When members of the Salvation Army is Ifford, east London, sought to influence their local council to do more to help refugee children, they enlisted the help of Britain’s most-loved refugee child, Paddington Bear! The children’s forum gave Paddington Bear a front row seat in a story that began at a celebration party.

Captain Naomi Clifton — corps officer (Salvation Army) in Battersea — had been hearing for a long time about the refugee crisis being played out around the world and particularly across Europe — and felt powerless to do anything. She was stirred into action after one of her corps (church) members spoke to her at a celebration event about how her brother’s wife and four children had been killed by a bomb in Syria. ‘It pushed me into action,’ she tells Naomi. ‘I want to go beyond social services; beyond food parcels, baby bank support and funding for the corps that was providing to refugees who had been lucky enough to make it safely.’

Not only was Naomi a member of Redbridge Citizens, which is the local chapter of Citizens UK, a broad-based alliance of churches, schools, mosques and community groups seeking to work for the common good.

So Naomi signed up to be part of the Redbridge Citizens refugee welcome team, missing that her work in the Salvation Army — was amplified through a shared, common action.

In May 2016 the British Parliament passed the Dubs Amendment, enabling a number of unaccompanied refugee children to come to live safely in the UK, even without a straight-forward family link. To its final form the legislation did not specify an exact number, rather the number of children would depend on the capacity and willingness of councils to allocate foster care places to unaccompanied refugee children arriving via the Dubs scheme. If every local council committed to take five ‘Dubs’ children, 3,000 would be able to come.

The Redbridge Citizens refugee welcome team made this its goal — to persuade the council to publicly endorse the Dubs Scheme offering five places for Dub children. The next step was to obtain the support of Councillor [name atel], leader of Redbridge Council. He made what Naomi describes as ‘positive noises’ but was non-committal.

As the date, the demolition of the huge camp in Calais, France, known as The Jungle became imminent. If the camp was closed, the children there that had been identified as eligible for Dubs transfers would be removed and become even more vulnerable to the lure of people traffickers or desperate attempts to board ferries bound for the UK. Time was running out.

This is when ‘Paddington Bear’ enters the story, as a [for a young girl dressed as Paddington] went to a number of local steps to meet Councillor Atel. This was more than a gimmick. While Paddington Bear is a fictional character, his story is one that many refugee children, arriving from countries destroyed by war, will recognise as their own. Bringing Paddington to the Town Hall steps was an important reminder of the values of compassion and hospitality that British people traditionally hold dear.

After testimony was shared by someone who had seen the horror of the Calais camp and another person who was willing to foster but struggling to get a response from her office, Councillor Atel was asked to say ‘Cabinet Forum — how many Dub children we would pledge to bring to Redbridge. He spoke of his belief that the council has a moral obligation to help but did not give a number, saying it was not yet possible to do so.

To Captain Naomi and the others from Redbridge Citizens, this wasn’t good enough, so they decided to ramp up the pressure and release a press statement with the headline Atel says no to Paddington! Naomi says it was time that she would shut down the conversation down action — but seeking justice demands more than a spiritual formulation for me too — I needed to overcome my natural inclination to play safe. I knew I wanted to be able to look the courage to live with the tension and, to paraphrase The Salvation Army’s Mother’, Catherine Booth, to disturb the status quo in the future.

A few days later the councillor joined Naomi and her colleague, [name atel], who are responsible for child welfare within the council office, to the House of Commons to speak about the need to give more places in Chelsfield.

In October 2017, as The Jungle camp in Calais was demolished, 3000 Dubs children arrived in the House Office’s Lunig House through an expedient process. Naomi writes: ‘It was wonderful to welcome them and accompany them in their first immigration interview.’

This is not the end of the story. The Jungle may have been destroyed, but there are still many lone refugee children looking for a safe place to come home. Naomi and Redbridge Citizens continue to campaign on their behalf, calling on political leaders including the Home Minister to reinstate the Dubs route.

‘Please look after the children’

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“Naomi and Redbridge Citizens continue to campaign on their behalf, calling on political leaders including the Home Minister to reinstate the Dubs route.”

“Naomi concludes: ‘Something I love most about our local campaign is that it involved every young children in the fight for justice. A three-year-old girl, dressed up as Paddington, was one of the leading figures in the march’ – and three months later, when six refugee children arrived in my borough, I presented them with his very own Paddington Bear to keep.”