

Dear Sally-Ann Hart

You recently published on your social media pages an open letter to Priti Patel MP.

As members of your constituency and representatives of The Refugee Buddy Project: Hastings, Rother & Wealden, Hastings Supports Refugees and Hastings Community of Sanctuary, we are deeply concerned that your letter does not accurately reflect the situation itself or the feelings of your constituents here in Hastings and Rye. We refer you to our statement issued on 9 April 2020 (published both on our website and in the local press), and would like to pick up on some of the points you make in your letter.

- To characterise the issue as “migrant crossings” is to misread the situation. Those seeking refuge are not migrants, they are seeking asylum which is completely different and an important distinction.
- It seems highly unlikely that these boats, which are little more than rubber dinghies, are aiming for Pett Level, but rather are drifting there due to currents and wind direction. To say it is a choice implies an attempt to raise anxiety among local people.
- You suggest the situation “is causing deep unease and concern to local residents”. In fact, many of us are deeply concerned that Northern France is so unsafe for people seeking refuge that they are risking their lives to make the journey across the Channel. We are also worried about the treatment of those seeking refuge once they arrive on our shores: in particular that they are placed in detention, which is inhumane at the best of times and, given coronavirus, extremely dangerous as the moment. In addition we are not convinced that those seeking refuge will have their claims dealt with fairly.
- The notion that crossing the Channel is “illegal” for the purposes of claiming asylum is utterly incorrect. Claiming asylum is absolutely legal under International Law; indeed the Article 31(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention clearly states that there should be no penalisation of peoples who cross a border without prior consent in order to claim asylum.
- As we, and others, have said time and again, the only way to stop people risking their lives to enter the UK is to have safe and legal routes of entry. Furthermore, the attempt to turn this into an issue of criminal human traffickers is to ignore the global refugee crisis and our responsibility as a nation to respond to it humanely and fairly.
- The current Government is underperforming on its own testing targets of people already in the UK, is not testing those arrival at airports, and is not offering testing to the public at large. It would be of greater benefit to your constituents to urge your leadership to commit to a comprehensive package of testing across the UK. The notion that people seeking refuge are coming in and infecting the community is nothing short of scaremongering.

- The Home Office has been quoted in multiple news sources as saying that those seeking refuge are taken to Dover to see if they require medical attention, and then transferred to start assessment of their asylum claims. This latter part happens in Lunar House, in Croydon, as we're sure you're aware. It seems, therefore, that you are suggesting the Home Office is lying to the press as well as preventing them from accessing due legal process. We are sure this is not your intention, so we can only conclude that you are making such statements to further whip up fear in our local community.
- You state that "these crossings are clearly being used by (sic) economic migrants as well". We are interested to know how you have determined this, as you surely do not have access nor take part in the formal process which those seeking refuge go through on arrival to the UK. We would ask that you elaborate on how you have access to this, supposedly confidential, information.

We are glad that you accept that crossing the Channel is incredibly dangerous. We agree. You should also accept that, to use the words of British-Somali Poet Warsan Shire: *"no one puts their child in a boat unless water is safer than land"*. We would hope that you, as an MP, would be fighting for the rights of people to be treated with the respect they deserve and afforded the legal access enshrined in both UK and International Law.

Hastings has a long standing and well-respected reputation welcoming people seeking refuge, bolstered by the success of the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Programme (formally the Syrian Resettlement Programme). We encourage you to speak to the organisations working with and for people seeking refuge in our constituency, because your views do not reflect your constituents who work in this area nor, we believe, Hastings more broadly. Many of your constituents volunteer much of their time and resources to support those seeking refuge and we would be more than willing to show you what we do, and how you can support us – your constituents - in that work.

Yours sincerely

The Refugee Buddy Project, Hastings Rother & Wealden

Hastings Supports Refugees

Hastings Community of Sanctuary