

Conversation Club Leeds

Trustees' Report 2020-2021



REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER: 1189217

ADDRESS: 16 BEECH GROVE, GARFORTH, LEEDS, LS25 1EG

TRUSTEES:

DOROTHY READ (CHAIRPERSON)

WAQAS SAAD SHAKIR AL BAJJARI

ELIZABETH MARY CATHERINE THOMAS

STRUCTURE AND MANAGEMENT

The organisation's activities are carried out exclusively by volunteers. Overall management and co-ordination are carried out by the trustees. There are no employees.

Trustees are recruited by personal contact and recommendation. The organisation seeks to recruit additional trustees so as to increase their number to above the minimum of three required by its constitution.

The Conversation Club, founded as an Unincorporated Association in 2016, became a registered charity (a CIO) - Conversation Club Leeds - on 1st April 2020.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES:

The organisation exists for the promotion of social inclusion for the public benefit among people who are refugees and asylum seekers who are socially excluded on the grounds of their social and economic position, by providing: (1) education and training in the English language and in vocational skills; (2) social and recreational facilities and events involving the local community.

Activities during the year 2020/21 are set out in the following paragraphs.

A SHORT HISTORY

Conversation Club started in 2016, in response to the refugee crisis sweeping across Europe in the wake of the Syrian civil war and other events in the Middle East and Africa. A large public meeting at the Yorkshire Playhouse resulted in various spin-off groups; our group planned to help asylum-seekers to practise speaking English in a safe and welcoming environment.

We were fortunate to have support from the Rev Jo James at Mill Hill Chapel, who allowed us to use the church hall free of charge for our weekly meetings. At the first meeting on 12th May 2016, just four asylum seekers attended, with probably six or eight volunteers! From that small beginning, word quickly spread among the asylum seeker community and it soon became a very lively, noisy and popular place for them to make friends and meet up, providing a much-needed social space. We continued with increasing numbers until it became obvious that in order to raise enough funds to pay for guests' bus fares, we needed to become a registered charity.

This happened one week after the start of the first national lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the year in between has been a challenging one, to say the least. From hosting 80 - 90 asylum-seeker guests plus volunteers at the weekly drop-in sessions in Mill Hill Chapel, our face-to-face meetings stopped on 12th March 2020, and up to the current time, March 2021, have not restarted.

With our guests uppermost in our minds, we set about finding an alternative way of reaching them and trying to support them remotely. We were acutely aware of the desperate loneliness and mental health problems many of them were facing

due to enforced isolation and lack of social contact, as well as basic physical needs such as food, and access to medical and dental care.

OPERATING ON-LINE

Along with the rest of the world, we discovered Zoom, and set up a weekly online Zoom meeting at the normal Conversation Club meeting time. At first this had only two or three guests a week, sometimes none, but once we realised that a huge issue for guests was a lack of mobile phone data, we applied for and were awarded funds last summer by the Leeds Community Fund to purchase phone top-ups. Since then, the numbers attending the weekly session have been gradually increasing, and guests are beginning to enjoy attending, and chatting in a group about the weekly topic and other issues. Each week, around six or eight volunteers also attend.

We also tried another online space we called the 'Coffee Bar', which was available for anyone to meet-up online at any time; however there wasn't enough demand at the time to make it work.

PARTNERSHIPS

For weeks after the first lockdown, some of our guests were in need of food parcels, and basic supplies such as nappies and baby food, which we were able to organise, and we became a registered referral agency for Leeds South & East Food Bank.

We have always had a close relationship with HARP (Health Access for Refugees Programme), part of the Refugee Council, and this connection has proved invaluable in getting GP, dental, mental health and hospital appointments during the pandemic. These have been difficult to access for everyone, but especially for our guests, many of whom have limited English.

We have also been communicating and working with other organisations including LASSN, the Red Cross, Touchstone, RETAS and PAFRAS, many of whom come together in the framework of the Leeds Migration Partnership. We are in touch with some Conversation Clubs and similar projects around the country.

LOCKDOWN SUPPORT and PROJECTS

We have supported asylum seeker guests with many challenging situations this year, including hospital admissions, sudden changes in accommodation, accessing GP and hospital treatment, potential homelessness, finding furniture for those who have been granted refugee status. We have also supported LEDAS by providing access to phone top-ups for their residents. Volunteers have been contacting a number of guests regularly by text and phone, checking that they are ok. Some volunteers have also provided individual English lessons / conversation practice on the phone or on Zoom.

During the summer, when meeting outdoors was allowed, we started meeting in local parks to make access easy for guests. We managed to keep the guests in groups of six, and though there weren't big numbers, they really seemed to enjoy just sitting and talking to each other.

That all stopped with the second lockdown - and the colder weather - on 2nd November. We had reports from our own volunteers and other organisations that many guests were suffering depression caused by the enforced isolation and the darker days. We started encouraging guests to take photos when they went for their walk in their local parks, and from this we collaborated with LASSN, Refugee Council, and other organisations to develop the idea of an online photograph gallery. We called it 'Lighting Up Lockdown' and asked guests and volunteers to send photos on different themes for the seven weeks until the end of the year. The result was a gallery of a lot of wonderful photos, which have now been collected into a video.

We have also commissioned a short film about Conversation Club, which is now on the Facebook page. A website is currently under construction.

Three volunteers are currently making our first podcast, which is proving to be quite a learning curve. But we hope that we will be able to produce it regularly, to help keep in touch with guests.

FUNDING NEEDS

We are currently looking for funding to cover various future Conversation Club costs, including potential room hire fees, phone data top-ups, bus fares, digital equipment (laptops / tablets) for guests, possibly day trips. We recently applied for and received a £5000 grant from the Grail Society.

FUTURE PLANS

While we would love to go back to our original 'roots' in Mill Hill Chapel, this seems unlikely, and we are looking for other venues, probably for two smaller meetings per week, instead of one large one.

THANKS

I would like to say a huge 'Thank You' to the Rev Jo James and the trustees of Mill Hill Chapel, where we had an extremely happy and fruitful (and rent-free!) four years - Conversation Club wouldn't be the same had we not had such a great start there.

Our grateful thanks are also due to Clive Briscoe, who is stepping down as treasurer after three years, during which he guided the trustees through the process of becoming a registered charity. And we say a warm welcome to Phil Lawler, who has stepped into Clive's shoes. Phil has a great deal of past experience in business and also within the refugee charity sector. Also, a huge 'Thank you' to Ann Callarman, who has been a committed volunteer since the start of Conversation Club, and has also been a trustee and the secretary since we became a registered charity, working tirelessly to get us through the seemingly endless paperwork.

We gratefully acknowledge much needed financial support from our funders in 2020-21:

- Leeds Community Foundation
- Grail Society

Finally, I would like to say a huge 'Thank You' to the amazing group of volunteers who have stoically kept Conversation Club alive through the last grim and unprecedented 12 months. They have shown great tenacity in attending weekly online meetings; reliability and compassion in supporting guests; ingenuity, humour and, in some cases, downright stubbornness in refusing to give up when standing up for guests against sometimes uncaring officialdom. Without their dedication over the past year, Conversation Club simply wouldn't have survived.

IN MEMORIAM

We pay tribute to two individual volunteers who played important roles in the development of the club:

- Helen Parkin, one of the founder members, died in March 2018. Her energy, enthusiasm and commitment to Conversation Club were legendary. She is still very much missed to this day.
- John Hall died in early 2021. Every week he supported asylum seekers in his own quiet way in the structured English classes at Conversation Club. When face-to-face meetings resume, we will miss his unassuming presence and his wonderful Northern Irish sense of humour.

FINANCIAL STATEMENT

The accounts for the year ended 31st March 2021, and the balance sheet at the end of that year, are shown below.

SIGNED ON BEHALF OF THE TRUSTEES

D READ

29TH JUNE 2021

Dot Read, Chairperson

CONVERSATION CLUB
LEEDS
ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31ST
MARCH 2021
BALANCE SHEET

	<u>This</u> <u>Year</u>	<u>2020</u>
CURRENT ASSETS		-
Cash at Bank	8,471.83	2,571.06
Cash in Hand	397.20	457.20
Stock of bus tickets	2,047.00	2,198.50
Debtors	0.00	698.71
	10,916.03	5,925.47
TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS		
CURRENT LIABILITIES		
Creditors	0.00	15.39
Loans	0.00	200.00
TOTAL LIABILITIES	0.00	215.39
	10,916.03	5,710.08
TOTAL NET ASSETS		
Represented by:	5,710.08	5,210.46
OPENING FUNDS	5,205.95	(831.78)
SURPLUS THIS YEAR	10,916.03	5,710.08
CLOSING FUNDS		
<u>INCOME AND EXPENDITURE</u> <u>ACCOUNT</u>	This	Previou

INCOME	<u>Year</u>	<u>s</u> <u>Year</u>
Donations	0.00	1,957.31
Fundraising income	0.00	1,585.46
Grants	8,700.00	6,094.86
Sales	35.00	989.72
Miscellaneous	0.00	362.29
TOTAL INCOME	8,735.00	10,989.64
EXPENDITURE		
Administration	49.00	0.00
Bus tickets	151.50	10,524.10
Craft goods and purchases	0.00	484.32
Fundraising expenses	0.00	415.00
Hardship gifts	122.40	100.00
Miscellaneous	248.32	298.00
Telephone top-ups	2,635.00	0.00
Social media	142.86	0.00
Training	179.97	0.00
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	3,529.05	11,821.42
SURPLUS INCOME OVER EXPENDITURE	5,205.95	(831.78)