

## **Written evidence submitted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CHA0011)**

1. Meeting with refugees from Lesbos, Pope Francis said: *"Economic interests must be set aside so that at the centre is the person, every person, whose life and dignity are precious in the eyes of God. We must help and save, because we are all responsible for the life of our neighbour."*<sup>1</sup>
2. The Catholic Church in England and Wales strongly believes that this principle of treating migrants and refugees as people in need of protection should shape our approach to the situation in the English Channel. Tragic deaths, such as that of Abdulfatah Hamdallah who drowned in August, are a direct result of the UK and other European governments not working together to establish policies that prioritise the protection of human life.
3. Our first imperative must always be to save people who are in danger, regardless of any presumptions about their immigration status. In 2014 the EU's shift in focus from search and rescue to deterring crossings caused a significant loss of life in the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> This was exacerbated by the vote against a resolution to step up rescue missions in 2019.<sup>3</sup> These mistakes must not be repeated in the English Channel.
4. Secondly, it is essential to recognise the worsening humanitarian situation facing refugees and migrants in mainland Europe, as well as the many different reasons people have for trying to reach the UK. The current tendency to suggest that people should remain in France, Greece or other supposedly 'safe countries' is oversimplistic and ignores the lived realities of those risking their lives to reach our shores. Furthermore, it fails to recognise the UK's moral responsibility for accommodating its fair share of the unprecedented population currently displaced from their homes across the world.
5. Thirdly, the government needs to acknowledge that providing safe and legal routes for people to seek sanctuary here is the only way of preventing dangerous crossings or exploitation by traffickers. This was highlighted by the former Anti-Slavery Commissioner in a letter to the Home Secretary in September 2016.<sup>4</sup> Extending resettlement schemes and opening new programmes for groups such as unaccompanied children should therefore be the focus of any long-term policy response. While the UK has previously taken some positive steps in this area, its current commitments fall short of the contribution that we can and should be making as a country.
6. Finally, it is important to end political rhetoric that has consistently overstated the scale of Channel crossings and created the false impression that refugees pose a threat to the UK's economy, public safety or national security. As our lead Bishop for migrants and refugees has stated: *"Rhetoric and policies that dehumanise or stigmatise people only serve to fuel hostility and harm our society."*<sup>5</sup>

### **7. Saving lives at sea**

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<sup>1</sup> [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20191219\\_rifugiati-lesbo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco_20191219_rifugiati-lesbo.html)

<sup>2</sup> [deathbyrescue.org/](https://deathbyrescue.org/)

<sup>3</sup> [europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0154\\_EN.html](https://europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0154_EN.html)

<sup>4</sup> [antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1105/iasc-letter-to-the-hs-re-calais-migrant-camps.pdf](https://antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1105/iasc-letter-to-the-hs-re-calais-migrant-camps.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [cbcew.org.uk/bishop-speaks-out-against-dehumanising-rhetoric-about-channel-refugees/](https://cbcew.org.uk/bishop-speaks-out-against-dehumanising-rhetoric-about-channel-refugees/)

8. The Catholic Church strongly opposes any use of naval vessels to intercept people trying to cross the Channel. We firmly agree with the UNCHR and IOM that: *“The foreseen deployment of large naval vessels to deter such crossings and block small, flimsy dinghies may result in harmful and fatal incidents”* and support their call to instead *“increase search and rescue efforts and combat human smuggling and trafficking rings.”*<sup>6</sup>
9. Lessons must be learnt from the EU’s decision to end the rescue-focussed Mare Nostrum operation and replace it with the deterrence-focussed Triton operation in the Mediterranean. As a comprehensive report by Forensic Oceanography, part of the Forensic Architecture agency at Goldsmith’s University, concluded: *“ending Mare Nostrum did not lead to less crossings, only to more deaths at sea and a higher rate of mortality.”* In particular the report highlighted how private merchant ships were left *“stuck between the lack of consideration for human lives demonstrated by the practices of smugglers, and that which EU policy makers demonstrated by cutting back their assistance at sea to forward the aim of deterrence.”* Such private vessels are ill-equipped to launch rescue operations themselves and attempts to fulfil their responsibilities for doing so, in the absence of official rescue efforts, actually resulted in more deaths.<sup>7</sup>

### **The humanitarian situation in France and Greece**

10. The Catholic Church has long been concerned about the dire humanitarian crisis facing migrants and refugees in Calais and across Northern France.<sup>8</sup> This was already a major issue prior to dismantlement of the ‘Jungle’ camp and has steadily deteriorated since, as people have been forced to live in smaller encampments, with even less access to water, sanitation, food, healthcare or shelter.
11. The issue of hygiene and sanitation has been particularly concerning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Secours Catholique, the official charitable agency of the Catholic Church in France, recently reported: *“There’s only one running water point located in the Dune Zone [the largest camp], while in some camps, they are several kilometres away...Garbage is accumulating and is not collected often enough, we have noticed the presence of rats. The state finances a maximum of 250 showers a day, which is far from enough for 1,200 people in need.”*<sup>9</sup>
12. Seeking Sanctuary, a UK-based Catholic charity working with Secours Catholique, describes how many refugees and migrants are: *“spread through woodland with no access to water, toilets and food. The remaining state food distribution points were at least an hour’s walk distant, as were departure points for the shuttle buses serving the shower blocks at the fringe of the town.”*<sup>10</sup>
13. Likewise, the humanitarian situation on Greek islands has rapidly worsened during the pandemic. Caritas Hellas, the official charitable agency of the Catholic Church in Greece explained: *“the refugee crisis in the Aegean islands is at a tipping point which requires urgent action by the Greek authorities and the international community to protect the fundamental rights of refugees and migrants, such as the right to healthcare, education and protection.”*

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<sup>6</sup> [unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2020/8/5f3567a84/unhcr-iom-interception-sea-solution-channel-crossings.html](https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2020/8/5f3567a84/unhcr-iom-interception-sea-solution-channel-crossings.html)

<sup>7</sup> [deathbyrescue.org/](https://deathbyrescue.org/)

<sup>8</sup> [cbcew.org.uk/bishop-for-migrants-deeply-concerned-over-the-deepening-humanitarian-crisis-in-calais/](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/bishop-for-migrants-deeply-concerned-over-the-deepening-humanitarian-crisis-in-calais/)

<sup>9</sup> [infomigrants.net/en/post/25590/in-calais-at-least-1-200-migrants-are-on-the-streets-twice-as-many-as-last-summer](https://infomigrants.net/en/post/25590/in-calais-at-least-1-200-migrants-are-on-the-streets-twice-as-many-as-last-summer)

<sup>10</sup> [seekingsanctuary.weebly.com/](https://seekingsanctuary.weebly.com/)

14. *The coronavirus pandemic has permanently changed everyday life on a global scale. In this new reality, vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants and unaccompanied minors are particularly at risk. A potential outbreak of the virus within the extremely overcrowded refugee camps could lead to a disaster.*<sup>11</sup>
15. The Catholic Church in Greece has recently appealed for more humanitarian support, with the director of Caritas Hellas warning that conditions have become *“inhuman and unworthy”* for tens of thousands facing food shortages, abuse and violence.<sup>12</sup>

### **Treatment of migrants and refugees in France and Greece**

16. Since 2017 there has been a clear effort to make the migrant and refugee population in Northern France ‘invisible’. The fight against ‘fixation points’ has been defined as a priority for public authorities. This has led to a vicious cycle of forced evictions, increased homelessness and short-term encampments, resulting in a further deterioration of living conditions.
17. Human rights organisations have documented regular evictions and the use of violence by the police. Evictions take place without prior notice and people are not allowed to pack up their personal belongings. It has been reported that sleeping bags, tents, and other possessions are often confiscated or destroyed.
18. As Secours Catholique explain: *“Everything is organised to fight against forming attachments, to discourage migrants from settling...People are expelled every morning, they feel they are being badly treated and harassed by the police...right now, volunteers at Secours Catholique have started sewing small cloth pockets so that they can keep their documents with them 24 hours a day. It's not right that it should come to this!”*<sup>13</sup>
19. Reporting on an eviction in July, the organisation stated: *“people were woken up at dawn and were forced to board buses without any possibility of recovering their belongings. Many people shared with us that they had lost all their belongings, a gentleman told us that he had lost all his savings. That same afternoon we were able to see that many backpacks had been left in the dark, but also shoes, clothes, children's games, testifying to the violence of the eviction. On the other hand, tents and blankets, extremely rare commodities in Calais, were thrown away before our arrival on the site in the afternoon...hundreds of tents were thrown in the trash.”*<sup>14</sup>
20. Beyond the immediate impact, repeated evictions are also causing increased stress, anxiety and sleep deprivation. The systematic nature of these actions constitutes cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of an already vulnerable population. In the first quarter of 2019, over 200 evictions were recorded by human rights organisations.<sup>15</sup>
21. These circumstances are compounded by persistent barriers to people accessing the asylum system including lack of information, the overload of reception arrangements, and fear of

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<sup>11</sup> [reliefweb.int/report/greece/caritas-greece-protects-rights-migrants-and-refugees-facing-covid-19](https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/caritas-greece-protects-rights-migrants-and-refugees-facing-covid-19)

<sup>12</sup> [thetablet.co.uk/news/13275/archbishop-says-church-needs-more-aid-for-refugees-in-greece](https://thetablet.co.uk/news/13275/archbishop-says-church-needs-more-aid-for-refugees-in-greece)

<sup>13</sup> [infomigrants.net/en/post/25590/in-calais-at-least-1-200-migrants-are-on-the-streets-twice-as-many-as-last-summer](https://infomigrants.net/en/post/25590/in-calais-at-least-1-200-migrants-are-on-the-streets-twice-as-many-as-last-summer)

<sup>14</sup> [medecinsdumonde.org/fr/actualites/tribunes/2020/07/21/situation-des-personnes-exilees-presentes-sur-le-littoral-franco-britannique](https://medecinsdumonde.org/fr/actualites/tribunes/2020/07/21/situation-des-personnes-exilees-presentes-sur-le-littoral-franco-britannique)

<sup>15</sup> [helprefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Les-Expulsions-de-Terrain-a%CC%80-Calais-et-Grande-Synthe-FR.pdf](https://helprefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Les-Expulsions-de-Terrain-a%CC%80-Calais-et-Grande-Synthe-FR.pdf)

deportation. Furthermore, the Dublin Regulations dissuade many people from claiming asylum in France, if they intend to subsequently reach the UK. As a result, people are compelled to live in appalling<sup>16</sup> conditions and deprived of their basic rights, often feeling they are left with no option but to use irregular routes across the Channel.

22. Seeking Sanctuary recently summarised: *“Relentless evictions and intimidation tactics in Northern France deter people from wanting to stay and create the conditions that convince them to try and get to the UK at any cost. Apart from resettlement schemes for people of certain nationalities, the only route to making a claim for asylum is to get into the country, even taking increasingly dangerous risks to do this. Despite the UK border controls being in Calais, people cannot claim asylum there, and it is not easy to access the French asylum system in that area.”*<sup>17</sup>
23. Human rights groups have also documented how refugees and migrants in Greece are frequently subjected to pushbacks or collective expulsions, physical violence and the destruction of their property.<sup>18</sup> In addition to violence by the authorities, vigilante mobs have attacked migrants, refugees and aid workers.<sup>19</sup>
24. Earlier this year Caritas Hellas signed a letter along with more than eighty other humanitarian organisations denouncing *“the extreme actions by security forces against refugees”*. It called upon the Greek authorities to *“immediately stop returning people to states where their lives and freedom are at risk”* and *“protect every person from acts of violence, victimisation and racism”*, while calling on other European countries to play their part by establishing *“the mechanisms for the relocation of refugees and asylum seekers from Greece...in a fair and rational manner, with priority given to unaccompanied children.”*<sup>20</sup>

### **Safe and legal routes to the UK**

25. People will continue attempting to reach the UK from mainland Europe, due to a range of factors such as the humanitarian conditions and actions of authorities outlined above, as well as the personal circumstances of individual refugees and migrants including language, opportunities or family ties. Coercive immigration controls will only increase the likelihood of people making dangerous journeys or being exploited by traffickers, rather than reducing their determination to build a new life here.
26. The Anti-Slavery Commissioner’s letter of September 2016, highlights situations where refugees would rather seek support from smugglers as they have no confidence in statutory provisions. One of the cases involving a Syrian mother with young children demonstrates how the complex and inhospitable systems in place are often the catalyst for criminal networks to develop.<sup>21</sup>
27. The Forensic Oceanography report described how in the Mediterranean context: *“even in the presence of the record means deployed by the Mare Nostrum operation, the danger of crossing remained high, because without avenues for legal and safe migration available, migrants continued to need to resort to smugglers and perilous means of crossing. Only a fundamental reorientation from a policy that seeks to select and block migrants’ movements*

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<sup>16</sup> [medecinsdumonde.org/fr/actualites/tribunes/2020/07/21/situation-des-personnes-exilees-presentes-sur-le-littoral-franco-britannique](https://medecinsdumonde.org/fr/actualites/tribunes/2020/07/21/situation-des-personnes-exilees-presentes-sur-le-littoral-franco-britannique)

<sup>17</sup> [seekingsanctuary.weebly.com/](https://seekingsanctuary.weebly.com/)

<sup>18</sup> [hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/greece-investigate-pushbacks-collective-expulsions](https://hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/greece-investigate-pushbacks-collective-expulsions)

<sup>19</sup> [hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/interview-whats-happening-refugees-greece](https://hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/interview-whats-happening-refugees-greece)

<sup>20</sup> [hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/open-letter-85-organizations-regarding-rights-violations-refugees](https://hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/open-letter-85-organizations-regarding-rights-violations-refugees)

<sup>21</sup> [antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1105/iasc-letter-to-the-hs-re-calais-migrant-camps.pdf](https://antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1105/iasc-letter-to-the-hs-re-calais-migrant-camps.pdf)

*to one that would grant legal and safe passage, thereby making both smugglers and the very need to rescue migrants at sea obsolete, may stop the list of more than 20,000 recorded cases of deaths at sea since the beginning of the 1990 from growing ever longer.”<sup>22</sup>*

28. Furthermore, the UK currently accommodates only a small proportion of people who have been forced to leave their homes by poverty, war, persecution or natural disasters. While an unprecedented 79.5 million people are currently displaced, 85% are hosted by developing countries.<sup>23</sup> Of those claiming asylum in Europe, the vast majority are in Germany, France, Spain or Greece. In 2019 France received more than 2.5 times more asylum applications than the UK.<sup>24</sup>
29. The Catholic Church therefore recognises that new safe and legal routes are the only humane long-term solution.
30. **Safe passage for unaccompanied children:** Catholic Bishops were among more than 250 faith leaders who wrote to the Prime Minister on World Refugee Day, highlighting the plight of unaccompanied child refugees on the Greek islands and urging to government to provide them with a safe route to asylum in the UK.
31. Their letter stated: *“More than 1,600 unaccompanied children remain stuck on the Greek islands – they have escaped war, persecution, and poverty only to find themselves now trapped in desperate conditions, with little or no access to the most basic necessities.*
32. *Water, shelter, food, and toilets are in scarce supply and with many children already unwell, they are also at heightened risk of Covid-19 infection. These children are at a severe risk of trafficking, sexual exploitation, and violence, and are surviving in circumstances that no child should experience. Heartbreakingly, an increasing number of these children are attempting suicide and self-harm.*
33. *Inaction in the face of such deprivation and suffering is not an option. Now, more than ever, the UK must step in and offer sanctuary to children in urgent need.”<sup>25</sup>*
34. We are also deeply concerned about the lack of protection for unaccompanied child refugees in Northern France. Both France and the UK have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, however children have been left to fend for themselves in Calais and at other camps along the coast.
35. At the time of its demolition, a large proportion of unaccompanied children in the ‘Jungle’ camp had no special supervision, adequate accommodation, or nominated guardians, and no measures or warning systems were in place to prevent them going missing.
36. On a subsequent visit to Calais with Secours Catholique, Catholic Bishops from Scotland, England and Wales observed: *“these young people are forced to sleep rough...their presence is discouraged by the authorities; police tactics include interrupting sleep and confiscating*

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<sup>22</sup> [deathbyrescue.org/](https://deathbyrescue.org/)

<sup>23</sup> [unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html](https://unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html)

<sup>24</sup> [ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_statistics#Main\\_countries\\_of\\_destination: Germany.2C France and Spain](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics#Main_countries_of_destination:_Germany.2C_France_and_Spain)

<sup>25</sup> [safepassage.org.uk/news/2020/6/20/250-faith-leaders-write-to-pm-on-world-refugee-day](https://safepassage.org.uk/news/2020/6/20/250-faith-leaders-write-to-pm-on-world-refugee-day)

*tents and sleeping bags...the [immigration] policies of the British government have resulted in young people turning to people smugglers in attempts to reach the UK.*

37. *We urge the authorities to recognise that these are our fellow human beings, regardless of their status, and that their intrinsic dignity must be upheld.*
38. *Of particular concern are unaccompanied minors whose rights as children must be recognised by both French and UK authorities.*<sup>26</sup>
39. Like many other faith groups, we were extremely disheartened by the government's decision to close the 'Dubs Scheme' after providing sanctuary to fewer than 500 unaccompanied children. At the time Cardinal Nichols stated that: *"the Government is seen by many as abandoning its statutory and moral duty to take effective action for the protection of vulnerable, unaccompanied child refugees. If this is the case, then it is truly shocking."*<sup>27</sup>
40. The Catholic Church strongly supports the establishment of an ongoing safe route for unaccompanied child refugees without family in the UK, as well as steps to ensure that those with family members here can continue to reunite with them after the end of the Brexit transition agreement.
41. **Resettlement schemes:** The Catholic Church is actively contributing to the UK's resettlement of refugees. Since the Community Sponsorship Scheme was launched in 2016, our parishes have resettled approximately 100 refugees from in and around Syria, making the Church one of the leading civil society actors in this field. More than 50 parishes are already supporting a family or preparing to welcome one and the Bishops' Conference is funding a national coordinator to assist this work.<sup>28</sup>
42. We strongly welcome the establishment of a new resettlement programme after the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) concludes and the decision that refugees resettled through community sponsorship will be in addition to the government's commitment.<sup>29</sup> However we are also deeply concerned about the lack of ambition or progress concerning the new programme.
43. In 2018 over 1.2 million people across the world were in need of resettlement, yet only 56,000 were actually resettled. The UK's commitment to resettle 5,000 people in the first year of the new programme is extremely modest given the scale of unmet need.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore no targets have been set for future years and no one has been resettled through existing routes for around six months.
44. While the UK does on average accommodate more people through resettlement schemes than other European countries, the comparatively low number of people given asylum here means that many of our neighbours provide sanctuary to a far greater number of refugees overall.

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<sup>26</sup> [cbcew.org.uk/bishops-call-on-uk-government-to-help-calais-migrants/](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/bishops-call-on-uk-government-to-help-calais-migrants/)

<sup>27</sup> [cbcew.org.uk/cardinal-nichols-urges-government-to-work-with-renewed-vigour-to-assist-unaccompanied-child-refugees/](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/cardinal-nichols-urges-government-to-work-with-renewed-vigour-to-assist-unaccompanied-child-refugees/)

<sup>28</sup> [cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/migrants-refugees/community-sponsorship-scheme/national-caritas-community-sponsorship-scheme-coordinator](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/migrants-refugees/community-sponsorship-scheme/national-caritas-community-sponsorship-scheme-coordinator)

<sup>29</sup> [gov.uk/government/news/new-global-resettlement-scheme-for-the-most-vulnerable-refugees-announced](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-global-resettlement-scheme-for-the-most-vulnerable-refugees-announced)

<sup>30</sup> [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8750/](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8750/)

45. It is five years since Alan Kurdi's tragic death in the Mediterranean. At the time Prime Minister David Cameron stated: *"Anyone who saw those pictures overnight could not help but be moved and, as a father, I felt deeply moved by the sight of that young boy on a beach in Turkey. Britain is a moral nation and we will fulfil our moral responsibilities."* Boris Johnson, as Mayor, stated that London would face up to its *"moral responsibilities"* to accommodate those fleeing persecution who are *"plainly in fear for their lives."*
46. We therefore strongly believe that the UK should honour these pledges by increasing its commitment under the new resettlement programme, setting ambitious targets for future years and taking urgent steps to get the process underway. In order to reduce unsafe Channel crossings or exploitation by traffickers, the new programme's scope must include adult and child refugees in European camps, as well as those currently accommodated in developing countries.

September 2020