

Case Study: International Café Didcot

Organised by Didcot Churches Refugee Welcome group, with start up support from CCOW

Didcot Churches Refugee Welcome group

The Didcot Churches Refugee Welcome group was formed in response to the arrival in Oxfordshire in August / September 2021 of people fleeing Afghanistan. Members of a number of churches wanted to do something to help and got together. A simple Google group was created and a coordinator appointed. Several of the members attended Welcome Churches' helpful online Afghan Welcomer training. The group met via Zoom and communicated via email to discuss what they could offer.

The group started by working with local charity Asylum Welcome to support **Afghan families in temporary hotel accommodation**, both through donating goods in response to specific requests and through offering activities aimed at helping the Afghans to learn more about the UK and to begin to settle here.

In Spring 2022 people began to arrive in the area on the **Homes for Ukraine** scheme and the group was keen to offer welcome and support to them, too. Didcot Baptist Church (DBC) gave their premises to the Didcot Ukrainian Support Group (a Facebook group set up by hosts for mutual support) to use for English classes and a family fun event for Ukrainian Independence Day, which members of the Didcot Churches Refugee Welcome group helped with. Aware of the need for more English classes, the group also started its own weekly English conversation class DBC, run by an ESOL qualified volunteer teacher and three other native speaker volunteer helpers. It also responded to requests from a member who had personally befriended Ukrainians.

The Start of an Idea

Over time, representatives of most of the local churches had asked to be added to the Didcot Churches Refugee Welcome group, providing a wider network for appeals for help and keeping people informed of developments. The group continued to meet at intervals on Zoom to consider how it could respond to the changing needs of refugees locally and to pray. By early 2023, conversations with refugees in a variety of contexts had suggested a need for an international café in the town - a safe and friendly space where refugees and other internationals, particularly those who have recently moved to the area, could come, meet local people, practice their English, be helped to settle in, and be signposted to advice and support.

A Catalyst

While many people in the group were thinking along the same lines, actually starting the café appeared a bit daunting. We at CCOW felt we could play a catalyst role and worked with this group to plan and deliver four pilot sessions in June 2023 at DBC.

CCOW offered the group five things:

- Time and space for group members to reflect on what they felt the refugees' and migrants' specific needs were, and what the group and others in their churches and community had to offer
- Suggestions of models which might be helpful and opportunities to visit people providing similar services
- Connections with a wide range of agencies and local groups, who could provide learning based on their experiences and who could participate in advice and support sessions
- The time of our Refugee Networking Officer to help the group make plans and coordinate the initial set-up
- A small amount of seed funding for basic supplies

Finding a host and volunteers

Working with what is already successful is better than reinventing the wheel. For this reason, the group felt that it would be best to provide the café as an add-on to an existing service for people newly arrived in Didcot from other countries. They therefore asked if it could run in the new “Hub” area at the front of DBC on Thursdays 11.30am – 1.00pm. This would place it immediately after the existing English conversation class and enable it to work in concert with DBC’s ‘Coffee and Company’ programme (grown out of the Warm Spaces initiative), which was already offered in the space at that time. DBC generously agreed to offer the space, and Coffee and Company graciously welcomed the opportunity to expand their session for the Café: its volunteers were key to forming the initial volunteer team.

Having an extremely supportive host was vital: the church leadership, the Coffee and Company group, and church members, who were recruited to provide home-made cake/biscuits for the sessions, have been critical to the café’s success. In addition to that, having the wider group drawn from a variety of churches gave access to a variety of gifts and enabled a high ratio of volunteers – of whom the café has 7 to 10 a week, drawn from 6 different churches - to attendees. The result was a warm, welcoming environment, and the possibility for anyone who wanted conversation in English with a native speaker to have it. The sessions always had a ‘buzz’. Supportive British people living locally also dropped in, which added to the conversations and sense of welcome.

Over time the team has solidified, with a core team WhatsApp group and responsibilities, decision-making and tasks shared out among its members. This has helped to make the café sustainable in the long term. In addition, some of the guests have offered to help run the café, which has been particularly welcome.

An initial time for prayer and announcements before the café was helpful for team building – and for laying the café before God and asking God’s blessing on all involved. Pressures of time can sometimes restrict this: the team is resolved to make sure it’s given adequate time going forward.

Publicising the café

All the stakeholders worked to publicise the café via their own networks, cascading information out through a variety of agencies, churches, community groups and international shops. The group designed a pdf flier, which made it easy to share information both on social media and through distribution of professionally printed hard copies.

Activities and Signposts to Support

From the beginning, the vision had been that, in addition to the warm welcome, conversation, and safe space, the café would offer an easy way for people who wanted to access support and advice to do so, and would provide local community groups and agencies a way to reach people who might not otherwise be aware of their services. Each of the pilot sessions, therefore, included a particular focus and guest speakers, with participants free to engage as much or as little as they wished.

The first session was an art workshop, as this felt like a way of giving people a safe space for getting to know each other and the café, and for expressing themselves. It was immediately clear that participants found the ability to create drawings, cards, embroideries and other crafts immensely helpful: one person stated explicitly that it helped them to deal with trauma. The decision was therefore taken to have an art table at each café, and deliberately to include small craft packs that could either be completed at the café or taken home. These have continued to be popular. Jigsaw puzzles also proved a success, as they offered people a chance to work together convivially without having to speak much.

At the following sessions experts gave short presentations, answered questions, and offered individual conversations and advice on benefits (Connection Support), access to housing (South and Vale District Council & Soha Housing) and access to employment, including help with CVs (Exec Recruitment Solutions & SOFEA). A wide variety of nationalities and experiences is represented at the café, and depending on their circumstances, guests interacted with the sessions to a greater or lesser degree. Both presenters and guests who took part clearly found the sessions helpful, and there was good take-up of the 'surgery' time after formal presentations. In addition, where experts provided hand-outs, these were placed in a folder, which guests could peruse in later sessions.

Over time, we evolved our briefings for external speakers, to clarify the importance of catering for all levels of English and, where possible, to provide summary handouts and/or to work with a translator.

Learning about the little things

Small things make a big difference – whether that's a 'Welcome' poster by the door to which people can add a welcome message in their own language, or an effort to ensure that familiar foods are available, or providing plenty of lemon slices for putting in tea!

Safety

As the café was being held on their premises, the DBC safeguarding team helped to create clear safeguarding policies and risk assessments. Several of the volunteers had attended safeguarding training and the majority of the volunteers were DBS checked. The team is aware that it is important to keep on top of safeguarding and safety at all times – including things like ensuring that all allergens are displayed with food and always having a volunteer at the door, checking people in and out, for fire safety purposes.

Next steps

A survey towards the end of the pilot asked attendees and volunteers whether the café was worthwhile and should continue: the answer was a unanimous 'yes', with participants noting that

they valued the companionship, opportunities to speak English, chance to meet English friends ... and cake! They also suggested topics for future sessions, including help with setting up bill payments and budgeting and time to share music from their countries.

In response, weekly Thursday sessions of the International Café Didcot continued until 20th July (the end of term) and restarted again on 7th September. To avoid isolation over the summer holiday break a few opportunities were offered for people to meet up on a Sunday afternoon – for picnic, conversation and outdoor games in the park and also joining the board games afternoon at DBC. These smaller gatherings further enabled relationships to grow.

Reflecting guests' interests, additional needlework and crochet resources have been introduced each week. Some recent sessions have also had a focus shaped by guests' offerings – e.g. a talk by a couple of the guests about their collection of foreign bank notes - while others have continued to bring in expertise from outside agencies, such as staff from Asylum Welcome's Ukraine team introducing their services and helping with guests' problems.

It has been vital to have the guests shaping the agenda and form of the café, sharing their skills, the things that they hold precious, and taking on leadership roles, both as volunteers running the café and as translators. The core team is working out ways to ensure that while no guest feels pressured to do anything, every guest is encouraged to contribute to the shaping and running of the cafe if they wish to – whether that's putting a suggestion on the flipchart, sharing a favourite food, or actually joining the team.

Impact

It is still too early to see the full impact of the café – but one reflection that was offered is that it is good for all involved to be working together. The café has fostered relationships among guests, volunteers, and support workers, creating or deepening helpful connections.

While there is no expectation that anyone will share their story, conversations do arise that give UK-based volunteers an insight into the stresses faced by refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants in the UK.

For volunteers, there can sometimes be frustration that they can't do more. But whilst guests may have many problems (trauma, financial, housing...) which people at the cafe cannot solve, we should not underrate the benefits of what is being offered. Experiencing that someone cares about you and is interested in you as a person can mean a lot.

Thanksgiving

There were times before the café began when people felt uncertain: this was quite an undertaking, would it work? A number of members, however, felt a strong calling in this direction. The group gives thanks for the sense of calling, for each of the volunteers and guests, and for the way that God has blessed this venture.

We would be delighted to work with your local churches group to do something similar - why not contact us: refugees@ccow.org.uk to explore the possibilities and what we can offer.