

How we came together

At the end of August 2015, following a visit to the Calais Refugee Camp by a couple from Brampton, and prompted by increasingly distressing images of the plight of refugees in general, particularly drowning children, Carlisle Action Carlisle (now known as Carlisle Refugee Action Group) was formed from concerned local people and coordinated and supported by Carlisle One World Centre and Sustainable Carlisle. A call went out for donations to help alleviate this developing humanitarian crisis, and the people of Cumbria responded by offering clothes, food, tents, money and their time as volunteers here at home and in the camps. The outpouring of support was tremendous! Soon a dedicated group of volunteers was sorting out the tonnes of donations coming in and preparing to get them to the refugee camps. The Op-Shop chain, Carlisle City Council and the Diocese of Carlisle all helped support the project with offers of premises to work in, and links were built with other organisations and charities to ensure help could be directed to where it was most needed.

As volunteers sorted through the donations, it became apparent that they were also much needed on the ground in the camps. Preparations were made and an initial group of volunteers headed off in October 2015 with a donated caravan and supplies to scope out how to best help. This trip was followed a few weeks later by an HGV full of supplies, a volunteer crew of 11 hearty souls, and two journalists from BBC Radio Cumbria who reported from the camps. Volunteers helped distribute food and clothes, worked in the kitchens and warehouses and built shelters.

Volunteers are the life force of CRAG and trips have continued since those early days. Much work has been done building shelters and drawing out plans to teach others how to build. Supplies have been sent, as well as more caravans, especially for vulnerable unaccompanied youngsters. The Dunkirk Adult Learning Centre has been set up, offering language classes as well as legal advice and support. Some volunteers have made multiple trips to the camps supported by the group in Carlisle where fundraising has continued apace.