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Migrant crisis: What the North East could and should be doing to help refugees

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- **BY** [MIKE KELLY](#)

The striking image of a dead child on a European beach has changed the conversation about refugees - but what will the North East do?



A migrant jumps a fence as he attempts to access the Channel Tunnel in Calais, northern France

Sometimes it takes a single event, an image, to change public attitudes and this appears to have happened with the death of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi.

He and his Syrian-Kurdish family were attempting to cross to the Greek island of Kos in an overcrowded dinghy when he and at least 11 others drowned, including his five-year-old brother Galip and their mother Rehan. Their eventual aim was safety in Canada from the brutal ISIS group now over running Syria.

Peter Sagar, former Northern East representative of Amnesty International, said: "It's terrible in a way that it's taken such a tragedy to get people to appreciate the enormity of the crisis and why Britain should act."

“Up until now, our Government’s response to it has been shameful.

“In my view, government policy on this issue has been determined by a small number of newspaper owners who don’t live in this country.

“We are the sixth richest country in the world yet there are far more refugees taken in by much poorer countries than ours.

“The problem is the whole issue has been clouded by myths and lies. I’ve read, for example, that people in Britain believe we have about one quarter of the world’s refugees living here. The figure is actually, I think, about 2.4%.”

He added: “We’ve got to stop just thinking of them as migrants or asylum seekers. We have to think of them as being human beings.”

The North East has a long tradition of providing asylum for those looking to escape prosecution and harm at home.

The diverse range of ethnic groups in the region’s community is testament to that.

AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis



Migrants, including children, on a dinghy start their journey from near the coastal town of Bodrum, Turkey, to cross to the nearby Greek island of Kos

And now [Newcastle](#), alongside [Gateshead](#) and [Sunderland](#), are part of the City of Sanctuary movement which aims to build a culture of hospitality for people seeking sanctuary in the UK.

Its goal is to create a network of towns and cities throughout the country which are proud to be places of safety.

Joyce McCarty, deputy leader of [Newcastle City Council](#), said: "It's about welcoming refugees from all parts of the world, to help people fleeing violence and persecution." There are now growing demands on the Government to take in more refugees. But where would they go, and would Newcastle be able to cope if approached to take them in?

Coun McCarty said: "Newcastle is a very welcoming city. If we received the request we would do all we can to help."

Since January, the number of 'asylum dispersals' to Newcastle has risen from 516 to 570, up 10%.

This reflects the national figure of 25,771 asylum applications by year ending June 2015, a 10% increase on the previous year.

This is coupled with the ongoing official pressure to rebalance the distribution of asylum seekers from the South of the region (Tees Valley) to the North (Tyne and Wear).

AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis



Migrants in a dinghy paddle after they began their journey from a beach near the coastal town of Bodrum, Turkey

Earlier this year it was revealed Middlesbrough has 1,000 asylum seekers out of a population of 134,000. The government has set a limit of one asylum seeker per 200 head of population.

In the mean time, Coun McCarty encouraged people who wanted to get involved personally to contact grassroots group, like the North East Solidarity with Calais Refugees, which is buying and collecting food, bedding and warm clothing to take to the migrants gathered in France.

Meanwhile Mr Sagar added: “The vast majority of refugees come from war-torn countries.

“They are looking for somewhere safe but, when peace returns to their homeland, they want to return there.”

He added that there is now an evident change in the politics surrounding the migrant crisis towards Britain doing much more to help.

Mr Sagar said: “In Germany, as has been reported, there has been more of a welcome. There have even been banners saying ‘refugees welcome’ seen at major football matches.

“It was great that a similar sign was put up at match in England down south involving the Kingstonian club. Imagine the message it would send out if similar banners were seen at St James’ Park or the Stadium of Light. That would be really something.”