

Campaigning locally to Welcome Refugees

As a result of the government's dispersal programme, hundreds of refugees found themselves scattered across the country. In Glasgow, refugees were housed in some of the most deprived and impoverished areas of the city. A city-wide Campaign to Welcome Refugees was launched to high acclaim. A range of successful initiatives were organised such as, protests against the pernicious voucher system, a city-wide distribution of clothes and other items to refugee families, and publication in the Scottish press of a statement against the scapegoating of refugees signed by well-known politicians, writers etc.

Alongside city-wide interventions, members of the campaign also planned to welcome refugees in their local areas. In Pollokshaws, which is in the south-side of the city, eleven refugee families were housed in the high rise flats. Pollokshaws is typical of many poor areas of the city. Local people have witnessed employers moving their businesses out of the area and the closing down of their local swimming pool. Many residents live in damp, draft-ridden council housing that is well below European standards. We knew that if refugees were really to be welcomed by the city of Glasgow then local people in Pollokshaws would have to embrace them as one of their own.

A public meeting to welcome refugees was called in the local community centre. We leafleted the flats and asked people to sign a petition to welcome refugees which most people did. This was a modest beginning; alongside the six of us who organised the public meeting, the following people attended: one person from the high rise flats, one refugee family, one officer from the local housing office and about six kids who came along because they liked to play football with the Kosovan kids.

After this pretty inauspicious start, we decided to organise a Saturday fun day for refugee families and invited everyone else to come along. This is what happened:

- Local shops were visited and asked for donations. Safeway and Woolworths gave fruit juice, kids' T-shirts and backpacks. One local caterer baked us a chocolate cake. A cash and carry gave soft drinks and crisps by the ton. Ian who worked in the local hospital got the canteen to provide plastic cups, plates, bin bags and bread for sandwiches.
- Karen who used to be cook in a local nursing home took charge of the catering. The food was delicious!
- Women, from an After School Care Group, turned up on the Saturday in their professional blue T-shirts with stacks of games and organised activities for the kids. They also provided food (lots of pakoras and bhajis). The fact that they were prepared to work for free on their Saturday afternoon off, indicates the amount of support refugees have.

- Donations of money from Pollokshaws Community Council, a TGWU branch and a local GP among others, covered the costs (in fact we even made a profit)!
- Local politicians turned up representing the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party. Mohammad Sawar our local Labour MP made a cracking speech against the voucher system and pledged to support the refugee families in any way that he could.
- A couple of retired actors contacted their Equity union branch and got us Brain, a magician and children's entertainer who entertained the kids for free. He was absolutely brilliant and really made the afternoon. All our hard work organising the social paid off when we saw the happy smiling faces of the kids and the laughter of their parents.
- People put boxes in their workplaces and collected toys, books, clothes and household items. Gerry who used to be a primary school teacher sat the kids down at the end of the fun day and asked them to come out in pairs to choose their presents. People had donated so much that the kids went away with bags full of goodies. A three year old Kosovan refugee won the star raffle prize which was a huge cuddly toy. To screams of delight he ran up to collect his toy which was twice as big as him and almost cuddled it to death!

All in all, about 80 people, half of them refugees, turned up for a great afternoon. Language problems were swept aside in the fun of it all. It felt fantastic to have created such a welcome and to start to break down the barriers. From just six of us, we now have a huge pool of local people, from all walks of life, who have opened their hearts to the refugee families and who are determined to fight the vicious and racist Asylum legislation brought in by this government.

The key to getting all this to happen was to take every opportunity we had. We started with people we knew: friends, neighbours, political contacts such as the local Socialist Workers Party and the Scottish Socialist Party, workmates, family etc. Whatever they had to offer was enthusiastically taken up and we were open to changing our plans to make room for anything that was on offer.

We had taken a clear decision that this was to be an afternoon event and was aimed at families. That meant we had to find some entertainment for the children. The After School Care Group and the offer of help from a few primary teachers were what we started with. Then we were offered a Bouncy castle, but then that wasn't available. It wasn't as if we didn't have any difficulties in getting it all together. Brian, the magician, lived out of town and didn't have any petrol. It was the weekend of the fuel protests! It took a fair amount of time to ensure that there was someone with enough fuel to pick him up and someone else to take him home, but it was worth it.

We knew it was important to get local residents involved. We leafleted all the local flats in the few days before the event inviting everyone along. On the day itself we took the decision that the gifts, toys and sweets as well as the food, drink and entertainment

should be offered to all the local kids who turned up as well as the asylum seekers families.

Although it was a family event we knew that some of the asylum seekers, who stayed in Castlemilk (5 miles away), were all young men. They were invited and the nature of the event was explained. We also had to find transport for them (and a few cans of beer!).

Paying attention to detail was fantastically important.

Even then, there were problems.

When we turned up at the Hall, which had been visited the day before to make sure everything was OK, the janitor didn't turn up. We had a car park full of balloons, food and kids. Fortunately we had a contingency plan and the right people there to deal with it. Janet a local Scottish Socialist Party member and community activist was able to get the Tenant's Association Hall at the last minute. Without the right people with the right contacts it could all have fallen flat, but we were determined to make sure that didn't happen.

Organisation on the day

We planned to do what we knew we could do and delegated responsibility for all of these things with a small team (4 people) to co-ordinate it all. There were people to organise the political speakers, the entertainment, to deal with the food, to make sure the kids were all involved, to talk to people, to pick up the rubbish and to organise and distribute the gifts and toys. We had to be out of the hall on time and it had to be cleared and clean.

After the event

We felt it was really important that everybody who had contributed, whether they were able to attend or not, should get a letter telling them what a success it had been and how their contribution had helped.

We were aware that the reputation of the individuals, the campaign and its constituent organisations were on the line. It was very important for the future that the event opened doors and did not leave any obstacles to future activities in the area. By paying attention to detail in this way we made sure that happened, and even those of us organising it were free to join in and have a really great time.

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