



South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group



2023 - 2024

ANNUAL REPORT

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# INTRODUCTION

This Annual Report is being compiled as the UK gives a loud and decisive goodbye to 14 years of Tory austerity and cruelty. We need to celebrate this, but also recognise that refugees seeking to escape war, persecution, destitution and the increasing impact of the climate crisis are unlikely to find their situation significantly or quickly improved. The alarmingly high vote for Reform UK and the lack of clear commitments to tackle the 'Hostile Environment' from the incoming Labour Government are indications of this.

We hope that the significant Labour majority will offer greater opportunities to press for the introduction of safe routes for asylum seekers, the right to work and live in decent accommodation, an end to the detention and threats of deportation and a fairer and speedier resolution of their claims. However, we know we will need to continue to fight for these things as Labour is far from committed to challenging the racism that underpins the current system or valuing the huge contribution which refugees bring to our country.



On a more positive note, the last year has seen SYMAAG's membership and reach continue to grow and this report is testimony to our widespread activities and campaigns, most developed in partnership with other local organisations working with and for refugees. We include our involvement in international campaigns, particularly those fighting for freedom for the Palestinian people. We haven't got space to cover everything we have done, but hope this gives a flavour of our work – all done by volunteers.

We have kept the format of last year's Annual Report, with contributions from different members and partners, interspersed with quotes from new members who have joined us throughout the last year. Thanks to all who have contributed and please get in touch if you want to get involved in the future.

# ASYLUM HOTELS - OPERATION MAXIMISE

In the summer of 2023, the Home Office implemented its policy of 'Operation Maximise', as part of the Government's strategy to ramp up the Hostile Environment and reduce spending on asylum accommodation. What it effectively maximised was stress, anxiety and further trauma for asylum seekers living in former hotels in already poor conditions.

At very short notice, single men living in the hotel in Sheffield, and those across South Yorkshire and the UK, were forced to share their rooms, often with strangers whom they had nothing in common with in terms of language, culture, religion and more. These men (and in several cases boys - see piece on Age-Disputed Children in Adult Asylum Accommodation below), had already experienced significant trauma before and during their journeys to the UK from their homelands resulting in serious mental health issues for many of them. As one of our members commented: "The rooms were our one private space, where we could escape the confusions and pressures of the rest of the hotel - how could we be made to share them?"

At SYMAAG's September meeting we heard detailed and distressed testimony from two of our new members about the impact of this change on them, and the conditions in the hotel.

From that meeting we drafted a strong statement calling on Sheffield City Council to use their limited but real powers to challenge this situation and work with us to improve the safety, health and well-being of the residents of the hotel.

We also worked closely with Victoria Munro, a journalist with Sheffield Tribune to produce a lengthy and supportive article

drawing on our members' experience – the link to the full article is here:

<https://www.sheffieldtribune.co.uk/p/scabies-and-sharing-your-room-with>

Whilst the situation in the hotel eased somewhat, when many residents were granted Leave to Remain before Christmas, to date SYMAAG is not aware of any visits to the hotel by SCC elected members or action in response to our statement in terms of raising concerns with the Home Office or Mears, their contracted accommodation provider for our area. The hotels are now full again, and most men are still having to share rooms.

**Emma**



"I joined SYMAAG to support the work in resisting the hostile environment, and wanting to help mobilise more young people to be in solidarity with those going through the asylum system."

**Barnaby**

# AGE-DISPUTED CHILDREN IN ADULT ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

HARP is a Refugee Council project delivering health advocacy in asylum hotels in Sheffield, Rotherham and Wakefield. In the course of our work, delivering drop-in health access sessions, we regularly come across young people who have not had their given age accepted at the UK border. We always report these young people to the relevant local authority, with the aim of safeguarding them.

Asylum hotels can be challenging places, populated with newly arrived asylum seekers who are traumatised and in need of support for mental and physical health. The young people who have not had their ages believed are sharing rooms with adult men and they feel scared, alone and forgotten. They become disillusioned and it is very clear to see who they are - sticking together, removing themselves from the older men, and behaving like children do. Refugee Council has recognised this ever-growing issue and co-produced a report 'Forced Adulthood' in partnership with other leading organisations.

I have attended SYMAAG meetings, including those SYMAAG used to organise with City Councillors, to raise awareness of this UK wide issue and its local impact. Whilst it is common to dismiss these age disputes as adults who are lying to get better treatment, the truth is much more sinister and children are being left to suffer in adult accommodation without the support that someone of their age should be getting. SYMAAG have contributed to highlighting this problem across the region.

Not having your age believed is a huge breach of trust and has a negative impact on health, education, future work and on the asylum claim itself. Our clients fall between gaps in services where adult services tell them they can't help because they are a child, and vice versa. Examples include mental health services denying access, education being refused in some areas, and even simple things such as wanting to join a sports team but not being allowed.

Our 'Forced Adulthood' report highlights some of the ways in which this problem can be addressed:

[Forced-Adulthood-joint-report-on-age-disputes-January-2024.pdf](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/forced-adulthood-joint-report-on-age-disputes-january-2024.pdf)  
([refugeecouncil.org.uk](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk))

We need to keep reminding our MPs and local councillors about the young people living in hotels in their area, and to challenge the myths about age disputes, not allowing these children whose lives are being put on hold to be forgotten.

**Caroline (Refugee Council)**



Photo credit: The Refugee Council

# RAISING AWARENESS OF REFUGEE HOMELESSNESS

Across the country homelessness and rough sleeping amongst people who have recently received their refugee status has risen dramatically over the past year, and Sheffield is no exception. In the current climate everyone experiencing homelessness faces major barriers to finding secure accommodation, however for refugees the problems are significantly exacerbated by policies such as the 28 day 'move-on period' and the ban on working for asylum seekers.

In response to the rise in refugee homelessness in the city, SYMAAG collaborated with Nomad Opening Doors - a local charity which supports people into secure accommodation - to organise a Housing Summit on March 27th. The summit brought together local people and organisations to raise awareness of the homelessness crisis amongst refugees and explore ideas for how we could respond as a city. Councillors, representatives from both Universities, City of Sanctuary, Shelter, and many other organisations, as well as local individuals, came together to start the conversation and think about what role they might play in the response.

Several potential action points were established, including identifying suitable empty buildings that could be converted into homelessness accommodation, encouraging the Universities to make unoccupied student housing available, or creating a forum to improve co-working between the Council, charities and other organisations and people working in homelessness. To reach a wider audience, representatives from SYMAAG and Nomad also appeared on Sheffield Live's African Voices Platform radio show.

The hostile environment doesn't end when people receive their refugee status. Instead, government policies continue to make life as



difficult as possible, and the homelessness/housing system is a clear example of this. The 28 day move-on period does not give refugees nearly enough time to find alternative accommodation, meaning that homelessness is inevitable for many. Over the coming year SYMAAG will continue to campaign for the housing rights of all refugees and migrants in Sheffield and further afield, drawing attention to the injustice of the current system.

## **Aso & Holly**



“When I moved to Sheffield last year, I looked online for a group that campaigned for migrant rights in the city and SYMAAG immediately stood out. It’s been a privilege becoming part of the SYMAAG community and getting to know so many passionate people working towards the change our asylum system so desperately needs.”

**Holly**

# NO TO HASSECKFIELD DEMONSTRATION

On 18th November 2023, in partnership with People and Planet, Sheffield Solidarity Group, Sheffield Action Group and Sheffield Student Action for Refugees, SYMAAG organised a coach up to join the No to Hassockfield campaign's monthly demo. Over 30 people traveled up from Sheffield to join the protest at the detention centre in County Durham.

Hassockfield is the largest women's immigration detention centre in the UK. Women are often driven for hours after being detained while reporting, and are isolated from their families, who are unable to visit them. Further, a 2022 report found cases of excessive force against detainees, with the body camera footage for some instances 'not being available'.

The demonstration had speakers from across the country including a group of women from London with experience of detention. There was also a noise protest to let the women detained know that we were there as well as a choir.



Representing SYMAAG, Khuzani spoke on his experience of detention, the conditions and the effects it has on people in the asylum process, and Shian spoke on the criminalisation of migrants and the use of the hostile environment as part of colonial violence and exploitation.

We would like to thank everyone who joined us and bought tickets. We are also hugely thankful to the No to Hassockfield campaign for allowing us to take part and for their great work. If you would like to learn more about their campaign and about UK immigration detention you can visit their website, [notohassockfield.org.uk](http://notohassockfield.org.uk), where you can also donate to support their vital work.

**Shian**

# LIFT THE BAN COALITION & LAUNCH

A highlight of this year's work was the official launch of the "Lift the Ban" Coalition at Sheffield Town Hall 15th December 2023.

The event received all party support and was attended by nearly 300 people, including many with lived experience of a system in which delays in resolving claims for asylum and settlement lead to people barely surviving; to homelessness, exploitation and massive trauma related health issues. Some survive only through exploitative work under the radar.

The absurdity of a system which denies migrants the right to work was laid bare by moving testimonies. A doctor spoke of the waste of his skills and experience during a long wait for settled status. A care worker described years of being sexually exploited; being unable to speak out for fear of impacting her asylum claim. Years when her exceptional skills could not be used and her mental health suffered.

The economic and social benefits of including and welcoming migrants in our communities are well evidenced. Some of LTF members work in organisations which are outside of the refugee and migrant sector but report support for solutions to workforce problems which both confer dignity and humanity and address the skills gap.

The local campaign has identified work sectors which may be well placed to bring pressure to bear for legal challenge and change. We are planning community events to raise awareness and meetings to systematically map opportunities for small businesses and workplaces, (including in the third sector) to sign up, collaborate and take practical action.

We want to promote mainstream discussions about the campaign for migrants' right to work, hopefully meeting with the Chamber of Commerce as a first step. We are pleased that the Chamber gave support to the Launch event and delighted that in a new year of action relevant research is ongoing at the University of Sheffield and that Sheffield City Council has formally signed up to the Coalition. We now need action. Thanks to all.

**Lisa**



"I joined SYMAAG when I newly moved to Sheffield in autumn 2023. I'd heard about their work from my time organising in Liverpool and wanted to join to meet like minded people in my new home and to be able to get involved with political action here too. Everyone has been very welcoming and I look forward to getting further involved in future."

**Harriet**

# RWANDA RESPONSE

Following the UK government's announcement at the end of April 2024 that it had launched an operation to detain people with the intention of deporting them to Rwanda (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/may/01/uk-ministers-acknowledge-detention-of-asylum-seekers-to-be-sent-to-rwanda>), a meeting was organised at City of Sanctuary to agree how to work together across the community and in solidarity with those affected. The meeting was packed and the level of anxiety amongst refugees present was understandably evident. Two pieces of work emerged from this, which SYMAAG members played a key part in:

## Vulcan House Protest

A mass protest outside Vulcan House, the Home Office reporting centre in Sheffield, on May 8th. Activists came together to leaflet and fly post to publicise the event, which was also widely advertised on social media. Over 20 organisations sponsored the event, and at least 200 people attended it. Sarli Nana of Migrants Organise led the event, where we heard from a wide range of speakers from across the community, including those with lived experience. This event effectively launched the solidarity stall outlined below.



## Solidarity Stall

A group of individuals, including some members from SYMAAG, organised information materials that explained more detail about the Rwanda plans as well as contacts for lawyers and other groups that could help people who may have received a notice of intent from the Home Office. Following the model of other grassroots groups across the UK who were taking similar actions, they organised a rota for volunteers to be stationed outside Vulcan House, the Home Office reporting centre in Sheffield.

For 2 weeks, the group had a permanent presence outside Vulcan House every day during core reporting hours, talking to individuals as they went into the centre to report, sharing information with them and offering support.

These actions were well received by people the group interacted with, and useful information was shared with them about other services that are available for people seeking sanctuary in Sheffield. Quite a few people expressed anxiety about the ongoing threat of detentions and deportations even outside of the immediate threat of the Rwanda scheme.

At the end of May, once the general election was announced, the government was forced to concede that no flights would take off to Rwanda before the election. This meant that the initial urgency to share support info about Rwanda was somewhat diminished.

The group that had organised the solidarity stall decided to take a step back to consider how individuals could be supported on a longer term basis, given that the threat of detentions remains and continues to impact people seeking sanctuary significantly. The organisers have since had further meetings to discuss what comes next, and are planning to continue to offer information and support as long as people seeking sanctuary are still at risk from detention.

**Fran & Manuchehr**

# EDUCATIONAL EVENTS

The film showings and panel discussions listed below give a flavour of the wide range of events SYMAAG has been involved in over the last year. All are designed to promote discussion, raise awareness and provide political education about the direct experience of refugees in the UK and all have been organised in partnership with organisations with similar concerns to ours:

- October 25th – Showing of Ken Loach's film **The Old Oak** as part of Community Kino, followed by a Panel discussion organised by SYMAAG.
- November 6th - SYMAAG and Community Kino again collaborated on a showing of the film **Gaza Fight for Freedom** at Theatre Deli. This was followed by a Panel Discussion and raised over £1000 for the humanitarian fund for Gaza set up by Sheffield Palestine Solidarity Campaign.
- Feb 22nd – Panel discussion on **Does Britain's Immigration System Respect Human Rights**, organised by SYMAAG, with People and Planet, Student Action for Refugees and Sheffield Solidarity Group at Sheffield University Students Union. Speakers: Nabeela Talib of Detention Action, Siobhan McGuirk researcher and journalist and Victor Mukakachi refugee activist in Sheffield. The event was chaired by Nadia Jama of SYMAAG.
- April 10th – showing of film **Lo Capitano** at the Showroom Cinema, followed by a Panel Discussion hosted by SYMAAG.
- May 2nd – **Child Refugee Event** at Sheffield University, organised with People and Planet and Sheffield Solidarity Group. Chaired by Nadia Jama of SYMAAG, with speakers with lived experience, a social worker and a lecturer and researcher from Sheffield University.

"I joined SYMAAG to collaborate with local folks to resist the hostile environment and to learn from the community, especially from those with lived experiences. "

**Fran**

# INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

## End the Genocide in Palestine

Since October last year and the start of the Israeli genocide in Palestine, SYMAAG has been actively involved in supporting the Sheffield Palestine Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid's many and varied events designed to raise public awareness about the horrors unfolding in Gaza and the West Bank, and on the complicity of our government and leading political parties' at Westminster and in the Town Hall. This has included:

- Holding a special meeting on the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza and on the Palestinian people's continuing resistance to the genocide in December. This was addressed eloquently and passionately by Musheir El-Farrar, the lead spokesperson for Sheffield Palestine Solidarity Campaign and tireless fighter for his people's rights and welfare.
- Sending a SYMAAG delegation to the huge London demonstration on January 13th this year.
- Taking the SYMAAG banner and many of our members to almost all the Coalition rallies, marches and events, and promoting these widely through our social media, and mailings.
- Actively supporting the Sheffield Palestine Campus Coalition Camp since it started in May this year.







## Kurdish Solidarity

Since highlighting the fight for Women Life Freedom in Iran last year, SYMAAG has been actively involved in supporting the local Kurdish community. This has included working with Sheffield University Students to establish the Sheffield Kurdish Solidarity Network and helping them to develop and Solidarity Centre in the centre of Sheffield. On March 22nd, SYMAAG jointly organised a lively Nowruz Celebration (Kurdish New Year) together with the Sheffield Kurdish Solidarity Network (SKSN).

"As a journalist, I have written, write and fight for aspirations to build a society and a world where every human being can live with their human rights and their identity freely and with security and peace - no matter who they are. Because I am a Kurdish journalist and because of my Kurdish identity, I have been arrested, threatened with death and persecuted in my home country. I believe SYMAAG shares my values and works to create a safe space and welcoming atmosphere for all."

**Aso**

# SOLIDARITY WITH THE STUDENT PALESTINE CAMP

Since October, we have seen large mobilisations for Palestine across the UK. And since April, there has been a wave of camps for Palestine and occupations have spread across university campuses demanding adherence from Universities to the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement in relation to the genocidal Israeli state. This has focused in particular on pressing Universities to cut their ties with the military industrial complex more widely.

Here in Sheffield, we have seen a large camp since May 1st outside the University of Sheffield Students Union, led by Sheffield Campus Coalition for Palestine. This group has highlighted the direct and substantial links that Sheffield University has to the arms trade, having received at least £72 million pounds of investment from the world's largest arms manufacturers since 2012/13 and being the University most benefitting from this type of investment in the UK by a large margin.

SYMAAG has consistently supported the camp, with our members regularly visiting and donating to it. SYMAAG ran an update session there on the Rwanda situation alongside collaborating with the camp and other groups in Sheffield to mobilise for the demonstration outside the Home Office Vulcan House reporting centre covered elsewhere in this Annual Report.

## **Spirit**



# RADICAL PRIDE 2023

In July 2023, SYMAAG marched with the migrants and refugees delegation at Sheffield Radical Pride and we had a stall there. The purpose of Radical Pride is to disrupt mainstream pride which begs and pleads for room under a racist-ableist-capitalist establishment and work with the systems that further oppress. Radical Pride embodies the spirit of the Stonewall Uprisings, we do not ask for space, we demand it.

Last year, it was a beautiful (rainy) day that prioritised the most marginalised communities - Black, Brown and minoritised ethnicities, disabled folk, immigrants, refugees, those whose right to movement is structurally restricted, sex workers and many others who sit at intersections of these oppressive systems. Radical Pride illustrates what it looks like to re-imagine and build new worlds and what inter-community solidarity can look like.

It was so powerful and necessary for SYMAAG to have that space within Radical Pride as sometimes in the mainstream, these two can be divorced or at least treated like they're divorced. We had a stall and it was wonderful to have people come and chat and learn about how SYMAAG works and the actions we do. The work continues as we unlearn, re-learn and co-learn while softly holding each others' hands.





# THANK YOU

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