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# EXODUS

Produced BY 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. Editorial team: Jean-Marc Hall, Souran Soleimani, Martin Trepte.

## Ahmad lands place at top University

THERE were celebrations after an asylum-seeker being supported by Care4Calais volunteers won a place at a prestigious London university.

Ahmad (pictured below) was thrilled to learn he had been selected for a fully-funded scholarship at the London School of Economics.

After passing an IELTS English exam he was set to start at the LSE in September for a post-graduate course.

Ahmad thanked all the people who had helped him. He said: "I owe this success to the great team of C4C, Sam Jonkers, Colin Cambell and all other friends who have helped me with patience and commitment."



## We've made it to issue two of Exodus

WELCOME to our second Issue of EXODUS. The first Issue was a triumph and circulated around the country with various Care4Calais and humanitarian volunteer groups, including Amnesty International, sharing it with their local communities.

It highlighted the fantastic contributions sent in by people seeking asylum and drew attention to the personal stories that were often moving and heartfelt.

The original intention of Exodus was to circulate the fanzine among asylum seekers and refugees, but it soon became clear that the very same people we intended it for felt it more important that Exodus went out into the community.

Stories and personal experiences need to be told, written and read by the local community and beyond. The written contributions give FIRST HAND understanding to the reader, instead of third party articles written and circulated by the national press.

Many people seeking asylum are integrating into our communities. They are finding voluntary work and grasping the English language with the hope that they receive Leave to Remain.

They look forward to the day that they can plan their futures and move on to a better, safer life.

Humanitarian and voluntary organisations are working hard to help make life easier and as time moves on they remain committed to responding to the needs of those who are seeking refuge from crisis and instability. We remember our 'mantra': Empathy, Compassion, Mercy.

We hope you enjoy this Issue of Exodus and that you look forward to reading further contributions from people seeking asylum, refugees and volunteers.

Please send your contributions to us at: [exodusfanzine@gmail.com](mailto:exodusfanzine@gmail.com)

**Jean-Marc Hall**  
(Exodus project co-ordinator)

## Cake sale makes a splash



**Care4Calais volunteer Cheryl Lawrence used £1,000 raised from a cake sale to buy swim passes for children staying at the Maidenhead asylum hotel.**

YEAR 6 girls from Claire's Court School made cakes and biscuits to sell to raise funds for the refugee children at the Maidenhead asylum hotel to pay for activities during the summer holidays. They raised £218.

Two contributors - one, a parent from the school - matched the amount which took the total to a healthy £654. The same parent then very generously decided to up the total to a whopping £1,000.

Care4Calais was able to buy 160 swim passes and plenty of equipment for the children and also managed to buy a table football.

Huge thanks to the Claire's Court students and their amazing supporters.

# Gay pride event gives LGBTQ+ refugees real sense of belonging

SINCE volunteering at an asylum hotel, I have got to know a growing community of LGBTQ+ refugees, and have been able to create an opportunity to meet and chat together.

Initially, the aim of this was to reach out to these individuals who were feeling extremely excluded and isolated since arriving here.

One of the unfortunate situations these individuals found themselves in here in the UK was that they were still experiencing similar prejudice, discrimination and persecution that caused them to leave their homes and travel to the UK in the first place.

It has been a privilege to regularly meet and speak as a part of this group to try to create a sense of welcome and normality for this wonderful group of people.

This summer, we were able to support this group by providing train tickets into London so they could experience London Pride.

For these individuals, this was the first time they had ever been able to attend such an event and to feel welcome, inclusion, friendship and a sense of belonging.

Two of our group, Toli and Vladimir, really enjoyed the event and were proud to stand with a banner thanking the UK for providing a sanctuary for them, as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Vladimir said: "It was amazing. Our first ever pride parade. We've been waiting for this. We are extremely happy."

Providing these opportunities for a group such as this is an essential part of their basic human rights; something that was not available to them before coming to the UK.

It has helped to raise awareness about some of the additional challenges faced by displaced individuals. It also provides refugees with an opportunity to interact with locals and other members of the LGBTQ+ community, fostering social integration.

This interaction helps break down barriers and build bridges between different cultural groups.

Their experiences of escaping discrimination and intolerance in their home countries can create a sense of solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community in the UK.



By sharing their stories, refugees can foster understanding and empathy, helping to break down stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding sexuality and gender identity.

Refugees attending Gay Pride events in the UK bring a number of positive impacts to society.

Their participation fosters understand-

ing, promotes diversity, and empowers marginalised individuals, all while contributing to a more inclusive and accepting society.

By continuing to embrace and support refugees in their quest for self-expression, the UK can further strengthen its commitment to human rights and equality for all.

**Eric Brutnall**

# All here are wounded in our souls and our hearts are broken

WHEN people look at you, they say: 'What a wonderful and comfortable life! They are living in a hotel for free. They cook their food, clean their room, and wash their clothes. What a comfortable life!'

But I wish they could change places with us for a week. There are many things here that destroy you from the inside. Feelings come to you, and you say to yourself: 'When did I become so miserable and worthless? Is life really worth all this hardship and humiliation?'

Many of the people who are here had a good life for themselves. They had a luxury car, owned a house, and had a good job with a bank account full of money... but they lost everything in a week.

It's like a flood has come. Everything has been washed away... but no! The flood does not take away your identity. This is worse than a flood. Imagine your life with your family and your friends, your social status, your pet, and your relatives; everything that you are dependent on.

You have to leave them all, and you just have to run away. Where? You don't know. How? You don't know.

You can never imagine how hard it can be to sleep with your shoes on, being afraid of even the slightest sound that you hear, that your sleep doesn't last more than ten minutes because the slightest sound is a sign of death.

Every minute feels like an hour! The clock stops moving, and the silence is killing you. All you want is to arrive at a safe place, not knowing what is going to happen. This is not something you want to experience!

When you reach that safe place, you will be older. You say to yourself, 'I wish I hadn't come here. I wish I had waited for death, at least it would end' and this is the beginning of your destruction.

Everyone has a story that, if you hear it, makes your whole body shake.

---

*'It's like a flood has come. Everything has been washed away. But a flood does not take your identity'*

---

No one got here easily. All the people who are here are somehow wounded in their souls. Their hearts are broken.

Many people try to sympathise with you, love you, make you happy; there are people here who help you fill your loneliness, and this is really valuable... but loneliness does not end so easily.

Every time you see a picture of your family or friends, every time you tell a memory to others, you feel sad, and you remember that there is no one to share

your heart with. Every time your heart breaks again, and you feel empty inside... it's like you are standing on top of a building and you can't move.

No one hears your voice, and no one understands your emotions.

At night, you cry in bed, and your tears don't stop. You try to cry quietly until you fall asleep. Maybe it's very difficult to understand the inner state of people. The moment they stand in front of you and smile, they boil inside and feel lonely.

Many people here are quiet. They don't talk to anyone, and they don't have any friends.

Maybe it's because of the feeling of insecurity...when we arrived here, we all ran away from bad conditions.

For many, it is still hard to believe that it is safe here... although maybe we are right to have a feeling like this. Just two weeks ago, some people came to the hotel yard and started shouting obscenities.

They even threatened to set fire to the gas station to burn us. The police closed the whole area, but nothing happened.

Maybe it's easy to say, but it's not easy for people like me who have panic problems or have had traumatic experiences. I had palpitations all day. I was afraid. It was hard for me to breathe... and the worst part is that you can't even tell others.

Maybe many people don't feel the same way. But the story does not end here. The feeling of insecurity, that every sound scares you, every person makes you panic, raises your heart rate... and this does not end.

We are looking to hear news as soon as possible from the Home Office, a letter, that we can work, go to college, have a house.

We'd like to live our own lives, have a life with our own efforts. We don't like to bow down. We want to be normal. We want to have a life.

We left everything and everyone in order to be safe... but here, in the middle of our loneliness and homesickness, we still don't have security.

We are people whose hearts are broken... we are scared... we suffer... we are full of anxiety.

All we need is a chance to be back to our normal life. Let us live.



Picture: Gadiel Lazcano, Unsplash

Picture: Ev, Unsplash



# The long wait and then the scramble

*PLEASE be patient. You will need to wait. There is no time frame given.*

These are three phrases that people seeking asylum will hear most frequently after they file their claim for protection.

The government website states an aim of processing all asylum claims within six months, but the current average wait time is closer to 19 months, with many people waiting for years.

Arash\* is an Iranian advocate for the freedom and human rights of the Kurdish people. One afternoon he received a distressed call from his wife: "The police were here. They are looking for you. I am afraid they will kill you."

He never returned home and was forced to flee Iran without the opportunity to kiss his child goodbye. He hopes to be reunited in safety one day.

Flo\* was a businesswoman, travelling the world to conferences and speaking at high profile events. But when her community began to insist her child should undergo female circumcision (FGM) she knew she couldn't let it happen.

As a victim of FGM herself, she knew the pain and suffering it caused, so she packed their bags and escaped to seek sanctuary in the UK.

"At least you are safe now," people say to asylum seekers like Arash and Flo, but when

you have fled war, violence or persecution, you can't sleep at night when there is still a chance that you could be sent back to face those very real dangers.

The anxiety, the guilt and the trauma gnaw away at you during the night. The prescription of anti-depressants and sleeping tablets is prolific among the asylum-seeking population, and the longer they have to wait for a decision, the harder is it to keep the 'black dog' of anxiety and depression at bay. The UK government's Hostile Environment policies mean that people can't work or claim benefits while waiting for their claims to be processed.

Weekly asylum support payments of £47 for those in self-catered accommodation and £9.58 for those in hotel rooms barely cover basic necessities like toiletries, clothing and travel.

In addition, people often wait months for the payments to begin. Flo had a delay of 11 months for hers, during which time she was wracked with guilt about being unable to provide the simplest things for her child.

Migrant Help, the charity contracted by the Home Office to support asylum seekers in the UK, and solicitors and Members of Parliament, get daily enquiries about chasing asylum support assessments, progression of a case, ID cards, HC2

certificates for healthcare, college places and so on.

The answer is invariably the same: "Please wait."

Each case eventually gets a decision. And then we get wonderful messages like this: "*I am so happy. I got a positive decision. And I just received the ID for leave to remain, Refugee status.*" We laugh, we hug, we go on Facetime to share the joy of the moment with friends and family.

"I remember thinking this was our happy ending at last," said one volunteer. "What I came to learn is that life rarely resembles a fairy tale."

Once asylum seekers are granted refugee status they have just 28 calendar days to put their affairs in order before their asylum support ends and they need to leave Home Office accommodation.

The joy and relief of being granted protection is, therefore, tinged with a sense of panic at the scramble to navigate all the bureaucracy in a foreign system. The wait for your Biometric Residence Permit and National Insurance number, opening a bank account (not easy with no home address), applying for Universal Credit and jobs, searching for rooms to rent, and finding a landlord who is prepared to consider someone with no deposit, guarantor or credit history, are all significant challenges.

In many cases it is simply not possible to achieve all these things in the 28-day allotted period. New refugees can end up homeless, living on the street. To help bridge this gap, between being a supported asylum seeker and an independent refugee, Local Authorities and charities are appealing for community groups, landlords and private individuals to help.

Could you host a refugee? If you have a spare room or an annexe could you provide temporary emergency hosting?

Care4Calais volunteers liaise closely with two hosting charities, [Refugees at Home](#) and [Sanctuary Hosting](#), who are experienced in matching hosts to refugees in need of a bed.

They assess both hosts and guests, offer support, and are flexible about placement lengths, which can range from a couple of nights to a few months.

Are you a landlord who could offer property at LHA rates and work with the council to understand the unique challenges facing new refugees?

Or can you offer time or a skill that might be useful to new refugees? If you think you can help, please get in touch with us at [Reading@care4calais.org](mailto:Reading@care4calais.org). We are a supportive friendly group and we transform lives.

**Sam Jonkers**

\*Names have been changed to protect identities



Volunteers welcomed the chance to get out into the fresh air as they helped around the grounds of BCA in July.

## Many hands make it light work

THROUGHOUT July a team of 10-16 asylum hotel residents have been working hard in the wonderful grounds of Berkshire College of Agriculture.

Care4Calais volunteer Jean-Marc works at the college as a driver and trainer and as the academic year drew to a close knew that there was a need for volunteers to assist around the grounds.

He also knew that in a nearby asylum hotel, people had been languishing for more than a year and were keen to be productive members of the community.

So, he approached the BCA volunteer coordinator, and a plan was hatched.

However, arranging for asylum seekers to volunteer is never as simple as it sounds. They have no income and are clothed in the relatively limited supply that charities like Care4Calais provide.

The volunteers would be required to do physical work, including forestry and litter picking between 11am and 5pm. They needed sturdy boots and waterproofs.

Physical work was welcomed by many, who are eager to do something physically active.

But transport to the college was less simple. It is on a bus route, but with only £9.10 per week, the refugees couldn't afford the bus tickets. Then there was sustenance to consider, 11am-5pm is also a long time to undertake physical labour without food.

But again asylum seekers lack funds to buy food, have no catering facilities to



prepare even basic sandwiches, and, of course, they have no Tupperware, drinks cups or cling film etc.

Sturdy boots and waterproofs were another challenge, as the limited emergency clothes C4C is able to provide rarely allows for many changes of wardrobe.

None of these challenges deterred Jean-Marc, who sought permission to make

use of the college mini-bus to bring the volunteer team along, explained about the need for snacks to be provided and asked the college staff to gather the clothes and equipment needed.

The result was a day of hard work and great camaraderie, as refugees from six different countries worked enthusiastically alongside the college's forestry team. And the list of volunteers signed up for the following weeks was so long that the mini-bus was creaking at the seams.

Jean-Marc said: "The chance to enjoy the fresh air and beautiful surroundings was a great way to escape from the confines of the hotel. Mornings pulling up Ragwort, which is poisonous to livestock, and loading timber sections onto trailers were paused for a tasty lunch before spending the afternoon waste wood recycling.

"A gentle walk around the woodlands and a chance to talk, laugh and enjoy the countryside were well appreciated. Certificates were awarded to all participants for their great work in helping the college with these tasks. It was a great way to say thanks to BCA, who have shown fantastic support to the residents of the hotel who are seeking asylum."

C4C is always looking for volunteering opportunities to assist the capable, talented people we support - and for volunteers with the drive and passion of Jean -Marc. To get involved email [annie@care4calais.org](mailto:annie@care4calais.org)

Sam Jonkers

# Courage and sacrifice in the fight for a safe and democratic future

SINCE the toppling of the monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic state in 1979, Iran's former Western cultural influences faced persecution and violence.

Many Western-educated elite fled the country, leaving an Iranian population facing conservative social values that denied rights to women.

Revolutionary bands, known as 'komitehs' (morality police), were sent to patrol the streets and enforce Islamic codes of dress and behaviour.

The Supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, is legally considered 'inviolable' with Iranians being routinely punished for questioning or insulting him.

In September 2022 a young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, was killed while in custody in a van belonging to the 'morality police' for allegedly violating the hijab dress code.

This sent thousands onto the streets to join mass anti-government demonstrations. Iran's intelligence and security forces committed horrific acts of torture and beatings to quell the protests. Over 500 people were killed and more than 85,000 detained and tortured.

Mahdi's sister Mina was a successful personal training instructor who was popular with her clients. Attractive, 32 years old and always happy and smiling with everyone she knew. During the anti-government demonstrations of September 2022, she showed her bravery and defiantly stood on top of a car, throwing rocks towards a picture of Ali Khamenei.

"Then we hurled rocks at the security forces that were attacking demonstrators," said Mahdi.

"These acts of defiance were filmed and went viral after being posted on YouTube. They were shared with well-known opposition journalists and we protested together for three months. Three days after the post had circulated; high ranking officers of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) ordered that Mina and I were arrested and detained. Mina in Arak City and me in Tehran."

Mahdi continued: "Mina had been demonstrating in Arak, simultaneously protesting with thousands of others in Tehran. I was kept in detention for three days



**Mina's bruising, inflicted during her captivity, became a mark of defiance.**

where I was tortured. I was put in a chair and handcuffed. I was beaten and whipped. Then I was subjected to a fake execution. A rope was put around my neck and I was blindfolded.

"They stood me on a chair and threatened to kill me. There was no visible proof that I was in the video that was posted, so they released me on bail. But they kept Mina in detention for 35 days."

They tortured her 12 hours a day, sentenced her to 11 years prison, 124 hours of grave cleansing, 85 lashes of the whip and two years of exile. They threatened her and told her to make a confession or they would continue to torture her and that they would kill her 12-year-old daughter.

After 28 days and her refusal to sign a confession, Mahdi said they tried to kill her and threw her over the balcony of the second floor of the prison. But Mina survived. The IRGC claimed that she had previ-

ous mental and emotional problems during detention and had attempted suicide twice.

They had to take her to hospital and it was there that someone recognised her and informed her family.

Mahdi said: "The IRGC did not want anyone to know Mina was in hospital. They wanted to falsely accuse Mina of attempting suicide. They did not want anyone to know that they had tried to kill Mina.

"I went to the hospital and I saw that there were many men, about 10, from the IRGC who were gathered outside her room, stopping anyone trying to enter the room to see Mina.

"I wanted to see Mina and they attacked me. I fought back in self-defence, but they overpowered me and detained me again. They took me to another unknown place. After one day in hospital, they transferred Mina back to prison, with the danger of a cerebral haemorrhage."

But with pressure from the media growing, they released Mina on bail.

One week after her release and when she had recovered enough strength, she released another video saying she would not give up the fight for freedom and that she would fight against the brutality and for women's rights.

The ferocious damage and bruised colour of her eye, which was inflicted on her during her captivity, became a mark of glory – a mark of defiance and resistance.

The slogan **WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM** had become a calling mantra of the revolution and Mina epitomised the bravery of Iranian women who have sacrificed themselves for the hope of a safe and democratic future in Iran.

Mahdi and Mina were once again ordered to be detained, still receiving threats to their lives. Mahdi's car was damaged and the headlights smashed and he was dismissed from his job.

The threat of being killed had taken its toll and they realised it was time to move on and escape from Iran.

Another challenge to their fearless courage was about to begin as they embarked on the intrepid journey that would eventually bring them to the UK in the search for a better future.

**Jean-Marc Hall**

## Exploring faith and finding friendship at al-Massira classes

I DID not run away from my country because of changing my religion, although the presence of the Prophet Christ is mentioned in the Qur'an and the belief in lord Christ should never be denied by Muslims.

In my country, I would have liked to have information about anointing, but this was forbidden. I used the opportunity that I was free here and went to al-Massira classes, at first it was out of curiosity, but then it became an interest.

I want to tell you about the benefits of this class. It is run by a charitable family.

First, you have dinner with Christians in a lovely welcoming church, and you discuss the weekly affairs together.

Even being a listener is beautiful be-

cause you can learn from the problems that are going to happen. Whether you want to prevent them or find a solution for them, you will feel like having a family dinner every week, with your heavenly family, and then you will go to class.

The weekly class, in 12 video-based lessons, is excellent for Persian speakers who know English at a moderate level or whoever is interested but knows Persian.

Because besides listening to all those videos and paying attention to English subtitles, they can learn more words.

And in this way, even if you go to church only to pray and gather with Christians on Sunday, you will understand many conversations, and the meaning of bible

words they are praying together, and difficult and religious words become easier .

And at the end, we will talk about our belief. You will find many friends, you will get rid of the boredom and loneliness of the hotel, and you will get a good education besides lots of English friends.

It doesn't matter to me whether it's a church or a mosque, I just wanted to be close to God and pure people.

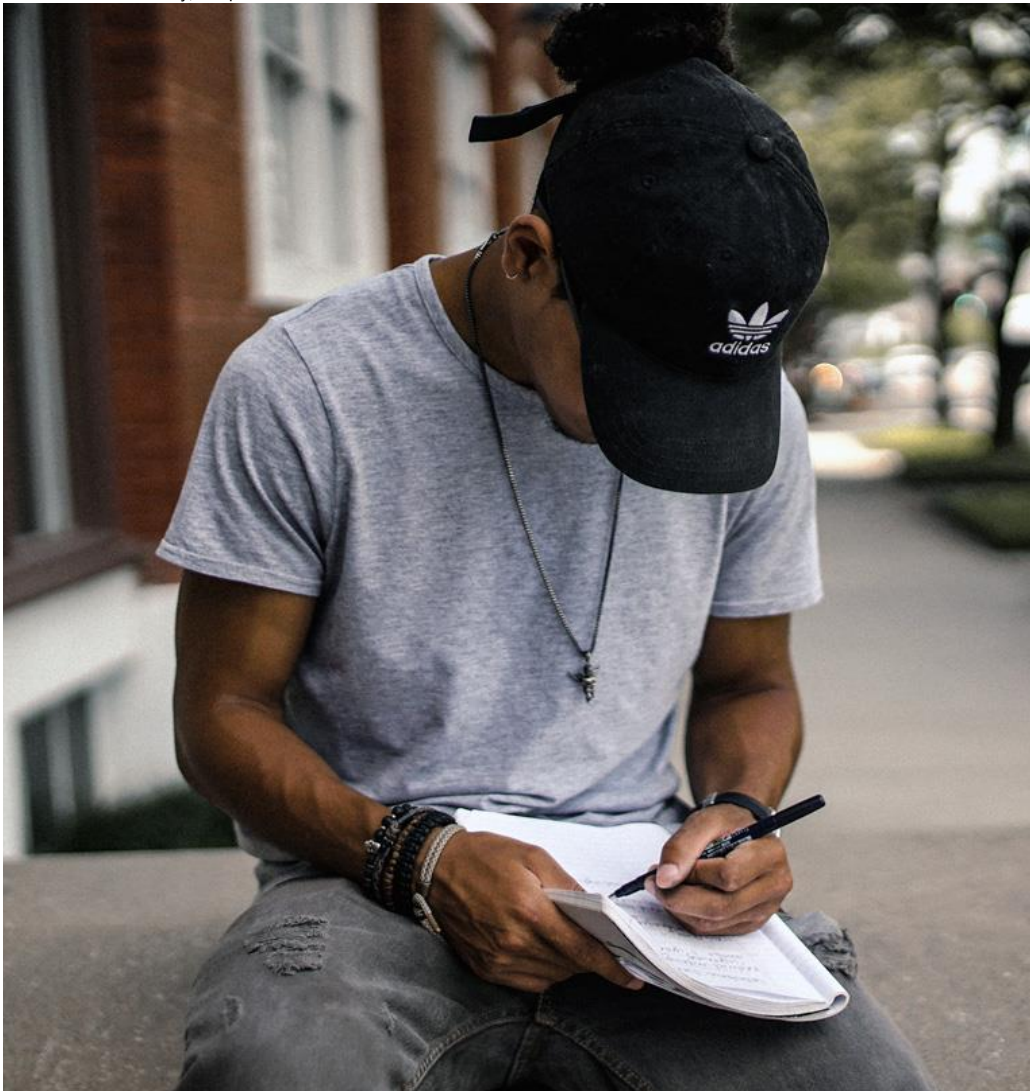
If you are interested, you just need to ask about the classes.

And finally, I must say that this dear family is very welcoming. A special thank to Jason, Laura, Copper, Cory and Paul and our lovely Christian families.

Kynz

# The most beautiful and best gift

Picture: Brad Neathery, Unsplash



WRITING and reading are as necessary for me as drinking water and eating. I learn by reading and find peace by writing.

When I arrived in Britain I was not in a good mood at all. I remember exactly that it was the second and third day that I was in the hotel. In the WhatsApp group of the hotel, I sent a message to the admin that I need a notebook and a pen.

In my mind I was thinking who should I ask for help? And if I can't write down my thoughts I would get more and more annoyed every day.

I didn't wait for an answer and told myself that I should buy a notebook and a pen later when I get my credit card. My mind was confused. The next day, when I went to the kitchen for lunch, I realised that the hotel receptionist was calling me. And he gave me a small gift box. I was very surprised. What is this gift and why is he giving it to me?

When I opened the gift, I saw that there was a notebook and a pen inside. I didn't know what to do and how to say thank you from my happiness and excitement. My feeling that day was indescribable.

Whenever I write in this notebook, I feel happy and I try to always keep this notebook with me. As it is the most beautiful and best gift...

Souran Soleimani

# Pull and push factors that cause people to seek new life abroad

MIGRATION is defined by the International Organisation for Migration as 'The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border or within a state'.

It encompasses any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants and people moving for other purposes, including family reunification.

People move from where they live for a lot of different reasons. Such movement can cause them a lot of problems — stress and health problems, cultural diversity and different languages can make them confused and feel isolated.

These kinds of psychological pressure may bring serious problems in life.

This pressure can be different for people who are aware of the problems they will face before they leave their country than for those who left their country without knowing about the diffi-

culties they may face.

In general the reasons why people leave their home country can be divided into two broad areas — pull factors and push factors.

Pull factors describe something attractive to a person such as better economic conditions or higher salaries, education and business opportunities, greater freedoms and the chance for better life, and being reunited with family members already in their country of choice.

Push factors describe when a person or a group of people flee their native land because of conflict, war, or politics. One is security problems. Often because of their ethnicity or profession, they are under threat to the point of losing their lives so they need to live in a safe place.

Political views in opposition to those of a country's leaders can also force people to leave their country to avoid jail or torture.

Journalists and human rights activists are exposed

to dangerous problems and because of this want to move to a place of safety.

Another cause of migration is simply poverty.

Because of government corruption and lack of good governance, people who are unable to effect change in their own countries have no option but to leave for developed nations with stronger institutions.

The promise of a good education is one of the pull factors for migrants.

Escaping climate disaster will increasingly become another push factor behind why people leave their native countries.

The answer to reducing or stopping immigration can be found within the reasons people leave their homes.

The problems in developing countries, from corruption and poor governance and political systems that do not work for all the people, need to be identified and addressed.

There needs to be a focus on universal development in whole regions of neighbouring countries so they are interconnected rather than developed in isolation.

Developed countries must genuinely share their experiences and knowledge with the developing countries.

At that time, the number of migrants may decrease to near zero.

**Elias Mengistu Woldegiorgis**



## FREE Parkruns are a great antidote to being stuck inside your hotel

TAKING part in a Parkrun offers people seeking asylum some great benefits, from improved health to better integration with their community.

Parkruns are free community events where participants can walk, jog or run around a five-kilometre circuit.

They take place every Saturday morning at venues all over the country. There are currently something like 2,000 Parkrun events around the country taking place every weekend across the UK.

The events pride themselves on being positive, welcoming, inclusive and free. They are aimed at everyone, no matter their level of fitness or ability.

They are all run by volunteers who help lay out the course and steward the events and many are glad of extra people who might want to help. And if you register and download the app you will receive your time and position.

Parkrun offers a great way to integrate into your community, meet people, practice your English and exercise. It is a fantastic antidote to being stuck in a hotel. To find a Parkrun near you see: <https://www.parkrun.org.uk/register/>

Picture: Kyle Glenn, Unsplash



# A city full of history and mystery

FINALLY, our journey to the historical, scientific and religious city of Oxford began.

For me, this trip was not just a historical or fun visit. Oxford is a city with a special background in history, science and religion. My excitement cannot be described. The locations of Oxford each have a special place in the history of the city and country, which should be seen, visited and discussed separately.

Our trip was on a sunny spring Wednesday afternoon. Although the weather was a bit hot, the excitement to see the holy places of this city made us forget the heat. There is a love of travel for everyone, but some people discover it.

Humans travel, search and see new cultures for this discovery, and of course, the bigger and more important discovery is the discovery of our own existence.

On the way to Oxford, I was thinking about the events that happened to this city throughout history. To the lives of scientists and scholars who were busy day and night making discoveries and most importantly finding the way of truth, those who removed the veil of the secrets of the world for us and the future generations. The thinkers who paved the tortuous path of life for us, and were able to clarify a corner of the truth of this infinite world.

Ken Smith, a churchwarden who had taken the trouble and responsibility of leading this trip, welcomed us with his usual energy and patience and explained the details of the trip to Oxford. A journey full of mystery...

Oxford is in the South-east of England and the river Thames also passes through the city. The buildings and monuments of Oxford are very old and magnificent, which all indicate the periods of English architecture since the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, the first time people lived there.

Oxford has one of the highest growth rates of ethnic diversity in the UK, and the history of this city for me, who studied history, is rich and mysterious.

Due to its geographical location, the city was a place of conflict with the Danes and other neighbours. Despite this early history, thanks to its universities and scientific centres the name of the city alone announces its importance to the whole world.

The prosperity of Oxford's commerce and trade in the 12th century became famous and was able to make the city's position known to the world in a significant way. But later, when trade became stag-

Exodus roving reporter **Soran Soleimani** enjoys a fascinating visit to the city of Oxford



**Soran exploring Oxford's heritage.**

nant, the growth of its university and scientific centres compensated for the fall in commercial activity.

Our trip started with seeing one of the magnificent and glorious old buildings of the University, the famous Christ Church.

We got off the bus exactly one street below the area of the Christ Church and continued on our way, passing through beautiful streets full of tourists and travellers, who were all amazed by the beauty and architecture of Oxford, and reached the entrance to the church. Indescribable emotion...

When we entered the green and beau-

tiful courtyard of the church, what thrilled me the most was the grandeur of the buildings, which reminded me of the distant past.

And for a moment I felt I was going back in time. Although there were many tourists and students in the area, the peace and splendour was amazing. The beautiful thoughts of a nation can be seen in this city.

Although there is no exact date for the establishment of this university, according to some sources, the history of teaching dates back to 1096 AD, so it has a record of nine centuries of teaching. The development and growth of this university began in 1167 when King Henry II banned English students from attending the University of Paris, in France.

Christ Church cathedral was built in 1160 originally as St Frideswide's Priory by Henry, in a traditional style, and its construction was completed in 1200. Today, it is a cathedral that includes all the architectural history of English churches. The church is a part of Oxford University. It became the cathedral of the Diocese of Oxford in 1546 by order of Henry VIII. The most prominent interior feature of this church is the double arch in the nave. The Thomas Becket window, which is located on the south side, consists of five glass windows designed by Edward Burns.

The image of St Michael and the angels who guarded him is also located in another part of the church. According to the guide, the church has many secrets that to this day no one has managed to discover.

There are a large number of tombs on the floor of the nave. According to the guide, some of them have not been identified but most were famous and important people.

The final part of the visit was to the spectacular great hall of the college. The author of the book Alice in Wonderland, who studied in this college, was inspired by it, and one of the Harry Potter movies was filmed here. The yard of the college is the largest square in the city, which was exciting to walk through. The Wesley brothers, the founders of Methodism, were also once students here.

Our trip left us with memories and happiness at visiting this religious and historical city, a trip for which I feel it necessary to thank the organisers on behalf of all of us who went.

## More important now than ever to stay positive

AFTER the euphoria of escaping injustice and human rights violations and getting to the UK, people seeking asylum have become impeded, delayed and worn down by the challenges they now face in the wait for the hope of 'leave to remain'.

Many who arrived here last year have become cynical, depressed and isolated. No longer survivors hoping for a better future.

Interviews with the Home Office are taking years with some applicants waiting more than three years. Their future once again remains unpredictable as they wait to join a society where they can work, contribute and live safely in a free country, where their children can be educated, bought up safely and look forward to a bright future.

It is not only the people seeking asylum who are struggling. Volunteers, many who last year were enthusiastic and eager to contribute in so many different ways are themselves struggling with the consequences, frustrations and lack of momentum dictating the asylum process. Their own lives have been changed and enhanced. But they are experiencing and sharing the many problems facing asylum seekers and many are facing their own challenges during a cost of living crisis.

However, great new initiatives are evolving and it is down to the sheer persistence of volunteers and people seeking asylum that this is happening.

Meetings with local councillors and organisations within the community have highlighted the needs for progressive and dynamic thinking. It is a common belief that empathy and understanding must be met with practical and positive action.

Humanitarian work, English lessons, bike share initiatives and many more, including the need to spread stories written by people seeking asylum and the reasons why they have made the arduous and often perilous journey to our shores, remains paramount.

The need to keep moving forward and to have hope of a better world is the reason we all embrace and share the problems we all face. Faith can be manifested in many different forms and the message is clear...be loyal, stand by and be true to yourself.

Jean Marc Hall



Hersh's friends and neighbours at the tree-planting ceremony held in his memory.

## Beautiful gesture ensures Hersh will not be forgotten

HERSH was a quiet, private Kurdish man who fled to the UK as a refugee.

In April, a friend and fellow asylum seeker in his Home Office hotel discovered Hersh had passed away suddenly in his room.

It was a horribly sad moment.

A private person, he had been kind to others, but neither his friends nor volunteers supporting the hotel had yet come to know him well.

But as the news sank in, a beautiful and moving determination took hold of the other refugees in the

hotel, and our volunteers who support them.

Life as a refugee can make you feel so alone, lonely and anonymous, and they would just not let Hersh and his memory succumb to those forces. They would not allow Hersh to slip away unnoticed and unremembered like this.

Volunteers and Hersh's friends and neighbours decided they would make a memorial to him, and to all those who have lost their lives seeking safety here.

It was decided that planting a tree would be a fitting, natural and

long-living reminder.

Care4Calais volunteer Alix organised a loving and inclusive gathering where it was planted. Men, women and children came to stand in remembrance of Hersh and his loved ones, as a eulogy was led by the hotel residents' English teacher, Margie.

Sleep well, Hersh. We won't forget you. And in this corner of England, far from your home, your tree will long stand in memory of you, and of the love and compassion of all those who came to the country seeking sanctuary.

The sun breaks through the clouds to shine on the tree planted as a memorial to Hersh.  
Pictures by: Luiz Lopez



# Voices from the Bibby Stockholm

THERE has been lots of coverage about the Government's attempts to house asylum-seekers on a giant barge in Portland, Dorset, but almost nothing from the 39 residents themselves. Here we reproduce an open letter they have written to the Home Office, outlining their concerns and the impact the policy has had on their physical and mental health.

"We, as a group of 39 asylum seekers from different countries, are writing to describe and explain our concern regarding the current situation. We were running from persecution, imprisonment and harsh torture, with hearts full of fear and hope from the countries we were born in, to find safety and freedom in your country and our new refuge.

It is hard to imagine that we have been forced to leave our homes, our jobs and our families, and some of us haven't seen our families for months. This abandonment and separation has been bitter and painful, and has been accompanied day-by-day with anxiety and nervous stresses so only a combination of hope and fear remains.

We arrived in Britain with the hope of a better future and, at the very least, some mental peace. For about six months, or for some individuals, a year, we have experienced unemployment without income, the ability to study, or basic rights. Despite all the hardships and discomforts of life in temporary hotels, we were informed we would be moved to the Barge 'Bibby Stockholm'.

Unconsciously, the mindset had arisen that they intended to take us to an unsafe, frightening, and isolated place. Because we are law-abiding individuals and wish to be recognised as responsible and good citizens in society, we decided to accept the authorities' decision and, despite all the stress and disappointments, act according to the written directive from the Home Office.

In doing so, our first priority was to respect the government's decision and follow the law. Therefore, without the slightest protest, we boarded the ship, even though we felt it was largely a place for troublemakers and lawbreakers.

But how can one imagine to what extent we will move forward in this unknown darkness? Given that the government had repeatedly been warned about various dangers and disasters, stating that if they continued with their plans, those inside the ship would be endangered.

After days of fear, disappointment, and stress, under heavy media pressure, we



**The Barge currently remains empty. (Photo: Ashley Smith, Creative Commons)**

were transferred to our place of exile by Home Office buses.

While none of us were criminals or had committed any wrongdoing it was a confined floating space on the water with strict security regulations. We had no access to the city and normal life. Small rooms and a terrifying residence.

When we entered the ship, it felt as if we were entering a world full of new anxieties and fears. On one hand, the fear of facing the questions of journalists prevented us from leaving the ship, and on the other hand, no one knew what awaited us in terms of our physical and mental health. Even the compassionate messages and sympathetic looks of friends had become unbearable for us.

During the few days of staying on the ship, we experienced very difficult conditions. Fear of the future and the possibility of disease spreading in confined environments were among the issues we faced. The lack of sufficient information about our situation and future caused doubt and uncertainty. Stress and anxiety were evident in all of us.

During our stay on the barge, we were informed of concerning incidents: some people on board had fallen ill, but strangely, the official permission to release this news was not given. Also, in a tragic incident, one of the asylum seekers attempted suicide, but we acted promptly and prevented this unfortunate event. Considering the ongoing difficulties, it's not unexpected we might face a repeat of such situations in the future.

Some friends even said they wished they had the courage to commit suicide, and our personal belief is that many of these individuals might resort to this foolishness to escape from problems in the

future. On the morning of August 11, news spread about the presence of an epidemic on the ship. Some of us displayed symptoms of Legionella disease, but no one responded to us, the Home Office did not contact us, and everyone was in shock and fear.

In the afternoon of that day, as the last individuals to learn about this problem, we were informed we would temporarily be moved to a new location, so that the ship's conditions could be re-evaluated.

Currently, we are staying in an old and abandoned hotel. The sense of isolation and loneliness has taken over us, and psychological and emotional pressures have increased significantly. We even lack the desire to live and perform any tasks. The absence of tranquillity, comfort, and basic needs has become our daily concern, striving for a freedom that is deteriorating in these exhausting conditions.

We kindly request you consider our situation as a priority and support us through the necessary guidance and assistance during these difficult times. We are individuals who are tired of the challenges that have arisen and no longer have the strength to face them. Even the presence in religious places, which were the only source of solace, warmth, and acquaintance with kind and sympathetic individuals for us, has become confusing due to these numerous relocations.

Now, we seek refuge in you and hope to walk alongside you on this path with your support and unity. We believe that with our joint effort, we can overcome these unfavourable conditions and achieve the peaceful and secure life that we aspire to. Respectfully and hopefully,

**The 39 refugees who were placed on the Bibby Stockholm**

## Learn English, volunteer and create a CV

WHILE you are waiting for your asylum decision to be made, I think you should pay attention to two things: one is to learn English and the other is to create a CV.

When you get a visa, and as far as I know, the government of this country is always kind to the refugees and in the end they all get visas, think about making a good CV for yourself. It doesn't matter if you have a visa or not, or how many years it will take.

It is very common in this country that in order to get even volunteer work, you have to present a good CV and justify your CV well in some organisations.

This CV does not need to contain just jobs and can only be filled with education.

Think about the job you would like to have in the future and choose any voluntary work that will help you get closer to that desire.

Also, follow any free tutorials on the internet.

Volunteering in the work you are interested in doing in the future will bring you closer to people who are successful and experienced in this work.

And it makes you sure to have a job in the future.

As you can see, even elderly people benefit from volunteer work in this country, so don't forget to speak English and make a good CV during your free time.

**Kynz**

Picture: Van Tay Media, Unsplash



**The Bike Share team ensure all the bicycles are kept safe and roadworthy.**

# Bike Share team keeps residents on the move

THE Bike Share at the Maidenhead asylum hotel has proven a valuable asset to the residents. With more than 20 bicycles ready to share, it is very popular.

When the hotel was first opened to people seeking asylum, many bicycles were donated by local residents. However, the management decided that it wasn't possible to receive any more bikes on the grounds that there was little space to store them and that they could not overlook health and safety regulations.

The idea of a Bike Share was something that had a positive and practical use. The bikes

are regularly checked and looked after by a team of residents who undertook basic maintenance training.

For any major repairs the bikes are taken away, repaired and returned. All the bicycles are checked to ensure they are roadworthy and helmets are available and encouraged to be worn.

Booking a bicycle is easy. Contact the Bike Share manager and he will unlock the bike and give you the key for security of the bike. When you get back return the bike to the Bike Share area and drop the key at reception.

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# Committed to the dignity, respect and safety that refugees deserve

**CARE 4 CALAIS**

APPOINTED in May when he took over from the charity's founder Clare Moseley, Steve Smith MBE is the new CEO of Care4Calais.

Steve joined the organisation after spending many years doing incredible and much-admired work to help refugees and the victims of armed violence around the world.

Having begun his career as a military officer, he has made it his personal mission in life to help people suffering in the ways that he has seen first-hand.

He said: "Having served in several war zones, I know what it's like to be shot at, and to see bombs going off nearby. I know what it's like to be afraid.

"But I always knew that I would be going home. I knew that my family was safe, and that my home was safe.

**“So often refugees are thought of as ‘the other’. But from personal experience I know they are people just like us”**

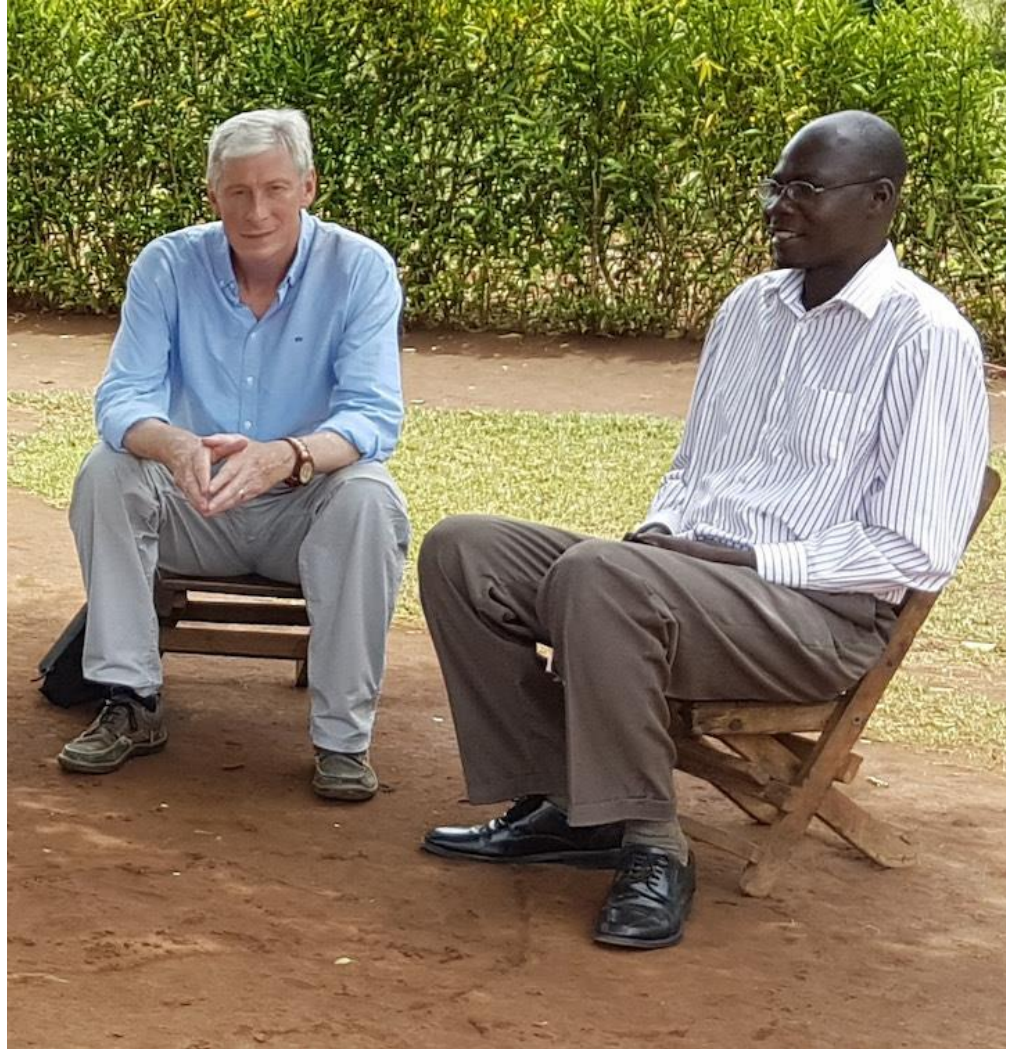
“Refugees don't have that certainty. As a refugee fleeing war, conflict and persecution, you flee with what you can carry and nothing else.

“Often, you know there is no way back. You now need to survive, possibly with your family, with whatever is in the bags you've taken with you.

“That is the refugee experience.

“I have long respected Care4Calais volunteers' understanding of, and empathy with, that experience.

“It has enabled this organisation to



**New Care4Calais CEO Steve Smith MBE, left.**

achieve great things. And I consider it a privilege to now be working alongside them.”

Steve was previously Chief Executive of the International Refugee Trust and before that, of Action on Armed Violence.

He has coordinated relief efforts for movements of refugees, and in the course of his advocacy work has worked closely with the UN, WCO and British Houses of Parliament, he also sits on the board of Keeping Children Safe.

As the new CEO at Care4Calais, Steve is determined above all else to enable refugees to find ‘a safe place they can call home’. He said: “So often, refugees are

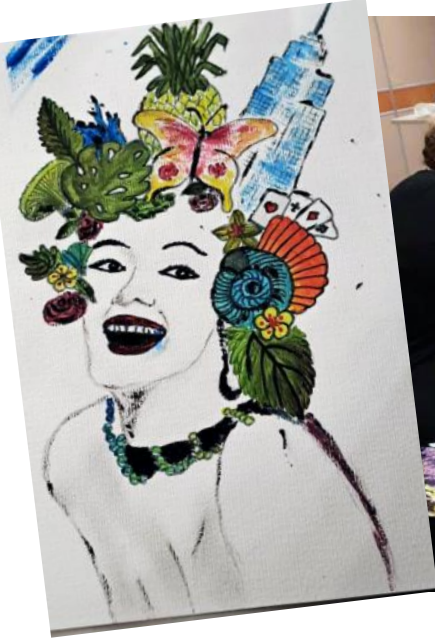
thought of as ‘the other’ – with different languages, different cultures and customs. But, from personal experience, I know they are people just like us.

“In their former lives, they may have been school teachers, librarians, lorry drivers, bank clerks, factory workers. Normal people doing normal jobs. Now they find themselves cast adrift.

“They deserve dignity, respect and safety.

“And working with the wonderful team at Care4Calais we will do all in our power to ensure they have just that.”

**First published on the Care4Calais website**



Getting creative at an arts session held at the Maidenhead asylum hotel.

# Building confidence, creativity and finding a voice through art

CREATIVITY is essential to wellbeing. And thanks to the efforts of charity partners and volunteers, art classes have been run for refugees across the region, helping participants express their creativity through paint.

In Maidenhead about 20 people, mostly girls, attend evening sessions at the asylum hotel while family art sessions are held at the nearby Norden Farm Centre for the Arts. It is hoped Norden Farm will host an exhibition of the paintings later this year.

In Witney and Central Oxford, the charity Time for Art has been offering art workshops to people supported by Care4Calais.

Time for Art Founder Sarah Moncrieff, who originally set up the charity to help a home for

street children in Senegal, said the art workshops bring many benefits.

“Participants gain pleasure and enjoyment,” she explained. “They also gain personal confidence through interaction with others and the workshops help to increase self-esteem as taking part in creative activity helps people gain and develop their own voice.”

“Mutual peer support also helps people to feel involved and connected to others in positive ways. Finally, participation in art projects can act as a vehicle to release and process emotions.”

Time for Art was awarded recent funding from The Network for Social Change specifically for art workshops for asylum seekers supported by Care4Calais.



Time for Art founder Sarah Moncrieff at one of her workshops in Witney and Oxford.

# When a perilous journey is safer than the risk of staying at home

Picture: Levi Meir Clancy, Unsplash



TO UNDERSTAND why refugees and migrants face the perilous dangers on journeys forced on them to flee their homes, we have to know what forces them to leave.

Some choose to leave their homelands voluntarily, to work, or join a partner. However, not everyone chooses to leave because they want to.

Violence, natural disasters, and lack of prospects are some reasons why people seek to find a safer and better future.

Some young people may find that there are a great many people in their age group so that job prospects are hard to find. Security is often another reason and the reason why Ukrainians have left their country is clear.

Environmentally, the world is facing a climate crisis that creates weather ex-

tremes such as excessive rainfall, floods and drought.

Not everyone forced to leave their home leaves their country. According to the UNHRC 60 per cent of displaced people around the world have been internally displaced. The largest proportion by far is in Syria. Almost a third of the population are refugees in their own land.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, around 20 per cent of the population has been displaced internally. Those countries are followed by Columbia and Yemen, Afghanistan, Congo and Ethiopia. Also, 23.7 million people have been internally displaced because of global environmental reasons.

Europe is at the forefront of countries erecting fences to seal off their borders. The Schengen Zone is now encircled or

crossed by 19 border or separation fences with a combined length of 1,273 miles.

Refugees and migrants encounter many dangers on their journey to a new life. At least 50,000 people have died or have been reported missing since 2014, many on the Mediterranean route from Libya, Egypt and Morocco. The majority of refugees are from Syria, where the initial uprising during the 2011 Arab Spring evolved into a civil war that continues today.

There is much criticism of government policies towards migrants and refugees from aid organisations. Care4calais is at the forefront of the need to help and support those escaping injustice and danger.

**Jean-Marc Hall**

(Source for statistics: Ines Eisele, fact checker at Deutsche Welle)

## Language lessons explore poetry to expand English

CLASSES in Maidenhead at the asylum hotel and a local church have been writing haikus and limericks to expand students' English. Here are just a few of the results:

Every Thursday I go English class,

During which a lot of questions I ask.

I make new friends,  
Conversations never end,  
So I like going to the class.  
**Geoff and Reza**

iCaf class is so funny  
The people are honey

We can learn easily  
We can speak friendly  
The last session was sunny.  
**Sama**

Maidenhead is good  
People here are fantastic  
You are welcome here  
**Anonymous**

Maidenhead is small  
But its nature is so nice  
I like it very much  
**Sama**

Maidenhead is fun  
Every time the sun rises  
And every weekend  
**Anonymous**

# Haroon's skill knocks 'em for six

REMEMBER this face, because in a few years he might be a genuine cricket star. Haroon's family had to flee Afghanistan in August 2021 because his parents were in severe danger.

He was just 15, and had been a promising student, with a huge passion was cricket.

In Afghanistan cricket has a fanatical following, and from being a little child he loved it.

He was extremely talented, and by his mid-teens his coaches were predicting serious success for him, and asking him to coach younger children.

And then the Taliban came, and suddenly he found himself with just his family in a small town in Wales, a new and strange country.



At such a difficult age, Haroon could have been forgiven for withdrawing into himself, but he wasn't going to give up like that.

He remembered his hero, the English cricketer Moeen Ali, and decided that now he was here, he would work hard to be like him.

He started school and then college, and joined the cricket teams. And then a volunteer introduced him to a local team that played in the South Wales cricket league.

Friendly and kind, the club invited him for a trial. Within weeks, this young man who just two years ago was fleeing Kabul was playing for the first team. He is still just 17.

To show their faith in him, the players at the club have given him the trophy they recently won to keep at home as inspiration.

Haroon now wants to try out for the local county team, Glamorgan, and C4C is supporting him in his approach to them. We wish him the best of luck.

"I know I came to the UK as a refugee," he said.

"But I dream that one day,



**Haroon with the cricket trophy he helped his team win.**

like Moeen, I will play at Lords for England." Watch this space.

To support C4C volunteers helping and supporting refugees like Haroon, go

to [care4calais.org/donate-now/](https://care4calais.org/donate-now/) Glamorgan Cricket Club England Cricket

**Fiona Norman**



## Refugees showing the power of unity through sport

ASYLUM-seekers have shown the world the power of unity through sport.

Several people seeking safety in the UK were among the competitors at a celebration of Olympic wrestling held in the heart of London at the Exhibition Centre London (ExCeL).

This interclub competition brought together an incredible tapestry of talent, with over 10 nationalities proudly representing three community wrestling clubs from London.

Kasra Kouhmani, pictured left in the red shorts, was one of those seeking asylum who was part of the team that won second place.