**What have we learned from two “Debates in the Pub” on supporting refugees?**

To understand better how a small, rural community can support refugees, EHH Village of Sanctuary has hosted discussions informed by speakers with direct experience as refugees, field-work volunteers, chairing a charity working in the field and supporting refugees locally.

For people desperate enough to leave everything familiar to escape from war or other misery, the first priority is safety; but is this enough? Safety can mean demeaning, squalid deprivation to which no human should be subjected and should have the right to something better. Those who provide or mandate this unacceptable form of safety, well-meaningly or grudgingly, fail in their duty as fellow human beings. It has too often been left to voluntary organisations to provide or improve upon this most basic security. This may be in the form of provision of shelter, clothing, hygiene or food; recognition and support for people’s differences; or simply respect. A simple example: researching, devising and providing a “map” can inform newcomers to a strange new location where to find the services they may need; in languages they may understand. This may apply as much to someone landing from a smuggler’s inflatable in Greece as to a family relocated to UK. Similarly, on arrival at a location where they may stay for a period, each new arrival needs induction into the locale, their rights there and what they can expect.

The refugee crisis stemming from the Syrian civil war took recipient communities all over Europe by surprise. Some responded better than others. The large numbers taken in by German communities demanded rapid service provision. In local experience, the lack of preparedness and resource to take in refugees with nothing delayed significantly the care, integration and teaching of the family members. Although volunteers stepped in to help with many aspects of their needs, local authorities failed to identify, resource, oversee or coordinate these in the interests of the families. These needs may be more acute in the scattered and isolated locations to which new some arrivals are sent without means. Each placement means starting afresh with identifying volunteers with the necessary will, skills and availability to meet the various needs of the family members; and for these to learn from scratch how to help, only for this expertise to be of no use to another family somewhere else. When achieved, integration has been rewarding to all but the journey could be shortened by a more coordinated and better resourced approach.

Key responses needed were/are:

1. Whilst the paramount need for a new home is recognised and may be met in rural areas, authorities should ensure that basic services required by a family can be accessed in locations offered. This may suggest grouping families to create critical mass for service provision; or urban destinations with better infrastructure.
2. A placing authority must take or delegate responsibility for and coordinate provision of the holistic needs of new arrivals.
3. Social isolation is inevitable but needs addressing. Priority must be given to equipping newcomers to speak and understand their new host language so that they can integrate and gain employment; as well as to providing clear guidance about local services and culture.
4. Volunteers also need to know where they may access resources, be these for language teaching, health education, religious or cultural understanding, transport, emotional support etc. What has been useful in one place may be useful in another if its availability is shared.
5. Small support organisations whether in UK or overseas can make a big difference to individuals but very little impact on the bigger picture. Donors may find motivation in meeting needs and receiving feedback from smaller hands-on organisations with which they can relate.