FOR a long time I knew about the refugee crisis being played out around the world – and particularly across Europe – but I felt powerless to do anything. But at my daughter’s dedication the issue suddenly became personal for me. There I was, celebrating with friends and family, when someone let me know that one of our corps ladies needed to chat to me. I headed over and she shared that she had just heard that her brother’s wife and four children had been killed by a bomb in Syria ... the family was too poor to get out of the country when the civil war came and this was just the latest tragedy to strike.

I will never forget that moment when the world-as-it-should-be and the world-as-it-is collided before my eyes. It pushed me into action. Action that went beyond social service; beyond food parcels, baby bank support and friendship that the corps was providing to refugees who had been lucky enough to make it to safety.

I felt compelled to get more involved in the local efforts to work for change through community organising. Ilford Corps was already 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 I signed up to be part of the Redbridge Citizens refugee welcome team. This was a really important step in our local effort to respond to the plight of unaccompanied refugee children. If we had acted only as The Salvation Army...
in Ilford we would have had limited influence. But by allying with other groups on areas of common interest, we built power and had more influence with local politicians.

In early 2016 there was a growing awareness of the scale and suffering in the huge unofficial refugee camp at Calais known as The Jungle, with particular concern for the hundreds of lone refugee children there who were desperate to come to the UK.

This led to the passing in the British Parliament in May 2016 of the Dubs Amendment, a provision in UK law to enable a number of unaccompanied refugee children to come to live safely in the UK, even if they did not have a straightforward family link here.

In 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 carer 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.

And so the Redbridge Citizens refugee welcome team made this our goal – to persuade our council to publicly commit to offering live places for Dubs children.

Crucial to the approach of community organising is that we don’t just ask people in power to make a change for us, we ask them to make a change with us. And that’s where we began, with an evening to share testimony about the plight of lone child refugees in Europe and to appeal for foster carers to help boost the council’s fostering capacity.

But this evening wasn’t just about recruiting foster carers. It was also about getting the issue on the agenda of the person with the power to make the commitment that we wanted – Councillor Jas Athwal, the leader of Redbridge Council.

A power analysis taught us that the council officers in the fostering department, who were telling us it was impossible, were not the people with power to set the direction of their budgets. That was the responsibility of the politicians, so we needed to convince the leader of the council.

‘I will never forget that moment when the world-as-it-should-be and the world-as-it-is collided before my eyes. It pushed me into action’
After hearing from a Syrian woman working with children in The Jungle, we asked Councillor Athwal if he would work with us to resettle children in our borough. He made positive noises but was non-committal.

As the summer went on the camp’s demolition became imminent. If the camp was closed, the children that had been identified as eligible for Dubs transfers would be scattered and become even more vulnerable to the lure of people traffickers or desperate attempts to board lorries bound for the UK. National campaigning intensified and so did our local efforts.

To help us, we enlisted the assistance of Britain’s favourite ‘refugee child’, Paddington Bear! Beloved across the UK for many years, the story of Paddington, who the books tell us came to London as a stowaway after the destruction of his family home in Peru, has gained an even greater audience in recent years through two hugely popular movies.

This approach highlights another core feature of the community organising approach to working for change – where possible, make it fun! So we grabbed facepaints and dressing-up clothes and took ‘Paddington Bear’ round to the Town Hall steps to meet with Councillor Athwal.

But 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.

In the recent film, Paddington’s Aunt Lucy recalls the evacuees of the Second World War, saying: ‘Long ago, people in England sent their children by train with labels around their necks, so they could be taken care of by complete strangers in the countryside where it was safe. They will not have forgotten how to treat a stranger.’

Again, we shared testimony from those who had seen the horrors of the Calais camp and from someone willing to foster but struggling to get a response to their offer. Sharing testimony is important in community organising because it makes the issue personal and reminds everybody that it is real life.

Then came the crucial moment – when we publicly asked Councillor Athwal how many Dubs children he would pledge to bring to Redbridge. This was a specific question and we didn’t want a vague response. We wanted a number – a number which would allow us to hold local and national politicians to account. As the months dragged on into October with still no Dubs transfers made, specific numbers were crucial to putting pressure on national government; we were able to reject the argument that the country did not have fostering capacity by quoting the total spaces pledged by local authorities.

But I’m getting ahead in the story! This numerical pledge was still elusive in Redbridge. The Leader of the Council spoke of his belief that we had a moral obligation to help but would not give a number, saying it was not yet possible to do so.

Evaluating whether our action was successful, we admitted that we had not yet got the reaction we wanted. So we decided to dial up the pressure on the Leader of the Council and release a press statement with the headline ‘Athwal says no to Paddington’.

Increasing the tension is always a risk. I worried that this would shut the conversation down entirely or that it could affect other campaigns we were working on, both as an alliance and as a corps. But seeking justice demanded capacity by quoting the total spaces pledged by local authorities.

‘We had the joy of seeing 900 lone refugee children arrive at the Home Office’s Lunar House through an expedited process’
personal spiritual formation for me too – I needed to overcome my natural inclination to play it safe. I knew I needed to have the courage to live with the tension and, to paraphrase The Salvation Army’s ‘Mother’, Catherine Booth, to disturb the present to better the future.

Sure enough, within a few hours we received a phone call from the Leader of the Council, who was not particularly happy with the wording of the press release! This allowed us to pressure him further on a specific commitment. A few days later we were encouraged when he joined us at a London-wide action outside the Home Office, calling on the government to work with councils to bring children to safety.

A few months later he joined us there again and publicly committed to provide five places for Dubs children in Redbridge. Most recently, in the May 2018 local elections he made an ongoing commitment to receive children via the Dubs route part of his party’s manifesto for re-election.

In late October 2017, as The Jungle camp in Calais was demolished, we had the joy of seeing 900 lone refugee children arrive at the Home Office’s Lunar House through an expedited process. It was wonderful to welcome them and accompany them in their first immigration interview. But after the initial rush, once The Jungle was out of the media spotlight, transfers of refugee children stopped.

It was then important to evaluate and to reorganise so we could continue to bring their needs to the attention of the government and the public. In January 2017, for example, we delivered a petition of more than 44,000 signatures to the Prime Minister, demanding the Dubs route be reinstated.

But going back to Redbridge, something I love most about our local campaign is that it involved even very young children in the campaign for justice. A three-year-old girl, dressed up as Paddington, asked the Leader of the Council to ‘please look after the children’ – and three months later, when six refugee children did arrive in the borough, she presented him with his very own Paddington Bear to keep.

Rachel Turner in her book Parenting Children for a life of Purpose writes about the importance of children seeing ‘power in the mirror’ – to discover the weight of their influence and be equipped to know how to use it well. Community organising helps us with this aspect of discipleship: it helps young people – and not so young people like myself – to see power in the mirror; to know that we can make a difference in the world where others say it cannot be done.

Major Naomi Clifton is corps officer (Salvation Army minister) at Ilford in the United Kingdom Territory with the Republic of Ireland. To re-watch the Global Summit sessions, go to http://sar.my/refugeesummit