

the **Asylum Link Merseyside**

2020

covid-19 diary part 3



Thanks again from everyone at ALM

The ALM Corona Diary September, October & into November

Who'd have thought we'd be back here again, locked up? Watching self imposed deadlines go past (Summer, September, six months) all seem to flag up the human need for milestones and targets to regulate our lives. One thing the Pandemic has perhaps given us an insight into, is what Asylum Seekers face, with unrelenting uncertainty and never being able to plan more than a couple of days ahead because there is no way of knowing what the future holds.

Since this thing started in March, we've been keeping in touch with other agencies and providers, sharing information and updating one another. This proved extremely valuable with recent attempts by the Home Office to evict and remove people. We were able to get the word out very quickly and support one another to stop much of it. Thankfully all the evictions that went to Tribunal Court have been thrown back, but there were one or two people that left their accommodation of their own volition, without realising they had an option. It shows how vital it is to know where you can get help.

Brexit is coming and with it, a probable withdrawal from the Dublin Convention. This legislation states that Asylum Seekers should make their claim in the first EU country they come to, and not travel onward. The result is that anyone who has been in the UK for less than six months (or under certain conditions, up to ten) will be returned to the EU country where they were first fingerprinted and there is a rush to get this done. Many of the people in the Hoylake hotel fell into this category and, while the Home Office said there would be no evictions from the hotels, reporting instructions were issued and people were detained when presenting in Liverpool. They couldn't even pack a bag of clothes. Others were moved to houses in Preston or Bristol, where they were then detained pending removal. Some of this was done illegally as it is against the law (rule 35) to detain someone who has been a victim of torture. Presumably the Home Office thought that moving people away from an area meant that they were out of sight, but Kath Vesey and people in Hoylake have kept in touch with their friends and been able to take action in some cases.

Sometimes it's difficult to know how to feel: there have been some fantastic things taking place, especially with Emma and the Asylum Action Project, where we got a mention in the House of Lords (thank you Lord Randall) and for a few hours at least, were the top story on BBC2's Autumn Watch.

www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/natureuk/entries/10f5a79e-78b2-4e04-8c81-2cfeffb56f6c

A lot of the comments were very supportive which gives you hope.



Other activities in the autumn have included bike rides, some great sessions at the allotments, adventures at Beechley Stables and the beach cleans at Hoylake and Southport mentioned earlier.



There's more things planned with tree planting in mid-December, possible sailing tuition with Shadow Wind CIC, and creative writing workshops with Be There Learning.

For every up there's a down and at the beginning of October, Covid arrived in our building with 3 staff and 1 volunteer contracting the virus. Thankfully everyone is in the clear and we're now back to being vaguely open again. That shifted us from a skeleton crew to barely anyone in the office. It didn't have too much effect as most of our current services are online or by phone, but it was hard going. Maintaining assistance to the destitute, we were able to shift from providing food (which Jan and the troops can tell you takes a lot of organising, bagging and delivering), to cash payments covering our period of isolation. It's thanks to the funding bodies being more flexible that we were able to do this.

People have been extremely supportive, from the Manager at Tesco Cargo enquiring after Jan to the lovely message we had from the Costco Team in Chester.

"I know you guys are one of our favourite pick ups as you're always on time, cheerful and take whatever's going. Thanks again 😊 Regards Julie & Rhi"

Not everything is good news and sadly we have lost some friends during these strange times. Gerald Henderson passed away; many of you will know Gerald through Judith his wife and their connections with All Hallows Church. Both were and are great supporters of ALM. Diane Tod also passed away.

Diane had supported ALM with grants going back more years than I can remember and she was a formidable presence. Diane's daughter Caroline is also a strong supporter and was the force behind the Film 'Jan', about Jan Chowdhury our destitution manager. Other changes coming are in the people working here. Sarah Jope is leaving at Christmas to pursue a career



Jan - A short documentary made in conjunction with Asylum Link Merseyside in 2017. We explore how this film has raised the awareness of the many challenges asylum seekers.

in Mental Health Nursing. Sarah has been with us for a decade, as a volunteer on the front desk, caseworker, destitution manager and for the last few years as deputy manager. She will be sorely missed and difficult to replace. Sr Kathleen and Sr Ruth are both officially stepping back from their volunteer roles at the centre. There is currently too much uncertainty and risk around peoples safety for them to attend and although it'll be great to see them back at some point, for now it's a bridge too far.

With the turn in the weather, the channel crossings will become far fewer. It was only a matter of time until someone was killed and the family of five that died in late October when their boat capsized, were not the first, but perhaps as a family with young children, considered the most newsworthy. Our Government had already ramped up the rhetoric, blaming smugglers and people traffickers, who while undoubtedly robbing people of their money and providing the boats, would have no way to do this if the UK provided safe corridors and ways to cross our border.

As we head towards the end of the year, ALM is keeping on with much of what we have already been doing since March: casework continues with the team delivering around 100 sessions per week by phone. (the phones are extremely busy so please stick with it if you can't get through) The ESOL classes are underway using Zoom and Whatsapp and we are trying to engage people in the Hotels with



translated guides to our services. The Homeless are still being fed and Jan and her band of helpers have done a fantastic job. And we're still trying to get winter clothes to people: Babs, Ian, Kushi and Sue have worked like Trojans sorting and bagging - currently delivery is the difficult bit.



So, again, thank you to everyone: the staff, volunteers and trustees that keep us running, the funders, donors and individuals who ensure the lights stay on, to everyone who gives their time to help. And to the Asylum Seekers and Refugees for their patience and understanding. Take care. Ewan



At the checkpoint, Ali saw the boat for the first time. An engineer by training, he realised that although it was around 10-12 metres, it relied on a single small engine. When he protested, he says the smuggler dismissed him, replying: "You think you're smarter than the German guy who sold this boat to me?"

The passengers piled in. "The boat was full of people, you couldn't move any further than 1cm." Children separated from their parents began to cry. As Ali had predicted, the motor broke.