
WITNESS STATEMENT OF IMOGEN HARDMAN

I, Imogen Hardman, of Care4Calais, will say as follows:

1. I am the Head of Field Operations – France for Care4Calais. (“C4C”). I have worked for C4C as Operations Manager between October 2020 – March 2022 and as Head of Field Operations between March 2023 – present. I have been responsible for running all aspects of Care4Calais’ operations in northern France including the management of the warehouse and donation storage facility, the volunteer teams who support our daily operations and the service provision and our mass non-food items (“NFI”) distributions.
2. The matters set out in this statement are within my own knowledge and experience, save where the contrary is indicated. I enclose a bundle of exhibits, which I refer to below. These are labelled “EX-IH1”, “EX-IH2” and so on. I confirm that these documents are true copies, and are accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
3. In this statement, I intend to assist the Inquiry with their investigation under the Terms of Reference, and in particular in respect of VI of the List of Issues, Recommendations. I will provide a description of the living conditions in Northern France for those who attempt the crossing, and how the situation now compares with November 2021, when the boat sank on 23/24 November 2021 (“**the November 2021 Incident**”). It is the view of Care4Calais that when making recommendations to prevent loss of life in the future, it is vital to consider the context of the conditions in which people making the crossing find themselves in Northern France and how this impacts on their welfare and decision making in attempting a journey which risks their lives.
4. This statement is divided into seven parts and structured as follows:
 - I. The work of Care4Calais in northern France
 - II. Communities supported by C4C in northern France
 - III. Reasons people attempt to reach the UK
 - IV. Conditions for displaced people in Northern France
 - V. The events and aftermath of 23-24 November 2021
 - VI. French response to people missing in the Channel
 - VII. The effect of loss of life on displacement communities
 - VIII. Conclusion and Recommendations

5. This statement was prepared with the assistance of Duncan Lewis solicitors who I understand represent a survivor and the families of several of the victims of the incident in November 2021, which is the subject matter of the Cranston Inquiry.

I. The work of Care4Calais in northern France

Humanitarian work

6. Care4Calais (C4C) was established in 2015 and registered as a charity in the United Kingdom and France in 2016. It provides direct aid and social support to displaced people in France and the U.K., as well as advocating for a welcoming and inclusive attitude towards displaced people. In northern France we are one of a small number of NGOs who provide basic services and humanitarian support to displaced communities. We run seven sessions each week over six days with displaced communities in northern France, spending between 2.5 and 3 hours with communities each afternoon.
7. When we began our operation in Northern France, we operated in what was then known as the 'Jungle'; a large, informal settlement in Calais, built by displaced communities with the support of civil society in the absence of state support. Most people will refer to any living site in Dunkirk or Calais as 'the jungle', however what was known then as 'The Calais Jungle' was home to an estimated 6,000 people, including over 1,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children¹ ("UASCs") (IH1/EX-1;INQ008186). The site encompassed living quarters, community spaces, cafes, restaurants, barbers and more, all created on an informal basis by those living there.
8. After the violent destruction of the singular camp and eviction of residents by police on 24th October 2016, thousands of people were bussed away from Calais by the French authorities², including UASCs, to reception centres in various locations across France (IH1/EX-2; INQ008197) Since then people have continued to arrive in Calais to attempt to make it to the UK to seek asylum. However, in the absence of any alternative accommodation, and as a result of efforts by the French government to prevent the creation of another large scale camp, people are now forced to live in separate, smaller, informal settlements. I will outline in paragraphs 47 – 62 the conditions that people live in currently, and how this has changed over the years since the destruction of the Calais 'Jungle'.
9. Following the dismantling of the Calais jungle we adapted our services in response to the change in how people were living, to include visiting the different sites and holding organised

¹ <https://doctorsoftheworld.org/blog/the-demolition-of-the-calais-jungle/>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-37745386>

distributions of items, activities and services at set locations. In 2020 our service was forced to adapt once more in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other NGOs operating in Northern France were forced to pause their services, including the provision of food items, which the majority of displaced people living in and around Calais and Dunkirk relied on for sustenance. As a result we took the decision to begin distributing food packs containing mainly dried goods and tinned food that community members could take away to cook themselves at their living sites. This year (2024), we have stopped distributing food items, a decision made in light of the high costs associated with purchasing items, and the fact that daily food provision is now again being provided by other NGOs and the Prefecture. The only exception is during Ramadan each year, where we distribute food packs consisting of bags of dried food for cooking, to replace hot food distributions which are no longer accessible for the community observing Ramadan in Calais and Dunkirk (Grande Synthe). We are now the only mass distributors of non-food items ("NFI") in Calais.

10. Currently, we distribute NFI including men's clothing and shelter items (tents, sleeping mats and sleeping bags) at seven distributions a week, as well as clothing for women and children twice a week. In any four - six week period we aim to meet the basic clothing and shelter needs of the communities living here. We run static mass distributions and service provision sessions. These sessions take place between 2pm and 5pm, six days per week. We set up at regular sites (wasteland or empty land) close to living sites, to ensure as much accessibility as possible for those living in informal settlements in Calais and Dunkirk. Each session is accessible to anyone living in the area and during summer months, we can reach upwards of 500 people at each distribution. The service sessions, which run six days a week across four different distribution sites, allow for the creation of a safe space where people can come together, socialise and have a temporary sense of normalcy and respite from the difficulties and violence faced on an almost daily basis. We are acutely aware of the indignity of destitution and having to wait in line for handouts from charitable organisations to ensure your continued existence, however we have to ensure that our distributions operate safely and fairly for everyone, including our own staff and volunteers. The provision of services allow us to interact on slightly more equal footing with the communities we serve, and for people to be able to partake in activities with dignity.
11. Whilst we do not distribute food, our services do include hot drinks (tea, coffee, and hot chocolate) and biscuits. In some cases, if an individual has not been able to attend food distributions run by other organisations, for example because they have been away from their living site attempting to cross to the UK, this may be the only food people have access to that day. This also applies to newer arrivals to Calais or Dunkirk, who may not yet know of the existence, timings or locations of food distributions, or who may not have been able to find any food for days at a time during long journeys to get to northern France. We take generators along to our sessions to allow for the provision of phone charging stations, with extension leads attached to wooden pallets to keep them off the ground. This allows for people to charge

their phones which is crucial to their ability to live in the harsh environment in Northern France. The majority of people we support are from countries facing ongoing, widespread violence and conflict, and the ability to contact families and friends is a priority for them. Being able to charge their phones also allows people to let loved ones know that they themselves are alive. Access to the internet also allows for access to Maps, Google, communication with each other, and the sharing of important information.

12. The generators we bring also support our hair dressing station. We bring clippers, hairdressing scissors, razors, and mirrors. Our volunteers will hold the space to allow for the communities to cut each other's hair. The lack of WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) provision in Northern France means that people struggle to keep up with their personal hygiene, which can have an additional negative impact on their mental wellbeing. A new haircut can offer some dignity back to people forced to live in undignified conditions. It also creates a community space where people can come together, and is always a popular activity. We ensure that equipment is sanitised between individual haircuts and any razors are returned and disposed of safely.
13. We also offer a bicycle repair station where people can access tools, puncture repair kits and inner tubes. On occasion we will have bicycle parts which have been donated and are able to replace parts on existing bicycles. Due to the increasingly long distances between living sites, our distribution sites, and/or food distributions, the people we support may walk tens of kilometres each day simply to access food, water, or clothing. Having a bicycle within their network means that one individual can go and bring back food and water for a number of people quickly.
14. Our sewing station enables people to fix clothing items and bags, making each item last longer. Some of their limited possessions may also hold sentimental value and repairing them allows people to hold onto them for longer.
15. We hold English sessions ranging from formal lessons using resources provided to very informal conversation classes, whichever those who attend prefer and that our volunteers feel able to provide. These are incredibly popular; often we speak to individuals who have spent time learning English using phone apps or YouTube throughout their journey, and are keen to partake in sessions focused on this. We support a large number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (under 18s who have typically left their home countries alone or in rarer circumstances have been separated from their families and responsible adults during the journey), who are always particularly interested in learning English. Many have been unable to continue their education in their home country due to conflict or have never had the opportunity to access this at all.

16. Lastly we always take games and activities to our sessions; footballs, goal posts, sets of dominoes, Jenga, decks of cards etc. The common goal for all of these activities is to give people the opportunity to have some respite from the difficult conditions of living in Northern France.
17. At the majority of these sessions we also work with a medical NGO, First Aid Support Team (FAST) who provide basic first aid and triage medical care to displaced communities.
18. During the distributions and services sessions, our team of staff and volunteers also provide information to displaced communities, as well as signposting people to other NGOs providing different services such as laundry, sim card distributions or tent and shelter distributions. We often give information with updates on UK and French immigration policy, which could affect communities, and signpost people to access legal or asylum advice from legal groups operating on the French side of the border .
19. C4C does not give legal advice as we are not qualified to do so, we also refrain from any conversations which could affect people's decision to stay in France or head to the UK. It is our experience that, whilst the people we work with in northern France are aware of headline grabbing immigration and asylum policy news, such as the Rwanda plan, there is little awareness or understanding of the complexity of the UK immigration and asylum system, and how it will affect them as individuals. The primary concern for the communities is reaching a place where they feel safe and able to rebuild their lives, and for the majority of the people we interact in Northern France this is in the UK. There are of course tens of thousands of refugees who stay in France and other European countries without considering travelling to the UK; in fact only 7% of the displaced people entering Europe ultimately access the UK asylum system. We also support a small number of people in northern France who have made an asylum claim in France and are waiting for a decision here but are not offered accommodation by the state. For example, we had almost no conversations about the provisions in the last series of new legislation (the Illegal Migration Act, the Nationality and Borders Act, and the New Plan for Immigration). Whilst some members of the community expressed concern and worry about the threat of being removed to Rwanda or housed on the Bibby Stockholm barge, this was not significant enough to deter them from continuing their journey to the UK for the most part.
20. Our volunteer numbers fluctuate throughout the year with a minimum of five and a maximum of 40 volunteers per day. Some volunteers are with us for a short period of time, others are long term and may stay with us for several months. The presence of long-term volunteers enables us to build strong relationships with the communities living in Northern France, as they will be able to see the same people multiple times per week. This increases our understanding of the situation on the border.

21. Each day volunteers will receive two thorough briefings from the team leader that day (either by an operations staff member or long-term volunteer). The first briefing occurs first thing in the morning when we run through what preparations we will be completing in the warehouse in order for us to run distributions later in the afternoon. Information offered includes the various tasks volunteers will need to complete, for example checking and cleaning tents ready to be distributed or checking clothing donations and sorting them by size, as well as health and safety information such as evacuation points in the event of a fire. We also brief volunteers that they must wear C4C hi-vis vests at all times whilst in the warehouse, as this allows us visibility if someone enters the building that is not authorised to do so. Whilst we have always safeguarded the address of the warehouse we have, on occasion, been visited by unauthorised journalists, locals unhappy with our work, or members of far-right groups. We brief our volunteers to notify a team leader as soon as possible if they see anyone in the warehouse who is not wearing a C4C vest.
22. Especially in the wake of far-right violence in the UK in August 2024 and evidence that these actors have and are making trips to Northern France to film and harass the displaced communities, we have taken the decision to put out further security information to all volunteers. This includes ensuring all volunteers have charged phones with data that can facilitate online communication in France at all times, strengthened photo policies where we do not permit any images or videos to be taken at our service sessions, ensuring that no information is shared, either by C4C or volunteers which shows the location, or rough location, of our warehouse and distribution sites. We also added additional information to alert volunteers to the risks and to be mindful of their own online presence before, during and after volunteering with us.
23. We inform our volunteers that they must carry their photo ID at all times when out and about in Calais on behalf of C4C. Since December 2023 volunteers must carry their passport or EU identity card. Carrying ID is a legal requirement in France and the police may ask for it. Since 2023, police have begun requesting that non-EU citizens prove they have the right to be in France through a visa or Schengen zone stamp in their travel document. There have been instances where British volunteers for other organisations working in Northern France have been detained at a border detention facility when asked to present their ID and only carrying a driving licence.
24. We also brief our volunteers that the sites we are visiting in either Calais or Dunkirk are either unauthorised living or distribution sites and therefore our insurance does not cover volunteers when we are out on site, and it is very unlikely that their own travel insurance will either. Volunteers take part in distribution and activity sessions at their own risk and are always able to choose to stay in the warehouse.

25. The second briefing of the day is in the afternoon before we head out to the distribution sites. We firstly run through the different services we will have with us and how they operate. Secondly we explain how our distribution will run. Lastly, we brief our volunteers on health and safety during our session. We explain what the muster point is should we have to conduct a hard evacuation of the site, which occurs in the event that our distribution becomes unsafe. For example, the limited resources available in Northern France mean that tensions and conflicts can occur between different communities. We rarely have to conduct a hard evacuation however the most recent time was September 2024, due to a fight breaking out during a distribution.
26. Finally we ensure that volunteers are briefed on the potential for police presence at our distributions. Police behaviour towards the displaced communities living in northern France is of a violent and harassing nature, as further detailed in paragraphs 63 – 70 below. As a result we ask our volunteers not to approach the police if they are present at our session, and to direct them to a team leader should they be approached by the police.

II. Communities supported by Care4Calais in northern France

27. The numbers and demographics of displaced people living in Northern France fluctuate given the transient nature of people's stays in the area. However, in the years we have operated from Calais we have noted certain trends. The nationalities typically reflect the countries that are facing surges in conflict and/or violence around the world. Protracted Refugee Situations ("PRS"³) globally mean that there has been a constant presence of individuals from certain states in northern France (IH1;EX-3/INQ008208). Following notable escalations in conflict numbers tend to increase. For example, in the earlier years of our operations we supported large numbers of Syrian individuals fleeing civil war, today we continue to see and support Syrian individuals but numbers have dropped. Afghan people have been present in Calais and Dunkirk since the beginning of our operation, yet numbers surged following the most recent return to power of the Taliban regime, especially after it became apparent that safe passage offerings by states in the Global North were so limited.
28. Typically, the people we support are male individuals, although some communities do have higher numbers of women and children. We undertake women's and children's distributions of clothing items twice per week. We visit four different sites across Calais and Dunkirk each week across six days, during which we complete seven sessions. Distribution and service

³ Milner, James, 'Protracted Refugee Situations', in Elena Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, and others (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (2014; online edn, Oxford Academic, 4 Aug. 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199652433.013.0038>, accessed 14 Aug. 2024.

sessions are usually attended by certain majority nationality groups based on the location with some minority nationality groups in attendance.

Sudanese

29. Currently, the largest demographic we see is Sudanese people whose numbers have increased since the outbreak of the current conflict in April 2023⁴ (IH1/EX;4-INQ008219). We saw this increase within a few months of the outbreak of the conflict, which is currently one of the world's largest displacement crises. The time it takes to see the impact of global conflicts on the demographics of people living in Northern France varies depending on the funds available to the individual and the routes they must take. At the quickest we will see people begin to arrive in Calais and Dunkirk weeks after conflict has broken out in their home country, in other instances it can take a few months to see any notable change in numbers.
30. Twice per week our session is attended by the Sudanese community in Calais, which is made up of a few hundred individuals at any time. These are predominantly young males. We would estimate that currently over 50% of the Sudanese community are unaccompanied children aged between 14-17. Previously the Sudanese people we would meet would be non-Arab Darfuri, from the Darfur region of Sudan, where ethnic persecution has remained commonplace over the last few decades. Now, we support people from across Sudan, at first from Khartoum where fighting began but as the situation has worsened we now see refugees from the whole of Sudan. People fleeing Sudan are typically forced to take migration routes through Libya where they are likely to experience arbitrary detention, torture, trafficking and modern slavery before being able to undertake the journey across the Mediterranean, which takes up to 4 or 5 days at sea. It is usual for people to make multiple attempts at this journey, after experiencing violent pull backs by the Libyan 'coastguard'⁵⁶⁷⁸ who will bring any survivors back to state run detention centres where they are again at risk of further exploitation (IH1/EX;5-INQ008222 – IH1/EX;8-INQ008225). This route typically means that we see the effect of forced migration from Sudan weeks or months after the beginning of any conflict or persecution. People will have been displaced and travelling for a number of weeks and months; sometimes even years – this has a significant impact on their mental wellbeing. The people that we meet in northern France are often acutely traumatised by experiences both within their home countries and on their journeys to Europe. The Sudanese community is the nationality most likely to stay in Calais for the longest time. In the time that we have been here they tend to have the least amount of funds to engage a smuggler, and in autumn and winter their situation becomes more desperate as there are fewer

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/sudan>

⁵ <https://sea-watch.org/en/ignored-mayday-relay-leads-to-illegal-pullback/>

⁶ <https://sos-humanity.org/en/press/libyan-patrol-boat-obstructing-rescue/>

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/1/caught-on-camera-libyan-coast-guard-shoots-at-migrant-boat>

⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/libya-migrants-boat-rammed-2947c449355bd007747698ee5f347700#>

opportunities to cross and the conditions in the living sites become even harder. In the summer when more boats are departing there are more opportunities to try and jump on a boat without having paid. As crossings by lorry have become more difficult due to securitisation, the Sudanese community have fewer and fewer options. Due to the current conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan, inflation in the country has significantly increased and food insecurity is exceptionally high. As a result, many people in the diaspora community who would ordinarily assist those trying to reach safety, are now sending any money that they may have back to their families still in Sudan. This means that those on the move have even fewer sources of financial support to draw on.

31. Recently we have witnessed the arrival of a small number of Sudanese women and children in northern France, which is in contrast to what we have seen before. Because of the dangers associated with the Libya migration route it is not usual for women and children to travel with male family members, who usually travel alone in the hope that reach their destination and bring their family members safely in the future. Through conversations with members of the Sudanese community in the UK, we understand that more women and children have begun to journey through Libya, due the escalation of the conflict in Sudan. Women and children face a higher risk of sexual violence, rape and sexual exploitation, in addition to the dangers faced by all migrants journeying through Libya. There is currently no process for Sudanese individuals to safely reach the UK and make a claim for asylum without engaging with irregular routes.

Kurdish

32. We have consistently met people from Kurdistan, who have always, at least to my knowledge, been based in Dunkirk. A constant presence of a Kurdish community reflects the persecution and protracted situation faced by Kurds across the Middle East where they are often denied citizenship, access to state services, or basic rights. Following the earthquake in Turkey in 2023, we saw an increase in Kurdish people arriving in northern France who had been disproportionately affected by the natural disaster, as a result of receiving little or no state support or aid during the relief efforts. In 2021, there was also a noticeable spike in the number of Kurdish people arriving in northern France, specifically family groups, who tended to spend less time here and made quicker crossings than other communities living here.
33. Typically, this population is made up of predominantly single adult males, families (I would say the highest number of family groups per nationality), and some unaccompanied children. Most Kurdish people we interact with in Dunkirk have taken the Balkan route across Europe to reach northern France. Many Iraqi Kurds that we speak to report that they are a persecuted population in Iraq, who face discrimination and socio-economic exclusion to an extent that they are unable to lead safe lives. Turkish Kurds report that they are also excluded from state support, especially following the earthquake in 2023 where they were excluded from access

to state provided aid to rebuild their lives. I met a Turkish Kurd in 2023, who had lost his entire immediate family in the earthquake and after six months with no support or provision from any aid organisation or the state he was forced to leave. Syrian Kurdish people we speak to explain how their community has far less rights in Syria than the majority population. Often Kurdish individuals appear to spend less time in northern France compared with other nationalities such as Sudanese (who I would estimate spend the longest) and Eritrean and South Sudanese (perhaps the second longest). This estimation is based on my experience at distributions which these communities attend each week, where I will regularly see the same people from, for example, the Sudanese, South Sudanese and Eritrean communities many weeks in succession. However, it is rare to see the same people from the Kurdish communities.

34. My understanding is that the length of time spent in the area relates in part to people's ability to engage with smugglers and finance crossings. Colleagues in the UK, who have extended conversations with people about their journeys after they have successfully crossed the Channel, have also reported that Kurdish clients more than other nationalities advise that they engage smugglers from their country of origin and are brought through Europe under their control. This is also sometimes the case for individuals from Iran and Afghanistan, but seems to be less common for other nationalities. Where an individual is travelling under the control of smugglers they are usually unaware of where they are and cannot name the countries they travelled through to reach the UK. They may also be fearful of disobeying the smugglers' instructions at any point of the journey, as the smugglers are often armed.

Afghan

35. The Afghan community in northern France currently consists of mostly adult male individuals. Soon after the recent Taliban takeover in 2021 we began to see increasing numbers of Afghan people in northern France. Many had been unable to access spaces on the few evacuation flights leaving during the fall of Kabul, did not meet the narrow criteria, or had time to wait for the application process for the ARAP scheme set up by the UK government in April 2021. As a result people were forced to flee the country utilising any route available to them. During the time of the Taliban takeover the Afghan community lived in the Calais area, however in the months after the existing population numbers dwindled and new arrivals fleeing Afghanistan began living in Dunkirk.

Ethiopian

36. A small number of Ethiopian men and women continue to arrive in northern France, and typically live in the living sites in Dunkirk or Calais. In Calais, women and children of this community tend to receive support with accommodation from Christian groups who provide support on an ad hoc basis, and they therefore do not attend C4C distributions as frequently

as other community groups. Many Ethiopians we met during 2021 and 2022 had arrived as a result of the ongoing civil war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

Eritrean

37. Twice per week we distribute and provide services to the Eritrean community in Calais who are predominantly made up of male individuals, although there are higher numbers of females within this nationality group who have travelled alone. There is also a more diverse age range amongst this community with a higher proportion of adults to unaccompanied children, although we still see a high number of unaccompanied children. We have observed a small number of unaccompanied female children within the Eritrean community. Many of the people we speak to disclose fleeing the current dictatorship in Eritrea⁹, including forced conscription into the national military services (IH1/EX-9;INQ008226). Similarly to the Sudanese community the typical route taken by Eritrean individuals is via Sudan through Libya, across the Mediterranean and into Europe facing the same challenges throughout. As with the Sudanese community there is no process for Eritrean individuals to seek asylum in the UK without undertaking irregular journeys to reach UK territory.

Syrian

38. Once per week we distribute at a site in Calais frequented by Syrian individuals. We are seeing more family groups within this community, including women and young children. Numbers of Syrian nationals have varied over the years since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, initially hundreds of people were staying in northern France at any one time but have decreased over time. In recent weeks and months there has been a slight increase in numbers of people interacting with our service provision although they are not as high as Sudanese or Eritrean communities. Through conversations with Syrian individuals in both northern France, and following their arrival in the UK when they are supported by our UK operation, we understand that one of the more typical routes to the area includes travelling via Eastern Europe and the Balkan region¹⁰¹¹, crossing by boat between Turkey and Greece (IH1/EX-10; INQ008187, IH1/EX-11;INQ008188). Here people may face similar state pushbacks and pullbacks at sea as well as at land borders where state police violence is widespread and too often deadly.

⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/eritrea>

¹⁰ <https://www.fmreview.org/externalisation/aulsebrook-gruber-pawson/#:~:text=All%20across%20the%20region%2C%20we,use%20of%20electric%20discharge%20weapons.>

¹¹ <https://ecre.org/balkan-route-and-eastern-borders-ongoing-violent-pushbacks-from-croatia-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina-pope-francis-urge-hungarians-to-open-doors-to-migrants-latvia-criminalises-migrants-rights-defender/>

39. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, we began to see Ukrainian individuals arrive in Calais and Dunkirk seeking to come to the UK. However the swift announcement of support schemes, temporary protection and travel visas to safely reach the UK meant that we have no knowledge of any Ukrainian citizens crossing the Channel by small boat. C4C also supported a small group of non-Ukrainian citizens who had been resident in Ukraine at the outbreak of the conflict including two Iranian people who had refugee status in Ukraine and one Yemeni individual. None were eligible for the Ukrainian scheme set up by the UK government. We tried to support them to access legal representation to make an application for entry to the UK but the outcome of this is unknown. We are aware of people who fled the war in Ukraine but were not eligible for any of the visa schemes, and ultimately chose irregular routes and arrived in the UK by small boat.

III. Reasons people attempt to reach the UK

40. Through conversations we have had with thousands of people experiencing forced migration over the years we have operated both in Northern France and the UK, we have identified a number of themes regarding people's motivations in choosing the UK as a destination to make a claim for asylum. For many people, the UK is the only place they envision finding safety. They often have strong community ties to the UK and cannot imagine being safe in France or other countries they have passed through on their journey.
41. First, many people we support have friends and/or family connections in the UK and wish to join them to rebuild their lives. This is especially the case with the large number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children we support in Calais. During a conversation in July 2024 in Calais with an unaccompanied 15-year-old child from Darfur, Sudan, he explained that his immediate family had been killed in the recent conflict after his village had been raided by militia groups associated with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). He wanted to reunite with an uncle and his cousins, who were resident in the UK. He explained that he had no other known family he could seek.
42. Second, knowledge of the English language also plays a part in decision making. For some people English is their second, third or more language, and they may not have proficiency in other European languages. It is thought that they may be able to build a life quicker and more easily in the UK, as they are able to speak some English. Alternatively, they may have been more exposed to English language news and multimedia in their lives, so feel they have an understanding of what their lives may be like in the UK. This offers further comfort and reassurance.
43. Third, the UK's colonial history is represented in the nationalities of the people we support, with many coming from countries that were former colonies or who have faced UK

occupation and military intervention in more recent decades. This history is within living memory of many people we support, who recall how older generations have told them of British presence in their country, of being taught English in schools, and hearing about life in Britain. It has also resulted in the presence of strong diaspora communities in the UK, through regular migration or through prior forced migration movements from states experiencing PRS, which people seek out when making decisions on where they might flee. The presence of a strong diaspora community creates an expectation that they will have community support to create new, meaningful lives in the UK.

44. Lastly, many people we speak to hold the belief that the UK is a safe and welcoming country, especially for those from Muslim and LGBTQ+ communities. We often hear people describe the UK as somewhere where human rights are upheld and where people have religious freedom.
45. However, it would be misrepresentative to suggest that decisions on migration are always made at the point of departure. Much happens in transit; some people who did not initially intend to come to the UK may have been influenced on their journey by experiences of violence in particular countries along Europe's borders, discrimination, lack of socio-economic rights, poor quality asylum offerings, and the subjective and/or objective inability to live safely.
46. We frequently have conversations with displaced people in northern France following failed crossing attempts, during which people tell us that they will attempt further crossings. Many people have spent weeks, months, and sometimes years, in northern France, where they have lived in extremely poor conditions and are reliant almost entirely on support from NGOs like C4C. Displaced people are forced to live in horrendous conditions and an extremely hostile environment, all of which I have described further below. The risks posed of crossing the Channel in a small boat are often seen as less than the risks of continuing to live in dangerous and dehumanising conditions in northern France.

IV. Conditions for displaced people in Northern France

Access to shelter

47. Almost everyone we support in Calais and Dunkirk is destitute and is living outside in unauthorised living sites. This involves the creation of temporary shelters in informal self-settlements, which are increasingly cropping up in more dangerous and unsuitable land. The spaces that have historically been used by the communities we support are increasingly closed off. This is completed by way of police clearances and evictions, which happen every 24-48 hours and every 6- 8 weeks respectively. Following evictions efforts are often made to make the land unsuitable for further settlement. Trees, which were used for some semblance of

shelter, are cut down so the site is further exposed to the elements, and hostile architecture and physical structures are put in place to make further use of the sites impossible. For example, large boulders are scattered across the only dry areas of high ground to stop tents being erected.

48. Over the last four years, I have seen at least four living sites permanently closed. On one occasion (17 November 2021) a site near Marck on the outskirts of Calais, which housed upwards of 200 people and was used as a distribution site by many organisations was completely evicted with all shelters destroyed. The site had one entrance route, and the authorities dropped large amounts of earth, enough to obscure the view from the road into the site, alongside large boulders to block the access to vehicles and pedestrians (IH1/EX-12;INQ008189 – IH1/EX-15;INQ008192). At a living site near the Calais Hospital, which at its height in October 2020 was used by at least 300 people, the police conducted a mass eviction. Following on from this they cut down large amounts of trees to make the land inhabitable. Over the next few years, the police have consistently used evictions to clear shelters and cut down more and more vegetation leaving the land prone to flooding and creating unsuitable spaces for shelter. This space is now used by a very small number of displaced people. During the winter the land is impassable. In one residential area close to the Calais Hospital in 2021, displaced communities used abandoned warehouses as shelter, the police again conducted a large-scale eviction and demolished the warehouses, removing the option for shelter. In 2022, there was a large population of displaced people living on the edge of a lake and public gardens in Coquelles, which is the next town along from Calais. The path was a popular walking and cycling route. The site was evicted and authorities installed boulders and fencing which prevented communities from returning to these sites to set up shelter.

49. Such strategies have also been used to prevent us from operating our distribution services. On several occasions the usual sites where we and other organisations would distribute from have had the land excavated by large machinery to make it impossible to access with our vans. On 19 August 2024, the authorities placed large boulders around a distribution site that had been used in Calais since 2016, meaning no vehicles could access the site to provide clothing or shelter distributions (IH1/EX16; INQ008193 – IH1/EX18; INQ008195) . The site itself was a car park also used by locals when accessing the nearby BMX track. The presence of the boulders means that distributions now take place alongside a road, increasing the risks to communities accessing the distributions.

50. All shelter items used by people such as tents, tarpaulins and sleeping bags are provided by NGOs and organisations like C4C. If we are unable to carry out distributions as a result of state interference this would leave hundreds of people sleeping rough with no shelter at all. This also forces people into more condensed geographical areas which are more unsuitable for living in, for example in small patches of remaining scrubland near

highways or train tracks, which has resulted in deaths of members of the displaced community in northern France (IH1/EX19; INQ008196 – IH1/EX20; INQ008198). There have been a number of settlements which have appeared on the side of live train tracks and there have been at least three deaths since 2021 of refugees who have been hit by trains. Those individuals were presumed to have been travelling to or from a living site. In the last year we have also noticed a number of small living sites appear next to major highways in the area where there remains small areas of low lying scrubland. We have also known deaths occur through individuals being hit by vehicles on the highways. It is unknown whether this is a direct result of having to access these sites.

51. The geographical location of Calais and Dunkirk on the coast means it experiences extremely wet and windy conditions year round, and remains colder than most other areas of northern France. There is little to no state provided shelter. In the event of extreme weather, shelters in local buildings are occasionally opened by the local Prefecture (council) in line with national French laws on protecting rough sleepers, the legislation is called the Plan Grand Froid. In the winter of 2023 - 2024, we witnessed the shelters open three times in total, and each time there was insufficient capacity to house all people living outside. As a result people were turned away. Additionally, many members of the displaced community reported not accessing the shelters due to fears that their shelter items (which they were unable to bring to the temporary shelter) would be confiscated by police during clearance operations, which at the moment occur every 48 hours. Shelters often close by 7am, leaving people to travel back out into serious weather conditions for the day and facing danger due to informal living situations in exposed areas.
52. Samu Social (Service d'Aide Médicale Urgente),¹² the French emergency social service, is required to support all rough sleepers with one night's emergency accommodation, however there are almost never any spaces available for adult men. In the last two and a half years I have called Samu Social on behalf of a single adult male 10 - 15 times each month. I have only ever had one single, adult male offered a space in this service in this entire period.
53. For families and unaccompanied minors, finding temporary accommodation in Calais and Dunkirk is becoming increasingly difficult. Children and women are often forced to sleep outside, as state provided accommodation is full and people are turned away. The same is true for state provided accommodation for unaccompanied minors. The state provided accommodation is often full, and children are told to report to police stations to access the service. Many are simply too scared to do this - and the majority of unaccompanied asylum seeking children we support sleep outside in informal living sites, without any access to formal education, social service support, or support by a responsible adult.

¹² <https://www.samusocial.paris/>

54. Winter is an acutely difficult time for the communities we support in northern France, when the weather becomes bitterly cold and the area is exposed to the elements. As the summer period comes to an end and the weather begins to turn colder each year there is a sense of desperation amongst the people living here knowing that if they do not make it to the UK, they may be forced to remain living in destitution over the winter.
55. From October to March an organisation in the area called the Woodyard distributes wood so that the communities can have small fires at their living sites which helps them to keep warmer. Without this provision, or when stocks are low, people will burn rubbish that they can find, including plastic items which creates toxic fumes but is preferable to the extreme and dangerous cold. Some community members who know they may not be able to make the journey to the UK over the winter months, e.g. when lacking sufficient funds to pay a smuggler, may leave the area and head further inland where there are more places to shelter.
56. Prior to 2021 very few crossings would occur during the winter months as the weather made conditions at sea so dangerous. I recall the surprise and horror when hearing the news of the incident in November 2021, both at the loss of life and the fact that the journey had been attempted in November given the risks this would have meant. From memory this was the first year that crossings continued into the winter months in anything over and above sporadic small numbers. This has continued over the years since and it is now normal for crossings to continue throughout winter, although the fear and desperation amongst the communities still grows and the conditions become more dangerous.

Access to food

57. In 2020, during the COVID19 pandemic, the French authorities introduced anti-food distribution bans - known as 'Arrets'¹³ (IH1/EX21; INQ008199). These bans restricted the areas that NGOs were able to use to distribute food items. By 2021, the areas under these bans covered much of central Calais and all roads around the main living sites. This meant that displaced people had to walk much further and it became more difficult to access food. These bans were temporary, and renewed every 2 months, and the areas impacted change over time, making it confusing for NGOs and the communities to know where to access food. Additionally police have fined, blocked and detained a number of volunteers and organisations for distributing food, making it even harder for these distributions to take place. A court ruled that these bans were disproportionate in 2022 and impeded local charities ability to provide necessary support (IH1/EX22; INQ008200).¹⁴

¹³ <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/34530/calais--larrete-interdisant-la-distribution-de-repas-aux-migrants-de-nouveau-reconduit>

¹⁴ <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/hautes-de-france/pas-calais/calais/migrants-a-calais-la-justice-annule-des-arretes-anti-distribution-de-nourriture-2638260.html>

Water and sanitation

58. The French authorities in Calais provide a small number of toilets, showers and water points. However, none of these are easily accessible from major living sites and many people will walk miles to access these services. On the week of 6 - 9 May 2024, the organisation contracted to provide showers, meals and water did not do so for at least 24 hours - leaving communities across Calais with no access to these services. In Dunkirk there are even fewer state provided services, and most communities are reliant on NGOs for all basic needs.
59. We partner with a medical NGO, First Aid Support Team ("FAST"), who report regular and widespread cases of skin diseases such as scabies, which are often a result of poor and/or unhygienic living conditions. Additionally we have known people who developed serious and life threatening conditions such as Tuberculosis and Meningitis whilst living in the informal camps. FAST coordinators (who are trained medical professionals) have commented that illnesses they treat would likely have been less severe if the patient was able to live indoors and access regular sanitation provision.

Safety and Security

60. There have been multiple instances of gun-related violence in and around Dunkirk, and we understand from conversations with affected communities and media reports that this is typically perpetrated by smuggling organisations operating in the area.¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷ (IH1/EX-23 INQ008201-IH1/EX-25; INQ008203). Typically it is reported that this violence is committed between different smuggling operatives vying for control of the routes, however individuals we support can find themselves caught in the crossfire. We have spoken to people who have been victims of gun violence in this manner. Due to fears around accessing medical care following such instances we also support people in the UK to access treatment for poorly and problematically healed gunshot wounds, which have occurred in Dunkirk. One such individual is currently supported by our Age Dispute team in the UK, he is an unaccompanied asylum seeking child from Sudan who was shot in the leg in Dunkirk. Though this event occurred months before accessing our Age Dispute Team's support, he reported experiencing pain walking and struggling to get up stairs in his accommodation. In August this year two further Sudanese boys were found in Calais and on the coast with gunshot wounds. It is unknown if they were both injured in the same incident or in two separate incidents in the same night, in any case it is indicative of

¹⁵ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/43206/rival-smugglers-blamed-for-shootings-in-french-migrant-camp>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/aug/06/he-held-a-gun-to-my-head-surviving-the-brutal-tactics-of-the-traffickers>

¹⁷ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2088576/world>

escalating violence of this kind¹⁸ (IH1/EX-26; INQ008204). Because of the heightened risk of gun-related violence occurring in Dunkirk we specifically brief our volunteers on this each afternoon, including what to do in the event that gunfire is heard while we are at the site. If gunshots are heard during distributions, our volunteers are to get low on the ground, put their hands over their heads, and evacuate when safe to do so.

Clearances and evictions

61. Clearances and the confiscation of shelter items, usually tents and sleeping bags but sometimes other personal belongings, happen every 48 hours in Calais. This has been common practice at least since 2021. During these operations a convoy of Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité ('CRS') and Police Nationale ('PN') officers, up to 50 officers wearing riot gear and carrying rubber bullet guns and batons, travel to each informal living site. They deny refugee communities access to these sites on arrival. People have to watch the officers confiscate their shelter items and are entirely powerless. We receive reports of police stealing money, damaging phones or papers left behind in these informal living sites on a weekly basis from displaced people we meet. Once the operation of 'clearing' is over, people are allowed back into their living site and often rely on NGOs to replace tents or shelter items lost. Where they cannot do so they will have to face sleeping outside.
62. The CRS and PN also carry out mass evictions of living sites in Calais and Dunkirk, which go further than the regular clearances. During these operations which tend to take place every 3 or 4 months in Calais and every 4 – 6 weeks in Dunkirk, police arrive with full riot gear, and force all residents of the camps into buses. Those who refuse have been arrested and detained. Those that travel on the buses have reported being taken as far away as the French/Italian border and Marseille. Often people might be offered state accommodation for a few nights but we have heard multiple reports of people being dropped off at the roadside with no provision being offered at all. Many displaced people taken from Calais or Dunkirk after an eviction, return to northern France as soon as they are able to. Some take up the state accommodation for a number of nights but after 2 weeks, they are obliged to enter the French asylum system. However, as the majority of people in northern France hope to seek asylum in the UK, many leave before this point.

Police violence:

63. There are many reports of police using tear gas and other violent tactics to forcibly remove people from their living sites. This treatment is often used during evictions but we have received multiple reports of police violence taking place during the night in informal living

¹⁸ <https://www.lavoixdunord.fr/1491731/article/2024-08-11/deux-exiles-ages-de-16-et-18-ans-blesses-par-balle-calais>

sites or in the centre of Calais. Many people who report these incidents to us are too afraid to make formal complaints or provide testimonies to human rights organisations, due to the fear of repercussions for reporting. One individual that we spoke to in the UK spent eight months living in the informal settlements in Calais, and described how he and other displaced people he knew would entirely avoid moving around the town alone due to the likelihood of violence from the police. He explained how a friend's arm was broken in such an attack and their fears of seeking medical attention for their injuries. One person I met in Calais in 2023, described how he was cycling on a road near the beach in Calais around 9pm and a minibus of CRS officers pulled up beside him. The officers got out of their vehicle and pulled him off his bike and punched him to the ground. He says he lost consciousness, when he came round he was lying in the road, the officers had gone and his bike was missing. He was too scared to report this incident and said he just wanted to leave France as he was not safe here.

64. We receive many reports of broken phones or the theft of personal items such as papers, money and clothing from displaced people we work with (IH1/EX27;INQ008205)¹⁹ Each month, we meet and speak to people who show us their phones which have been stamped on by police or purposely broken during a clearance or police stop. People report the police throwing their belongings in water or on the ground in front of them. One man we met in 2023, reported the police stealing his wallet left in his tent, with ID and money inside during a site clearance. In 2021, I met an Afghan man who had just returned from a food distribution to his tent, the police had conducted a clearance whilst he was away and his friends reported seeing the police take one of his walking boots, leaving the other behind. In June 2024, I met a Kurdish man in his 50's who had a serious heart condition. He had been hospitalised the previous week as the condition had become unmanageable. During an eviction of the Dunkirk living sites, police had seized all of his belongings and whilst searching him they had confiscated his new medication. No alternative accommodation had been offered to him for the night and he was deeply concerned about managing his condition, our team had to call an ambulance for him to be returned to hospital as he was unable to access other state medical services.
65. During police evictions, NGOs like Care4Calais are blocked from accessing distribution sites and providing services during the operations. Most recently, the C4C team was blocked for over 20 minutes on Monday 12 August 2024 before they could begin their service provision. During this particular incident, police were aggressive, shouting at us *'If you are English, go'*. During previous incidents where the police blocked access, we were issued with a parking fine for pulling up to wait for the police operation to finish. Police often travel in large numbers, responding to NGO activity or displaced communities in three or four vehicles with multiple officers, who are often armed. They shout or speak aggressively to C4C staff and

¹⁹ <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Annual-Report-2021.pdf>

volunteers - demanding they move or cease an activity without providing the legal basis for this request.

66. C4C has witnessed heavy handed policing on multiple occasions. E.g. on Thursday 19 September 2024, police witnessed an inter-community fight that we understand was a result of tension and a lack of resources. Tens of officers intervened with tear gas, targeting a small child in the process, multiple members of the community were affected, we were forced to evacuate our distributions leaving behind our equipment, when we returned to collect the equipment, volunteers and staff also experienced effects of the tear gas which remained on our equipment. Multiple people we meet in Calais report heavy handed tactics and violence from the police in most interactions. In a further example, on 10 October 2023, two Sudanese men reported police returning to a living site, following a mass eviction that morning, where police used tear gas on groups sitting by fires to disperse them further. Recently, C4C teams have been stopped from distributing biscuits with our hot drink provision in the centre of Calais at a distribution site, as the police claim this constitutes a food distribution which is banned by a 'Stop Order' in this area. This is called an 'Arret' and is used by the police in Calais to stop organisations from conducting specific activities, most commonly food distributions. During the pandemic there were multiple orders covering the main distribution locations in Calais.
67. Staff and volunteers are also subject to traffic stops in NGO vehicles, fines are issued for any small issue such as a broken bulb, and ID checks are protracted, sometimes taking over 30 minutes where every piece of ID and paperwork is taken away and sometimes photographed by police officers on their personal mobile phones. For example in November 2023, I was stopped with another volunteer for over 25 minutes, during which they checked our documents and searched our van. No further action was taken.
68. In addition to police violence and harassment, we have witnessed a lack of support for displaced people from emergency services in Calais and Dunkirk. On three occasions since 2020, we have called ambulances for people who were critically ill or injured at a distribution site, and in one case (2023) the emergency services refused to send an ambulance as the person was a member of the displaced community.
69. In two other instances since 2021 the ambulance took hours to arrive, as they were waiting for police escorts. Arriving with police escorts can be traumatising for many who have experienced police harassment and/or violence, and causes some displaced people to avoid necessary urgent care, leading to worsened medical conditions. In September 2024, two people sustained stab injuries whilst I was present at a distribution. A medical professional who was present called twice for an ambulance and both times the operator hung up as she spoke in English. Another C4C staff member called again, this time speaking in French to the operator who asked if we needed police support. We declined. Despite this, when the

ambulance arrived 25 minutes later they were accompanied by eight separate police vehicles including at least 15 CRS officers, Police Nationale and Police Municipale officers.

70. On two occasions in 2023 displaced people reported calling emergency services, only to be unable to adequately describe their location or the situation. In both instances a displaced person died. People involved in these incidents reported their frustration at being unable to name the road or area where they were and reported that the lack of emergency response led to the death of their friends. In one instance a man had been stabbed in the neck during an altercation, his friends called an ambulance but as they did not know the street name or speak French they had to wait until a member of the public passed by and in this time their friend lost a lot of blood and could not be saved. In my experience, there are no translation services provided when contacting the emergency services and there is a reluctance to respond to incidents involving displaced people.

Treatment in public

71. Many of the refugees we have worked with have experienced racial abuse in France. This is commonly reported by individuals we provide direct aid to, and also through testimonies from individuals we support in the UK. The abuse has included verbal assaults when using public transport or in shops.
72. We have received numerous reports of racial profiling by security guards in shops in Calais and Dunkirk. This has included bag searches, being followed around the shop, and having their shopping and receipts checked multiple times on exit.
73. Many displaced people report being stopped from accessing the buses (which are currently free for all in Calais) and the train network. Videos taken in Calais show drivers refusing access to those they believe to be from the displaced community, or empty buses driving past groups of displaced people at bus stops. Additionally, police (CRS & PN) and train security are known to block access to train platforms and forcibly remove refugees from trains and stations. On Friday 13 September 2024, our team received messages from other organisations in Calais, describing a situation at Calais Ville train station where a group of 150 displaced people were trying to access the train to Boulonge. Police blocked the entrance and stopped people from accessing the train with tear gas. Many displaced people ended up on the train tracks and were unable to use the train network.
74. In a recent decision by the local Calais prefecture, buses in Calais which have been free for all since the pandemic in 2020, will now only be free for residents and tourists. This policy has been brought in by the right wing local council, and during their consultation meeting, they referred to the use of the bus network by the displaced community in France being a factor in the decision to restrict free access.

75. We receive large numbers of testimonies and have seen multiple videos from refugees who have experienced police harassment, abuse or discrimination on public transport networks across France. Conversations with the people we support have highlighted their attempts to mitigate and avoid this violence; for example it is rare for anyone to walk around the Calais area alone, especially after dark. Where individuals have done so they have reported being beaten by police for no apparent reason.

V. The events and aftermath of 23-24 November 2021

76. Following the disaster on 23-24 November 2021, as an organisation we recognised that identifying and supporting the family members of the deceased was of greatest importance. Volunteers who were with us on the ground in Calais had known some of the individuals on the boat, and we were able to begin supporting the families of those who had lost their lives. This was primarily through social media connections and information provided by other civil society groups in northern France. Alongside this we worked to track media reports related to the incident for information relating to the passengers, to put together as comprehensive a list as possible. In preparation for supporting this Inquiry we have since compared this list with that put together by a civil society group in Northern France, le Group Deces, who record and recognise those who have lost their lives on the UK-French border (IH1/EX-28; **INQ008206**).²⁰
77. For each family member we have supported, we have offered the option to assist them to access legal representation, both in the UK and France. In France, where the investigation into the tragedy is operated as a criminal investigation, a number of the families are represented by the firm that represents C4C in their operations there, JP Karsenty et Associés. In the initial stages of the process the representation was funded by C4C given the lack of an equivalent to legal aid in the UK. In the UK we also supported family members to access legal representation via legal aid, to explore pushing for a public inquiry into the tragedy.
78. We remain in contact with family members of those who lost their lives in this incident, particularly from the Kurdish communities. Each year on the anniversary of the incident we have held memorial events or created public posts to commemorate the deaths in collaboration with family members. For example, in 2022, we supported family members of some of the Kurdish people who died to put together a statement and various posts which we published on our social media channels, including a video message from a close

²⁰ Exhibit list

friend (IH1/EX-29; INQ008207, IH1/EX-30; INQ008209)²¹²². We also organised and advertised a public anniversary vigil, which was attended by some of those close to those who had lost their lives (IH1/EX-31; INQ008210)²³. In 2023 we coordinated an open letter signed by family members²⁴ as well as a public post in collaboration with family and friends (IH1/EX32; INQ008211 - IH1/EX34; INQ008213)²⁵²⁶.

79. From memory, 2021 was a turning point in how journeys to the UK across the Channel were conducted. Prior to this, whilst there were smuggling operations that organised crossings, people still attempted the journey using their own small boats. These were smaller crafts and typically would hold five to ten people, occasionally up to 15. During the course of 2021 however, the number of people in each boat increased drastically. I recall my surprise following the news of the incident in November 2021 that over 30 people had been in one boat. This trend has continued, and we are seeing increasing numbers of passengers on each boat, and a parallel increase in the size of vessel used. By way of an example, recent arrival data shows that on 21 September 2024, 707 people arrived in the UK on 11 boats, averaging around 60-70 people in each vessel. I have heard of crossings that had up to 80 or 90 people in each boat. In 2024 there has been an exponential increase in the number of deaths at sea, the majority of which have occurred close to the coastline. My understanding from speaking with affected communities is that some of these deaths have been caused by people rushing the boats when boarding trying to avoid police interception, others have been the result of poor vessel construction. The larger boats seem to use inflatable outer rings and MDF boards as flooring which are prone to collapse.

80. In total 425 people have been confirmed to have lost their lives since 1999, and at the time of writing 43 people have been reported to have died in 2024 during an attempt to cross the Channel, including at least 9 children. A further 9 people have lost their lives at the UK/French border, there are many more reported missing (IH1/EX-35; INQ008214).²⁷

VI. French response to people missing in the Channel

81. We often hear reports from the people we support that individuals have gone missing during a crossing attempt. In cases where there is no body or formal investigation, these reports are left unconfirmed. Based on the information we receive from those we support, I believe that the number of lives lost in the Channel is likely much higher than what is officially reported.

²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CITeeBIDreo/>

²² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIVhgIltDnQ/>

²³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CILWol1gxGN/>

²⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/C0BaqTpOEah/>

²⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/C0B8c9dO50D/>

²⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/p/C0CaNwAPNMd/>

²⁷ <https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/deaths-at-the-calais-border/>

82. In March 2021, C4C staff met people in a group of survivors in Calais who had been involved in an incident in which four men had attempted to cross the channel in a small boat. The boat got into trouble, and two of the men swam back to shore and one was rescued by the authorities. Despite friends insisting there was a fourth person on board the authorities called off the search [Name] was the fourth person who went missing that night, but due to the absence of a body it was not initially recorded officially as a death. The people involved in the incident were worried about making contact with the police to ask for more information, due to police harassment they had received. The family did not understand why Majdi's body was not available for them to bury. A body has never, to my knowledge, been recovered.

83. In another incident in 2021, the bodies of three people who were confirmed by family members to be from the vessel in question, never had their bodies recovered. In June 2021 it was reported that the body of a 15 month old boy, [Name] whose body had never been recovered following an incident in the Channel in October 2020, washed up on the beach in Norway two months later (IH1/EX-36; INQ008215)²⁸.

84. In March 2024, [Name] a Syrian man, was with friends in a boat on L'Aa canal in northern France. The police arrived and people on the boat jumped into the water to escape. [Name] friends immediately reported to the police that [Name] had jumped in the water but not made it out of the canal. The authorities believed he had fled the scene and refused to search for him. [Name] body was recovered a few weeks later in the same canal, during a search for a French man who had gone missing (IH1/EX-37; INQ008216)²⁹.

85. On Thursday 18 July 2024, a person was confirmed to have drowned after their small boat got into difficulties crossing the Channel. Other individuals, who had been rescued during this incident and returned to Calais, reported to our staff on the ground when receiving support the following day that they believed that three people were unaccounted for. Their bodies had not been found.

86. More recently, when 12 individuals lost their lives crossing the Channel on 3 September 2024, survivors of this incident spoke to C4C staff and volunteers on the ground in northern France and reported that there were in fact more people on the boat who were missing. Since then, at least one body has been found washed up on the beaches, and it is

²⁸ <https://news.sky.com/story/toddlers-body-that-washed-up-in-norway-is-boy-who-drowned-during-migrant-channel-crossing-12327158#:~:text=News%20%7C%20Sky%20News-,Toddler's%20body%20that%20washed%20up%20in%20Norway%20is%20boy%20who,parents%20and%20two%20older%20siblings.>

²⁹ <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/hautes-de-france/nord-0/le-corps-d-un-migrant-de-27-ans-retrouve-dans-le-chenal-de-l-aa-a-grand-fort-philippe-2942073.html>

likely they were one of the reported missing (IH1/EX-37; INQ008216)³⁰. It is unclear what identification process the French state is following in this instance.

VII. The Effect on those in displacement communities

87. Events like this happen very frequently in northern France, as many people live here with no state support or intervention, and with little or no access to reliable internet or phones. The families of those living here often do not have regular contact with their family members or friends. As a result it could be days or weeks before they are able to raise the alarm that their loved one is missing, at which point they can do very little other than try and contact any other community members that may have interacted with the missing person. It is, in our experience, highly unlikely that any family or friends would be able to formally report the missing person to the relevant authorities, not least because there is little to no information on how to do so, and certainly not any that is targeted at the likely affected groups. I have heard reports of cases where people have fallen into the water or gone missing during an attempt to cross, and friends of those missing struggle to get authorities to conduct search and rescue missions.
88. It is also the case that people lose their lives or go missing when attempting to make it to the UK via alternative means, for example they are hit by vehicles whilst attempting to stow away in lorries heading to the UK, or when leaving living sites that have been precariously created next to motorways. Others may succumb to the difficulty of life in northern France, either through illness, lack of access to appropriate medical care, mental health related concerns or die by suicide.
89. In the majority of cases there is no official record of displaced people's existence in northern France. This means that beyond their presence in informal living sites and interactions with other members of the community and NGOs like C4C, they are not registered with the French state and only become known to the British authorities if they are able to arrive on UK territory and make a claim for asylum. Those who perish whilst in northern France or during an attempt to cross (whether by small boat or other means) will only be known to the authorities if and when a body is found, or when they are reported missing by their family or friends. The latter is often delayed, for the reasons set out below.
90. It is expected within the communities that an individual arriving in the UK may not be able to make contact with family or friends for some weeks after their arrival. Often people's phones are lost or damaged on the journey or confiscated on entry to the UK, a practice that has been found by the Courts to be unlawful (IH1/EX-39; INQ008218, IH1/EX-

³⁰ <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/hauts-de-france/pas-calais/un-corps-repeche-au-large-d-ambleteuse-il-pourrait-s-agir-d-une-exilee-victime-du-nauffrage-qui-a-fait-12-morts-3033515.html>

40;. INQ008220)³¹³². Despite this, our Legal Access Department in the UK continues to receive reports from newer arrivals that their phones have been taken on arrival. In some cases the phones are returned weeks and months later, in other cases they are not. As a result there is often a delay in reporting that an individual may be missing after attempting to cross the Channel.

91. In December 2023, C4C in northern France were contacted by the Group Deces on the ground, who had received a police report of a body discovered in a lorry in the UK earlier that year. The police were trying to contact the deceased's family, and the phone found on the victim had photos taken in Calais with people wearing C4C hi-vis vests (what all volunteers wear during volunteering). Through these photos, C4C staff and volunteers identified the victim as well as located the family's contact details. Despite the victim's body being found around six months before, the family believed he was in the UK and simply did not have access to a phone as they often went long periods without hearing from him. The victim's friends in France and the UK also believed he had successfully reached the UK. Such a period without contact between friends and/or family and people experiencing forced displacement is, in our experience, common.
92. On occasion, staff and volunteers at C4C across France and the UK are contacted by members of the communities we work with, who are concerned about not hearing from family or friends for extended periods, or in the days or weeks after they reported they would attempt to cross the Channel. Family and friends of the Kurdish people who lost their lives in the November 2021 incident will often contact C4C if they hear reports of further incidents. They will either ask if we know if there are any Kurdish individuals reported missing or dead, or have a belief that someone from their community in Iraq was making the journey that night. These situations are difficult to navigate, and although we do our best to gather what information is available and pass to the concerned relatives, there is often none.
93. Most recently a colleague was contacted by a Yemeni individual we have been supporting as a client of C4C's Legal Access Department in the UK for a number of years, who was recognised as a refugee two years ago. He advised via message on 21.07.24 that he needed help finding his brother who had been living in Calais and has intended to cross to the UK. He reported that his brother had told his family on 17.07.24 that he had found some people heading to the UK, and that he would attempt the journey with them. Since then they had not heard from him. On 18.07.24 it was reported that a boat had got into difficulty in the Channel the night prior and one woman was confirmed dead. He passed on details of his brother,

³¹ <https://privacyinternational.org/news-analysis/4987/uk-high-court-orders-groundbreaking-redress-thousands-migrants-affected-unlawful>. C4C provided evidence in these proceedings.

³² <https://bylinetimes.com/2021/08/26/home-offices-secret-inhumane-policy-of-seizing-phones-of-refugees-arriving-on-boats-and-extracting-their-data-exposed/>

including a photo and where he said he had been living with members of the Sudanese community. Our team in Calais asked at distributions if anyone remembered or had seen the individual since his potential crossing, and we reached out to the team at the Croix Rouge (Red Cross) in northern France who work on cases of separated family members. The brother in the UK had also been able to make contact with community members who had arrived in the UK on the night of 17.07.24-18.07.24, who reported that they had not seen his brother when they were processed in Dover, although given the number of arrivals and processing times this is not unusual. Our client advised that his brother was very vulnerable. He described how he had '*suffered a lot*' and was '*psychologically exhausted*'; having been at one point in his journey '*on the verge of death due to kidney dehydration*'. Our client described that his brother '*was beaten and assaulted by [Polish border force agents], who took all his personal belongings and forced him to walk barefoot in the winter.*' This took a great toll on the mental wellbeing of our client, who explained how he was struggling to sleep, lost his appetite and was distraught at the prospect of losing his brother. His mother called him multiple times each day asking for an update which he was unable to give, experiencing feelings of guilt at the inability to take any action to find his brother. Fortunately, in this instance his brother made contact with him on 24.07.24 advising that he had made it to the UK and had lost his mobile phone on the crossing. He had been able to borrow the phone of another resident in his accommodation to make contact with his brother. Whilst this incident thankfully had a happy ending for the family, it is an example of the level of uncertainty that often exists amongst family and friends of those attempting the crossing.

94. Each death on the border has a profound impact on the people living there, including local residents, C4C staff and volunteers. Following each death reported by the press, a commemoration or vigil is held in the centre of Calais and Dunkirk the following day. These are organised primarily by the Group Deces, who use the space to honour each victim, and remember the rest of the lives lost. The Group Deces also support the deceased's friends and family once they have found and contacted them to organise funerals, and bodies are either buried in Calais, Dunkirk or Lille or repatriated where possible. The latter is often an expensive and complicated process, and is not always an option for those who have lost loved ones. The Group Deces is made up of activists and NGO workers at the border, and relies on fundraising for funeral costs, repatriation and other support offered to friends and family of those who passed away. During the commemorations a banner is displayed with the names of those who have been identified. It is increasingly the case that there are many blank spaces, or a 'X' in place of a name, age and nationality on the banner, as people have not been identified. Activists, volunteers and NGO staff attend alongside Calais locals, and there is space for people to talk about the deceased person, and the situation and politics of the border. This event is held in a very public area, which often attracts the attention of local people walking past. In highly publicised events, journalists from French and UK media outlets are sometimes in attendance. This tends to be in cases where there are higher numbers of deaths.

95. With the increase in the volume and frequency of deaths in the Channel and in Calais and Dunkirk, the focus of the media has waned and does not grab as much attention or receive such wide coverage as it used to. In 2024 specifically we have noted a visible decline in interest towards reporting deaths at the border as these have become devastatingly normalised.

VIII. Conclusion and Recommendations

96. As small boat crossings have become more frequent, so too have the deaths at the UK/French border. Each time a tragedy has occurred, the UK and French governments discuss 'smashing the smuggling gangs' yet we have seen that displaced people will continue to make journeys in small boats where no alternative safe routes exist. The harassment and discrimination we have witnessed displaced people experience in France and heard of across their journeys through Europe, as well as the poor living conditions and police violence experienced by those in northern France, push people towards making these journeys. The increased funding and focus on 'securing' the UK/French border only push people to take greater risks to make these crossings. For example, increased policing of beaches and areas where small boats are launched in Calais and Dunkirk has caused journeys to begin further along the French coastline, increasing the length and therefore danger posed to those in small, often unseaworthy boats. This is seen in the increase in deaths and serious incidents off the coast of Wimereux and Boulonne sur Mer. Additionally, enhanced securitisation preventing travel via other irregular routes, for example via lorries or trucks, leaves little other option than crossing via small boat. The boats are leaving with increasing numbers of passengers each year which has led to heightened overcrowding and deaths due to crushing in the panic to board (IH1/EX-41; INQ008221)³³.
97. The environment of hostility, harassment and violence we witness daily on the UK – French border, created and funded by both the UK and French states, is untenable. This regime has not, and will not have, any effect on the desire of the people we work with in northern France to reach a destination which they consider safe. Over the years I have only ever known the introduction of more policies of securitisation, externalisation, criminalisation and deterrence by the governments on both sides of the Channel, none of which have had any effect on the increasing numbers of people forced to undertake dangerous journeys via small boat. The living conditions forced upon displaced people here, only lead to increased desperation and drive to get to the UK where they feel they will be safe and able to lead meaningful lives. The systems of degradation and dehumanisation must cease with steps taken to ensure displaced

³³<https://news.sky.com/story/people-stomped-to-death-in-migrant-boat-crash-says-survivor-who-saw-son-die-13216201#:~:text=A%20man%20has%20said%20his,Sunday's%20incident%20in%20the%20Channel.>

people are able to live in dignity. The UK and French government must work together to improve the living conditions for those living in and around northern France.

98. The reality that the increased securitisation of the border has contributed to more avoidable deaths, driving people to engage with smuggling networks as their only remaining option, must be accepted. The smuggling operations in northern France are violent and abhorrent, however they remain profitable and are present because of the absence of safe routes to seek asylum in the UK. Each time I have witnessed new securitisation, I have recognised a response in the methods of the smuggling networks to circumvent this. These methods often mean the communities here face greater risks or consequences. When the UK government introduced criminal prosecutions targeting people seeking asylum that had no option but to steer their small boat to the UK, I heard of the introduction of free passage for anyone desperate enough to agree to tiller the boat. As such prosecutions have increased, I now hear of an offer of two free places per boat. None of the increased deterrence has led to any reduction in crossings. There must be an introduction of safe routes, for those hoping to seek asylum, which cut out the dangerous journeys people are forced to make. Without these routes, displaced people will continue to risk their lives in small boat crossings. Without a reduction in the funding of securitisation and deterrence policies, lives will continue to be lost in the channel.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I confirm that the contents are true to the best of my knowledge and belief. I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings for contempt of court may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Name: Imogen Hardman

Signed:

Personal Data

Date: 25/10/2024 | 15:48:42 BST