

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK

English for Life in the UK

Season 2 - Episode 24 - Seeking Asylum in the UK: part 2
Local Support, the Work of the St Augustine's Centre

June 2021

Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is mainly for people who want to improve their English and at the same time learn more about life in this country.

This is the second of two special episodes where we have been looking at the experience of asylum seekers and refugees and the support that is available to them. Those of us that record this podcast are volunteers at the St Augustine's Centre, a charity that supports refugees and asylum seekers and others in need. It may be this episode will be of interest also to those who just want to know more about our work.

Our charity is entirely funded by donations and grants that we apply for and are, usually, short-term; so, if any of you listening are in a position where you would be able to support our work, we would be most grateful for some donations and there is information at the end of this podcast about how to do that, through our website.

In our last episode, we were talking about asylum seekers and refugees, and we talked about the process of seeking asylum in this country, and we heard the voices of some of those who have experienced this. Today's episode follows on from this and looks at the local support available. In particular, we will look at the work of our independent charity, the St Augustine's Centre, here in Halifax, Yorkshire.

I started by interviewing the Reverend John Hellewell, who has been the chair of the board¹ that runs this charity for a number of years, now. He's told me a bit about the history of the Centre. Later, we will hear from the Centre Director and again, the voices of some of our asylum seekers and refugees, and their experience of the support that they have received.

(Music) *(3 minutes 18 seconds)*

¹ chair of the board = the person in authority over a committee, or of directors or trustees in an organisation. Once, would have been called "chairman" but awareness of gender-specific language means neutral terms are now regarded as being more appropriate.

I'm delighted to say we've got with us the Reverend John Hellewell, again. Hello, John.

Revd John Hello. Good to be with you again.

Mark And, John - you're going to tell us a little bit about the history of the St Augustine's Centre.

Revd John The Centre was founded just over 50 years ago. It began as a "parent and toddler group" for the local area, but that very quickly expanded to providing basic skills for local families and some holiday provision for families that otherwise would never have had holidays. It also included some holiday play schemes for different ages of children. And that continued for a number of years, gradually taking over the whole of ... what we now call the Family Centre. It was the original vicarage for the church.

Then, in 2001, the first asylum seeker walks through the doors. We're never quite sure how they came to find the Family Centre, as it was then, but they did do, and as was fitting² for the ethos of the Centre, we welcomed them and tried to do what we could for them. The founder, Denise Keenan, was still there as the Centre leader, at that time, and she welcomed that particular individual and tried to help them - and just befriend³ them - but, very quickly after that first person, we discovered more and more asylum seekers coming to the Centre, because we were the only place in the area, really, that offered any kind of help or support. And that's a variety of things - helping them find solicitors, but helping them with basic needs like food provision and a friendly face really, as much as anything - and as that grew and grew, so the focus on working with asylum seekers and refugees grew.

In 2009, we became an independent charity for several reasons. One was it allowed us to apply for sources of funding that were denied religious organisations, so it gave us access to wider help. It also made the point that the work didn't just belong to St Augustine's church - but the work was so important that it belonged to the people of Halifax, and Calderdale indeed, and beyond. So the Centre was always open to all faiths and no faith, but becoming a separate charity that deliberately chose not to have any religious objectives in its fundamental objectives, was to make that point. That here was somewhere for anybody and everybody, whatever their beliefs or faith or viewpoints. I think it's really important that we continue to treat the people who come as individuals, because they're all unique. They aren't asylum seekers - they are people, first and foremost, who happen to be seeking asylum - and treating them as

² fitting = appropriate, in keeping with, suitable

³ befriend = become a friend to them, behave like a friend would

individuals and as the human being that they are is the core of St Augustine's and we will continue to do that.

(Music) (7:31)

Mark Then I spoke to Sara who is our Centre Director and I asked her about the range of services we provide and also our plans and hopes for the future.

I am joined now by Sara who is the Centre Director so she runs the Centre on a day-to-day basis for us.

Sara - tell us a bit about the Centre today - we've heard from John about the history of the Centre. What is it that we're trying to achieve in the work that we do?

Sara Yes - hello. I guess what we're really trying to do is ensure that anybody who comes to Calderdale, who is seeking sanctuary, can find us and get involved in all sorts of different activities. And what we want to do is support that community of people seeking asylum and refugees - it's about 650 people in our community, living very close to the Centre in Halifax and some people living outside. And we offer a range of different services. We give people welfare support, so that's issues around housing or health or employment or education. And we also provide specialist immigration advice and then the other side of what we do is more, kind of, "living well" activities. So that might be creative activities, sports - we have a welcome cafe which is really at the heart of what we do. At the moment, that food is 'take-away', but when things are safer, we often have 60 to 70 people coming for a free hot meal, every lunch-time, cooked by members of our community.

We have - in the cellar, we've turned the cellar into like a charity shop, so people can come and get clothes, donated clothes and shoes and bedding and household goods. We organise trips so we take people, often, to the beach. We haven't been able to do that as much as we'd like, obviously, over the last year, but we have plans for all sorts of things, this summer. And - what's really important to us is that people in our community: they're very keen to contribute to how we run. So, we have 120 volunteers - and about 40 - 50 of those are also our Centre Members. So they do things like: they cook food, they garden, they do DIY⁴, they teach English. Obviously, English is a I haven't mentioned that: English is a huge part of what we do; we have 80 - 90 students a week, learning English with us. So it's really important that our community of volunteers, staff and Centre Members are all making St Augustine's Centre work together.

⁴ DIY - "Do-it-Yourself" - small domestic maintenance and up-dating jobs, building furniture, mending broken items, painting walls, etc being self-reliant, instead of paying for crafts people.

(10:36)

Mark Say a bit more about what we might mean by Centre Members, because that might not be obvious to listeners.

Sara So, when I use the term, Centre Members, I mean members of the community who we support. So, that is people seeking sanctuary, or people seeking asylum, or people with refugee and "leave to remain" status and we - we used to call people like that 'centre users', and actually, we felt it wasn't right, so we recently changed it to "Centre Members". It's like a kind of ... we're a community together and we're members of that community.

Mark That's great. Tell me a bit more about the kind of welcome part of what we do. So, you know, people have arrived - in fact, we'll hear the voices of some of those people later in the podcast - who arrive in Halifax, not knowing anybody, often with fairly limited levels of English. What's the welcome part of what we do?

Sara The welcome is so important because, obviously, a number of people arrive at a new place that they haven't necessarily chosen to live in - you know, "where's Halifax?" - often, without many belongings, often not being able to speak much English, and so, they can come to us, and say hello, and we will arrange to have a good sit down and a chat with them and, if necessary, arrange an interpreter. And we'll talk to them about what their needs are: make sure their housing is OK; register them with a doctor; if they have children, we'll help them find the right school, or a nursery, We'll invite them to come and eat with us or to go into our free shop and choose possessions, if they need that, or if they need bedding. And then, what we'll do, is work with them and say 'OK, what are your interests?' What would you like to do? We've got a gardening group, we've got football, we've got art classes, we can help teach you English, and we'll find out, also, what their skills are, and how they can contribute, when they're ready and feeling a little bit more settled. And, brilliantly, we've recently, just a few months ago, created a new post in our staff team. Adrian who runs our "Integration Project" and he works with people - particularly, new arrivals - to make sure they can navigate their way around this new town. So he'll give them a tour of Halifax, he'll show them some of the best places to go walking, he'll introduce them to others - we're about to start a new "befriending scheme". So, sometimes people can feel really quite isolated - so, it's matching them up with someone else who can become a friend and show them how to do things, locally.

(13:27)

For some people that is as simple as - what does a post box look like? - how do I send a letter? If you've never really lived in England before, you might not know how to do that and particularly, in lock-down, you know, how do you do those simple things like send a letter?

Mark Yes - that's really helpful. What about the help with the asylum process itself? We ... In our previous episode, we talked about what the process involves. What ... what's our role in supporting people with that?

Sara Well - a number of ... a number of things. There we have specialist immigration advisers who are OISC⁵ trained. That means they're trained and they're registered and able to provide legal advice. So, they'll work with individuals to help find a solicitor and help make claims and prepare for their Home Office interviews. And just make sure they've got someone to talk to and make sure that they can give the best case they possibly can. And that work might be just over two or three months or it might stretch out for years, depending on the individual.

But also whilst people are living in asylum property with us, while they're waiting on [for] a decision, there are other asylum issues that we often need to support people with. For example, sometimes the standard of property isn't great, so we need to work with them to make sure they get their needs met and sometimes people seeking asylum have an allowance of £39.00 a week. They have an Aspen Card. We've had a real difficulty with that, just in the last week, because the Government changed the provider, and when they sent the new cards out, they sent them often to the wrong address, or they weren't working, so we've had thirty or forty people, just in the last week, with no money at all, so they've come to us and we've managed to help them or loan them some money, or just give them £10.00, to be able to buy food.

So, I suppose we're just ... we're a place in Halifax that people seeking sanctuary know they can come to, and that we will work hard, to work alongside them, to make sure they can live comfortably while they're in Calderdale. And it's a journey really, from that first welcome, right through to the point at which they may leave Calderdale, or they may get their "leave to remain", and they may stay and settle. And we've watched so many people who've come from really quite challenging situations - often with the trauma of the journey that they've been on, and their own personal reasons for fleeing - be that war or persecution or something else - and we've seen over time, those people building back their sense of identity, contributing to life in Calderdale and getting to a point where they're ready to go off on their own and make their own lives on their own terms.

(16:39)

Mark Finally, Sara, what would you say - what are the plans for the future when you look to our Centre and where we're going in the next few years? What particularly, are you excited by and want to see happen?

⁵ OISC - Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner

Sara Well it's been a really exciting time. There's a lot of change happening at St Augustine's, at the moment. We have new members of the team and one of the big objectives that the Board and staff are making sure happens is ensuring that our staff and our volunteers and our Trustees - so they're the governing body - the Board - are made up increasingly of people with lived experience of the asylum process. And we want that for obvious reasons. When you get people who have lived experience of whatever an issue is, they're going to bring intelligence and an insight that other people won't have. So just in the last couple of months, we've recruited three new members of staff who have been through the asylum system. We have a board member who has, and we are about to recruit two or three new Board members who've been through the system. So, that's really exciting - I hope that in two or three years' time, we'll be able to say, you know, a number of us that are at the helm, that are running this organisation, have been through that system. So that's a key objective.

We're also pushing the amount of cultural, social, sports and well-being activities that we offer - both at the Centre and with partners across Calderdale. We want to do more and more of that, because that's about quality of life, so that's really important.

We'd love to develop our premises, our buildings and our land. Plans to grow more fruit and veg⁶ and make the large building that we operate from more fully accessible, because it isn't at the moment - there's a big staircase and no lift. And work together with the Valley of Sanctuary⁷, to make Calderdale the most welcoming place in the UK, to people seeking sanctuary. That's our overall aim.

Mark Do you want to say anything about our campaigning role?

Sara I think, historically, St Augustine's Centre has always done incredible work. It's really quite a unique organisation and I feel very privileged to be involved with it but we've kind of flown under the radar - by which, I mean we've been quite quiet in some ways, about what we do. But immigration is such a key issue at the moment, not just for the UK, you know, but for the world, We have 80 million displaced people and I think that we can play a really important role in making sure stories are heard in the right places. So we've got a new role at the moment and we've got Charlotte who is our Campaigns Manager, and she's working with national organisations and with our Centre Members to tell stories and to be involved in campaigning and

⁶ veg = vegetables

⁷ Valley of Sanctuary is another voluntary organisation that aims to make Calderdale a welcoming place for asylum seekers and refugees

communications to make sure we have a seat at the table⁸, to make sure that it's our Centre Members' voices that are heard.

Mark For any listeners who wanted to know more about what we do and wanted to support us in some way - what would they be able to do?

Sara Great! We're always looking for support in a number of different ways. If you live locally, we have alwayswe are always on the look out for volunteers. We've got many roles for volunteers. Obviously, we always welcome donations and you can look on our website which is:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

but if you scroll down on our website - and I have to say: we're going to be launching a new one in a month's time - but if you scroll down, you'll see a "donate" button there, and you can donate, really quite easily. Again, if you live locally, we take good quality second hand donations of clothes and shoes and household goods.

Mark And there is more information about that at the end of the podcast and how to contact us by email, as well. Thank you very much, Sara.

Sara You're very welcome.

(Music) (21:00)

Mark In the next section you can hear the voices of some of the people who have been asylum seekers, some of whom are now refugees, and who have experienced support from the St Augustine's Centre and elsewhere. They come from a range of different countries, have had different experiences of the system and the support and their level of English also varies, partly as a result of how long they have been here. I started by asking them about their experiences of the support they have had here, locally in Halifax, and particularly from the St Augustine's Centre.

[Please note, we have chosen not to correct the English being used in most cases in these interviews but to leave the written version to match what has been said. We have not used names as some of those we interviewed are in sensitive situations.]

⁸ seat at the table = a short way of saying "participating in discussions and being heard, being listened to, contributing to decisions"

- A When I arrived in Halifax, I was introduced to a volunteer at St Augustine's Centre who helped me improve my English language skills. As well, they helped me get a GP⁹ and find me a solicitor and also they give me a lot of classes, on-line English class lesson. And during lock-down, you know, they take look after me now - sometimes they call me and they ask me my, you know, my healthy, about, and then you know they provided food for all asylum seekers during the week on Monday and Thursday.
- B OK, once the Home Office sent us from London to a house in Halifax, the house manager told me to visit St Augustine's Centre. I visited them and I registered there. As I mentioned earlier, they were so professional and kind: they treated me and my family in a really professional way. A case worker visited me at home many times and explained to me all the necessary like GP, optician registration, and also the transportation, and many other things, They were always available for help actually.
- C So in the St Augustine's Centre they help me. The Centre is so helpful for every asylum seeker. Though they can help asylum seeker to find a GP or find a solicitor, if they have asylum seeker has any problem with house or with Home Office, they can claim, they can complete form, or can call Home Office and solicitor that's so good because, when I arrived, I couldn't speak English. So they helped me for learning English. I used class three days a week in St Augustine's Centre, so I had one-by-one teacher for learning English, teaching English, it was so useful - so useful for every asylum seeker if they want to learn English.
- (24:42)
- D I had a really good experience with them. For example, they made my process ... procedure ... easier, because of the help. For example, when I want to go to the hospital they can make an appointment for me. Also, the English classes helped me a lot, to improve my English. They helped with clothes too and food. And I make a lot of friends there. We don't know nobody [anybody] when we arrive here. And at St Augustine's, we can find friends.
- E People seeking asylum are despatched into Halifax. That initial contact is very, very crucial for people - they are like fleeing, people with traumas, so their welcome in there is really, really, really important.
- Mark As you heard in my interview with Sara, we are very keen to give volunteering opportunities to asylum seekers and refugees and once they become refugees, the opportunity to get a job with us. Here are some of their experiences.

⁹ GP - "general practitioner" - a doctor who works in the locality and is usually the first person they see if they have medical problems

- C I have been in the DIY group, so that was so useful, so and I made friends there: from a different country, a different language.
- B Actually, I was hoping to get a job but, finally, I got a job in this amazing organisation, St Augustine's. You know, I am really happy to work with this organisation because I like to help people seeking asylum because I can feel [for] them because I was one of them. I can feel [for] them, I can know what they need, exactly what are their needs, and the other way ... it's like a way of thanking St Augustine's, about what they did for me, because they did a lot, actually.
- E Yes - I was over the moon¹⁰. I'm now working as a case worker at St Augustine's. I so, so privileged because St Augustine's employing people who are expert by experience, which is really good, so they, kind of, like show about inclusion and diversity, giving people opportunity. I just say, before - they give the opportunity to volunteer there, for years, and now I've got a job with them, so it's really, really good.
- (27:40)
Mark Finally, I asked them about their hopes for the future and what advice they'd give to others who might be going through the asylum seeking process.
- A I would like to further my education. I would also like to thank the British Government for giving me sanctuary. I would like to say if I am given "leave to remain", in this country, I would try to be a good asset to this country. My advice and my experience: just try to improve English skills and then try to learn some skills and be patient - and be patient.
- B What we are hearing about asylum is too much. Yes - some people are suffering, but believe me, it is worth it. After that you will see how your life is changed totally and how you will be feeling safe in this country, without any discriminations or any bad behaviours, which we faced before.
- C Obviously, I would like to find a job for my skill and I want to see my family. Yes - I want to have a good life, safe life - in my country, my life, was not safe because [so] I came to the UK. I think my life in this country is safe, so I would like to have a good life and have a good job.
- D Just having a stable life - have a house, a good job, to be married and have children and help to people who will meet me.

¹⁰ over the moon - an expression used to indicate you are very happy about something

E To create a good environment for my children, for them not to go through the pain I went through. And for them not to feel let down and to provide for them a safe space where they can express themselves, where they're free of pain and traumas.

(Music) (30:19)

Mark We are finishing with some words from John, who you heard from earlier. I was thanking him for his years of service at the heart of this organisation and, typically of John, he turned it round, so that he was thanking us.

Revd John Although at times it's been hard work, my experience of working with the Centre and the people associated with the Centre, is that the more that I give to it, the more I gain from it. So I feel very blessed to have been part of the Centre and the many people that I've got to know over the years. It's been a real privilege for me.

Mark That's it for this week and the end of these two special episodes. Stay listening, if you want to find out how to make contact with our organisation, how to find the transcript for this and all other episodes and how you can support our work through donations or in any other way. Otherwise, we will be back again very soon, with a new episode and until then, stay safe and thank you for listening.

(Music). (31:58)

You can find the transcript - that's the written version of this episode - on our website:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

And that's where you can also find links to all the other episodes, and the transcripts, so you can listen and read along at the same time. That's also where you can find out how to donate, to help our work. There is a "donate" button on the front page of the website.

Also, if you're interested in volunteering or helping in other ways, there is also a tab called "Get Involved" which can help you with that.

We have an email address specifically for the podcast, which is:

englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com

and there is a general email address for the Charity or the Centre, which is:

info@staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

I'll spell out all those addresses:

So, the website: w-w-w-.s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

So that's the website.

The email is: englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com

And that's "English for" spelt: f-o-r

and the general email is:
info@ - so that's i-n-f-o (at), and then the same as the website address
staugustine's centrehalifax.org.uk

Thank you again.

Ends (33:52)