

# PEOPLE NOT WALLS

The Cross-Channel Human Rights Initiative  
L'initiative trans-Manche de défense des droits humains

## ***Our First Year – 2019***

***'People not Walls' is a recently established collaboration: a cross-border partnership between English and French NGOs concerned to maintain the rights and dignity of people who find themselves trapped at borders in Europe, especially the French-UK border along the coasts of the English Channel.***

*The principal organisations involved so far have been the Anglican Chaplaincy & Refugee Project Officer (Pas de Calais); L'Auberge des Migrants; Anglican Diocese of Canterbury; Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark, Commission for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; Catholic Diocese of Westminster Justice and Peace Commission; Help Refugees; Refugee Rights Europe; Secours Catholique; Seeking Sanctuary; Association Maria Skobstova, Calais. (With support from Kent Refugee Help; Samphire Project; London Catholic Worker; Columban Missionaries UK, and others.)*

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## REPORT ON THE FIRST YEAR'S WORK

### Background

Over 90 people (a third of them from the Pas-de-Calais area) attended a gathering in St Paul's Church, Dover on 20 October, 2018, entitled 'Solidarity Across the Channel'. Discussions proceeded in both French and English and it was agreed that a contact group would meet to discuss how greater solidarity could be developed. This group first met a year ago, on 24 January 2019, and three lines of action have been followed:

- Exchange of information about the situations regarding asylum systems / procedures, reception conditions, etc. on the two sides of the border and the efforts being made to publicise these conditions and provide humanitarian assistance;
- Planning a joint symbolic action on World Refugee Day in June 2019 to demonstrate that citizens on the two sides of the border are connected and work hand in hand for solidarity with refugees;
- Pursuit of a possible joint advocacy campaign on violations of human rights in the region.

### Launch – June 2019

The name **PEOPLE NOT WALLS** was adopted and the above logo developed in readiness for a launch to the public on World Refugee Day with a forceful statement against the extremely dire conditions, inhumane and degrading treatment, and excessive police violence facing refugees in Northern France, with demands for change.

On World Refugee Day in June there were, for the first time, simultaneous public awareness events on both sides of the Channel. In Dover, we started with a short service beside the two memorials on the sea front for those who have died attempting Channel crossings. A period of silent witness with banners followed at the busy roundabout facing the port en-

trance, and we then visited "Samphire", a small organisation working to help ex-detainees and running a community engagement project to improve social cohesion, and inclusivity, not to mention an excellent schools' outreach programme.

In Calais several hundred participants, mainly exiles, gathered to enjoy a picnic with music and dance on the *Plage Blériot*. Also, thirty people from Sudan, Iran and Ethiopia met with a media trainer from London to learn how to deal with reporters, and held their own press conference, pointing out that they were still in Calais, having fled their homes for the same reasons as in the past: wars, violence, injustices, poverty.

Dover events concluded in the evening at the 11th century Church in St-Margaret's-at-Cliffe, the village closest to the French coast. Rev Diane Fawcett read a passage from *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini, in which a father, watching his sleeping son on the eve of their journey, reflects upon the dangerous sea-crossing that lies before them. We walked down to a green above the White Cliffs in sight of those gathered on the Calais beach, just 22 miles away. A 'Love Knows No Borders' banner was displayed and the new 'People Not Walls' declaration of solidarity with all migrants was read on both coasts, summed up by the words: "Stop investing in walls and start investing in people". That is to say, replace the current security-focused approach with a humanitarian alternative.

It was particularly encouraging to see the ecumenical work and preparation as well as the cooperation among all the various organisations, both faith-based and secular, to make the event a success.

### **Further Efforts**

On 25 October, members of the continuity group met in Dover and approved a statement of concern for the human tragedy that was then being revealed in Essex, involving numerous Vietnamese deaths in a sealed truck. The meeting concluded with a visit to the plaques on the seafront that remember others who had died when attempting to cross the Channel, especially the previous group of 58 Chinese found dead at the port in June 2000.

On 4 December, several People not Walls member organisations were involved, with others, in organising events at various French border crossings calling for a Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry into the dehumanising and hostile treatment of migrants at the borders. Some 40 people, UK members and many others, gathered outside the French Embassy in London to stand in solidarity with

them and deliver a letter of support to the Ambassador.

A handsome new banner was on show in both London and Calais!

### **Looking Ahead**

While we are particularly pleased with the media attention and awareness raised by our common symbolic events, it is also important to acknowledge the advantages of working together and attracting others to join us. 20 June 2020 will see another gathering in Dover at 11.30 am to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of the 58 dead young Chinese in a sealed truck. The new Bishop of Dover, the Rt Revd Dr Rose Hudson-Wilkin, intends to join us.

Our French friends are very much on the front line of all the issues involving exiles, but the UK outlook is very worrying. It seems that the "hostile environment" remains at the top of the immigration agenda. Efforts to raise awareness will be ever more important to counter the hostility and prejudice which is the hallmark of the present-day political narrative.

We aim to grow our numbers and continue our efforts through 2020 and try to respond effectively. UK members have already joined calls upon the new government to maintain a commitment to negotiate with the EU for an agreement to allow child migrants in Europe to be united with their families. They point out that any lapse will simply further encourage more youngsters to look for illegal and hazardous ways to enter the UK and condemn many more of them to a life of homelessness and futility.

*January 2020*

