

Winter 2010

Waiting for the Chance to Give Back What He's Received

Z came to England sixteen years ago with a charity called Zimbabwe Educational Trust. The charity supported him while he studied at university; he finished his studies ten years ago but was never able to use his qualifications.

In 2000 he was in the process of renewing his visa when the troubles in Zimbabwe escalated to breaking point: "They were beating people up and everybody was running away, my family had to escape to South Africa. So I was too scared to go back and I ended up over-staying my visa. I didn't even know about the asylum process, so I didn't know what else to do."



When he first sought asylum he had no support and didn't know about any organisations which could help him: "I was left destitute, so I had to rely on the help of friends until the end of last year, when my friend couldn't help me anymore." He found shelter at St Georges Crypt in Leeds, which provides overnight accommodation for the homeless: "I slept there, spending the rest of the day on the street. My asylum claim had been refused; I'd gone through the appeal process and had no support."

Whilst at St Georges he was in the process of making a fresh claim, which his solicitor eventually managed to get through. He was then able to go to

the Refugee Council to apply for Section 4 accommodation. In April 2009, he was put on the Short Stop scheme which is where he met G."

Today, he is still waiting for his claim to be approved. He made his first claim in 2003 and is now waiting on the appeal made in April 2009: "I don't think it even matters to the home office that I've been in the UK for sixteen years. I haven't even had the chance to invest what I learnt in England, I can't give back to them what they have given me, as I cannot work legally."

Yet Z doesn't waste his time whilst he waits; he volunteers for The Manuel Bravo Project, a charitable organisation that helps asylum seekers who are unable to find adequate legal representation. He also helps co-ordinate the Short Stop scheme for LASSN. Z has hopes for the future: "I know that when my claim is accepted, I will have to go back to university to update my qualifications. I'm willing to do anything, even teaching or post graduate studies, but at the moment I can't do anything, even though I'd like to do some teacher training."

He'd even be a Short Stop host if he had his own home: "People like G have such good hearts, she hardly knew me and she let me come and stay in her house until I got other accommodation. Through G, I have been able to meet other people and make more friends. At the moment I'm house-sitting for one of her friends, it's a massive house, too big! The whole experience has been really positive."

Z says "Most people who seek asylum have no idea about British benefits or support; they are here because they have no choice and are trying to escape the governments of their countries."

Marishka Van Steenberg, Leeds Press Gang.

Leeds Press Gang

Leeds Press Gang is a group of refugee journalists, media students, refugee agencies and others who have come together to counter the misunderstanding and hostility generated by the media by informing the public who have not met asylum seekers, heard their stories or understand why they have come to the UK to seek refuge.

If you want your story to be heard in the public domain, contact Richie on 0113 380 5690. This newsletter will carry these stories and it is hoped that you, the reader, will be able to use them in order to promote a true and positive image of asylum seekers.

Please contact mas.lal@lassn.org.uk indicating if A) You are happy to receive LASSN correspondence by email, and/or B) You prefer to receive this newsletter by email.

Asylum Housing Standards

What should asylum seekers expect from their housing? The National Asylum Seekers' Support contract sets out the requirements that should be met. The following is a summary.

Standards

- The property to be clean prior to moving in.
- Children: provide sterilisation equipment for children under 1 year of age; cots; high chairs.
- Bathroom: bath or shower, wash basin and toilet. No sharing between families unless agreed.
- Kitchen: fridge, cooker, sink, laundry facilities, hygienic work surfaces and floor, cookware, utensils, cutlery and crockery, broom, dustpan and brush.
- Bedrooms: single or double beds dependent on occupancy. Only a husband and wife or persons agreed to cohabit, different sex related children under 10 or same sex under 16 years, a couple or single parent with 1 child under 10 may share. 1 wardrobe and chest of drawers per room.
- Dining and living space: 1 table, 1 dining chair and 1 armchair or space on a sofa per occupant.
- Personal linen: 1 towel, flannel and tea towel, 2 sheets, pillows and cases, duvet covers, blanket and duvet per person.

Room size determined by Local Authority rules.

Assistance

The service user to be provided with an information pack and briefed in a language they understand, within one day of occupancy, to assist with registering with a GP, dentist a school for children. Told how to use appointment systems for one stop and advice, asylum support, NHS, emergency, police, legal and social services.

Repairs

Housing providers must inspect accommodation at least once per month.

- Repairs should be completed within 2 hours of being notified for problems needing immediate attention. For example: gas leak, flooding, leaking roof, fire damage, damaged asbestos.
- 24 hours for emergency: unstable ceiling, blocked drains, weakened floor, plumbing leaks, exposed electrical wiring, loss of mains water or electrical services, no hot water, no smoke or fire alarms, no heating, ground floor windows and entrance doors can't be closed.
- 7 working days for urgent repairs such as broken windows.
- 28 working days for routine maintenance such as cleaning.

Complaints

If remedial work has not been undertaken within these time limits, contact the head office of the housing provider and discuss the issue with the Refugee Council on 0113 386 2210 who will keep a record of the complaint. If there is no improvement, then write to UKBA at Waterside Court, Kirkstall Road, Leeds LS4 2QB. or your NAM

Case Owner. They should pass on the complaint to the contract compliance team.

Where a lease exists between a housing provider and owner of a property, you must notify the housing provider of the need for a repair, not the owner of the property. If you have serious health and safety concerns, contact the local council's Environmental Health Service.

Better Housing Campaign

Citizens for Sanctuary is a group of citizens which welcomes anyone who shares their vision of wanting to improve the lives of people seeking sanctuary in Leeds. People from various organisations in Leeds and individuals have met since Spring 2009 supported by the national Citizens for Sanctuary movement. The current focus is on housing as this is a specific area which is under review by UKBA and therefore there exists a good chance to have a real impact at the local level.

The group believes that housing for people seeking sanctuary should be better. As a minimum, housing for asylum seekers should meet the requirements of the asylum support housing contract (see above). The campaigning group intends to lobby decision makers in order to help housing providers attain a better level of provision, quality, health and safety and thereby help people in the asylum system get better housing

Asylum Housing Testimonies

The first step in this process is to gather evidence to show local decision makers what the problems faced by people in asylum support housing in Leeds are. Citizens for Sanctuary are asking asylum seekers to tell them about their problems, or for you to help someone you know with these problems to fill out an asylum housing testimony form obtainable from betterasylumhousing@googlemail.com or phone Richie on 0113 380 5698 for further information.

LASSN is aware of several of its clients having problems with their housing. However, they have been reluctant to complete a housing testimony because they fear it may result in them being moved to accommodation outside of Leeds where they have no friends or access to support.

The information provided will be used to compile a dossier of evidence. It is not possible for the campaign to address the specific housing problems that an individual has. Names, contact details and housing provider will only be used by the Better Housing campaign group in order to follow up the testimony. Under no circumstances will details which identify individuals be passed on to UKBA or any other authority without the person's consent.

Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network

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