**Report of Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees Co-Ordination Group Meeting held on**

**15th. November, 2022 in Edinburgh.**

Representatives from different faith groups met for the SFAR bi-annual meeting to discuss progress throughout 2022.

Sabine Chalmers reviewed the **Faithful Welcome** programme whose vision “that faith groups in every local community actively seek to involve refugees and asylum seekers in community life and welcome them as neighbours and friends” is being realised across Scotland. In association with Faith in Community Scotland and facilitated by financial support from the EU they have liaised with 153 faith communities and have also distributed small grants to those already supporting refugees and asylum seekers. Failte Edinburgh Community Sponsorship Group (SESAM) has been one such recipient, receiving £500 to help with interpretation costs. Another recipient is a Mosque in Glasgow which reached out to the Asylum hotel close by and established regular, meal-sharing events.

We were also shown the first of six videos SFAR has commissioned to illustrate how effective such initiatives can be in building interfaith relationships. These training videos will be available later in 2023 and it is hoped they will inspire more faith groups to open their doors.

We were asked to consider how welcoming we actually are within our own communities and were reminded that “Welcome is a **doing** word.” An Iranian Bahai refugee who has been living here for a number of years reminded us of the enormous stress encountered by refugees on arrival in a host country. He concluded that “love is the most important thing we can do”.

We then heard from Elodie Mignard of the Scottish Refugee Council and David Moodie, part-time Churches Support Officer with SFAR who gave updates about their work with **Ukrainian Sponsorship** and ongoing support.

The situation is complex and it was recognised that the Super Sponsorship Programme (SSP) although considered a model of good practice outside Scotland has also faced its own share of problems. Since March 2022 the SSP has received 35,501 applications for visas of which 30,629 have been granted. As of November 2022, however, there have been 17,463 actual arrivals. (**NB**: This compares with 3000 Syrians arriving here over the past five years!) As the war has continued some applicants have been unsure if leaving their country is right for them. Others have started their journey but found sanctuary in adjacent countries, particularly Poland where 1.4 million people have received temporary protection. The numbers arriving continues to grow, however. Poland, which has also seen 7.7 million Ukrainians cross their borders since March, is now experiencing compassion fatigue which is putting pressure on other countries to step up and help. Concern about the cost of living, particularly the cost of fuel, has resulted in fewer places of refuge being offered across Western Europe.

In Scotland there have and continue to be delays in matching Ukrainians with hosts. In Edinburgh, for example, where there are no available social tenancies and private tenancies are expensive, Ukrainians are being accommodated in cruise ships at Leith. While only intended as a temporary option some Ukrainians actually prefer to remain on board ship in safety with a sense of belonging to a community in exile; they have the option to seek work while free schooling and medical care are available to them and their dependents. Their hope, of course is to return home as soon as the war is over.

Meanwhile some Hosts who have been approved under the **Homes for Ukraine** scheme are still waiting to be matched.

Difficulties have arisen when people are accommodated in rural areas with few or no other Ukrainians nearby. Many have opted to return to the central belt as soon as possible which has left some rural hosts feeling quite disappointed. One case was cited by Ephraim Borowski from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities. He had received a phone call from a Ukrainian Jew stranded north of Thurso who wanted to know if there were any other Jews living in the immediate area!

In other remote parts of Scotland local churches have co-operated effectively to support groups of displaced people. In Strathpeffer, for example, two churches support thirty Ukrainians while another rural church invited local Ukrainians to a special Remembrance Day service which also remembered those lost in the current war in Ukraine.

David Bradwell, Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer, then gave an overview of the legal situation. **The Nationality and Borders Act** has now been passed without any of the amendments proposed by faith groups. The law creates a two-tier system for those people entering the country ‘legitimately’ and those without papers. Markedly different levels of support are available in each category. The Act is ostensibly designed to be a deterrent to ‘illegal’ entry to the UK but has apparently been created to appease the right wing of the Conservative Party. In any event it is manifestly not working. This two-tier system is also incompatible with International Law. Meanwhile a new Bill of Rights Bill will receive its second reading in Parliament at the end of November. This proposed Bill would replace the existing Human Rights Act and would make it easier for foreign National offenders to be deported. It might also curtail the human rights of asylum seekers though this has not been verified as the Bill has not yet been made public.

He went on to discuss the appalling conditions at the Manston Processing Centre which have only recently been exposed. The Home Office mechanism for dealing with asylum-seekers’ claims has completely broken down due largely to cuts in funding; the result is a desperate shortage of accommodation and people are having to wait three years or longer in sub-standard, often tented accommodation for their applications to be decided. They are not allowed to work. In the past year There have been 140 deaths, half of them suicides. Meanwhile The Telegraph reported last month that **116 children - some as young as 11 - disappeared** between July 2021 and August 2022, after temporarily being put in hotels by the Home Office. The very real fear is that these desperately vulnerable, unaccompanied child migrants may have fallen victim to sexual abuse and/or economic exploitation.

The Campaign Coalition “**Together with Refugees**” of which The Religious Society of Friends is a member, is now acting to seek the repeal of the Nationality and Borders Act and to raise awareness of the inhumanity meted out to displaced people living in the UK today. To date more than 370 organizations have joined it.

Lynne Barty.