

Written evidence submitted by the Refugee Resilience Collective (CHA0047)

1. Background

The Refugee Resilience Collective (RRC) is a UK-based team of psychotherapists and psychologists who have been offering resilience-based support to refugees and NGO volunteers in Calais and Dunkirk, France, since March 2016. Since the large Calais refugee camp (“The Jungle”) was closed down in October 2016, and after the Dunkirk refugee camp burned down in April 2017, we have continued to work with several of the key voluntary associations in Calais and Dunkirk that provide life-saving services to unaccompanied minors, families, and other refugees sleeping rough in those areas. These include: Human Rights Observers, Collective Aid, L’Auberge des Migrants, Utopia56, Refugee Community Kitchen, Refugee Youth Service, Project Play and the Refugee Women’s Centre. We offer support to volunteers of these associations, in managing the traumatic and stressful situations in which they must work.

2. Our concerns

2.1 We are writing to draw your attention to the worrying conditions on the ground in Calais, as reported to us by associations there, whose daily work is the provision of basic necessities such as food, drinking water, and clothing to refugees, services not provided by local authorities. The volunteers of these associations are direct witnesses to the daily lives of refugees sleeping rough in Calais. In the past three months, there has been a noticeable increase in police (CRS) and local authority hostility towards refugees, and also directed at the work of the NGOs. The police have enacted multiple forced evictions of refugees from the spaces where they were camping, not using interpreters to explain what was happening, instead relying upon physical force including teargas and threatening refugees with beatings. One harrowing recent report included a woman who suffered a miscarriage as a result of police brutality.

2.2 Refugees’ tents and other personal belongings have been routinely confiscated and destroyed, increasing their need for material aid from the associations that we support. Most recently, the local prefecture in Calais has attempted to impose a ban on the distribution of food and water to refugees in most areas of the city, which is having the effect of pushing higher volumes of refugees to other distribution sites, increasing concerns around physical distancing, in light of heightened tensions about the spread of Covid-19. Similarly, the local authorities in Calais have been systematic in their efforts to restrict the locations and size of refugee encampments, which has forced

people to crowd together into even smaller spaces, often without ready access to water for hygiene purposes, regardless of the global pandemic.

2.3 We have also received troubling reports of increasing numbers of pregnant women and women with young children moving into the Calais area, who have no option but to sleep outdoors with crowds of other refugees, because there is no provision of safe accommodation by the local authorities there. When the large Calais camp (“The Jungle”) was in situ, there was a separate and more secure accommodation area for women with children, organised and run by local authorities, which helped to safeguard this particularly vulnerable group. Since the dissolution of that camp in late 2016, no similar provision has ever been created in Calais. The high risk of sexual assault for women and children sleeping out in the open is well established, which RRC knows from our years of work in Calais, as well as from reports by refugees currently in the UK, who experienced these dangers first hand.

2.4 Unaccompanied minors often disappear in such conditions, as they are extremely vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation. In a recent eviction, vulnerable minors were dispersed to new locations by the local authorities, and some of these young people contacted the associations back in Calais, in tears, saying they had no idea where they were, nor what they should do, nor who they could ask for help. At such moments, these children are at high risk of exploitation, given their heightened needs for material and emotional support, which increases the likelihood that they will turn to any adult for help, including the traffickers who are watching and waiting for these situations. Just last week, we were informed of the situation of an unaccompanied young person in Calais who had nowhere to sleep, and had no one to support him, and was pleading for help from volunteers, who were not in a position to secure accommodation for him. And earlier this summer, we learned of the tragic death of a young person attempting to make the crossing to the UK, which devastated the rest of his family, and sent shockwaves through the associations who had worked directly with this child and his younger sibling.

2.4 The Covid-19 pandemic has made it extremely difficult for associations to support these most vulnerable refugees, among them people who have been tortured along their journeys and have fled persecution in their home countries. The increasing hostilities directed at volunteers by authorities in Calais have exacerbated this. Despite these serious challenges, these voluntary associations on the ground continue their work, day in and day out,

providing essential support and advocacy to refugees sleeping rough in Northern France, using creativity and compassion.

3. Our recommendations

RRC calls on political leaders in the UK and France to reassess their current positions, moving away from the 'hostile environment' that is causing so many hardships and prompting people to take serious risks in their onward journeys. The current approach does not lead to fewer people arriving, but instead increases desperation and suffering for the refugees caught in this situation, and leads to people taking increased risks in their pursuit of safety and a better life. We urge the UK government to actively engage in the creation of more humane, consistent, and accessible routes for refugees to settle and establish new homes and new lives.

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