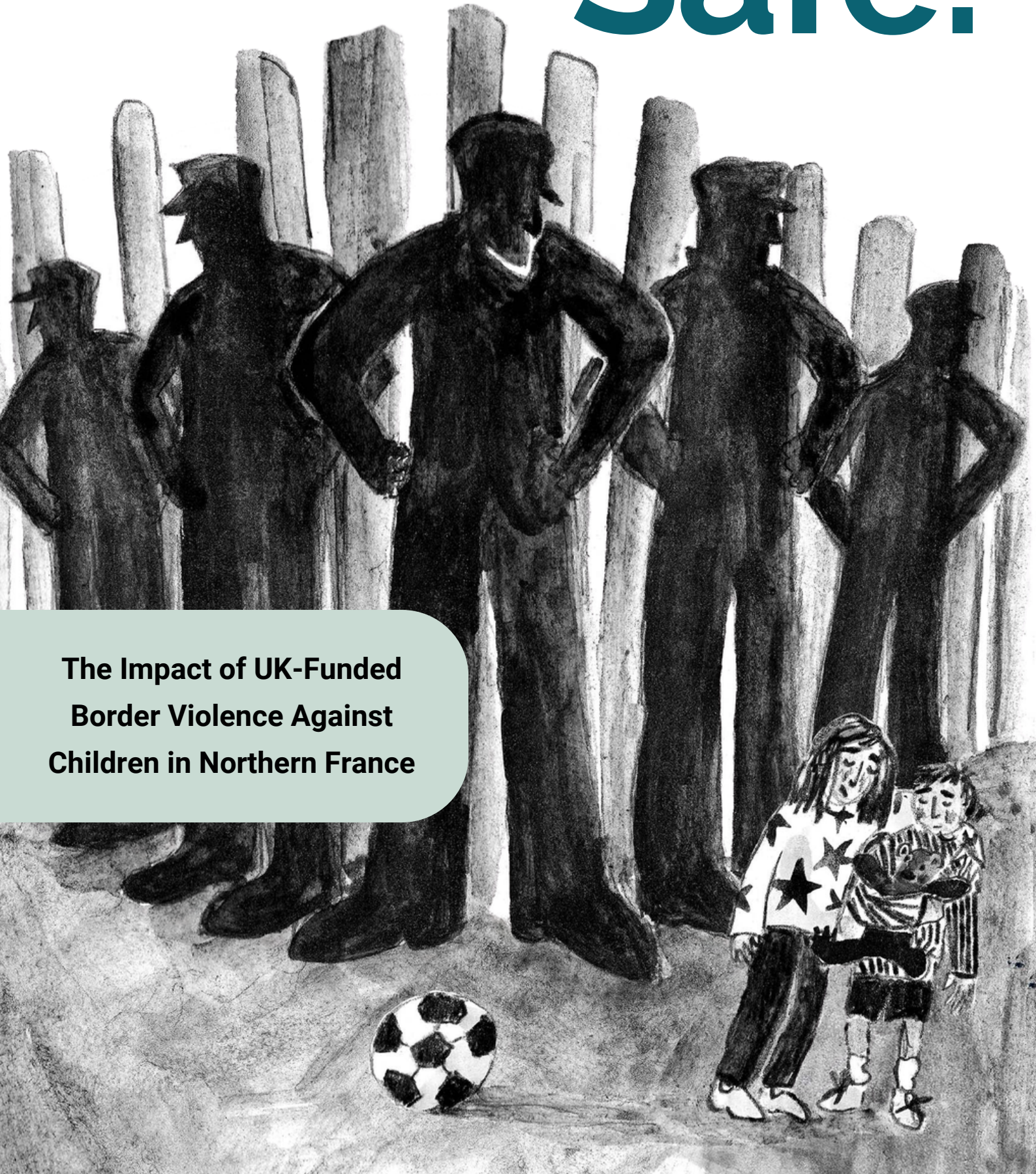




# Nowhere Safe.

**The Impact of UK-Funded  
Border Violence Against  
Children in Northern France**



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In 2024 and 2025, at least 22 children were killed on the UK-France border. Thousands more endured repeated and compounding violence - during crossing attempts, in evictions from living sites, and through the systematic denial of basic needs.

This report centres the voices and experiences of the children and families we worked with in 2025 to trace the policy and funding decisions that gave rise to this violence, and to make the case for accountability and urgent change. It is designed to build on our July 2025 Report, "*We Want to Be Safe*", and on Humans for Rights Network's December 2025 Report, "*You Can't Stay, But You Can't Go*".

## **NOWHERE SAFE: The Impact of UK-Funded Border Violence against Children in Northern France**

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Cover illustration: Niamh Shaw

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Published 28<sup>th</sup> February 2026

# For the Children Killed on the UK-France Border.

In 2025, five children were killed on the UK-France border. This report is dedicated to them, and to every child who has been forced to endure the violence and hostility of the border in northern France. Every child deserves to live in safety and happiness - to play, laugh and grow. Every child deserves a future.

Today, and every day, we remember them. We remember those whose names we know, and those whose names we don't. We remember:

## **Agdad, aged 8**

Agdad and his mother, from Turkey, were killed as a result of crush injuries sustained during an attempt to cross the English Channel on the 21st May 2025.

## **Unnamed child**

An unnamed child, from Vietnam, was killed as a result of crush injuries sustained during an attempt to cross the English Channel on the 9th September 2025.

## **Unnamed child**

An unnamed child, from Vietnam, was killed as a result of crush injuries sustained during an attempt to cross the English Channel on the 9th September 2025.

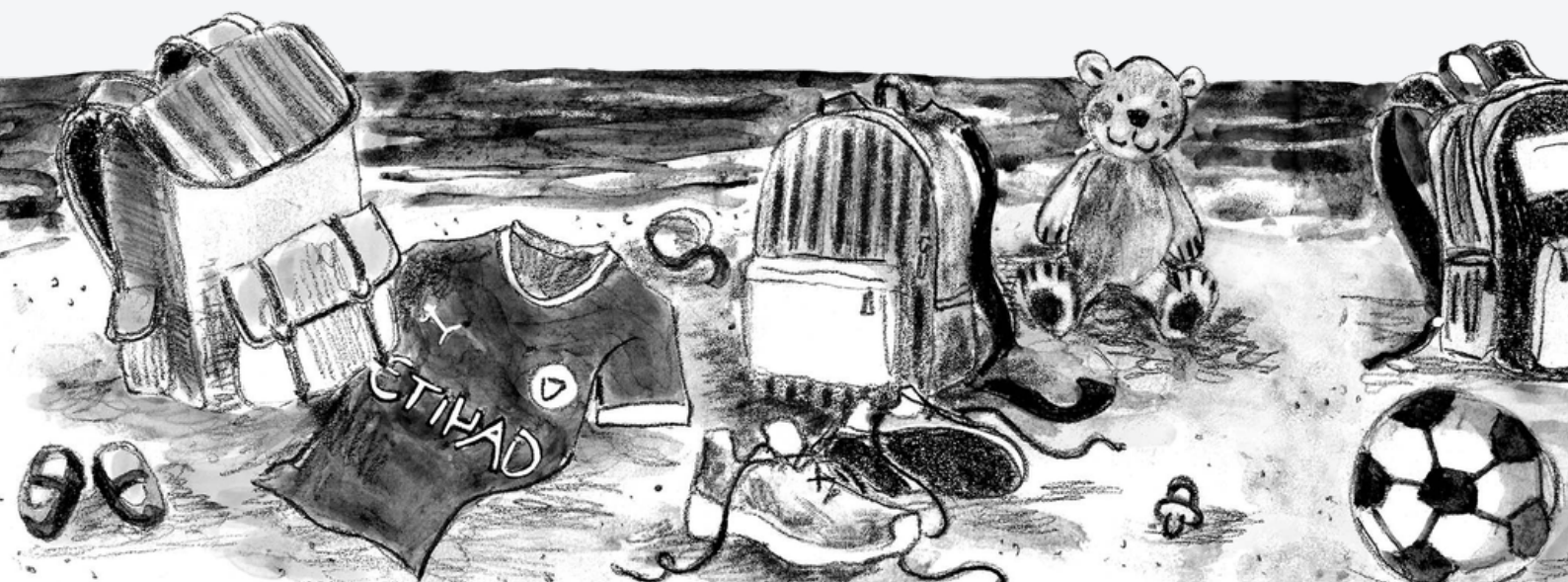
## **Unnamed child, aged 16**

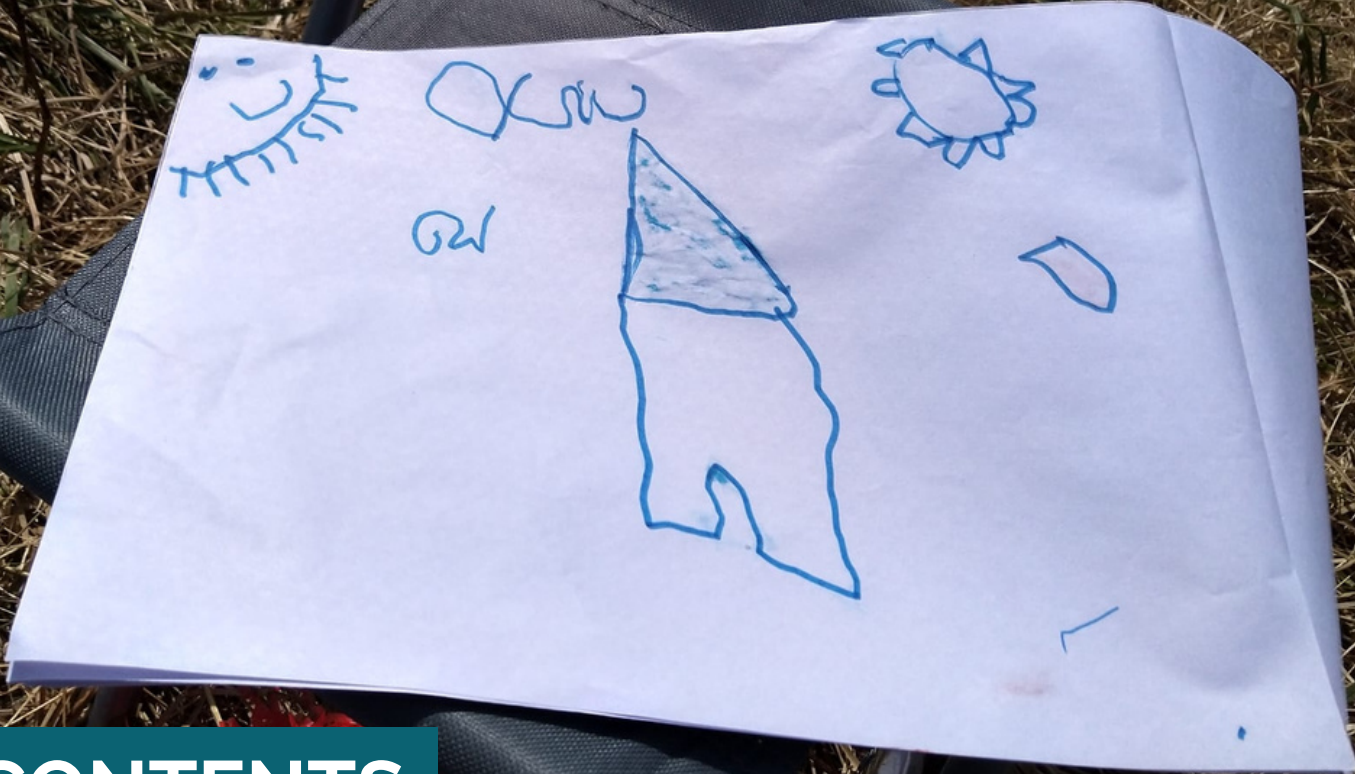
An unnamed 16-year old child, from Egypt, was killed as a result of crush injuries sustained during an attempt to cross the English Channel on the 9th September 2025.

## **Unnamed child**

An unnamed child was found on a beach after a crossing attempt on the 28th September 2025.

**We remember each of these children, killed in 2025, and every child killed on the UK-France border in the years before.**





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Project Play is an organisation which has been facilitating play sessions for children on the move in northern France since 2018. Working in informal living sites, safe houses and community centres, we support children aged 0-18 and their families. Since 2018, we have worked with nearly 9,000 children. We are the only independent organisation working with children of all ages in this context.

Project Play's work focuses on children, and this report reflects that. This focus does not seek to diminish or undermine the experiences of adults living on the UK-France border. All people have the right to life, to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment, and to live in dignity. We support the work of our partner organisations to advance access to rights for other demographics of people on the move living on the UK-France border.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Authors:** Katie Hall, Kate O'Neill and Lily MacTaggart

**Illustration:** [Niamh Shaw](#)

We thank in particular the children and caregivers who shared their stories with us. Their contributions are anonymised and their names have been changed to protect their identities.

We also thank the following partners for their support: [Humans for Rights Network](#), [Calais Appeal](#), [Human Rights Observers](#), [Secours Catholique Calais](#) and [Calais Migrant Solidarity](#).

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## Data on Fatalities at the Border

Compiling an accurate record of those who are killed or go missing in their journeys across borders is challenging. Neither France nor the UK publish official data on those killed or lost during crossing attempts - a trend seen across Europe's borders.<sup>1</sup> Non-governmental organisations work to fill this gap, but often rely on reports made by local authorities, the media and other grassroots organisations.

In this report, we have used data from Calais Migrant Solidarity, cross referencing with partners in northern France, to build as accurate a picture as we can of those killed on the UK-France border. Through this work, we identified **five children and thirty-six adults killed in 2025**. From the evidence we have seen, four of these children were older teenagers. A number of sources have recorded them as adults. The adultification of children on the move - particularly unaccompanied boys - is well noted, and likely influences reporting.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, many people making these journeys fear interception by the authorities, and thus their crossings may go undetected. Families may lack the resources or information to report people going missing, and the authorities repeatedly refuse to investigate those reported missing by friends and family. This, combined with inconsistent media reporting, means that the number of those who are killed or go missing on our borders is likely an undercount.<sup>3</sup>



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2024 and 2025, at least 22 children were killed on the UK-France border. Thousands more endured repeated and compounding violence - including being tear gassed by police, multiple traumatic crossing attempts, eviction from informal living sites and the systematic denial of essential services. This is the direct consequence of policy and funding decisions made by the UK and French governments.

Since 2018, Project Play has worked with nearly 9,000 children passing through northern France as part of their journeys to seek safety. The violence documented in this report is, in significant part, UK-funded - since 2023, the UK has committed €541 million to border 'securitisation' in northern France - a more than threefold increase on the previous three-year period. The three years which have followed have seen unprecedented violence, and included the deadliest year on record.

**Section 2: Access to Asylum** documents how increasingly hostile policies across Europe and at the UK-France border leave many people on the move facing ever more barriers to safety and stability.

**“Abel, aged 7, loved school - he had always gotten excellent grades and considers himself Swedish, as this is his first language.”**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Section 2 finds that:

- Many families arrive at the UK-France border having spent years in other European countries, threatened with deportation despite years of living, working and studying there. For many, the UK is seen as a last chance at safety.
- In 2025, the UK government closed the Afghan resettlement schemes (ARAP and ACRS) with hours' notice, and suspended refugee family reunion with three days' notice. Women and children received 93% of family reunion visas in the year ending June 2025, more than half of which were granted to children.

- The UK and France introduced a 'one in, one out' scheme, which is structurally dependent on dangerous crossings continuing and has resulted in unsafe deportations, including of unaccompanied children. It is largely inaccessible - excluding those without documentation and unaccompanied children entirely - and was condemned by eight UN experts, who called for it to be revoked.

**Section 3: State Violence During Crossing Attempts** examines the direct physical and psychological violence children face during crossing attempts, including the amplification of risk through overcrowding and off-shore interceptions and the expansion of surveillance technology.

**"Yoadan showed me with her hands how the gas went into her mouth, throat, chest and lungs. She said it was "spicy", and thought she was going to be sick. She also said it was "spicy" in her eyes, which I could see were still bloodshot"**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Section 3 finds that:

- At least 22 children were killed on the UK-France border in 2024 and 2025. Every child killed in 2025 died in situations of overcrowding - the increasing risk of which can be linked to UK funding and the panic caused by police interceptions.
- Tear gas, a chemical weapon, is routinely deployed against children during crossing attempts, including against babies and toddlers.
- Four-year-old Meron sustained chemical burns to her stomach and back waiting for a coastguard that took hours to arrive.
- Six-year-old Musab and one-year-old Leila witnessed their father's ribs broken by a police officer during a crossing attempt. The family received no support in the aftermath, and were ineligible for the 'one in, one out' scheme due to lack of documentation.
- Fear of police is pervasive among the children we work with - shaping how they play, how they sleep, and how they understand the world. Four-year-old Meron asked her mother: "why do the police have guns? Is it to kill us?"
- Off-shore interceptions - the stabbing of inflatable boats in the water - were documented throughout 2025, before being formally accepted into French guidance in November. The UK government publicly welcomed footage of a boat being stabbed at sea with a distressed child clearly visible on board.
- Surveillance technology, funded through bilateral agreements, is used primarily to facilitate police interceptions rather than protect life. Children speak of fear of being watched even when police are not visibly present.

**Section 4: State Violence in Living Sites** interrogates how violent eviction operations and the systematic denial of shelter, food, healthcare and child protection compound the repeated, multiple harms children face whilst present on the UK-France border.

**"I hate the police.... [ they take away our tents ]."**

- Child, aged 6

Section 4 finds that:

- Human Rights Observers recorded the number of evictions in Dunkirk in 2025 to be twice that of 2024, with three times the number of sites impacted. The area's mayor assured locals that the increase was funded by the UK government.
- Evictions compound the harm of crossing attempts - stripping families of tents, clothing, phones and other essential belongings, with no support offered in the aftermath.
- Children on the move are systematically failed by child protection mechanisms. Of 18 referrals made by Project Play to state agencies across seven cases in 2025, one received a response and follow-up action.
- Ten-year-old Ali was refused care twice at Calais Hospital after inhaling seawater during a crossing attempt. His mother was forced to return to Germany - the country they had been forced to leave - to access treatment. Ali was hospitalised for three weeks with infections in his blood, lungs and stomach. Without treatment, this could have been fatal. They later returned to northern France to continue to attempt crossing to the UK.
- The absence of safe accommodation and accessible routes has enabled intermediary networks to operate with impunity in living sites. As Humans for Rights Network has found, these networks are the product of government policy - if safe routes existed, smuggled journeys would not be required.



## Recommendations

2026 presents a crucial moment for change. Negotiations for the next three years of UK border funding are underway, whilst a group of French MPs have opened a formal investigation into the impact of bilateral funding and operations. The decisions made now will shape what happens at the border for years to come.

### A STATUTORY INQUIRY INTO UK SPENDING AT THE BORDER



**The UK must conduct a statutory inquiry into UK spending at the border, whether through the French government or private companies, to establish how taxpayer's money has been used.**

Our primary call is for the UK government to open a statutory inquiry into UK funding for border enforcement in northern France. Such an inquiry must be genuinely independent, must have access to the details of bilateral agreements that have so far been withheld from public scrutiny, and must centre the experiences of those most affected - including children and families who have experienced the border first hand.

This report focuses on UK policy and funding - and makes the case for a UK inquiry - because the French government has already announced a parliamentary investigation into the impact of bilateral funding and operations. We welcome that investigation and call on the UK government to match it. The responsibility for what happens at the UK-France border is shared, and accountability must be too.

### REINFORCING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF "WE WANT TO BE SAFE"

Alongside our call for a statutory inquiry, we repeat the recommendations made in our July 2025 report, "[We Want to Be Safe](#)". These require the UK and France to:



- **Put an immediate end policies of violence at the border**
- **Open safe, accessible routes for all those who need them**
- **Over the longer-term, commit to an approach to migration founded on dignity and human rights, rather than hostility and deterrence**

These recommendations are detailed in full in the [Conclusion](#) to this report (page 41).



# 1. INTRODUCTION

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In 2024 and 2025, at least 22 children have been killed on the UK-France border. Whilst northern France has long been a bottleneck for people on the move,<sup>4</sup> these years have seen the border become increasingly violent and deadly - and this is no accident. Rather, it is the direct consequence of policy and funding decisions made by the UK and French governments.

Since 2018, Project Play has worked with nearly 9,000 children who have passed through northern France as part of their journeys to seek safety. In 2025, nearly 1 in 8 of those who arrived in the UK in a small boat was a child.<sup>5</sup> This does not account for children who spend time in limbo on the border, without making it to the UK.

Over the past two years, we have witnessed a sharp escalation in violence against those children - both acute and chronic. Acute violence takes the form of police interceptions during crossing attempts, involving tear gas, physical force and the destruction of boats, as well as violent evictions of informal living sites. Chronic violence operates through the systematic denial of children's basic needs, including shelter, food, healthcare and protection. Both are the result of deliberate policy choices; and both cause serious, lasting harm.

Increasing violence has also led to a staggering rise in child fatalities on the UK-France border. In 2024, more children were killed than in the previous four years combined.<sup>6</sup> In 2025, five more children died - each of them crushed or asphyxiated on an overcrowded small boat, during or after a violent police interception. Their names, where we know them, are recorded in the dedication to this report.

This increasing violence has correlated with a dramatic increase in UK spending to 'secure' the border in northern France. For over two decades, the UK and French governments have signed a series of bilateral agreements committing to joint funding and operations to 'securitise' the border.<sup>7</sup> 2023 marked a turning point: with the UK committing to send France €541 million over three years.

**Equivalent to £473 million, this marked a more than three-fold increase compared to the previous three-year period.<sup>8</sup>**

Since 2023, the UK  
has sent France  
**£473 million**  
to 'securitise'  
the border.

4 - Section 1, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe*: July 2025

5 - UK Home Office data, year to December 2025 (26<sup>th</sup> Feb 2025). Dataset - IER\_02c

6 - Project Play, *We Want to be Safe*: July 2025, page 9

7 - For a full history see House of Commons Library, *Unauthorised Migration: UK France border cooperation*, Feb 2026

8 - House of Commons Library - <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9681/CBP-9681.pdf>. For an analysis of UK funding, see Humans for Rights Network (2025) "You can't stay but you can't go", section 2.a.

The exact use of UK funding is unclear, and despite numerous attempts by journalists and NGOs to find out further details, very little information has been made publicly available.<sup>9</sup> However, it is clear that this funding is directly linked to border operations carried out by the French police. For instance, in March 2025 Bruno Retailleau, then French Interior Minister, stated that 730 out of 1200 security personnel deployed to patrol the border each day are paid for by the UK.<sup>10</sup>

**2026 presents a crucial moment for change. Negotiations for the next three years of UK funding are underway,<sup>11</sup> and a group of French MPs have opened an investigation into the impact of bilateral agreements. It is time for the UK government to do the same.**

Both the UK and France are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees every child - regardless of nationality or legal status - fundamental rights, including the right to life, to protection from violence, and to healthcare. These rights should not stop at borders.

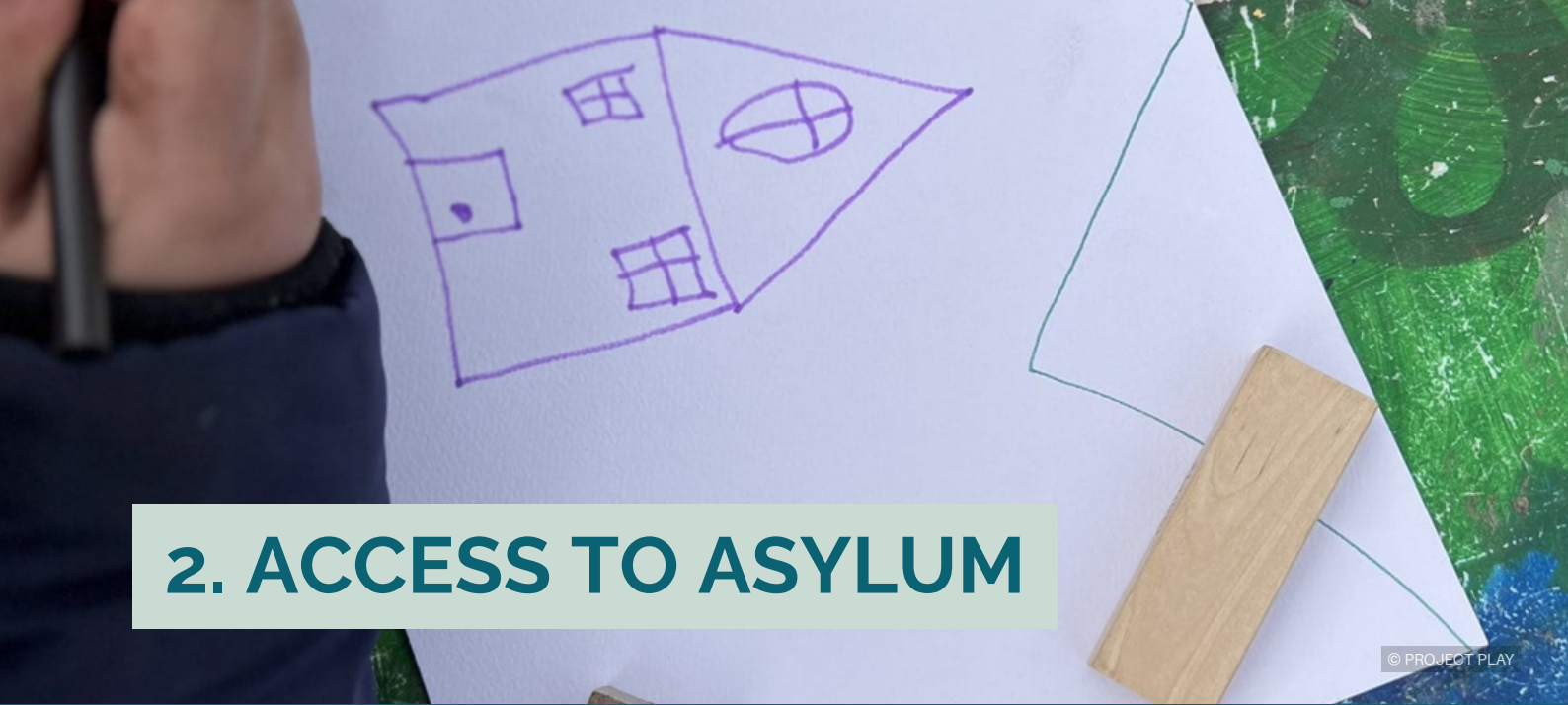
Yet every day in 2025, we witnessed children sharing experiences of extreme violence - violence that is the direct result of political choices made by the UK and French governments. This report centres their stories to show how catastrophically both governments are failing in their legal obligations to protect children on the UK-France border. It argues the need for accountability and urgent change on both sides of the Channel, and makes the case for a statutory inquiry in the UK to parallel that already underway in France.

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9 - Pg 31, Humans for Rights Network, *You can't stay but you can't go*, December 2025

10 - In March 2025 Bruno Retailleau, then French Interior Minister, stated that 730 out of 1200 security personnel deployed daily are funded by the UK - see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c39vjnpxy1wo>

11 - Pg 4, House of Commons Library, *Unauthorised Migration: UK France border cooperation*, February 2026



## 2. ACCESS TO ASYLUM

In 2025, families in situations of displacement continued to try to travel to the UK in search of safety and stability. Due to the lack of accessible routes to come to the UK safely, they were forced to attempt difficult and dangerous journeys again and again. For most, this means crossing the English Channel, often by small, inflatable and unseaworthy boats.<sup>12</sup> Attempts to cross in trucks and lorries are less common but still used - particularly by unaccompanied children and young people.<sup>13</sup>

For an increasing number of the families we meet, their journeys to the UK are driven by being unable to stay in other parts of Europe. Political shifts have led to increasing hostility and anti-migrant and refugee sentiment across the continent, manifested in policies which make obtaining secure, regular status ever harder.<sup>14</sup> The result of this is people who have lived for many years in one country feeling they have no option but to move again. For many, the UK represents a last chance at safety and stability.<sup>15</sup>

Against this broader context of European hostility, the governments of the UK and France continue to enact domestic policies and bilateral agreements which prevent people from accessing safe routes to asylum, and render the UK-France border a site of systemic state violence. Through the stories shared with us, this section shows how increasingly hostile policies across Europe and at the UK-France border leave many people on the move facing more and more closed doors.

### 2.1. BROADER EUROPEAN HOSTILITY

In recent years, our team has observed a significant increase in the number of children and families we meet who have spent years - sometimes their entire lives - in other European countries before travelling to the UK-France border. Yet, as a result of hostile migration and asylum policies across the continent, many of these families were threatened with deportation - after years of living, working and studying in a country. For many, the UK represents a last attempt to find safety.

12 - UK Home Office Data, year to December 2025 (26<sup>th</sup> February 2025). Dataset - IER\_02a

13 - Pg 90, *Humans for Rights Network, You can't stay but you can't go*, December 2025; Pg 16, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

14 - See, for e.g. <https://cmsny.org/how-europe-closing-doors-to-asylum-seekers/>

15 - Section 2.1.c, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe*, July 2025

The governments of the UK and France are not passive within this, operating their border policies in the knowledge that doors are closing across Europe, and in many cases contributing to that closure. What results is a zero-sum race to the bottom: families who have already been repeatedly failed elsewhere arrive in northern France to find yet more hostility and violence. The stories shared with us in 2025 show the impact of this reality.

The disruption of having to uproot a whole family's life after years of integrating has severe emotional impacts on children and parents. M is the single mother of Abel, aged 7, who was born in Sweden and has a Swedish passport. When M's asylum application was rejected and she was threatened with deportation, they had no safe route to the UK, and they made the journey to northern France. M's story speaks to the disruptive experience of facing displacement for a second time:

**"M described feeling quite lost and not knowing what to do, as her priority was to get Abel back into school... She particularly wished he could go back to school in Sweden where he was settled and happy, but knew this was not possible. She talked about how Abel loved school, and had always gotten excellent grades and that he considers himself Swedish, as they spoke Swedish at home and this is his first language."**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Some weeks later, after the school year had started and it was apparent that Abel would not be going back to school, M asked Project Play to provide more educational materials so that Abel would not fall behind. She told the team she was feeling stressed and under pressure trying to sustain Abel's education alone, remarking that parenting was particularly hard while displaced and at the border.

Many of the families we worked with had spent time in Germany, living under papers renewed every couple of years, before being refused permanent settlement. Lili, a German playworker who volunteered with Project Play in 2025, observed this pattern repeatedly:

**"We met so many families and children coming from Germany. Most of them had stayed for quite some time... and left because of the changing political situation, rejected asylum claims, or impending deportation. I wasn't too surprised about that, because I worked in refugee aid in Germany before and knew about the difficulties. It still made me sad and angry and very clearly showed the direct impact politics has on people."**

**There was a family where the mum and baby brother went missing after a failed crossing attempt and we met the dad and daughter. The family had been in Germany before and while we helped with translating information for the family to find the mum... the dad told us about their time in Germany and showed me their papers. They had a deportation order...**

**...They didn't want to be in Calais, they didn't want to go to the UK, but they couldn't stay in Germany and they couldn't go back to their home country. For them crossing the Channel felt like the only option they had left."**

*- Lili, Project Play Playworker*

In 2025, we worked with a **family with children aged 5, 15 and 16 who had lived in Germany for seven to eight years - the youngest child was born there.** The teenagers were studying apprenticeships and their mother worked in a hospital. However, their insecure status meant they had to leave to try and find stability. Within a month of arriving in Calais, they had attempted to cross the Channel five times.

One reason why families attempt to cross to the UK when they can no longer stay in other European countries is because the UK is not party to the Dublin agreement, unlike EU member countries and countries like Norway and Switzerland. Under Dublin, a person refused asylum in one signatory country cannot seek it in another - making the UK one of the only remaining options.

**Layan, a mother of 4 from Kuwait and a member of the Bidoon stateless community, had lived in Finland for six years before being forced to leave. Her children had been enrolled in school – one with a year left and plans for university. After leaving Finland, the family came to France because of the UK's position outside Dublin. When we met them, they had already attempted to cross by small boat twice.**

These are not isolated cases. As Asmara, a single mother from Eritrea whose four-year-old daughter Meron was born in Denmark, told us:

**"Mostly our kids, they are born in here, in Europe. She doesn't read Tigrinya, she doesn't know Eritrea, she is Danish but she doesn't have the papers. How is it that they keep us in their country all those years but she is not a complete citizen? It makes no sense. She is born in Denmark. She does not know Eritrea. Why do many Danish kids who were born in hospital have papers and citizenship but not Meron? It is racist."**

Asmara's experience is part of a wider pattern she describes:

**"That is why we are leaving from all countries - from Belgium, from Germany, from Norway - because this happens. Most of us, if you go and ask us, we are living six years, eight years, ten years in a country without papers. That is why we are leaving, to find some better life."**

*- Asmara, from Eritrea, mother of Meron, aged 4, who we met in 2025.*

Yet at the UK-France border, families like Asmara's find not safety but further violence. She describes what drives families to attempt the crossing despite knowing the risks:

**"All of us, we know it is dangerous, we know it has risk, but we don't have a choice because we don't have papers. We need safety to protect our kids - that is why we are here. This is not our voluntary path. This is happening in your system...."**



**We have a responsibility to our kids to keep them safe, to have education, to have a future. But the system does not let me. They say we have human rights - but we never see it physically. We only hear this in voice. We are not criminals - we just need somewhere to be our home."**

*- Asmara, from Eritrea, mother of Meron, aged 4, who we met in 2025.*

Increasing hostility towards people on the move across Europe means that, for many, the UK represents a last chance at safety. The stories shared here illustrate how many families are pushed to the UK-France border having already exhausted other options - to find themselves met with yet more hostility and violence from both the UK and French governments.

As the following section shows, both governments have responded to this reality by escalating violent border enforcement and closing access to safe routes. Whilst this report focuses primarily on UK policy and funding - and the need for an inquiry in the UK to parallel that ongoing in France - the responsibility is shared.

#### LONG-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France and the UK must become European leaders in championing human rights and ending hostility to migration, supporting collective change on a regional level.**

## 2.2. UK-FRANCE POLICY

Within this wider climate of European hostility, the UK and France continue to entrench a border regime defined by exclusion and violence. The French government has consistently failed to ensure access to asylum processes and has advanced legislation eroding the rights of people on the move - failures documented extensively elsewhere, including by Project Play and Humans for Rights Network.<sup>16</sup> Here, the focus is on the decisions of the UK government in 2025, which have directly put children in danger.

**The lack of safe routes to seek asylum in the UK mean children and families are forced to make dangerous crossings, usually attempting these multiple times. Yet in 2025, the UK government closed a number of the already limited safe routes to asylum which had existed.**

On 1st July 2025, the UK government announced the closure of the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) with just a few hours' notice - meaning that Afghan individuals who had worked with the UK government, and those referred by the UNHCR for resettlement, were suddenly unable to apply to come to the UK safely.<sup>17</sup>

Going further, on 1 September 2025 the UK government announced the suspension of refugee family reunion, effective just three days later, with no given date for its reinstatement.<sup>18</sup> The government also indicated that when family reunion is reimplemented, it will be significantly more restricted.

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16 - Section 2.1.b, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

17 - <https://righttoremain.org.uk/closure-of-safe-routes-for-afghans-changes-to-the-immigration-rules/>

18 - <https://righttoremain.org.uk/refugee-family-reunion-whats-changed-and-what-it-means/>

This will disproportionately affect women and children, who received 93% of refugee family reunion visas in the year ending June 2025 - more than half of which were granted to children.<sup>19</sup> Men often make the dangerous journey first, intending to bring their families through a safe route once settled. Restricting family reunion in the long term could mean higher numbers of women and children are forced to make life-threatening journeys.

In July 2025, the UK and French governments jointly introduced the so-called 'one in, one out' scheme - formally the Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Journeys.<sup>20</sup> Sold by the government as of a safe route, it has at the time of writing enabled 350 people to enter the UK from France safely.<sup>21</sup>

However, the scheme is not a safe route in any meaningful sense. It functions by deporting people who have already made the dangerous crossing back to France, and admitting an equivalent number of people in 'exchange'. This means it can only exist whilst people continue to cross in small boats. This scheme does not reduce dangerous journeys - it depends on them.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the scheme is also leading to increased detention and the deportation of at risk people without adequate safeguards.



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19 - [https://helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/HBF%20refugee%20family%20reunion%20briefing\\_Final\\_Oct25.pdf](https://helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/HBF%20refugee%20family%20reunion%20briefing_Final_Oct25.pdf)

20 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukfrance-agreement-on-the-prevention-of-dangerous-journeys-cs-france-no22025>

21 - <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/69650/uk-government-reveals-just-a-few-hundred-migrants-have-been-exchanged-under-one-in-one-out-deal-so-far>

22, 23 - Section 6.b. *Humans for Rights Network, You can't stay but you can't go*, December 2025

In December 2025, eight UN Special Rapporteurs wrote jointly to the UK and French governments expressing serious concern about the scheme. They raised particular alarm about the exclusion of people without documentation and unaccompanied children from the “in route”, the absence of individualised assessment before deportation, the risk of discrimination on grounds of nationality, and the scheme's incompatibility with international human rights law. They called on both governments to end the agreement entirely.<sup>24</sup>

Project Play and our partners in northern France have observed these failures directly. Applying for the admission side of the scheme is inaccessible to many of the families we work with - it requires photo ID that many do not have, involves long and opaque waiting times and often offers no clear grounds for the rejections people receive. Furthermore, unaccompanied children are not allowed to apply for the scheme, meaning they are left with no other option but to make dangerous crossings.



### **Many families whose stories appear throughout this report attempted to use the scheme and were unable to do so.**

A mother and her two-year-old daughter, separated from the rest of their family after a crossing attempt, applied and waited five weeks with no response before crossing by small boat to rejoin them.

A single father with immediate family in the UK found that his children - Musab, aged 6, and Leila, aged 1 - lacked the documentation required to apply. Having exhausted this option, they attempted to cross by small boat, during which the father was kicked in the chest by a police officer in front of his children, breaking multiple ribs.

The stories shared in this section make clear that dangerous crossings are not a choice, but the result of a systematic absence of safe alternatives in a context which meets people on the move with violence and hostility at every turn. The restriction of safe routes across Europe, and the escalation of violence and hostility by the UK and France, does not prevent people from moving - it forces more people to make more dangerous journeys, and endure more violence along the way. In the short term, the opening of safe routes is the only realistic alternative to the violence documented in the sections that follow, since as the stories in this report make clear, violence is not incidental to the border regime. It is intrinsic to it.

### **SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:**



**The UK must ensure safe and accessible routes to asylum are available for all those who need them.**



(LEFT) A child draws a boat;  
(RIGHT) Police at the coast  
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### 3. STATE VIOLENCE DURING CROSSING ATTEMPTS

Crossing the English Channel irregularly is inherently dangerous. However, intensified policing since 2024 - funded in large part by the UK government - has made it even more life-threatening, particularly for those travelling by small boat. Children are facing heightened risk of serious injury and death as a direct result: from overcrowded vessels, crush injuries, violent police interceptions, the destruction of boats at sea, and the psychological harm that accumulates across repeated failed attempts.<sup>25</sup>

Each of the five children known to have been killed during a crossing attempt on the UK-France border in 2025 died as a result of crush injuries or suffocation. They are 8-year-old Agdad Hilmi from Turkey, killed alongside his mother, two unaccompanied teenagers from Vietnam, a 16-year-old boy from Egypt and a teenager whose age and nationality are unknown.<sup>26</sup>

**We have previously demonstrated the direct correlation between UK funding for border “securitisation” and the increased overcrowding of boats,<sup>27</sup> which has led to the deaths of at least 8 children in the past two years.<sup>28</sup>**

Children who survive crossing attempts are exposed to serious physical and psychological harm. The testimonies shared with us in 2025 show that children often experience repeated, cumulative and overlapping harms - including direct physical and psychological violence, a lack of access to essential services and witnessing violence against others. These harms compound over time and across multiple crossing attempts, and are the result of hostile policy decisions and funding choices made on both sides of the Channel.

This section examines three dimensions of that violence: direct physical and psychological harm during crossing attempts; the amplification of risk through overcrowding and off-shore interceptions; and the expansion of border violence through surveillance technology. These themes are presented separately for clarity, but they are not separate in the lives of the children who experience them.

25 - Pg 38, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

26 - See [note on data](#), page 6, for more information on how this was researched.

27 - Pg 38, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

28 - At least three children were killed in such circumstances in 2024 - they were Sara, aged 7, Mansur, aged 2, and Maryam, aged four months. Pg 38, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

## 3.1. DIRECT PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

### a) Teargas and Physical Injury

The use of tear gas by police during Channel crossing attempts is regularly described by the children we work with. Tear gas is a chemical weapon, and children are at heightened risk of serious harm when it is used: children have smaller respiratory systems and are closer in height to canisters deployed at ground level.<sup>29</sup> Its use in the context of crossing attempts - where children are often standing in cold water, already cold and frightened - is likely to compound these risks significantly.

Siblings Hosi, 8, and Yoadan, 6, from Eritrea, were present in northern France for over seven months in 2025. After one crossing attempt in October 2025, they described what had happened:

**"They told me that they walked into the sea, and that the water was up to Yoadan's mid-thighs. The police on the beach used tear gas against them - Yoadan showed me with her hands how the gas went into her mouth, throat, chest and lungs. She said it was "spicy", and thought she was going to be sick. She also said it was "spicy" in her eyes, which I could see were still bloodshot. Yoadan said that everyone else was coughing and shouting and feeling sick, and that there were two babies in the group with them. They ran away from the police and had to walk back to Calais."**

- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator

**French officials have noted that the majority of personnel deployed on the border each day are funded for by the UK. As such, it is more likely than not that the police officers who teargassed Hosi, Yoadan and their group, including two babies, were paid for by the UK government.<sup>30</sup>**

In May 2025, an adult, Ghaida, spoke to the Project Play team about a crossing attempt where children had been present.

**"Ghaida told us she was part of a group of 100 people, split between two boats. In her group were five young children, and other teenagers. As the boats were being inflated, the police arrived and used tear gas on the group at close range, including against the children. Ghaida described falling down, being unable to see and hearing the children screaming and crying. ...She wanted to help them but was unable to see as a result of the pepper spray, and could not reach the children. She described all people falling over and being unable to see or stand up: she said "it was a disaster".**

- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator

29 - Leung & Leung, "Health effects of tear gas exposure in children, infants, and fetuses", Hong Kong Med J 2020 Aug 26(4), 351-2  
30 - In March 2025 Bruno Retailleau, then French Interior Minister, stated that 730 out of 1200 security personnel deployed daily are funded by the UK - see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c39vjnpxy1wo>

**Tear gas is a chemical weapon, and the stories shared with us show that the police utilise it as a weapon - to harm and terrorise.**



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In 2025, Layan, a mother from Kuwait whose family had already been forced to leave Finland, described her family's second attempt to cross:

**“The police did not enter the water but threw tear gas bombs from the shore towards the people in the water, including Layan’s family. They had managed to get inside the boat and were in shallow water, she thought to be about a meter deep. The police ordered everyone to get off of the boat and the children were told to move away from the adults and stand on the beach, while the adults remained in ankle-depth water. The police officers decided who was a child and should go to the beach...**

**They did not consider Layan’s 15 year old daughter to be a child, so she was forced to remain with the adults. Once the children were separated from the adults, the police launched yet more teargas at the group in the water, including Layan’s daughter. At the same time, the children who were moved onto the beach were forced to witness their parents being deliberately tear gassed by the police at close range.”**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Layan’s experience shows the deliberate use of tear gas against a group whose crossing attempt had already been stopped. Further, the treatment of Layan’s 15-year-old daughter here illustrates a profound failure in child protection, whilst the experience of children watching their parents face calculated police violence speaks to the compounded psychological harms they face. This is explored further in the next sub-section.



In May 2025, Asmara, a single mother from Eritrea spoke to us about an experience she and her four-year-old child, Meron, had during their fourth attempt to cross to the UK:

**"[Before the boat reached the sea we were intercepted by the police. People were shouting] police, police, police! Then the police opened the smoke and threw it at us, and all of us were suffocating. The littlest they are coughing and crying, as was everybody."**

Whilst Asmara spoke about this moment, Meron said: **"scary, scary, scary, ouch."** Asmara continued to describe another crossing attempt from the week before, in which the engine on the boat had stopped working and the boat was stranded:

**"We called 112 because we had already been two hours waiting in the boat without moving... They pushed us into the middle of the sea. We almost lost our lives from the water... But they didn't come, we waited and they said they were coming but they didn't speed up for the women and children."**

In the end it was almost three or five hours we were waiting, when we might have drowned. Everybody, they were screaming and crying and all the children were cold. **[Whilst we were waiting], Meron was injured because the diesel together with the salt, it burns."**

- Asmara, from Eritrea, mother of Meron, aged 4, who we met in 2025.

**Four-year-old Meron sustained chemical burns across her stomach and back as a result of the diesel mixing with the seawater while the group waited for the coastguard to arrive.**

She later received medical support through an NGO - one of many instances in which non-governmental organisations are left to fill the gaps left by inadequate state support.<sup>31</sup>

In July 2025, 12-year-old Farah spoke to us about their experience of a crossing attempt the night before:

**"Farah said they felt really sad and tired after trying to cross last night, and their Mum was crying and exhausted too. Farah said that when they tried, the police slashed the boat while it was in the water and teargassed everyone there - including a number of children. Farah said they had walked five hours each way, there and back. They had lots of cuts on their body from the crossing, including what looked like chemical burns and cuts on their feet from walking so far. Farah said they hadn't eaten since yesterday - over 20 hours ago."**

*- Valentina Natale, Project Play Safeguarding and Child Protection Coordinator*

The next day, Farah and their 10-year-old sibling Ali spoke more about their experiences:

**"Farah said when they were on a boat and the police arrived, everyone started pushing. They ran away and fell down and now have a big lump on their leg and a chemical burn on their hand. Farah and Ali spoke about missing their school in Germany, where they lived for five years."**

*- Project Play Playworker*

Farah and Ali's stories illustrate both the physical harm caused by violent police interceptions and the wider context in which that violence occurs - children who had built lives in Germany, were unable to find safety and stability, and who were facing yet more violence and hostility at the UK-France border. Their physical injuries were a direct result of violent police interceptions - operations enacted by the French authorities, but funded in no small part by the UK.

#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France must end all violent operations on the border, and the UK must cease funding for them.**

## b) Psychological and Emotional Harm

In addition to physical harm and injury, each encounter with police violence is a source of psychological and emotional harm for children. Our team regularly works with children in states of emotional distress or deregulation, or who display signs of trauma and toxic stress.

These impacts are often visible even in very young children. Meron, four years old, had by the time we worked with her already witnessed multiple uses of tear gas and sustained chemical burns while waiting for rescue at sea. Her mother Asmara, described the impact of these experiences on her:

**"[Meron has repeatedly seen the police use teargas] spray and bombs, and is very scared of the police. She asked me;**

***'Mama, why the police have guns? Is it to kill us?'***

*- Asmara, from Eritrea, mother of Meron, aged 4, who we met in 2025.*

These encounters shape how children understand the world around them. Police violence dominates the imaginations of many of the children we work with, and children regularly play games pretending to be the police, hiding from the police and re-enacting encounters with them. In June 2025, Saad said that in his dreams, the police were all dead. In July, Mikal, aged 7, put a blue "siren" on his head, pretended to be the police and "arrested" a Project Play playworker.

Some children explicitly vocalise feelings of fear and panic during or after their experiences. In September 2025, 15-year-old Soliana spoke to us about a failed crossing attempt:

**"Soliana said they fell into the water and lost their belongings. She said that her mother had been intoxicated by the fumes, and had been close to dying. Soliana said that she felt very panicked in her chest and fell down, and "couldn't feel her heart"."**

*- Mhairi Carson, Project Play Volunteer and Welfare Coordinator*

Increasing police violence intensifies fear, panic and psychological distress, particularly when children witness serious harm to their parents and loved ones. In summer 2025 we worked with a single father and his two children, Musab, 6, and Leila, 1. During a crossing attempt, Musab and Leila witnessed their father be severely injured by a police officer. In the wake of the incident, Musab and Leila showed emotional distress, but the family was unable to access sufficient support:

## MASUB, 6, LEILA, 1, AND THEIR FATHER - POLICE BRUTALITY

During a crossing attempt in summer 2025, Musab and Leila's father experienced an excessive use of police force. He was kicked in the chest by a police officer, and suffered two broken ribs as a result, while Musab and Leila witnessed this take place.

When he later went to hospital for his injuries, no support was provided to the children who were in an extreme state of emotional distress in the hospital waiting area. Leila was observed to be repeatedly banging their head off the floor, while Musab was breaking and throwing items at the wall in the hospital.

Their father was discharged that day, but experienced significant difficulties taking care of his children due to his injuries, in particular one-year-old Leila. No accommodation was offered to the family while they were at the hospital, but an NGO was able to arrange access to state accommodation for them the following day.

In the days that followed, we continued to work with Musab and Leila. They were emotionally dysregulated and Musab treated other children with aggression, hitting them in the face. Leila was withdrawn and did not respond - even when hit by Musab, Leila did not react.

Musab and Leila's father has immediate relatives living in the UK, but his children do not have the necessary documentation to be eligible for the "one-in-one-out" scheme. The father's injuries took place after the ratification of this agreement, which may have allowed them the possibility to reach the UK safely with his children. Instead, the exclusionary nature of this agreement meant they were exposed to extreme violence as they attempted to cross the English Channel in a small boat.

Musab and Leila's story is not exceptional. It is representative of the compounding, overlapping harms that children on the UK-France border face as a direct result of violent policy choices.

Repeated failed crossing attempts compound these harms further. Fahda is the mother of four children aged 5, 6, 10 and 12, who were present in northern France for over three months. Fahda spoke to us of police violence and the impact of repeated failed crossing attempts:

**"Fahda testified that in the early hours of the morning, whilst it was still dark, her family were trying to cross to the UK and experienced police violence. 20 people from the group had already boarded the boat and the rest of the group were about to climb in when the police arrived and cut the boat in the water.**

**Fahda and her family were in the water but not yet inside the boat. The police then took the phones of all the men in the group, and the men that were inside the boat were taken to the police van and arrested. The remaining people, including Fahda and her family, were offered no help or support by the remaining police officers. This included no offers of medical aid, food, water or dry clothes.**

**Fahda described feeling very distressed, despite it being her 'tenth or eleventh' attempt at crossing and that she felt she should be 'used to it'. She said that the event felt more violent than previous police interventions with so many being arrested, and she said her husband was very nearly one of those arrested and if this had happened, she would have been alone with her four children and unable to reach him or get news of what happened to him."**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Fahda's testimony illustrates how repeated exposure to failed crossing attempts and police violence exposes children and families to compounding forms of harm, and how the fear of family separation, itself a form of psychological violence, is a constant presence in many of their lives.<sup>32</sup>

#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France must end all violent operations on the border, and the UK must cease funding for them.**

## 3.2. AMPLIFYING RISK - OVERCROWDING AND OFF-SHORE INTERVENTIONS

Police violence is particularly intense during embarkation - the moment when people are trying to board small boats. This dramatically amplifies an already elevated risk of injury and death for both children and adults.

**Research by Humans for Rights Network shows that of the 87 people killed on the UK-France border in 2024, 65 died within 300 metres of the coastline.<sup>33</sup>**

As documented in our previous report, the increased overcrowding of boats correlates with increased UK funding for border 'securitisation'.<sup>34</sup> The UK Home Office's data from 2025 showed that there was an average of 61 people per boat arriving to the UK - not accounting for failed crossings. This number has increased by a factor of ten since 2018, and has nearly doubled since 2022 - aligning with the three-fold increase in UK spending to 'secure' the border.<sup>35</sup>

Overcrowding, compounded by the panic caused by violent police interceptions during embarkation, is deadly. Eight children have been killed in these circumstances in the past two years - three in 2024, and five in 2025.<sup>36</sup> Every child killed in 2025 died as a result of crushing, asphyxiation or other consequences of dangerous overcrowding made more fatal by violent police interceptions.

**In 2025, the UK government sought to push this violence further, persuading the French authorities to intervene not just at the shoreline but in the water itself, up to 300 metres from shore.**

Off-shore interceptions were previously prohibited under official guidance in France, drawing on provisions of international maritime law which forbid the endangerment of life at sea and compel rescue for vessels in distress.<sup>37</sup> These interceptions are inherently dangerous - often, they involve the stabbing of inflatable boats, leading to people being thrown into deeper water. For children, who are out of their depth much faster than adults, this presents an acute and immediate risk to life.

Although official guidance was not changed until November 2025 - with French authorities concerned about legal liability - off-shore interceptions have long been documented by Project Play and partner organisations. In April 2025, 9-year-old Sameet described what had happened during a crossing attempt the previous night:

**"Sameet told me that the police stabbed their boat, and it broke. He said the water got in his eyes after the boat was stabbed, suggesting that he was inside the boat and afloat when this happened."**

- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator

33 - Humans for Rights Network, *You can't stay but you can't go*, December 2025

34 - Pg 38, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

135 - UK Home Office Data, year to December 2025 (26<sup>th</sup> February 2025). Dataset - IER\_02a

36 - P38, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

The following month, Sameet described another attempt:

**"Sameet told us that his family had tried to cross that morning, but there wasn't enough space in the boat. He had to wait in the sea with the water up to his chest. He repeated that he was not scared because he is a 'big brother' – but his mother said he was very scared of the water. The family walked back to Calais in wet clothes."**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Maryam, the mother of children aged 5, 15 and 16, described her family's fifth crossing attempt within a month of arriving in Calais:

**"Maryam said the police stabbed their boat while it was in the water and they were onboard, and it was really scary for everyone in the boat - the children in particular."**

*- Project Play playworker*

That off-shore interceptions were happening well before they were formally accepted into French guidance in November 2025 is clear from these testimonies, and from evidence pre-dating 2025. Clear too is the role of the UK government in bringing them about. This is not the first time the UK government has attempted to influence French operations in the water. In 2021, early suggestions of a policy allowing off-shore interceptions by the UK Home Office were shut down by the French government due to their unwillingness to violate international law.<sup>38</sup>

The reopening of these conversations, and the subsequent adoption of a policy, has happened in tandem with marked expansion in funding for border "securitisation" from the UK government as well as high-profile support from government officials. This underscores the central role of UK funding and support in steering the increasingly violent and life-threatening practices undertaken by the French authorities.

**This support was made explicit in July 2025, when BBC footage from July 2025 showing French riot police (CRS) stabbing an inflatable boat at sea, with a severely distressed child clearly visible on board. Then-Home Secretary Yvette Cooper welcomed the intervention, as did the UK prime minister's official spokesperson, who stated "we welcome this action".<sup>39</sup>**

No concern was shown for the safety or wellbeing of the child, or the people placed at risk when their boat was stabbed and deflated at sea.

The UK Government is well aware of the dangers of these interceptions. In October 2025 Martin Hewitt, UK Border Security commander, told the Home Affairs Committee that the French were working on ensuring that officers would be 'protected' from accountability in these circumstances, because:

**"Any activity in the water is incredibly dangerous and we're all familiar with the examples previously where there's been numbers of fatalities".**

This is a clear admission from a senior official that the UK has persuaded France to adopt policies and practices which present a danger to life.<sup>40</sup>

The contradiction at the heart of UK policy is stark. The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act, passed in December 2025, creates a new offence of endangering life at sea - targeted at those who steer small boats across the English Channel. This offence applies the moment boats leave dry land. It is unclear why steering a boat is considered life-threatening from the moment it leaves shore, but stabbing that boat and throwing everyone into the water is not. Ultimately, individuals are not responsible for people having to make dangerous journeys to the UK: these journeys would not be necessary if safe, dignified welcomes were offered and safe routes accessible.

**This shows a deliberate evasion of accountability and further criminalisation of people seeking safety. Yet again, UK policy and funding looks set to treat people with growing violence and put them in even more danger.**

### 3.3. SURVEILLANCE, TECHNOLOGY AND THE EXPANSION OF BORDER VIOLENCE

The expansion of UK funding has supported a significant growth in surveillance infrastructure on the border. As previously documented by Project Play and Humans for Rights Network, surveillance equipment - including drones, plane flights, helicopters and thermal cameras - constitutes a significant portion of the investment in border 'securitisation' under the Sandhurst Treaty.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst surveillance technology is presented as a tool for life-saving operations, research has consistently shown that in practice it is used primarily to inform and support police interceptions - facilitating, rather than preventing, physical violence against people on the move.<sup>42</sup>

In 2025, 7-year-old Tigisti described her experience of being watched by surveillance drones during a crossing attempt:

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40 - At 10:19:20 <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/2c00962a-3d62-4605-b5a7-381476133f59?in=10:19:20>  
41, 42 - Pg 27, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025; Pg 27, *Humans for Rights Network, You can't stay but you can't go*, December 2025

**“Tigisti told us that they tried several times to cross but never made it. They were always stopped by the police. She said that they tried to cross yesterday evening, but didn't make it, again being stopped by the police. Tigisti said that they were spotted by drones and that she saw red lights, like magma from a volcano. I asked if it was in the sky and she said yes. She repeated that there were drones who saw them.”**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Beyond facilitating physical violence, surveillance technologies are also a source of psychological harm. Children regularly speak to us about their fear of being watched by police even when the police are not visibly present. The knowledge of being surveilled is a form of violence in itself, contributing to the toxic stress that many of the children we work with experience. For children who have already faced repeated police violence, the presence of drones overhead is not a neutral fact. It is a reminder that the police can see them, and that what follows that visibility is rarely protection.<sup>43</sup>

#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France must end all violent operations on the border, and the UK must cease funding for them.**





Police evict a living site with children present © HRO

## 4. STATE VIOLENCE IN LIVING SITES

State violence at the UK–France border does not begin or end with crossing attempts. Violent police operations in living sites, notably through actions to evict people from these spaces, are an additional source of direct and acute violence. The denial of access to essential services - including healthcare, child-protection, shelter, food and water - represents chronic and systemic violence, and prevents children and families from recovering from acute episodes of violence.

Together, these overlapping forms of violence experienced in living sites contribute to the repeated, multiple harms children face whilst present on the UK-France border. As with the violence documented in section 3, this is not accidental - but exists by design in the policy and funding choices made by the UK and France.

### 4.1. EVICTIONS

Since the closure of the Calais 'Jungle' in 2016 and La Linière in Grand Synthe in 2017 - two larger and more permanent living sites - a policy of “zero points of fixation” has been maintained in bilateral UK-France agreements.<sup>44</sup> This is a deliberate strategy to prevent the establishment of stable living sites in northern France.

In practice, this policy is used to create extreme instability. French authorities engage in regular “eviction” operations to move people from their living sites. In these operations, anyone within the site is forced to move outside a given perimeter, and any belongings left inside the site are confiscated by authorities.<sup>45</sup>

**2025 saw an increase in the number and scale of evictions in the Dunkirk area, with Human Rights Observers recording a two-fold increase in the total number of operations carried out in 2025 compared to 2024, and three times the number of sites impacted.<sup>46</sup> The mayor of the local area assured locals that this increase was paid for by UK government money.<sup>47</sup>**

44 - Pg 30, Project Play, *We Want to be Safe: The Impact of Violence Against Children on the UK-France Border in 2024*, July 2025

45 - Ibid, section 3.1.

46 - <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Monthly-Report-December-2025-Grande-Synthe.pdf>

47 - <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a69d94949fc2bad10754433/t/692f1b0f7ef338123aa38752/1764694799800/HfRN+-+Final+Report.pdf>, p.75



**Evictions are a source of physical and psychological violence for people, including children and their families.**

One child, aged 7, and his father told us about an experience of an eviction in which police officers confiscated their belongings, including their tent and then proceeded to mock them, asking the children:

**"Where will you sleep tonight now?"**

Another child, aged 6, told Project Play that he "hates the police" and "the police hate women's centre [Refugee Women's Centre]". When asked why, he explained that it was because Refugee Women's Centre gives people tents, which the police want to take away.

Though not a new phenomenon, eviction operations serve to compound the harms experienced through the marked increase in acute violence experienced by people on the move during crossing attempts. In May 2025, Gazalah - an adult - spoke to us of returning from a crossing attempt, where their group, including children, had been tear gassed:

**"The group returned to an informal living site in Calais to sleep and recover. That morning, a police eviction of this living site took place, and all those sleeping there were ordered to leave. Gazalah gave some of her belongings to an unaccompanied child in the group, including a tent and life jacket "that I bought myself, so I may make it to England still alive".**

**All of these, including the unaccompanied child's phone and clothing which were inside the tent, were seized by the police during this eviction. After these events, Gazalah described feeling "really afraid" whenever she saw police cars."**

*- Kate O'Neill, Project Play Advocacy Coordinator*

Gazalah's testimony illustrates how police interventions during crossing attempts are often followed by further violence, including evictions, confiscation of essential and precious personal belongings, and a complete absence of support.

Evictions, along with other experiences of police violence, shape children's world views. Encounters with police often dominate the imaginations of the children we work with, who regularly play games pretending to be the police, hiding from the police and reenacting encounters with them.



## 4.2. DENIAL OF SUPPORT AND PROTECTION

The harm caused by acute episodes of state violence, for example during crossing attempts or evictions, is compounded by the systematic denial of state support and essential services.

This not only includes healthcare, psychological support and protective services, but basic necessities such as shelter, food and water. Without these essential services, children and their families are denied the services they need to simply live safely and in dignity, let alone to recover from often traumatic experiences of violence.

Access to healthcare is severely restricted for people on the move, both in formal entitlements and through the 'chilling effect' created by mistrust in authorities and inadequate access to translation services.<sup>48</sup>

**The active denial of medical care in the wake of crossing attempts is something we regularly hear of, including from 17-year-old Aida. Aida spoke to us about the police refusing to provide healthcare or medical attention when their group was returned to port by search and rescue vessels following a failed crossing attempt.**

The consequences of denied healthcare can be life-threatening, as the story of 10-year-old Ali, who we worked with in July 2025 attests.

### ALI, 10 - LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Ali is a ten year old boy who's family are from the Bidoon stateless community in Kuwait, but who has lived in Germany since he was a baby. During an attempt to reach the UK via small boat in July 2025, Ali fell into the sea and inhaled a significant amount of sea water.

He became quite sick in the following days, and his mother took him to Calais hospital (Centre Hospitalier Dr Jean Eric Techer Calais (CHC)) twice for his symptoms. On both occasions, Ali was refused care by the staff at CHC. Ali's mum told Project Play she felt discriminated against for being on the move, and not speaking French and her son continued to get more unwell.

Becoming increasingly concerned for her son's health, Ali's mother called their local hospital in Germany (where they used to live before being forced to leave) for advice and was told to bring him to the Emergency Department immediately. Having been refused care at CHC that day, Ali's mother felt unable to return, and instead decided to take her children back to Germany to access healthcare.

Ali was admitted to hospital for three weeks with infections in his blood, lungs and stomach as a result of inhaling sea water during the crossing attempt. This condition could have been fatal for Ali had he not been able to access healthcare. Ali and his family then returned to northern France, continuing to attempt to reach the UK.

Ali's story speaks to a dangerous lack of support provided by French authorities, including those mandated to provide care and protection.

This lack of support extends to social services. Children on the move often fall outside of the French state's child protection mechanisms, leaving them and their families unprotected and unsupported.

**In 2025, through the inter-organisational safeguarding casework Project Play is involved in, we made 18 referrals to state agencies as part of seven cases where additional support was considered appropriate. Of these 18 referrals, only one received a response and follow-up action.**

This is a long-standing failing, and one which exacerbates the situations of vulnerability and precarity both accompanied and unaccompanied children face on the UK-France border.<sup>49</sup>

These failings have particular consequences for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The Project Play team has worked with a number of children with complex needs who require specialist support - support inaccessible to them at the border. Kizzy, a Project Play playworker and SEND specialist, described the impact of this directly:

**"The later support frameworks are put in place, the harder it is to integrate them. I have this sense that you are actively losing time, the longer a child with additional needs is in Calais."**

- Kizzy Griffiths, Project Play Playworker and Psychosocial Volunteer

The lack of access to adequate shelter is a persistent failure of the state. The vast majority of the children and families we work with live in tents, without access to safe or stable accommodation. During one Project Play session, 8-year-old Jamila, from Palestine, showed her emotion as 'sad' on an emotion poster and said "I don't have a house". She said that she doesn't sleep well because their tent is on the street, and she finds it scary sometimes. Children often draw houses or speak to us about the homes they have left behind - in Europe and elsewhere.

Children also face inadequate access to food and drinking water. In February 2025, Yahya, aged 8, picked up a "burger" and "drink" in a pretend game and said:

**"I'm so hungry because I live in the jungle".<sup>50</sup>**

- Yahya, aged 8.

Furthermore, by refusing to provide safe accommodation or safe routes to cross to the UK, the UK and French governments have enabled the proliferation of intermediary<sup>51</sup> networks who expose communities to violence within living sites.<sup>52</sup>

**Sara, a child we worked with, described seeing “lots of guns and drugs” in living sites. Similarly, 10-year-old Basma said that, in a living site she had stayed in, “there were a lot of guns”. Her mother told us the family did not feel safe enough to leave their tent. Basma’s family felt isolated, and were struggling to access healthcare, food or psychosocial support.**

As Humans for Rights Network’s research has shown, despite the high numbers of police presence at the border, they persistently fail to protect people from intermediary violence.<sup>53</sup> Instead, the police are a source of yet further violence and hostility, both in living sites and during crossing attempts, as documented throughout this report.

This reflects the fact that both the UK and France prioritise meeting people on the move with violence and hostility rather than ensuring access to protection, and safe routes to travel. Indeed, the existence of intermediary networks fundamentally relies on the absence of safe, accessible routes to reach the UK. As Humans for Rights Network finds:

**“these networks are... the product of [UK] government policy. If safe routes were available.... Smuggled journeys would not be required”.<sup>54</sup>**

By restricting access to safe routes and increasing funding for border enforcement, the UK creates conditions of inevitable violence on its border in northern France. This places children at direct risk of harm as a result of the dangerous living conditions they endure. The French authorities fail in their duties to protect children - the reality that even state agencies with a mandate to protect children fail to extend such support to children on the move illustrates that the violence they face is systemic. Instead, resources are focused on securitisation and the active perpetration of violence, including as a result of significant pressure and funding from the UK.

**These interrelated and compounding harms require cross-border accountability and action to keep children safe and protect their rights.**

#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France must end all violent operations on the border, and the UK must cease funding for them.**

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51 - Intermediary used in place of the more commonly used ‘smuggler’ - see glossary for more info.  
52, 53 - Pg 128-129, *Humans for Rights Network, You can’t stay but you can’t go*, December 2025  
54 - Pg 125, *Humans for Rights Network, You can’t stay but you can’t go*, December 2025



## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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In 2024 and 2025, at least 22 children were killed on the UK-France border. Thousands more endured repeated and compounding violence - including police interceptions during crossing attempts, evictions from living sites and the systematic denial of basic needs. Often, this came after years being failed by asylum systems across Europe. This report has documented some of their stories, and traced the policy and funding decisions which gave rise to them.

The violence which faces people on the UK-France border is the result of deliberate choices, made by the UK and French governments and sustained by bilateral agreements and escalating public funding. Since 2023, the UK has committed €541 million to border 'securitisation' in northern France - a more than threefold increase on the previous three-year period. According to French officials, it is more likely than not that, when a police officer perpetrates violence against a child on the UK-France border, it is paid for by UK funding.

This report builds on "[We Want to Be Safe](#)", published by Project Play in July 2025, and "[You Can't Stay, But You Can't Go](#)", published by Humans for Rights Network in December 2025. Together, these reports document a trajectory that is becoming impossible to ignore - year on year, funding has increased, and border violence has intensified.

2026 presents a crucial moment for change. Negotiations for the next three years of UK border funding are underway, and the decisions made in those negotiations will shape what happens at the border for years to come. Meanwhile, a group of French MPs have opened a formal investigation into the impact of bilateral funding and operations.

Project Play calls on the UK government to open a statutory inquiry into UK funding for border enforcement in northern France, parallel to the investigation already underway in France. Such an inquiry must be genuinely independent, centring the experiences of those most affected - those who have experienced the UK-France border first hand, including children - and prioritise transparency.

Alongside our call for a statutory inquiry, we repeat the recommendations made in "[We Want to Be Safe](#)" - an immediate end to policies of violence at the border, the opening of safe, accessible routes for all those who need them, and a longer-term commitment from both the UK and France to an approach to migration founded on dignity and human rights rather than hostility and deterrence. Our recommendations are summarised on the following page.

## 5.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

Centrally, we call for a UK inquiry into spending on the border. The past three-years of enhanced UK funding resulted in a catastrophic increase in violence and fatalities. 2026 represents an important moment for transparency and accountability - with the negotiation of UK spending for the next three-year term, and a parliamentary inquiry ongoing in France. As such:

### 1. WE CALL FOR A STATUTORY INQUIRY INTO UK SPENDING AT THE BORDER.



**The UK must conduct a statutory inquiry into UK spending at the border, whether through the French government or private companies, to establish how taxpayer's money has been used.**

### 2. WE RESTATE THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF "WE WANT TO BE SAFE".

In our 2025 report, we made a number of urgent, short, and long-term policy recommendations targeting the need for accountability and action on both sides of the Channel. These recommendations remain relevant, and we restate them here:

#### URGENT

**To prevent further loss of life, the governments of the UK and France should:**

- Demonstrate cross-border accountability, committing to genuine life-saving operations, publishing data on deaths and improving support for survivors.
- End the criminalisation of people on the move, including by reversing legislation which criminalises those arriving irregularly.

#### SHORT-TERM

**To end systemic violence on the border the governments of the UK and France must:**

- End violent operations, including interceptions and evictions, and cease funding for them.
- Ensure safe and accessible routes to asylum are available for all those who need them.

#### LONG-TERM

**To create broad and enduring change, we urge the UK and France to:**

- Create genuine policies of welcome, prioritising the dignity and human rights of people seeking safety in France and the UK.
- Become European leaders in championing human rights and ending hostility to migration, supporting collective change on a regional level.

## **Glossary**

### **Asylum seeker**

Someone who has registered an asylum claim in a country outside their home country.

### **Crossing (attempt)**

Unless otherwise stated, this refers to attempts to irregularly cross the Channel in small boats.

### **Global North**

Countries in Europe, North America, Oceania and Asia which have benefited economically from colonisation and globalization. Many of these countries were colonial powers in the 16th-20th centuries, and still wield disproportionate power on the global stage.

### **Global South**

Countries in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean which have been underdeveloped as a result of colonisation and globalization. Many of these countries were colonised by the Global North in the 16th-20th centuries and have since been part of decolonisation movements and alliances.

### **Informal living sites**

Living sites which are not approved by government or local authorities and which are therefore precarious and materially vulnerable. Tents or abandoned buildings may offer a crude form of shelter in informal living sites.

### **Intermediaries**

People who organise irregular crossings across borders (often referred to as 'smugglers').

### **Irregular migration**

Migration which takes place outside of state-sanctioned systems of crossing borders.

### **People on the move/children on the move**

People or children who are currently undertaking a migration journey. This includes people hoping to cross the English Channel to reach the UK.

### **Refugee**

Someone who has been granted refugee status.

### **Safe routes**

Processes which allow people to safely travel from one country to another, particularly from a place where they are at risk to a safer country.

### **Unaccompanied children**

Children (anybody under the age of 18) who are travelling without a parent or adult carer.

### **United Nations Refugee Convention (“The 1951 Refugee Convention”)**

The United Nations convention which defines refugees and outlines how they should be treated. It also details the rights of asylum seekers.

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**

An international treaty ratified in 1989 by the majority of UN members including the UK and France which lays out the fundamental rights of all children.

For more context on why these language choices are made, please see Appendix A of *We Want to Be Safe*.

## **Illustrations**

- Teargas is used against a family during a crossing attempt (p23)
- Drones like magma in the sky (p33)
- Children play out experiences of violence (p36)

Many thanks to Niamh Shaw for her support both with this report and *We Want to Be Safe*.



# NOWHERE SAFE:

The Impact of UK-Funded Border  
Violence Against Children in Northern France



In 2024 and 2025, at least 22 children were killed on the UK-France border. Thousands more endured repeated and compounding violence - during crossing attempts, in evictions from living sites, and through the systematic denial of basic needs.

This report centres the voices and experiences of the children and families Project Play worked with in 2025 to trace the policy and funding decisions that gave rise to this violence, and to make the case for accountability and urgent change.

It is designed to build on our July 2025 Report, "[We Want to Be Safe](#)", and on Humans for Rights Network's December 2025 Report, "[You Can't Stay, But You Can't Go](#)".

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