

*Prior to CWDF's AGM on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2019, **Shantele Janes**, Director of the Cheshire, Halton & Warrington Race & Equality Centre, gave a talk on CHAWREC's work, with a particular focus on their work with refugees and asylum seekers.*



### **Background:**

Originally started out as a Racial Equality Council, one of 100 RECs across the country set up in 1995 by the Commission for Racial Equality. When the legacy Commissions merged into the Equality and Human Rights Commission the Council changed their name and their remit. They are a Charitable Company.

### **Overall aims:**

**'To eliminate discrimination, especially race discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and good relations'**



Key areas of work include policy development, community development, discrimination casework and public awareness and campaigns. As part of their work, the Centre gets involved in an advisory capacity on a number of panels such as the police and the fire and rescue service.

The Unity Centre came out of "Community Development".

### **Staffing levels:**

There is only 1 full time member of staff – The Director – Shantele, 2 part time caseworkers, 2 part time admin workers, 3 part time tutors and 1 part time interpreter attached to the refugee contract. The Centre is heavily reliant on volunteers and does struggle with the capacity to complete the work involved. Everyone is working beyond their remit.

Basically, it's a vicious circle: CHAWREC find themselves in a position whereby they have less funding so need to reduce staffing, then have less capacity and less flexibility which leads to less funding as well as less time to seek it.... and so it goes on.

### **Refugee work:**

Involvement initially was as a result of new "community" coming into the area. The Unity Centre was already offering English classes with one of the most experienced tutors in the area.

The definitions of "a refugee" are as follows:

- A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.
- Two-thirds of all refugees worldwide come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia.
- When people flee their own country and seek sanctuary in another country, they apply for asylum – the right to be recognised as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded.

The system CHAWREC is working within is the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme, whereby the government pledged to bring in 20,000 refugees of the conflict in Syria by 2020. There is a massive difference in working with this group than other refugees through other routes. Those applying to leave Syria must register with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as being "vulnerable". The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) arranges for their transport to the UK and then the Home Office matches people with available accommodation in the UK. The Local Authority then feeds in a local offer.

The UK only agreed to take in 20,000 refugees from Syria. There are so many more displaced people living in Syria's neighbouring countries as the following figures show:

- Turkey — 3.6 million Syrian refugees. Ninety percent of Syrian refugees in Turkey live outside of camps and have limited access to basic services.
- Lebanon — 950,000 Syrian refugees make up about one-sixth of Lebanon's population. Many live in primitive conditions in informal tent settlements, which are not official refugee camps. With few legal income opportunities, they struggle to afford residency fees, rent, utilities, and food.
- Jordan — 670,000 Syrian refugees. Some 120,000 live in refugee camps, where aid groups have converted desert wastes into cities.
- Iraq — 250,000 Syrian refugees. They are concentrated in the Kurdistan region in the north where more than a million Iraqis fled to escape ISIL. Most refugees are integrated into communities, but the large number of newcomers puts a strain on services.
- Egypt — 130,000 Syrian refugees are in Egypt.

CHAWREC's refugee families have come from Egypt and Lebanon.

### **The Scheme:**

- The programme is for 5 years
- Home office have specific requirements:
  - Accommodation provided that is 'affordable and sustainable'
  - Furnished
  - Arrange utilities
- Help to register GP/Job Centre etc
- Cash allowance while waiting for benefits and groceries
- One year dedicated casework support
- 8 hrs of English learning a week
- All costs met by the government for 1<sup>st</sup> year
- Tapers down to £1000 pp in last year

The refugees get a lot of help in the first year but it is often the case that this runs far short of what is needed. These refugees only get support because they have come through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Other refugees get no support. Cheshire West & Chester Council (CWaC) was committed to take 20 families and they are housed in Ellesmere Port. The first families arrived in Dec 2016 and the last families in early May 2019.

CHAWREC's role is to deliver English support, help with community integration, raise awareness/training, advocating and provide a volunteer befriending service.

- English support - bespoke classes have been developed by highly experienced tutors already engaged by CHAWREC. On the whole the families have no English and some don't even read or write in Arabic because they've never been to school. Volunteer interpreters to support the tutor have been brought in. The sorts of issues which can be brought into classes include, for instance, letters from the GP and school.
- Community integration - introducing new communities into area can cause tensions. CHAWREC tries to prevent that and ensure that the families integrate into UK life. Staff have created an induction pack for this purpose and the refugees are taken on various trips – e.g. Llandudno, Arabic Arts Festival, Liverpool, Manchester, and Storyhouse – to experience life in the UK.
- Raising awareness/providing training – brought in IOM to run a Syrian Cultural Day for agencies and volunteers. Last year CHAWREC ran two Summer Schools looking at Syrian culture and identity to raise awareness. Also last year they collaborated with the Cathedral & Storyhouse to celebrate "Refugee Week".
- Advocating - Sit on Refugee Strategic Group and raise matters of concern. Typical issues raised include the fact that support is only provided from Monday to Friday – what happens at the weekend? What provision is made after the first year? There are concerns about the

lack of support for teenagers, the refugees lack of understanding of the system eg getting appointments at the GP, preventing debt being racked up through high rents and how to deal with it and mental health issues

- Befriending service: Last year CHAWREC received a grant from the Home Office's BSBT (Building a Stronger Britain Together) fund to support the Befriending service which has enabled it to match people with families so that the refugee families can practice their English. The families are also supported with going to GP, hospital appointments and reading through letters.

### **Refugee Work Challenges:**

- Not really enough staff to deal with all the issues and takes up a lot of time
- TAF (Time around the Family) meetings and CWaC's lack of funding after 1 year
- Others poorly equipped to support
- Support available is very time limited
- Refugees lack of English
- CHAWREC's own lack of resources
- Asylum seekers coming through now who get no support because they haven't come through the Resettlement Scheme. They don't get any benefits. The local Council has increased properties available from 20 to 40 but the families have no other support from anyone. CHAWREC would like to help but simply haven't got the resources.

**Shantele concluded that a dedicated Support Service for Refugees is what is needed which is properly funded.**

### **Any Questions?**

What has happened to Ellesmere Port families who've been here for 2 years now? Most have settled in well and some are on level 2 now and seeking work.

What about unaccompanied minors? This is a separate issue and so far there aren't any in this area.

AMcC

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