

## February 2018 Trip to Northern France

### Day One

Arriving at the Care4Calais warehouse, the flapjacks, coats, jumpers and sleeping-bags from Carlisle Refugee Action Group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/calaisactioncarlisle/>) and Massive Outpouring of Love (<https://www.facebook.com/DGRefugeeAction/>) were unloaded and we were briefed on the day's plans. A large part of the day was spent sorting through literally a truckload of donations sent from Spain that week. The warehouse looked gloriously full as donations were sorted and boxed. As ever though, new arrivals in Calais and destruction of possessions by the police means supplies don't hang around for long. Part of the day was spent preparing vanloads ready to be sent to six different locations the following day. Part of the day was also spent chopping up old pallets and any other spare timber for firewood. Ikea-bags packed with timber were then sent to another group in Calais to distribute. You'd turn your nose up at the quality of this fuel if you saw it for sale at a filling station. Fortunately, as I've witnessed countless times in the past, those forced to sleep rough in Northern France have a phenomenal ability to make a little firewood go a long way. And poor firewood is better than no firewood, as when they don't have firewood any old thing gets burned...including plastic waste and polystyrene packaging that whilst providing some warmth, does no good for anybody's health.

### Day Two

Today, I had the odd experience of attending an NEU (Teachers's Union) meeting in a warehouse in France! Stand Up To Racism had arranged for over a hundred volunteers (mainly teaching-staff) and a heap of physical and monetary donations to be at Care4Calais. After a briefing, the morning was spent preparing for distributions to six sites in Calais and Dunkirk. That afternoon our group headed out to a site near an underpass where an estimated 80 Eritreans sleep, with no more than a sleeping-bag for shelter. With a generator, we set up a tea-urn and charging station for mobile phones. We shared tea, biscuits and flapjack and chatted to our new neighbours whilst their phones (a vital piece of survival equipment when you're on the move) charged before distributing hygiene packs (toiletries, clean underwear, snacks and water). It was bitter enough standing about for a couple of hours. But we were headed to a warm venue for a film-screening afterwards. The refugees we'd met were returning to their windy underpass.

The film screening, jointly arranged by Care4Calais and Stand Up To Racism (and ironically shown in a function-room at the ferry terminal!) was "Calais Children: A Case to Answer". A brutal, honest insight into the last days of the camp, the neglect that children faced and what has happened to some of those children since. If you come across a screening near you, do spend 90 minutes of your time taking on board the cruel truth of how Britain and France collaborated in these childrens' suffering. Some refugees were invited along to share their testimonies, and I had a grand evening in the company of two Afghan men, neither of whom wished to be anywhere but the impossible dream of a safe homeland, and who were left with an unspeakably dangerous unfinished journey as the only alternative.

### Day 3

This morning I helped load a van with sleeping-bags, blankets and duvets destined for refugees in Paris. Other teams were preparing to distribute hoodies, sleeping-bags, food-parcels and hygiene-packs to sites in Calais.

I spent the afternoon with Mobile Refugee Support. Their focus is on people in Dunkirk. Since the camp burned down last year, hundreds of people have been scraping by in the woods nearby. A local sports centre has provided some relief for families over the winter months, but in March that will close and they too will be at the mercy of the elements. MRS operate with next to no resources, providing hot drinks, phone charging and a few hours of WiFi each day (their bespoke unit built onto a Land Rover is powerful enough for over a hundred people to have high-speed internet access, be that for skyping families, downloading vital information or even downloading a movie for later (What else are you going to do with your time when your foreseeable future is going to be spent in hiding under a tarpaulin in the woods?). In addition to this, through daily attendance at Dunkirk they have come to know those living there and so are able to meet specific needs, such as replacement tarpaulins/tents/pots&pans. They also provide food-parcels, and distribute hot soup from another organisation once a week. They have a phone-repair expert on their team, trying to maintain refugees' phones with replacement screens etc, and they also house Roots, dedicated to re-using rechargeable batteries form old laptops etc to build rechargeable torches, phone-chargers and powerbanks. A seriously impressive group of projects to support those living in limbo in the woods at Dunkirk. From the woods we headed to the sports centre mentioned above. A couple of hundred people living in the sort of conditions you might put up with for a day after a flood or local gas-leak. Camp-beds arranged into 10-foot square family homes. The heating's on, and two meals a day are provided but it's no way to live long-term. Much-needed sim-cards were provided, repaired mobile-phones were returned and requests taken to be fulfilled another day. I got talking to an Iranian family - two couples, one with their seventeen-year old son. Lovely chat, such as the language barrier would allow. Though they kept reiterating how good Iranian people are. How employable Iranian people are. What a lovely country Iran was. As if they'd travelled for so long trying to justify themselves and their situation to everyone they'd met. And how could they justify their situation? How could any of us justify people being forced from their home in fear of their lives, only to be met with hostility where there should be sanctuary? As we left the gymnasium, a family group including an elderly lady and a young child who had just arrived in Dunkirk were being refused entry, and stood outside, without a plan, as the temperature dropped below zero. Another volunteer group took up their case, trying to secure entry for them. If they failed, a last ditch solution would have been sleeping on an earth floor in a tent.

#### **Day 4**

We started early at Care4Calais with a 4-hour drive to Ouisterham and Caen. At Ouisterham, we found approximately 80 Sudanese refugees, all of whom had headed that way from Calais (many after tensions reached a peak in Calais the previous week). Hail was falling amid gusty winds as we handed out hygiene packs and food parcels, as well as sleeping-bags and jackets. For some, the need was a waterproof to put over soaking outer layers. For others it was something warm to go underneath a waterproof. Though it's worth noting that no-one took what they didn't need. It was

hard to comprehend people saying they couldn't use an extra sleeping-bag, or a jacket over another jacket in those conditions. Also notable that with there not being enough food-parcels for one per person (This being a first visit to the area, it was hard to predict how many people to cater for), there was no greed or competition with bottled water, juice, tinned fish and flapjacks being gratefully received and politely shared. The men showed us where they stayed – in a thin patch of trees, in the open air. It being winter, they didn't even have the benefit of leaf-cover. Two small fires were going amongst the trees. Not a lot of comfort for 80-odd people on a winter's day. Their main requests were for shoes (often not because shoes were falling apart, but because they were soaked through with no opportunity to dry or change them), food and shelter items. No doubt Care4Calais will deal with this on future visits, having established needs and the size of the population here. Next we went to Caen, where refugees sleep in a disused building. There is heat here, and the refugees we spoke to said that they often spend time here resting and recovering. Again we handed over hygiene packs. There wasn't much call for sleeping-bags here, as those indoors at least remained dry from night to night. However we did come across a number of people in flip-flops and sandals. Fortunately there were enough appropriate shoes in the van for those present. With that we headed back to Calais, driving through what became blizzard-conditions as our thoughts turned to those we had just met, now trying to shelter themselves and all their possessions from the snow amid a clutch of bare tree-branches.

### **Abiding thoughts:**

Solidarity counts. Turning up and standing with people, to let them know they are important, matters. Helping people keep warm and fed is vital, but standing shoulder to shoulder also has an impact on people's well-being.

Police harassment certainly hasn't gone away. There are far less vans of riot police around Calais by day (Though Lord knows what the CRS officer with his tear-gas launcher at the ready was expecting from the 200 people eating peacefully in the warm gymnasium in Dunkirk), but by night they continue to hound people away from their shelters, destroying their possessions in what will surely lead to people freezing to death at some point.

There is no foreseeable end to the suffering of people in Northern France too afraid to go home and unable to go anywhere else. CRAG have been in existence for two and a half years now, and governments appear to be more intransigent than ever. Indeed, Britain have just signed up to spend even more on restocking teargas stockpiles and paying overtime to French Riot Police squads as they terrorise homeless teenagers. But I did see the energy, resolve and compassion that volunteers in Calais have always shown, continuing to promise to try to make tonight warmer, safer and better than last night. Please keep donating, keep talking about this, and lobby your MP to support The Family Reunion Bill in March to allow those children who have reached the UK to be reunited with their families here (<https://action.refugeecouncil.org.uk/savethedate/>).

Thank you everyone who donated towards this trip...Funds raised will be allocated to Mobile Refugee Support and Care4Calais shortly, and I'll post an update below about this once I've done the maths.