

Spring 2008

# From Asylum Seeker to Refugee

## The Right to Work

Asylum Seekers are denied the right to work while their asylum claim is being assessed. If the initial decision takes longer than 12 months for no fault of theirs then they are allowed to apply for permission to work. They can only ask, it is not a right and there is no guarantee that they will be given it. Permission to work is withdrawn when an asylum claim is refused and appeal rights are exhausted.

While waiting for a decision almost all asylum seekers are therefore forbidden by law to work. Lack of purposeful activity can lead to a reduction in mental wellbeing, whereas useful occupation can improve mental health. Many suffer acute social isolation which leads to a lack of self-confidence and increased depression and anxiety. Past trauma and fear are likely to remain along with increasing feelings of worthlessness.

Most asylum seekers arriving in the UK are enthusiastic to work and have little understanding of welfare systems. Over the months or years that their asylum claim is being processed people are forced to survive without working and become dependent on the state.

In addition their work skills are not being utilised which can make it even harder for them to find work once they receive refugee status. For example, in the last 9 months I've met a qualified civil engineer, architect and quantity surveyor. All of them were unable to work while their claim was being processed. In one case this took 5½ years. Just imagine how much could have been built if these three had been allowed to work!

It is also harder to find a job after such a length of time unemployed. Unemployment among refugees is much higher than the average and could be as high as 60% and even higher within some particular Refugee Communities.

The European Commission noted that in 2005 that, "Employment is a key part of the integration process and is central to the participation of immigrants, to the contributions immigrants make to the host society, and to making such contributions visible"

Integration should start from the first day someone arrives in the UK and therefore a change of policy to grant a licence to work for asylum seekers could make a huge difference. It could benefit not only the asylum seekers themselves but also reduce costs for the home office, help meet local employment shortfalls, boost the economy,

improve integration of people while in the asylum process, enable better monitoring, improve family life, improve integration of those granted leave to remain and reduce dependency on the welfare system.

Pete Richardson, LASSN Manager.

### Lord Goldsmith backs "the right to work" for people seeking asylum.

Lord Goldsmith has said that paid employment is essential to allow people seeking asylum to help themselves, British society and the UK economy. Lord Goldsmith, who was asked to do a review by Gordon Brown, stopped short of saying outright that people refused asylum cannot work. Rather he called for a further "review of the policy in practice".

It is a tragic waste of the specialist skills of refugee health professionals (for example) that they are usually prevented from working. And at the other end of the spectrum there is a massive pool of people willing to do the 3D's (dirty, dangerous and demanding) work that many British people won't do. Nevertheless it is useful that somebody of Lord Goldsmith's status and experience has partly recognised the plight of the thousands of people who cannot be forcibly removed because of serious safety issues, uncooperative governments, or unreliable travel routes.

Church Action on Poverty (CAP) sees his comments being part of the British values of "work for those who can; support for those that can't". His advocacy of this for people seeking asylum is an opportunity for us all to use, with MPs and the Government.



Befriending volunteer Frank Stevens delighted to be granted leave to remain in the UK (page 2)



## Agencies Report Large Numbers Facing Destitution

Asylum seekers and refugees in Leeds are still at risk of becoming homeless at some stage during the asylum process. Key refugee agencies across the city such as the Health Access Team and the Refugee Council, report that they are seeing large numbers of clients facing destitution.

Homelessness is also a real risk for those people fortunate enough to be granted leave to remain in the UK. Upon receiving a positive decision, people are given 28 days notice to leave their NASS accommodation. The chronic shortages of council and social housing, particularly for single people without dependents, mean that for many people, destitution is the result of been granted permission to stay in the UK.

Here at Short Stop we have seen a dramatic increase of referrals of people who have received a positive decision and have been evicted from their NASS accommodation. Increasingly we are also seeing more people from outside the Leeds area who the local authority are refusing to accept as homeless as they have no local connection.

When and if accommodation is secured, it is extremely difficult for some people to maintain their tenancy i.e. understanding rights and responsibilities as a tenant, managing money and budgeting, furnishing the property and dealing with anti-social behaviour. Some people are fortunate to receive housing support from providers including Connect and Leeds Federated Housing Association as part of Supporting People.

Katrina Burton, Short Stop Co-ordinator

### Vulnerable People Sleeping Rough

“The hardships faced by refugees who are given leave to remain are often forgotten. Making the transition out of the asylum support system into the mainstream welfare system can have devastating consequences, and it’s tragic that we often see vulnerable people whose need for safety has been recognised sleeping rough and suffering extreme hardship. We’ve been lobbying the government for an accessible and high quality support service to be in place until people have managed to navigate the mainstream system, and to put in place an action plan to ensure transition arrangements are improved.”

Charlotte Cooke, Head of Operations (North), Refugee Council.

### Short Stop

- 25% of referrals to LASSN’s Short Stop emergency accommodation project are of people who have been granted refugee status.

## How Refugee Community Organisations Help

Research carried out by Leeds Refugee Forum (LRF) supported by LASSN, has found that eleven Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) have between them supported a community of over 6,000 people. When asked about the main issues faced by their community to integrate into UK society, three key themes emerged: Language; Cultural differences; Lack of understanding of the UK system.

RCOs are responding to these needs as best they can but need support themselves. Every RCO is run by volunteers with not a single member of paid staff between them. Despite this they provide invaluable services to their communities such as advice and information, sign posting, letter writing, translation, recreational, social and cultural activities.

LRF is starting to provide some support and is seen by all RCOs as key to:

- Creating one voice for refugee and asylum seekers;
- Being a strategic body for RCOs and influencing policies;
- Providing advice and information;
- Providing opportunities to meet up with other RCOs;
- Providing training.

The research in Leeds is being rolled out to Bradford and South Yorkshire. A report of the findings will be published soon.

Marzieh Berenjjan, Leeds Refugee Forum.

## UK Asylum Process Fosters Trauma & Anxiety

In February, representatives from the Destitution Steering Group conducted a survey on the link between destitution and mental health. The Befriending project at LASSN, concerned by the ever increasing level of mental health referrals, took part. We found that of all the new or existing clients that co-ordinators saw during this month:

- 81% were experiencing emotional distress
- 57% had a diagnosed mental health illness
- 19% had tried or had talked about committing suicide.

These clients were a mixture of refugees, asylum seekers and ‘failed’ asylum seekers, which indicates that it is not just destitution but the whole nature of the asylum process which fosters trauma and anxiety. However, we have witnessed the profound effect befriending can have on relieving such distress, even though in most cases we cannot treat the root cause.

Pauline Cooke, Befriending Co-ordinator.

## Thank You!

to everyone who has raised funds over the last year towards the work of LASSN. Your support has enabled us to make Hardship payments of £27,000 to destitute Asylum Seekers in Leeds.

## Free ESOL Key to Integration

Free English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision would prepare people for work by being job ready and so help them integrate into the wider community.

Because it targets mostly wives of asylum seekers and refugees, the English at Home project has helped students gain access to ESOL classes at college by raising their confidence to attend a class. However, over the years, only about half the students have been able to go on to college classes. Many students have either moved away or continued without moving to college or going into employment after the tutor had left. Reasons for this have been the arrival of another baby or lack of motivation because of continued childcare. As for male students, their particular mental health state has made it difficult for them to access classes or employment after the tutor had left. However one particular man from Afghanistan who didn't have much education in his country and who was tutored for over a year was able to access low grade employment as his English had improved greatly.

The main contribution of tutors is to raise these women's confidence in using the English they already have or have acquired. One particular student from Eritrea stated categorically that, after six months of learning, she could now talk with her housing provider worker on the phone and understand what he was saying.

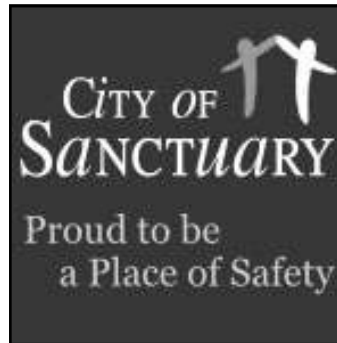
Occasionally, it has helped a few to gain access to other subject classes such as IT or hairdressing. One student from Ethiopia was able to go on to do a Health Care course and is now at the end of the

first year of nursing training. However, since the majority of these other classes are not free, it has been a rare occurrence.

Gerard Godon, English at Home.

## City of Sanctuary

The City of Sanctuary movement started in Sheffield with the aim of building a genuine culture of hospitality for refugees and asylum seekers. 'City of Sanctuary' is a place where a broad range of local organisations, community groups and faith communities, as well as local government, are publicly committed to welcoming and including asylum-seekers and refugees in all aspects of life.



The aim for 2008 is to see a growing national City of Sanctuary movement that can start to influence policy makers and public attitudes throughout the country. The first national City of Sanctuary conference will be on 4th June 2008.

The aim of the conference is to bring together people from communities across the UK who are already involved in City of Sanctuary initiatives or who are interested in the idea.

Contact the working group in Leeds through Richard Byrne, Regional Media Officer, Refugee Council, [Richard.byrne@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:Richard.byrne@refugeecouncil.org.uk) 0113 386 2235, 07776 203404, or [ed@togetherforpeace.co.uk](mailto:ed@togetherforpeace.co.uk). Details can be found at [www.cityofsanctuary.com](http://www.cityofsanctuary.com)

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### Show your support – 21 June 08

The news often gives a false impression. At LASSN we know that thousands of people in Leeds support asylum seekers. For example, this morning I had a phone call from a neighbour concerned for an asylum seeker who had been detained with her two children.

On the afternoon of Saturday 21 June during Refugee Week, we are holding a Parade to show just how many people believe that those fleeing persecution should be supported. Please put the date in your diary and look out for further details.

### Help raise money – 5 July 08

Please join us for LASSN's third sponsored walk to raise money for our Hardship Fund for destitute asylum seekers and refugees. LASSN's Hardship Fund offers a financial lifeline to people in greatest need. We receive no direct funding for the fund, so

every penny raised on the walk is much appreciated. An entry form and further details are enclosed with this newsletter.

### Good Asylum? – 18 October 08

What would a good asylum system look like?

How can the existing UK system become fair and just?

We are holding a national conference with both Universities in Leeds to examine practical solutions to the asylum issue. Philippe Legrain will be our keynote speaker. He is a critically acclaimed journalist and writer, visiting fellow at the London School of Economics European Institute and contributing editor to Prospect magazine. His latest book is Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them. Come to the conference to find out why he thinks freedom of movement is a moral imperative and a win-win for Britain.

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