



RA-C Newsletter

November
2016

Refugee Action – becoming a catalyst in Colchester

by Rosalind Scott, Chair of RA-C

Last year I heard Yvette Cooper say to us all, 'If every town took just 10 families ...' and suddenly ameliorating the situation of refugees stuck in Calais seemed possible. I went to Cabinet at Colchester Borough Council that very evening to ask our Labour – LibDem administration to ensure that we take our part. They agreed and we do now have 10 refugee families safe in Colchester.

I reported my meeting on Facebook and lots of locals wrote back saying, 'What can we do?' Then Gemma wrote again and said, 'I know what we can do.' So it began. We decided to collect tents, sleeping bags, boots, clothes and so on to take to Calais. We found that Trey had already begun to collect and store loaned by 'Man with a Van' in the Hythe. A meeting for all people working to help refugees was called to First Site foyer and over 40

organisations and individual activists turned up, every one of them was doing their part, collecting, sending, going, reaching out to refugees. I piped up with an offer to chair the meeting and suddenly we were effectively communicating, sharing advice, swapping experiences, exchanging details, making donations. We decided to keep the whole thing completely informal, after all, I was link person to Colchester Borough Council and we knew we wanted to provide the fast, flexible, informal response which would complement the formal, slow but sustained working of local government. This network has grown, shifted, and sustained. Refugee Action – Colchester emerged when we needed a bank account and a committee – just enough structure to steady ourselves and subsequently to encourage and support others.

Our aims:

- To collect, sort and distribute donations in the form of clothing and relevant supplies to Refugees
- To organise the safe and efficient distribution of the donations to refugee groups both in Britain and abroad
- To work cooperatively with other groups who deliver aid/support to refugees and asylum seekers both locally and abroad
- To administrate a Facebook page publicising our activities
- To provide a safe and welcoming environment for volunteers to enable them to help
- To distribute donations that are not needed by refugees to other local groups where appropriate

Our progress has been a meandering journey working with emergent opportunities, meeting emergent needs and accompanying people and organisations as their ideas swept us into action.

What do we do? We started by going to Calais with donations, we continue to support organisations such as Care4Calais and we are considering whether to continue organising trips to Calais.



We called together the groups and individuals working with refugees and shared knowledge, experience and hope so that we began working together and helping each other

We have created a network of people and organizations and called upon them for help or helped them to do what they realize is needed

We went to **Colchester Borough Council** to assure them that many people in Colchester want to welcome refugees. We delivered a petition to encourage them to welcome more refugees. We continue to make sure that positive messages remain in all media, so that people are not afraid to express their humanity.

We held a Welcome Refugee march.

Colchester Borough Council has been very supportive throughout. The council unanimously voted to welcome refugees.



February 2016 Motion that: - Following the Prime Minister's announcement last year to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees to the UK from camps in Jordan and Lebanon, this Council:

- 1. Warmly welcomes five Syrian families to Colchester. Four families are already settling in well with the fifth family soon to arrive.**
- 2. Recognises the significant contribution from voluntary sector organisations such as Fresh Beginnings in forging new relationships with the community and drawing on the expertise and generosity of volunteers.**
- 3. Is encouraged by the level of support from residents of our Borough, which is a credit to Colchester and builds on our historic past of welcoming refugees.**
- 4. Signals its intention to welcome a new group of Syrian families in the summer, with a fresh offer to the Home Office and UNHCR, continuing the strong partnership with Essex County Council.**

We held Fact and Fiction events where fears and anxieties can safely be expressed, myths dispelled, information shared.

We held a Pledge Assembly for people to promise what they could do to help welcome refugees, everything from lessons and play dates, to transport and furniture.

We hold events with music, food and opportunities for refugees and their families to meet local residents and friendships to form

We hold drop in events to find out what the questions are – and then make sure we can answer them, or bring in someone who can.

We signpost people to help they can access for themselves and accompany them while they find their feet, with translation and advocacy.

We have helped find accommodation and make it homely

We raise funds, mostly by activities which involve refugees and local people together

We make small financial donations to allow people to take steps to independence, for example to pay for applying for a passport, travelling to relatives.

We are starting a micro-finance project to make small loans to give people a hand up.

To get involved:

Visit our Facebook page: Refugee Action – Colchester, Come to our events

Let us know what you can offer and what you would like to do – we love to put you in touch with others to help things to happen.

TO DONATE:

<https://gogetfunding.com/refugee-action-colchester/>

Pop Up Syrian Café 3rd & 4th December at First Site



Bring family and friends to enjoy delicious Syrian food and a beautiful setting combined with a wonderful opportunity to support Syrian families who have recently settled here in Colchester in their first professional cafe endeavour here in the UK. Huge thanks to First Site and Gee Vaucher for their generous support. 10.30am till 4pm both days.

Try a full meal of soup, Koushari, Kibbeh or salads and finish with baclava or pop in for a cup of tea with mint and a plate of home made baclava.

We also need a clean up team – from 3.30 each day until 5pm – all left overs given as payment! Please contact brymarella@hotmail.co.uk if you can help.



Picture Credit: Mimi

Calais Jungle Update:

We asked Philip Horner to write about the current situation in Calais.

Having worked on many occasions with the volunteers in the camp, it is to them I turn to get an accurate picture of what has happened since my last visit in September.

First, the position as the camp was being demolished and our government looked away as the children they had promised to help were mistreated and abused. This is a statement put out by the Refugee Youth Service on the 27th October:

“The past few days have seen much of the Calais camp on fire as well as the dismantling of shelters and homes by demolition teams. The registration process is no longer functioning. Children have yet to be registered by the State and the container camp (Le CAP) where children are meant to be moved to is full. Last night (26/10/2016) saw children sleeping on the street outside of the container camp as they were unable to be registered at Le SAS (registration warehouse) and their shelters were burnt down in yesterday’s fires. Children have been completely misinformed at every step and many have yet to be given safe and secure accommodation by the French State. RYS have had reports today that children who have not been processed are now being arrested by the State. This ties in to our concerns for children who have had their age disputed based on their looks and have therefore been denied their registration as a child. Yesterday, RYS made further

recommendations that would ensure every child still living within this very dangerous camp had a space to sleep. These were not adhered to and children were forced to sleep outside and only received the most basic provisions from other volunteer services. With a lack of information, RYS remains extremely concerned for the safety of every single child that is in this camp.” Eventually the children were removed to reception centers, but only after they had been used as a political football between British and French authorities which left them even more traumatized than they had been previously. They have fled war, trekked across Europe, lived in the awful conditions in the camp, then the simple process of registration and bussing to reception centers ended up causing many to be tear gassed, sleeping without shelter and being ordered from one area to another, without food (apart from that provided by the volunteers). In western Europe in the 21st Century – how could this be?



This second account is from the last week, from a Care4Calais volunteer.

“The streets of Calais are not safe. Just walking through town you will pass at least five CRS vans and groups of police. They are waiting at train stations and they are waiting

near bus stops, lingering and ready to pounce. Walking through town you may also see refugees, alone, in pairs and even in larger groups, some have just arrived, some used to live in the jungle, now they don't know where to go. These people are vulnerable and alone, if they are unlucky they get spotted by the police, arrested and taken to detention centers before potentially being deported to unsafe countries, countries they've fled from, countries they should never be sent back to.

Yesterday I visited the detention center in Coquelles, Calais. We went with the intention to visit three men from Sudan, two of whom had been detained for 17 days and one for 14 days. The three men we visited had nothing, they only had the clothes they were wearing and one phone between them, they were wearing sandals and t-shirts and had been given little information. They asked us for clothes and toiletries as they'd been sleeping in their jeans and had been given only soap and toilet paper. Often when refugees are stopped by the police their belongings are confiscated for no reason. One of the men we spoke to asked for a toothbrush as he said he had not brushed his teeth in two weeks.

All three of the men said that they didn't think what was being said at their hearings was being translated properly (unfortunately, this is incredibly common) and they were asked no questions despite having a solicitor present. Whilst speaking to them we attempted to work out their release dates as they were all being released at separate times and with one phone between them we will have difficulty communicating how to get them to a safe place

to stop them being caught again. They have been told they will be detained for 20 days but nothing is clear or definite. The lack of information and translation is appalling and biased, giving them little to no opportunity to utilize the few remaining rights they have. When they are released they are not sure where they will go or be sent, two of the three have fingerprints in Italy but they do not know if this means they will be sent to Italy.



Picture Credit: Mimi Michaelescu

During the visit, a Middle Eastern man who we had not met or known walked into the room. We greeted him and started talking and asking him questions. His English and Arabic was very limited therefore communication was a real struggle. We learnt that he was 19 and had been picked up by the police the previous night. He wants to go to the UK where his 17 year old brother lives. He is a refugee from Iraq and therefore speaks Kurdish, but as this is not such a common language it means he is very isolated, he had not met a translator and therefore did not understand anything that had happened. He gave me some sheets of paper in French that neither he nor I could understand and said that the police implied he would not be leaving any time soon. Towards the end of the visit he started to cry, he is a terrified

and incredibly isolated young man, he has no phone, no change of clothes and no one to talk to. These people are not criminals, so why should they be treated like criminals? They are simply desperate and so alone in this foreign land that even I, who am only from 100 miles away, find hard to understand.

Today I am bringing these four men shoes and phones with credit, something we would not be able to do without financial donations. This is an incredibly vital time and contrary to what the media portrays, or doesn't show at all, this problem is far from over and support is needed!"

There are also many undocumented encampments in the Calais area. It is difficult in some cases for the volunteer groups to visit them as when the authorities find them they arrest the occupants and destroy the tents.

Nevertheless, organizations such as Care4Calais are trying to continue to support these people. Care4Calais are in desperate need of funds to help provide basic needs for these refugees, as well as those who continue to arrive on a daily basis – many of whom have no idea the camp is no longer there. There is a car going to Calais in the next week with donations from the list on their website. Sleeping bags and warm jackets are the priority, but there are other items also needed. We have also decided to support **Jungle Canopy** who are funding mobile catering equipment that meals can be provided to those on the road. Please contact Refugee Action Colchester if you can help.

Philip Horner

Light & Shade Event

On Sunday 30th October RA-C held a stall in the Colchester town centre as part of the **Light & Shade Event** organised by Colchester Borough Council. We set up at 10am and throughout the day many people came over to the stall wanting to know about the group. Questions were asked about what we do, future plans, Calais, donating items and offers of help. The day came to an end at 5pm and once again we came away feeling that RA-C is just as supported as it was when we first began. A good day was had by all.

Stand Up To Racism Meeting

Refugee Action-Colchester was invited to the **SUTR (Stand up to Racism)** meeting on Thursday 10th November. Maria was invited along as one of the guest speakers at this event, the subject which she spoke of was the Micro Credit Project which RA-C has recently undertaken and also about a family that she had met in Calais. The family from Calais have now happily been re-united here in England and RA-C has helped them by sending provisions for them. The SUTR rally was attended by 40+ people and we hope that this number will grow, RA-C was very pleased to be a part of this evening. On the **6th January** SUTR are joining forces with RA-C to have an international meal at the Quaker Meeting house, Colchester from 7.30 to 10 with

entertainment and shared food from around the world.

Sense of Healing

On Sunday 6th November we took part in the **Sense of Healing event held at Firstsite**. This event was to raise awareness and funds for refugees of world conflict. The day began with a 3 minute silence for refugees fleeing world conflicts and this was a time for us to reflect and come together.



The whole day was jam packed with wonderful food by various stall holders together with more delicious food which was prepared by the Syrian families. There were stalls, workshops and an auction, as well as a series of talks entitled "Voices of the Refugee Community". We were so honoured to be part of this amazing day which wanted to raise funds for our group and others. The hosts of the event were Myles Fisher and Aanka Batta. The love and effort that they gave to this day was



beautiful, it was a wonderful community day which most certainly spread love and light.

Syrian Meal and Fundraiser

On the **9th December**, 6.30 till 10pm, Essex Syrian Solidarity Society are having a fundraising meal. They will be raising funds for Mosaic Syria – a wonderful organisation who say 'Hidden costs of accessing education are plenty. Transportation costs, books, uniforms, daily pocket money that discourages a large number of families living in poverty to send their children to school. Additionally, the majority of the country's schools has been destroyed or



being used as shelters for the displaced people, and many teachers are unable to teach. Therefore, there was, and still is, an urgent need to provide emergency education to these students who are unable to pursue their studies and access education.'

For further information and to book tickets (£10 or £7 for students) please visit <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/es/syrian-fundraising-dinner-tickets-29726964150>

TO DONATE:

<https://gogetfunding.com/refugee-action-colchester/>

Microcredit initiative

The Micro-credit initiative

We would like to tell you briefly about the micro-credit scheme we are in the process of setting-up. Micro-credit loans are as the name suggests, very small loans that are given to individuals who lack collateral and would otherwise have no access to funds. This banking system relies on mutual trust, creativity and accountability. The idea was pioneered in Bangladesh with the Grameen Bank, or the *Bank of the Poor*, as it became known. Over the past few decades, this project has funded millions of economically disadvantaged entrepreneurs, to start new businesses or fund existing ones.

Many social development projects around the world, have been modelled on this example, making a real difference to people's lives.

A few months ago, Refugee Action-Colchester became aware of a family in Syria, who are relatives of one of the newly arrived families, and needed urgent help. The father, who supports a family of ten including his elderly parents, had lost his cows to a virus. They were his only form of income, as the family had been living on a modest income from making and selling dairy products. Ferhad, was interested in buying a second hand van that would enable him to buy vegetables from the main town and sell in his village as well as ones nearby. We agreed that we would try and help him and turned to some very generous friends in Colchester to ask for funds.

The needed sum was collected within two weeks and was sent to him. For three months now, Ferhad has been trading. He feels happy and optimistic and is grateful that he can, once more, support his family. He has also started to repay his loan through his sister in Colchester.



Another example is a second loan, which has been made to one of the Syrian refugees in Colchester. This young man needed a loan for his transportation to college, which is some distance from where he is living. As he is unable to continue working in his previous career, he decided to retrain and is studying for a diploma, which will allow him to start working in a new trade.

Currently, we are in discussions with the Quaker and Essex Syrian Solidarity groups to try and expand this initiative turning it into a sustainable project benefiting refugee families in Colchester and beyond.

Please do get in touch if you are interested in being a part of any future projects we have.

Community Evenings

We now hold **monthly Community Evenings** at Fresh Beginnings which enable us to work with refugees and asylum seekers in the Colchester area. Last month a team came from the Borough Council to help explain the Benefit caps that will soon be coming into force. Translators from the area kindly gave up their time to help facilitate this. RA-C supply cakes and refreshments and craft activities with the help and support of many.

Thanks especially to the Mormon church who always supply amazing cakes and keep the children entertained.

To attend please email www.refugeeactioncolchester@gmail.com



RA-C website:

<http://refugeeactioncolchester.org.uk/>

Donations:

<https://gogetfunding.com/refugee-action-colchester/>

Knit & Natter:

Every Wednesday during term time come along and join Knit and Natter at 12.30, spare wool and needles appreciated but we do have some to share...



English spoken together while having fun is often easier to learn and our friends from other countries often have interesting patterns and stitches to show us so we all learn together ☺

**at Fresh Beginnings
Abbeygate Two, 9 Whitewell
Rd, Colchester CO2 7DE**



Brightlingsea Refugee Support Network welcomes first Syrian family to Tendring under SVPR scheme.

BRSN set up about 9 months ago and started to find out how to welcome a Syrian family to our small and beautiful coastal town. We ran a Refugee Facts and Fictions evening with the help of Essex Syrian Solidarity society at the university and great guest speakers. The meeting was very well attended. Since that time, we have been maintaining a presence at all local events so that we can

inform and encourage people to join us in welcoming Syrian families here. And in September we welcomed a family of 5 people from a UN camp in the Lebanon through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme. The children are settling in well and the parents have made a lot of friends. It has been wonderful to see the good people of Brightlingsea go out of their way to ensure that every need was met when we set up the house. For those of you interested in helping welcome a family to your area do get in touch and we can help you initiate the process. It was worth every moment of preparation.



Homelessness on arrival in the UK and during the Asylum

by David Gynn

Homelessness is a very real issue for asylum seekers, and the time taken for benefits to be made available makes periods of homelessness a reality for many. Grass-roots organizations help as much as they can with limited resources – if

you have a spare room that you'd be happy to share with asylum seekers in need, please contact us

Regardless of their country of origin and mode of transport, the journeys undertaken by asylum seekers do not end when they arrive in UK. Once here, those that claim asylum start a whole new journey through the Home Office's UK Visas and Immigration process – the process that will decide whether the individual's claim for asylum is accepted – or not.

The journey through the asylum process presents a very real risk of homelessness at different stages, which can be viewed broadly as...

1. Arrival in the UK – immediately before/during the process of claiming asylum
2. Following an unsuccessful claim for asylum

Many asylum seekers arrive in the UK in with little or no money or possessions and limited paperwork and forms of identity. From this position, it can be difficult or impossible to secure accommodation in the private sector – because of a lack of funds and/or because of a law that came into force on 1/2/16 obliging landlords to undertake 'right to rent' checks on new tenants, which specifically exclude people without the right to stay in the UK. Local

authorities are unable to provide help until an individual has submitted a claim for asylum and is within the Home Office system.

Once an asylum claim is 'live' the claimant can apply for accommodation and financial support – if granted, accommodation is provided on a no choice basis, and is unlikely to be in London or the South-East – and it may take the form of a flat, house, hostel or bed and breakfast. Financial support is limited to £36.95 per person per week – asylum claimants are not usually allowed to work.

Without access to private rented accommodation and needing to wait for up to four weeks for the state to provide accommodation, unless staying with family or friends already resident in the UK, many asylum seekers find themselves to be homeless and in need of charitable help.

It may come as a bit of a shock, but many night-shelters in the UK – probably thought of as the obvious charitable resource for the homeless and destitute – are accessible only to people eligible for housing benefit – and are therefore closed to asylum seekers.

There are a few purely charitable faith-based hostels and night-shelters in London and other larger cities – but they are few and demand exceeds supply.

Rooms for Refugees and **Refugees at Home** are grass-roots organizations set up to meet the needs of homeless asylum seekers –

they are run by volunteers who coordinate the use of accommodation ranging from spare bedrooms to whole houses made available by private individuals.

The asylum process can be very drawn out...

sometimes taking years to get to an initial decision which is then subject to appeal to the Home Office and in the courts (if funds are available to the claimant).

Successful claims for asylum result in the individual being granted 'discretionary leave to remain' which is usually granted for a 'standard' period of 30 months. Successful claimants are eligible for housing and other benefits in line with what UK residents could expect to receive – they can also register for council housing. The prospects for unsuccessful claimants are far less positive – the Home Office's aim is to remove failed asylum seekers from the UK through their Immigration Enforcement processes, returning them to their country of origin. In practice this process doesn't seem to work and instead results in failed asylum seekers becoming homeless and destitute as a class of people known officially as people with 'No Recourse to Public Funding', NRPf.

I cannot write that last sentence without adding a personal point of view ...

I remain shocked, angry and incredulous to have learned that the UK government considers it acceptable for

the state to impose NRPf status on people living within our communities. As the term implies, NRPf people are eligible for zero support from the state (thankfully with the exception NHS support it seems), they are not allowed to work, cannot rent accommodation (not that they could afford to without work) and are forced to rely on whatever handouts and charitable support they can find. Essentially (still a personal point of view based on experience), it seems that the government uses homelessness, destitution and hunger as a weapon against these vulnerable individuals who have made their way to the UK to seek refuge.



However you look at it, this must be wrong and should be challenged. If the government want an efficient asylum/immigration system which processes claims promptly and fairly (currently approx. 40% of rejections that reach court are overturned – suggesting that current decision making is flawed), and then takes steps to efficiently remove/deport failed claimants they should invest sufficient resources to make this a reality. A policy which deliberately puts people in a situation where they need humanitarian assistance

within the UK is as wrong as it is inhumane. Destitute failed asylum seekers can apply for what is known as 'Section 4' support which is broadly in line with the provisions for those within the process – although their weekly financial support is provided in the form of a payment card which can be used only at specified supermarkets. Section 4 support is provided in return for an agreement to take the necessary steps to leave the UK.

Refugees at Home:

<https://www.facebook.com/refugeesathome>

Rooms for Refugees:

<https://www.facebook.com/RoomForRefugeesUK/>

Failed asylum seekers with NRPF are subjected to a state that requires basic humanitarian aid within the UK, by the state. The only help and support available to people in this group is that provided by charities and organisations groups such as Refugee Action Colchester which are funded solely via donations. We have recently been supporting a person with NRPF while also seeking to change his designation so that he is entitled to funding.

Donations:

<https://gogetfunding.com/refugee-action-colchester/>

WANTED and NEEDED

More interpreters – Arabic and Kurdish speakers to help with translation for a variety of activities.

We are also in search of a small office space in Colchester. There is now enough need for what we can offer, to justify a designated space where people can find us easily and we can have access to a computer and support. A small office with room for a filing cabinet, desk and some chairs is more than sufficient.

We are also looking closely at our own status as a group moving forward. This first year has given us an opportunity to be guided by the needs of others and we have taken on two of the recent arrivals to Colchester as part of the groups so that we can get things right and not push our own thoughts onto others. We are currently exploring CIC – Community Interest Company status. At present, we survive solely through our own fundraising efforts and your generosity and while we can cover basic expenses none of us gets paid for what we do. It would be good to explore further funding opportunities so that we can formalize some of what we are already doing. Anybody with experience setting up a CIC – we would love to hear if it has provided you with the structure you wanted.

Fundraising – anyone with fundraising ideas who can generate some money for our various projects please do get in touch. A small amount can make a huge difference to one person – a passport application

can help a refugee visit family from whom they have been separated by war and escape and costs only £72. Likewise, Visa applications are normally costly mostly in terms of time to fill them out and chase them up. Small and generous gifts like these make a huge difference to how well the new comers in our town settle and feel supported.

RA-C website:

<http://refugeeactioncolchester.org.uk/>

Donations:

<https://gogetfunding.com/refugee-action-colchester/>

Diary Dates

29th November – Welcome Committee meeting – looking at Colchester becoming an official Town of Sanctuary

2nd December – late night shopping in Brightlingsea – BRSN stall

3rd/4th December – First Site Gallery Colchester – Syrian Pop up café 10.30 till 4 pm

7th December – Community evening @ Fresh Beginnings refugee centre 5pm to 7pm

9th December – Syrian fundraising dinner 6.30pm to 10 pm Essex University

6th January – Quaker Meeting house, 7.30 SUTR and RA-C International meal, bring a dish to share and a drink. Entertainment provided.