

REFUGEE HOTELS

A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Living the Gospel amongst Afghans

On Sunday 15 August 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and took over control of the country. Over that weekend, the US forces and their allies left the country, together with hundreds of Afghan families whose members had been involved in working with the Western Nations in embassies and with their troops.

The UK government gave those who worked for them permission to relocate to the UK, because their lives were in danger under the Taliban. These Afghans did not come as asylum seekers but as refugees. Most of the Afghan men who came to the UK had been translators and spoke reasonable English, but their wives often had no English at all.

They were accommodated by the Home Office with the promise of permanent accommodation and initially two hotels were used in Watford, which was then reduced to one. That hotel was closed after two years in August 2023.

I am proud to say that the church I was part of lived the gospel in front of 200-300 Afghans, and 10-15 hotel staff for two years. It was a special God-given opportunity and I find it difficult to imagine how a church could have responded better. This is our story.

How we got involved

We had a member of our church who was involved in Welcome Churches. Welcome Churches had a history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers from many countries, and our government had been impressed by their help with people arriving from Hong Kong. So, when this crisis arose very suddenly, we were able to say we were the Watford branch of Welcome Churches, and that opened many doors.

Generally speaking, the Home Office together with local councils and agencies did well in helping the Afghans, especially in the early days.

How we won over and helped the hotel staff

One of the two hotels used by the Home Office was about 30% occupied by Afghans, but the hotel tried to maintain a normal commercial service with the other rooms. This was a lose-lose situation for everyone, especially the children. The Afghans were badly treated and often confined to their rooms, the normal hotel guests complained about the Afghans, and the hotel staff were in an impossible situation and could not please anyone.

The other hotel was used exclusively for Afghans. It was able to focus on them and be a bit more relaxed, while obviously trying to maintain control and safety standards. Many of the staff built relationships with these Afghan families and really tried to make them feel at home by changing the menus, providing social space, etc.

When we were first introduced to hotel management they were not sure about us or what churches could do. So we asked a simple question, “what one thing would make a difference?” Both hotels said helping with the children, since they have no toys, very few have more than 1-2 sets of clothes, babies are sleeping in travel cots not beds, no prams etc. Through Welcome Churches we were put in contact with Baby Basics and they were incredible, providing a whole host of new items for the children, and we were able to bless over 60 families.

The hotel management and staff, and the Afghans, were amazed at what we were able to do and so the requests started coming in to do more, and with the help of local churches we pulled it off.

Even though the Home Office and the local authorities did a good job, they were stretched and bureaucracy meant that provisions they needed often took some time to arrive. We did our best to provide anything the hotel asked, and brought it to reception within hours. This could be nappies, sanitary towels, cleaning fluids, all sorts of things. They ran out of many items much quicker than expected, but they knew a phone call to us could solve their immediate problem. We helped in many practical ways.

We took time to build relationships with the manager, his staff, and the security personnel and were quickly accepted as part of the hotel team. We were even added to the staff parking list so we could come and go any time. Several of us were allowed to go in and move around the hotel as we wished. Many of us spent time with Afghans and often had meals with the Afghans in their rooms, or we took them out.

Other services we provided

We contacted the CEO of Shoe Zone and they provided us with vouchers for £14.99 each, so we could get a pair of shoes for all our Afghan friends.

Halfords also provided us with about 15 bicycles, helmets, and locks which we let the men have on a loan system. We also bought five sewing machines for the women to share.

As the children got accepted into schools, they needed uniforms and we spent many hours getting school clothing of the right size for children. Obtaining correct measurements was a problem. An ‘inside leg’ measurement was beyond their understanding, so many trousers arrived far too long.

What facilities we provided inside the hotel

We saw the need to establish a computer room in the hotel. A room was allocated by the staff, and we purchased six computers and a printer. We provided basic lessons in Microsoft Office, helped them use the internet, fill in official forms, and do some of their college work.

One evening a week we set up a film night, mainly geared at kids. We generally used animated films where the language was not too important.

One part of the hotel had previously been a sports club house (which had been abandoned) and football pitches were given to us to utilise. We turned the club house into a children’s and youth club, with table tennis, pool tables, a football game, a basketball game and other things. Initially we had to police this but, over time, we saw better behaviour, more keeping to the rules and a greater sharing with others. We felt this was very important so that the children would be more easily accepted by their fellow pupils and staff at school.

The artificial 5-a-side football pitches at the hotel proved very popular, and every Saturday we'd take 20+ youth to a large pitch for a match.

We also had a homework club for the kids and ladies conversation/crafting sessions on a Friday morning.

One Christmas, we arranged for the local Council's Father Christmas to arrive on his sleigh, and we provided some refreshments and presents for the children.

What we provided outside the hotel

Initially we provided lots of activities away from the hotel. We thought it was important to get them away from their cramped surroundings. But hiring coaches is expensive and we never knew who would turn up. Even then we could not provide enough seats, but with the help of council funding we were able to hire coaches (heavily discounted by the coach companies).

Notably we arranged, with the help of some other churches and the Salvation Army, a summer of Saturday mornings in the playground of a local school. Two coaches came and took the families for a time of sports and games, and we had a chef cook Afghan food. Another big church in town provided a venue for a coffee and cake morning once a week.

We also arranged regular snooker sessions, and 10-pin bowling for the men and young boys. Cooking mornings were especially popular for the women and young girls because they had no means of cooking in the hotel, and they certainly loved to cook!.

We also persuaded Watford Cricket Club to let us use their nets one evening a week in the summer. Some of the Afghan boys demonstrated that they were very skilful cricketers.

Who was involved?

This took a lot of time and effort because we were present at the hotel for most days every week. We reckon that about 60% of our church members were involved in one way or another. Initially other churches helped in practical ways, and latterly they would help financially to support the work our church members were doing.

Spiritual impact

The spiritual impact was hard to gauge. We believe we showed them the gospel by our actions, and were often seen as peacemakers when disputes arose in the hotels due to the diverse mix of Islamic cultures.

They knew we were Christians from a particular church. We lived the gospel amongst them, we talked about Jesus and faith when the opportunity arose, and we prayed with some of them, especially the women.

Towards the beginning of our 2 years, we invited the Afghans to a church service and about 15 men turned up.

Towards the end of the two years, the hotel allowed us to use their ballroom once a month for our church service. This was a ballroom that would be hired out for a thousand pounds for a wedding or

anniversary party, and we used it for nothing. We used it for our Christmas service towards the end of the second year and 80-100 Afghans came to the service, heard the story of Christmas, and saw the church together at worship.

Even though they are now dispersed around the UK we are still in touch with many of them and pray and trust that the gospel that was shared will bear fruit in the years to come. We believe we removed barriers and radically altered their perception of the church, Christianity, and imitating Christ in how we love people, especially those displaced and facing many challenges.

What we could have done better

It is difficult to know what we could have done better. We were given an opportunity and the church, which does not have a strong history of international concern, stepped up and did a brilliant job. Maybe we could have prayed more, especially those who were not actively in the hotel work... but honestly, it was a time of sacrifice and selflessly blessing others that we will never forget.

Bryan Knell
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