

Diocese of Leeds Refugee Support Group - Refugee Response Wakefield

Fr Simon Bradbury and the Parishioners of St Peter and St Paul, Wakefield, gave a very warm welcome to the Diocesan Refugee Support Group and their Refugee Response meeting on Tuesday 22 October. Well over 50 people attended and there were some very interesting and moving presentations.



John Battle, of the Justice and Peace Commission and member of Caritas Leeds Steering Group, welcomed everyone to the meeting and then Carol Hill, Director of Catholic Care, began with a presentation on Community Sponsorship. She told the gathering about the family recently welcomed in Settle, under this scheme, and explained how Catholic Care were involved as the approved charitable sponsor and had also provided Safeguarding training to the impressive team of volunteers. We watched a very moving slide show which contrasted the desperate scenes of war in Syria and the tragedy of refugee journeys across Europe with the warm welcome given to families when they are resettled here in the UK. Carol also mentioned the work of the Gianna project, now called Gianna: Baby Bank Plus, and introduced Janet Kent who had brought a display.

There were a number of presentations given by those involved with Wakefield District City of Sanctuary, including Brian Hamill, from St Austin's Wakefield, and Linda Fielding, both founder members. Much of their effort is to support the 300 or so asylum seekers housed in Urban House which is one of the 5 Initial accommodation centres in the country. There are also a number of destitute asylum seekers in the town as well as about 100 more who have been provided with accommodation while their

claims are being processed. They run a Clothing Store and Asylum Seeker Support Fund along with various drop-ins and other sessions offered in venues around the town, all of which need volunteers and help with funding.

Another member of Wakefield District of Sanctuary explained how they offer temporary accommodation for those who find themselves on the streets and also of their hopes to establish a hostel to help with the increasing numbers of destitute asylum seeker men. We heard the latest news from St Monica's Housing with the recent opening of their second house, now looking after a further four asylum seeker women in Harehills. The Refugee Council spoke about their Access to Health project (HARP) for those in Urban House as well as their support for refugee families who have been resettled in Wakefield. Finally, a Syrian refugee spoke of his own experiences and this highlighted for how difficult life can be when you do not speak English and you are expected to use a computer for benefits, housing and job searches when you do not have those skills. As he said, *'you have to learn fast'*. It was good to hear how so many are offering their support but there is always more to do as Mike Woulfe, from the Sts Peter and Paul Parish SVP group, said in his presentation.

Refreshments were offered by the Parish and there was plenty of time to meet with the various organisations, enquire about volunteer opportunities and to share news and ideas for ongoing collaboration.

Anyone interested in finding out more about the situation in Wakefield or supporting refugees and asylum seekers is invited to contact the Diocesan Refugee Support Group Facilitator, Lucy Irven on lirven@catholic-care.org.uk / 07739 975 020.

