire, with a further 30 expected in May.
- Although the numbers appear small, they are more than most councils are offering to take, and Wiltshire Council are open to receiving more refugees in the future.
- Wiltshire Council are working with the social housing sector, receiving what they term “hard to let property”. They can also point people with available rooms to agencies who are looking for accommodation within a home.
- They are also working with the voluntary sector to provide for material and practical needs for the refugees who are re-settled here. There is an opportunity for those who wish to provide financial assistance to help the council to buy the refugee families more than just the bare essentials.
- The Overseas Aid budget is paying for the whole refugee re-settlement programme currently. Part of the delay in getting people here to safety is that everyone received into this country has to become UN registered and be security checked for obvious reasons. This process is time consuming but important for the safety of the refugees and for those who will be working with them here.
- Wiltshire Council have offered to take unaccompanied minors.

So what has happened so far?

- On 2nd December the refugees arrived in this country, and 2 volunteer translators and a bi-lingual teaching assistant went with members of Wiltshire Council to meet and transport the families back to Wiltshire.
- The refugees who have arrived so far are all from Syria and mainly speak Arabic. They arrived with no understanding of the English language. Most had arrived as you can imagine from horrendous circumstances. The youngest was 8 weeks old.
- On arrival in Wiltshire, they are given a short amount of orientation support, and translators had placed signs in their new homes to help with their settlement.
- It is clear that the refugees are not here to receive benefits. They want to work, and part of the requirement that Wiltshire Council have in receiving refugees is to teach them English.
- The refugees already here are settling in well, and are informing practice ready for the next group of families who will arrive here.
- Sandie would welcome hearing from anyone interested in offering voluntary support with refugees (welcome, befriend, fill forms, and so many other things). Jonathan Philpott to co-ordinate the communication between the support network and Sandie Lewis.
- If people are interested in other support – financial, housing etc then please also let Jonathan know and this can be passed on to the correct people at the Council.

Part 2 – Wiltshire Council Fostering and Adoption Team

The second part of the evening was 2-fold. Firstly, it was to give information to those who might be interested in offering fostering care to unaccompanied refugee minors. Secondly, it was to highlight the desperate need that exists for suitable foster carers across North Wiltshire (there are currently 420 children in the care system in Wiltshire alone). The process to offer fostering in either case is the same, and the following information was given.

- Fostering is providing children with a family life when unable to be looked after by their own family.
- There are different types of fostering opportunities:
 - **Short-term.** This might be 2 days, 2 months, 2 years. The plan for short-term fostering is to return the child to their own family in due course. Or it may be that the child/ren are very young and need to be adopted.
 - **Long-term.** These children cannot return home, and are too old to be adopted.
 - **Emergency.** These are very short notice placements.
 - **Respite.** This could be offering cover for permanent foster carers to have a break.
 - **Short breaks.** This is for children who do live at home with their parents, but may be disabled for example and as part of their care package they are given a weekend away.
- Why is there a need for fostering care?
 - Isolated families with no support network
 - Illness in a family
 - Family breakdown
 - Disability
 - Neglect and abuse
 - Mother and baby who together need additional support
- Who can be a foster carer?
 - Anyone from any walk of life
 - You need to have concern for children and a desire to share you home and life
 - You need to have emotional space, time and physical space (a bedroom!)
 - Any age, marital status, sexuality, religion, culture, race
- What is it like to foster?
 - There is great reward and satisfaction
 - There will be difficult behaviour to manage
 - For all involved it will be an unfamiliar situation
 - There will be an impact on family life – may involved some change of routines
 - There is good ongoing support from the Council.

- What support is offered by Wiltshire Council?
 - Placements are arranged to suit skills and family circumstances
 - There is an allowance paid fortnightly
 - There is ongoing training (some mandatory, some optional, some tailored especially)
 - Families are given their own support worker and access to 24 hour help
 - Support from EMAS (Ethnic Minority Assistance Service) where needed
 - Child also has their own social worker

- What is the process for being approved to foster?
 - This is the same for children from this country and for unaccompanied refugee children
 - An initial enquiry is made
 - The Council will arrange an initial home visit (usually within 5 days of enquiry)
 - A social worker is allocated during a time of training and application
 - Interested parties have to attend a skills to foster course, intensive references are sought, medical checks carried out, a DBS check is completed, and ex partners are contacted where necessary
 - There is a home study assessment
 - The application is presented to a foster panel
 - If approved, then the matching process begins
 - The whole process can take 4-6 months to complete

There is a real need for foster carers in Wiltshire, not only for unaccompanied minors. Is this something that we can help with?