

MOOL Volunteering in Calais report

Thanks to the generous support of MOOL, I travelled to Calais to volunteer for 4 days with Refugee Community Kitchen (RCK). I was part of a small group of Mooligans, with two of us (myself and daughter Anna) working with RCK. This was in part because I had worked with RCK 3 years ago (shortly before the violent demolition of the Calais 'jungle') and found them to be an inspiring organisation.

I was not disappointed second time around. RCK continues to produce a huge number of hot meals to asylum seekers who are now scattered across Calais, Dunkirk and Belgium. This is an extraordinary feat, involving the production of 1500 hot meals a day that are distributed to these 3 locations, together with hot tea, water, and condiments (extra chilli proving to be particularly popular!).

Similar to the other migrant charities, RCK holds the highest standards for the food they produce and how these are distributed. The food is a daily (changing) hot vegetarian curry, with spiced rice, tossed salad, and bread when available. It is nutritious and filling – as testified by all us volunteers who had the same meal. Our briefing before distributing the food included how to serve the food in a respectful way – definitely no slopping of food 'school dinners' style, but a careful holding of the serving box and asking folk how much they wanted and how they would like it served. This briefing also reminded us that many of the migrants we would meet may have told their stories umpteen times to various groups of volunteers and officials on their journey to Calais – so we should therefore not expect either gratitude or (necessarily) conversation from those we served. Taking any photographs was definitely forbidden.

The pre and post distribution briefings also demonstrated the admirable care that RCK holds for its volunteers. We were advised of the 'green, amber and red' alerts that are used by the section leaders should there be any tricky situations arising, as well as code words that we could all use to alert others to potential risk. The debriefing also including information on counselling support that is provided by visiting therapists on a monthly clinic at the RCK depot, as well as psychotherapeutic online and skype counselling available on return home.

Whilst the distribution I was involved in did go into 'amber' on a couple of occasions, I found these (mainly Kurdish) migrants to be well mannered and polite. This was despite the enormous difficulties they were currently facing – sleeping in makeshift shelters in a car park in Dunkirk park (having been recently evicted from the local authority gym in Dunkirk), and without access to fresh drinking water. RCK had also heard of migrants starting to drink the water from the park lake, so always provided drinking water with our meals.

The plight of the dozen or so women and children we served was particularly disturbing. It is hard as a mother to contemplate the worry of keeping your children safe in such an environment. I did however later learn from the debriefing that the 'Unofficial women's and children project' keep a close eye on these families and tabs on any new arrivals – a great relief to know of this support.

Meanwhile back in the depot, volunteers peeled and chopped boxes and boxes of onions, garlic, aubergines, salad vegetables of all kinds, and potatoes, and washed up enormous quantities of pots and pans and serving 'gastros'. I was given the job of 'tea lady' for 1500 people on 2 days, involving boiling 5 huge vats of water with 35 tea bags and 10 ladles of sugar each – a steep learning curve for me!

All of us volunteers rose to the challenge of this physically hard work, helping one another out as required, and constantly taking responsibility for anything that needed doing. This was a quite

unique coming-together of volunteers of all ages and backgrounds. We were all there because of our concern for the potential humanitarian disaster so close to our shores, and the abominable way in which distressed people and families fleeing violence and poverty are forced to leave their homes and stigmatised for doing so. In the space of 4 days, I became very close of a retired health visitor from London (and her 2 children), an inspiring MSF doctor from the Basque region of Spain, two charming student sisters from Germany (who travelled by bus with their tent and were camping nearby in increasingly chilly nights), two stalwart Australian girls travelling the world, two gracious French cousins, and the most comical 21 year German philosophy student I have ever met. He proclaimed that he would never forget me – a mutual feeling!

I would definitely return to the Refugee Community Kitchen again, and would highly recommend this volunteering opportunity. You do have to like (or be able to tolerate!) loud, funky music in the kitchen, and sometimes hours of peeling and chopping vegetables. But the company is excellent and the support wonderful. If you get the chance to go with MOOL next year, do take it!

Sue Downie
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