

## PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NATIONAL SOCIETIES

# British Red Cross response to young migrants in Calais, France

### Debbie Busler

Debbie Busler is Head of Refugee Support (East), a member of the British Red Cross Psychosocial Support Team, and a senior member of the British Red Cross Refugee Support team that responded in Calais.

### Abstract

*In 2016, thousands of young migrants were stranded in Calais, France, in the “Jungle” refugee camp. This paper aims to provide an overview of the British Red Cross’s response and of how the organization engaged in numerous activities to secure their safety, culminating in a transfer of children to the United Kingdom.*

**Keywords:** Calais, crisis, Dublin, Dubs Amendment, emergency deployment, Jungle, migrants, psychosocial support, refugees, reunification, separated children, unaccompanied minors.



The British Red Cross provides a range of services to asylum-seekers and refugees across the UK. Most services are delivered directly in the UK, but the Refugee Support team also engages with other National Societies and European partners to try to ensure security and safety for those on the migratory trail. The core aims of the Refugee Support and Restoring Family Links Division are to reduce destitution and exploitation, restore family links and facilitate reunion, challenge stigma and build inclusion, ensure protection, and empower people to make positive decisions in order to regain control of their lives. This work is carried out through individual casework and group work provided by staff and volunteers, often in settings where service users can arrive without an appointment to access services. As part of its efforts towards restoring family links, the British Red Cross offers family reunion services. This includes support

from qualified caseworkers to apply for visas, and travel assistance to pay for flights for those granted permission to join a sponsoring family member in the UK.<sup>1</sup>

In this respect, in the autumn of 2016, efforts were made to support young migrants trying to reach the UK who were stuck in Calais, France. Over a period of several months, actions were intensified and culminated in the transfer of many young people.

The “Jungle”, the unofficial refugee camp in Calais, France, has been in and out of use since 1999. Most recently, migrants returned to northern France in January 2015, seeking a staging ground for getting to the UK. By the summer of 2016, there were more than 1,000 children and young people<sup>2</sup> living in the “Jungle”, with approximately 90% of those children being unaccompanied. Most were waiting for an opportunity to make dangerous attempts to get to the UK, and many of them tried repeatedly. The British Red Cross supported young people who were granted permission to move from France to the UK by the respective governments of those countries.

Many of the children who were stuck in Calais qualified for family reunification under the Dublin III regulation.<sup>3</sup> They had family members in the UK who were willing to provide care and support, but the practical mechanisms of using this legal route were not established, leaving the children stranded. Since the summer of 2015, the British Red Cross, government officials and other relevant organizations – principally the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – had been holding discussions in an effort to come up with solutions to a range of issues related to migration, including a way to safely facilitate the transfer of these children to the UK using the Dublin Regulation as safely and efficiently as possible.

The justification for bringing the young people to the UK was primarily on humanitarian grounds, but included legal recourse through the Dublin Regulation and the Dubs Amendment.<sup>4</sup> The Dublin Regulation is a European framework that defines which State takes responsibility for assessing an asylum claim; this is usually meant to be the first State that a person has entered. However, if a close family member of the asylum-seeker is already in a particular European Union member State (even as an asylum-seeker), that country becomes responsible for evaluating the asylum claim of the family member.<sup>5</sup> A number of children in

1 See British Red Cross, “Refugee Support”, available at: [www.redcross.org.uk/What-we-do/Refugee-support](http://www.redcross.org.uk/What-we-do/Refugee-support) (all internet references were accessed in August 2017).

2 See Help Refugees, “How Many More? September Census Results”, 19 September 2016, available at: [www.facebook.com/HelpRefugeesUK/posts/306615809699099](http://www.facebook.com/HelpRefugeesUK/posts/306615809699099).

3 Regulation No. 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing the Criteria and Mechanisms for Determining the Member State Responsible for Examining an Application for International Protection Lodged in one of the Member States by a Third-Country National or a Stateless Person (Recast), *Official Journal of the European Union*, 26 June 2013, available at: [eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:EN:PDF](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:EN:PDF).

4 British Red Cross, “The ‘Dubs Amendment’ and the ‘Dublin Regulation’ Explained”, available at: [www.redcross.org.uk/en/About-us/Advocacy/Refugees/Family-reunion/The-Dubs-Amendment-and-the-Dublin-Regulation-explained](http://www.redcross.org.uk/en/About-us/Advocacy/Refugees/Family-reunion/The-Dubs-Amendment-and-the-Dublin-Regulation-explained).

5 Refugee Council, “The ‘Dublin’ Regulation and Family Unity”, policy briefing, November 2015, available at: [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/6143/Nov15\\_Dublin\\_III.pdf](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/6143/Nov15_Dublin_III.pdf).

Calais had family members in the UK, which qualified them to have their claims assessed by the British government under the Dublin Regulation. In August 2016, Safe Passage<sup>6</sup> counted 170 children living in the “Jungle” who had the right to join family members in the UK.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, no bureaucratic processes had been put in place by either the French or British governments to facilitate the transfer of cases to the UK. The British government, at first, considered the problem to be a French one, while France was reluctant to put in place centrally prescribed measures to break the impasse.

The other relevant legal instrument was the Dubs Amendment, an amendment to the 2016 Immigration Act<sup>8</sup> tabled by Lord Alf Dubs, and now Section 67 of the Act.<sup>9</sup> Lord Dubs was himself a child refugee, saved from the Nazis by the Kindertransport during the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> He introduced the Dubs Amendment in an attempt to bring children living in northern France to safety in the UK, particularly those who did not have family in the UK and therefore could not benefit from the Dublin scheme. The UK government interpreted the Dubs Amendment as applying to children who entered Europe on or before 20 March 2016 and did not have family links to the UK. In the summer of 2016, there were at least 200 children in the “Jungle” who qualified to be transferred under the Dubs Amendment.<sup>11</sup> It was widely understood that approximately 3,000 children would be moved to the UK from across Europe under Dublin and Dubs over time, though the legislation omitted a firm number.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the scheme was abruptly ended after 200 children from France were transferred, with allocations for Greece and Italy still pending in summer 2017.<sup>13</sup>

## British Red Cross involvement in securing children’s safety before the close of the camp

The British Red Cross continually offered its assistance to the UK Home Office to transfer children from Calais to the UK as quickly and as safely as possible. The

6 See the official webpage of Safe Passage, available at: [safepassage.org.uk](http://safepassage.org.uk).

7 British Red Cross, *No Place for Children*, report, 2016, p. 2, available at: [www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/What%20we%20do/Refugee%20support/No%20place%20for%20children.pdf](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/What%20we%20do/Refugee%20support/No%20place%20for%20children.pdf).

8 See Immigration Act 2016, 12 May 2016, Chapter 19, available at: [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/contents/enacted/data.htm](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/contents/enacted/data.htm).

9 See Section 67, relating to relocation of and support for unaccompanied refugee children, available at: [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/section/67/enacted](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/section/67/enacted).

10 Read more on Lord Alf Dubs in *The Guardian*, available at: [www.theguardian.com/profile/alf-dubs](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/alf-dubs).

11 British Red Cross, above note 7, p. 3.

12 Lizzie Dearden, “Government Plan to Resettle up to 3,000 Refugee Children ‘Not Good Enough’, Say MPs and Charities”, *The Independent*, 21 April 2016, available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/government-plan-to-resettle-up-to-3000-refugee-children-not-good-enough-say-mps-and-charities-a6994551.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/government-plan-to-resettle-up-to-3000-refugee-children-not-good-enough-say-mps-and-charities-a6994551.html).

13 Tom Peck, “Government Backtracks on Pledge to Take Child Refugees”, *The Independent*, 8 February 2017, available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/only-350-syrian-refugee-children-will-be-allowed-to-settle-in-britain-thousands-less-than-promised-a7569691.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/only-350-syrian-refugee-children-will-be-allowed-to-settle-in-britain-thousands-less-than-promised-a7569691.html).

National Society also had conversations with various actors (central and local government, partners in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and other voluntary groups) to see how the situation could be progressed, including scoping visits to see how support could be offered.

In December 2015, a joint British and French Red Cross mission was undertaken to distribute humanitarian relief to those living in the camps. Tents, sleeping bags and other articles to make the living conditions a bit more bearable were distributed to residents.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the winter of 2015 and into the spring of 2016, the numbers living in the camp only grew, but without a clear escape route to the UK other than the dangerous attempts to stow away in lorries. Voluntary organizations were spontaneously organized by both UK and French citizens to support those living there, offering a range of services, but these were completely independent of the government. As spring turned into summer and there was no progress through the official channels, the British Red Cross used various other methods to try to move the situation along. Meanwhile, the French Red Cross continued some outreach work. The discussions with government officials continued, but the National Society decided to publish an advocacy report about the issues, as well as offering support to a smaller organization attempting to open up safe and legal routes of migration.<sup>15</sup>

### The *No Place for Children* report

Following research, interviews and a scoping visit, the British Red Cross released a report entitled *No Place for Children* on 9 October 2016. This document examined the situation in northern France and highlighted the plight of the many children stranded there.<sup>16</sup> The report made an immediate impact, was covered widely in the media and was referenced in a parliamentary debate featuring the UK home secretary.<sup>17</sup> It described the process that children who qualified under Dublin III were meant to use, but which had failed them for months on end.<sup>18</sup> For example, there was a severe lack of information in an age- and language-appropriate format to explain what options children had, and a dearth of staff to implement any of the processes needed to facilitate transfers. Children lacked safe accommodation and the most basic resources, and government agencies on both sides of the Channel were not prioritizing them, despite their vulnerabilities. As

14 British Red Cross, “Red Cross Helps Refugees and Migrants in France”, 23 December 2015, available at: [www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/News/2015/December/Red-Cross-helps-refugees-and-migrants-in-France](http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/News/2015/December/Red-Cross-helps-refugees-and-migrants-in-France).

15 See “Winter Looms in the Calais ‘Jungle’ camp”, *BBC News*, 9 December 2015, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-35047732/winter-looms-in-the-calais-jungle-camp](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-35047732/winter-looms-in-the-calais-jungle-camp).

16 British Red Cross, above note 7.

17 See the statement in the House of Commons by Home Secretary Amber Rudd on the Calais camp, 24 October 2016, available at: [www.parliament.uk/business/news/2016/october/statement-on-calais-24-october-2016/](http://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2016/october/statement-on-calais-24-october-2016/).

18 British Red Cross, above note 7, p. 5.

of August 2016, it was taking an average of ten to eleven months to process a claim to get a child from France to the UK.<sup>19</sup>

## Best interest assessments

With word circulating that the French government was going to close the camp imminently, efforts intensified and became more urgent. From 12 to 14 October 2016, an experienced and qualified social worker who is a senior member of the British Red Cross Refugee Support team<sup>20</sup> led a group of independent social workers conducting best interest assessments on children in the camp. The children were identified by staff and volunteers with Safe Passage, whose mission is to open legal routes to sanctuary for children. Lawyers working with Safe Passage then used the assessments to build their case that the government must take action to get the children to safety. While the social workers were conducting the assessments, the French government was moving closer to shutting down the camp, positioning water cannons and riot police.<sup>21</sup>

The situation was getting more dangerous as each day passed in the camp, and the UK government was under a legal challenge to develop a functioning system to protect children who had a right to be in the UK. This required cooperation from the French government, who had also not developed working systems to manage Dublin cases. Eventually everything came to a head as the French authorities decided to close the camp in mid-October, though a clear protection plan for the children remained unclear.<sup>22</sup> This gave the governments and voluntary agencies working in the camp very little time to coordinate a clear plan. At this point, the UK Home Office accepted a long-standing offer from the British Red Cross to assist.

## Escorts

The primary role that the British Red Cross undertook was to escort and support children and young people in their journeys – in coaches from Calais to London, and then during onward journeys from London to their next accommodation, usually in foster homes. On 16 October, the first transfers from Calais to the UK began. The British Red Cross initially sent members of its Psychosocial Support Team (PST) to escort the young people in coaches secured by the UK Home Office. The PST is an emergency deployment team that assists British nationals abroad in times of crisis, with staff who are specially trained to manage

19 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

20 The author of this article.

21 The author was in Calais during these events, and was in regular communication with colleagues in the camp. See also “Calais Migrants: ‘Jungle’ Closure to Start on Monday, France Says”, *BBC News*, 21 October 2016, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-37733794](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-37733794).

22 May Bulman, “French Police Accused of ‘Stealing Phones and Shoes of Refugees to Stop them Leaving Calais Jungle’”, *The Independent*, 14 October 2016, available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-police-calais-jungle-migrants-refugees-human-rights-brutality-a7362281.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-police-calais-jungle-migrants-refugees-human-rights-brutality-a7362281.html); UNHCR, “UNHCR: France Decision to Close ‘Jungle’ Camp Welcome; Proper Care in Next Steps Crucial”, 14 October 2016, available at: [data2.unhcr.org/en/news/15786](http://data2.unhcr.org/en/news/15786).

high-intensity situations outside of the UK, providing practical and emotional support to British nationals (and occasionally others) in need. Team members are usually deployed in conjunction with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office abroad; this was the first time the British Red Cross had been deployed at the request of the Home Office.

As the situation continued, it became evident that more volunteers from other parts of the organization were needed, so the response expanded to include those from the wider Emergency Response teams and Refugee Support teams of the British Red Cross, among others. Given that Calais was also seen as the border between England and France, British Red Cross team members who were not necessarily trained for international deployments were allowed to go, since they would not technically enter France.

Volunteer teams also escorted young people from the Home Office's Lunar House in Croydon, south London (where people claim asylum), to their planned accommodation. Their new homes were spread all across the UK, so this often involved multi-hour journeys for the young people after their already exhausting experiences.

Through the course of the operation, the British Red Cross supported nearly 429 young people (under the Dublin and Dubs legal instruments) in their journey to the UK using 247 volunteers.<sup>23</sup>

## Other roles

Though the official role for most of the operation was to escort young people to and from the Home Office, many British Red Cross volunteers found themselves undertaking other roles to fill gaps. Though there may have been rough timetables of when coaches and taxis (to foster homes) were meant to arrive and depart, these were often not followed. Coaches were delayed for various reasons, and sometimes it was not always clear where the young people would go next. The asylum screening interviews also took a significant period of time in between. This meant that volunteers were often sitting in the Home Office supporting young people for hours at a time, reminding staff that the young people needed to be fed and watered, playing games with them to keep them entertained, and serving as appropriate adults<sup>24</sup> during asylum interviews.

## Challenges

There were many challenges to this operation, many of which could have been avoided had it been handled in a planned, organized fashion months earlier. The

23 Internal British Red Cross data collected by Emergency Response team leading the response, on file with Emergency Response team.

24 "Appropriate adults safeguard the rights, welfare and effective participation of children and vulnerable adults who are detained or questioned by police": see the National Appropriate Adult Network website, available at: [www.appropriateadult.org.uk/](http://www.appropriateadult.org.uk/).

Home Office was leading the response, which at times made it difficult for British Red Cross members to challenge or correct various courses of action.

There were a number of other organizations with a range of roles, but they did not have clear coordinators to lead the response. Basics such as introducing team members and explaining roles from respective organizations could have gone a long way to ease communication and working relationships. The British Red Cross had a team leader, but did not always know with whom to liaise. Communication between teams within the Home Office could also have been improved, though it was recognized that all parties were working under severe time constraints and were taking part in an innovative use of the Dublin Regulation. As an example of the problems involved, coach delays also led to potential safety concerns, with drivers being on the clock for many more hours than they should have been, due to waiting for interviews to finish. British Red Cross staff and volunteers raised these concerns consistently with the Home Office. Another challenge was the lack of interpreters available to brief the young people about where they were going. On a few occasions the coaches left without the young people having been told where they were going – something that the British Red Cross staff and volunteers had to manage en route.

Some volunteers felt that the other organizations which were leading various elements of the response did not have the appropriate skills to do so. For example, in England, an appropriate adult is a specific role with specific responsibilities and training, but some who were undertaking this role at the Home Office did not seem to understand all of their responsibilities within that role. At times there were not enough people from the other organizations, so British Red Cross volunteers were asked to step into some of these roles. This fluidity of roles may have led to some confusion.

There were also certain miscommunications that caused distress for some young people. Many of those coming under the Dublin Regulation expected to be immediately reunited with their families upon their arrival in the UK. In some cases, however, the local authority had not yet assessed the families' viability to take a new child into their homes (if they were not the biological parents). In other cases there were concerns about the proposed family members, which led to delays in reunification, similarly causing upset. These circumstances meant that the young people had to go into foster homes or other temporary accommodation, which was yet another bump in the road of their already very bumpy journey. For children who came under the Dubs Amendment, it could be bittersweet to see others reunited with their families when they themselves did not have anyone waiting for them.

Once on the coaches, the volunteers had the unenviable task of trying to keep the young people from using their phones. This remit was in part due to concerns that the media was tracking their location and movement. The young people also wanted to be in touch with their families, but the Home Office did not want them to contact the latter prematurely.

There were also some very high expectations of what the UK would be like, with one child saying “it will be like going to heaven”.<sup>25</sup> The volunteers tried to manage some of these expectations, while validating their excitement at moving to a place of safety.

During the early trips, there was heavy media presence at the Home Office, waiting for the coaches’ arrival. There was no private area or screens to protect the young people as they exited the bus, so several young people were photographed and their images were used by the media almost right away. These photos led to a huge controversy about the age of the children, with many members of the public assuming the young people were over the age of 18 due to their weathered appearance, and so should not be treated as children. The British Red Cross responded in the media and also met directly with the Home Office regularly during this period, both individually and alongside many other organizations, in order to highlight the need for changes to the process.<sup>26</sup>

Transitions were quite difficult. As the young people left France, they were often forced into saying quick goodbyes to those voluntary-sector workers who had supported them. Once at the Home Office, the young people were usually told where they would be going, often away from friends who had become family to them. This was quite a shock, and one that the volunteers tried to ease by exchanging phone numbers and/or passing on details through social workers.<sup>27</sup>

## Successes

Both Home Office and British Red Cross members were on coaches with the young people as they left the camp to make their way to England. The power of the emblem was notable, as the young people tended to trust the Red Cross volunteers and welcomed their support with the aid of interpreters. Reflections from one member of the PST were that, although the young people seemed to have grown up very fast due to their experiences, they were, at the same time, still frightened children. The emotions they expressed ranged from excitement to fear to apprehension, often cycling through these emotions repeatedly.

Many of the children were desperate to meet up with family, in some cases from whom they had been separated for many years. Some volunteers were on hand to directly witness and facilitate the restoration of family links, which were profoundly moving experiences. Several volunteers noted how the young people cared for each other, as they had become family to each other, supporting one another during transitions.

The British Red Cross volunteers felt excited and proud to contribute to the mission. PST volunteers were team leaders for the Red Cross teams, and felt the

25 Notes from PST member Gill Moffat, on file with author.

26 “Two-Thirds of Refugee ‘Children’ ARE ADULTS Figures Show”, *The Express*, 21 October 2016, available at: [www.express.co.uk/news/uk/722968/two-thirds-calais-refugee-children-over-18-home-office-age-assessment-teeth-test-davies](http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/722968/two-thirds-calais-refugee-children-over-18-home-office-age-assessment-teeth-test-davies);

27 Notes from PST member Andrea Wood, on file with author.

training they experienced had prepared them for the roles. Team leaders for the Red Cross ensured that their teams were briefed, supported throughout and debriefed at the end (unlike some of the teams from other organizations). One British Red Cross volunteer noted that their Red Cross colleagues were “calm, professional, aware, enthusiastic, thoughtful and proactive”, and that the various skills that volunteers brought from different parts of the organization led to an improved response.<sup>28</sup> Several colleagues noted that the Red Cross teams shared “commitment, good humour and flexibility” regardless of the length of time they had been with the organization, showing the Fundamental Principles shining through.<sup>29</sup>

The British Red Cross’s national Emergency Response team in England received high marks for maintaining a level of coordination in a chaotic situation. Briefings supplied to teams evolved as new information was learned and team leaders were briefed appropriately. There was also consideration of lessons learned as time went on, and the managers of the responses ensured that this was fed in to subsequent team leaders and responding staff and volunteers.

## Conclusion

The situation of children being at risk in Calais is far from over. Children remain in northern France in insecure positions. Governments and the voluntary sector, including the British Red Cross, need to continue to consider how to avoid a similar situation in the future, and how to respond should there be a repeat of these circumstances. Many of the young people who are now in the UK are struggling in their new situations. Families that received the young people have not been given nearly enough support, and many of the arrangements have broken down.<sup>30</sup>

The British Red Cross learned valuable lessons from the response, many of which the organization is still trying to unpack, consolidate and apply to responses that have happened since, but ideally, any future migration response will not be crisis-led like the one that occurred in 2016. Regardless, the British Red Cross will continue to refuse to ignore people in crisis, and will apply the Fundamental Principles to all responses.<sup>31</sup> The British Red Cross will continue to model these principles, as in this response: the principle of humanity, by preventing and alleviating human suffering wherever it may be found, and the principle of impartiality, by not discriminating as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinion and being guided by the needs of those in distress.

28 Notes from British Red Cross PST member Rowan Johnson, on file with author.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Many of these young people are now approaching the British Red Cross’s young refugee programmes for support.

31 The fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality bind the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement together. See British Red Cross, “The Seven Fundamental Principles”, available at: [www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/The-international-Movement/Fundamental-principles](http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/The-international-Movement/Fundamental-principles).

