

Story of one asylum seeker

Local communities have traditionally welcomed people from other countries with customary northern qualities of friendliness and hospitality — a welcome generally extended to many of the asylum seekers the borough has been receiving since 2001 under the Government's dispersal policy.

Wigan Council has a Policy Framework for Asylum Seekers which brings together the council, police, private landlords, churches and voluntary groups to manage asylum issues. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) held it up as a model of best practice and the borough has received fewer asylum seekers than could reasonably have been expected. Although NASS statistics say the borough can support 1,533 asylum seekers, the actual number is only about half that.

Here, Borough Life talks to one of them: Fowsiya Said of Worsley Hall, Wigan, a Yemeni mother of two.

Away from the numbers

Forty-one year old Fowsiya Said was a successful lawyer; her husband, Mughad, was a police officer. Yet, like many of her compatriots, she says she suffered intimidation, illegal detention and death threats from the state security services.

Fowsiya hails from Aden in the south, but practised in the north of a country where old north-south rivalries remain long after unification.

"The north-south divide means there are problems all the time, especially in the south," Fowsiya explains. "People like me and my husband went north years ago, but this led to more problems. The government made it very bad for us", she adds.

Fowsiya told Borough Life that she was under investigation from the authorities, though for what she was never really told.



Food for thought: Fowsiya Said (left) with sons Riyadh and Sami, Groundwork's diversity co-ordinator Mathilde Vautier and friend Rohini Nadam at Marsh Green Community Centre.

Yemen's constitution doesn't discriminate against women, but interpretations of Sharia (the holy laws of Islam) and social custom do so in many different ways. And the lack of practising female lawyers is having a significant impact on the struggle to better promote and protect the human rights of Yemeni women.

"I was a lawyer, I had a good job, an office, many clients and lots of friends. But being a lawyer isn't normal for a lady. The government said that I knew secrets about my husband's work; I didn't know anything, but they didn't believe me.

"I don't like to remember what happened to me at one point I was imprisoned, I don't know where, for two weeks. I was pregnant and they kept me standing alone in a dark prison cell without food. Then suddenly I was told I could go and was released. After that, they came and took my husband."

Fowsiya took her young son, Riyadh, and fled to Egypt where she had previously studied for four years and had some friends. She knew she would have to return to Yemen sooner or later, but was offered

arranged passage to Britain for \$5,000. The detail is difficult to talk about, but Fowsiya admits she was desperate.

Fowsiya's first destination was London, then... Wigan! And her first impression?

"It was like I was the person from the moon!" she says, "and I had a few problems at first. I had a very bad neighbour who robbed my house and stole everything. But now everything is okay."

Sami was born shortly after arrival and adjusting to the new surroundings hasn't been easy for Fowsiya, Riyadh or the latest arrival. But she has thrown herself into her new life by joining the local Sunflower group, a community health project based in Pemberton.

"I've lost everything: my husband, my family, my house, my country... I don't even know if Mughad is alive or dead. But Louise at Sunflower is a very good lady, I go to the baby club and I volunteered for Norley Hall Café. I really like it and I've made many new friends. I study English every Monday and I can understand people now. At first I couldn't understand anything — the accent is very difficult!"

Fowsiya now speaks English really well, but she aims to speak it even better and go to college. "I don't want government money she insists. "I want to be a lawyer again or a translator."

And she has similar ambitions for Riyadh, who's now attending Kingsdown High, and Sami, who is still only two years old.

"I like my country" says Fowsiya, "but the government is very bad with the people and I can't go back. It's every, very different here, but I like the place and I want to say thank you to lots of people for the way I have been treated here. In Yemen I helped other people, now people here are helping me."

About Yemen



It's the reputed home of the Queen of Sheba, but Yemen today remains a very poor country where about 40 percent of the population live in poverty.

The modern republic was established in 1990 when traditionalist North Yemen and Marxist South Yemen (a British Protectorate called Aden until 1967) merged after years of border wars and skirmishes. A brief civil war in 1994 ended in defeat for separatist southerners and the survival of the unified Yemen.

Since unification the country has been slowly modernising and opening up to the outside world, but according to Amnesty International, torture and ill treatment are widespread, and government control of the media is very strict.

The ancestral home of Osama bin Laden is considered natural territory by Al-Qaeda, but President Saleh is an earnest ally in the war-on-terror. This year, Yemen faces its worst domestic crisis since 1994 with the emergence of radical Shi'ite

opposition in the north and a democratic opposition group seeking secession for the south.

What is an asylum seeker?

He or she is somebody who is waiting for their application for refugee status to be assessed by the government. A refugee is defined as somebody who:

- Has a well-grounded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion;
- Is outside the country they belong to or normally reside in; and
- Is unable or unwilling to return home through fear of persecution (1951 Convention on Refugees).

Terms incorrectly applied to asylum seekers include:

- Economic migrant - this refers to somebody who voluntarily leaves their own country to seek a more

- prosperous way of life in another;
- Illegal asylum seeker - by definition, there is no such thing. The UK has signed the 1951 Convention on Refugees, which means that anyone has the legal right to come here, apply for asylum and remain in the UK until a final decision on their asylum application has been made.

Leaflet gives the facts

Wigan Council has produced a leaflet, Asylum: Questions and Answers, to give people more information about the asylum system and how it relates to Wigan borough. The leaflet has been Crystal Marked for clarity and honesty by the Plain English Campaign and is available from libraries and housing offices, and online at www.wiganmbc.gov.uk/pub/council/asylum/asylumseekers.htm or by telephoning 01942 828145.

Join the friendly faces

Would you like to:

- Meet people from different countries?
- Welcome people to the borough and show them around your area?
- Make a big difference to people's lives?
- Friendly Faces is a Wigan-based charity that needs volunteers who can help newly arrived asylum seekers settle into their new surroundings.

If you think you can help, contact the Friendly Faces team on 01942 235022.

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