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EXODUS

Produced by refugees and people seeking asylum for the community

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Exodus is a non-profit magazine produced by a small group of volunteers to give a voice to refugees seeking a new life in the UK. Exodus team: Jean-Marc Hall, Souran Soleimani, Martin Trepte, Ian Syer, Helen Ball.

Welcome to issue three of Exodus

EXODUS 3 starts 2024 with the news that the 'zine is now an online publication and available through Facebook and ISSUU social media platforms.

Of course, you are encouraged to print hard copies to be distributed on demand, but the online issue gives more opportunities to spread Exodus around communities in the UK and beyond.

Our editorial team has grown, and we remain committed to delivering first person stories and articles from those seeking asylum in the UK.

Giving a voice to refugees and those seeking asylum has always been the aim of Exodus and we will shortly be taking that literally in the form of podcasts, hosted online.

We continue to report on the fantastic work of Care4Calais volunteers and other humanitarian groups who have welcomed vulnerable people to our shores.

Exodus also recognises the importance of humanitarian and political pressure that needs to be imposed wher-

ever required and we will remain united in our resolve for a just and tolerant society.

Several themes have emerged in this issue that are all interrelated: the housing crisis created by the Government's ill-thought out strategy of clearing the backlog of asylum claims by cutting the notice period for eviction for those given leave to remain; the additional impact this has on the mental health of often traumatised people seeking sanctuary; the sheer kindness of the volunteers who help them; and how asylum seekers somehow still manage to hang on to their compassion and humanity in the face of so many crushing difficulties.

As always Exodus can only be effective if we have stories to tell. So please share the 'zine and the links of where to find it far and wide so we can continue to give a genuine voice to those seeking sanctuary in the UK. Submissions should be sent to exodusfanzine@gmail.com

Jean-Marc Hall
(Exodus project co-ordinator)

Civic award for 'outstanding contribution'



Carey Sedgwick and Seema Khan of Care4Calais' South-west London group receive the Special Civic Award from Wandsworth Mayor Cllr Juliana Annan.

CARE4CALAIS has been presented with a prestigious Special Civic Award by Wandsworth Council in recognition of the incredible support its volunteers give to refugees in South-west London.

Seema Khan and Carey Sedgwick, of Care4Calais' South-west London group, accepted the award from Wandsworth Mayor Cllr Juliana Annan at a special

ceremony in Wandsworth Town Hall. The judges said the award was given 'in recognition of those who have 'provided outstanding contribution by improving the lives of others'.

Judges praised the group for understanding what is needed to improve the quality of life of people seeking sanctuary, and working to build their confidence in

belonging to their new community.

The judges said: "We know how Seema, Carey and their team go many extra miles to help people in their area, and over the years they have collectively made an incalculable difference to many people's lives.

"To everyone at Care4Calais South-west London - thank you."

‘They are now part of our family’

Hosting a refugee can be an enriching experience for everyone.



TODAY another of the young refugees Care4Calais supports will have a warm bed after a few weeks of rough sleeping.

Despite speaking good English and doing all the right things, A, a refugee from Sudan couldn't find a place to rent or work in the short time he had between his grant of refugee status and eviction from asylum accommodation.

But volunteers are awesome! Rachel and family are also hosts with Refugees at Home and have agreed to host him, just days after their last guest moved on.

Rachel and her family spoke about their experiences as hosts.

“We have been hosting with Refugees at Home for the past eight months and have had three guests in our house. The first two stayed for a few weeks and the last for six months,” she said.

“We took some time to decide if hosting was right for us. I had children at university and another travelling, we had space and it felt like the right thing to do.

“There was some apprehension - what if we didn't get on, or it was awkward? However, whatever my worries were, it must have been so much harder for the refugees we hosted. Imagine facing home-

lessness, having nowhere to go, no family in the UK, being alone, feeling terrified and anxious and the only option is to stay with a complete stranger, from another culture in their home.

“To date hosting has been an extremely positive experience for all of the family. We have had three wonderful guests in our home. We have shared food, stories and laughter. They have all been polite, respectful and a pleasure to host.

“Since August all of my adult children have been back home, with some room changes we have managed to fit everyone in and it has been a success.

“Our last guest was forced to move to Reading as there was no accommodation or hosts in the town where he was living. In six months he found a job, started college (doing English and Maths GCSE's), made friends in Reading, saved for a deposit and month's rent in advance.

“He has just moved out and has a room in a shared house. He is delighted to be independent and we are very happy for him, even if we are a little sad to see him move on!

“Comments from my kids (who are teenagers/young adults) have included: ‘it

made the house more interesting’, ‘the food has been great’, ‘they are now part of the family’, ‘he is a life-long friend’, ‘everyone should do this’, ‘I think we have gained more out of this than they have’ and a simple comment of ‘why not?’

Massive thanks to Rachel and family and to the team at Refugees at Home. To find out more about hosting a refugee see: <https://refugeesathome.org/>



How to defuse ticking timebomb

Care4Calais CEO Steve Smith outlines the charity's response to the homelessness crisis created by the Government's rush to clear the backlog of asylum claims without giving any thought to the consequences.

THERE has been a devastating backlog of asylum claims. The government is under pressure to clear the backlog. This is resulting in a sudden bow wave of individuals granted refugee status and the right to remain, thereby increasing the pressure when it comes to finding jobs, accessing Universal Credit, finding accommodation, signing up with the NHS, opening bank accounts, etc.

The situation is exacerbated by a reduction in the notice period that individuals are receiving before being evicted from their hotel accommodation. In some cases, the notice period, in days, can be counted in single digits.

Whereas, until recently, the ticking clock started from the point of notification of status, it is now from the point of decision. With actual notification often taking days or weeks to reach the individuals concerned, the clock has generally run down significantly by the time they learn about their impending eviction.

Both of these circumstances are creating a surge of homelessness, as those with newly appointed refugee status leave their asylum accommodation at very short notice, with nowhere to go.

C4C's UK operations currently take asylum seekers up to the point where refugee status either is, or is not, granted.

At this point, the ongoing support for those individuals transfers to other organisations. However, with the need growing, and the capacity of all support organisations increasingly stretched, it is time to review the situation to determine how best C4C might respond.

I also recognise the present situation has the potential to cause much distress amongst C4C's volunteers, who may feel helpless in the face of a growing catastrophe. I appreciate that many of you will already be helping people in this situation and have queried the level of help the charity can offer.

I know we are all incredibly proud of the amazing work we do with people seeking asylum - from the life-saving work in Calais, to the life-changing work and advocacy in the UK - and as a compassionate charity, we wish we could assist in every



Care4Calais CEO Steve Smith MBE

area of need. But there are times when we need to ensure we stay within the remit of the charity, to guarantee we continue providing reliable, quality support for those who need it. In short, we must balance the needs of those on the ground with our ability to provide support within capacity, while not over-extending the charity to the point where it is put at risk.

To that end, I have held lengthy discussions with key staff members in order to find a way forward.

As a result of these meetings, we have been able to refine the actions we need to take. These are:

Comprehensive information for volunteers

C4C staff teams are working to prepare comprehensive documents to provide information about the UK welfare structure

'The Home Office is now so intent on rushing asylum claims through that it is failing to think through the consequences of its actions'

(Universal Credit, social housing, council housing, private tenants' entitlements, etc).

While many of you may already have this information at your fingertips, others won't. It is essential we can provide the best possible advice, not just at the moment of need, but in advance of a crisis happening. I am aware that local information (regarding local government and

other organisations) may vary, and we are looking at how these variations might best be catered for.

In addition, we wanted the document to include contact information for other organisations that may be able to help with the transition process.

Comprehensive Information for Asylum Seekers.

We are also drawing together similar information for the asylum seekers themselves. Much of this may be online so that it is easily amended to adapt to changing circumstances.

We are finalising translated versions, and they will be available soon. QR codes will be used to aid accessibility. We are looking at how this information may best be publicised (for example by posters, social media, website), and at the need for any printed copies.

I am conscious that some volunteers feel that oral presentations are the most effective mechanism for getting this information across, and I do not wish to discourage this. But I see this work as complementing the written information.

Finally, whether used for presentation purposes or individual access, we will be providing a briefing video covering the same vital information.

Liaison with Other Key Organisations and Key Contacts

Some areas around the country are better connected with useful organisations and key contacts than others. For example, some find their local council extremely helpful, while others verge on outright hostility.

I think it's important that we map these contacts so that we are best placed to guide the newly appointed refugees in the right direction.

This is not just a problem facing Care4Calais. Others are already well aware of the ticking timebomb of potential refugee homelessness. We are actively reaching out to partners in the hope of defining some coordinated action moving forward.

Advocacy

We need to change the Government's mindset. Embarrassed by the extraordinary backlog, the Home Office is now so intent on rushing asylum claims through that it is failing to think through the consequences of its actions.

It is merely transferring the problem to

of refugees with nowhere to live

Picture: Nathan Dumlao, Unsplash

other areas – primarily at local level. The small Communications Team at Care4Calais is already stretched to the maximum, but I have asked them to play a part in this advocacy drive as well.

We will join with other organisations (Red Cross, Refugee Council, and others) in pushing for a change in the notification period from 28 to 56 days. We also want to see a return to the clock only starting to tick once the refugee has been informed of their new status.

Finally, we need to see Central Government taking greater responsibility for addressing the likely carnage they will create if they continue along this route without providing adequate support to minimise the humanitarian crisis.

Provision of Limited Ongoing Support

With all of the above in mind, we must remember that Care4Calais is here to offer support to asylum seekers on the long journey up to refugee status being awarded, and not beyond.

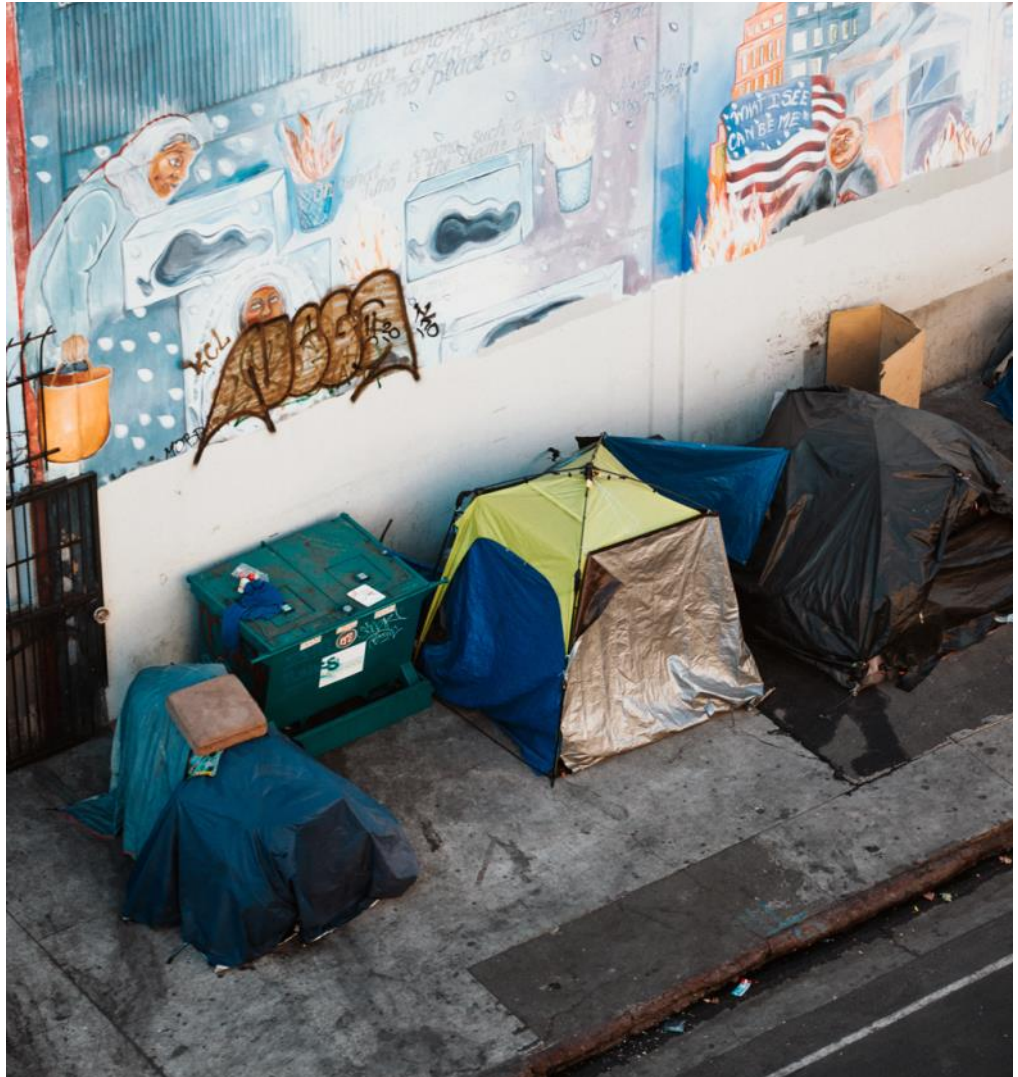
This means we cannot offer team capacity, or allocate central budget funds, for activities or goods beyond that.

That said, I know that many of you will feel helpless if you are unable to provide emergency support in a crisis.

To that end, for an interim period of three months, commencing from 1 November 2023, I am prepared to authorise up to 30 per cent of area budgets to be used in supporting refugees.

This will come under the heading of Refugee Status Support (RSS). Any allocations of funding towards RSS will require the authorisation of both the appropriate UK Field Ops Manager, and also, the UK Field Ops Coordinator. We will be establishing a process whereby such authorisations can be processed quickly.

In providing RSS, it is vital that support



Government policy will create ‘carnage’ without proper support.

to our core activities - hotels, barracks and barges - is not degraded.

I look to Area Leads to implement this policy with care and balance.

Conclusion

I hope that this message provides

clarity, and helps you answer any related requests you may receive from team members or those you support.

I understand that some of you will want to help friends on this next part of their journey, and of course as individuals you are free to do so.

We thank you for your care and commitment.

The advice document is in circulation across all areas we support already and we will endeavour to have the translated guides out to you. We will also have the advice document uploaded to our website and QR code posters are available for your hotels.

Please contact your Field Ops Manager for these resources.

Thank you so much for all your work, passion, time and energy you give to make this world a fairer place for those seeking asylum.

At a glance: Care4Calais’s response to the homelessness crisis

- Comprehensive local and national information about the UK welfare structure to help volunteers give the best support to those granted refugee status
- Similar information for the asylum seekers themselves in different accessible formats and languages
- Working with partner organisations and key contacts to take a coordinated approach to tackling the problem of homelessness
- Advocacy – working with other organisations to lobby to change the notification period to leave hotel accommodation from 28 to 56 days, starting from when a refugee is informed of their new status
- For a limited period be able to use 30 per cent of area budgets to support those facing crisis after being granted refugee status.



John, left, and Bato embarked on a perilous journey after fleeing armed militia in Sudan.

‘You have a choice: live or die - you decide that you will live’

“THE militia came to my village at midnight. They all had guns, and I saw them shoot people. They shoot people for nothing. When I saw that I realised my life was nothing to them, that I was nothing. That’s why we had to leave.”

John, the South Sudanese refugee on the left in the photograph, told me this story at a distribution of bags and chargers one afternoon in Dunkirk.

He seemed sad as he remembered home and how he had fled with his friend Bato (right) to escape to the UK. As two young men, they knew the militia would come back and either press them into service, or kill them.

They made their way through Libya, crossed the Mediterranean Sea in a ‘very scary’ boat, and then trekked through Italy and France.

“It was tough,” said Bato, in an understatement that brought a lump to my throat.

Enduring the long, hard wait to somehow find a way to the UK as the winter drew in, John said they now faced the big challenge of keeping up their spirits.

“We have to be strong,” he said. When I asked how, he laughed kindly. “You start by knowing there are two choices. You live, or you die. You decide you are going to live. You look into your heart, and you make yourself believe it. Then you believe in each other. That’s all.”

It was moving to hear such hard-learned words from such young men, particularly ones who had been so cheerful and friendly.

But, as I learned as a volunteer, refugees so often have this incredible understanding, strength and humour.

We were there to support them, but in my week in Calais I learned more than I can say.

Good luck, John and Bato; the UK will be all the richer if you finally get there.

B, C4C volunteer

Don’t blame refugees for shortages in services

HOW often do we hear ‘migrants are taking our homes’?

Migrants are often blamed for housing shortages. But this is far from the truth.

They stand less chance of getting social housing than those born in the UK.

Migrants from outside the EU are not eligible for social housing except in limited circumstances. Councils have ‘local connection’ rules so migrants don’t get a chance.

They have no more right to a social home than those born in the UK. Migrants face document checks before they even stand a chance of a home.

The same applies when they access the NHS, apply for a job, or open a bank account. Regularising documents often comes with legal obstacles and fees and can also affect British citizens who don’t have passports.

Primary and secondary education is not affected by the immigration status of a child or parent. However, child refugees are being forced to wait months for UK school places.

Education access should take no more than 20 days, but this has never been achieved.

Increases in the proportion of pupil numbers is down to more children being born in the UK rather than children migrating here each year.

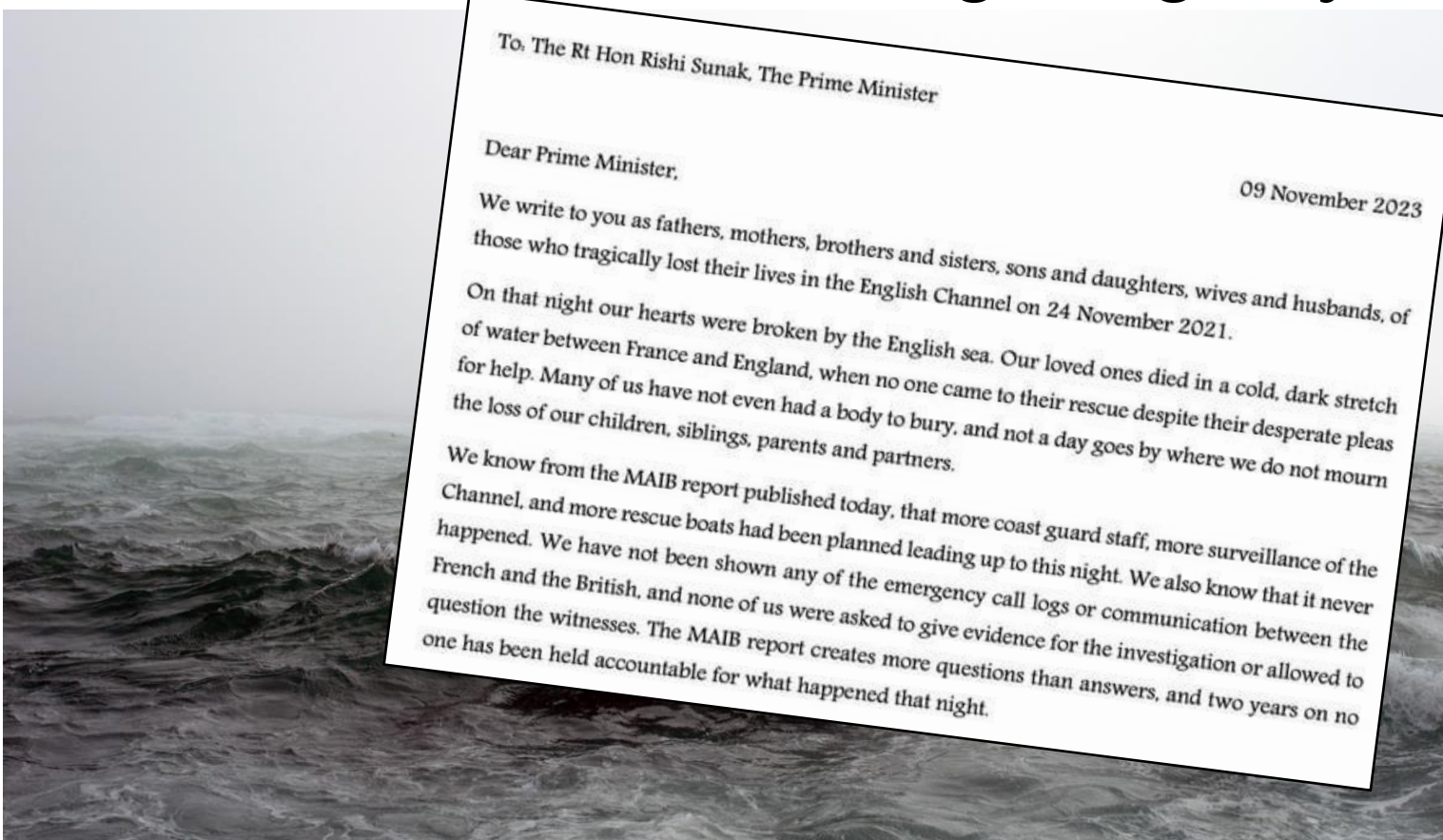
So, the biggest aspect influencing increasing pupil numbers is changes to the birth rate.

Schools need the resources to deal with that and, like the amount of housing and medical provision, it is a matter of political choice for the government and those who vote them in.

It is wrong to blame newly arrived migrants for a housing, educational and health system that has been failing for years due to under-investment and austerity.

J-MH

Families demand proper inquiry into Channel drowning tragedy



An excerpt from the letter to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak from the families of the 32 people who drowned in the English Channel.

THE families of a group of asylum seekers who drowned in the English Channel in November 24, 2021 have written a heart-breaking letter to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to demand justice and action following the publication of a report into the tragedy.

The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB), which investigated the tragedy, did not allow family members to give evidence or put their queries to those involved, and critics say the report entirely fails to settle the many unanswered questions. There were only two survivors when a dinghy carrying at least 34 people sank.

The letter is a reminder of the families' anguish and suffering – and of the urgent need for Government action.

“Our loved ones died in a cold, dark stretch of water between France and England, when no one came to their rescue despite their desperate pleas for help,” it reads. “Many of us have not even had a

body to bury, and not a day goes by where we do not mourn the loss of our children, siblings, parents and partners.”

The report, published in November 2023, revealed serious shortcomings in respect of staffing levels and coastguard resources, disorganisation within the control room, lack of oversight, failure to accurately record and log calls resulting in confusion in respect of what incidents had been responded to, and an overall display of chaos in relation to those coordinating the search and rescue operation.

This came only days after the Observer newspaper and Liberty Investigates uncovered that 999 calls to the Coastguard had been wrongly downgraded in the days leading up to the disaster.

The letter continues: “This tragedy could have been prevented, and the UK Government must do everything it can to fully and publically investigate what happened, to ensure that those responsible are held to account and to prevent such a

tragedy from happening again. Without truth there can be no justice. The Government must act now.”

In the wake of the MAIB report's publication, the Transport Secretary announced that a non-statutory inquiry would be set up to investigate the events surrounding the tragedy. But the families say this simply is not enough. A non-statutory inquiry will not have the power to compel attendance of witnesses or disclosure of evidence, and will not be sufficient to get to the truth of what happened on the night, and for lessons to be learned to prevent future deaths.

The claimants say they will continue to fight for justice for their loved ones, which requires the announcement of a statutory inquiry. You can support the families by contributing to the campaign to hold the UK Government to account over the tragedy and call for a proper inquiry.

For more details see: <https://buff.ly/3QPOFmK>



Care4Calais volunteer Freya found the refugees and fellow volunteers she met in France restored her faith in humanity.

Staggered by kindness, humour and care in terrible conditions

VOLUNTEERING in Calais shocked me in ways I had not expected. It was shocking, though perhaps shouldn't have been, to have been surrounded by the volunteers who fill the Care4Calais warehouse.

You feel straight away that you're among the very best of people – the sorts of people who restore your faith in humanity a bit after being swallowed by the negativity of British politics and media – people who are there genuinely and deeply because they want to help.

There is a spirit in the Care4Calais warehouse that is like no other that I have ever experienced.

Truly though, my shock came not from the attitudes of my fellow volunteers, but from those of the refugees.

Perhaps it was ignorant to assume that it wouldn't have been this way, but their kindness, compassion, humour, care and thankfulness is incredible, and all in the face of some of the worst living conditions in Europe.

Their consideration for others was staggering at times; I heard of refugees giving away their tent to a friend who had not managed to request one for our



Freya's touching friendship bracelets.

evening drops, and of others inviting volunteers to share their food which had been newly distributed, and there is always, always a group of ever eager guys waiting to help load the van at the end of an afternoon on site. One day when I was there, I made a friendship bracelet for one of the guys I met. He was 16 and had come alone to Calais from Sudan.

He disappeared shortly after I gave it

to him, but came to find me at the end of the day to give me a matching one he had made. Our communication had been stilted, and I hadn't asked him to make me a bracelet, but instead of using his time on site to charge his phone, or play football with his friends, he'd spent it making a bracelet for me.

It was a simple act, but one of sincere kindness. Stories like this are not hard to come by at C4C, but they stick with you - and my bracelet is still on my wrist. It is not an enjoyable experience to see and hear of the horrendous living conditions that the people C4C support in Calais endure, nor to hear of the things they've experienced on their journey there. But there is empathy and hope and laughter and kindness among the stories of their suffering, and that is perhaps the biggest, and best, shock of all.

Freya, volunteer

• Care4Calais volunteers like Freya do amazing work with refugees in Calais, and often find the experience deeply rewarding. To volunteer in Calais, go to: care4calais.org/get-involved/volunteer-in-calais/

Compassionate Didi has devoted her whole life to helping the vulnerable

THROUGHOUT her life, Didi has been a trailblazer, showing up for vulnerable communities across the world and challenging prejudice. At the age of 90, she recently registered with Care4Calais to volunteer.

Didi was a young child during the Second World War, and grew up with an acute sense of the harm people can do to one another. When she discovered some hidden newspapers at home, she was confronted with horrific images of the concentration camps – the dreadful results of conflict and persecution.

International wars continued throughout Didi's teens, and she couldn't turn a blind eye to them.

"There was nothing wrong with my childhood - but what I saw was that a lot of other children and adults were very unhappy," she said.

When Hungarian refugees came to live in her community in the 1950s, Didi got to know them.

One even became her boyfriend, and she witnessed his pain in being so far from home and family.

An opportunity arose for her to volunteer, building refugee houses in Austria, and she jumped at it – essentially becoming a builder's mate.

Didi rolled up her sleeves, and she felt useful.

As a young woman she trained in nursing, and took her medical knowledge to volunteer in communities not reached by international aid efforts.



She supported Tibetan refugees in the Himalayas, outcast groups of people with leprosy in India, and also spent time in Japan.

Didi later worked in vulnerable communities across London as a social worker, and introduced the first ever anti-racism training for Social Services in the 1980s.

She now volunteers with Care4Calais at Wethersfield Barracks, befriending asylum seekers, helping at drop-ins, and teaching English. She is a total asset to the team, with a wealth of knowledge and experience.

"I think it's very important that we try to create

a better world by having more compassion and more understanding. It doesn't mean that we have to agree with everybody by any means, but it does mean that one is prepared to negotiate and discuss - and try and get a world that is more equal," she said.

Please help Didi and C4C try to create a more fair and just system for refugees by donating to the crowdfunder to support the legal challenge to brutal sites like Wethersfield and the Bibby Stockholm: buff.ly/47eRnig

To volunteer with C4C at Wethersfield, please go to buff.ly/4ON8grO

Humans must strive for peace, kindness and an end to war

I WANT to talk about peace, but let's start with trees and nature that have always inspired us, *writes Mehrsana.*

Imagine planting a seed or a seedling. It grows, bears fruit, and flourishes. You look at it every day, and it brings you joy. You care for it, water it, and then someone comes along, picks its fruits, and crushes it underfoot.

How does it make you feel?

We humans are similar; our plague is the wars that rob us of life and happiness. Wars waged by those who have not truly lived or lack a deep and correct perspective on life and existence.

War has no end. It lingers, like a scowl or a harsh word to a child remembered into adulthood. War is like a perpetual explosion echoing across the world, leaving wounds on trees for years, akin to the scars of 1945 etched in minds and hearts, undeniable.

Everyone who breathes has the right to live, a right not determined by us or anyone else. But our eternal life is when peace becomes the law, reigning over all hearts and mouths.

Peace is a universal human reaction, akin to a smile, sharing happiness. Peace is our eternal tree, ever-growing. We humans must thwart the pests, the cruel passers-by, and build a forest where unity, kindness, and security prevail. How can war and killing be more comforting than love and humanity, forgetting that history is recorded, and judgment awaits?

Why is peace so difficult for us? I wish we could be a bit kinder to our kind and to nature and animals, making life full of happiness and the affections of kind hearts.

Humanity and honour are crucial and kindness should be a mandatory law. Hoping for a better life, a better planet, better people, and more peace, long live the shining lights in hearts without anger.

Human beings are members of a whole, in creation of one essence and soul. If one member is afflicted with pain, Other members will remain uneasy.

We must never allow this great cycle of kindness to be broken

THESE days, I sometimes feel a deep sense of sorrow and sadness and I cry in my loneliness, so hard that my shoulders are shaking, much like the day when two of my little students, Hiva and Bavān, lost their eyes and legs on the path to the rural school.

They had stepped on a leftover mine from the war. Many times, my existence is filled with despair and distress and I feel helpless, like the day when my 12-year-old student, Leila, out of fear and to escape a forced marriage to an elderly man, threw herself into a river near their house and drowned.

Some nights fear grips me and I tremble as I did when I was a seven-year-old child and the sounds of bullets and armed clashes between Kurdish forces and the central government of Iran continued through the night until morning in our streets and alleys, and I saw bloodied bodies on both sides of the conflict scattered in every corner.

I am from the Middle East. The land of oil and war! The smell of gunpowder and blood always permeates the air there.

The people of the Middle East have been kept in petrification and bigotry, and this petrification and bigotry is like accumulated gasoline ready to explode at any moment when a small match is struck.

The horrible Angels of Death, like the blot of ugly clouds, cast a permanent shadow of terror upon the children's faces there.

Each year, on a completely irrational pretext, they wrap their filthy hands around the fragile necks of the children.

With a mixture of barbarity and cruelty, they kneel upon children's feeble chests and draw their swords to turn them into lifeless and blood-soaked dolls. In the end, they derive pleasure from this gory act and laugh loudly.

Although I am now in Britain, cradle of civilization, culture, urbanisation and security in the world, traces of my grief and stress still linger.

It's as if I've locked all that sorrow, despair, fear, and trembling in a tightly sealed box and brought it with me.

The long wait for my asylum application to be accepted here, and being far from my family, has made my conditions

even more challenging. Exile and seeking asylum in Britain are truly a difficult and complex process.

Often, I feel powerless in the face of these circumstances, and my heart longs to escape from here, back to the land of gunpowder and blood, despite all the life-threatening dangers that await me.

I sit in the corner of my room, clasp my knees, and think to myself whether I should give up or not, if I should continue?

I search for only one reason and source of joy to resist the hardships. I find it in the presence of angels in our place of residence - wingless angels who come to visit us refugees, every day.

They are beautiful and kind, with smiling and energetic faces. It's no exaggeration to say that they have prioritised our lives over the demands of their own.

They sacrifice their time and energy for us without any expectations.

I don't know if they are Christians, Muslims, Jews, or perhaps a different breed of humanity, or perhaps of no religion at all?

But I am captivated by the philosophy and way they nurture people. How can one think that someone can love others more than themselves?

It's hard to believe, but these angels are exactly like that.

How wondrous these volunteers from West Berkshire Action for Refugees and Care4Calais are!

I wish I could speak English like my mother tongue (Kurdish) and express my

feelings to each of them. I want to say to them: 'we refugees appreciate every moment you spend on us'.

I want to say that each of your smiles is a ray of light in the dark house of our difficult lives these days. I want to say we are indebted to all your kindness and we are grateful for all your efforts.

In fact, you are the ones who give real meaning to some words in the dictionary. It's through your behaviour that all understand what humanity means and what love is! Without a doubt, words like kindness, goodness, and hope will be ashamed to see your behaviour and will understand their actual true meaning.

Certainly, words like sacrifice and help will bow before you.

Not only we asylum seekers, but all of humanity and societies should honour you for your love of humanity.

You keep the wheel of kindness turning despite all the hardships and challenges in this grand cycle.

I hope that one day, all people will understand how valuable this chain of kindness is and what a tremendous asset it is to society.

I wish that each one of us asylum seekers, one day deserves to become one of the links in this human chain.

I finally conclude that I have to stay and fight and become one of the rings of this chain of kindness in future.

Let's not allow this cycle of kindness to ever come to a halt..

Brahman



Picture: Tyler Nix



Exodus team members Souran Soleimani, Martin Trepte and Jean-Marc Hall at the Outsiders Art Fair in Clapton, London.

Team spreading the word about Exodus

EXODUS Fanzine reached out to the East End community recently with a visit to the Outsiders Art Fair held at the Clapton Community Football Club in Forest Gate, a football club 100 per cent owned by its faithful supporters.

The Old Spotted Dog ground hosted the annual art festival organised by the Clapton Punks featuring a variety of creative stalls and independent films and finishing with an evening of punk anarchist music from six bands.

The Exodus team were humbled by the fantastic response to the 'zine and the work of volunteers supporting Care4Calais.

The power, intellectual acumen and understanding of all those present was a confirmation that we are all doing a fantastic job supporting those seeking asylum.

Power to the people!

Constant vigilance needed over suicide risk to asylum seekers

SUICIDE manifests itself in many different situations. Often, people who are considering suicide are dealing with a combination of mental ill-health and difficult life events.

Those seeking asylum from countries experiencing human rights violations, wars and atrocities can arrive in the UK traumatised and in poor mental health.

According to the charity Papyrus, which is dedicated to preventing suicide among young people, refugees and those seeking asylum in the UK are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population. Mental ill-health can be exacerbated by anxieties around money, housing, accessing education, social support, and the fear of deportation and discrimination.

Symptoms such as very low mood, negative thinking, severe anxiety, and psychosis can lead to suicidal thoughts.

People who take their own life sometimes display warning signs beforehand - expressions of hopelessness or helplessness, an overwhelming sense of shame or guilt, a dramatic change in personality or a change in eating or sleeping habits.

New data, obtained by Liberty Investigates, has emerged just weeks after an

Albanian asylum seeker, Leonard Farruku, was reported to have taken his own life on the Bibby Stockholm barge, moored in Portland Dorset. A full inquest is still to be held.

A total of 180 people died in government asylum seeker accommodation last year (2023) according to Home Office freedom of information data. A total of 23 asylum seekers are thought to have taken their own lives in the last four years.

Recent cases include Irakli Kapnadze, aged 37, found dead outside his asylum hotel in Wakefield; Rima al-Badi, aged 21, from Oman, who took her own life after more than a year in a Home Office hotel; and 63-year-old Victor Hugo Varges, from Columbia, who was found dead in his hotel room in Hailsham, Essex.

The problems are not just confined to England. North of the border, the Scottish refugee council admitted that revelations pointed to "badly wrong" issues affecting over 50,000 refugees.

Clearsprings Ready Homes, which has contracts with the Home Office, has refused to comment on individual cases, but said the wellbeing of service users was always of prime concern.

A Home Office spokesperson said:

"The welfare of all those in our care is of utmost importance and we work continually to ensure the needs and vulnerabilities of those residing in asylum accommodation are identified and considered."

It is without condition that, as humanitarians, we should protect the vulnerable and their right to life and liberty and freedom of opinion and expression.

We have a duty to uphold the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The care of people seeking asylum and those who have gained their refugee status must be paramount.

The need to be sympathetic, vigilant and aware that suicide, in all its manifestations, can be inhibited and reticent is a reminder that suicide can be masked and hidden.

Jean-Marc Hall

Help is available. If you are having suicidal thoughts or are concerned about someone else, please contact:

- Samaritans: Call 116 123, lines open 24 hours every day
- Papyrus Hopeline: Call 0800 0684141 between 9am and midnight every day

Vital we keep a healthy balance between mind, body and spirit

‘MIND the gap between the train and the platform’ is a useful metaphor, writes *Elias Mengistuwoldegiorgis*

One of the developed countries that welcomes immigration is the United Kingdom.

There are quite a few people seeking a new life in the UK.

While their case is being considered and before they are sent a decision, the asylum seekers have a lot of spare time to do something. It’s a good opportunity to have self-talk and be your true self.

If a human being has a strong desire to live a true life, he must maintain a balance of three things - his spirit (soul), body and mind.

If he leads his life by maintaining the balance of these properly, it can be understood that he is living a true and correct life.

Authenticity, or true identity, is the balance between what we seek within ourselves, what makes us comfortable when we do it, and how we express and represent ourselves to external life.

Writer and researcher Dr Jeremy Sutton PhD tells us: “Authentic living involves a balance between what is occurring within us and how we express and represent ourselves outside.”

Keeping your body in balance means physical health; it means maintaining mental,



body and spiritual (soul) health. To be healthy, we need to pay attention to all three natural phenomena.

Let me look at those three things more closely.

Soul is the art of taming the thoughts that run through our minds. It is a concept that refers to food for the soul. Our souls find happiness when we give ourselves to good deeds, volunteering, donating time and money to charitable causes, giving thanks and when we pray every day according to our faith.

This is a very important issue in keeping our body in balance.

The second one is our body. Our bodies require many things from us to stay healthy for many

years. Affordable food, exercise, enough water, sleep and so on. This makes maintaining balance as important to our bodies as breathing.

The third aspect of balance is the mind. Just like our body, our minds need food every day.

Acquaintance with new knowledge by reading books enhances creative skills. It also helps our mind to stay busy.

Furthermore, it gives us an opportunity to reconcile ourselves with the immediate changes that are happening in the world. This is mental food.

The connection of mind, body, and spirit (soul) are intertwined with each other.

When we have these in balance it make us who we are.

According to E health connection: “The main concept behind the mind-body-spirit connection is that we are all more than just our thoughts. We are also our bodies, our emotions, and our spirituality... all these things combine to give us identity, determine our health, and make us who we are.”

There is a wide gap between what we define ourselves to be on the outside and how we balance our bodies.

Why is this? On the one hand, it’s the way we’ve grown up, and on the other it’s because we give less weight to important issues.

We don’t pay enough attention to the things that need to be done every day to keep our bodies in balance.

It seems that we are not aware of this issue in this migration world.

We don’t seem to understand that by wasting 24 hours for no good reason we are willingly throwing our lives away. We will never get back the time we wasted today,

That’s why ‘time is life’. If we don’t recognise the gap between maintaining body balance and what we outwardly express ourselves as, unhappiness and an unplanned life awaits us.

What do we think will happen if we don’t mind the gap between the train and the platform?

Free schools programme aims to dispel myths about refugees

THE charity Migrant Help has launched a new free schools programme aiming to promote positive discussion, and increased understanding and empathy about the issues facing people escaping violence and persecution.

The programme offers schools visits to deliver engaging and thought-provoking

workshops and assemblies to dispel some of the myths, and inspire ideas and discussion on the theme of asylum and refuge, and how we can all play our part in extending a welcome and showing support to those who seek sanctuary in the UK.

Workshops and assemblies can be tailored to the school’s own needs and the

age range of the students at which they are aimed.

For more details about the workshops and assemblies contact school programme lead Jonathan Scanion at:

schools@migranthehelpuk.org or visit www.migranthehelpuk.org/pages/category/schools-programme

Rwanda plans causing stress and anxiety

SINCE our last issue of Exodus, significant changes have happened concerning the arrival of people seeking asylum and those who are already here waiting to be processed, or who are receiving leave to remain and gaining refugee status.

The closure of many hotels has left many refugees homeless without the time or finances to apply for jobs and find homes.

Suella Braverman's final week of political tail-spinning before she was sacked began with her infamous warning that UK streets were being 'taken over by rows of tents occupied by people, many of them from abroad, living on the streets as a lifestyle choice'.

A new home secretary, who seems bent on continuing to make the lives of many people seeking asylum more painful, together with the judgement over the controversial issue of deportation to Rwanda, is causing anxieties and trepidation.

Those seeking asylum and evicted from hotels are being sent to other parts of the country including military barracks and the Bibby Stockholm barge, where residents have said conditions are so awful, they 'despair and wish for death' and which recently saw a tragic suspected suicide.

There is a legal rule that refugees must not be returned to their countries of origin, either directly or indirectly, if their lives or freedom would be threatened in that country, known as *refoulement*.

The Government's alternative option is offshore processing of claims in Rwanda, which has been ruled unlawful by the UK Supreme Court. Emergency legislation has declared Rwanda is a safe country, but the plan would still be in breach of the Government's international law obligations and constitutionally a completely extraordinary thing to do, effectively overruling a decision by the highest court in the land.

The Bill was set to return to Parliament in January where Tory backbenchers including former Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick, have vowed to 'toughen it up'.

According to Human Rights Watch, "Rwanda is a country where it's very dangerous to oppose the government".

Jean-Marc Hall

Minister's office blocked charity's volunteers from helping refugees

ROBERT Jenrick, who recently-resigned as the Government's Immigration Minister, had personally intervened to stop Care4Calais volunteers supporting refugees in Home Office accommodation at Wethersfield and Napier Barracks, documents have revealed.

The charity offers individuals at these sites legal and emotional support.

Its volunteers provide clothes, haircuts, social support and legal advice to people who are otherwise isolated.

Care4Calais legal clinics help asylum seekers to understand letters they have received from the Home Office about their claims or possible deportation to Rwanda.

Internal emails the charity has obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show the instructions to keep it away from Napier and Wethersfield came directly from Jenrick's office.

This is the Government trying to enforce the segregation of refugees, deprive them of support and prevent them from being heard. But Care4Calais has vowed it will not stop speaking out for people in camps such as Wethersfield and on the Bibby Stockholm, and it will fight the Government all the way.

Jenrick, who resigned as a minister because he did not think the Government's flawed Rwanda scheme went far enough, has form.

Exodus readers will no doubt recall he



Former Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick. Photo: Chris McAndrew/UK Parliament

ordered cartoon murals on the wall at a reception centre for child refugees in Dover to be painted over because they were 'too welcoming'.

He has now been replaced as home secretary by James Cleverley, but the problem remains.

Care4Calais believes these sites are unlawful, and has launched a legal challenge against the Government, aiming to make them close them down, and house refugees in local communities.

A spokesperson for the charity said: "We will fight it with all the passion and energy we have, but we also desperately and urgently need funds to support this challenge. We are not a big charity. We're just a group of normal people who refuse to let this Government unlawfully detain refugees.

"We know the Government are throwing all they have at us in the hope we will shut up and go away – but we also know that with your help, we can fight them on behalf of refugees, and win."

If Care4Calais is to have a chance of holding this Government accountable, and making sure refugee rights are upheld, it will need the support of the public. Please consider donating to its crowdfunder and Integration Not Segregation campaign at: <https://buff.ly/3uanr1s>



‘It’s far better to light a candle than it is to curse the darkness’



AMNESTY International is a global movement of more than 10 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all, *writes Helen Ball.*

We are the largest grass-roots human rights organisation in the world, which means we are completely independent, funded and led by our membership.

The Reading group is one of more than 100 local groups in the UK, where volunteers work for the main aims of Amnesty: to build a powerful movement that can change attitudes to human rights and be successful in lobbying for real improvements in human rights policy and practise that directly impacts individuals and communities.

We also create our own actions based on our relationships with like-minded local groups.

For example, it’s been great to work with the Exodus team to promote the circulation of this magazine and hear the voice of people seeking asylum reach



Amnesty members.

Our group meets monthly, in Reading or online.

Meetings usually involve a speaker talking to the group about an area of human rights which inform and inspire us in our work.

Future meetings include the Amnesty lead for Northern Ireland talking about the Troubles Bill in February and the Amnesty lead for USA talking about the death penalty. We also have social and planning meetings so we can catch up more informally.

We have a presence in the

local community so we can promote Amnesty’s work and raise funds.

We have stalls at Reading’s annual Waterfest and Pride events, as well as Reading University’s Freshers Fair.

We create our own events which have included barn dances, quizzes and music concerts. We work on the main social media platforms to amplify our voice and promote our campaigns.

Being an active volunteer for Amnesty is a passion for me – it allows me to work directly for individuals and communities

that need a light shone on their experiences.

And it works – our annual greetings card campaign, Write for Rights, had an impact in many cases as we see people released from prison or have their condition in jail improve.

Anyone can be part of Amnesty’s work – you can take action online, join us at our local Reading Group for a meeting or a local event. We hope to see you soon!

Get in touch by email at: Amnesty.reading@gmail.com and you can sign up here to get our [monthly newsletter](#).



Members of VIAN are aiming to set up new branches of the environmental volunteer group across the country.

Not end of road for green group

AN ENVIRONMENT group set up by asylum seekers in Thattham to support their host community has been forced to stop its activities following the closure of the hotel where its members were staying.

For 13 months The VIAN Environment Society has been supporting Thattham Parish Council and the community by litter picking and other volunteering activities.

Group founder Brahman, a teacher and environmental activist seeking asylum

in the UK, said: "It was very sad and painful for all of the members, but due to the closure of the hotel where the members of this group stayed VIAN has been forced to stop its activities in Thattham."

He added: "VIAN enthusiastically accepted all requests from Thattham Council for voluntary support, though our activities are a drop in the ocean compared to the kindness and goodness of the local people."

The good news is that members are setting up new branches of VIAN in Reading and Maidenhead and are planning more even further afield as they move and settle in different parts of the UK.

"We hope to resume our activities better and wider in another part of the UK in the near future," said Brahman.

"We are very grateful to the local people who came to thank VIAN for its activities,"

How we treat animals reflects on how we treat other people

THE fate of animals should be important to all of us, **writes Mehrsana.**

It is permanently linked to the fate of humans. If man doesn't want to suppress his human feelings, he must be kind to animals.

Cruelty to animals makes one hard-hearted in dealings with people. We can gauge a human heart by observing how he treats animals. In my coun-

try, I've witnessed numerous homeless and helpless animals treated terribly.

They lack the strength to defend themselves and live oppressed lives with difficulty.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of respect for living beings, stripping them of their right to live.

Animal cruelty is pervasive, and the silence is deafening. I regret to say that animal cruelty

is rampant in our country, with no right to protest.

In this article, I aim to be the voice of animals, bringing their plight to the world's attention. I've seen many animals silently scream for support — it's a matter of humanity and honour motivating me to write.

I want to emphasise the protection and respect of living beings with the right to live.

Nature's delicate balance is

on the verge of extinction, often ignored. Helpless animals have feelings and understanding; though tongue-tied, they communicate through their eyes.

Understanding and accepting them with kindness is essential.

I wish goodwill to all people worldwide, hoping for a world free from cruelty, with peace, tranquillity, comfort, and happiness everywhere.

Charities and their volunteers are

Exodus journalist Soran Solaimani takes an in-depth look at the importance of charities and the essential work of their dedicated volunteers who make such a difference to the lives of others.

CHARITIES play a vital and influential part in any society. They can be considered one of the main pillars of a society to improve people's lives both qualitatively and quantitatively. In other words, it may not be an exaggeration to consider them the 'beating heart' of the societies they serve by trying to reduce the crises and problems people face.

According to their different goals and functions, charities help people live a better life by coping with the challenges thrown at them. This is the most valuable and important impact of charity organisations in modern societies.

Throughout the centuries, people used to help and support each other in many ways and philanthropy helped address severe social, especially economic, crises.

Religious teachings always urged people to help the needy and their neighbours. This help ranged from financial assistance and basic life needs to more important spiritual and emotional support.

This article about the work of charities like Care4Calais is perhaps one of the most difficult types of writing for me.

On the one hand, I wanted to write about my personal experience and that of many of my refugee friends who have a direct relationship with this charity, its services and activities. But on the other hand, I wanted to write in a general way and separate it from my personal feelings.

Care4Calais (C4C) is one of the voluntary charities that helps and supports refugees who are far from their homeland and are looking for a new life so they can reclaim their lost identity. This organisation has not limited its activities only to Britain, but offers services in northern France and Belgium.

The charity fully believes in a tolerant and fair British society and champions a representative and inclusive attitude towards refugees.

From the first day I came to Maidenhead as a refugee and until today, having been in the UK for almost nine months, I have closely witnessed the work and activities of this charity.

I can say with certainty it has not spared any help to the refugees it supports, from providing warm clothes, medi-



Hilda speaks to Soran about her experiences as a volunteer for Care4Calais.

cal assistance, and English language classes at any level to welfare and various programmes to fill the emotional void of being away from home, such as music workshops, movies and concerts.

The kind volunteers give advice to asylum seekers through counselling, guidance and support, even after people have received their residence card.

C4C tries to support the refugee community by creating healthy and humane relationships. It also facilitates assistance from other organisations it is not able to provide itself.

To highlight this work I have interviewed two members of the C4C team.

Hilda

Q: Please introduce yourself and give a brief explanation about your work with C4C.

A: My name is Hilda. I retired just over two years ago and had never heard of C4C or had had anything to do with working with asylum seekers (AS).

When I heard a hotel near to where I live had been contracted by the Home Office to house AS I just knew I had to help. I visited the hotel with others from my church and was introduced to Sam who was the regional manager for C4C and was struck by both her compassion and the huge needs of the residents. I joined the charity immediately and have been helping most days since then.

Q: Tell the readers more about Care4Calais.

A: The Charity was only set up about eight years ago to help those sleeping in tents in the Calais area in France but has grown to help AS in this country.

The local hotel is like an international village. Wherever there is violent conflict or persecution in the world, if people can find

a way to flee - some of them find their way here. I am constantly amazed at the bravery and resilience they show given the trauma they faced in having to flee, leaving everything they knew and loved behind and arrive with next to nothing to have to start again here with all the language and cultural difficulties and knowing no-one. Many arrive with just the clothes they are standing in and flip-flops.

Q: What services do you provide to asylum seekers, and what do you focus on?

A: The charity is able to provide material needs such as donated phones, laptops, clothes and shoes; facilitate activities such as children's clubs and English classes and help with all the form filling.

C4C volunteers have been hands-on in getting the children into schools, getting bikes and helping with integration into the community.

I have focussed on helping with material needs and running drop-in advice sessions - mainly correcting the endless errors made by the Home Office.

Q: What are the problems and challenges that have to be overcome?

A: Every day I will be asked by a resident to help with their paperwork. Often the language barrier can be the problem but often it is a Home Office mistake - for example they haven't received their ID cards or there is a mistake in them.

I have helped residents take the Home Office to tribunals in a number of cases where they tried to evict residents for not co-operating only to find out that their systems were not up-to-date and all correspondence was being sent to a previous hotel.

Another example recently took me a month to get a stay of eviction of a man

the 'beating heart' of our society

with severe learning difficulties who was here with his sister but being evicted on his own without correct ID papers.

The pressing concern now is the sheer number of evictions taking place. Once someone gets refugee status they are evicted on very short notice and need help with their ID cards, bank accounts and applying for benefits.

Q: In your opinion, how important is the work of charities like C4C?

A: I wish that the Government did not have to rely on the charity sector.

Treating asylum seekers with dignity and respect should be the standard they aspire to but the opposite feels the truth.

Asylum seekers live in cramped accommodation in boarded-up hotels – single people sharing with strangers, families of four to a room – they have to eat often inedible food and the laundry system is so bad that every week several families lose their belongings.

They cannot work and save for their housing needs when they leave. They get basic soap, shampoo, toothpaste, razors and sanitary products but as far as I know, everything else has to be offered by volunteers, and the health visitors are great working with the youngest children.

Q: What is the relationship between C4C and other charity organizations?

A: At first only C4C volunteers seemed to be working in the hotel but increasingly volunteers from other churches and charities have become very involved. I think credit should especially be given to St Mary's Church, All Saints Church, St Ed-



Just one of the many sessions run by volunteers for asylum seekers.

mund Campion RC Church, Babybank, Baby Matters and Norden Farm for all the work they continue to do to support the asylum seekers. We all do our own thing but with great respect for each other.

Q: Some asylum seekers are interested in charity and voluntary work, what kind of help can you offer these people?

A: As they are not allowed to work, I love to see asylum seekers placed in volunteering opportunities. It is great for keeping them busy, improving their English skills and their prospects for integration. Mostly those that have gone this route have used their own initiative. Sometimes I help with form filling but I am always happy to give a reference

Q: What tips, advice and suggestions do you have for asylum seekers that will be useful for them and reduce problems in society?

A: Everyone can take their tips from you Souran! Learn English. Volunteer. Try and stay positive. Smile. Ask for help.

Q: The last word...?

A: It has been a gift and a blessing to be able to help people seeking asylum. The impact a smile or even a bottle of deodorant can make can still make me cry.

Getting to know such brave and resilient people from all walks of life around the world is something I will never forget.

Laura

Q: Please introduce yourself and give a brief explanation about your work with Care4Calais.

A: My name is Laura. I got involved with Care4Calais as soon as I heard the charity wanted to help people seeking asy-

lum in Maidenhead. They provide far more services than I could have ever imagined and certainly more than I could on my own.

It's great to be part of a team where my little drip adds to what other people contribute to result in what I hope is a blessing to the residents.

Q: What do you focus on?

A: I teach English at the hotel and in the town centre. Providentially, I got my CELTA certification to teach English just after lockdown and before the hotel opened to all you lovely people.

I feel like it was God preparing me and opening a door for me to serve in a very practical way. I love our variety of English classes. They are all different, but each one has a really lovely atmosphere of people working together and loving one another. I wanted to serve you all, but the reality is that you bless me more than you could know.

Q: What are the problems and challenges you have had to help asylum seekers overcome?

A: I know it's a lot of work to learn English. But I am confident it will pay off and help you to be an active part of British society and help you to get a job. There's so much you can contribute to our culture and I want to help you share your stories and your talents.

Q: What tips, advice and suggestions do you have for asylum seekers that will be useful for them and reduce problems in society?

A: Advice to help reduce problems in society... get involved, get to know people, look out for the needs of others, practice listening to people's stories.



Laura teaches English to asylum seekers at the hotel and elsewhere.

All you need is compassion and time to make a huge difference

CARE4CALAIS urgently needs volunteers to join its committed teams in the UK. From organising donations and delivering aid to providing friendship and support to refugees, their help will make a big difference to the vulnerable people the charity works with.

When refugees first arrive in the UK it can be bewildering for them. Navigating a new country and a foreign language is a big challenge, made worse if you have no money and are scared and alone.

C4C volunteers meet up with refugees to provide a friendly face and helping hand. They collect and distribute clothes, shoes, mobile phones and other essentials. The charity can also help them to access services such as legal aid, English lessons or public transport.

To find a group near you take a look at the [UK refugee support group locations](#), or help by becoming a virtual volunteer. Training and resources are provided – all that's need is time and compassion.

There are also lots of opportunities to help refugees by getting involved behind the scenes with the C4C back office operation.

Areas needing further volunteers include logistics management; drivers, both within the UK and from the UK to Calais; internal and external communications and marketing; fundraising; research and campaigning for refugee rights; and general admin and finance.

C4C also need volunteers in Calais, an impactful and insightful way to help refugees on the front line of the refugee crisis.

By working within the refugee camps in France, volunteers get to know those forced to flee their countries and become part of the Care4Calais community. It is a friendly team and volunteers make a big difference, whether they can help for a few days or a few months.

Full details about volunteering opportunities are on the Care4Calais website at <https://care4calais.org/get-involved/supporting-refugees-in-the-uk/>

To get involved please email ukadmin@care4calais.org



Volunteer Niki pictured with the asylum seekers who secretly organised her birthday bash.

Residents thank Niki with birthday bash

CARE4CALAIS volunteer Niki had an amazing surprise when she turned up at a local hotel for her regular meeting with the people seeking asylum whom she helps to support.

It was her 50th birthday – a fact the guys were secretly well aware of.

Niki does a fantastic job, and they had decided to show their appreciation by staging a surprise birthday party in lieu of the usual support session.

With the help of other volunteers and the hotel they found food, decorations and

even a cake! Everyone had a brilliant time, especially Niki, who was honoured with an inflatable gold crown.

It was a night to show what integration really means in reality; people coming together as equals, to share each others' customs in a spirit of openness and friendship.

The photograph shows the strength of the mutual friendships volunteers forge with the people they support – in full effect like this, it's unstoppable, exactly like Niki herself.

Author Edgar writes himself a new chapter as master of horror

MOVE over Edgar Allan Poe. A new chapter has begun for Edgar Hernandez - a horror enthusiast and writer building a new life for himself in the North-east after being granted refugee status.

Edgar enjoyed the arts since childhood. Growing up in El Salvador he was encouraged to pursue other subjects to earn a living, but he always loved classic black and white cinema - particularly old vampire movies.

Scratching his creative itch, he started writing in 2007. Printing was expensive in El Salvador, so Edgar wrote short stories - fewer pages made them affordable to produce. As his popularity grew, he carried copies with him at all times to sell.

Ideas came from the films he loved, the world around him, and from the haunting characters of the local legends passed down through generations in El Salvador - from werewolves and misfits, to a headless priest.

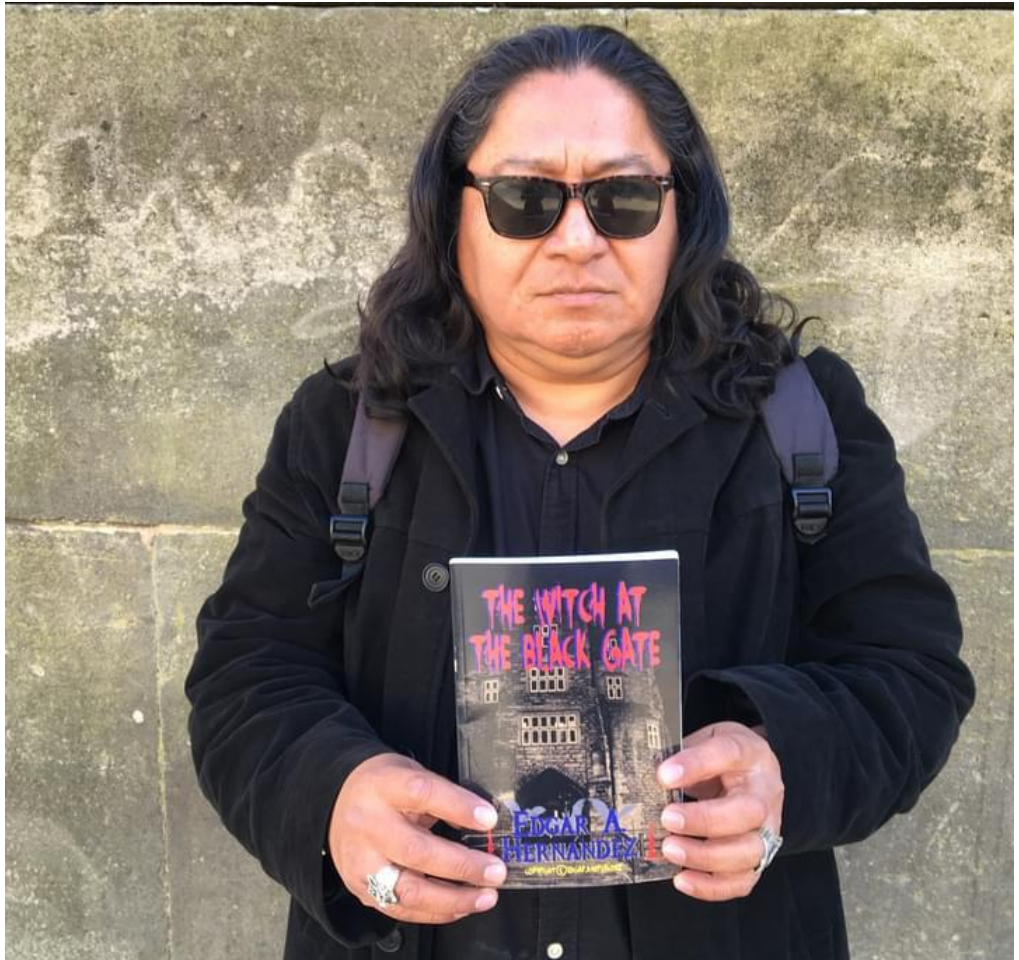
‘Edgar experienced real horror in his life. Writing brought him some relief as he escaped reality to focus on a story’

His readers would tell him: ‘Hey - my grandfather told me about this character!’. But at first, Edgar was inspired to write by his nightmares.

Like all refugees, Edgar has experienced real horror in his life. He explained how El Salvador is an incredibly dangerous place, rife with corruption and gang culture. Writing brought him some mental relief as he escaped reality to focus on a story.

Edgar lived among civil war as a teenager in the 80s and 90s, dodging bullets in the street. But when a couple of years ago Edgar was kidnapped by a gang and his life threatened, something was different this time - he had children to protect.

A single parent (he and his wife are separated) he fled with his boys seeking safety for his family in the UK. He had read



Horror writer Edgar Hernandez with a copy of his first book in English and below a selection of his work from El Salvador.

how safe people feel here. Despite already speaking English, Edgar found life as an asylum seeker a struggle.

Thankfully, he received refugee status this summer, and can now plan a future. He aims to share his story, and speak up for the people of El Salvador from a place of safety. He also hopes to write again.

With help from friends, he is translating his stories and adapting them for a British audience.

His first book in English, *The Witch at the Black Gate*, features the famous Newcastle landmark - now on Edgar's doorstep as he forges a life in the North-east.

He said: “I just keep dreaming that everything would have a happy ending. We continue writing our own best story.”

You can buy copies of Edgar's book ‘*The Witch at the Black Gate*’ at: <https://bit.ly/WitchattheBlackGate>



The true spirit of Christmas shines



There was food, fun and face-painting as Christmas parties were held for the refugee communities in Reading and Maidenhead.

WE WERE feeling extra Christmassy in Reading this festive season, as we hosted our big festive party, in collaboration with our friends from Reading Red Kitchen, *writes Sam Jonkers.*

Well over 100 people came together to eat, have their faces painted, play music and try their hand at crafts.

The hall and riverside terrace were full of chatter and squeals of delight as old friends visited, new arrivals were welcomed and the great big melting pot that is the Care4Calais refugee community in Reading came together in festive spirit.

“What a bunch of wonderful most loving and caring people you are! God bless you and your families...you guys are simply the best,” said one person attending.

The event was made possible by the help of so many different groups; Sanctuary Foundation provided edible goodies, @Yaagdar and other local restaurants provided food, Abbey Baptist Church, Reading and LifeSpring Church provided beautifully wrapped gifts for adults, while Green Ways helped with children’s games.

We were particularly touched by a

schoolgirl, Eleanor, who prepared hot chocolate reindeer, beautifully presented, and with an accompanying festive message. It was a real community event and a day filled with love.

In the evening we treated our refugee

‘The hall was full of chatter and squeals of delight as the refugee community came together in festive spirit’

helpers and translators to a trip to Reading’s Winter Wonderland to try our hands at ice skating.

There was a lot of laughter!

It was such a fun way to end the day, and to say thank you for all the very hard

work they do in running our café, carrying boxes, sorting clothes and translating.

“We owe today’s happiness and smile to the loved ones of Care4Calais. May God bless you,” was how one asylum seeker summed up the day.

Meanwhile, down the road in Maidenhead residents at the asylum hotel enjoyed a number of festive activities including a party for residents hosted by the nearby Norden Farm Centre for the Arts.

Norden Farm has been a huge supporter of residents at the hotel since it opened, organising art and craft sessions and English lessons, and offering free tickets to many of its events and activities from movies and concerts to dance classes. The party in the centre’s historic long barn featured music and food with dancing and games for children, followed by the chance to see the centre’s Christmas family show, Miki.

Several asylum seekers have also joined the arts centre’s team of volunteers which has helped them improve their English and build important connections in the local community.

through at fantastic festive parties



Art provides essential outlet for



BEING creative is essential to wellbeing and art workshops in asylum hotels have helped participants express themselves through paint, pencils, pen and ink and even digital art.

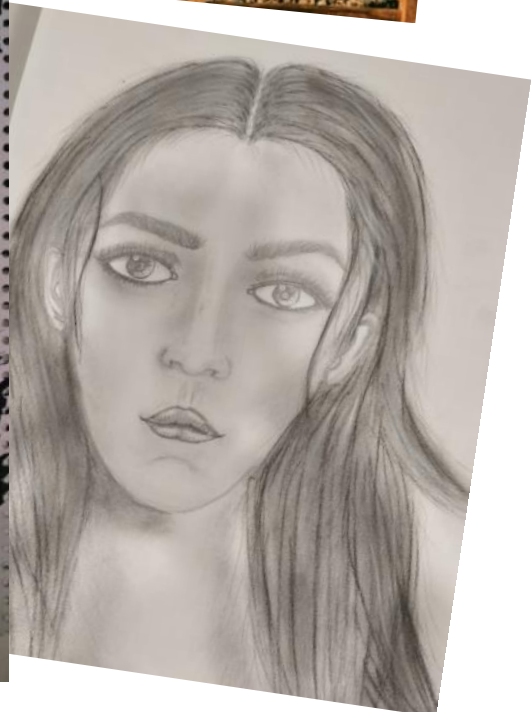
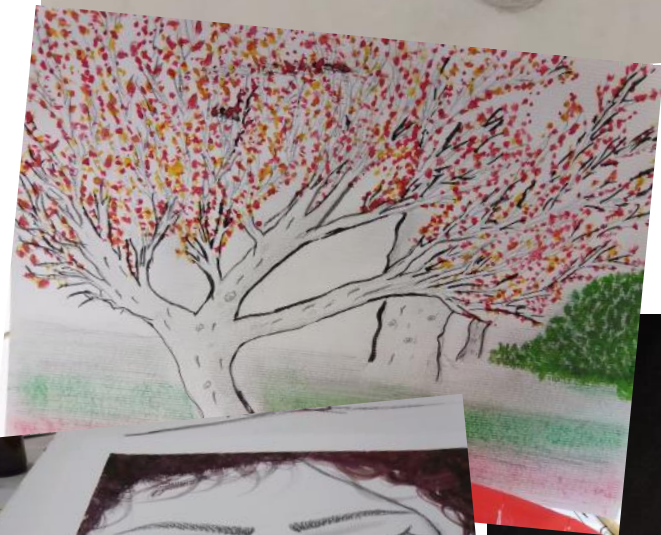
The workshops offer enormous benefits to asylum seekers, from

simple enjoyment to developing confidence, finding their own voice through art and even acting as a vehicle to release and process difficult emotions.

Here is a gallery of just some of the amazing artwork asylum seekers have created recently.



self-expression and creativity



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