



### **WALKING WITH IN NORTH TYNESIDE: 'It's just down to loving people, basically'**

Try to imagine living in circumstances so awful, so lacking in any hope, so filled with dread and fear, where your very existence is under threat. Suppose things are so appalling you're prepared to face all the risks and hazards involved, and leave behind the culture in which you were raised, leave behind vulnerable parents, siblings and friends, and your home if it's still standing, in search of a place of safety where you and your family might be able to flourish as human beings.

You'd be jolly glad when the Immigration services sent you to live in North Tyneside whilst you made your application for asylum, if there was someone to welcome you, to walk with you as you find somewhere to live, to understand the totally unfamiliar way of life, to cope with the language, the climate, the food, the finances, the administrative processes of life and asylum application. To help you in your ambition to become a responsible member of British society.

'Walking With' have been doing all that and more ever since the churches of Wallsend set them up almost twenty years ago. But in recent years, especially now that vulnerable refugee families from Syria, selected under a British Government programme, are being resettled across the Borough, people are beginning to realise that Walking With isn't a Wallsend Charity, but a North Tyneside charity based in Wallsend.

The charity's only paid member of staff, Project Manager Carole Parkins, says: 'We help asylum seekers understand the processes, and signpost them where necessary to those who will help them make their application or where necessary their appeal. Our wonderful team of volunteers, mainly from local churches, work with me to provide help in completing forms, making telephone calls or sometimes accompanying clients to meetings. We run a food bank, a clothing bank and operate a hardship fund. Two days a week we welcome clients and others to a drop-in session, including a cooked lunch every Monday. We offer English language tuition and other activities such as yoga and cooking, music and chess and we're currently planning a sewing group.

We work with clients in ways that help with socialisation and enhance their self-worth, their self-esteem, so that they feel supported by 'Walking With'. Several of those we support have experienced extreme violence, torture or trafficking. Many suffer from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, helplessness, hopelessness, stress and isolation. We attempt effective listening and try to resolve individual problems.'

Things took a significant turn into more intensive, more complex work last year when North Tyneside Council agreed to welcome ten vulnerable families fleeing from the devastating war in Syria and in need of humanitarian protection. The families were selected by the Government because of their extreme need, trauma and vulnerability and include people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children risk. Each resettled

family is different but they've all suffered the loss of their home. Many have lost loved ones, friends and family, and witnessed the horrors of war. They have specific medical needs or disabilities, including the mental health consequences of their dreadful experiences.

From the outset, the Council showed its faith in 'Walking With' as an organisation adept at understanding and making an appropriate and compassionate response to people in extreme need. The Council employs two Support Workers who operate under the aegis, direction and supervision of 'Walking With', and with back-up from their volunteers.

This has entailed meeting the families at the airport, providing a warm welcome, settling them into housing arranged by the Council, making links with medical and social services as necessary, arranging English language tuition and providing support towards employment and self-sufficiency. As with others who are granted leave to stay, (in this case for five years) we help them register with the Job Centre, seek work, claim benefits, and set up bank accounts and utility agreements.

In 2017, in addition to the ten Syrian families, 'Walking With' supported 46 families and 25 single people, a total of 250 people. Most people visit our base in St Luke's Church, Wallsend on a weekly basis and most receive food from us. In the last year, we issued 3,404 bags of food.

All our clients have to face the fact that in our society a substantial number of people are unhappy about immigration. There is fear, suspicion, resentment and protest, often based on a partial and mistaken understanding of the realities of the situation, and fuelled by inaccurate and sometimes deliberately inflammatory media reporting. We aim to improve social cohesion in our local communities, and to reduce the chances of racial misunderstanding, prejudice or radicalisation, in the interests of all concerned.

Carole again: 'We try to convey to community groups, particularly children and young people, the reality of immigration in their own communities: why, how and in what numbers people become refugees and asylum seekers. We're happy to deliver our workshop about asylum to any group of people, or to come and talk to your group about what we do. Contact us to discuss this'.

Trustee and Volunteer Fundraiser Tony Garland adds: 'We're largely a volunteer organisation. Some wise accountant has calculated that the work of our volunteers would cost around £58,000 a year. That's great of course but we still need money to continue our calling to break down barriers, to welcome the stranger, to love them as ourselves, and to seek the peace and justice of our God in our world today. It's my role to find something like a further £30,000 a year. We receive lots of donations, some from churches and a few individual Standing Orders. Anyone willing to donate can do so via our website [www.walkingwith-nt.btck.co.uk](http://www.walkingwith-nt.btck.co.uk) (it includes a touching YouTube video clip which shows beautifully what we do, and is summed up by Carole's concluding words 'It's just down to loving people, basically'). Or ring Carole (Monday to Wednesday) on 0191 649 8974.

Donations to our food bank will be welcome on Mondays or Wednesdays at our premises in St Luke's Church, Frank Street, Wallsend, NE28 6RN.