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## PRESS RELEASE

### Chief Commissioner Welcomes Refugees to Northern Ireland

Chief Commissioner Michael Wardlow – “I hope the refugees see the welcoming and friendly side of Northern Ireland, but I must confess I have some concerns”.

We often complain about “inertia on the hill” when we discuss how our devolved Assembly is seen to be taking forward actions towards building a united community here. I am not sure, however, if we are so ready to give praise when our MLAs take positive action. So, you heard it here first. Well done to the Assembly’s strategic planning group for refugees, led by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister and to the operational planning group, part of the Department for Social Development (DSD).

On behalf of all of us, they agreed to welcome a number of Syrian refugees into this place we call home, beginning with the first group who arrived this week. The human and personal tragedy the families and individuals have left behind strains the imagination. Now, arriving with few possessions, in a strange place, where the language may be unknown to them, they must set up home with their families - for how long they do not know - and they must seek new friends against a background of political turbulence. It is the start of a difficult journey, but at least they are safe..... or are they?

We like to believe we are modern, adaptable, open and welcoming to strangers, willing to offer the hand of friendship to those in need – and I have no doubt that this accurately describes most of us. I hope these refugees see that side of Northern Ireland, but I must confess I have some concerns.

As a society we have also seen the ugly face of racism over many years and again in recent days. There were over 1,300 race incidents recorded in 2014/15 (3 a day); and over 900 race hate crimes (2 a day). Race also remains, stubbornly, in the top three most common grounds of discrimination notified to us in the Equality Commission. Those who stir up and carry out race hate attacks may be in a small minority, but that is no consolation to a family which finds their house and property smeared and damaged, their lives threatened and their peace of mind destroyed.

The question is, what will the silent majority do to ensure this welcome? Can we follow the lead now given by our politicians, given that we have often called on them for that

leadership on a wide range of social issues? To enable refugees to integrate, they need to be welcomed into our community and given access to the services they need. It is a two way process which places demands both on us and on the refugees themselves.

This needs a response from all of society – from all of us. We cannot enjoy the luxury of the bystander. As we have been reminded, evil happens when good people do nothing. Those who foster fear and manipulate facts to suit their own prejudice need to be challenged. This begins with me. This begins with you. We are stronger together. Let's be creators and not consumers of history.