

# Birmingham Schools and Colleges of Sanctuary

## Newsletter No. 15 March 2023

This has been a busy term for our Schools of Sanctuary network. We were delighted to be able to re-accredit **Washwood Heath Academy** and **St Vincent's Catholic Primary** (Nechells), and to award **St Jude's Catholic Primary** at Maypole. The work going on in these schools and all across our network is truly inspirational and a much-needed antidote to the increasingly bleak political landscape.

In this newsletter, you'll be able to read about some of those activities, including imaginative activities for World Book Day, lots of Orange Hearts, participation on Radio WM and a very moving report about the visit to Calais by staff of two of our schools, St Dunstan's Primary and Bishop Challoner Catholic College. A constant thread through many of these activities is engagement with local councillors and with MPs - it is so important to make them aware of the widespread support for asylum-seekers and the compassion we can show towards them.

Wishing everybody an enjoyable and restorative Easter Break!

Birmingham Schools of Sanctuary team

@BrumSchOfSanc

[info@birmingham.schoolsofsanctuary.org](mailto:info@birmingham.schoolsofsanctuary.org)

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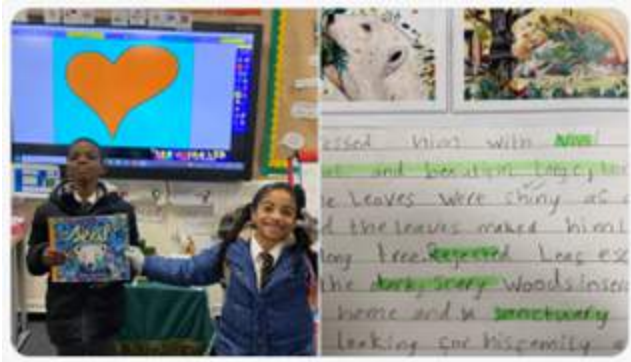
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At **Holy Family Primary School**, the pupils thought about children and families all round the world and about refugees who cannot always get education. They also thought that their safe place was with their friends.



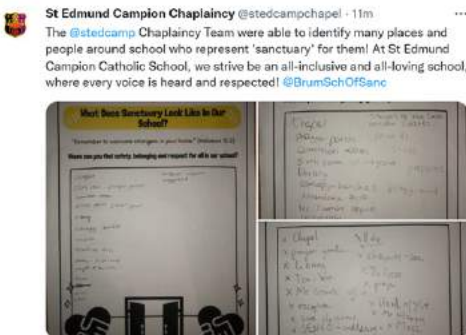
The children in Year 5 find the library is a place of sanctuary where they can step into the shoes of the characters they are reading about.



At **Benson Community School**, Brown Class also nominated the library as their “Happy Place” where they have time to reflect and to read together and on their own.



It was good to see that for many classes, it was their own classroom with friendly people and supportive teachers which was their safe place.



**At Catholic secondary school St Edmund**  
**Campion**, pupils wrote down the places and  
people who created “sanctuary” for them, including  
the chapel, the library, the sixth form courtyard,  
specific prayer points, and also named some very  
special members of staff.

Even the youngest children know the importance of friendship and solidarity and at **Our Lady and St Kenelm's Primary** pupils thought deeply about this, as the Reception teacher reports:

Our focus was "We are friends'. We each had a piece of paper-chain strip and wrote our names on them. We sat in a circle and talked about what it is like to have friends and what it would be like if there was no-one to be our friend. We used one strip to make a link on its own, stating that sometimes we feel alone and cut off from others. We talked about how this feels. We then linked another piece of paper-chain to it and talked about what it is like when we are linked together by our friendships. Each person connected their piece of chain to the link until we made a whole circle of chain. We talked about what had happened and what it means when Jesus wants us all to be friends.



**The whole school spent a week thinking about the Common Good and living as a whole family of brothers and sisters across the world.**



Year 1 pupils donated toys to the local Welcome Group (which supports refugees and asylum seekers) and this year 2 pupil was very pleased to receive a reply from the Prime Minister's office after she wrote to him sharing her concerns about refugees.



The school's Caritas Ambassadors held an assembly about solidarity and using our voices to spread the message of unity, and Year 6 wrote poems for their very own poetry book to share. **We were very impressed to learn that the Head Teacher was able to hand a copy of this poetry book to Pope Francis himself on her recent visit to Rome!**





**Oasis Academy Foundry** has been an awarded School of Sanctuary since 2015 and was recently re-accredited for the second time! Here, Deputy Principal Camron Mills tells us about their allotment project, which is one of their many strategies to create a warm and cohesive community.

### Oasis Academy Foundry: Where community and Allotment go hand in hand



At Oasis Academy Foundry, we decided to embark on a new and exciting project. Guided by our school motto “Exceptional Education at the Heart of the Community,” we converted part of our school field into an allotment, complete with raised beds, polytunnels, hot composting, and alpacas (who provide much needed free fertilisation). The site is used first and foremost by our students, who grow their own vegetables and participate in the composting

process. Using the latest techniques in farming, we are able to compost nearly all food waste at the school and are on a mission to become a “zero food waste school.”

We set out on our allotment journey guided by the following five principles, which we chose due to their connection with the “5-a-day” campaign:

**Physical activity:** Gardening involves physical activities such as digging, planting, and watering, which can help children stay active and healthy.

**Cognitive development:** Gardening helps children learn about the natural world, as well as basic concepts such as cause and effect and responsibility.

**Social skills:** Gardening can provide opportunities for children to work in a team, share tasks, and communicate with each other.

**Environmental awareness:** Gardening can help children learn about environmental issues such as climate change and the importance of conserving natural resources.

**Personal satisfaction:** Children can take pride in the plants they grow and the fruits of their labour. This can help boost their self-esteem and confidence.

However, this allotment is not only about the children – it is about community. At allocated times and in designated spaces, we welcome members of the community to

come and "work the land" where they have an opportunity to grow vegetables of their own. Many of our newly arrived community members come from farming backgrounds, where "working the land" is a lived experience. However, the temporary housing and multi-occupancy housing to which they are usually assigned lacks garden space. Through our community allotment initiative, they can grow once more.

Our community allotment is guided by the following five founding principles:

**Social interaction:** Allotment gardens provide a space for people to come together, interact, and get to know each other. This can help build a sense of community and belonging.

**Shared experiences:** Working on an allotment garden allows people to collaborate and share skills and knowledge, which can bring people closer together and foster a sense of teamwork.

**Sense of accomplishment:** When people work together to achieve a common goal, such as growing a successful allotment garden, it can create a sense of accomplishment and pride that can strengthen the bond within the community.

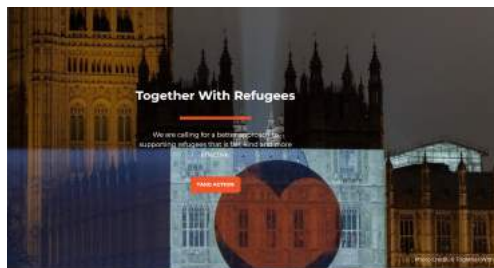


**Improved mental health:** Gardening has been shown to have numerous mental health benefits, including reduced stress, anxiety, and depression. By participating in an allotment garden, people can improve their own mental health and that of their community.

**Physical activity:** Gardening involves physical activities such as digging, planting, and watering, which can help people stay active and healthy.

Our central aim for our community allotment is community cohesion. With many of our community members coming from all over the world and speaking a multitude of languages, we recognised that people needed something to connect them and draw them together. What can be more inclusive and universal than food?

## Open letter to political leaders from Together With Refugees



Following the horrific scenes from Knowsley in mid-February, we were able to sign a letter to politicians calling for a clear stand in condemning this kind of violence and the inflammatory rhetoric which may have contributed to it. In spite of the very short deadline, we were delighted to see that **Our Lady of Lourdes, St Thomas Aquinas Chaplaincy** and **St Anne's Primary** (Chelmsley Wood) were

able to sign too. We're sure others would have joined us if they had been able to - it was urgent to get the letter out very quickly.

You can read the letter and see the signatories here: <https://bit.ly/3IsHg8H>

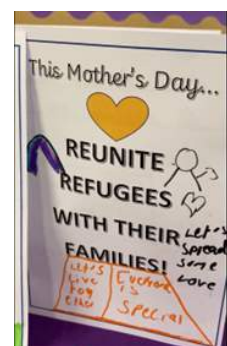


It is so important to maintain good links with local politicians as well as the national government. **Councillor John Cotton**, the Birmingham Cabinet Member for Social Justice and Equalities, is a committed supporter of our Schools of Sanctuary and was happy to visit **Our Lady's Primary** in Tile Cross, the first of our schools actually to be in the ward he represents.



MP for Perry Barr **Khalid Mahmood** spoke out strongly in the House of Commons in support of asylum-seekers and refugees in the debate on the new proposed legislation. We're sure he will have been pleased to receive these cards from **St Mark's Primary** in his constituency!

Later that week, he and his fellow-MP **Tahir Ali** also spoke to pupils from **St Bernard's Primary** on their visit to Parliament.







**Corpus Christi Primary** invited their MP **Jess Phillips** to tell her about their work towards the School of Sanctuary Award.

Pupils from **St Dunstan's Primary** were interviewed on **Radio WM's Breakfast Show** about the Mother's Day cards they were sending to MPs to highlight the issue of separated refugee families.

The interview can be heard here:

[bbc.in/3lgTAAr](http://bbc.in/3lgTAAr)



Later in the day they welcomed over a hundred parents who helped to make cards.





**Cromwell Primary School** recently received its re-accreditation to acknowledge its continuing commitment since receiving its first Sanctuary Award in 2019. Here Headteacher Rubina Darr shares some ideas with us.

The issue of Refuge and Safety – one of the most basic of human values - is a theme explored at each assembly – focusing on the understanding of Foundation Stage children, KS1 children and KS2 children. All staff are aware of the issues around refugees and asylum seekers, whether local, national or international.



Some questions that we explore with our children are:

- Why do people leave their country of origin or other destinations behind? / Is their home country safe, has there been war/conflict / lack of respect for human rights /are there opportunities to excel?
- We consider the perilous journey undertaken.
- We consider economic opportunities to get work, a good job, earn money, have a life that is comfortable and enjoyable.
- We consider the impact of inequality – colonisation opportunities for people who have historically been oppressed. We explore what the word “oppressed” means.
- Sometimes you cannot exercise your human rights.
- Sometimes you are not treated with respect and dignity.
- Opportunities are denied for someone to do well in their field.

We consider how asylum-seekers and refugees are portrayed in the media, and think about the United Nations High Commission for Refugees - UNHCR – why was this setup and why do we subscribe to it? We learn about the current climate both in Britain and Internationally towards those seeking sanctuary e.g. those risking their lives in small boats,

We consider how the countries of the developed world are in a more favourable position: we take for granted that we have food, water, shelter and care (based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) and consider how many children are denied this.

Exploring the use of language of migration, we consider the terms “immigrant”, “migrant”, “expats” (in other countries are they not migrants or immigrants?)

Our assemblies are thought provoking, soul searching and truthful, honest expositions. We invite charities involved in supporting migrants and refugees to talk with our children about these issues.



A range of books are on display around school on refugees and our World Book Authors and Illustrators were also from displaced countries.

We have been having non-uniform days to raise money for refugees around the world and will continue to do so; it is reassuring to receive letters from charities that work on the ground in these countries and not just big named charities.

***Many thanks to Cromwell Primary for hosting our annual networking meeting at the beginning of March this year where schools shared updates on their activities and made some plans for the future!***

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How do you make sure that the concept of sanctuary and welcome is embedded in your school? We know from quite a few meetings that you are all experts in this. Here are some examples from **Nelson Mandela Primary**:

***EYFS – Understanding the world - exploring the similarities and differences between breads from different countries/ traditions***

***Year 1 – History – Malala Yousafzai; RE – cultivating inclusion***

***Year 2 – PSHE – diversity. Respecting others***

***YEAR 3 - PSHE – Living in a community***

***Year 4 – English – The Boy at the Back of the Class – Onjali Q Rauf; PSHE – Rights and Responsibilities***

***YEAR 5 – English – The Journey – Francesca Sanna; History – The People of Sparkbrook.***

***Year 6 – PSHE – Discrimination, Prejudice and Respect***

## 2023 Valentine's Day action!

Our social media pages were a riot of Orange Hearts as schools shared their messages to political leaders about their feelings about the Rwanda plan and the hostile environment. These are only some of the images we have received and which were much appreciated all across the country!



Year 2 children at **St Mary's B17** sending an important message about kindness.



Children at **St Anne's** in Chelmsley Wood are proud to wear their heart on their sleeve! Year 6 also wrote to their MP telling him about their opposition to the Rwanda scheme.

Dear Mr Bharti,

We are writing to you to raise awareness about the struggles that refugees face. At St Anne's school, we strongly believe that everyone is unique and special. Furthermore, we believe that we are all created in God's love. As children of St Anne's school, we see the face of God in every one that we meet. Therefore, we strongly believe that refugees should be treated with compassion and love. They deserve our generosity. We strongly believe in living out the virtues and values and as a British Citizen, you should also live out the British Values. This is a perfect opportunity to do so.

We ask you to educate our local community and raise awareness about the struggles that refugees face. Imagine how difficult it must be to leave your home and give up everything that you own. It must be as difficult. We would like you to place interpreters in school, so that children who come to our country have someone that they communicate with. We would also like you to make life in our community easier for them by translating signs so that it becomes easier for them to understand everyday life.

Above all, we want you show others the importance of treating refugees with respect, and tolerance as this will make them feel welcome in our country. We believe that every human being should have basic rights and an opportunity to feel safe with a right to education.

Mr Bharti, we need to stand for a better approach to how we treat refugees that is effective and fair. This means that we want you to defend their rights when they come to the UK. They need the resources to rebuild their lives. They need to be educated and supported. All too often, we witness vulnerable people languishing in a hostile system for months and years on end, unable to access justice, barred from working to support themselves and prevented from rebuilding their lives and contributing to their communities.

Roses are red  
Violets are blue  
I oppose the Rwanda scheme  
And so should you.

The Rwanda scheme is brutal. If you were serious about tackling trafficking and saving lives at sea you would urgently create new safe routes for refugees. Scrap the plan. The Rwanda scheme flies in the face of human decency. It will tear families apart, destroy lives and undermine the Refugee Convention.

We need to stand for a better approach to supporting refugees that is more effective, fair and humane. This means defending people's rights to seek safety in the UK, no matter how they come here and ensuring they can live in dignity while they wait for a decision on their asylum application.

Let's empower refugees to rebuild their lives and make valuable contributions to our societies. We look forwards to seeing a movement of change towards refugees.

Yours sincerely  
The children of year 6  
(St Anne's Catholic Primary School)



Pupils at **St Thomas More** in Sheldon also wrote to their MP as well as sending their Valentine's Day message to the government.





Valentine's day cards at **St Alban's Primary**.

**Our Lady and St Kenelm** made a Valentine's card for their local MP to present to Parliament, and declared on their window that they are **Together With Refugees**.



At **St Bernard's**, the pupils from across KS2 showed their support for refugee rights.





On **WORLD BOOK DAY** on 2nd March, many schools focused on books about people seeking sanctuary. Here are some moments from the carousel of activities throughout the day at **St Ambrose Barlow Primary** in Hall Green.



Children in **Reception** listened carefully to “The Journey” and acted out the story. Then they role-played how they would welcome a refugee child arriving at school.



**Year 1** listened to “The Day the War Came” and thought about how they would feel if somebody gave them a chair that they needed. “I would feel elated!” was the favourite quote of the session!

**Year 1 and Year 2** created and illustrated poetry based on “The Journey”. They also thought about what they would take with them in their rucksack.



**Year 3** designed their own welcoming chair and also made bookmarks based on “The Journey”.

**Year 4** did a role-play about how a refugee might feel and drew welcoming chairs. In another session they decided that they would welcome Paddington with open arms - he deserves somewhere safe to live and family to love him.

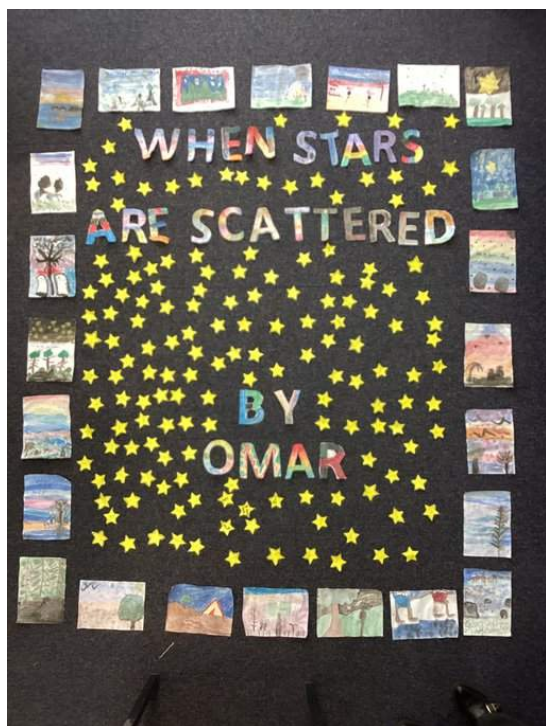
**Year 5** visited **Year 6** and shared a role-play based on “The Journey”.



**Year 5 and Year 6** debated whether or not Paddington Bear should be allowed to stay in the UK. They agreed that we should show compassion to refugees and welcome them.



One book which was read in several schools was the graphic novel “When Stars Are Scattered”, which inspired beautiful work at **St Martin de Porres Primary**.



Year 5 created a front cover for the book with scenes from the story. Each of the stars that are scattered has a hope/dream written upon it for the future of refugees.

Here in Birmingham we also received an invitation from **NORFOLK SCHOOLS OF SANCTUARY** to a webcast on Friday 16th June 13.30 - 14.30 when the authors of “When Stars are Scattered” will discuss the novel and the participants will explore Omar’s experiences and learn how the novel was put together.

**YOU CAN REGISTER FOR THIS EVENT AT**  
**[A Day of Welcome – When Stars are Scattered | VNET Education CIC](#)**  
**[vnetcic.com](http://vnetcic.com)**

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## Embedding texts in the curriculum

**St George’s C of E Primary** in Ladywood has revamped their English curriculum to ensure that texts about migration and refugees are covered in every year group at different times of the year. Some of their possibly less well-known favourite books are:

**Year 2 - A way home for Wolf by Rachel Bright**

**Year 3 - Hummingbird by Nicola Davies**

**Year 4 - The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo**

**Year 6 - Everybody Comes From Somewhere by Michael Rosen**

**Year 6 - Who are Refugees and Migrants by Michael Rosen**

The **CORE Education Trust** has four secondary schools in Birmingham, including two right in the city centre. All four schools are being encouraged to work towards the Sanctuary Award, as is the Trust itself. Here they tell us about CORE Hello, their special programme for asylum-seeking children.



Supporting young people who have experienced trauma or disruption has unique challenges – which recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine have brought to the fore. As a city-based trust, CORE Education Trust is experienced in working with refugee children and we are committed to doing everything we can for those who have come

to our country for sanctuary. We work closely with partners to assess the needs of refugee children and put personalised packages in place. On a practical level, tackling communication – giving students the skills and confidence to express themselves – is key to both their emotional wellbeing and educational progress.

In September 2021 we launched CORE Hello as a specific response to the unique needs of our students. CORE Hello is a high quality, intensive intervention, funded by the trust, and is designed to boost language acquisition, help students access the curriculum and thrive when they return to their ‘home’ schools. Led by a qualified teacher of English as a Foreign Language, the programme supports up to 20 children, who are struggling with language acquisition, in 12-week blocks. Informed by best practice and research, students follow bespoke programmes, depending on their level and experience of English.

Students are also given introductions to everyday life. They are shown how to catch a bus, taken to the nearby Library of Birmingham and taken bowling.

One important exercise all students complete is their journey – a pictorial map of their story. This draws the student out and also helps staff to identify any issues which need to be addressed, or require specialist support.

Last year, 56 students joined CORE Hello, from 24 different countries. They spoke 22 different languages. All now speak English.

**Washwood Heath Academy** was recently re-accredited with its second **Sanctuary Award**, which was presented at a special assembly on their “Cultures Day” when the school celebrates and embraces diversity.

The assembly was led by a group of pupils from Afghanistan, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Italy, Romania, Pakistan, Senegal, Somalia and Spain, each of whom spoke about the culture of their countries. Before the award was presented, the students watched two short videos, “Ivine and Pillow” about the experiences of a young girl from Syria, and “Hassan and Youssef”, about the lives of two teenage refugee boys, their hopes and their aspirations.



In the Library, which is a home from home for many of the students, we were delighted to meet five Year 11 boys from Afghanistan who recently arrived on their own and who are working hard to pass their exams and learn a trade.

It was so inspiring to be in an environment where every individual is clearly valued and supported.

**The school has an original project to encourage their pupils to share their stories. The link to the podcast is here:**

**<https://washwood.academy/566/the-washwood-way-podcast>**

## **The Washwood Way Podcast**

Washwood Heath Academy is an all through school in East Birmingham, catering for pupils from 4 to 18. On roll, we currently have 1040 children who speak 87 different combinations of languages. One of the main reasons behind setting up the podcast was to allow these students a voice to celebrate the diversity they bring to our school.

In Podcasts so far, some of our Romanian students have talked about their customs and traditions as well as discussing the differences in their lives in Romania and England. As well as the Romanian students, students who are Gypsy Roma came in the Podcast to talk about their lives, traditions and cultures.



In another episode of the Podcast, we had two students who are Spanish in origin, talking about their journey from their homeland of Spain to England and the differences they had found.

After listening to the Podcasts one of our parents has asked if she can come on a future episode to discuss her childhood in Czechoslovakia.

The Washwood Way Podcast will continue to give a voice to those students who come to us from other countries and allow them to share their rich cultural heritage with us.

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## An Update from the Blue Plaque Project for International Migrants Day

International Migrants Day was in December and at **Oscott Manor Community Special School**, the pupils chose to acknowledge their staff who have come from different countries to work with them. Here you can see the Rights Respecting Team, who have taken on the responsibility for working towards the Sanctuary Award, and the beautiful display they have created in the school foyer.



**St John Wall Catholic Secondary School** used the opportunity of Lent to think about asylum-seekers and refugees across the school. Mrs Ellis tells us how:

This Lent we have worked as a school to promote Sanctuary through our Lenten Bag project.

The project itself has had several stages.

For our Year 7 and 8 groups, they have been given a rucksack, filled with items such as food, water, a mobile phone and a sleeping bag. They were given the opportunity to discuss who might need a bag like this, and why they would need to pack those items. Each class then reflected on the plight of people who are displaced from their countries due to climate change.



Year 9 and 10 groups received the same rucksack in their forms, and after reviewing the items, were led in a CAFOD meditation, considering what they would put in their bag, if they had to leave their home suddenly due to conflict or persecution.

Each of the groups then put together their 'back story' onto a luggage label, of the country and person who their bag belongs to. This empathetic response has caused pupils to become more aware of issues in our wider world, to be more considerate to their neighbour, to pray and to welcome others into our school community whole heartedly.



For our Year 11 pupils we are attempting a little experiment in empathy and compassion. During our last week of term, our rucksacks will make an appearance on the playground. We will be looking to see whether or not anyone picks them up and brings them inside, or if they will be left alone, ignored. On the last day of term, we will then bring the rucksacks out during a service and discuss the importance of sanctuary, and how we need to look after the most vulnerable within our society.

We made links to our bags within our Reconciliation services, discussing the 'baggage' that we carry around due to our wrongdoing. The 5 bags will make their final journey to the front of our service on the last day of term, where we will place them at the foot of the cross and pray for healing around the world.

## Visiting Calais

In February, teachers from two of our schools visited Calais. Here, Vanessa Baker of **St Dunstan's Primary** tells us about the first day with Secours Catholique and then Marie Healy of **Bishop Challoner Catholic College** writes about the next days with Care4Calais. These are only extracts - please let us know if you'd like the full reports.

**Day 1, Vanessa:** My first day in the Secours Catholique, a day centre for refugees, I felt completely overwhelmed. I watched the men who frequented the centre on a daily basis, to get a hot cup of tea, have a shower, charge their phones and meet up with people, who they had met on their journeys, talk with one another and kick a football about as they would in any park in the UK. They smiled, they said hello and chatted happily amongst themselves as well as with the young people we had travelled with.



The walls were plastered with artwork, sketches drawn by a local 70-year-old artist, who came to sketch the migrants, capturing their age and the destinations they had been to enroute to a place of safety. The most striking thing was that they were mostly men, largely between the ages 16 and 30, but some as young as 12. Most were from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iran and Syria. Amongst the sea of faces, a few stuck out to me, namely the sketch of a 4-year-old girl, one of a 70-year-old

Ethiopian woman and the eyes of a 27-year-old man, Kamal, who had travelled from Sudan, to Turkey, then to Greece, Italy and finally in France, waiting for his chance to cross the Channel.

As closing time drew nearer, I helped the volunteers tidy up, stacking chairs and moving tables – feeling like I was doing nothing useful at all. One by one, the young men dispersed but two remained to talk to us and answer our questions.

When asked where everyone was going now that the centre was closed, he answered, “To find somewhere in the city to sleep, anywhere.” So, whilst I was wrapped up, yet still struggling against the cold, these men, some in their teens, were going to sleep outdoors. There are no words to describe how stunned we all were. There were at least 80 people, where would they all sleep? He continued to explain how collectively, they did not like being called migrants or asylum seekers, that they preferred to call themselves ‘exiles’ – this hit hard, reinforcing the notion that these people did not leave their home of their own free will. They literally have no other option but to flee, feeling forced to do so. I struggled to understand how others could not see this?

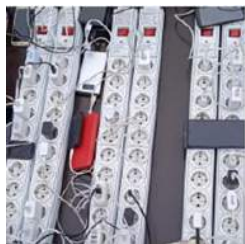
The local people are not friendly towards them and not happy that the centre is so close to their homes, often causing conflict which can turn violent. The volunteers are all from outside of Calais. “No one in Calais would work here,” a volunteer said.

I am so deeply passionate about championing for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, always encouraging children and young people to take a stand, to speak up for those that are voiceless. However, leaving the centre, I felt completely helpless and daunted by how small I was in this insurmountable problem and that shocked me to my core. Reflecting on this after I left Calais, I realise that there is no way that I alone can help; I realised more than ever, that we have to stand united, we have to speak up, just as Jesus implores us to do, because if you look into their eyes, we are all the same.

**Days 2 & 3, Marie:** Care4calais is a massive warehouse on an industrial estate. There were no signs outside, I imagine to avoid local attention, and the size of the space was not apparent until we were through the gates. The sheer volume of donations was quite overwhelming. Endless boxes filled countless shelves and racks but the donations go out almost as quickly as they come in. We began the day with a briefing about how the organisation runs and what our day would entail. It was freezing in the warehouse; every time I thought about moaning about the cold, I reminded myself of how fortunate I was to be sheltered and dry.

I, and my travel companions, were put on ‘tent task’; assemble a tent, check it is in a clean and good state, and then label it as checked and move to the distribution area, or put it in the recycling area if it is no good. Tents are not allowed in Calais and are regularly hosed down or confiscated. Checking them seemed like a redundant task but if any of the tents could offer shelter from the elements for even one night, it would be worth it. Some of the tents looked like they had barely been used while others were in tatters; muddy, stained and torn. It was sad to see that there is still a mindset of ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ when it comes to charity donations.

The afternoon saw us go out to a disused patch of land for ‘distribution and services’. We were joined by SKT Welfare, Spreading Kindness Together, an Islamic charity from Yorkshire who are led by an unshakeable faith and strong desire to help the most vulnerable. They had brought with them over 800 pairs of new boots, walking socks, hats and gloves. As SKT Welfare got their van ready for the distribution of their goods, we set about getting the ‘services’ ready. Stations were set up around the field; a hot drinks station, bike repair, tables with games such as Connect 4, dominoes and chess, extension leads screwed into wooden pallets and plugged into a generator to charge mobile phones. There was also a ‘hair station’; 5 camping chairs set up in a circle with combs, brushes and 2 pairs of clippers on the ground in the middle.







Men of all ages and all nationalities soon appeared from all directions. Lots went straight to queue for new boots; they had heard what was on offer that day and walked for miles to get there. I was fully expecting this experience to be very upsetting and I was not prepared for what I encountered. Every person I walked past said hello and smiled. These men were here to engage in a safe space and, for a couple of hours at least, enjoy the social interactions.

Later that evening we spoke about what we had experienced and I found myself worrying that so many of us had found the day enjoyable. Surely that couldn't be right? We went to Calais to see the misery and be so outraged that we would come home and take action. Yet despite being tired, traumatised, cold and hungry, the refugees managed to give out positivity. One of the leaders had commented earlier in the day about looking for the face of Christ in those we would encounter. I saw Him in the faces of those who were persecuted, and in those who showed love and kindness. The people we met were not of the same religion but all had the belief that a greater being was at work.

The next morning followed the same routine but in the afternoon we set up in a car park in the centre of Calais. Again, men came from all directions. I felt more nervous this time. Police cars had passed us a few times and the organisers had told us that they might stop and question us. A young man, Frankie, from the Ivory Coast, briefly told us a bit about his story, tears quietly rolling down his cheek as he spoke about his son, who he had left behind in the hope of getting to the UK. I felt ashamed knowing that if he did make it across the Channel he would not be welcomed by the authorities.

Over the few days, we came up with 'how bad must your life be.....'. How bad must your life be to leave the place you call home? To make this treacherous journey and be stripped of all self-respect? To have literally the possessions you can carry? Don't know when your next (warm) meal will be? To charge your mobile phone on the ground in a muddy field for an hour a day? To be faced with hate? It can go on and on.

This trip was the most humbling experience of my life. I met so many people who have been stripped of all their rights and dignity and yet they still have hope that things will get better. That glimmer of hope is what keeps us alive. My faith has been strengthened by seeing love and faith in others. In the refugees that continue to trust and have faith that they will find safety. In seeing good people reaching out, with great compassion, to those in need.. I will continue to tell people of my experience and campaign for safe and legal ways for all refugees to reach safety. During times it is difficult to see where God is. Pope Francis said "Where love becomes tangible, becomes closeness, becomes tenderness, becomes compassion, God is there". It is up to us.

## Halesowen College never stops supporting its ESOL students!

### Reading Buddies

Our Reading Buddies group has continued to thrive at Halesowen College.

Students across college are invited to volunteer their time to talk to and read with students from our ESOL programme. This helps build bonds of friendship between students from different courses who have differing life experiences and allows students for whom English is their second language to become more confident with their speaking and comprehension skills. This is particularly helpful for students who want to pick up more colloquial or regional language and have a greater understanding of their peers.

Enrichment Coordinator Erika Walkington says, "It's great to see students from a wide range of courses come together during the Reading Buddies sessions. Talking and making new friends is as important as reading. All students involved benefit from these sessions, making valuable connections with peers outside of their main social groups."



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Many thanks to everybody who has shared information with us for this newsletter! The staff and pupils are so inspiring in these dark times.

If you are doing some fund-raising at school, please consider donating to Schools of Sanctuary which you can do via this link:

<https://www.totalgiving.co.uk/donate/city-of-sanctuary-uk>

Funding for the national work is precarious, and this work is needed now more than ever!