

TWO reports from local women who have gone to help with the Calais situation recently. Important feedback for us to hear.

From Cariad Astles

Dear Friends

As you know I made a trip to Calais in mid-September with a carload of donations from Totnes Quakers to distribute to the growing numbers of refugees arriving at Calais, mostly from the Middle East, as we know. Two things stand out about the whole experience for me: firstly, the joy and willingness of people to help and the gratitude expressed towards me for taking the donations. It is inspiring and heart warming to see and hear that people enjoy helping and it gives much hope for the future of our world. When people are offered opportunities to help they respond with kindness. This is wonderful.

My decision to go came after the dreadful media reports and knee jerk political and individual responses to migrants that swamped the press during the early summer and my wish to do something that countered these. Not long after this decision, the tragic photos of the drowned child began to be circulated and there was a noticeable and marked shift in public and - to an extent - political opinion. This meant that many more donations were being taken and the distributors in Calais were overwhelmed by car and vanloads arriving and insufficient people on the ground to sort and distribute the goods. I was not able to delay my visit to a later date though and made contact with both SALAM and the Auberge des Migrants to receive the donations.

It is sobering to see refugees camped by the roadside and waiting around the tea/coffee distribution points in Calais. The sense of uncertainty and anxiety is very strong. The second thing that stood out about my visit was the need for volunteers to visit Calais, assist with whatever is needed, which changes on a day to day basis. The situation is complex: there are thousands of refugees in Calais with all the difficult dynamics that fragility of one's living circumstances engenders and an approaching winter. There are various groups set up to continue to collect donations (many on facebook) and there is an application form for those wishing to volunteer in Calais which can also be found via facebook or perhaps beyond borders?

I took the donations to a busy community centre called 'Maison pour tous' which receives donations for the support organisation SALAM. This went very smoothly and the donations were stored in a room in this community centre to await sorting and distribution. You will find more information about the situation in general in the email from Hayley (see below) but I wanted to let you know that the materials were taken safely and donated to SALAM.

In friendship,
Cariad

From Hayley Kemp

This is a report about my last trip to Calais, to give you a picture of a camp that over 4,000* (* reports citing now over 6,000) people are currently forced to call 'home'. There is no Red Cross, UN or Save the Children here. There are just volunteers reaching out to their fellow human beings. Everything here is grass roots and driven by nothing more than a desire to try and bring some support and dignity to fellow human beings in need of help.

The trip got off to a bad start, tunnel closed because migrants 'stormed' the tunnel (hurrah!), we were possibly the only people in the queue silently cheering. Then a punctured tyre on Eurostar. At least this gave us the chance to speak to a French Moroccan Eurostar team manager, sympathetic to people in the camp, who has said he is coming in to the camp with us next time.

We started the day with l'auberge des migrants at the distribution warehouse, which is a logistical nightmare. We repacked donations into vans of one type of item, so there was a van full of tents, van full of blankets, another van of men's jackets etc. This feels like chaos, unpacking and repacking again as more & more vans arrive. It's only half way through that you realise there is most definitely a system. And whilst it seems to take up a lot of time at the warehouse, it actually makes distribution in the camp easy, calm & fair.

We then headed off to the camp in a convoy of vans ready to distribute. Even though I have been to the camp before, as we drive right into the camp the feelings of shock and shame are still overwhelming. Overwhelming because we are allowing people to live like this and our govts are doing nothing. It takes me a while to adjust as I feel so ashamed that I find it difficult to look people in the face there. However the logistics of distributing soon take over and you are thrown into action quickly. Because it's well organised and we are working in a large group everything remains calm. Some of us have the chance to walk along the line talking to people. Osman and his friends show me their scars from the dogs the police set on them. He does a funny 'Tom and Jerry' style re-enactment for us to make us all laugh but I'm conscious that I can't even begin to imagine how terrifying it must have been. Their flesh has been badly ripped on their legs and torsos by the dogs.

Once we finish distribution we head over to the 'caravan of love' to be guided to the building projects to help. Shelter is much needed especially with the winter coming soon. It takes us a while to get there because there are so many people wanting to share their stories, tents & tea. Everywhere people come up and shake your hand and offer you to come for a sit down with them. We reach the field where the caravan and builders are. So many people are arriving every day and there are many Kurdish families just arrived with small children. I hear the sound of Kurdish music playing so I go to investigate. The Kurdish men are dancing and I greet them and join in the dancing with them. Some of the others also join us. Imagine my surprise when on my return to the UK some of my friends in Kurdistan send me a link to a Kurdish news channel showing us all dancing together in the camp! There is also a football match happening and it brings a smile to my face to see the Kurds even in these most difficult of circumstances doing two of their favourite things, dancing and football.

We quickly get on with some work and the rest of our days there are spent helping with the building project. It's amazing to see a whole 'street' go up and to see families move into shelters created with wood, pallets and tarpaulin. There is even a 'housing waiting list' with those most in need given the highest priority. The irony of me working in social housing and now working on a 'social housing' project in the camp was not lost on me. Families with small children are usually at the top of the list and there is even flexibility to be able to do 'adaptations' to assist those with extra needs. A shelter is built with a separate private washing area for a man with his disabled son. They are from Syria, his wife got killed in the bombing there.

In between building I chat to the Kurdish families that are newly arrived. I take some of the men to the other side of the camp to show them where the medical tent is so that they can take others to seek help if they need it. I talk to them about why they want to come to England. They want to come because they can speak English and some of them have family here. One man who arrived two days before tells me he has an Uncle in England, in a 'place called Plymouth'. I told him I was from Plymouth and asked his Uncle's name. He told me his name and I couldn't believe that it was someone I knew. We phoned his Uncle together from the camp. His Uncle was even more surprised than I was. It reminded me that we are all connected. I had helped a man access housing support in Plymouth and now here I was trying to support the nephew with housing in a refugee camp in France.

Two of the men from Iraq told me that they had been in the UK before, had not got their asylum decision after waiting 7 years, and as Iraq seemed to be getting safer they decided to return to Iraq. I have never yet met a refugee that didn't want to return home if it was safe. However as the situation was deteriorating and they didn't feel safe they decided to try and come back to England.

Whilst we were assisting with the building it gave us chance to meet some other volunteers. The volunteers were of all different nationalities and ages. One man was from Iraq who had lived in London for 15 years and wanted to help. A Kurdish family from the UK who had also once been in this situation many years before had also come over to help. The man from Iraq told me: 'Sir Cameron Sir Hollande and the rulers around the world sit in their chateaus & sip their wine and the people are paying. This is the life.'

It was amazing how quickly the volunteers erected houses. However more volunteers, wood and tools are needed badly and this will be what I will be concentrating my efforts on in the immediate future. I will also be using the bulk of donations collected for wood and tools. I have already planned the next trip taking two vans of pallets and staying there to do some building again.

It was difficult to leave this time. I wanted to stay there and continue helping with the building but too soon it was time to go. We said our goodbyes to people whom we had very quickly become attached to, both inhabitants of the camp and volunteers. We promised we would be back soon. As we headed to the tunnel we passed those from the camp making the evening trip to try and get on the lorries. I prayed inside that they would stay safe, that they wouldn't end up like so many we had seen at the camp, with broken and swollen limbs on crutches. I desperately

hoped that Mercy who had cooked for all the builders and kept us fed and watered, would find some mercy.

On my return home I noticed I kept smelling burning. I kept sniffing my skin to see if it was me or my clothes smelling from the burning rubbish at the camp as it was the same smell. I realised that the smell had permeated my nostrils and no washing or blowing my nose could remove it. It went after a couple of days. It is symbolic of how much the camp gets inside you. The difference for us is that we can walk away anytime whilst others are forced to call this their 'refuge' and for that we should ask, where is the humanity? These people are suffering and need our help.

If you would like to you can donate here:

<http://gogetfunding.com/plymouth-calais-refugee-aid/>

Hayley Kemp

Communities Team

Plymouth Community Homes

Tel no: (01752) 389785

Hayley.Kemp@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk