

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Asylum decision-making and conversion to Christianity, HC 595

Tuesday 12 March 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 March 2024.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Lee Anderson; James Daly; Marco Longhi; Tim Loughton; Alison Thewliss.

Questions 1 - 169

Witnesses

[I](#): The Reverend Matthew Firth, Former Priest, St Cuthbert's Church, Darlington.

[II](#): The Rev Canon Christopher Thomas, Senior Priest, The Catholic Church, and General Secretary, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales; The Rt Revd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani, Bishop of Chelmsford, Church of England; The Reverend Steve Tinning, Public Issues Enabler, Baptist Union of Great Britain.

[III](#): Tom Pursglove MP, Minister of State for Legal Migration and the Border, Home Office; Dan Hobbs, Director General, Migration and Borders Group, Home Office; George Shirley, Director of Asylum and Human Rights Operations, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England](#)

Examination of witness

Witness: Reverend Matthew Firth.

Chair: Good morning. Welcome to the Home Affairs Select Committee. This morning we are looking into the asylum decision-making process and conversions to Christianity.

The aims for this session are to look at the extent to which conversion to Christianity is grounds for granting asylum or granting an appeal in the United Kingdom; how statutory guidance is used in this process; how the genuineness of conversion to Christianity is assessed within the asylum decision-making system; how lawyers can challenge a Home Office refusal to grant leave to remain in the United Kingdom within the context of conversion to Christianity; and how church leaders and clergy assess and support asylum seekers who wish to convert to Christianity, including the policies and guidance they have in place with regard to conversion.

We have three panels this morning. A very warm welcome to our first panel. We have Reverend Matthew Firth from the Free Church of England, formerly the priest at St Cuthbert's in Darlington.

Matthew Firth: Good morning.

Q1 **Chair:** We are very grateful for your time this morning. We noted the comments you have made about conversion to Christianity for asylum seekers. We have read the interview you gave to the *Telegraph*. Just to start us off, could you just explain? You were part of the clergy within the Church of England, but you have left the Church of England now.

Matthew Firth: That is right, yes.

Q2 **Chair:** You were in the clergy at St Cuthbert's between 2018 and 2020.

Matthew Firth: That is right.

Q3 **Chair:** Your experiences that you gave the interview about relate to that period for two years.

Matthew Firth: Yes.

Q4 **Chair:** They are not in relation to your work now.

Matthew Firth: No. I am just giving oral evidence in relation to that personal experience, from that context and my wider knowledge and insight.

Q5 **Chair:** When you were at St Cuthbert's for two years, what support was your church offering to asylum seekers? Could you set out for us what the church was doing?

Matthew Firth: Yes. Thank you for inviting me. Good morning to the Committee. First, as I have been preparing for this Select Committee, I have been speaking with wise counsel. Unfortunately, that wise counsel



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has said, "Matthew, as a result of the evidence that you might give today, people might try to get you". I just want to say that it is a sad state of affairs if people feel slightly intimidated by giving such evidence on a topic like this. I shall report back to the Select Committee if I should get any comeback in those terms.

Q6 Chair: Please do. We will take that very seriously. You are coming here to give evidence to us in good faith and to explain your experience.

Matthew Firth: Yes, absolutely. Very briefly, before I get on to answering that question, in a way it is sad that we have to meet because baptism and conversion is a joyful thing. When people are incorporated into Christ, that is a joyful thing. It is sad that in some ways baptism has been brought into disrepute by certain behaviours.

That said, I shall now address the question you directly put. The parish in Darlington was offering all sorts of welcome to people who are asylum seekers. For instance, I was using my garage as a bit of a furniture distribution centre for people who had been housed in the local area. I was working a little bit with some people who were working with Darlington Assistance for Refugees. They said, "Could we use your garage as a furniture store to distribute furniture to people who are being rehoused?"

I was very happy to do that. The congregation members were very good at befriending and supporting, in a pastoral sense, people who were asylum seekers. Congregation members tried to engage those people in ways that drew them into the life of the church community, whether that was social, worship services or teaching programmes. That was the kind of support that was happening in the parish, and there was wider support in Darlington itself through secular organisations.

Q7 Chair: It is quite normal for churches to reach out, is it not? Asylum seekers are often in areas where they do not know people, but the church is often there for the stranger.

Matthew Firth: Yes. That is a fundamental thing. We have to be as welcoming as possible to people who find themselves in difficult circumstances.

Q8 Chair: Just explain your concerns about what happened in the two years that you were there.

Matthew Firth: There was no formal booking system, so to speak, but when I arrived there were quite a surprising number of baptisms that were going forward in the baptism system that was there. It was a large number of young male asylum seekers, almost in a cohort. When baptisms are already in the system and you arrive as a new incumbent, you honour those baptisms. It is not an honourable thing to do suddenly to cancel things.



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I started looking into it a bit further. After those baptisms, week in, week out, significant groups of young male asylum seekers, mainly Iranian and Syrian, were brought to me in sizable cohorts.

Q9 **Chair:** How big were the numbers?

Matthew Firth: Six or seven people at a time were being brought to me by people saying, "These people need baptism". You start to spot—

Q10 **Marco Longhi:** Madam Chair, I am sorry. When you say they were brought to you, who was doing the bringing?

Matthew Firth: There was a particular individual who I think had received the right to remain in the UK through the asylum application system. This particular individual did not want baptism but was bringing lots of other people. This individual was saying, "These people need to be baptised".

Q11 **Marco Longhi:** This person was potentially an asylum seeker beforehand.

Matthew Firth: Yes. That person had sought asylum and had received the right to remain in the UK. They were not requesting baptism for themselves. They were bringing groups who were said to want baptism.

Marco Longhi: It was not, in other words—

Q12 **Chair:** I am sorry, Marco. Can I just conclude? I just want to be clear. You said six or seven people.

Matthew Firth: It was six or seven at a time.

Q13 **Chair:** How often was this happening? Was it six or seven every week?

Matthew Firth: Every two or three weeks, you would get that number of people being brought.

Q14 **Chair:** Was it the same people being brought back or different people?

Matthew Firth: It was different people.

Q15 **Chair:** Over a two-year period, six or seven people were brought every week.

Matthew Firth: Every two or three weeks a batch of six people—that sort of number—brought to me.

Q16 **Chair:** From looking at the information that has been made available to the Committee, of the number of baptisms that took place in your church during the period when you were there were, 15 could be referred to as asylum seekers. The numbers do not quite tally, if you are saying that there were six or seven every couple of weeks but there are only 15 baptisms over that two-year period.

Matthew Firth: That is because I pressed the pause button on the process. There is not a discrepancy but a difference between the number



of people who were being brought to me to request baptism and the actual number of baptisms that happened.

As I said both in the interview that I gave to the *Telegraph* and just a moment ago, I honoured the baptisms requests that were already in the system. When you spot a pattern, you think, "Hang on. There is something going on here". You try to press the pause button and make sure people are requested to come to church, to start getting involved, to attend church events regularly and so on.

That was the thing that made the numbers fall off a cliff in a sense. Those people melted away. They did not really want to get involved with the life of the church so much after I requested them to do so.

Q17 **Chair:** I have just looked at this again. It was a total of 15 people over the past 10 years. There were 13 adults and two infants who may have been asylum seekers. That was over a 10-year period. It was not just the two years when you were there.

Matthew Firth: I would not know those figures. You would have to look in the parish registers and I do not have access to those. All I know is, when I arrived, there were a handful of people already in the system, which I honoured. When you spot a pattern, you think that something has to be done about it.

Q18 **Chair:** You basically stopped baptising any asylum seekers.

Matthew Firth: No. No baptisms happened after that period of time. It is not that I said, "I am not going to baptise you". I made sure the process for taking those applications forward was rigorous, and that caused people to melt away.

Chair: I am sure we will have some questions about what that meant and what rigorous process you introduced.

Q19 **Tim Loughton:** Reverend Firth, since your interview and your comments, it is probably fair to say the Church of England has come down on you like the Spanish Inquisition.

Matthew Firth: Yes.

Q20 **Tim Loughton:** The quote from the Bishop of Durham, who was the official spokesperson in response to your interview, was, "We robustly reject all the allegations being made by Matthew Firth, who resigned from his role at St Cuthbert's in 2020, for which he has provided no evidence. At no time did he raise concerns locally or with senior clergy about the number of asylum seekers being baptised at the church, and produces no evidence of being bullied by local church members in relation to this matter". Why have they come down on you in such a quite a heavy way?

Matthew Firth: It is interesting, is it not? No allegations have been made by me about the bishop, the diocese, the church or anything. I was



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simply describing what I saw. If the eyewitness testimony of a priest is not evidence, in a sense I do not know what evidence they want.

It is quite interesting. Rather than dealing, calmly and in a business-like way, with the eyewitness testimony that I put forward and the experience that I recounted, there were a number of veiled attacks in the press writing it off as nonsense. In a letter to the *Telegraph*, the former Bishop of Durham said that I have presented “an imaginative range of allegations”. They are not imaginary. It is what I saw and had to deal with at the time.

When something is raised like this, one of the reflexes of any large organisation can be to try to deny things and have a go at the so-called whistleblower. Certainly, the Church of England and other organisations have been through a journey. They have learned to assess things in a more level-headed way. Take safeguarding, for instance. Around 20 or 30 years ago, there was almost a reflex to say, “No, it is not happening” and have a go at the whistleblower. Most large institutions have now learned not to do that and to deal with things in a business-like way. It is unfortunate that in this case there has almost been a relapse back into that reflex action to have a go at me in the press and on social media.

- Q21 **Tim Loughton:** Is it a fair criticism to say that, if you were genuinely concerned about a genuine problem at the time, as you have told us you were, to the extent that you pressed the pause button, why would not you have reported it up the management chain?

Matthew Firth: There are two reasons. First, I dealt with the situation. I personally dealt with it. Secondly, I had experience, in that particular diocese, of reporting quite serious things that were going on in various spheres—

- Q22 **Tim Loughton:** Such as what?

Matthew Firth: It was to do with bullying. My experience was that those disclosures were just ignored and pooh-poohed. I did not have much confidence that I could have shared something like that and been taken very seriously. Over the past few weeks, when I have raised this matter more publicly, the response from the Church of England has again been denying, rubbishing and having a go at the whistleblower.

That was the culture that I experienced. The main thing was that I observed a situation when I came in as the incumbent, and I dealt with it. I was aware that there was enough awareness among senior staff of the dynamics that were going on in parishes such that, if I had reported on that particular local situation, it would not have been news.

- Q23 **Tim Loughton:** You are saying that this was fairly common knowledge amongst other parishes and certainly for the bishop of the diocese in which your parish was.



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Matthew Firth: There was a letter in the *Telegraph* in response to all this from a parish priest who is now in London. He was a curate on the south coast in 1999. He said, "Yes, this sort of dynamic was happening there as well". Clergy with whom I have spoken, who have contacted me since I was public about my experience, have said, "Yes, we are aware that this dynamic is happening". That is my answer.

Q24 **Tim Loughton:** Just to come back to what happened to you, when you said, "I am sorry; there is a pause on baptisms here", they melted away. Where did they go? Somebody—a fixer, it is suggested, for want of a better word—was bringing cohorts of people to you and saying they need baptism. These were people who you had not seen before. They had not been regular attendees at the church before. When you said no, you effectively never saw them again. What happened to them?

Matthew Firth: I did not quite say no. I just made sure that, rather than it being a quick process, those people realised they had to get involved in the life of the church, come to church, come to our events, come to our social events and help out in different ways. When that understanding was put forward in terms of being involved in the life of the church, people would fairly quickly stop coming to that morning service. I do not really know where they went or what happened after that because they were not coming along to church after that.

Q25 **Tim Loughton:** They tried to find a soft touch elsewhere, as far as you know.

Matthew Firth: I have no idea.

Q26 **Tim Loughton:** I have one final question. What would be a fair assessment of somebody who is absolutely genuine, presents at church and then after a while says, "I want to take this further. I would like to be baptised into the Church of England"? If you were setting up a scheme to say, "Yes, that person is genuine", how would you do it?

Matthew Firth: First, we need to take the story slightly further back to where that particular person may have come from. If somebody is part of a church community in Iran or Syria or they have been baptised in Iran or Syria, that should carry a lot of weight in terms of the genuine assessment of this person's Christian faith. It is a brave person who would be part of a church community and be baptised over there. If you come into contact with a person like that, there is a great deal of confidence there.

Secondly, if somebody in Iran or Syria wants to convert to Christianity but is afraid to do so in their home country, when they arrive in the UK they are coming to a very free country with religious freedom, tolerance of worship and so on. If that person were to request baptism or to join a church pretty quickly after coming to the UK, that also would carry a lot of weight.



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I spotted that the vast majority, if not all, of the people seeking asylum who were coming to me for baptism were seeking baptism after having already failed in their initial asylum claim. Again, that is a pattern that should be spotted. It perhaps should be part of the advice and guidance to clergy on how to deal with these situations discerningly. If you are receiving baptism requests more or less solely from people who have already failed in their initial asylum claims, something is going on there.

Therefore, I would be far more careful about that particular baptism request, as indeed I was, which is why I spotted that dynamic and tried to press pause in a reasonable way to make sure I was behaving in a discerning and wise manner in relation to those requests.

Q27 **Chair:** Was there a whistleblowing policy when you were the vicar at St Cuthbert's?

Matthew Firth: I do not know whether there was an official policy or anything like that. I cannot remember seeing anything like a whistleblowing policy. Again, it was something that I dealt with at a local level. In fact, the Church of England said in its statement that it was for me to deal with, and I dealt with it.

Q28 **Marco Longhi:** At the risk of being slightly patronising, can I just say that I think you are a brave man? I want to thank you for being here today.

I would like to try to investigate and explore a little bit further the tipping point in terms of assessing the veracity of a person's application to join the Christian faith. You have already elaborated on it a little bit. If someone had already failed their application process, I am sure your pattern of thinking would be, "Why not apply immediately when you arrive rather than make an asylum application? Why would not you do that?" What would it be for you? It seems to me this is something that is based on the perception of an individual and therefore very subjective.

Matthew Firth: That is the difficulty. On the one hand, you are dealing with individuals; on the other hand, you are dealing with dynamics, as I have described, in terms of the dynamic of the cohorts of people coming. The reality is that each baptism request is from an individual.

The question is a pertinent one. How do you assess the veracity of that particular person? Having been around the block a few times in terms of pastoral work, there is some intuition involved. There is also a sense of, "Is this person seeking to get involved in the community life of the church? Is this person seeking to get involved in the worshipping life of the church? Is this person seeking to get involved in some of the outreach life of the church?" It is almost about that person's spirituality or expression of their faith rather than a particular event, which is called baptism, and a particular document, which is called a baptism certificate.

In all of this, we should be looking more at a rounded picture of a person's Christian expression, Christian exploration or Christian



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discipleship rather than focusing on applications and baptism certificates. Those things can just happen. They are events. A rounded Christian experience and Christian life is more of an organic picture. That is the discerning assessment that I would try to make of the individuals that were coming to me.

Q29 **Marco Longhi:** You served the population in Darlington. I do not know Darlington. Does it have a Muslim population?

Matthew Firth: There is not a very significant Muslim population apart from when you start looking at the figures for the asylum seekers who are placed in Darlington while their claims are being processed. I am not exactly au fait with precisely how that system works, but I believe that when people apply for asylum they can be placed in certain areas. Darlington seemed to be one of those places where there was a significant proportion of asylum seekers. Therefore, you would start to get more of a population of people who were Muslims.

Q30 **Marco Longhi:** Let me ask the question in a slightly different way. Based on your knowledge of the population that you had at the time and based on your knowledge from talking to your own peers, colleagues in your own church and perhaps wider clergy, are you aware of any Muslims who are already in the country who are seeking to convert?

Matthew Firth: Yes. They could be in two categories. There are Muslims in the UK who have been here for a long time—they may be second or third-generation Muslims—who are seeking to convert to Christianity.

Q31 **Marco Longhi:** Are they coming in batches of sixes and sevens?

Matthew Firth: They were not coming to me. There was not a significant Muslim population in Darlington. I would not expect to see second or third-generation Muslims coming to me.

I think I know where you are going with the question. The people who were coming to me were people coming from the Muslim faith who had already failed in their initial asylum claims. I was not seeing people who were Muslims who had been here for a long time. Second or third-generation Muslims were not requesting baptism. I would not put too much weight on that because there was not a very high Muslim population in Darlington anyway.

Q32 **Marco Longhi:** How easy would it be for anybody to access your church and you for this purpose? Does somebody need to bring them to you?

Matthew Firth: Nobody needs to bring them. When somebody is new to the country, they have an overwhelming sense of not knowing how things work. If people are bringing others to the church for baptism, either for totally genuine reasons or for reasons that may be less than genuine, it may need somebody to be a bit of a shepherd to bring those people.

The other thing is that people do come to churches in relation to baptism and asylum for different reasons. There is an organisation called Justice



First, which says it is “supporting people seeking sanctuary in the Tees Valley”—note this—“who have had their applications refused”. This is a justice organisation with lots of legal input that is supporting people seeking sanctuary in the Tees Valley who have had their applications for asylum refused. One of the places it was basing itself out of is St Cuthbert’s in Darlington. It says, “Come along to see a lawyer at St Cuthbert’s Darlington”.

When certain sections of the church—I am not just talking about the Church of England—say, “We are just trying to extend an open-arms welcome”, in some cases it is not just that. There are some worship centres that are positioning themselves to be centres of legal help and support and advice, in this case specifically for people who have had their applications refused.

There is a bit of a grey area developing there. Somebody might come to church for baptism, but somebody also might come to one of the churches concerned to receive this legal advice, which is going to help them to overturn their failed asylum application.

Q33 Chair: Getting legal advice is not a problem, is it?

Matthew Firth: It is perfectly legal, but it does not tally with the church just saying, “We are offering an open-arms welcome”. In some cases, there is an effort to make those places centres where there can be active work to try to overturn applications that initially failed. There is a blurring of the lines there. It is not just an open-arms welcome. It is a legal engagement.

Q34 Chair: The Home Affairs Select Committee has taken evidence about the number of applications that are refused on first decision by the Home Office, go through the tribunal system and are then overturned. We need to be careful. There are legitimate reasons why people need to get advice. That is a very reasonable thing to do. There may be genuine cases that are not decided correctly in the first place.

Matthew Firth: Yes. As I said, it is perfectly legal. That is clear in law. What I am commenting on is the fact that some churches are saying, “We are simply offering a welcome to people”—it is not just St Cuthbert’s; it is other churches around the country—and then positioning themselves as centres that lawyers are working from, and bringing asylum seekers to those centres to give them specific advice about what they should do given that their initial asylum applications have been turned down.

That is an observation that I have made from evidence that I have seen advertised on social media. All I am doing is saying there is a big blurring of the lines. It is not just a welcome. There is significant legal engagement going on in certain places and cases.

Q35 Alison Thewliss: I just wanted to ask a little more about your expectations of people when they come to the church. It would be fair to say, would it not, that attendance at churches is much greater at Easter



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and Christmas than it is through the rest of the year?

Matthew Firth: Yes.

Q36 **Alison Thewliss:** You will have members of your congregation that you do not see week in, week out.

Matthew Firth: That is right, yes.

Q37 **Alison Thewliss:** Are you applying perhaps a higher standard to those people who are coming and saying they are converting than to the general church population?

Matthew Firth: I do not think so. My observation at the time was that attendance did vary for people who were asylum seekers and people who were more regular or longstanding members of the congregation. Some of them would come every other week; some of them would come every week; some would come every month. It is not necessarily about the frequency. It is about the regularity and how much that person is woven into the life of that particular community.

There are all sorts of reasons why any one person might stop attending church for a few weeks or a few months. In the case of people who are asylum seekers, there are certain dynamics that I spotted, which were not there for the regular longstanding members of the congregation, in terms of patterns of attendance, when they would stop attending, when they would start attending and those sorts of things.

Q38 **Alison Thewliss:** You would not generally be expecting every member of your church to come to every bring and buy sale, every bake sale or every single event.

Matthew Firth: No. You would expect that the people who are woven into the warp and weft of a church community are involved in the community life of the church and the worshipping life of the church, whether that is Sunday, midweek or a study group. You would expect them to try to support the church community by being involved in some of the outreach work of the church as well. These are just the hallmarks of a Christian life and being part of a Christian community.

I was not applying any higher standard. When there are issues of asylum, applications and bits of legal stuff coming into it, you have to be more discerning in those particular cases. It heightens your awareness of some of the dynamics that might be going on.

Q39 **Alison Thewliss:** In cases where you have been supportive of somebody within the church, sometimes these cases end up going to an immigration tribunal. Have there been cases where you have been prepared to go and give evidence at an immigration tribunal or provide written evidence to an immigration tribunal?



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Matthew Firth: The reality is that in the vast majority of the cases, if not all of those that I was dealing with, I had already provided all the evidence I could into the tribunal system before any request to attend.

I can only remember being requested to attend on one or two occasions. I had already supplied all the evidence I could in written form, which was, "A particular person attends the 10.30 service regularly on a Sunday". That was it. For the vast majority of the people I was dealing with, their involvement in the life of the Christian community did not extend much further than that. I had already provided that evidence to the tribunal system. In fact, it was to the Home Office assessment system.

I would get requests from the asylum seekers' lawyers to say more. I could not say more because there was rarely more to say. On a number of occasions, they did not take no for an answer. They were saying, "Could you say that person X does this or that?" I am thinking, "That is extraordinary". A solicitor was asking me to say things in a context where I had already said that I had provided all the evidence I could.

Q40 **Alison Thewliss:** The lawyers are trying to build the best case for their client in the circumstances.

Matthew Firth: They are, but I would slightly call into question some of that practice. I have had communications from lawyers in which they say, "Could you say that my client is involved in evangelism?" I could not because I did not have that evidence. I had already said that I did not have more evidence than the fact a particular person attends church at 10.30 on a Sunday morning regularly.

Q41 **Alison Thewliss:** In terms of whether this should be the Home Office's decision in the end or whether the church should almost be a gatekeeper of the process, where does that balance lie?

Matthew Firth: Any responsible civic body has some responsibility in terms of its own processes and how they relate to the processes of law, nation, the Home Office and so on. We cannot just say that asylum is the Home Office's business and the church is working in a silo over here.

First, there is a section of the church in England that is established by law. It probably has a heightened responsibility to be working well in parallel with Home Office guidance and so on. Of course it is the case that the church is not assessing asylum claims, but it does have a responsibility to make sure its own sacraments are not being dragged into that asylum process through means that are less than totally honourable in terms of requesting to become a Christian or be baptised.

It is a truism. Of course, the church is not there to administer the asylum process, but neither can it just say, "It is nothing to do with us", especially when certain churches seem to be bringing lawyers into their premises. It is greying the boundaries between the two processes.

Q42 **Lee Anderson:** Thank you, Reverend Firth. You said these were



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predominantly young men from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Matthew Firth: In my experience, they were from Iran and Syria.

Q43 **Lee Anderson:** What percentage of these young men, who you saw a few years back, came to you during the appeal stage?

Matthew Firth: To the best of my knowledge, it was all of them. That is a key thing, which has sometimes been missed in both the press coverage and some of the guidance. From some of my conversations, people at the Home Office have not necessarily been as aware of this as they could be.

Q44 **Lee Anderson:** Why have they had this road-to-Damascus moment at this stage and not before?

Matthew Firth: Some of them are in very difficult situations. They are seeing baptism as a ticket to something, whether that is true or not. It is a matter for researchers to look into how many cases where baptism is used as evidence turn out to be granted.

Q45 **Lee Anderson:** Let us go one step further, Reverend. There were none who came before. All the ones that you saw came during the appeal stage.

Matthew Firth: In my experience, yes.

Q46 **Lee Anderson:** How many asylum seekers who have been granted asylum without going through this part of the system, who have just come to this country and been granted asylum, then come to convert or come to be baptised?

Matthew Firth: I do not know.

Q47 **Lee Anderson:** Have you done any?

Matthew Firth: I am sorry. Could you ask the question again?

Q48 **Lee Anderson:** How many people who do have a genuine asylum claim accepted all of a sudden decide that they want to convert to Christianity? How many of those did you see?

Matthew Firth: I have not done any such baptism, where somebody has come to the country, been accepted for asylum and then requested to be baptised. I have not done any of those baptisms.

Q49 **Lee Anderson:** Does that sounds a little bit fishy to the onlooker?

Matthew Firth: This is partly why I became public about some of these issues. This dynamic is happening. I do think it is happening. I know that colleagues around the country are seeing similar dynamics, whether that is in Liverpool, Wakefield, Stockton or Darlington.

Q50 **Lee Anderson:** Some of these asylum seekers who have been baptised and then been granted asylum on the grounds of their new faith have



gone on to commit some awful crimes. Should the church be held responsible for that?

Matthew Firth: There is a tightening up that is needed in terms of its processes. I would not say it could just be held responsible for that. The parallel that I sometimes draw is with the journey that all sorts of institutions, including the church, have been on with safeguarding, for instance. With safeguarding, things were quite lax 20 or 30 years ago. We now say that we are strict on everybody for the sake of protecting people from the individuals that might be seeking to do something they should not be doing.

When it comes to baptism and conversion, if we do see these dynamics happening, if we do the research and we think, "Yes, people are using baptism as some kind of ticket", that means we need to be tightening up our processes for everybody for the sake of making sure that we are doing our best to avoid the headlines that we have seen.

Q51 **Lee Anderson:** I have one more question. The problem with people smuggling, illegal migrants and asylum seekers is that there is an industry. We know that, as a Committee. People smugglers make money. The charities make money in northern France. The people who make the boats make money. The RNLI is running a transport operation. The bus companies that transport the migrants when they get here are making money. The hotels are making money. Rental housing is making loads of money. The lawyers dealing with the asylum claims are making money. What is in it for the church?

Matthew Firth: There is nothing in it for the church. The church—I am speaking broadly there about the Christian community in the UK—wants to be genuinely welcoming and hospitable, but there has been some naïvety and some laxity born of a political position. If you look at the guidance that the established church has produced for clergy on how to support asylum seekers, on page—

Q52 **Lee Anderson:** Reverend, I am just going to interrupt for one minute. You have seen some of the comments that the Archbishop of Canterbury has made recently about us not being tolerant enough or not welcoming enough. Does this stem from him?

Matthew Firth: I became public about this issue because I detected some senior church leaders almost saying, "There is no issue here. There is no problem". I thought, "I have seen a problem in my own local situation and in other situations". The guidance that the established church has issued is quite political. It attacks journalists. It talks about anti-immigration rhetoric. In guidance to clergy, you should not be having a go at journalists and things like that. You should be giving really sound, wise and discerning guidance.

Q53 **Lee Anderson:** Are the archbishops turning a blind eye?



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Matthew Firth: In certain sections of the wider church, there is some political motivation in terms of how they are dealing with this issue.

Chair: Lee, I am going to come back to you. I am just going to bring in James Daly because he does have to go to another appointment very shortly. I will come back to you, Lee, and you can carry that on.

Q54 **James Daly:** Reverend Firth, at the start of this meeting—I am sorry; I did not catch everything that you said—you said that somebody had threatened to get you as a result of giving evidence here today.

Matthew Firth: No. I have been having sleepless nights about coming to the Select Committee and I have taken advice from senior people. People have said, “It is a contentious topic. Be careful because people might try to get you”. That was the phrase used. Whether that is just a load of new trolling on social media, which I am fairly used to—

Q55 **James Daly:** Were those people trying to influence your evidence to this Committee?

Matthew Firth: I have not come across such a person, but this was advice that was given saying, “Be careful because people might try to rattle the cage about this. People might try to get you”. That is why I raised it at the beginning because it speaks to where we are in the debate and discussion and where our democracy is in terms of the worries about that.

Q56 **James Daly:** I am just going to concentrate my questions on the statement of the now ex-Bishop of Durham. I was looking at what you were saying. Effectively, what you have said here today is that every three weeks six or seven people came to you, and there was an individual with them who said, “These people would like to be baptised”. In response to that, you said, “There is a process you have to go through”. We are not going to repeat that all again. Your evidence to this Committee is that, when that process is outlined and the requirements are outlined, those people are not seen again.

Matthew Firth: In the vast majority of cases, those people melted away, yes.

Q57 **James Daly:** I was looking at what the criticism is of what you were saying. The former Bishop of Durham uses a very articulate way of saying you are lying. He says it “contains an imaginative range of allegations”. The allegation or statement that I understand you to be making is simply, “People were coming to church every two or three weeks. When I explained to them that there is a robust process”—however you want to call it—“I did not see them again”. That is what you are saying, is it not, in terms of your first-hand evidence?

Matthew Firth: That is right. I did find it quite extraordinary that that little phrase was used in his letter to the *Telegraph*. It was my lived



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experience as to what was going on there in Darlington. I just told it like it is.

- Q58 **James Daly:** The Bishop of Durham then says, "Mr Firth does not have any evidence to support these claims", other than your first-hand evidence of talking to these people.

Matthew Firth: He could have asked me, could he not? When I went public about it, he could have asked me about it. Instead of doing that, he wrote to the *Telegraph*.

- Q59 **James Daly:** This is what I am trying to get to the heart of. Please share with us if you have a history of dishonesty before the courts or anything like that.

Matthew Firth: No, none.

- Q60 **James Daly:** That is the point. The Church of England seems to be taking the position that you are lying in terms of your first-hand evidence on what you were seeing. That is a pretty strong reaction.

Matthew Firth: Yes. I was not happy that that was said. As I said, some senior church leaders were saying, "This is not really an issue. It is not really happening. We are just trying to offer a welcome. There is no real issue here". I thought, "I know there was an issue in my local situation. I know there was an issue in Liverpool, Wakefield, Stockton, Darlington and various other places", so I decided to paint a picture of what was happening on a local level, knowing that it is likely that it is probably happening in other places across England. That is all I did, really.

- Q61 **James Daly:** Let us stick to what was happening in your particular situation. We then go on to the situation where you are challenged. As the Chair has said, a total of 15 people who may have been asylum seekers have been baptised the past 10 years. That is as may be, but that is nothing really to do with the nature of what you are saying. That is a fact in respect of what is happening. Effectively, your evidence, for right or wrong, is that a number of people have come; you have explained the situation to them; and you have not seen them again. That is it in a nutshell, is it not?

Matthew Firth: I saw a surprising number of baptisms in the system from asylum seekers when I arrived. I honoured them. I experienced cohorts being brought to me, as I have said. I tried to press the pause button because the dynamic clearly was not right.

- Q62 **James Daly:** That is the point. The point is that one is not linked with the other in respect of this.

Matthew Firth: No.

- Q63 **James Daly:** Both are factual statements. That is what I find quite curious about how you have been challenged in respect of this.



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Matthew Firth: This figure of 15 baptisms keeps being mentioned. According to their own figures, that represents 20% of the baptisms that were happening, which is an extraordinary number given the population demographics of Darlington.

- Q64 **James Daly:** I have one last question for you. It does seem extraordinary that you appear to be being criticised for taking responsibility and for having a process in place which encourages life within the Christian church. That is what you are being accused of. If somebody comes to you and says, "Can we have a baptism?" you say, "That is not how this works. You have to get involved in church life", as you have described. That appears to be the position that the church is taking in terms of its criticism of you. Would you agree with that?

Matthew Firth: To be honest, when I read the statement that was put out in the letter to the *Telegraph*, I could not really work out what I was being criticised for. It seemed to be a bit of a flailing around. Institutions have been through this before. Somebody raises something; they try to deny something; they have a go at the whistleblower; a few days later, they say, "Maybe there is a problem here"; and then it goes to, "We are having a full-scale review". They are probably on that journey, but I do not really know what they were attacking me for.

- Q65 **James Daly:** You have not said in any of your evidence to this Committee that you were saying to any of these asylum seekers, "I am not going to baptise you".

Matthew Firth: No, absolutely not.

- Q66 **James Daly:** You were saying to them, "Become involved in the life of the church. That is the road towards baptism". There was never any denial of baptism to anybody.

Matthew Firth: I found the response from the diocese in question extraordinary. I could not quite figure out what they were getting at. All I did was explain and sketch out the experience in that particular location.

- Q67 **Lee Anderson:** Reverend Firth, you are incredibly brave for coming to this Committee, much braver than the Archbishop of Canterbury, by the way, who has not come today. I will just go to my final question. Has the Archbishop, if you are brave enough to say it, turned a blind eye to this?

Matthew Firth: There is a lack of awareness. There is a lack of awareness about the particular dynamics that I have been describing and an unwillingness, at the moment, to be totally honest about the dynamics that we are seeing in this area. That is partly why I started to engage in the public discussion on this. I wanted there to be a good balance to the discussion. I wanted to inject some truth into it.

- Q68 **Lee Anderson:** There is some good news. The Archbishop of Canterbury will be delighted to know that Rwanda is a Christian country; it is 96% Christian. If more asylum seekers or illegal migrants convert to



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Christianity, it will be a safe place for them to go.

Matthew Firth: I was a parish priest in Darlington, so I would not know too much about Rwanda.

Q69 **Marco Longhi:** You referred to political motivations earlier when you referenced the document from the Church of England. In your opinion, is that consistent with the way Church of England bishops have voted in the House of Lords on every single piece of legislation with reference to dealing with the problem of asylum seekers?

Matthew Firth: I have certainly spotted that pattern. Some Church of England bishops have said, "Whichever Government were in power at the time, we will give them an equal run for their money". I cannot second-guess how particular bishops are voting or how the House of Bishops is voting together in the House of Lords. I cannot really assess that.

Marco Longhi: It is a matter of fact.

Matthew Firth: I too have noticed that the votes have been going in that direction. As I said, when you are producing guidance, it should be very dispassionate, clear, level-headed, discerning, wise and so on. It should give the bare bones of how to deal with situations.

Chair: We are going to put that guidance to the—

Q70 **Marco Longhi:** Is there a specific point that is very political, in your opinion?

Matthew Firth: In the guidance for how clergy should deal with asylum seekers and support asylum seekers, it says, "Some journalists have suggested that asylum seekers are only claiming to have become Christians in order to be baptised".

Chair: You have already said that.

Matthew Firth: It then talks about anti-immigration rhetoric coming from journalists. That should not be in the guidance.

Q71 **Chair:** We are going to conclude now. I just want to ask you one question. You said you knew that the six or seven people who were coming in these cohorts were all failed asylum seekers at first instance. How did you know that?

Matthew Firth: I knew through conversations with them and with people in the congregation who knew them.

Q72 **Chair:** You knew that each of them had failed. That is your evidence.

Matthew Firth: Yes.

Chair: You knew.

Matthew Firth: That is what they had said, yes. The people coming to me had said they had failed in their applications.



Q73 **Chair:** They were telling you that they had failed and they wanted to be baptised.

Matthew Firth: That was either said to me or said to other people in the congregation. As the local ministry team, we knew these people who we were dealing with were people who had already failed in their initial asylum applications.

Chair: Can I thank you very much for your evidence this morning? That is very helpful.

Matthew Firth: Thank you for inviting me. It is an honour to speak to you and try to contribute whatever I can. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will now move to our second panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Reverend Canon Christopher Thomas, Right Reverend Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani; Reverend Steve Tinning.

Q74 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming along this morning. I wonder whether each of you in turn would like to introduce yourselves.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Yes, of course. Good morning, my name is Guli Francis-Dehqani. I am the Bishop of Chelmsford.

Chair: You are very welcome.

Christopher Thomas: My name is Canon Christopher Thomas. I am the general secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

Steve Tinning: I am Reverend Steve Tinning. I am the public issues enabler for the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Q75 **Chair:** We are very pleased that we have a variety of churches in front of us this morning. Bishop, I wonder whether you could perhaps start us off with your reflections on what we have just been hearing about what was happening in Darlington between 2018 and 2020. Is there anything that you would like to say in response to the evidence that we have just heard?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I do not know Mr Firth personally, so I do not want to get involved in tit-for-tat accusations. I have also seen the response of the diocese of Durham, which has been robust. Mr Firth was there for a brief period of time.

The thing that I am most interested in is the figures. The figures suggest that there are 15 people who may have been asylum seekers over a 10-year period. Five or six of those years are before Mr Firth arrived. He is absolutely right to say that clergy should be very vigilant. We take



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baptism incredibly seriously. It is a sacrament. It is not something to be played with. We also expect our clergy to act honestly and truthfully and within the bounds of the law.

The figures do not quite add up for me. The objection that the diocese of Durham had was the suggestion that the church is being a conveyor belt for asylum-seeking cases. Those figures from the best part of a 10-year period just do not demonstrate that from that parish, nor indeed more widely. Where the number of asylum seekers has gone up—this is generally, across the board—the number of baptisms, certainly in the Church of England, have not gone up in correlation.

In all honesty, if there is evidence there, we would really like to see it. We genuinely want to be helpful in this conversation and in the way ahead. At the minute, we have not seen evidence that is compelling.

Q76 Chair: We did hear comment about Liverpool, Wakefield and other parts of England. Do you have any sense at all whether what was described to us is happening around England? You look particularly at this area and at asylum seekers, do you not?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I am one of those who is interested in this area. It is certainly true that some churches are experiencing a larger number of asylum seekers than others. In places such as Liverpool and the other places that were mentioned, that is the case.

I believe that is largely because that is where asylum seekers are themselves placed. Where we see hotels or a high-density population of asylum seekers, it is likely to be the churches in those areas that will see asylum seekers coming to them. Our churches respond to local need however it presents itself. That might happen to be in an area where there are large numbers of asylum seekers.

Incidentally, in the increasingly hostile environment, it is perhaps not surprising that, if they find a place of warmth and welcome, they may well be drawn to it. That is a totally separate issue to saying that we are quickly, easily and freely baptising large numbers in order to scam the asylum process, which is properly the responsibility of the Government, the Home Office, the courts and the tribunals.

We need to play our part honestly and truthfully, but with the extension of Christian warmth, hospitality and welcome that is our responsibility.

Q77 Chair: I wondered whether we could talk a little bit about the Catholic Church. We have been talking mainly about the Church of England. What is the Catholic Church's view on what is happening? Are large numbers of asylum seekers trying to become Catholics?

Christopher Thomas: We do not have that data in the office that I work in because we do not collate that data. As the bishop has noted and as our Holy Father Pope Francis has been saying constantly, we should welcome the migrant. We should protect them and promote their



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integration into the community, not only within the church but within the broader society in which we live.

We have a very defined and universal process for the right of initiation of adults, which is quite a lengthy process. I do not have any data about people who have come for baptism who are asylum seekers, but I can give you some figures from 2020 to 2022 on the baptisms of those who were over seven years old. That is the only data that we collate. We do not collate data on what their position was prior to baptism. In the church in England and Wales in 2020, there were 2,157 baptisms of children who were seven years old, 2,841 in 2021 and 3,958 in 2022. Those would be children who were aged seven and adults.

We do not have any data about what the background of the people was beforehand. We have a defined process. I have sent evidence to you about the lengthy way in which the order of Christian initiation takes place.

Q78 Chair: Could you give the Committee an idea of how long that process would take? Are we talking months and months?

Christopher Thomas: Yes. Typically, in any parish, you would begin that process around September. There are markers on the road, as it were, of that process. The process takes place not just with one person, a priest or a parish deacon, but with a team of people. There will be a team of catechists who engage with anybody who is seeking baptism as an adult. They will engage with the person on a regular, normally weekly, basis and explore why they want to become a Christian.

At the end of this first period—it is called the period of inquiry—around Advent Sunday, the first Sunday in December, there is a formal welcome of those people who are interested in becoming Christians into the local community. From the period over Advent and Christmas, the first part of the year, up until the first Sunday of Lent, there will be the period of inquiry. That is where it becomes more formal in terms of looking at what the church teaches. Can you adhere to what the church teaches? Do you have questions about it?

On the first Sunday of Lent, all the people from the diocese, which is the geographical area in which a parish is situated, will come to the cathedral to be greeted by the bishop. He would then welcome them as a broader community. It moves from the individual to the parish and then to the broader community of the diocese.

In the period of Lent, which is called the period of enlightenment, there is a deeper reflection on what they have learned before the sacraments of initiation take place, which includes baptism and confirmation of the Eucharist, at Easter. The period after Easter, mystagogia—it is from the Greek word—is about deepening the experience and insertion into the parish community.



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There is an expectation that the person who comes right at the beginning of this process will be part of the community, that they will be baptised and then continue their work and life within the community itself. You are looking at around about nine months.

Chair: It takes nine months to go through that process.

Christopher Thomas: That is right.

Q79 **Chair:** How long is the process in the Church of England? If you were going to baptise someone, how long would you expect someone to engage with the church?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: We do not have a central policy about how that is done. According to canon law, clergy are required to make sure that any inquirers have a full and deep understanding of the Christian faith and so on.

Typically, for those who are asylum seekers, from the stories I hear from churches around the country, the process of Bible study, classes, learning or whatever lasts somewhere around 10 to 12 weeks. It is often done in groups. From the evidence that I hear from people that I speak to, a high percentage then remain involved in the life of the church and the community.

They would expect to see Christian faith demonstrated through attendance at Sunday services, Bible studies, classes and so on; in a growing ability to reflect and understand; in how they are contributing to community life; and in their changing patterns of behaviour in life. Those are the kinds of criteria, given that there is no cast iron set of criteria.

Q80 **Chair:** In terms of the Baptists, what is the range of time that you would expect someone to engage with you before they became a member of the Baptists?

Steve Tinning: It is varied. Every Baptist church would be expected to follow up with those who are inquiring about baptism on their journey of faith. Many of them will have been on courses about the Christian faith to help them develop their own understanding and come to a personal response of Christian conversion.

The Baptist Church does not baptise children or babies. There is no set age, but we tend to wait until that point when people can give personal testimony as to their own faith. That is quite a central part of it. The clue is in the name. Being Baptists, this is what we are about.

At the point when a person has come to a personal conviction of faith and would like to express that publicly through baptism, it is more common than not that they will embark upon a course of around six weeks to look at what baptism is, their personal journey of faith, why they have come to that decision and the practicalities of how the day progresses.



That is often done hand in hand with church membership. More often than not in the Baptist Church, congregations have an official church membership covenant agreement between the Christians who want to commit themselves to that fellowship and similarly from the fellowship into their pastoral care, discipleship and growth. There is a very strong expectation that people who are baptised in the context of a Baptist church will go on to exist in the context of that ongoing church.

Q81 Chair: Does the Baptist Church have data about asylum seekers who are seeking baptism with the Baptists?

Steve Tinning: No, we are not a centralised denomination as such. We are a movement of 1,800 churches that have a central resource that supports and encourages those churches. We just do not collect data of that nature, no.

Q82 Chair: Are you able to say anything about the story that was in the paper about the Baptist church in Weymouth and the number of asylum seekers who were living on the Bibby Stockholm barge being baptised? Are you able to say anything about that?

Steve Tinning: Yes, of course. My understanding is that around 40 asylum seekers on the Bibby Stockholm are currently attending churches in the local area. Around 25 to 30 of them are attending the Baptist church in Weymouth. Seven of them have been baptised since October, where they have been attending that church. They have gone through that process, as I said, of understanding their faith. They have been meeting with a Farsi-speaking Christian who is associated with the church, alongside a Baptist minister that is in membership of that church as well. They have gone through all of that in their own language and translated for the English speakers, to understand that discernment process themselves.

When they were baptised, they gave full testimony of their Christian conversion, all of which occurred in their country of origin, not as a result of Christian conversion since they have arrived at the Bibby Stockholm.

Some of the 40 have come from other places around the country. I understand some of them have been baptised in those contexts, but the first four that came to Weymouth Baptist Church came out of the blue one Sunday morning. They just attended. There is an organisation called Welcome Churches that exists to help asylum seekers transition when they are moved on. If they are part of a church that is expressing an explicit welcome towards asylum seekers and refugees and they are moved on and they are registered with Welcome Churches, then similar churches in that area will be alerted, given permission, so that they can extend and continue that discipleship process.

That is how that started initially, and then a number more came and a number more came, and now they are vibrant members of the community of that church.



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- Q83 **Tim Loughton:** Can I first welcome all of the work that the various churches have done in giving support to various asylum seekers and refugees in this country? What we are looking at today, though, is those who effectively may have abused that hospitality, who have used a conversion of faith as a means of boosting their asylum application.

Canon, can I just query your figures? You just gave us the figures in the Catholic Church for baptisms for over-sevens between 2020 and 2022, which showed a big increase. That was, of course, during Covid, was it not?

Christopher Thomas: That is right, yes.

- Q84 **Tim Loughton:** Do you have similar figures pre-Covid?

Christopher Thomas: We do, but I do not have them with me, I am afraid. I can send them to the Committee afterwards if need be.

- Q85 **Tim Loughton:** Would those figures, off the top of your head, show an increase or a decrease?

Christopher Thomas: They would be around about the same, I would suspect. I would have to look at them, but it would be around about the same number as for 2022. There would have been a dip during the time of the pandemic, especially because churches were closed at that time.

- Q86 **Tim Loughton:** That is my point. I quoted figures before for Church of England baptisms in the 10 years up to Covid, which is a legitimate period to take, which show a very substantial decrease of more than a third. It was 140,000, dropping to 87,000 in the year before Covid. Would that pattern be similar for your church?

Christopher Thomas: It could be. There would be a decrease, but one of the things about the Catholic Church that is significant is that over the period of the last 20 years we have seen a significant number of migrants coming in, particularly from the Philippines and south India, in the Keralan community, who are Catholics. They would actually be part of the community and would come and seek our communities. When they have children, they would have those children baptised. I could certainly send the figures to the Committee afterwards.

- Q87 **Tim Loughton:** Can I just check that for both the Catholic Church and the various Baptist churches you represent, Reverend Tinning, there is no central guidance to clergy about baptisms for asylum seekers?

Christopher Thomas: No, there is not.

Steve Tinning: There is not specifically for asylum seekers. We have a collection of various guidance for baptism and we have guidance for ministers that are called to give evidence at tribunals in cases of asylum seekers as well. If you are asking if I have a special pamphlet just for asylum seekers, no, I have not.

- Q88 **Tim Loughton:** Bishop, the Church of England does have guidance,



which you have now decided urgently to review. Why?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: It is always advisable to review guidance periodically. It was produced initially, as I understand it, in 2017, around the time that the community sponsorship programme was launched jointly by the then Home Secretary and the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace. The guidance was produced around about that sort of time. A great deal has changed between then and now, including some legislation and policy, so it is appropriate that we look again.

I do wonder whether it is not so much that the guidance is not now helpful, but that actually the context has changed with the hostile environment. Maybe the guideline now looks softer than it actually is, because of the change in context around us. Having said that, it is quite appropriate that we look at it. I have said publicly that we ought to review these guidelines from time to time.

My sense is that we may be able to tighten up some of the language, to clarify things a little bit more. The underlying essence of it will not change. Our role is to offer a warm and loving welcome, to provide support and pastoral care where we can, but to be wise as serpents, certainly when it comes to baptism, and to always act honestly and within the bounds of the law.

Q89 **Tim Loughton:** You do not think the guidance will fundamentally change. There will be some nuances and some contextual changes, but the underlying guidance is sound, as far as you are concerned.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: It is guidance. We need to remember that. It is not policy. It is guidance. The underlying message will remain the same, but I hesitate to say too much because it is currently under review. We will see what is produced, and what is produced will take into account consultation, both with clergy who have a lot of experience in this area and with other stakeholders—charities and so on. We do want to take into account the reality of the situation and the experience of people on the ground.

Q90 **Tim Loughton:** Where in the guidance does it guide clergy that they should be convinced as to the sincerity of somebody coming forward to be baptised into the Church of England and that that should be a consideration before taking forward that process?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I do not have the detail in front of me, but my understanding and memory is that, in this guidance and more generally, there is an understanding, according to canon law, that anybody who seeks baptism must understand the importance of what they are doing. They must understand the tenets of the Christian faith. They must demonstrate this through their lifestyle, what they are saying and their commitment to the life of the church. The things I have already mentioned—attendance, Bible study, involvement in community and so on—are absolutely necessary parts of the discernment process.

Q91 **Tim Loughton:** That is not what I asked, is it? You said just now that



there should be a full and deep understanding under canon law. The phrase on page 8 of the guidance, which is the only section of this 10-page guidance that appears to refer to any judgment about the legitimacy of the applicant for baptism, is "to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves". It says, "Clergy must be confident that those seeking baptism fully understand what it signifies as a sacramental act of initiation, which ushers an individual into the church". It is an understanding of what it is all about. It is a general knowledge test, rather than a genuine commitment that is being judged according to your guidance, is it not?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Nobody in the Church of England would say that the baptism is about a general knowledge test. That is part of the challenge, is it not? How do you assess something that is in somebody's heart? It is very difficult to do that. As I understand it, some of the Home Office approach and tests and so on have been exactly that, trying to see what people's knowledge might be about the Bible or whatever. It is a very difficult thing to assess, which is why we use the language of discernment and wisdom needed.

I have spoken to clergy who have said that they have denied baptism to asylum seekers because they have felt that there has been a lack of genuineness. As a bishop, I have to trust our clergy, the training they get and the experience that they have on the ground. They get to know people. They develop relationships and they use their wisdom, but if the language can be tightened up in the guidelines, I am really comfortable with that.

Q92 **Tim Loughton:** Do you not think it is more than just tightening up the language? Going through this guidance, which was quite an eye-opener for me, it is more of an instruction manual as to how to get somebody through the asylum process. There are lots of practical things for clergy here about their participation in attending court appearances. For example, it gives the advice, "Judges are likely to react negatively if there is anything that looks like an organised demonstration, so avoid there being too many people present". It says, "You need to give convincing evidence".

It also then says, "It would be very helpful if we can collect case studies where cases claiming religious conversion have been poorly assessed. The Home Office changed their policy on LGBTI assessments based on the *Guardian* presenting a list of poorly assessed cases".

Then, as we heard from Reverend Firth earlier, it talks about journalists and the anti-immigration rhetoric of a number of media outlets, "which are used to support broader political narratives about British identity, rights and values, as was particularly evident in the run-up to the EU referendum". Why is that relevant to how clergy should assess whether somebody approaching them for baptism into a new church is what they should be looking for? This is all about process, is it not? It is an instruction manual; it is not really guidance.



Dr Francis-Dehqani: I do not think it is an instruction manual. We do not have a policy on this. It is not an instruction manual. It was designed, when it was created, in order to help clergy understand how best to support somebody in a way that is both helpful to the individual, but also appropriate and honest. Around this whole area, there is an awful lot of rhetoric and negativity of language, which is feeding into the reality of the experience. Headlines are very often driving people's perceptions and that is unhelpful, which is why an opportunity to explore these things more deeply is a positive thing.

Q93 **Tim Loughton:** It is not impartial guidance, is it, though, when it starts to talk about Brexit, effectively?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I cannot comment on Brexit, I am afraid. It depends what you mean by "impartial". It is designed to support somebody well through the system. It is not designed to ensure that you baptise people and get them through. Again, if I can just come back to the data and the figures, my understanding is that in 2023 the Upper Tribunal cited 0.1% of their cases—23 of their cases—where religious conversion was cited as a reason. Of those, 13 were set aside. Only seven people were accepted on the basis of religious conversion.

The Upper Tribunal has also said that clergy coming to support as witnesses should not be considered generally as expert evidence and that religious faith and conversion is not a determinative reason for asylum. We, as a church, have also been learning more and more over the years. Anybody who comes to us, seeking practical support or teaching, friendship and support through a process of exploring faith will receive the same treatment, whether they are an asylum seeker or not. Again, I stress this: we want to act always honestly, above board and in keeping with what is law.

Q94 **Tim Loughton:** Bishop, are you saying that you do not seem to think there is a particular problem with this guidance? This revisit is largely about updating the context, rather than essentially making this into greater guidance for clergy to ascertain whether somebody is genuine about their reasons for converting and not seeking to do so for the convenience, so that it aids their asylum case. You do not think there will be a fundamental change in this guidance. Presumably, it has to be passed by the Synod, does it?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: The Archbishops' Council, one of the NCIs, have taken responsibility for this document. It was one of their staff who produced it and it will be they who renew it. What I am trying to get across is the essence of the fact that the church is there to support individuals and enable them to explore faith, to teach them, to bring them to baptism if that is their intention, they demonstrate commitment and clergy discern that that is the right thing.

Essentially, that is our role, and it is the role of the Home Office, the courts and tribunals to assess the veracity of the asylum claim. If we can



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help with that in any way, we are absolutely happy to do that in the understanding of conversion and all of those things.

In terms of tightening up on the criteria for how you assess whether somebody is genuine or not, I come back to the point that there will never be a set of cast-iron criteria. You are looking into people's hearts. Our evidence, the evidence that I witness when I visit churches and so on, is, where there are asylum seekers, often thriving communities, mixed communities of asylum seekers, refugees and locally born British people all contributing to life in the community, and they have retained an interest and indeed are contributing to the—

- Q95 **Tim Loughton:** Nobody is denying that. We are just concerned about those people, whatever the number, who appear to match the description that Reverend Firth has given in his limited experience. Do you regard Reverend Firth as a whistleblower?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I do not know that I can answer that, to be honest with you. I do not know enough about the situation. He was in Durham for a short period of time. As I understand it, he did not raise these issues—

- Q96 **Tim Loughton:** He was in charge of a parish for at least a couple of years.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: For a couple of years, yes. He did not raise these issues, as I understand it, while he was there. He raised them through an article or an interview in a newspaper and the diocese have responded. If you want more detail about that, I am sure we can find it from the diocese of Durham. I am afraid I cannot comment on it.

- Q97 **Tim Loughton:** Do you support the response of the now retired Bishop of Durham, in his pretty robust calling out of Reverend Firth? Effectively, he accused him of lying.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I have no reason not to take the comments of the Bishop of Durham and the diocese of Durham seriously. As I say, I do not know the situation. I do not know the church, so I hesitate to make a value judgment.

- Q98 **Tim Loughton:** You agree with the Bishop of Durham and his inference that Reverend Firth was lying.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I am not going to get into comments and judgments about whether he was lying. I do not recognise the notion that the Church of England is currently being a conveyor belt for baptisms in order for people to gain their asylum status.

- Q99 **Tim Loughton:** You have condemned the use of the phrase "conveyor belt". Would you use any phrase to recognise that there is some abuse going on?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I do not believe that there is abuse going on. I have put in a written question through the House of Lords to ask for



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statistical evidence from the Home Office to the claim made by the former Home Secretary in the *Daily Telegraph* on 3 February that she has become aware of churches around the country facilitating “industrial-scale bogus asylum claims”. We do not have that evidence. If there is such evidence, we would like to see it so that we can adjust and work with the Home Office.

Q100 Tim Loughton: Of those baptism figures in the 10 years that I gave, how many of them are by people going through the asylum seeker process?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Like my two colleagues, we do not hold information about what people’s status is pre-baptism. We have been baptising people for centuries and we have never held that kind of information.

Q101 Tim Loughton: With respect, Bishop, you have just condemned Reverend Firth’s figures of only having dealt with 15 baptisms in his parish, of which seven were down to him. You have no knowledge of what the total figure is for the UK. How can you join in the Bishop of Durham’s condemnation for that only being an insignificant amount, even though it represents 20% of all baptisms? What is your data?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Our data is the number of baptisms that have taken place over the age of 11 or 13. We do not hold data centrally—or anywhere, for that matter—about precisely what the status of the individual is. However, as I have explained to you, where there are large numbers of asylum seekers—and when we are talking large numbers, we are talking maybe 20 or 30 in any given church community—there is evidence that they are participating fully in the life of the church.

Q102 Tim Loughton: With respect, Bishop, that is not the point. Can you just confirm that the Church of England does not keep any figures and has not done any analysis of the proportion of those that it has accepted into baptism in the church over the last 10 years, or whatever it may be, who went through that process while part of an asylum-seeking procedure? Therefore, you cannot claim that the figures cited by Reverend Firth, as condemned by the former Bishop of Durham, are negligible, because you do not know what the overall figure is, do you?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: We do not hold that information. You are correct. What we do know is that, sadly, from our perspective, there has been a steady decline in the number of baptisms overall, including where there have been peaks in the number of asylum claims. Baptism figures have still been steadily going down. What I would say is that the reason the figure of 15 is interesting in that particular context is that it is 15 people over a 10-year period. However you look at the figures, those are not vast enough to reference a conveyor belt.

Q103 Lee Anderson: Bishop, were you alarmed when Reverend Firth said that the only asylum seekers he ever saw for baptism were at the appeal stage? They were not there before, or after they had been granted



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asylum; they were strictly at the stage of an appeal for asylum. Was that alarming? Was that a red flag?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: If that is his experience, then that is his experience. I do not want to question it. I have not heard that before.

Q104 **Lee Anderson:** If you were a vicar in a local parish church, would that be a red flag for you?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I would ensure that I was applying the process of discernment as wisely as I could. If that was the pattern I was seeing, I would want to be very careful.

Q105 **Lee Anderson:** Would you raise it with your superiors?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I would certainly raise it with colleagues to see if they were noticing a similar pattern and, if I felt it was necessary, yes, I could speak to my seniors as well.

Q106 **Lee Anderson:** The previous witness suggested, in the end, that the Archbishop had turned a blind eye to this. Do you agree with him?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: We do not operate that kind of system in the Church of England. The Archbishop does not act as a CEO in the Church of England. Every diocese is led by the diocesan bishop, together with a leadership team, and we have responsibility for clergy within the fact that they are officeholders. Clergy have a certain autonomy and responsibility in their own patches as well. The Archbishop of Canterbury, even if he wanted to have that kind of responsibility, could not within the structures that we have.

Q107 **Lee Anderson:** We know the asylum process and system is broken in this country. We all know that. Do you think, with what Reverend Firth had to say, that the church is adding to the problem?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: As I have said already, we want to be part of the conversation going forward and, if we can help and if there is data presented that suggests that there is a serious problem, then absolutely we want to be part of that conversation.

Q108 **Lee Anderson:** You said previously, Bishop, that as a church you want to provide a warm and loving environment for refugees and asylum seekers. Can you tell the Committee how many asylum seekers the Church of England actually houses in its vicarages and properties around the country?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I cannot talk for the whole country. I can talk for Chelmsford diocese, where we currently have 11—

Q109 **Lee Anderson:** What about a rough, ballpark figure around the country?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I am really sorry. I just do not have that evidence. I can only speak for Chelmsford diocese. I can give you the information about Chelmsford—



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Q110 **Lee Anderson:** Is it hundreds?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Do you mean in Chelmsford diocese?

Lee Anderson: No, I mean around the country.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I do not know what other dioceses do.

Q111 **Lee Anderson:** Is it dozens?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: We can try to find out, if you want it, but I really do not know what the policy is in other dioceses. This is what I am trying to say.

Q112 **Lee Anderson:** What I am trying to ask, Bishop, is whether you are practising what you preach. Excuse the pun.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Yes, absolutely. There are many examples of churches offering warm welcomes through events, through practical support, through guidance and so on, but in practical terms around housing, I can only speak for Chelmsford diocese.

Q113 **Marco Longhi:** I am afraid this is again for you, Bishop. Are you aware that the chap who was on his way to blow up Liverpool's Women's Hospital, al-Swealmeen, was in the country as a result of claiming to have converted to Christianity?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I believe I have read some of that in the newspapers.

Q114 **Marco Longhi:** As was the case, in fact, for Ezedi as well. Do you believe these to be Christian acts?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: They are crimes. Of course I do not.

Q115 **Marco Longhi:** These are very violent acts, quite clearly completely at odds with Christianity, though not necessarily, in fact, at odds with other religious teachings. How could it get to the stage that clergy would vouch for the Christian faith of people who then go on to commit these acts, given that you say such a small proportion of people are actually allowed into the country on that basis?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: The first thing I want to say is that the church is not infallible. It is a human institution and errors of judgment and so on may be made. I want to absolutely accept that.

However, we cannot make policy and form our wider opinions on the basis of a couple of negative cases. We have to be very careful about that. Human beings will fall into bad ways and particularly human beings who have been through traumatic experiences, have mental health problems or whatever it is. There could be a whole host of reasons, but it is dangerous to use a couple of examples to criticise a whole system when, at the end of the day, it is not the church's responsibility to assess the veracity of the asylum claim.



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Q116 **Marco Longhi:** It is as a result of the church's position that a previous denial of claim for asylum has then been overturned. I am expressing an opinion of my own now; perhaps I should ask the question. Is the church's altruism over its attitude towards asylum seeker applications and asylum seekers not actually at the cost of and to the harm of other people already resident in this country, some of them perhaps belonging to your church? Could it not actually harm them?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I have a couple of things in relation to that, if I may. One is that the asylum claim has to take into account more issues than just the conversion. We know that it is not a determinative factor. The responsibility for giving somebody permission to become a refugee does not lie with the church. That is one thing I would say.

The other is that you could argue from the other side that the work that the church and other civil groups and charities do with asylum seekers is enabling positive and good integration. If these kinds of groups were not working with asylum seekers and refugees, we could have even more problems because people are not being enabled to integrate well, to find a place of belonging, to begin to contribute to the new society that they are part of. Again, it is difficult to assess these things, but there are many good examples.

I wonder whether the complexity of this issue is such that one Select Committee is going to struggle to get to the heart of it. If there is a genuine desire to understand the significance of the church, other groups, charities and so on working with asylum seekers, perhaps there is a longer-term process to be done, with a Committee looking over a period of time. We would be delighted to show you some of the places and some of the good examples, but we cannot vouch for every case.

Q117 **Marco Longhi:** If I may, you have mentioned that you are human beings and therefore fallible, but that could be at very serious cost. That is the first point I would like to make.

The second point I am really struggling to reconcile here is that you seem to be very willing to describe the former Bishop of Durham's testimony in response to Reverend Firth as being serious, with no reason why you would want to question it. When you come to answer other questions, you say that you simply have no data, but you are not willing to accept that Reverend Firth's observations of what he was experiencing have any credibility at all. Those are completely contradictory positions to take, if you do not mind me saying.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I hope I have said that I do not know the situation of Mr Firth, and I have not criticised him or accused him of anything.

Q118 **Marco Longhi:** You seem to be supporting the former Bishop of Durham's position, though, which is basically calling him a liar.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I have never called him a liar. What I am saying is that, if he is claiming that the Church of England is being a conveyor belt



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for baptisms in order for people to gain asylum status, that is not the experience that I have. I do not believe there is the evidence to suggest it.

Q119 **Marco Longhi:** Perhaps we are arguing about semantics. Maybe there is a conveyor belt in attempting to get baptisms, but that fortunately many of those are not succeeding.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Possibly, but I have not seen the evidence for it.

Q120 **Marco Longhi:** You have heard evidence from Reverend Firth this morning. Is there any particular part of it that you disagree with?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: The experience that I have—

Marco Longhi: No. That is not the answer to my question.

Chair: Let the bishop answer.

Q121 **Marco Longhi:** Are there any aspects of the evidence you heard from Reverend Firth this morning that you disagree with?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: He was speaking about his particular context in Darlington and I cannot comment on that specific context in Darlington.

Marco Longhi: There is no point asking any further questions.

Q122 **James Daly:** I am going to have to come back to you briefly, Bishop. The situation that concerns me goes to Mr Loughton's point. An organisation—in your case a religious organisation—takes an overtly political stance in respect of an issue. What Mr Loughton read out to you is a political statement. It is not an ecumenical statement. It is a political statement, and we have a situation where the Archbishop of Canterbury is using very strong terminology in respect of legislation such as the Rwanda Bill that is going through Parliament.

How can we rely on the Church of England on this issue to take an impartial position regarding these applications? It is clear as day that you are an organisation that will do everything possible to ensure and support asylum seekers to stay within this country. That might be an admirable position. I am not challenging that, but it is not an even-handed position, is it? I sometimes do wonder whether one of your parishioners, if they had the temerity to support the Rwanda legislation, would dare say that and would be welcome in their parish after that.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: We represent the breadth of the Church of England and there are people with all kinds of different views in our parishes. They would find an equally welcome place, or they should find an equally welcome place. Sorry; can you just restate your question?

Q123 **James Daly:** In terms of the wider application of Christian conversion that we are talking about here, we are concerned that we have an organisation with an overtly political position. It is not a religious position. It is a political position, which makes reference to the EU referendum.



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Morality has been brought into discussions of the Rwanda legislation. Some of us are losing faith that you are, as an organisation, dealing with applications in an even-handed manner and have a sufficient amount of impartiality.

You are looking at claims in a way where you are essentially part of a process that is looking to ensure that people can make successful applications, rather than taking a position based on the evidence. A lot of people, as we have heard from Reverend Firth, appear to be turning up at churches attempting to get a quick baptism for the reasons that have been said. Is it unfair for me to say that?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: It is not unfair for you to say it, because there is that perception around. It has not been what I have experienced and I come back to this point that, if the Committee really wants to see what the picture is widely across the Church of England, perhaps there needs to be a little more time invested, to come, see and meet some of our clergy, who have built up a lot of experience over the years. They seek support and advice from one another as well.

Q124 **James Daly:** Has the Church of England, through the Archbishop of Canterbury's leadership, taken a political position on how this country should deal with asylum seekers?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: No.

Q125 **James Daly:** You have not taken a political position at all in respect of that, even though Mr Loughton has said what he has said.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: Sorry. Do you mean an agreed, common political stand?

James Daly: Absolutely, yes.

Dr Francis-Dehqani: No. That absolutely has not been the case. The Lords Spiritual who sit in the House of Lords are not whipped. We are there as individual people. There happens to be a lot of agreement on the Rwanda Bill and the Illegal Migration Act, but we are there as individuals. There is no common political stand.

Q126 **James Daly:** A lot of people would be surprised by that. My final question is this. By any stretch, there is no evidence—none whatsoever—that Reverend Firth is not telling the truth regarding six or seven people attending every three weeks. He has, quite admirably, taken the position that we have to engage in the full Christian process before baptism can happen, as he has said today.

Can I ask you, as a bishop in the Church of England, what you are going to do, taking away that information? It is not just happening in one church in Darlington, is it? It is happening all over the country. What steps can be taken? What research can you do? What processes are going to be put in place to ensure that that is not happening elsewhere?



Dr Francis-Dehqani: If there are churches where large numbers of asylum seekers are being brought, at appeal stage, asking for baptism, we would advise our clergy, as we always do, to act with great wisdom and discernment. As I have said, there are clergy I have spoken to who say that they have turned down baptisms. The picture that Mr Firth has painted—

Q127 **James Daly:** How many have turned down baptisms? You have said that you know people have done it. How many?

Dr Francis-Dehqani: I do not know exactly how many, but I have spoken to clergy who have told me that they have turned people down because they did not feel that what they were saying was meeting the criteria.

Q128 **Alison Thewliss:** I wanted to ask the other two churches about what happens in their church communities. It feels as though they have perhaps not had enough of a say here. I am conscious that we do not have representatives from Scotland here. Could you tell me a bit more about how you see this? Do people who have converted stay in the life of the church? Do they continue to contribute?

Christopher Thomas: I do not have specific data about asylum seekers. Our process, the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults, is quite a robust process in terms of the engagement that people need before they receive the sacrament of baptism. There is also the discernment that Bishop Francis-Dehqani has talked about. It is not a singular person taking that decision. It is not just the parish priest. There are other people involved, including sponsors and catechists, and there is a broader community aspect to this.

In particular, it would be incumbent on every priest to have a formal interview with the person who is seeking baptism. You will, I am sure, be aware of the church's teaching on marriage and other things. We have to ascertain the background of the person before they receive the sacrament. In that process, you would unpack the position of where they have come from, if they were asylum seekers, for instance, but not only that. If they were coming from any other particular background, you would unpack that.

There is a sense of real engagement. You cannot say whether everybody who receives baptism as an adult will then continue on in the church. As the bishop said, we are all human and people will have different experiences of faith but, from my own experiences as a parish priest—I was 13 years a parish priest in the diocese of Nottingham—the people who came as adults to receive the sacraments of initiation had a real depth of participation within the faith community and were really valuable in terms of developing their own faith, but also taking on the role of being sponsors for those who came up to receive faith as well.



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Steve Tinning: Like I said earlier, in the Baptist Church baptism and church membership are often very closely aligned. It is very unusual for a church to walk with somebody in their journey of faith, see them baptised and then never see them again. It is extremely rare and, more often than not, it is because they move away. There are some anecdotal examples that have been shared about churches that have welcomed asylum seekers, baptised them and not seen them again.

That sort of reporting and language is desperately unhelpful because, when you dig a bit deeper, it is because they have been moved on out of the community, and they have gone on to express their faith in other places and in other ways.

I would suggest that that is not our experience. For churches in the Baptist faith, as in our other churches that are represented today, there is no more explicit teaching in scripture, from beginning to end, that is consistent with welcoming the stranger. Churches are desperately keen, where they can, to welcome people at whatever stage on that journey they are, if they are perceived to be in need. It is that process of understanding their needs, serving their needs, coming to understand them and their journey of faith that sometimes leads to Christian conversion.

As was said earlier, in an environment that is so hostile towards them as human beings, when they are given a warm welcome, when they are provided with a food bank, when they are given a home, when they are embraced as part of a community, it is no wonder that that instils questions about the motivation of the people that have expressed that welcome.

I would also like to say that, in the situation in Weymouth, if the church were here today the one thing that they would want me to articulate before the Committee is the sadness and the fear that they have felt as a church since some comments have been made by MPs around this issue. They sent me an email that was sent to them, that said, "YOU NEED SHUTTING DOWN AND THE BACKLASH FROM THIS WILL BE HUGE!... THE TRUTH IS YOU KNOW YOUR LYING AND CHEATING OUR SYSTEM!... TRAITOROUS TO TAX PAYING PEOPLE!... BRACE YOURSELF!..."

That is a small church on the south coast that is desperately trying to express a kindness towards people they consider vulnerable. They have been on the barge. They have seen the conditions that they are in. They have come to them expressing faith. One lady who exemplifies that church community is over 80 years old and she is known by the asylum seekers as "the huggy lady", because she will not let them leave the church without expressing Christian love and kindness to them through an embrace and a hug.

This church is now fearing the backlash because of language used, as we have heard earlier, about questions as to whether taxpayers are being scammed by the Government, others saying that you can attend mass



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once a week for a few months and, bingo, you are signed off by a member of the clergy. It is just not true and it is doing damage to the communities that are desperately trying to serve the poor and the vulnerable in their areas.

Alison Thewliss: Thank you. It really is quite disturbing to hear that the church has been targeted in that way.

Steve Tinning: Thank you. I told them I would share that with you all. I am not trying to berate anyone. I am just trying to say we all have a responsibility to recognise the consequences of all our actions. We, as a church, definitely have that responsibility and we will continue to encourage our church leaders to give evidence when asked in tribunals as honestly, clearly and helpfully as they possibly can. We have a similar expectation for our places of power: that they would hold that same level of responsibility.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That was a very important point to hear, about that particular church in Weymouth and how they are feeling at the moment about what has been said.

Can I thank all three of you for giving evidence today and helping us to understand more about what the situation is? That has been very helpful.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tom Pursglove MP, Dan Hobbs and George Shirley.

Q129 **Chair:** Perhaps I could ask you, Minister, just to introduce yourself to the Committee, as well as your officials, one of whom we are very familiar with and one of whom we have never met before. We are very pleased to see a new face.

Tom Pursglove: I am Tom Pursglove, the Minister of State for Legal Migration and the Border. This is my colleague Dan Hobbs and my colleague George Shirley.

Q130 **Chair:** Could Mr Shirley just say what his responsibilities are, just so we are clear?

George Shirley: I am the director for asylum and human rights operations. That is the casework element of the asylum process.

Q131 **Chair:** You will be able to particularly address some of the questions we might have around how applications are dealt with within the Home Office and what is considered by decision-makers.

George Shirley: Yes, that is right.

Q132 **Chair:** Mr Hobbs, you are in charge overall.



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Dan Hobbs: I am the director general of migration and borders in terms of the policy systems and strategy.

Chair: That is very helpful to know.

Q133 **Alison Thewliss:** I would like to start, if I may, with a written question that I sent to you, Minister, which you did not really answer. I wondered if you might take the opportunity to answer it a little bit better now. I had asked, with reference to the article by the former Secretary of State, the Member for Fareham, entitled, "Too many churches are facilitating bogus asylum claims. This must stop". It was in the *Telegraph* on 3 February.

You were unable to answer the question as to what evidence the Department holds on churches facilitating high levels of false asylum claims. Do you have that evidence just now?

Tom Pursglove: The key point to make here is that it is, of course, a matter for the former Home Secretary to explain the comments that she has made. They are not my comments. They are not the comments of the ministerial team in the Home Office at the moment and they may be questions that you as a Committee wish to ask of her. What I can say, for the Home Office's part, is that we recognise that recent cases have given rise to an interest in this issue.

We do not have specific evidence of facilitation but, where there are issues that are raised about specific cases, the evidence within specific cases and particular issues, we will look into those issues. Those matters are properly tested as part of the consideration of any asylum claim. You will recognise the introduction of the two-stage test that we brought forward through the Nationality and Borders Act, which I legislated for when I was last in the Department.

What we are seeing on the back of that is grant rates coming down, but also a more thorough testing of the evidence that people are bringing forward as part of their claims, including the credibility of those claims.

Q134 **Alison Thewliss:** The former Home Secretary said that she had seen evidence as Home Secretary, which she must have seen as the Home Secretary, as the Minister in that Department. What evidence does the Department have that she is referring to?

Tom Pursglove: I cannot answer, as you will appreciate. Rather like I would not ask you to explain the thinking of a colleague of yours in the SNP, I cannot give you a specific, definitive answer as to what it is that Mrs Braverman has in mind. She would need to explain that to the Committee on her own terms and in her own way.

What I can say is what I have just said, which is that we do not have evidence of systemic abuse of the asylum process in the way that some, perhaps, are suggesting but, where there are issues that arise, where there are concerns about abuses of the asylum process, we look into that, as we do all angles of abuse. When it comes to Christian conversion,



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that is properly tested as part of the asylum determination process. As I have said, the reforms that we have already introduced are making a difference in terms of helping that process to be more robust.

Q135 **Alison Thewliss:** The evidence that she says exists does not exist, as far as you are concerned. It does not exist at all.

Tom Pursglove: I can only refer you to what I have said previously. You would need to ask her what the rationale behind her comments is.

Alison Thewliss: I ask because it is quite topical.

Tom Pursglove: In that case, you may wish to ask her directly.

Q136 **Alison Thewliss:** If there was evidence in the Department, you would expect to have seen it.

Tom Pursglove: I would expect to see evidence within the Department. If there was a systemic issue, I would expect officials to come to me, as the Minister, with that. As I say, we are working through reform that is dealing directly with credibility testing, but also there is a case-by-case consideration of individual claims, recognising the circumstances of specific claims and also ensuring that any allegations of abuse are properly looked into.

Q137 **Alison Thewliss:** Have you asked if that evidence exists?

Tom Pursglove: As you would expect, we have a Select Committee hearing today. I have done considerable preparation ahead of this Committee, as you would expect Ministers to, and I have no doubt that you will want to probe as a Committee on various aspects of the Department's work in this area. It is something that we consider to be of importance, given the concerns that are being raised. That is why the Home Secretary has had the meeting with faith leaders to talk about this issue and why we intend to establish a working group, to work with them to make sure that all of us are ensuring the integrity of the asylum system in the way reasonable people would expect.

Q138 **Alison Thewliss:** May I ask your officials? Are either of you aware of such evidence existing?

Dan Hobbs: I refer to the comments that the Minister has made in terms of what we have and wider issues in terms of the decision-making process. I cannot add anything further to what the Minister has said.

George Shirley: Where there are individual cases, evidence and issues, we will deal with those cases specifically.

Q139 **Alison Thewliss:** There is no evidence of the systemic nature that the former Home Secretary has suggested.

George Shirley: It is as Dan and the Minister said.

Q140 **Marco Longhi:** Maybe you did not hear the previous panels. I think



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maybe you were not in the room. Were you able to listen?

Tom Pursglove: I have been in wall-to-wall meetings ahead of this morning, so I will be catching up on those proceedings but have not seen them as yet.

Q141 **Marco Longhi:** That is fine. In a nutshell, there was some robust questioning from members to the panels and whenever questions were asked around data it always seemed to be that the answer was, "There is no data". That, if you do not mind me saying, seems like a very convenient answer. The Home Office, on the basis of whatever a church might recommend, might choose to, on appeal, overturn a previous rejection. How can we go about assessing with confidence whether decisions are correct, if there is no assessment, post approval of an appeal, as to whether the criteria used for granting the appeal were correct?

In other words, say I am an asylum seeker. Say I, as my colleague mentioned a few moments ago, am on the road to Damascus and have had my appeal rejected, so I decide to become a Christian. A priest decides to support my position on that. I would like to quote the *Daily Express*, which actually interviewed an asylum seeker whistleblower who said it is routine, that they try to do this sort of thing. I think it was a Kurdish asylum seeker they interviewed.

How do we go about, post approval, determining whether that system is working, if we do not keep any data whatsoever?

Tom Pursglove: As the Home Office, we are actively working to improve the dataset that we have around this issue. One of the challenges is that the legacy IT systems we have been working on do not capture data in this area very effectively. There is considerable reliance on free text, for example, and, with the new systems, we are in a much stronger position to be able to capture in an itemised way data relating to claims and the grounds by which those claims are either refused or granted.

That is actually something that is ongoing work. The Home Secretary and I have been very clear with officials that we want to see greater itemised data in that area and we are currently working through publication around that. You are absolutely right to touch on the data point. All of us want to see an improvement in terms of the quality of data that we have around decision-making in the asylum space. That is precisely why we are investing in the IT infrastructure that will help us to do that.

Q142 **Marco Longhi:** Given that my question was around data, I would now like to move on to the point on the veracity of information as presented to the Home Office. You will be aware of the al-Swealmeen case. An asylum seeker, who claimed Christianity, went to Liverpool Women's Hospital to blow the place up, but actually managed to blow himself up in the process.

There is also the Ezedi case. I believe the individual had had his application refused and that was then overturned, through Home Office



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decision-making on the basis of the submission of a priest. Are you not alarmed at these cases?

Tom Pursglove: You will appreciate why I am limited in what I can say in terms of the fact that there are ongoing police investigations in relation to one of those cases, but I am confident that the Home Office did do its job in relation to that latter case. It was the tribunal that made an adjudication different to that of the Home Office. It is, of course, for the judiciary to make those decisions. We have a separation of powers in this country and for good reason, but it would be them that would need to account for why it was they reached the conclusion that they did in that specific case.

I am confident that the Home Office did what was necessary and required, in accordance with our process, in relation to that particular case.

Q143 **Marco Longhi:** On the matter of process, then, if a tribunal makes that decision, does the Home Office have a further step it could take? Could it say, "No. We would like to fight that decision"?

Tom Pursglove: There are various appeal processes in place. Perhaps I can bring officials in operationally on this. There will be appeal rights that people have and it is for the judiciary to make appropriate decisions. That is why we have taken the legislative steps that you have supported in relation to improving the testing of credibility, making sure that the decisions that we make are as robust as possible, which then makes it easier to be able to defend those cases within the setting of the tribunal.

Of course, it is the case sometimes that people bring additional grounds. We, within our Home Office processes, if people are introducing those factors later into the consideration of their claim—perhaps if someone has been refused and is then seeking to apply subsequently, and then at that point says that they are a Christian convert—that would be something that we would weigh within the decision-making, in terms of the credibility of that. Why was that not raised at the outset? Why is that being raised much later on in the journey?

The Home Office bit of that, I would argue, is now in a better state. We have made improvements. The credibility testing helps us to do that, but I do not know if, operationally, there is any more that we can say on the judiciary.

Q144 **Marco Longhi:** Just to be clear, my question was whether there was a further step, after the tribunal adjudication, that the Home Office could have taken to say, "No, tribunal. You are wrong. We are sticking to our original argument".

Dan Hobbs: We can appeal to the Upper Tribunal cases from the First Tier where there is an error in law, not a difference of finding of fact. The basis of an onward appeal is that there is an error in law by the immigration judge. When we are overturned on appeal, those cases are



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reviewed by operational teams and there is a decision made on whether to appeal or not. We cannot unilaterally disregard a finding of the immigration tribunal without going through an appeal process that, as I say, is based on an error in law, not on a difference of finding of fact.

Q145 Chair: Could I just ask the Minister something? We know that the threshold in the tribunal is the lower threshold of a real risk. Do you have a view about that? Do you feel that is the appropriate threshold?

Tom Pursglove: This is precisely why, through the Nationality and Borders Act, the NABA cohort is being processed against that higher balance of probabilities threshold, which I would argue is more appropriate. That is why I took the legislation through to do that, with those two limbs of testing against those claims and really focusing in on the credibility of the claims that are being made and the evidence around that.

That will be what future appeals against Home Office decisions would be considered against, because that is the legal basis upon which those claims are being considered. There is tangible improvement there, again, in terms of telling the story about the work we are doing on this.

Q146 Tim Loughton: Minister, welcome back. The evidence that we have had in the panels before you today will make interesting reading. The Home Office has announced a review of the role of conversion to Christianity in asylum cases. Can you give us more details? When is that likely to report? Who is undertaking it? What sort of issues are you actually looking at?

Tom Pursglove: This is the working group that we are taking forward. The Home Secretary had a meeting on 22 February with faith leaders. That was a constructive meeting. There is a broad recognition that there is a responsibility on everyone to ensure the integrity of the asylum system and all of us want to see sanctuary provided to those who are genuinely in need, with swift decisions taken in relation to those where that is not appropriate and removal action that follows as a result.

We are now working up the detail of that working group. You will appreciate that there are other parties involved in that work, not just the Home Office, but I hope that will be a forum to have candid conversations about these issues. I know that you heard from Matthew Firth as part of earlier evidence that the Committee took. When you consider some of the steps that he took within his particular parish when he had concerns about abuse of the system, they were very sensible and practical steps.

These are the sorts of conversations that we ought to have as part of this. We have had a track record of working constructively in the past with the Church of England in particular. I know that there is an inconsistency of advice around handling of these matters across denominations. These are the sorts of issues that we want to really get into the detail of, just to try to make sure that there is a mutual



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understanding of the situation and that our objectives are fully understood.

All of us should really want to guard against abuse of the asylum system wherever we find it, not least because of the organised criminal gangs who are responsible for taking people's money, putting them in small boats, bringing them across the Channel, with all the risk to life that we have seen, again, writ large in recent days and weeks. All of us have a responsibility to guard against that and not allow those criminal gangs to sell a vision, trying to persuade people of particular routings, praying in aid of organisations such as the Church of England.

Q147 **Tim Loughton:** We are not challenging that, Minister. You referred to Matthew Firth. He is sitting in the row behind you. He gave us evidence earlier. Has he been asked to be a member of the working party?

Tom Pursglove: We are currently working through what the potential membership of that working group might look like, but I am very happy to consider that as a meaningful suggestion, because it is important that we hear a range of views and that we work constructively to try to address these issues and give confidence around decision-making, but also the role that the church plays in this.

Q148 **Tim Loughton:** I am not trying to volunteer his services. I am in no position to do that, but certainly somebody who has now been dubbed as a whistleblower, who has some direct experience, would inform that working group. Have you read the Church of England guidance on this?

Tom Pursglove: I have looked at that in some detail.

Q149 **Tim Loughton:** What do you think of it?

Tom Pursglove: It is obviously for the Church of England to set out what it thinks is appropriate in terms of its communications to members of the clergy and those involved in the Church of England across the country. There are elements of it—for example, some of the comments about journalists, etc—that are rather political. I am not sure that that is the most helpful thing in the world.

We should be trying to focus on ensuring the integrity of the asylum system, making sure that people are being supported appropriately and that none of us who comes into contact with asylum seekers and vulnerable people is doing anything that lends itself to the business model of the criminal gangs who bring people across via those unsafe journeys.

I hope that we can have a constructive dialogue as part of those meetings about that guidance. Again, the consistency point is something that I am very mindful of, to try to make sure that, across the board, there is good-quality advice available for members of the clergy to support people as is appropriate.



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Q150 Tim Loughton: Are you surprised, as I was, that nowhere in this 10-page guidance is there any reference or instruction to clergy about the importance of ascertaining the sincerity and the genuineness of somebody coming forward, who is an asylum seeker, who now wants to either convert from their own faith or to be baptised into the Church of England's faith?

Tom Pursglove: Again, these are areas that we should look at as part of that conversation. The Home Office has guidance, to which I would always refer people who are interested in this, because we set out our position in terms of the law and the way in which asylum claims are handled and what people should reasonably expect. However, there is a responsibility on organisations who come into contact with people and who support people to ensure that the support that they are giving is appropriate.

Ultimately, it is the Home Office that is responsible for the control of our borders and for the decisions that are ultimately made on cases. That is why we are bringing about the legislative changes that we have delivered, which are now being utilised when it comes to the NABA caseload, for example, and the processing and the decision-making around it.

There is an onus on everybody to be responsible about the support that they give and how that is formalised in terms of its interactions with the Home Office processes.

Q151 Tim Loughton: Again, I do not think anybody is going to disagree with you, Minister. What is important about this guidance is, first of all, only the Church of England appears to have guidance. The other churches we interviewed appear not to have guidance, which clearly is causing a bit of a vacuum which needs to be addressed. You will be dealing with all main churches on your working party.

The evidence of religious conversion, be it articulated through a clergyman, a priest or a senior member of a church community, is a contributing factor, although not determinative, to decisions made either by Home Office decision-makers or, if then accelerated, to the tribunals. It is important that the evidence that is produced is done so in a legitimate and what the Bishop of Chelmsford kept referring to as discerning way.

Now what confuses me—I want you to shed some light on it—is how it is that a Home Office decision-maker, faced with those facts which may include religious conversion, can reject asylum claims only for them to then be overturned on the same evidence that has been presented to a tribunal system. Where is it going wrong? Is the Home Office system faulty, or is there something wrong with the tribunal system? Is it that they are a softer touch or they are looking at a different sort of evidence? How can there be such disparity between Home Office decision-makers and tribunal decisions?



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Tom Pursglove: You are right to say in your remarks that Christian conversion is not a determinative factor in the decision-making process and that that is weighed within the decision-making, with credibility associated to that and testing of credibility amongst a range of other factors relevant to each individual case.

I do not know, operationally, if there is anything that you would add to that in terms of the way in which the tribunal then takes those case files from our reporting officers, etc.

George Shirley: Our decisions are made in line with the guidance, and our decision-makers, taking into account all the evidence before them, will reach a decision. That can then be tested at tribunal by the individual claimant. The Minister's point earlier that we are now working to NABA and the different standard of proof is important, because those cases are yet to be tested at scale before the tribunal, because of the waiting time between decision and tribunal hearing. That will be important in terms of assessing the tribunal's assessment of those NABA claims where we have refused.

Q152 **Tim Loughton:** There are two factors here, are there not? There is one about assessing the validity of a conversion and that somebody has sincerely made that move. That has to be seen in the context of a second major consideration: is that now an added danger for them being returned to their country of origin where they may face persecution on the grounds of their newly declared or newly found religion? How do those two factors weigh?

Tom Pursglove: Again, within that NABA change, there is a testing of the well-founded fear of persecution and what the grounds for that are. The second limb of that test is as to whether that is likely to be realised in the event of that individual being returned to the country from which they have come.

Tim Loughton: Again, these are not science tests.

Tom Pursglove: Inevitably, there is also an element of subjectivity in all of this. What we are dealing with in this hearing today strikes me as a subset of a subset. From the dip sampling we have done ahead of this, to try to give the Committee greater clarity, recognising the changes that we are bringing about in terms of reporting and statistics, around what is happening, what we are seeing is that the vast majority of individuals where Christian conversion is a factor are saying that they have converted at that initial reporting stage. It is not something that is happening, in the vast majority of cases, subsequently, on the basis of the testing that we have done.

Q153 **Tim Loughton:** It is, therefore, a factor that the Home Office has reviewed and decided is not a good enough factor, but the tribunal, for some reason, has then decided that it may be, along with various other factors as well.



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Tom Pursglove: I cannot speak for why the tribunal reaches the conclusions that it reaches.

Q154 **Tim Loughton:** That is the nub of the matter, is it not?

Tom Pursglove: That is a matter for them to account for.

Q155 **Tim Loughton:** Do you think that part of the weakness in it is the complete lack of evidence and data that the Home Office has? I asked the question about how many asylum claims have been granted to people who have gone through a conversion/baptism process after reaching the UK, and you do not hold that data. Is there now any intention to try to get some proper data to assess how big an issue this actually is or not?

Tom Pursglove: That is the precise point that I was making earlier, about the fact that we are upgrading the IT systems that the Department has that we casework on in relation to asylum matters and why we will be in a far better position moving forward to have better data around this.

Q156 **Tim Loughton:** Can you do that retrospectively?

Tom Pursglove: Certainly in relation to new claims that are coming onstream, that would be possible. You will appreciate that there is a very considerable volume of information around existing claims on those legacy systems. We are talking about new claims here, are we not?

George Shirley: Individual case records contain full details of the reasons that the decision was made. Those are not on industrial reportable fields that allow transparency data to be reported. The change that the Minister has steered us to is to capturing that. We are building to capture that for decisions moving forward. That is being developed and tested at the moment.

Q157 **Chair:** Do you have a date for that? When will the applications start that you will be able to capture?

George Shirley: We are testing at the moment. I am hoping that data will be captured from May onwards.

Q158 **Chair:** For any new application coming in from May, we will be able to follow that through and see the decision and the reasons for the decision, and that data will be available.

George Shirley: Yes, in terms of high-level reporting. You will be able to report on numbers. Individual case details, like some of the cases we discussed here, would obviously be confidential and have to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, but volumes and outcomes are what we are attempting.

Q159 **Tim Loughton:** Going forward under the new legislation, of course, people arriving here illegally will have no right to claim asylum in any case. It is going to be a rather depleted sample that you are going to be inputting into your new data process, is it not?



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Tom Pursglove: That is right about the premise of the Illegal Migration Act. I would also just reiterate the point that, when it comes to the Nationality and Borders Act reforms, we are seeing grant rates fall. I would expect that to be reflected in the next iteration of the statistical reporting.

Q160 **Chair:** There is obviously still a backlog, although we are not supposed to call it a backlog, are we? We call it a queue.

Tom Pursglove: I would not say a case that came in yesterday, for example, is in a backlog.

Q161 **Chair:** Yes, I heard the Home Secretary trying to argue why it was not a backlog and it was a queue. Can I just ask, in terms of the queue/backlog, whether those applications will still be decided under the previous legislation?

Tom Pursglove: Claims will be decided against the legislation that was applicable at the time.

Q162 **Chair:** In terms of the training that decision-makers are given, could you just give us a little flavour of how they are making decisions? What is the training to try to discern whether there is a genuineness around a conversion to Christianity? What kind of things do they look at or take into account?

George Shirley: Yes, of course. The caseworkers and decision-makers go through a training period, an initial classroom-based training period, which focuses on a number of things, including the functionality of how to complete IT, but also a day on assessing claims, particularly those on religion and belief, and also, importantly, training on interviewing and credibility interviewing—how to probe, how to test, how to assess the evidence that is being presented, and the type of probing questions to develop. That is initial classroom training.

The individual decision-maker then joins their decision-making unit. We have quite a number across the UK. Within that unit, they are then supported by their technical specialist team, who will sample their initial interviews, sample their first decisions, and mentor and coach them through the process of becoming a signed-off decision-maker. That is not a big bang experience. You will be signed off at types of decisions as you go along—types of nationality, types of claim—before you become a fully-fledged decision-maker.

Once you are a fully-fledged decision-maker and fully signed off, you still receive the support of the technical teams—your technical specialists, our dedicated chief caseworker team. You have links into policy and guidance, and there will be sampling of your cases, both your interviews and your decisions, as that moves forward.

Q163 **Chair:** What are they taking into account in terms of religious conversions?



George Shirley: If I can, I will talk about NABA rather than historically and legacy, because that is what we are dealing with at the moment, in terms of the current threshold. When we are assessing a religious claim, we will assess the evidence that is presented as part of the claim once the decision-maker receives the case. There will have been statements made in the screening process when the claim was first submitted. There may well have been written evidence provided, including, for example, letters from religious organisations. The decision-maker will assess those, will undertake some checks.

Q164 **Chair:** Just to be clear, if they just have a letter saying, "Yes, this person has been baptised on this date at this church", how much weight is given to that?

George Shirley: It is not in itself determinative and it is not the be-all and end-all, particularly under NABA. We will check the details of that, check who has issued the letter, do some research on the organisation itself and take into account what has been said in that letter ahead of the interview. We will then go into the credibility in the interview on the claim itself. There we will be testing the background, in this specific circumstance, of conversion—how, when that occurred, what led to that, how they then practise—and there will be all sorts of elements of that that will form into the credibility assessment.

For example, one of those credibility assessments will be timing of conversion: "Did that occur before arrival in the UK? Has it occurred after other potential refusals? What was the moment that led to that? Was it an immediate revelation? Did you stumble into it? How did you find your faith?" All of these type of assessments will be brought together. The decision-maker is building a rounded picture, both of the supporting evidence that is available but also the claimant's individual evidence and the credibility of their asylum claim in this circumstance based on their conversion to Christianity.

Q165 **Marco Longhi:** I, Ministers and lots of MPs have described the Channel crossing as a very dangerous, often tragic journey that people take. What is very rarely, if ever, mentioned is the journey that a lot of these people might be taking on the way to get to Calais, crossing some of the African countries, maybe the Mediterranean Sea and so on.

In so doing, they are abetted by a huge business, which is the smugglers, who would not give a monkey's about a person's religious, sexual or any other preference that they may have in terms of the way they live. They just want money.

Do you think it could be inferred that anything that any organisation does, whether it be the likes of charities such as Care4Calais or on our shores, are actually aiding, if not even abetting, the business model of the smugglers and, that being the case, making it more attractive for asylum seekers to make these journeys and put themselves in danger as a result? Could we be seeing the Church of England now playing a part in that as well?



Tom Pursglove: I well remember saying many times, during the course of the Nationality and Borders Act deliberations in this House, that we do not want to see people making unsafe journeys at all. The Channel is a really perilous part of that, but there are also many other elements of these journeys that people are making that are horrendous, often in the hands of evil criminal gangs who will do anything, as you so rightly touch on, to exploit people to take their money. They are not fussed as to whether people get here safely or not, and we have seen again in recent weeks the most terrible loss of life in the Channel on the back of that.

It is incumbent on all of us who come into contact with individuals who have made those journeys and who are seeking asylum to be mindful of that. We all have to weigh our actions very carefully. The sophistication that sits behind these criminal gangs is very considerable. They adapt their business model. They will take innovative routes to try to extract that money from people. Everything that we do has to be seen in that context.

I do not think anybody would want to be inadvertently aiding that terrible business model that has no regard for human life. There is nothing humane or decent about that exploitation and that criminality that we see.

Q166 **Marco Longhi:** I get your answer there. We have heard multiple times today that the church, irrespective of whoever stands in front of it, wants to be as welcoming as possible. I get that; I completely understand that. However, we have a Government whose policy is to try to reduce incentives to come and use deterrence. We have a church that is effectively working in the opposite direction, and, in fact, every single vote that we have had in the House of Lords from bishops has been to try to frustrate Government in that way. Would you agree with me, therefore, that the Church of England is behaving in a way that is aiding and abetting the smugglers' model?

Tom Pursglove: It is for Government to have appropriate border control, and we have a plan that is putting an end to these small boat crossings. We are seeing the results of that beginning to play out with crossings falling by a third last year compared to 2022. We need to see that through.

I strongly disagree with those who have opposed that work and who have obstructed the course of the legislation that underpins it in both Houses, because every day that passes where people lose their lives in the Channel or put their lives at risk is one day too many. That is why I am determined, as are colleagues in the Home Office, to see this legislation and that change through.

Q167 **Marco Longhi:** What about the Church of England?

Tom Pursglove: The church has to think very carefully, like all of us do, about the work that we do, how that work can be portrayed by those that



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are facilitating these terrible crossings, the vision that they sell about what happens when you arrive here, what you should expect and certain things that you ought to do in order to try and improve your chances of remaining here.

That is precisely the context with which we are keen in the Home Office to bring people together from faith communities to have those conversations about how we can all guard against that terrible criminality and make sure that we preserve the integrity of the asylum system. All of us have a role to play in that regard.

Chair: It would be very helpful if we could have information about the working party, when it is meeting, who the members are and what the timeframe is for its outcome. That would be very helpful.

Q168 **Alison Thewliss:** I just wanted to ask a quick question because we talked about the decision-making process initially, but you have not talked about the advice given to Home Office officials at tribunals and how they go about interrogating witnesses.

Dan Hobbs: It is in line with all our guidance. Presenting officers who represent the Secretary of State at tribunals will check the veracity of the evidence; they will question any witnesses. That is all public guidance that is available and it is the same test. It is on occasions where there will be different evidence or further evidence that is provided to the tribunal, and the presenting officer, in terms of preparing for that under the guidance, will look at that evidence and will test it with the tribunal when, ultimately, it is a matter for the immigration judge. That is the same process as the advocates, if they have them for the individual, and the presenting officer will be testing that evidence at the first-tier tribunal.

Q169 **Alison Thewliss:** That is useful to know. I attended a tribunal at one point, and the presenting officer was quite robust in terms of asking questions of those that had come to support the person making the appeal. Are there particular questions you would expect to have asked of, say, a church minister that came to support somebody?

Dan Hobbs: It would depend on the individual case and the preparation the presenting officers go through. A bit like Mr Shirley was setting out, presenting officers will equally go through training for how they approach the tribunal and how they check the veracity of the evidence. That is the role that they perform on behalf of the Secretary of State. You would expect them to be testing the evidence before the tribunal, particularly if that is evidence that was not available at the time of the initial decision.

Chair: Thank you. We are very appreciative of you attending today, Minister. We know you have a very busy diary. We look forward to seeing you again before too long. We pay a particular interest in your area that you are responsible for.

Can I also just thank all the witnesses we have had this morning in front



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of us? It has been a very interesting session. Also, I want to, again, pay tribute, as Tim Lawton did, to the work that churches do day in, day out, all around the United Kingdom in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our country. Thank you to all of our witnesses today.