



Channel Crossings

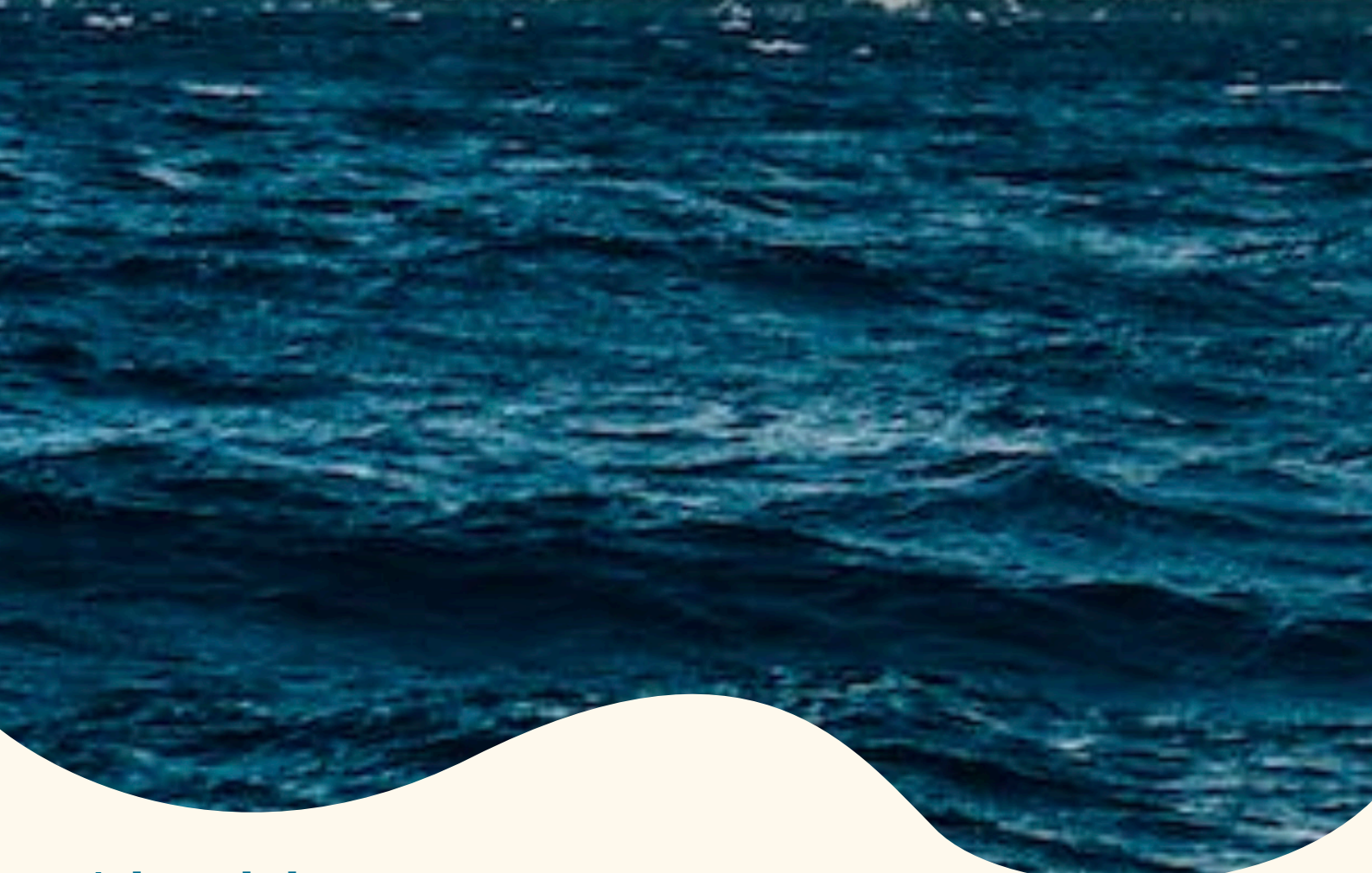
Final Report

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
Our research.....	6
1. Introduction.....	7
1.1 Channel crossings	7
1.2 How does the UK compare to nearby countries?	8
1.3 What caused small boat Channel crossings?	9
1.4 Report structure	11
2. Policy timeline.....	12
3. The Politics of Small Boat Channel Crossings.....	18
3.1 Political representations of Channel Crossings	18
3.2 Migrants as a foreign invasion	20
3.3 Migrants as a racial ‘threat’ and ‘sexual deviants’	20
3.4 Policy Interventions 2018-2025	21
3.5 Contemporary government approach 2024-25	22
3.6 What’s wrong with current approaches?	23
4. Experiences of crossing the Channel by small boat.....	26
4.1 Before the Channel	26
4.2 Experiences in northern France	27
4.3 Experiences with smugglers	28
4.4 Weighing up different routes	29
4.5 Crossing the Channel	30
4.6 Hope against the odds	31
5. The border security economy.....	32
5.1 Where does government money go?	32
5.2 Profiting from small boat Channel crossings	33
5.3 A manufactured crisis, a profitable fix?	35
6. What are the policy options?.....	36
6.1 Approaching the alternatives	36
Option 1: The liberal humanitarian response	37
Framing the problem	37
The policy package	37
Option 2: The push factor response	39
Framing the problem	39
The policy package	39
Option 3: The budget shifting response	41
Framing the problem	41
The policy package	41
Option 4: The shifting borders response	42
Framing the problem	42
The policy package	42
Option 5: The debordering response	43
Framing the problem	43
The policy package	43
Option 6: The climate centred response	45
Framing the problem	45
The policy package	45
Questions to think with	45
References.....	46



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Executive Summary

This report investigates the British government's responses to small boat Channel crossings, and how these responses in turn shaped the Channel borderzone and the lives of people who cross the English Channel.

Since 2018, the arrival of people across the English Channel in small boats to claim asylum has been represented as a 'crisis' of 'illegal migration' by politicians and policy makers under successive Conservative and Labour governments. Efforts to curb the number of people crossing the Channel have been central to electoral and governing strategies. The Conservative government introduced both the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which attempted to end the right of people to claim asylum entering Britain through this route. They also introduced the now defunct UK-Rwanda plan to send people seeking asylum to Rwanda. The Labour Government is currently pushing the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration bill 2025 through parliament. The Labour Government has also amended the 'good character' guidance for citizenship applications, laying the ground for rejecting nationality applications by people who entered the UK irregularly. Automatic detention, the criminalisation of people steering vessels, investment in policing in France and technologies to monitor the Channel, have all expanded in attempts to 'stop the boats'. Ending the arrival of so called 'illegal migrants' has become a focus for far-right parties, movements and politicians.

This report explores how these policies have developed, why these government policies have been inadequate solutions to small boat crossings, and the effects that these policies and border security practices have had on people making these journeys.

This research has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The report is based on four areas of research undertaken by the Channel Crossings project team (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) examining; 1) politics and policy 2) the impact on civil society of small boat Channel crossings, and government policy which seeks to stop them 3) the experiences of people who have crossed the Channel by small boat 4) the business of border security and infrastructure in the Channel. The report draws on data gathered through the qualitative analysis of 345 policy documents, 217 Home Office contracts (2018-2025) and 64 interviews carried out by the authors with policy makers, politicians, migrant rights advocates, NGO workers and with people who had crossed the Channel to claim asylum

Key findings:

- Borders do not stop people from moving. Instead, they produce deflection effects, making journeys to seek asylum more dangerous. The 'small boats' route has developed in response to decades of security infrastructure, policing and anti-migrant hostility in Northern France (often funded by the British state).
- The ramping up of technologically sophisticated surveillance and draconian immigration policies will not stop the structural dynamics that cause displacement, and people's subsequent journeys for survival. It will, however further endanger lives at sea. We are already seeing this. 2024 was the deadliest year on record for drownings in the English Channel (73 people lost their lives).
- Border control efforts are creating the conditions for smuggling to expand and become more professionalised. As routes of entry into Britain become more dangerous and complicated, the need for facilitators to enable journeys across the Channel increases. Whilst international policing efforts may hamper elements of smuggling networks, these strategies focus on the symptoms, not the causes of irregular migration. 'Smuggling' will continue because safe routes for asylum are limited and, in many cases, impossible to access.

- The political narrative regarding small boats by mainstream politicians and media has further opened the door for far-right ideas and strategies to appear ‘normal’ in Britain. Treating small boat crossings as ‘illegal’ has led to the criminalisation and dehumanisation of people who are seeking asylum, and plays into the hands of far-right political campaigns. The dehumanisation of refugees has taken place under both major parties, with successive Conservative governments and politicians increasingly drawing on explicitly far right racist narratives. The Labour government has also sought to extract political value from attempts to end ‘illegal migration’. This is despite the reality that the vast majority of people who cross the English Channel apply for asylum. By failing to challenge the narrative which equates small boat crossings with ‘illegal migration’ the Labour government is sharing the same political space as far-right actors and organisations.
- Responses to small boat crossings cannot be understood in isolation. Instead, we need to understand how hostility to asylum seekers is embedded within broader historical and socio-economic processes and where economic decline in Britain has become associated with multiculturalism and immigration. In this representation, the erosion of people’s economic prospects is not caused by a failing economic model or austerity, but by ‘uncontrolled’ immigration.
- Providing border security, services and technologies for UK immigration enforcement has become an increasingly profitable business opportunity. At least £2b worth of contracts for private companies have been handed out by the Home Office since 2018. This is for border technology and infrastructure to monitor English Channel ports and maritime space, as well as provide search and rescue services. Increasingly, large multinationals are profiting from the push to curb the movement of refugees. With the border industry predicted to expand dramatically over the next decade (to US\$ 679bn), this relationship between state border enforcement and private interests demands further scrutiny
- There is no one, simple, solution to small boat Channel crossings. In the final chapter we work through several ways of approaching the challenge of small boat Channel crossings (‘policy alternatives’). We explore both their potential to address the challenge, and the limitations of different approaches. Our central guiding principle is that any response should have human dignity at its heart, and should approach people on the move as rights holding human beings who are deserving of equal respect vis a vis French or British citizens. In light of this, we do not work through policies which would strip people of their human rights or deport them to a third country against their will. The policy alternatives are:

1. The liberal humanitarian response – focussing on the creation of safe and legal routes.
2. The push factor response – focussing on actions aimed at the production of forced migration, most notably wars and persecution.
3. The budget shifting response – focussing on defunding bordering activity which inadvertently produces smuggling and dangerous routes for asylum, and reallocating these funds towards activities which support safety and community flourishing.
4. The border shifting response – focussing on relocating the UK border back on to UK soil, to destroy the business model of smuggling.
5. The debordering response – options 3 and 4 above combined.
6. The climate centred response – options 3 and 4 above combined, but also with action on climate to pre-empt future populations displacement challenges.

Our research

This is the final report of a three-year research project, funded by the ESRC. The project is a collaboration between academic researchers at the Universities of Liverpool, Nottingham, Sheffield and York.

The project entailed four areas of work:

1. Political and policy analysis

We analysed 345 texts covering the period 1962-2023 (but mostly post 2018) which relate to bordering and irregular migration in the Channel. The texts include government policy proposals and announcements, think tank reports, parliamentary debates, acts of parliament, select committee minutes and reports, speeches, party manifestos, cabinet memos and letters, and international agreements. In addition, we interviewed 15 UK politicians and policymakers, and we developed a comprehensive timeline of irregular migration and policy responses to it in the Channel borderzone.

2. Understanding the space of contestation

We interviewed 26 people who work in the refugee and migrants rights NGO sector, and 3 activists who have campaigned on this issue. This allowed us to understand the perspectives and practices of people who contest government policy in this space -how do they frame the problem? But also, how do they understand the solutions? We developed a working paper on policy alternatives and ran two workshops with key civil society stakeholders to explore different options, and what needs to change in order for sustainable responses to be developed.

3. Experience of crossing the Channel

We interviewed 39 people who have crossed the Channel irregularly to explore their experiences. This included the contexts which they fled, their long journeys to the UK, experiences in northern France, interactions with smugglers, and finally their journeys to the UK.

4. Understanding the border security economy

As UK government policy is implemented in part via the private sector, we were interested to understand more about the business of border security. Using the outsourcing platform Contract Finder Pro and the government's Contract Finder service, we identified 217 contracts between the UK government and private companies who deliver key aspects of the UK border in the Channel borderzone. We then explored relationships of company ownership and lobbying in the UK Parliament.

From this research we have a robust picture of the policy, politics, and economics of irregular migration and bordering in the English Channel.

1. Introduction

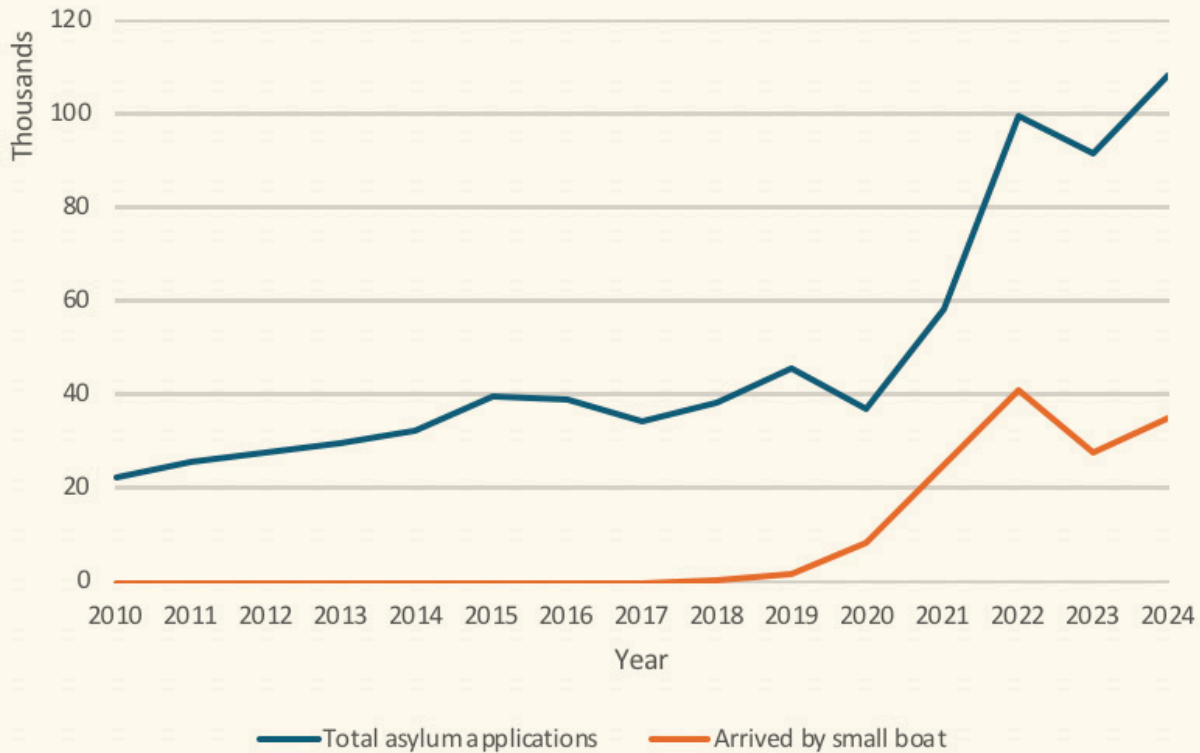
1.1 Channel crossings

‘Small boat’ Channel crossings began in 2018 and have been on an upward trajectory since (see Figure 1). Thousands of people with no other feasible or safe route to reach the UK to apply for asylum take the risk to cross the Channel by small boat. Almost every day people continue to take that risk. Successive governments have introduced a series of increasingly restrictive policies towards refugee arrivals, all of which have consistently failed in their aim of stopping small boat Channel crossings. Recent years have seen a range of punitive measures introduced, undermining and restricting of the rights to protection that the UK has committed to offer: from the Rwanda Plan to the housing of asylum applicants on a prison-like barge in the sea, to enhanced funding for an anti-smuggling ‘Gold Command’.

Home Office data from 2024 shows that 99% of all those crossing the Channel applied for asylum or were named as a dependent on an asylum applicationⁱ. Indicatively, the top nationalities of applicants in 2024 were Afghan, Syrian, Iranian, Vietnamese, Eritrean, Iraqi, Sudaneseⁱⁱ. 68% of Channel crossers are granted asylum (variable by nationality, with over 90% grant rates for some), which is higher than the overall 57% grant rate for all asylum applicants in 2025ⁱⁱⁱ. This means that people who arrive by this route, having presented all of their evidence, are more likely to be considered refugees in the Home Office’s assessment than those arriving by other routes. It is important to point out, however, that small boat Channel crossers still only represent around a third of all asylum applicants in the UK (Fig. 1).



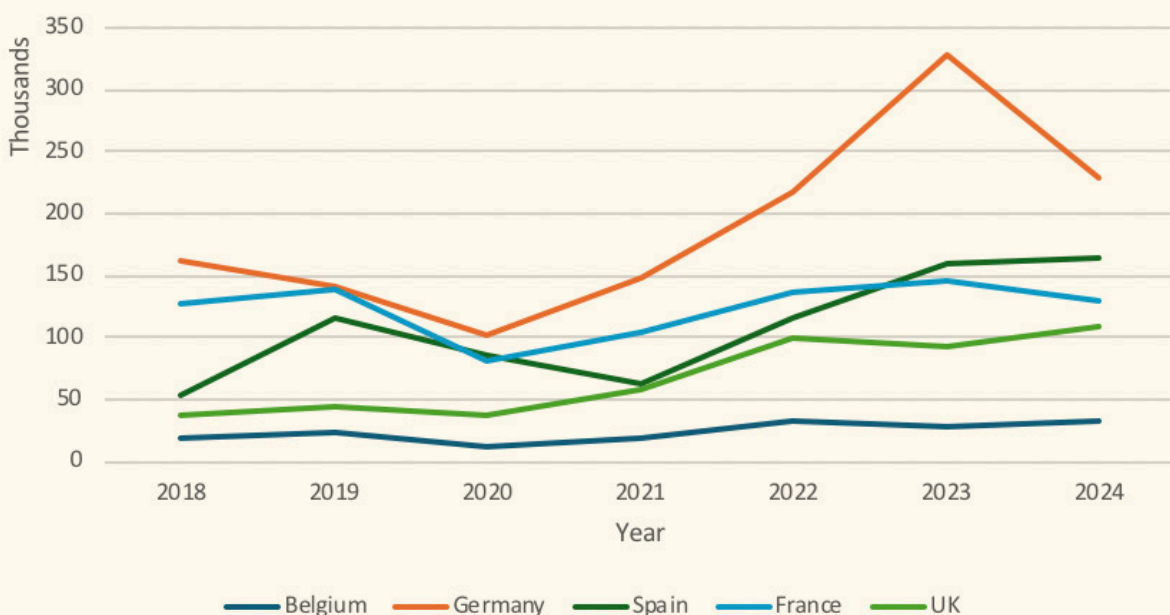
Figure 1. Total applications, and arrivals by small boat since 2010 (Source UK Home Office)



1.2 How does the UK compare to nearby countries?

Whilst UK numbers of asylum applications have been increasing in recent years, the rising trend is broadly in line with the rise in asylum applications in nearby European states (Fig. 2) However, overall, the numbers of people applying for asylum in the UK are substantially lower than in nearby European states including France, Germany and Spain.

Figure 2. Asylum applications country comparison 2018-2025
(Sources: UK Home Office Immigration system statistics 2025, EUROSTAT)



The UNHCR suggests that the recent increase in asylum applications within the European region is “likely linked in part to the easing of global travel restrictions that were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic”.^{iv} UNHCR reports that the global population of displaced people doubled globally over the past decade, and identifies the war in Ukraine, conflict in the Tigray region in Ethiopia, the events leading up to the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in Afghanistan in 2021, and displacements from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Sudanese conflict could also be added to this list. This reflects global research which has established that the main dynamics which shape the numbers of asylum applications in destination states are wars, conflicts and authoritarian and oppressive regimes^v.

Studies demonstrate that broad measures of ‘poverty’ alone do not increase migration for the purposes of asylum; neither do ‘pull factors’ such as welfare payments and working rights in destination states^{vi}. However, we should be wary of simplistic bifurcations between fleeing from conflict and persecution, and motivations to secure a ‘better life’, which will include economic factors. Like any other kind of human population, asylum seekers’ trajectories are shaped in part by material needs in the present and in future. Security and safety are not separable from economic or material security.

1.3 What caused small boat Channel crossings?

People were already travelling into the UK via the Channel route before 2018, but their journeys were less visible. There has been significant investment in border infrastructure, building cumulatively over the past 30 years, and restrictive policies such as carrier sanctions which restrict visas for arrivals deemed likely to apply for asylum. This means that it is now extremely difficult to travel to the UK to seek asylum by clandestine means such as stowing away in lorries, or travelling by aeroplane. Yet despite these difficulties, some of the participants in this research entered the UK by stowing away in lorries.

We know from research on borders and forced migration around the world that making it difficult for people to move does not stop them from moving^{vii}. Rather, it has what academics term a ‘deflection effect’. In other words, it funnels them into alternative, usually more difficult and dangerous, routes. It also creates demand for smuggling services. Thus, informal camps began to appear in northern France shortly after the Channel Tunnel opened and the UK introduced border controls in France.

When the Channel Tunnel company reached a level of fortification that prevented clandestine travel through the tunnel, people began to stow away in lorries along the French road network. This, again, was made extremely difficult through significant border infrastructure investment and the further securitisation of both the Calais and Dunkerque ferry ports and the Eurostar Terminal in Coquelles. From 2018 onwards, people began to attempt to cross the English Channel in small boats.

In short, actions to secure borders are powerful in shaping the journeys of would-be asylum seekers. This has had a knock-on effect on their visibility to authorities since they are much more visible in small boats in the English Channel than they were when stowing away in lorries. In turn, this means that more people are captured by authorities, and induced to make timely applications for asylum. In other words, it is possible that there are not proportionately more people crossing than previously, but that circumstances have just made it more likely that they are statistically captured and that the nature of these crossings make them highly visible. This has happened at a time of heightened politicisation of immigration in terms of the rise of far-right electoral strategies and policy making in the UK and across Europe and North America.

The dynamics of more visible routes across the Channel have been noted by the Home Office. At a Westminster Legal Policy Forum on ‘Next steps for the asylum system in the UK’ in November 2022, Daniel Hobbs (the then Director of Asylum Protection and Enforcement at the UK Home Office) said:

Previously most of our asylum claims came through to [the processing office in] Croydon having been here for years, having overstayed their visa. Now they arrive via our ports... This is not clandestine migration, it is quite obvious. We can see them^{viii}.

The central dynamic occurring in this borderzone, which led to the shift to the small boat route, is the mutually reinforcing relationship between bordering, irregular migration and asylum (see Figure.3).

When people (and particularly forced migrants) are prevented from travelling due to bordering efforts, they still continue to move, but their movement is irregularised. In order to travel they might then require the services of smugglers. But this dynamic leads states to introduce more bordering measures, which irregularises more people and leads them to take more risky routes, which increases their dependency on smugglers.

This dynamic began many years ago in the Channel borderzone, and it ultimately led to the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon.

Figure 3. A mutually reinforcing relationship



Some commentators have suggested that Brexit may have played a role in creating small boat Channel crossings. This is not a perspective that we agree with. The UK had some opt-outs from European directives on asylum, but aspects of the EU's 'Common European Asylum System' impacted the UK, chief among them being the Dublin III Agreement. This designated which member states were responsible for determining asylum claims, and thus facilitating returns of people seeking asylum back to those counties, if it was found (often through the EURODAC fingerprint database) that they had been registered as seeking asylum elsewhere in the EU. The UK sent very few people elsewhere in Europe using the Dublin III mechanism, and it had little impact on overall asylum applications in the country^{ix}. In fact, the UK overall gained more applicants than it lost in the final year of inclusion in the mechanism. In 2019 the UK received 2236 requests from EU member states to accept transfers of individuals to the UK, and 714 transfers took place. The UK made 3,259 transfer requests to EU member states, and just 263 transfers took place^x. With the end of the UK's participation in Dublin III people seeking asylum also lost some entitlements around family reunion.

In spite of these facts, there is some anecdotal evidence, mainly reported by media outlets, that there is a perception amongst people in Northern France that they are less likely to be sent back to France from the UK now that the UK has exited the European Union and thus left Dublin III.^{xi} The relative role of this effect in impacting overall numbers of asylum applications in the UK is difficult to capture. Multiple factors influence the number of people applying for asylum in a given country, and these are international factors which are equally connected to foreign and economic policy as well as histories of colonialism.

These multiple factors include population displacement through wars, conflict and state violence. There are well evidenced direct links between forced displacement of populations and Western foreign policy, interventions and arms exports. For example, the US lead 'Global War on Terror' is reported to have forcibly displaced 38 million people from 2001-2020^{xii}. The occupation of Afghanistan (2001-2020) and subsequent rapid withdrawal of the occupying forces created significant numbers of refugees. Many remain trapped in both Afghanistan (as internally displaced

people) or in neighbouring and regional states (Pakistan, Iran, Turkey). The US and allies intervention in Afghanistan has also destabilised Pakistan and created factional conflicts between the military and the state which has led to routine crack downs and violence. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the destabilisation of the Iraqi state not only displaced people through bombing campaigns but created a series of economic and political crisis that have led to escalating forms of civil conflict over resources and territorial control^{xiii}.

This situation has been mirrored in Libya, where the NATO bombing campaign, funding of opposition parties, and the arming of proxies to topple the Gaddafi government has led to widespread state collapse, factional violence and widening levels of inequality and impoverishment. Aiming to use Libya as a bulwark against Europe-bound African migration, European states have channelled funds to different Libyan factions and the Libyan Coast Guard^{xiv}. This has shaped migrant and refugee experiences in the country.^{xv} Historically, Libya was a key regional actor in routes of labour migration within North and Sub-Saharan Africa, but the destabilisation of the Libyan state and economy has led many more people to seek asylum in Europe.

1.4 Report structure

The next chapter (Chapter 2) offers a brief overview of some of the key moments in the policy timeline (the full timeline can be found in the Appendix), showing the dynamics which led to the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon from 2018 onwards.

Chapter 3 focuses on the politics of small boat Channel crossings, showing how key political stakeholders have framed the problem and the solutions. We explain why this framing is problematic, and assess how the solutions stand up to expert scrutiny. While the people discussed in Chapter 3 are the most heard voices speaking about small boat Channel crossings, Chapter 4 shares the voices of lived experience experts. That is, people who have crossed the Channel in a small boat and/or lorries. Their perspectives challenge many of the claims of politicians.

While smugglers are one of the main characters in the story of small boat Channel crossings, and they appear across the report, Chapter 5 focuses on other people and organisations who are making money from the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon. That is, companies paid by the government to deliver border security, and deal with the impacts of it (such as search and rescue). Even less discussed than the experiences of small boat Channel crossers, this is an important part of the picture if we are to understand what is happening in this borderzone.

In the final chapter we discuss some of the policy options which are discussed in the public sphere (for example presented by NGOs), and those which are less often raised. The Channel borderzone and the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon is a complex site of global dynamics and systems. For this reason, the crossings cannot be easily understood or addressed with one single policy intervention. Equally, the policies which are selected are politically driven, and which responses different people think are the 'best' strongly correlate with ideological positions. In other words, there is no politically neutral technical fix to this problem which will please everyone involved and stop the crossings once and for all. For this reason, we have chosen not to present a set of recommendations, but to take you through a series of different options, weighing each up in terms of strengths and limitations. Our central guiding principle is that any response should have human dignity at its heart, and should approach people on the move as rights holding human beings who are deserving of equal respect and dignity as any French or British citizens. In light of this we do not work through policies which would strip people of their human rights or deport them to a third country against their will. Our aim is not to persuade different stakeholders to agree with any one of these positions, but to open up space to think in different ways.

2. Policy Timeline

The significant increase in people crossing the English Channel by small boat took place in 2018. But to understand small boat crossings we need to go back much further.

People have been crossing the English Channel in order to seek asylum for hundreds of years (if not longer). The first refugees recorded crossing the Channel were protestants fleeing persecution from the Hapsburg Netherlands in 1568^{xvi}. One hundred thousand people arrived in this way at a time when the whole population of England was just 3 million. Around 50,000 Huguenots crossed in 1681. These newcomers made up one third of the population of East Anglia, Devon and Canterbury in the late 17th century, and 2.5% of the population of Bristol. There were so many Huguenots that it is estimated that 1 in 6 people now living in Britain are descended from Huguenots.

But this all took place before the centralisation of the state immigration system, which in Britain was 1905. Even after this, 250,000 Belgian refugees crossed the Channel during the Great War ‘crowding every floating thing that could possibly be put out to sea’; 35,000 arrived in October 1914 alone and Folkestone on the south coast became known as a ‘town of refugees’^{xvii}.

These are just a few examples of the many people who have crossed the Channel in search of asylum, but the contemporary situation has been fundamentally shaped by the creation and fortification of this borderzone in a period in which controls on the mobility of negatively racialised people -often from former European colonies- has proliferated.

In 1968 the Cross-Channel Intelligence Conference (CCIC) was established with the aim of fostering regional cross-border policing of the English Channel. It was this group who accelerated the building of infrastructure for cross-border policing that still develops today^{xviii}. The issue that precipitated the

establishment of this network was so called “illegal” Channel crossings. Most of the ‘illegal aliens’ that British police were aware of came from Pakistan, India, and Iran, with a smaller portion being Commonwealth seamen deserting ships at British ports. These people would largely only have been “illegal” travellers because of the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, which transformed many people from citizens of the British Commonwealth, into immigrants in need of special work visas. This Act explicitly sought to prevent people racialised as black and brown from settling in the UK. In other words, the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act created the conditions for the irregular Channel crossings, and led to the need to police this border zone.

The CCIC continued its work over the decades up to the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994. As the number of people claiming asylum in Europe increased in the 1990s, the Channel became an important transit point for people entering Britain. The British and French states pushed to make it as easy as possible for goods and capital to move across the Channel and for certain categories of travellers – tourists, EU citizens, business people to transit smoothly and efficiently. At the same time, they worked to stop irregular migration, primarily of negatively racialised people aiming to claim asylum, and to stop the smuggling necessary to facilitate it: an unending task now that the border existed in its modern form.

It is at the point at which the Channel Tunnel opened when we started to see the media and political interest, a policy cascade, and public debate around this borderzone. You can read a longer version of the timeline in the Appendix. The timeline below more briefly shows how intensified bordering and the criminalisation of movement has not stopped irregular Channel crossings, it has simply meant experimentation with new routes of entry and ultimately making these journeys more dangerous.

1991	Sangatte Protocol signed by UK and France agreeing to introduce UK border controls in France and French controls in the UK when the Channel Tunnel opens. It comes into force in 1993.
1994	Channel Tunnel opens
1995	Schengen Area created. People can travel passport free within the EU. The UK opts out, creating a border with much of Europe.
1998	Increasing number of homeless migrants living in the Calais area hoping to cross to the UK
1999	Sangatte refugee centre created by the French Red Cross for migrants attempting to travel to UK.
2000	A woman dies after falling under the wheels of a lorry in Hastings (UK) that had crossed the Channel. Four other people hidden in the truck are arrested. In June, during a routine border inspection, the bodies of 58 people from China are discovered in a lorry in Dover. The incident is one of the largest mass killings in British criminal history
2001	Sangatte refugee centre (capacity 600) now houses 1000 – 1600 people on any given day and conditions are squalid. In November a riot breaks out between Kurdish and Afghan residents at the overcrowded Sangatte refugee centre. A 25-year-old Kurdish refugee dies. In August 44 asylum seekers walk seven miles through the Channel tunnel towards the UK before being detected by heat sensors and cameras. A large group of refugees storm the Eurotunnel on Christmas Day, allowing more than 500 refugees into the Tunnel. The UK government starts to impose a civil penalty of £2000 per head on Eurotunnel each time asylum seekers make it through the Channel Tunnel into the UK. Ferry companies, Airlines, ferry companies, lorry and coach drivers already face the same fine – known as “carrier sanctions” Eurotunnel spends £3m enhancing security around its terminal to reduce irregular crossings and launches legal proceedings for the closure of the Sangatte refugee centre
2002	Second riot at the overcrowded Sangatte refugee centre French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy orders the closure of Sangatte centre. The UK agrees to take 1000 Iraqi Kurds and 200 Afghans, while France takes responsibility for the remaining residents Treaty of Le Touquet signed. Reciprocal border controls of French and UK officials in each other’s countries brought in. Effectively moves the UK border to France.
2004	Belgium, France, and the UK sign an agreement, allowing pre-embarkation immigration controls

2009

An informal camp in Calais with 1000 inhabitants is bulldozed and 190 people are arrested

UNHCR establishes a presence in Calais, providing legal aid and counselling

2012

UNHCR leaves Calais. Responsibility for legal advice passed to French NGO France Terre d'Asile

2014

At least fifteen people die living informally in Calais in 2014, according to the UNHCR, who condemn the situation in the town as "shameful".

UK commits £12 million over three years in a Joint Ministerial Declaration for border security in Northern France

2015

French government sets up a centre for women and children at 'Jules Ferry', a former children's holiday camp to be run by an NGO. 52 women and children move in within 3 months. Around 1,200 people are evicted from squats and camps around Calais, and moved to the site next to the Jules Ferry centre. Once fully established it has makeshift schools, shelters, and a variety of organisations offering aid. Houses 10,000 at its peak. An informal camp in Dunkirk also emerges

UK commits £10 million over three years in a Joint Ministerial Declaration for border security in Northern France. Joint UK-French information and coordination centre set up in Calais. Two British liaison magistrates seconded to France, one of whom is specialised in combating immigration criminal networks in Calais.

Europe's 'refugee crisis' intensifies. Asylum seekers attempt to access asylum in the UK by travelling through the Channel Tunnel.

2016

The UK National Crime Agency's 'National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2016' report states that while no data is available, most clandestine entry constitutes 'individuals travelling alone or in groups conceal themselves inside unaccompanied or accompanied freight, or sometimes underneath vehicles, in an attempt to pass through the immigration and customs controls undetected. ...some make use of tourist traffic, concealing themselves in 'cars (including car boots), vans, coaches and caravans/mobile homes'.

UK-France summit Annex on migration states that the UK has contributed £63m towards securing the Port of Calais and the Eurotunnel in the last year, including extra fencing and infrastructure, security guards, search dogs and detection technology. French authorities have deployed more than 1300 police officers to prevent crossings

The UK holds the Brexit referendum, voting in favour of leaving the European Union. Refugees are used as a key risk motif in the 'leave' campaign

Construction work begins on the 'Great Wall of Calais'. A four meter high barrier, initially running for 1 km along both sides of the main road to the Calais port, paid for by the UK government, by 2018 it is 65km long

2018

The first year that small boat Channel crossings start to be noted. Just a few hundred people cross this year. UK Home secretary declares a major incident Sandhurst Treaty signed – committed the UK to spending €50 million to improve security and reduce illegal migration in northern French ports

2019

UK-France Joint Action Plan on illegal migration across the Channel in small boats. UK commits £3.6 million for reinforced preventive security measures, such as CCTV, night goggles and number plate recognition capability.

Home Secretary Priti Patel meets her French counterpart to review progress against the January joint action plan. Set an “immediate objective” “to halve the number of successful migrant crossings by the end of October, and to reduce it further by the end of December 2019, such that by Spring 2020 it has become an infrequent phenomenon.” Extra €2.5 million committed by UK

2020

8500 small boat Channel crossings this year

UK and France sign a “Declaration of Intent” to establish a Franco-British Operational Research Unit staffed by British and French officers

Home Secretary Priti Patel appoints Royal Marine Dan O’Mahoney to a new position of ‘Clandestine Channel Threat Commander tasked with making Channel crossings in small boats ‘unviable’

UK and France sign a joint statement on tackling illegal migration -more police to stop irregular journeys, new surveillance and detection technology to detect and disrupt crossing attempts before they happen, steps to support migrants into appropriate accommodation, measures to increase border security. UK pledges €31.4 million to support these efforts

2021

28,500 people cross the Channel in small boats this year

UK government published ‘New Plan for Immigration’ policy statement. Plan to make all small boat arrivals inadmissible for asylum in the UK, life sentences in prison for those who facilitate irregular travel, expansion of immigration detention, and suggests the possibility of deportation to a ‘safe third country’ (later announced as Rwanda)

UK-France Joint Statement to tackle illegal immigration announces strengthened law enforcement deployments along the coast of France, more wide-area surveillance technology and vehicles, increased border security at key transport infrastructure points, investment in centres dedicated to providing support to migrants across France. UK commits €62.7 million in 2021/22

In November 27 people drown attempting to cross in the English Channel in a small boat

2022

45,756 people arrive in the UK following small boat crossings this year, a 60% increase on the 2021 total.

Manston asylum centre opened in Kent to process asylum seekers who have crossed the Channel

Memorandum of Understanding between the UK and Rwanda announced.

UK-France joint statement: enhancing co-operation against illegal migration announces enhanced surveillance and intelligence gathering, increased French patrols, a Taskforce to reduce Albanian Channel crossers, more surveillance technology and dogs, more reception and removal centres in France. UK commits €72.2 million in 2022/23

2023

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak promises to ‘stop migrant boats’ crossing the English Channel before the 2024 election

A report by the charity Alarm Phone finds that increased funding from the UK is leading to more overcrowded boats, chaotic departures, and deaths.

In September 872 people successfully cross the English Channel on 15 separate vessels. This is the highest daily recorded number in 2023

UK Supreme Court judges find that Rwanda is not a safe third country for the government to send asylum seekers. Later the same day Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announces that he will introduce a new law to parliament which will declare Rwanda a safe country

2024

At least 36,816 migrants crossed the English Channel in 2024, 25% more than the previous year but lower than the 2022 peak

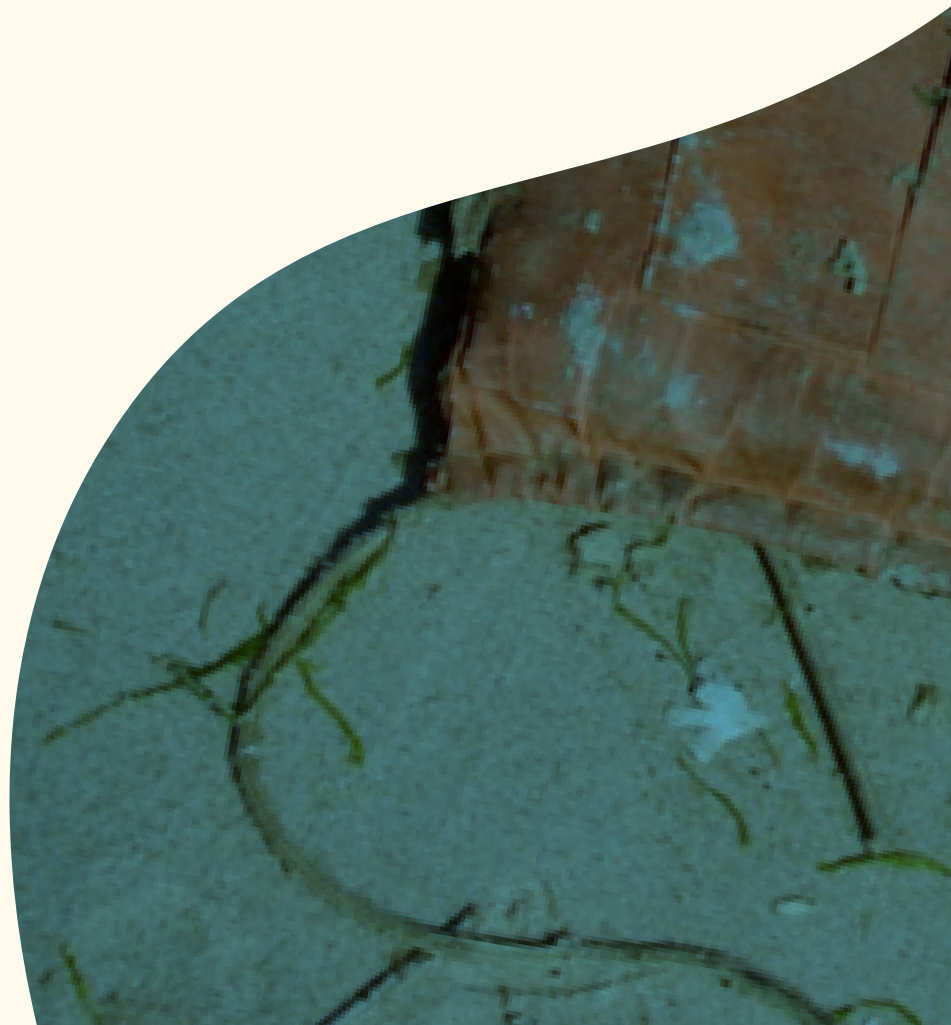
Footage shows French authorities using aggressive tactics against Small Boats, including circling boats, causing waves to flood the dinghy, ramming them, and puncturing boats when they are already at sea

Islamophobic and anti-refugee race riots breakout across England, as hundreds of people attack hotels that house asylum seekers. Buildings are set on fire in Britain's worst riots in 13 years. More than 700 people are arrested and 302 are charged.

By end of the year, 2024 becomes the deadliest year on record for Channel crossings, with 76 deaths.

2025

UK and France agree a 'one in one out' agreement by which a small number of people who crossed the Channel will be sent back to France, and some asylum seekers will be transferred to the UK in return.







3. The Politics of Small Boat Channel Crossings

Small boat crossings are not simply a policy problem that requires an appropriate technocratic solution. Policies designed to reduce small boat arrivals are inseparable from the *politics* of Channel Crossings.

The issue of Channel crossings has become a powerful site for political storytelling. In this storytelling broader anxieties about not only the state's ability to control its borders, but also other issues such as identity, sovereignty, economic crisis and social order are brought to the fore. In recent years nationalist and populist political projects have connected economic decline in Britain with multiculturalism and immigration. In this representation the erosion of people's everyday lives and economic prospects is not caused by a failing economic model or austerity, but by what some politicians frame as uncontrolled mass immigration.

The language used to describe people crossing the Channel reflects a striking convergence in how the issue is understood across the two recently governing parties. The small boats phenomenon is often framed as a problem to be managed, contained, or eliminated. Humanitarian concerns tend to be limited to concerns around loss of life at sea, and rarely extend to issues of persecution, forced displacement, refugeehood, or the conditions of life for migrants in Calais and beyond.

There are four key figures in the political storytelling around Channel crossings. They are: the evil smuggler, the bogus asylum-

seeker, the passive victim, and the rescuing state. These are represented and deployed in different configurations by different parties, but they remain remarkably stable over time. These figures appear in migration policy contexts around the world. In the UK they emerged as the main characters in the story of irregular migration only after the start of the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon.

In this section we discuss our analysis of political and policy discourse around small boat Channel crossings. We first discuss the general representation of small boat Channel crossings and mainstreaming of far-right narratives in this space, and the Labour government's ambition to 'bring order to the border' (to quote Prime Minister Keir Starmer). Having discussed how the problem is represented, we then explain how these representations lead to certain types of 'solutions' being proposed. In the final section we explain what is wrong with these representations and solutions, and why they do not 'solve' Channel crossings, but pave the way for future crises.

3.1 Political representations of Channel Crossings

We have analysed the ways in which politicians across major political divides have conceived of the 'crisis' of small boats arriving in the UK. The political representations of Channel Crossings are significant, because they shape the ways

in which the phenomenon is understood, and therefore the proposed solutions. As noted above, we have identified four common tropes that shape political and public understandings of the Channel Crossings phenomenon: The smuggler, the victim, the bogus-asylum seeker and the rescuing state^{xix}. Each works as a kind of narrative shorthand that shapes public perception and policy responses.

The smuggler is most often portrayed as the villain of the story. Political speeches and media reports depict smugglers as predatory criminals who endanger the lives of migrants by forcing or luring ‘desperate’ people into paying for unsafe journeys across the Channel. In this framing, smugglers are not seen as facilitators of movement but as the root cause of migration itself. As a result, criminalisation and policing become the main policy responses, and this is reflected in the repeated promises by successive governments to ‘smash the gangs’. The moralised language around smugglers as ‘evil’ or ‘vile’ also blurs the distinction between smuggling and trafficking, though these are legally and practically different types of practices.

The bogus asylum-seeker is another central figure in this narrative, and the notion of the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker has a history within British political discourse that dates back to the late 1990s. In this depiction, those people arriving by small boat are portrayed as illegitimate entrants and claimants or as ‘queue-jumpers’ who exploit the asylum system. The bogus-asylum seeker is usually imagined as a young male, who in the very first instance is also a criminal due to his method of arrival. Even though around 68% of Channel migrants are eventually recognised as refugees, the belief persists that small boat arrivals are illegal entrants without a legitimate claim to arrive. This representation is reinforced by broader narratives about welfare, within which refugee arrivals are linked to other forms of resource scarcity such as housing shortages or the cost of public services. In this way they are assumed to be ‘jumping the queue’ of people in line for any type of social and economic support from the state. This narrative has salience in the context of constrained public finances; the Labour Party manifesto for the 2024 general election suggested that the Conservatives’ unworkable approach had created a “perma-backlog” of tens of thousands of asylum seekers, who are indefinitely staying in hotels costing the taxpayer millions of pounds every

week^{xxx}. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson also used the phrase ‘jumping the queue’ to describe male migrants specifically as being illegitimate, taking the place of more legitimate women and children asylum-seekers.

This narrative of illegal or ‘bogus’ migration has paralleled the **criminalisation and securitisation** of people claiming asylum. This was a key tactic used in the Conservatives’ justification of making all asylum claims inadmissible if they came by irregular/criminalised routes in 2023. In the period of the Labour government, however, we can also observe this same slippage between ‘criminal smugglers’, and ‘criminal migrants’, who have become one and the same in the increasing number of arrests of those who steer small boats^{xxi}.

In contrast, more liberal political and media accounts construct asylum seekers as simply **the victim**. In these representations usually female or child asylum seekers are depicted as powerless individuals. They are victims of persecution in their home countries, and victims of exploitative smugglers. This framing can be accurate in part, highlighting vulnerability and suffering, but it also risks removing the agency of migrants themselves. What it can sometimes occlude, and what our data confirms, is that, like any humans in difficult and threatening situations, asylum seekers have capacity to plan and arrange to take rational decisions, including taking extreme, yet calculated risks in order to survive and to ensure that they can establish long-term security for themselves and their families. In hiring the services of brokers or smugglers for example, they are responding to a situation in which an absence of legal routes means other, costlier and riskier alternatives become plausible options.

The rescuing state emerges as the counterpoint to all three other figures. The state presents itself as a protector: saving victims from smugglers, protecting the public from bogus claimants, enforcing law and order, and securing the integrity of British borders. The state is therefore both saviour and enforcer, humanitarian in rhetoric but punitive in practice. The Labour and Conservative parties differ in tone and emphasis but both operate within this overarching frame. For the Conservatives, small boat migrants were consistently portrayed as illegal queue jumpers, a criminal threat to national security

and sovereignty. Labour, while criticising Conservative mismanagement as policy ‘gimmicks’ largely echoed the same tropes. Their own position has focused on efficiency, reducing bureaucratic backlogs and financial waste rather than questioning the framing of crossings as a criminal problem that needs to be eradicated.

It is worth noting that more recent moves have seen the phenomenon of small boat crossings framed more explicitly as a national security threat and as a threat to nationhood itself. This is emphasised in current plans to extend counter-terrorism powers to police the Channel and prosecute ‘people-smugglers’.

3.2 Migrants as a foreign invasion

One of the most striking aspects of the political and policy discussion around small boats since 2018 has been the use of far-right talking points and responses in mainstream politics. This appears across three key themes: small boats as a foreign invasion; small boats as bringing racial and sexual threats; and an association with demographic threats in the context of climate catastrophe.

Smuggling is presented as a vast transnational criminal network which is undermining British sovereignty and which demands systems of international policing to combat it. Smuggling is represented as akin to terrorism, with counter-terrorism practices viewed as necessary solutions to the problem. Here smuggling and human trafficking are often presented as one and the same, and connected to drug and weapons smuggling by the Home Office^{xxii}.

The militarised description of people crossing the Channel as a foreign enemy is widely used across far-right groups in presenting migrants as a force that needs to be violently expelled. This kind of rhetoric was increasingly used by the Conservative government 2018–2024. These narratives have been extended by Reform UK and have remained largely unchallenged by the current Labour government.

During their time in office, Channel crossings were regularly presented by Conservative MPs, the Conservative government, and right wing think tanks using the militarised language of ‘invasion’ or as ‘encroaching’, ‘storming’,

‘penetrating’, or ‘breaking in to’, Britain. As MP Philip Hollobone argued in parliamentary debates on ‘illegal seaborne migration’:

‘There is [also] a security risk. The No. 1 priority of Her Majesty’s Government is to defend this nation. We do not know who those people are, where they come from or what their intentions are, and that activity needs to be stopped’.^{xxiii} And subsequently declared ‘We must be able to defend our coastline from illegal immigration’^{xxiv}.

In 2023, speaking to Policy Exchange, former Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick argued, ‘The English Channel was once a barrier more impenetrable than any wall – a “silver sea” in which these islands were set... it is [now] a gateway for those in search of better economic prospects’^{xxv}.

Dehumanising language using naturalist metaphors described people on the move as ‘hurricane(s)’, ‘surges’, ‘tidal waves’, ‘flows’, and ‘great rivers’^{xxvi}. In representing people moving across the Channel to claim asylum as a threat to the security and integrity of the border, and as an existential threat to the nation, they presented Channel crossings as a national emergency that demands exceptional solutions. This of course relates to questions of sovereignty, so central to public discourses around Brexit.

3.3 Migrants as a threat to cohesion, public services, and women

Small boat Channel crossings have often been presented as threatening in terms of ‘community cohesion’. The then Home Secretary Suella Braverman, for example, commented in a debate on the Illegal Migration Bill in 2023 that:

[it is] right to talk about the risks we face as a country that is harmonious, happy with itself and cohesive. If we do not deal with this problem, we will face serious problems of community tension and challenges to community cohesion^{xxviii}.

‘Community cohesion’ here refers to cultural differences which are deemed ‘at odds’ with ‘British Values’ and that will lead to community tensions. In this specific case, Braverman’s

statement came in the wake of violent anti-asylum seeker protests in which fascist groups such as Patriotic Alternative mobilised against asylum seekers being housed in hotels. Whilst the Home Office condemned this violence, references to community tensions place blame for such events on asylum seekers themselves and the ‘different cultural values’ they are thought to carry with them. These sentiments were shared by the leader of Patriotic Alternative when he announced that: ‘Suella Braverman has basically admitted multiculturalism has failed and that mass immigration is a threat to the West. This is a good thing’^{xxxix}. This theme was also used by Labour peers and key think tanks in the wake of the 2024 racist riots in England^{xxx}.

People seeking asylum were also presented by former prime minister Boris Johnson as burdening ‘our NHS and our welfare state... our local schools, our housing and public transport, and creates unsustainable pressure to build on precious green spaces’^{xxxi}. In this way, stressed public services, an absence of good jobs and affordable housing were presented as the fault of people crossing the Channel, rather than decades of underinvestment and government policy. The concerns of people needing to access basic subsistence and public services were thus routinely presented as evidence of the public’s desire to crack down on ‘illegal’ migrants and anything else is portrayed as a ‘betrayal of the electorate’^{xxxii}.

The framing of cultural threats to the nation and to public services was also wrapped up with a focus on who is crossing the Channel. This actively draws on historic tropes of racialised-sexualised danger. This was predominantly portrayed through the figure of the ‘single male’ ‘economic migrant’ who is represented as not a true asylum seeker and often as a sexual predator^{xxxiii}. That 70% of people crossing the Channel are men is frequently used as evidence that they are not refugees but instead fit young men who have ‘elbowed aside’ more ‘deserving’ refugees (i.e. women and children)^{xxxiv}. MP Lee Anderson, then Chair of the Conservative Party, asked in a debate on the Illegal Migration Bill whether the ‘Home Secretary [can] confirm that the Bill will indeed get rid of foreign rapists and murderers?’^{xxxv}.

While women and very young children seeking asylum are often presented as passive victims, this was complicated in the period of the Conservative government by a refocus

on the reproduction of ‘foreign women’ as breeders of racial difference and twinned with the catastrophic threat from future climate refugees. For example, in her speech to the right-wing think tank the AEI, Home Secretary Suella Braverman argued that:

More than one in five births are to foreign-born mothers. Due to immigration and high birth rates among foreign-born mothers, English secondary schools will need to find an extra 213,000 places by 2026 compared to 2020^{xxxvi}.

The conspiracy theory of the great replacement and the coming ‘race war’ touted by white supremacists, sets the wider context for the presentation of Braverman’s demographic assertions^{xxxvii}. Here immigration is presented as part of the ‘take over’ of British (and ‘Western’) society in which migrants pose a biological and cultural threat to the continuity of whiteness and Britishness.

The notion that immigration is a threat to community cohesion was also emphasised in Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s speech in 2025 during the launch of the governments’ immigration white paper, in which he described immigration levels under the Conservative government as a ‘squalid chapter’ in the nation’s history, that risked turning the UK into an ‘island of strangers’^{xxxviii}. The speech was paralleled with Enoch Powell’s infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech which suggested that Britain faced an existential crisis in the wake of migration from the former British Empire.

3.4 Policy Interventions 2018-2025

The policies directed towards the phenomenon of small boat Channel crossings have aimed to reduce or prevent arrivals altogether. There has been a cross-party focus on deterrence measures such as policing and enforcement, asylum inadmissibility, the potential of offshore processing in various forms, and expanded detention within the UK. This section provides a brief summary of some key interventions and measures considered, implemented and sometimes revoked by successive UK governments.

Significant legislation in this area includes firstly the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) which was spearheaded by the preceding New

Plan for Immigration (2021). Reinforcing the importance of political storytelling (section 3.1) this legislation was introduced in 2021 under the pretext that Channel Crossings constituted a ‘national emergency’. A core part of the proposals was a plan to expand the parameters for inadmissibility of asylum claims, effectively creating a two-tier system for refugees, based on arrivals, between those who arrive through regular legal routes, and those arriving irregularly. Those in the latter category would only be granted temporary protection without automatic settlement, and with limited rights to family reunification. The criteria for temporary protection also strengthened inadmissibility rules for migrants who had passed through ‘safe countries’.

The Act criminalised irregular arrivals, potentially imprisoning those guilty of the crime of ‘illegal arrival’ with imprisonment of up to 4 years. Provisions in the legislation also sought to increase the penalty for ‘facilitation’ of illegal arrival, with penalties of up to life imprisonment. The Act also limited the protections offered for victims of modern slavery, raising the bar for survivors to access support. Significantly it allowed a much greater legal scope for inadmissibility that would provide the foundation for the subsequent UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Partnership (henceforth Rwanda Migration Scheme).

The Rwanda Migration Scheme was announced in 2022, and was billed as the flagship policy to deter asylum entrants to the UK seeking to arrive via the Channel. It was advanced by the Safety of Rwanda Act (2024) which sought to reassert the ‘safety’ of Rwanda as a destination for offshore processing of asylum claims. As part of this legislative programme, people claiming asylum who have crossed the Channel would have their claims categorised as inadmissible, and they would be deported to Rwanda and then processed, with a view to protection or resettlement in Rwanda instead of the United Kingdom. The logic of the scheme was both as deterrence, and to reduce the scope of admissibility criteria for protection in the UK. Indeed, this logic was restated in a 2022 Policy Exchange Report which confirmed that the aims were to ‘ensure that nobody who arrives here illegally will ever, under any circumstances, be allowed to settle in Britain’^{xxxix}. Despite detailed research on the failure of deterrence as a policy solution (demonstrated in the Home Office’s own research 2020^{xi}), this was represented as a means of eliminating

the threat of ‘illegal’ movement. The plan to dismantle the connection between arrival and processing asylum claims also necessitated the promise to ‘house’ asylum seekers en masse, by repurposing military barracks and housing people on barges such as the Bibby Stockholm.

By any objective measure the Rwanda scheme was costly, with an estimated cost of £715 million pounds between 2022-2024, had it proceeded as planned. In addition to this, £290 million was handed to the Rwandan government as part of the wider development partnership.

The Rwanda plan ultimately failed to materialise and only four people were voluntarily ‘removed’ under the scheme before it was repealed. The scheme was beset by legal and ethical concerns and opposition from the outset, with the Supreme Court declaring the scheme unlawful in November 2023, owing to Rwanda’s human rights violations and failures to uphold protection guarantees for asylum seekers. Neither was the aim of deterrence shown to have had any material effect on the number of arrivals, during the period in which the scheme was being legislated and enacted. Instead, the net effect was to contribute to a backlog in the asylum system and consequently to the long-term housing of people who had applied for asylum in hotels. This in turn offered a physical mobilisation point for far-right protesters. Efforts to stop smuggling did not work, though deaths at the French shoreline increased.

3.5 The Labour government approach 2024-25

Whilst in opposition, Labour focussed their criticism of government policy on waste of money and mismanagement of the asylum system under the Conservatives. The new government in 2024 eschewed the more spectacular proposed ‘solutions’ to Channel Crossings such as the Rwanda Migration Scheme, in favour of a focus on ‘efficient’ management. However, what has also been reinforced by the Labour approach is the notion that the central cause of the problem are criminal networks, and hence the ‘crisis’ of the Channel has been conceived of as one which can be policed into a resolution.

Since gaining power in 2024 the Labour government has **repealed the Rwanda**

Migration Partnership and amended elements of the Illegal Migration Act such as the duty to remove asylum seekers to other countries, allowing for claims to be processed. The government has however, also set out a policy agenda and narrative that largely continues the position of previous administrations. Funding that had previously been assigned to the Rwanda scheme has been redirected towards the establishment of the Border Security Command (BSC), which is tasked with co-ordinating international policing efforts and intelligence reconnaissance with a view to tackling smuggling beyond the Channel^{xii}. With extra funds directed through the command to the National Crime Agency, local and European police forces, its primary aim is to disrupt the supply chain of smugglers (following where money flows, the distribution of small boats, seizing and intercepting communication devices etc).

The activities of the BSC are supported by the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill (2025) which cements the use of counter-terrorism powers into immigration enforcement. Among its powers, the Bill broadens the authority to confiscate individuals' electronic devices at the border and expands restrictions on solidarity with refugees by criminalising those supplying goods or information that could assist the travel of 'undocumented migrants'^{xiii}. Alongside the enhanced policing of the border, there has also been an increased emphasis on enforcement and returns, with a 38 percent rise in raids on illegal working and a 24% increase in enforced removals within the first months of the labour government. Whilst the most visible group subject to removals have been those serving prison sentences (labelled as foreign national criminals) this also includes people who have crossed the Channel to claim asylum^{xiiii}.

The logics behind these moves again both reaffirm the notion that the source of the crisis of small boats is the existence of criminals or crime syndicates, and that the solution lies in a deterrent that is strong enough to repel would-be arrivals, which would 'break the business model' of smuggling gangs^{xlv}. This logic is identical to that which previous Conservative governments mobilised in the policies listed in the previous section.

Similarly, whilst the Rwanda scheme was criticised and repealed almost immediately upon the new government coming to power

in 2024, it has been proposed by the Labour government that return hubs could be set up in countries in the Balkans, in which failed asylum seekers might be 'processed'^{xlv}. Here, the logics of off-shoring find a parallel with that of the Rwanda Migration Scheme. It remains to be seen if this proposal will be realised.

Most recently the Labour government negotiated and ratified a deal with France to return people from the UK to France, on a one-in, one-out basis, with each returnee being replaced by a 'legitimate' asylum seeker arriving via a safe route^{xlvi}. This scheme however is reportedly limited to 50 persons per week. Despite being launched with some fanfare, there is no evidence to suggest that such a scheme would have the desired deterrent effect, or that deterrent based policies work.

Whilst asylum housing is not within the purview of this research project, it must be noted that the goal of ending reliance on 'hotel' housing by 2029 is a key focus of Labour's immigration policy.

3.6 What's wrong with current approaches?

Our analysis emphasises a surprising consistency between Conservative and Labour governments' approaches to small boat Channel crossings. There are of course some differences too; Conservative approaches in relation to the short-lived Rwanda scheme and other attempted militarised measures, tended towards 'spectacular' deterrence measures. Labour approaches, on the other hand, have tended to be framed within a managerial and security-focussed direction.

Nonetheless, across both of the two recently governing parties, the 'problem' of asylum is erroneously framed as a problem of arrival. The very appearance of people seeking asylum on British shores, or at the border, is represented as the key problem, rather than wars and persecution, and the lack of safe and legal routes.

Small boat Channel crossings are also understood as a crisis of criminality and border security. Whether framed through the imagery of "evil smugglers," "bogus asylum seekers," or the "rescuing state," policy has rested on the assumption that deterrence and policing

will reduce arrivals. The assumption continues that if the state treats those who arrive harshly enough, through detention, offshoring, removal, or the denial of rights, future migrants will be dissuaded from making the journey. Yet decades of evidence from the UK, Europe, and elsewhere show that deterrence-based strategies do not prevent irregular migration. Instead, increased enforcement tends to create demand for facilitators and pushes journeys onto riskier, more clandestine and costly routes

xlvi

The Rwanda scheme under the Conservatives and Labour's Border Security Command differ in form, but both share this deterrence logic. For the Conservatives, the answer was offshoring claims and removing the right to asylum altogether. For Labour, the focus is better policing, more efficient removals, and international agreements such as the "one in, one out" deal with France. In each case, the problem is cast as one of criminality, rather than displacement, violence, or the absence of legal routes. As we show in the next chapter, the evidence gathered via interviews with those crossing the Channel simply does not support the notion that smuggling is the principal driver of migration.

These commonalities mean that despite changes in rhetoric (Conservative tendencies towards moral panic / Labour's emphasis on managerial competence) the underlying policy logic remains strikingly similar. Both parties equate irregular migration with criminality and invest heavily in border security, detention, and enforcement. Both neglect the structural drivers of movement: war, persecution, inequality, foreign policy, and the closing of safe and legal pathways. These things are often simply written out of policy discussions in relation to processing and resettling refugees, but it is important not to see displacement and persecution as 'natural' or ahistorical features but instead a consequence of global and domestic economic and political systems.

Criminalising small boat crossings has not reduced arrivals, but has expanded backlogs, placed thousands in precarious hotel accommodation, and created new flashpoints for far-right racist mobilisation in the UK. The emphasis on "smashing the gangs" ignores the fact that smuggling is a by-product of border fortification itself. Arresting facilitators or closing one route simply shifts demand elsewhere. In short, current approaches fail because they

misdiagnose the issue. By treating migration primarily as a security threat, governments justify ever harsher deterrence policies that do little to promote refugees' rights to refuge, reduce crossings and much to legitimise racist border practices. The result is not resolution, but the continual production of future crises that sustain the politics of emergency without addressing the realities of displacement or the rights of people seeking asylum.

In order to begin to rectify this gap in understanding, it is helpful to hear more directly from asylum seekers themselves who have come to the UK via small boats. In the following section people who have crossed the Channel on small boats provide us with a set of narratives that give an indication of the kinds of factors that motivate and indeed necessitate movement across borders. This evidence provides a more complex picture of how experiences along journeys make those seeking asylum alter their plans, and why people might favour certain destinations, and may be willing to take grave risks to ensure their survival, safety and security.



4. Experiences of crossing the Channel by small boat

There has been much discussion in the public sphere about small boat Channel crossings. Within this discussion there are voices which dominate, and those whose perspectives are less heard. The voices of UK and French politicians, ministries, media commentators and think tanks are the dominant voices. They present a narrative about small boat Channel crossings, which was discussed in the previous chapter. In this representation some claims have become self-evident. These include: France is a safe country; people who seek to cross the Channel in small boats have no logical reason to do so; Channel crossers are therefore in fact criminals; smugglers are evil and profit from human misery; stop the smugglers and you will stop the crossings; and criminal justice solutions and fortified borders are the solution to Channel crossings.

The less heard voices include aid workers, activists, academics, and critical journalists, but the least heard are those who cross the Channel. In this chapter, we share the perspectives of 39 people who have crossed the Channel in small boats. These accounts present a completely different reality to that which is described above. Here, France is a dangerous country for people of precarious immigration status; people have no choice but to cross the Channel in small boats; Channel crossers are seeking asylum from tyranny; smugglers provide a service to cross in the absence of more desirable alternatives; and criminal justice solutions and fortified borders are the cause of small boat Channel crossings, not a means of stopping them.

The participants in this research know about the Channel borderzone. In this chapter we see the border from their perspectives.

4.1 Before the Channel

None of the people that we spoke to could isolate their experience in Northern France, and crossing the Channel, from their longer journeys. Their stories all began with the horrors of war, persecution and human rights abuses. As one of the participants, Rashid (all names have been changed) explained, everyday life in Afghanistan before his departure was impossible:

My home was near an army post and every day due to suicidal attacks on that post I used to collect human bodies and human flesh around my home. My wife and kids were scared. I used to clear the path before they saw. My boys were not even able to go to school. When they went to school, I kept worrying for them -either they would come back alive, or I had to collect their bodies. Then my father-in-law and one sister-in-law asked me to leave Afghanistan and move to another safe country. That's how my journey started.

But the journeys themselves were then also fraught with risks and fear. All of the people who participated in this research had been on long journeys. These journeys started in Sudan, in Eritrea, in Iran, and elsewhere. So when we asked them about their journeys to the UK, they did not begin from northern France, they first told us stories that in other circumstances would sound like the epic and perilous quests of heroes. They covered the treacherous Sahara Desert, forced labour in Libya, deadly borders across the Afghan-Iran border areas,

“If you are asking about the effect of these experiences on a person during such a journey, I would say you face death thousands of times along the way.”

Turkey-Greece borders, in the Balkan region, and crossing the Mediterranean.

The journeys across north Africa were the experiences that most talked about at length as the most difficult experiences that they had faced. It was here that smugglers were consistently described as a source of real and imminent violence. However, in Europe the source of imminent violence and fear was agents of the state such as border guards and police officers. Participants cited examples of pushbacks, police beatings and ad hoc forms of state sanctioned violence and impoverishment as the most dangerous aspect of their journeys through Europe.

People told us many stories of the things that they saw on their journeys which still haunt them, and of the terror experienced at different borders. Often these stories involved babies, children, and women in very difficult situations, extreme cruelty and violence, and encountering many dead bodies or seeing people die along different routes. For some, this made the Channel crossing seem much less scary. Melake, for example, said ‘for me crossing the Channel was like a piece of cake compared to my experience of the Mediterranean Sea. I was not even scared.’ For others, it was another ordeal to survive amongst many.

The UK’s border with France in and around Calais was therefore the final border in a long chain of border crossings. People had been subjected to extreme danger, and experienced the French/UK border similarly – as a place of fear and danger. Arsam articulated this succinctly:

The only reason for my journey was the presence of my family in the UK. If you are asking about the effect of these experiences on a person during such a journey, I would say you face death thousands of times along the way. You experience poverty, hunger, sleeping in forests, and witnessing how the police in most of these countries, countries that claim to uphold human rights, treat you.

This means that many people approached this border already exhausted, with a raft of traumatic experiences behind them, and the mental and physical wounds to show for them.

4.2 Experiences in northern France

In spite of the hardships already encountered earlier on their journeys, northern France was consistently described by our research participants as a place of fear and suffering. France is treated by the British state as a ‘safe third country’. The widely held assumption is that as France is a safe European state with a functioning asylum system, that this means people seeking asylum should apply in France. At the same time, the dominant account in the UK is one in which people crossing the Channel are routinely dehumanised. They are ‘breaking into Britain’, ‘swarming’ or ‘flooding’. This dehumanisation is one of the ways in which their suffering can be ignored, enabled or accelerated.

This is a misrepresentation of the reality of the asylum system in France, and the level of impoverishment and police violence that refugees in northern France face. There is decades of academic and journalistic research demonstrating the experiences of refugees in Calais and the surrounding area^{xlvii}. This research has shown again and again how refugees in northern France are forced to sleep rough, struggle to survive, experience police brutality, segregation from the settled population, lack legal advice or pathways to protection, and seeking dangerous irregular routes via which they can cross to the UK. Our research supports these findings.

According to the people that we interviewed, exhaustion is one of the main lived experiences of living in northern France and waiting to cross the Channel. All participants spoke of how the French police demolished their camps or ripped their tents on a regular basis, using exhaustion as a political tactic to wear them down and make them leave^{xlix}.

One participant said that when they returned to their camp after a police raid, the trees that they had been camping amongst had been deforested, a practice that has been reported by activists working in the areaⁱ. Sometimes these raids involved physical violence as well. As Aron explained:

This constant upheaval caused immense challenges and left us frustrated due to the discriminatory practices of the police toward migrants. Sometimes, they even forced us out of our tents during rainstorms, demonstrating a lack of sympathy for migrants in their actions. Furthermore, the French police used tear gas and struck people with batons. Consequently, some individuals ended up with disabilities.

Esey explained how in the harsh environment of Calais, with repeated failed attempts to cross the Channel, hope could dwindle

[Calais] is a dangerous place and it makes many people lose hope. Trying non-stop to cross to the UK for about 6 months was tough. But I had the determination, and I kept trying until the last day.

Survival was enabled through the support of charities who hand out food, clothing, toiletries and tents. Berhe explained:

Life in Calais was terrible, but the charitable organisations' support, including food, was good. The weather was freezing, and there was terrible wind [...] What makes this worse is that the authorities used to come and destroy our shelters when it was raining and bad weather.

The hostile environment faced by those living in Northern France is part of the French state's policy towards those seeking asylum. But these policies of police intimidation, segregation and enforced homelessness and impoverishment are also a consequence of British policy.

4.3 Experiences with smugglers

Left with no choice for safe routes to enter the UK, many people reluctantly put their trust in smugglers. Smugglers were referred to by our interviewees as agents, brokers, mediators, or facilitators. Here we will refer to them as facilitators. The most trusted sources of knowledge and information about the UK/French border in Northern France are families, friends, and facilitators. Facilitators are (cautiously) trusted for their knowledge of the border and their position as the only ones who facilitate travel to the UK. Whilst smuggling is represented as a nefarious criminal enterprise, then, the perspectives of Channel crossers present more complex view.

There is evidence of international organisations operating to facilitate journeys across the English Channel¹⁶, and that the context has become more professionalised as border infrastructure has become more sophisticated. However, those profiting most from this system are often removed from organising passage across the Channel. Given the costs of accessing a crossing on a small boat, some people needing to claim asylum pay their way by working for smuggling operations. This is a highly exploitative situation but one born out of necessity.

“We had to follow the agent only, they know how to cross the sea”

For some of our participants, trust was built through discussions with others who had been in the area for longer and had developed a trusting relationship with the facilitators. For some people this trust was built through living with the facilitators (usually fellow migrants temporarily working to fund the next part of their journey) and having long discussions with them about the journey ahead. For example, as Amir explained of his experience in Calais:

The mediator himself may be one of the guys who lives with you in Calais, maybe a Sudanese national or any other nationals who stay in Calais, he lives in the same situation as you live in Calais, who gives you full details about the means and quality of rubber boats [...] I have received information regarding when you choose the suitable time, and the weather, and the sea waves' level, which the height of waves would be 70 centimetres, so more than 70cm, the mediator won't allow you to go.

Some participants expressed a deep trust in the facilitators as the only people who could help them succeed in crossing the Channel. This extended to providing information about the UK, as Rashid explained:

I didn't know much about that but how to cross the border, but my friend told me how they cross the border, and they introduced me to the agents. They told me how the UK is better than France. They were very aware of many things. We had to follow the agent only. They know how to cross the sea and from where they will arrange a boat for us [...] Those agents helped in everything. They know about the routes and police too.

Rashid shares the fact that the agents have all of the information, and help with everything, but it did take him nine months of attempting to cross to be successful. His in-laws made the payment, and it 'was a huge amount'.

Some participants trusted the facilitators in Calais because they perceived them to be more professionalised, reliable, and less prone to violence than those on other border zones. Melake explained his experience:

Yes, they are different from the previous. When you get to Dunkirk, the agents themselves approach and ask you if you need their service [...]. You try to make a deal and would ask them if their service is guaranteed. They try to reassure you that the deal is until you get to the UK and if you decide to stop, they refund your payment. You pay first and you try as many attempts as you can until you get to the UK. They told us that they can refund our payments if we decide to stop trying for any reason. This deal was guaranteed compared to the previous one [in other borderzones].

It is important to highlight that some people also shared experiences of coercion, deception and violence by facilitators during their journeys. Facilitators in this area were not discussed in terms of human trafficking -the forced movement of people to work- but that is not to suggest that nobody has been trafficked via this route. But within the context of the Channel borderzone they were also understood as the holders of vital information, the means to facilitate a crossing, and business people providing a service.

4.4 Weighing up different routes

Decisions to travel in small boats are not taken lightly, they are based on gathering information and weighing different options. Contrary to political representations of hapless migrants being forced at gunpoint into small boats by smugglers, people discussed with us their long decision-making processes. Decisions are made based on discussions with friends, but also facilitators, who often offered multiple options for different prices.

Rashid explained how some people tried to cross the border by hiding in containers, or in lorries. But, he explained 'a lorry is way more dangerous than a small boat. Many people died because of suffocation'. The other option is to travel as a tourist on a ferry. But for Rashid this was too expensive: 'I had no other option but a small boat that I could afford. Those ships were a safe way but

too expensive for me'. The small boat, for him, was affordable but not too high a risk. Based on careful evaluation of the limited options, he knowingly decided upon this strategy, dangerous as it is.

“A lorry is way more dangerous than a small boat. Many people died because of suffocation”

Sogand told us about her failed attempt at flying to the UK from Paris with the help of a smuggler. She chose this route because of a deep fear of the small boat option: 'I was absolutely terrified of that route. I had always heard about how risky and dangerous it was, and the thought of crossing the sea in a rubber boat was extremely frightening'. After the failed attempt to travel safely in an aeroplane, she was were told by the smuggler that it could take 6 or 7 months to set things up to try again. This induced a new fear: 'it was a huge risk because I had no legal status there [in France], and even stepping outside the building was dangerous—if the police caught me, it would be a serious problem'. It was then that she decided to travel with her friend by boat, liaising with the same facilitator.

Milad had a similar level of fear of the boat route but explained that he could not afford another route and he was even more scared of the ‘truck route’ than the small boat route. ‘So, the sea was the only option left. I had no other hope’, he said. He went on, ‘these days, when I think back to that journey, I have no idea how I made it through. At any moment, you could lose your life, never see your family again, and all your hopes could be destroyed.’

4.5 Crossing the Channel

Reaching northern France exhausted, people then face the gruelling process of crossing the Channel. Everyone spoke of making multiple attempts (often 8-10) to cross and of living in precarious informal camps in extreme weather conditions and under constant pressure from the French police, for months, even years. To know this borderzone as an irregularised migrant, then, is to understand that it is formed of structural violence and an absence of human rights. Understanding this means that the greatest risks on land come not from smugglers, but from state authority representatives such as police.

In the Channel the rules are different: state authorities are the only people who might save you from drowning. Sometimes people made it into the sea but their boat capsized, sank, or ran out of oil, and they were rescued. Khan explained his experience:

water was coming into the boat at a very high speed. We were not able to stop that water from coming inside. It had its pressure and our boat had started sinking to the sea. We were almost in the water when the UK police came there. [...] that time we were scared to death. We were thinking that it was the end. We were frozen to death. I was not able to feel even my legs at all because my half body was in cold seawater.

If rescued in UK waters, the UK asylum system awaits. If rescued in French waters, you survive but you are back in a precarious situation on land.

As discussed in the previous section, the sea crossing terrified many. Hamdan explained that on his successful crossing there were sixty people who went down to the beach, but some people were so scared they went back to their camps. He said ‘they were scared of the sea and that the French police may come and rip up the boat’.

Most of this very legitimate fear related to the sea crossing, and fear of the authorities.

These two things were intertwined since the police thwarted many people’s efforts to cross in a small boat by slashing it with knives. This led to chaotic embarkations, and many near death experiences. The intensity of the memories of these experiences was evident in the details that many could recall, as though fear had heightened their senses and laid down clear memories. They volunteered the times and dates of different crossing attempts, the time of arrival in the UK, the number of people in the boat, even years after the crossing had been made.

“The risk was palpable”

“These days, when I think back to that journey, I have no idea how I made it through. At any moment, you could lose your life, never see your family again, and all your hopes could be destroyed”

Aron vividly described his multi layered fears from his time in Calais attempting to cross to the UK:

The challenges we faced were immense. The agents—often Arabs—recruited individuals like us, living in tents with little money, to act as facilitators. Our nightly attempts were relentless. However, danger lurked. Sometimes police drones tracked our movements, signalling the authorities. We spent the remaining hours of each night evading the police and their vigilant dogs. This routine persisted for several nights. Our path led us through thickets and bushes, carrying dingy plastic

boats toward the seaside. The risk was palpable—the spiky branches threatened to puncture our flimsy vessels, potentially deflating them in the middle of the treacherous sea.

Hamdan said his journey was expected to take 2.5 hours but took nine. He described his fear: ‘I swear I sat down and I thought it was over. I mean, Allah knows, I was scared. I was living in a constant state of fear. It became a normal thing.’ He went on to explain how this experience changed him: ‘When I made the first trip, I was scared and valued my life. But after that, I became numb to my own feelings.’ This experience of praying for survival, and this being a way to convey how scared people were during the journey, was common. Isaias, for example, said ‘we were scared. I always pray to God to protect me. When we went to the water, I was scared and kept praying to protect us. The water was very rough and when you enter the sea you don’t know if you will survive or not.’

Kareem described a similar experience. Their boat lost direction, the person steering the boat was clearly scared and the other passengers, panicked, were shouting at them. He said, ‘that time I saw death standing in front of me.’ As he was trying to stabilise the boat, he was reciting Quranic verses and thought to himself ‘it’s the end now. The boat front was upward towards the sky and there were so many people in the boat...’ Most people said they did not know how to swim, and those who had lifejackets had mixed experiences with them. Many people experienced boat sinkings and near drownings in the Channel. Some of these were close to the shore, some out at sea.

Subhan shared that off the coast of Dunkirk ‘when we were travelling by boat the police chased us and threw a net on us so that we couldn’t escape. They ruptured our boat with knives as well, and we were about to drown in the sea. Women and children were crying with fear, and I got injured on that trip too.’ Subhan described how the French police rescued them in one crossing attempt,

but we were badly treated by the police at that time. They were beating everyone with sticks in their hands and were shouting at us and arrested a few. But I was left due to my injury. I was bleeding badly at that time. I had a bruised eye, and my hand was bleeding due to that strike.

4.6 Hope against the odds

All of the participants were traveling, they explained, for survival. They felt they had no other choice, though they did make strategic decisions within a constrained set of choices (for example deciding against other modes of travel or other routes). And underlying this quest to survive was a hope—mainly of safety, of security, and peace. The will to survive was explained by Habtay:

all the borders I crossed from Eritrea, to Sudan, to Turkey, to Greece, Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, Croatia, Italy, France, Belgium, and the UK are guarded by human and technological power. And some of the treatments in the border areas are cruel; but I can tell you even if they put fire in these borders, migrants who are escaping persecution will not be deterred. [...] For example, I and many other Eritreans had to cross border areas which were infested with landmines and took the lives of many. This shows you that refugees who escape danger won’t be stopped from crossing these highly guarded borders as long as they are alive. What I want to tell you is that those governments who try to control the borders should try to understand this fact of life of refugees.

**“I had the
determination, and
I kept trying until
the last day”**

In spite of borders people will move, it is a ‘fact of life of refugees’. Across the experiences shared with us we found a complex interaction between hope, which invokes a more active aspiration for an imagined future life, and survival, which invokes necessary endurance of hardship which continues even in moments where hope is dwindling.

5. The border security economy

‘Stopping the boats’ or ‘smashing the gangs’ is not a strategy implemented by a single arm of government. These policies are designed to be delivered by multiple agencies and hundreds of contracted services provided by private businesses and enterprises. Behind almost every piece of infrastructure, every form of surveillance, and even behind every rescue and processing of people who cross the Channel by small boat, there are private companies working to win contracts, implement policy and accrue profits. These state investments on bordering seem not to ultimately pay off, since small boat Channel crossings continue, yet the border security economy receives very little scrutiny in comparison to other aspects of the Channel border dynamic.

The outsourcing of border control is linked to wider political dynamics. The logic of neoliberalism has led to the privatisation and marketisation of many aspects of UK state infrastructure and public services. As anti-immigrationism and far right nationalism is further mainstreamed in British politics, and as right wing and centrist politicians call for more border control, more detention, more deportation, they are simultaneously expanding these border markets and distributing profits to corporations and private shareholders.

This is not something that is unique to the Channel borderzone. In response to the movement of people, border security is becoming big-business globally. Tech companies, arms firms, and private security contractors promise to facilitate control over international borders. Globally this market is projected to grow from US\$377 billion in 2023 to US\$ 679 billion by 2032ⁱⁱⁱ. Driven by rising anti-immigration politics, business is booming for companies involved in border-security markets in Europe and beyond. Many of the larger companies are involved in multiple borderzones globally, and some of the defence contractors are also implicated in the conflict zones where future displaced people and border-crossers come fromⁱⁱⁱⁱ. In other words, both war and the refugees produced by them are a business opportunity for companies around the world.

As part of our research project, we set out to build a deeper understanding of the scale of private sector involvement in bordering the Channel. The Parliamentary Research Office has noted the difficulty of tracking the amounts of money given to the French government in numerous deals they are not consistently and transparently reported^{liv}. We have had a similar experience in researching contracts with private companies. Contracts are not made easily accessible for public scrutiny and agreements are sometimes heavily redacted by the Home Office. We have trawled through databases which are designed for private companies to identify tender and contract opportunities, searching for the types of contracts that we are looking for^{lv}.

5.1 Where does government money go?

In order to scan the Channel to look out for boats crossing the Channel, an array of surveillance architecture and technology is employed. This includes sentry towers, maritime patrols, CCTV cameras, satellite-surveillance powered by artificial intelligence, aerial drones, and scanners equipped with heat-sensor technology. The more mundane pieces of infrastructure such as walls and fences also require contracts to be set up to see them installed (such as the 65km ‘Great Wall of Calais’^{lvi}). Once people have arrived, reception centres and detention facilities are established and built through tendering processes. All of this also requires manpower: security guards patrolling the perimeters of lorry parks, ferry ports and detention facilities, health workers, drivers and administrators processing each individual who is intercepted and brought to shore.

Of course, this border infrastructure goes beyond the Channel borderzone, reaching into the UK on a scale that we have not yet fully mapped out. It also goes beyond this county. Since 1998 the British state has provided France with £1.1 billion and a further commitment of £464 million to be spent between 2023-26 strengthening border security^{lvii}. It is likely

that the French state is also subcontracting to private companies to secure the UK border in France, as it has done in the past^{lviii}. In short, we are only just beginning to understand the scale of government spending on private sector contracts in this space. Indeed, one of the objectives of the new Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill is to establish a legal basis for the £150m ‘Border Security Command’ which intends to ‘unlock sophisticated new technology’ to track and intervene in the so called ‘smuggling gangs’ –whose routes are paradoxically made more profitable through border restrictions^{lix}.

Table 1: Top Five Sectors

1	Maritime: Selling boats and conducting boat maintenance
2	IT: Hardware and software for IT systems
3	Security: A wide variety of security operations from escorting to fitting CCTV cameras
4	Transport: Primarily transporting Border Force staff between France and the UK, but also transporting people who are being detained or deported
5	Defense: Mainly selling drones and other high-tech surveillance and tracking equipment

5.2 Profiting from small boat Channel crossings

Let us briefly delve into some examples of firms who are making significant profits from the securitisation of the English Channel. Mitie Group PLC is a company headquartered in London which is involved in supplying the UK government with infrastructure, facilities management, energy and healthcare. With revenue of over 4.5 billion in the UK and

operating income of £210 million, Mitie have become a fixture in tendering processes to secure government contracts for public sector work. Since 2016 Mitie has run holding facilities in transit terminals in northern France. In 2018 they secured £514 million to escort detained asylum seekers between holding facilities in both ‘overseas’ and the UK. In 2022 they won a £53 million contract to run the infamous Manston reception centre in Kent, subsequently extended to 2024. In Early 2025 the Home Office began advertising a £700 million contract for the management of Manston and the western jetfoil in Dover where people disembark from Border Force boats.

Technology firms such as Fujitsu and IBM play a large part in delivering and upgrading borders. Together they have secured £55 million for biometric services to track suspicious people who may be attempting to make illegal entry into the UK.

Construction firm Galliford Try benefitted from contracts worth £172 million in 2024 for the reconstruction of two detention facilities which were to be reopened for the detention of people as part of the now scrapped Rwanda plan. In this way, companies not obviously connected to the ‘border security’ industry benefit from the business of bordering.

Border security in the Channel border zone is also entrusted to defence companies whose primary industry is the manufacturing of arms and weaponry. The Israeli arms company Elbit systems, which has boasted in the past of having ‘battle-proven’ its technology in Gaza, has also received £1 million from the Home Office for drone technology^{lx}. The Portuguese company Tekever has received an open contract for up to £1 billion from the UK Home Office for drones and maritime surveillance. Britain’s BAE systems, the UK’s largest manufacturing firm, and a defence contractor with a revenue of over £26 billion in 2024, has also won contracts for border security. They received £38 million for developing a ‘risk assessment’ system to identify threats and risks along passenger and freight routes such as the transit points in Dover. These larger corporations are equally backed financially by a global web of asset management, private investment and insurance companies who pour billions into the security, arms and border industry^{lxi}.

Table 2: The Ten largest contracts

Year	Company	Detail	Amount
2020-2022	Tekever Ltd	Maritime patrol aircrafts: for a UAV Managed Service to enhance maritime awareness	£1,000,000,000
2018-2028	Mitie Care and Custody Limited	In-country and overseas escorting operation and management of short term holding facilities	£514,200,000
2020	Serco	Tinsley House Detention Centre & Brookhouse Removal Centre	£276,600,000
2005-2019	Serco	Fixed Radiation Detection Systems	£149,300,000
2023	Entrust Corporation	Identity verification technology	£109,300,000
2024	Galliford Try Construction Limited	Haslar removal facility (reconstruction) [one of two detention facilities reopened, linked to the detainment of people before they are sent to Rwanda]	£102,000,000
2018-2028	Leidos	Biometrics and fingerprinting	£96,395,438
2016	UNDISCLOSED	Freight Searching, searching of persons, detention and escorting services in Northern France	£80,000,000
2024	Galliford Try Construction Limited	Campsfield removal facility (reconstruction) [one of two detention facilities reopened, linked to the detainment of people before they are sent to Rwanda]	£70,036,749
2023	IBM United Kingdom	Biometric matcher platform	£65,659,748

One of the striking things is the diversity of border contracts. Not only in terms of the sectors and activities, but also the size of companies. While the large multinationals mentioned above are notable, so too are the plethora of contracts for things like coach travel, sniffer dogs, marquees, catering, vessel servicing, and storage containers. For example, between 2020 and 2024 the Kings Ferry coach company received £2.7 million for coach services for Border Force. In 2022 Wagtail UK received £23.4 million for the provision of sniffer dogs that can find humans. In 2023 Speedy Asset Services Limited received £7.7 million for marquees as temporary accommodation during screening processes. These and many more, some as little as £6000 (for custody suite bedding) paint a picture of a border security economy which profits from the capture and control of people who wish to seek asylum.

Our research is certainly an under-estimation of government spending in this area. For example, that £1 billion Tekever contract mentioned earlier was renewed, but the cost of this renewal was redacted from published tendering documents. It has also been reported that the US military contractor Anduril has installed a sentry watchtower at the Dover Maritime Rescue and Coordination Centre overlooking the Channel on a contract of £16.1million^{lxii}.

5.3 A manufactured crisis, a profitable fix?

Like smuggling, this is a business opportunity which is created by, and depends upon, the ongoing failure of borders to 'work' to stop irregular migration. Borders actually do the opposite, they produce irregular migration^{lxiii}. This creates business for smugglers and border security companies alike. The fact that decades of research has found that border securitisation does not work is perhaps not a negative for companies, nor is the broader inequality and the politics of anti-immigration^{lxiv}. In fact, it holds the promise of decades of lucrative contracts ahead. In this sense borders do work -to bolster the political aspirations of anti-refugee politicians, and to offer business opportunities for companies who in the end benefit from their rhetoric.



6. What are the policy options?

6.1 Approaching the alternatives

At the start of this section it is worth re-emphasising some key points we have addressed above: the Channel Crossings phenomenon is not one primarily characterised by ‘criminality’. The ‘problem’, as such is not one merely of arrival, nor can it be treated in isolation as a UK problem. For all the complexity outlined in previous sections, the Channel Crossings phenomenon is not one which can somehow be addressed in through harsh punishments such as offshore detention, law and order solutions targeting smugglers, nor technocratic solutions to tweak the asylum system.

Push factors are important, and the UK (as well as other European states) play both direct and indirect roles in instigating situations of forced displacement through foreign policy, military interventions and arms sales. But there is no single ‘solution’ to population displacement, or forced and irregular migration.

The current terms of the debate on immigration in the UK are highly constrained and characterised by crisis language and far right responses. What is thought of as ‘realistic’ has become limited to a consensus around the need for tight border controls, with some selective admission of a small number of refugees. We hear a lot about irregular migration as a security problem, as a cultural threat, a biological threat, and the solutions proposed are then centred on security, criminalisation and dehumanisation.

What is needed is a sustainable response over the long-term that accepts migration (including for asylum) as a feature of the human world. That is, a feature that cannot be solved, fixed, policed, fenced-off, detained, or deported away, once and for all.

Various different organisations from across the political spectrum have proposed alternative policy responses to the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon. This has ranged from proposing that the UK withdraws from all international human rights conventions and places all people seeking asylum on offshore islands, to proposing opening up new humanitarian visa schemes, and the expansion of safe and legal routes.

In this chapter we do not advocate for a single policy approach. Instead, we work through several ways of approaching the challenge of small boat Channel crossings. We explore both their potential to address the challenge, and their limitations. Our central guiding principle is that any response should have human dignity at its heart, and should approach people on the move as rights holding human beings who are deserving of equal respect vis a vis French or British citizens. In light of this we do not work through policies which would strip people of their human rights or deport them to a third country against their will.

The aim of this chapter is to push our thinking in terms of what is possible, and what might be imagined in responding to the situation unfolding at this particular borderzone. We explore six ideas which take a different direction to the current terms of debate, which we discussed at workshops with different stakeholder communities in 2024 and 2025. Our aim is not to persuade different stakeholders to agree with any one of these positions, but to open up space to think in different ways.

Option 1: The liberal humanitarian response

Framing the problem

Channel crossings are caused by a lack of safe and legal routes. There are many people who have strong grounds for refugee status who cannot travel safely to the UK in order to gain protection. Because they cannot travel via safe routes, they take risky journeys.

The policy package

There should be more safe and legal routes for refugees to travel to the UK to receive protection. From the liberal humanitarian perspective safe and legal routes tend to fall into three categories:

- a) Resettlement schemes, mainly from countries or regions of origin
- b) Humanitarian visas either for people in Northern France or people in conflict zones to travel to the UK
- c) Mechanisms for family reunion from any location, including Northern France, for people to reunite with family members who are already in the UK

Currently resettlement schemes only capture smaller numbers of people based upon vulnerability criteria; UNHCR identifies individuals who are then referred to countries running resettlement schemes. A policy option would be to run a resettlement scheme in the UK attached to a broad enough criteria to capture those who might otherwise arrive irregularly. They are resettled directly (arriving by plane) to the UK.

Alongside this lottery type system, another option is a quota based humanitarian or refugee visa whereby particular nationalities from known refugee origin countries can obtain a pass to travel directly to the UK.

Many people are trying to cross the Channel because they have family or friends in the UK who they plan to reunite with. Specific schemes through which they can do this should also be expanded.

Strengths

The strengths of this type of response lie in increasing the number of people who can access protection in the UK (without first needing to travel to the UK to make an asylum application). This will strengthen the UK's reputation on the world stage by demonstrating its willingness to adhere to international law and participate in 'responsibility sharing'.

Limitations

The main limitation of expanding safe and legal routes as a means of addressing the Channel crossings problem is when those routes are from regions of origin directly to the UK.

Resettlement schemes have become a small but important part of the international refugee system. Humanitarian or refugee visas are less commonly offered to people already in Europe. Because they involve selecting people from a larger pool of people outside of Europe, there is no evidence that they have any impact on the numbers of people who travel irregularly to apply for asylum. Depending on where any humanitarian visa scheme would intervene, they may not impact people who are already in Northern France and those who are planning to travel to the UK irregularly and so cannot necessarily be understood as a solution to small boat Channel crossings.

This does not mean that resettlement schemes or refugee visas should not be expanded or introduced, certainly they should. But in expanding them we would be addressing a related but separate issue -playing more of a role in the broader global refugee context, rather than solving the Channel crossings phenomenon specifically.

Resettlement can only have a real impact on Channel crossings when it is directly from Northern France, or the EU more broadly. However, and conversely, if resettlement was opened up from

Northern France, then more people would be attracted there as a hub for accessing resettlement. Not all would be granted resettlement and so the Channel crossings phenomenon would continue.

There is also a risk that in portraying resettlement as 'humanitarian', we hide the geopolitical contexts by which refugees are made subjects of the UK's humanitarian responses. This can obscure the role of Britain in displacement producing contexts.

Irrespective of the type of resettlement scheme, creating a group of people who will be protected always entails the production of an excluded group who will not be helped. This creates a new hierarchy of the deserving where the existence of some 'safe and legal routes' offers rhetorical resources to politicians to criminalise other modes of entry to the UK. Amongst those who are selected, resettlement schemes are often based on imaginaries of essentialised vulnerability, victimhood and the passiveness of refugees. This undermines the imperative to ensure human dignity.



Option 2: The push factor response

Framing the problem

Irregular migration, including for asylum, is fundamentally caused by political and economic push factors. These can be divided into push factors including poverty and a lack of job opportunities, the destruction of subsistence agriculture, the expansion of informal labour, land grabbing; and factors including war, genocide, generalised violence, state failure, and human rights abuses. What might be termed ‘political’ and ‘economic’ factors are often in reality highly related to each other.

The policy package

In order to stop people making dangerous journeys, domestic and foreign policy could be focussed on creating more equitable development in origin countries - removing push factors. Economically, this has tended to be framed in terms of development aid, economic investment, and projects focussed on youth education and employment. But it could include more radical interventions which may reduce out-migration: debt relief, reparations for historical injustices, and a planned transformation of the world economy with the aim of equality for all and an emphasis on economic sovereignty. Any real commitment to development would need to involve a major rethink of the UK’s current aid and development policies which are guided by the extent that UK firms and economy benefit from aid and development spending - including limiting migration. Equally, this would need to end the UK’s role in supporting the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) system which gives powers for corporations to sue states. This would involve rejecting ISDS in new and replacement trade deals and removal of ISDS in existing investment deals.

Political push factors tend to be less discussed by British governments and political parties. But such actions would include: the banning of arms sales from the UK into conflict zones; the scaling down and ending the role of arms manufacturing in the UK economy; minimal UK military intervention in situations of armed conflict or potential conflict; a focus on diplomacy and conflict resolution in emerging conflict situations, ending diplomatic support for authoritarian and oppressive regimes, specifically Israel and Saudi Arabia, and ending the relationship between arms companies and the UK state and foreign office.

Strengths

Regarding political interventions, research studies consistently find violent conflict to be the single biggest predictor of refugee migration. This is true of studies of single countries, all European states, and in all parts of the world^{lxv}. The types of regime and violent conflict that cause refugee flight are well documented. Genocide, political violence and civil war, especially civil wars that involve foreign military intervention and inter-state war account for the vast majority of refugee migration. Persistent conflicts lasting many years create more refugees. Interventions such as stopping arms sales, ceasing military interventions, and focussing on securing peace, the UK could, over the long term, contribute to reducing displacement.

Limitations

Regarding economic interventions, decades of research has found that poverty may not always be identified as an immediate cause of refugee displacement. Impoverishment and underdevelopment do not alone explain displacement in the absence of violent conflict, famine, starvation and climate change induced crisis^{lxvi}. The evidence suggests that asylum seekers primarily flee from persecution, not from poverty per se and that violent conflict causes refugee migration regardless of a country’s wealth.

However, this does not mean that economics has no relationship to refugee displacement and mobility. Studies of poverty and asylum tend to work at the level of analysis of countries GDP and the relationship between poverty rates and migration. They do not take into account how mainstream approaches to development rely upon facilitating access to resources for multi-national corporations, and how the actions of corporations are often in conflict with the needs of local people^{lxvii}. Development within a global system of unequal corporate power and a fixation on ‘growth’ without social justice can lead to displacement, such as through agricultural land grabbing, mining projects, deforestation. This necessitates a rethink of how development is linked to migration.

It is important then to recognise that economic factors work as a catalyst for refugee flight since survival strategies are limited and projects of 'development' can also cause displacement. Equally, the conditions for conflict are shaped by economic factors and the wider structures of global capitalism. This should be born in mind, alongside the reality that no one factor shapes the need to cross international borders to claim asylum and that peoples journeys to safety and refugee often taken years, even decades. This corroborates the more complex 'asylum-migration nexus' theory of forced migration. Equally, when refugees are moving to seek refuge, they are also shaped by considerations of survival and where opportunities are for material survival. In an unequal world, perceptions of wealthier countries and access to better paid jobs are likely to also determine movement. Nevertheless, most refugees flee to neighbouring countries in the developing world, rather than directly to the global north.

The evidence on the relationship between economic development and migration under conditions of global inequality is also mixed. Some research finds that development increases out migration, while other studies find that it has little effect. Overall, this means that development aid focussed interventions are likely to have a more marginal impact on Channel crossings than foreign policy interventions.

Changes in foreign policy which mean that people do not feel forced to leave their country of origin are long term and will not have immediate impacts on irregular migration across the Channel. Equally, some people will always continue to move, and removing push factors does not address the barriers (such as visa restrictions) that limit their ability to move legally and regularly.

Option 3: The budget shifting response

Framing the problem

Bordering produces small boat Channel crossings and debordering must therefore be part of the solution. The UK government is spending billions of pounds on bordering. Not insignificant funds are being transferred to private companies who deliver border security on behalf of the UK government. This includes contracts for biometric and software infrastructure, drones, boats, fencing, lorry security including x-ray machines and CO2 detectors, warehousing, processing, dogs, equipment such as night vision goggles, detention, and transportation.

Not only is this infrastructure very expensive, it does not succeed in stopping irregularised migration into the UK.

The policy package

Spending on border security must be dramatically reduced in order to stop dangerous journeys. Shrinking the architecture of border security will free up a large budget which can be spent on other measures which are centred on human dignity.

This budget shifting response therefore entails moving budget allocated to part or all of this border security apparatus, and reallocating it to other activities which could better secure human dignity, safety and livability. These activities might include such things as:

- Humanitarian support in northern France including legal advice, clean and safe accommodation, clean drinking water and food
- Safe and suitable accommodation in the UK
- An expanded budget for UK local authorities to extend services to appropriately support all communities, including new arrivals
- Settlement and integration schemes in the UK such as English language classes and support accessing benefits and employment
- Anti-racist campaigns to encourage a culture of welcome and inclusion.

This could be done gradually over time to shift from a security and exclusion centred logic, to a dignity centred logic; from security focussed spending to dignity focussed spending.

Strengths

A key strength here should be the cost saving, and the ability to invest in services within the UK. Spending money on communities and services in the UK benefits all residents.

With funds invested in public sector services within the UK, rather than transnational corporations which take profits out of the country, the benefit to the UK economy will be enhanced. There are strong precedents to bear out the positive impact on economic growth of this approach.

This approach takes budgetary responsibility out of the hands of the Home Office, which centres border security and criminality, and invests it into other government departments which centre population level support and flourishing.

Limitations

Defunding border security and reinvesting in activities that support people will not straightforwardly lead to less irregular migration. It seems likely that people will take (relatively) safer routes than small boat crossings, but without changes to the border and immigration regime, the crossings will continue.

Option 4: The shifting borders response

Framing the problem

The problem is the border, and border controls, rather than irregular migration. Any genuine solutions to irregular Channel crossings must therefore focus on solving the problem of the border, understood as the barrier at the edge of the territory.

The policy package

As the highly fortified border is what produces the small boat Channel crossings problem, any policy response must involve breaking down the border. Opening the border, moving the border, loosening the filtration system, or allowing easier flows across it must be central to the response. This will remove demand for smuggling services, and slow or stop small boat Channel crossings.

This could include one or more of the following:

- Allow the UNHCR to operate in northern France. They could assess and determine asylum claims, or provide legal advice to apply for refugee status in the UK or France, and appropriate support while people are waiting for a decision. The UK and France would each take an annual percentage quota of the share granted refugee status.
- Allow those who present themselves at the border as intending to apply for asylum to pass through to the UK to do so. This was the policy for Ukrainians and it prevented people finding themselves stranded at the border.
- Abolish carrier sanctions for human transportation at the UK/French border.
- Move the UK border back on to UK soil so that people can cross on ferries and present themselves to apply for asylum while on UK soil.
- The UK join Schengen, thus opening the border to all forms of mobility

Border controls which target the movement of goods (for example legal and illegal drugs, weapons, food) and livestock would be maintained. Controls on the movement of capital are minimal, so they would not necessarily be impacted.

Strengths

The strengths of this approach lie in it facilitating safe and legal travel for all who need it. Shifting the border would limit demand for smuggling, thus destroying the business model of smugglers, and would stop irregular Channel crossings.

Limitations

While shifting or opening the border would have a range of benefits, including stopping small boat crossings, without investment in support mechanisms for arrivals, their situation will not be straightforward. This approach cannot work without the inclusion of other responses, such as defunding in border security and investment in other areas of public provision, as well as the opening up of means of regularising one's status (into the asylum system or another status) upon arrival.

Option 5: The debordering response

Framing the problem

The problem is the border, and border controls, rather than irregular migration. Any solutions must therefore focus on solving the problem of the border, understood in an expansive and deterritorialised way.

This would include addressing police violence and the ‘no point of fixation policy’ in northern France, the whole architecture of border controls in and around Calais, and carrier sanctions. The UK legal and policy context, including key legislation that has limited access to refugee rights, and the hostile environment agenda are part of the problem too.

This extends into the private sector delivery of border security, including those aspects mentioned in Option 3 in France, and similarly profitable services delivered on UK territory. That is, including, but not limited to, the asylum support and housing system, immigration detention and deportation.

The policy package

As the problem is the border, understood in an expansive sense, the solution is debordering. This would combine aspects from Options 3 and 4, and go further. For example:

- Abolishing many of the laws introduced since 2002 which have sought to limit the rights of people seeking asylum in the UK
- Abolishing the hostile environment policy agenda
- Removing carrier sanctions
- Disinvesting from border security in northern France, and using the money to support and promote dignity and flourishing of all communities resident in the UK
- This may mean an improved asylum system, or it may mean the replacement of the asylum system with a system of support for newly arrived people of different backgrounds, irrespective of entitlements under asylum rules or norms.
- Emphasising the principle of both a right to stay and a right to move.

The agenda would need to transform how we think and talk about migration, the migrant/citizen divide, and hierarchies of deservingness in which some nationalities are welcome and others are seen as a threat.

In line with a border abolitionist perspective, the gradual dismantling of the border regime should be accompanied by the simultaneous rebuilding of alternative spaces -of protection, dignity and community for the wellbeing of all.

As with Option 4, border controls which target the movement of goods (for example legal and illegal drugs, weapons, food) and livestock would be maintained. Controls on the movement of capital are minimal, and might need to be increased in order to control tax evasion and extreme concentrations of wealth which disadvantage the majority and undermine population flourishing.

Strengths

The strengths of this approach lie in it being the only sustainable way to destroy the business model of smugglers and the phenomenon of dangerous irregular Channel crossings.

The benefits would be felt by a broader community, including many citizens who suffer and are disadvantaged by the immigration regime and the hostile environment policy agenda.

Limitations

This option is limited by the current terms of discussion on immigration in the UK, the political consensus on the need for securitised border controls, and our ability to imagine beyond this status quo. The strength of the far right means that violence and disorder would be likely should such an approach be proposed. Its main limitation is that it feels impossible in the present moment.



Option 6: The climate centred response

Framing the problem

Currently, people who are environmentally displaced, or people fleeing conflicts in which environmental degradation has an exacerbating effect, have even fewer rights than those displaced by war and persecution and are met with closed borders. Population displacement and climate change are interrelated global challenges of the human world that must be understood and addressed together.

The policy package

Since climate change will increase population displacement, exacerbating current challenges, we need to go beyond border policy and focus on global climate policy. In the climate change policy space we need to go beyond net zero. The UK must become a world leader in climate change reversal. In the bordering space we need to defund the border, abolish the border, and combine this with defunding fossil fuels. A reparative politics of climate change will involve significant transfers of wealth from wealthier countries to those where population displacement is most likely to occur. It would also include rights of mobility and settlement in territories less impacted by climate change.

Strengths

Addressing the intersecting global challenges of climate change and bordering are absolutely necessary in order to ensure human dignity into the future.

The strengths of this approach lie in addressing what are going to become, over the next century, some of the primary conditions of human displacement. That is, at the point of origin, and (through debordering) in the search for sanctuary.

Limitations

This approach cannot stop climate change, as it is a process which is already set in motion. In this sense, the UK becoming a leading state in climate change reversal will not stop people from travelling, and some of those routes taken, without international collaboration, will be dangerous.

Questions to think with

In a context where the current terms of debate on asylum and immigration policy are highly constrained, the aim of this chapter is to contribute to the conversation and the space of ideas.

We can see how limited the public discussion is via the mainstream media. But people who work in NGOs and community groups have told us that they have little space to imagine beyond the current terms of the debate because they are so busy fire-fighting the immediate needs of people, and challenging the seemingly relentless pace of new legislation in this area. Each new piece of legislation seems more illiberal than the last. And communities are picking up the pieces.

Here, then, are some questions to think with:

- Which option most aligned with how you, your party or your organisation thinks about the Channel crossings phenomenon?
- How and why did you arrive at this position?
- Have any of the options made you reconsider your position?
- If proposals that feel 'politically reasonable' to express cannot address Channel crossings or the challenges facing most people who are looking to make an asylum claim in the UK, are there ways in which they are still worth fighting for?
- What political changes do we need to see to resist anti-immigrationism being central to mainstream political projects?
- How do we build collective movements or solidarities to reduce the salience of anti-immigration politics, and which connect more broadly to social and racial justice?

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Notes

