

## **TOWN TWINNING NETWORK**

**WEDNESDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER 2020**

**PRESENT:-** Councillors Kevin Small (Chair) Junab Ali, Brian Mattock, Jim Robbins and Caryl Sydney-Smith.

Cristina Bennett (Swindon Ocotal Link) and Christina Tripper (Swindon Madhyapur Thimi Friendship Group).

### **1. Declarations of Interest**

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting. No declarations were made.

### **2. City of Sanctuary - Update**

The Forum was updated on work related to the City of Sanctuary Since the last meeting of the Network which included:

- There were a number of challenges for people seeking sanctuary within the Borough that were directly related to Covid-19 including , including extreme isolation, with no or fewer face to face support services available.
- Often people seeking asylum in Home Office accommodation would share a house, possibly with people they didn't know or even speaking the same language, and not have internet access which increased the sense of isolation with little privacy.
- The isolation felt and limited ability to get out of the property crated additional mental health problems. City of Sanctuary with some funding from the Wiltshire Community Fund to support people, through a remote befriending project although not all people seeking sanctuary were comfortable seeking this type of support.
- The wellbeing project where people could go to yoga and 1-2-1 sessions and schools of sanctuary project work also had be halted.
- The Family Box Project (staff and volunteers had put together activity boxes for asylum seeking families with schools aged children which supported school learning at home) supported by the Wiltshire Community Fund had been very successful. This project had been undertaken working alongside the Harbour Project and all the materials used (including 100 new books donated by the library) were new. Feedback from families showed the importance of these boxes.
- Refugee week in June was held on-line working with volunteers and a local artist who had designed a colouring book which were given to the children of the 20 families supported by the Family Box Project and a Borough wide colouring competition link to the colouring book was also held.

- During the lock-down there had been reflection on the best way forward and there would soon be a consultation to enhance work undertaken to date in respect of welcome, support and inclusion within the town and to breakdown hostility towards asylum seekers.
- There were discussions about moving towards a more network related support and to make a welcoming town.
- The need to consult on what would encourage people to become volunteers and to gauge what support asylum seekers felt they required.

Resolved – That the update be noted.

### **3. Friendship Links**

The clerk requested a contact for the Swindon/Ocotol Link as a member of the public had contacted him wishing to become involve with the organisation. Christina Bennett indicated that she would discuss this request with the Link and respond to the clerk.

The Chair reported Councillor Nick Burns-Howell had written to the Chair regarding concerns for LGBT community due to recent events in Poland crating LGBT free zones and asking if the Chair was aware of any issues in Torun and if there were adverse issues if action could be taken to register concerns about such zones. The Chair had responded to Councillor Burns-Howell regarding the issue in Poland and other eastern European countries and read his response to the meeting and would continue to monitor the situation and report to the network.

The network supported the action taken by the Chair.

### **4. Reports from Town Twinning Associations and Links**

Madhyapur Thimi, Bhaktapur

In June a discussion was held regarding getting schools Covid ready, working from home and schooling from home. This had been organised with the deputy head of Lawn Manor School and 40 head teachers in Nepal had participated asking questions and explaining how there were approaching the situation. Nepal had gone into lock-down early with virtually no cases, the lockdown had ended two weeks previously with there now being approximately 470 reported cases and with schools still closed and had been shut for six months. From her experience with schools she supported 50% of pupils were doing online learning although many pupils didn't have this facility and were losing out on education. During the meeting guidance on providing online courses was given and this was well received. The association had provided some financial assistance to teachers who were not receiving wages. The Nepalese Government, who were facing territorial and internal issues, was not providing much guidance and no aid for schools. Newsletters were being produced by the Association but there had not been the opportunity for fund-raising events.

The Nepalese Mayor who had visited Swindon last year had been proactive in his community and had established a local covid testing centre and organised food

packages for local people without food. India had put up the price of staple foods in retaliation for territorial disputes.

#### Swindon Ocotol Link

Everyday life was a struggle due to Covid and Dengue fever in Nicaragua. The network was continuing to communicate with contacts in Ocotol. The network expressed concern that struggles in many countries in need of assistance was not being widely reported.

#### Salzgitter

In Lower Saxony there had been around 17,500 reported covid cases and 665 deaths which was broadly in line with the German national average. He had spoken to the Mayor regarding how Salzgitter was handling the covid crisis. A visit to Salzgitter planned for April had been cancelled although it was hoped that a visit would take place in May 2020.