

Agenda item 4

For information - annual summary of Frome Welcomes Refugees Advisory Group

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Background

In February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine. As a result, the UK government created a scheme to accept refugees from Ukraine staying either with existing family and friends or in hosts' properties. Refugees started to arrive in Frome before local government was fully prepared to support them.

A group of volunteers accordingly created a support group called Frome Welcomes Refugees (FWR) calling on the skills of people who had supported earlier refugees. This group continued to support arriving refugees until an official infrastructure was established in late December 2022 with the advent of the Refugee Hub, now known as the Welcome Hub, in Frome Town Hall under the auspices of Frome Town Council. The contribution made by the early volunteers in welcoming and supporting refugees and people seeking asylum in those early days was invaluable and many thanks go to those who gave so much of their time and energy.

As a result of this development, FWR re-defined its aims and became Frome Welcomes Refugees Advisory Group (FWRAG) in February 2023. In conjunction with the Hub's remit, the Group's coverage widened to include a number of villages around Frome. The activities of the Group support all refugees regardless of nationality.

Organisation

FWRAG comprises the following organisations/members:

- Justin Worringham (Frome Twinning Association) as Chair of the Group
- Councillor Anita Collier (Frome Town Council)
- Rotary Club of Frome (previously Alan Glover, Bryan Wilson and currently Norman Elmer)
- Clare Hein – volunteer with previous experience of supporting refugees
- Jean Boulton – volunteer as group administrator

Meetings of the advisory group have also included as guests, staff from Frome Town Council, the Welcome Hub and Fair Frome.

Terms of Reference

The advisory group agreed terms of reference for its activities. These were published on the Town Council's website page relating to the Welcome Hub

www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/FWRTerms-of-Referencefinal020223.pdf

In brief, the aims of the group are:

- Advise and support to the Welcome Hub in its responsibility for refugees in Frome and district.
- Disbursement of small grants.

Refugee community

During 2023, the number of refugees and asylum seekers in Frome and district fluctuated but the following figures show the situation at the end of 2023.

- 47 families are in Frome and district from Ukraine, Syria, Eritrea, Kurdistan and Afghanistan representing 139 individuals.
- 17 families are still in hosted accommodation with the remainder living independently.
- Of the approximately 80 adults about 50 are working and contributing to the Frome community.

Finance

A fund had been created by Frome Town Council with the Rotary Club of Frome to support refugees and asylum seekers to which Frome residents could donate. This, together with an amount of money ring-fenced by Frome Town Council, has been used to support refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Frome and district. Examples of the type of purpose for which small grants have been given are as follows:

- A small cash payment to new arrivals to help with initial essentials.
- Help with school uniforms.
- Winter coats and footwear.
- Help with some items when moving into rented accommodation for the first time.
- Activities to retain cultural and social links.

At the beginning of 2023, the fund stood at £16,325.32 with a closing balance of £9,145.22 at the end of the year.

It seems pertinent at this stage to update you on the funds raised by the town in the early days of the Ukrainian crisis.

Over £40,000 was raised by the town for Ukrainian refugees of which around £15,000 still remains. Frome's twin town in Poland, Rabka, have let us know that they currently are not in need of any funds, so the decision has been made by Cllrs to ring fence and hold on to that money in preparation for any further potential conflict within Ukraine, or indeed elsewhere, which might result in refugees.

The situation will be reviewed annually and if there is no pressing need, the money will be allocated to relevant charities.

Activities

- Meetings of the Group. During 2023, the advisory group met 5 times with minutes recorded.
- The advisory group hosted an evening meeting for hosts on 29 June to update them on any developments.
- The advisory group attended the Children's Festival on 23 July and the Multicultural Festival on 8 October to publicise and explain the activities and aims of the Group.

Future activities

FWRAG intends to have a presence at The Children's Festival, National Play Day (7 Aug) and Multicultural Festival in October to help promote the group and the ongoing need for support for all refugees and asylum seekers.