

Minutes of Amnesty International Reading Group Meeting, 13th July 2023

Chair: Anne McFarlane

This meeting was held via Zoom.

1. Welcome and introductions

Six people joined the meeting for some or all of it: Anne, Helen, Ruth, Vicky, Liz and our speaker, Sam Jonkers.

- apologies - Hilary & Sue

2. Sam Jonkers, from Care4Calais was our speaker today. Sam is a volunteer for the local Thames Valley Group.

Sam told us that Care4Calais

- provides direct and essential aid for asylum seekers
- advocates for asylum seekers and refugees
- is staffed almost entirely by volunteers
- supports asylum seekers in Northern France, Belgium, but also significant work going on in the UK

Sam described how & why the charity's work has evolved and is so important.

- recent conflicts that have seen a surge and waves of people arriving
- withdrawal of so many services during COVID
- hostile atmosphere created by current government, including
 - Rwanda scheme
 - illegal immigration bill
 - military bases being used to house people
 - Bibby Stockholm, the barge that will house 506 asylum seekers, soon to be in place this summer
 - possible re-opening of Campsfield
 - if people are in a detention centre, it's even harder to access information
 - another traumatising environment
 - children going missing
 - people can be moved at any time
 - food and board paid for, but then only £9.10 for all other expenses

Sam shared with us some of the FAQs people have about asylum seekers

- asylum can only be claimed once you are in the UK
- international law says it is not illegal to enter a country "irregularly" to claim asylum
- in 2022, over 80% of claims were found to be genuine at the first hearing - a further 50% found to be genuine on appeal
- Care4Calais campaign for safe passage for more countries - currently schemes are available for Hong Kong and Ukraine.
- huge backlog of cases, made worse by the pandemic and recent international events such as Ukraine and Afghanistan
- some people have been in hotels for over 2 years and rising
- asylum seekers are not allowed to work

- lack of services to support them
- issues for people also include digital exclusion - so much is now done online, forms, etc... but they have to find that access in their £9.10 per week.

Sam told us who they support in this area

- Asylum seekers in Home Office accommodation
- currently from 56 countries
- in Reading, 3 hotels are also being used - this is new since COVID.
 - just a bedroom, families of 3 or 4 different ages, or could be sharing a twin room with a stranger
- here due to a variety of reasons - genocide, religious persecution, persecution due to sexuality or gender, modern slavery for example
- a wide range of professions - farmers, scientists, journalists, nurses, engineers

When they are granted asylum, there are further challenges

- they have 28 days to find their own accommodation, access benefits, open a bank account, get a national insurance number, find a job
- this leads to many people becoming homeless (families with children cannot be made homeless)
- it is then the local council's responsibility to support them

What Care4Calais does - and can you help?

- volunteers support
 - provide food and clothing
 - a friendly face
 - explain the asylum process and support with completing paperwork
 - teach English
 - support with finding voluntary roles (as they aren't allowed to work)
 - support with sourcing mobile phones, bikes, laptops
 - create social events
 - fundraise
 - collect donations
 - host a refugee
 - volunteer!!

Contact details

- Reading@care4Calais.org
- www.care4calais.org
- facebook and instagram - care4calais Thames Valley

3. Campaign Updates

- see monthly newsletter (and weekly updates for regular attendees)

4. Group News & Upcoming Events

- 28th – 30th July - WOMAD - Sue is working on a petition about Ukraine. Will use our PoCs petition if she doesn't get the support from AIUK.
- 2nd September - Reading Pride - please let Helen know if you can do any time on the rota.

5. AoB & monthly meeting schedule

Group Meetings: Aug23 – Jan24



Month	Group Meeting	Events
August	Pizza night – planning & letter writing	
September	Rachel Dover - Transgender	Pride
October	<i>USA</i>	International Festival?
November	Ilyas Nagdee - Racial justice	
December	Write4Rights	
January	<i>tbc</i>	

Next meeting: Thursday 10th August - Pizza and planning at The Reading Biscuit Factory