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FROM THE EARL OF COURTOWN
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Dear Lady Sheehan

21 July 2016

During the question for short debate on Thursday 7 July on Refugees and Migrants: International Summits you raised a number of points which I was unable to respond to at the time and I promised to write to you.

You expressed concern that those displaced for reasons other than individual persecution are not readily accommodated by the provisions of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. There is little appetite within the international community for re-opening those legal texts. But I am optimistic that the UN General Assembly High Level Event will provide an opportunity to build international consensus on the practical actions that should be taken to respond to large movements of people, acknowledging that individuals move for many reasons and in different circumstances. The Summit will reaffirm existing legal frameworks, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and will seek to develop best practice in the treatment of refugees and migrants by transit and host countries.

The Government recognises the benefits that refugees bring to the UK and is keen to ensure they are given opportunities to integrate and fulfil their potential. We are working towards achieving increasingly integrated communities and creating conditions for all to live and work successfully alongside one another. All those claiming asylum in the UK are provided with information about British laws and values and services that are available to support them. Those who are granted refugee status are given full access to the labour market and benefits system, and are encouraged to access organisations that can assist with integration. The Home Office provides refugees with an integration loan to assist people with accessing training and housing.

We are keen to see communities supporting the process of integration for refugees. The Home Office has recently announced that they would build on offers of support in order to develop a community sponsorship scheme, to allow individuals, charities, faith groups and business to support refugees directly. The Home Office is now working with those parties who have made offers on developing a sustainable model for helping vulnerable peoples settle and integrate into communities and, where they are able, help find employment.

You raised the situation in northern France and asked about what the UK Government is doing. The UK Government is providing support to the French Government to improve the management of the migrant camps. In order to assist those vulnerable in the camps, the French Government with UK assistance is providing alternative accommodation arrangements for migrants, particularly, women and children including more than 130 new welcome centres away from Calais to assist migrants with their asylum options. Over 4,200 migrants have taken up this offer since October 2015. The UK and France retain a strong focus on protecting those vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, and have put in place a programme to identify and help potential victims in the camps around Calais. The project to identify and protect vulnerable people in the camps in Calais is being delivered by a French non-Government organisation, France Terre D'Asile. It will find potential victims of trafficking and exploitation (including children), and direct them to existing protection, support and advice within France. The UK has contributed £530,000 (€750,000) towards the costs of this project.

The UK and France are running joint communication campaigns at both Dunkirk and Calais to help inform migrants of their options and of their right to claim asylum in France. Both Governments are clear that we should be doing everything to encourage refugees in Calais to claim asylum in France, and to prevent more illegal migrants from coming to Calais, where they will be living in very difficult conditions, often exploited by traffickers and putting their lives at risk by trying to enter the UK.

In addition, the UK and French authorities have worked intensely to improve the operation of the Dublin system, including the secondment of a UK expert to the French Interior Ministry and the establishment of a permanent official level contact group.

You also asked about the number of unaccompanied refugee children that have been brought to the UK under the provisions in the Immigration Act 2016. The UK is working through complex legal and safeguarding mechanisms in other countries, in order to ensure any actions undertaken are in the best interests of the child. However, I can confirm that 20 children who met the criteria under the Immigration Act have been accepted for transfer to the UK since Royal Assent was given, with the vast majority having already arrived in the UK. The UK is also working on making the process more effective by communicating with the UNHCR, UNICEF, NGOs and Italian, Greek and French Governments. In conjunction with discussions, the UK has seconded an expert to Greece, alongside a long standing secondee in Italy to coordinate on this initiative. As per the requirements in the Immigration Act, the Home Office has been consulting local authorities to understand their available capacity and to ensure appropriate support systems are in place for new arrivals. We will update Parliament in due course.

I hope you find this letter helpful. I will place a copy in the House Library.

THE EARL OF COURTOWN

Baroness Sheehan
House of Lords