

## Asylum....Questions & Answers

The opening of induction centres around the country for the processing of asylum seekers marks a major improvement in the management of the asylum system.



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But myth and misconception continue to characterise much of the debate around the issue. Thanks mainly to negative media coverage and political opportunism, terms like 'illegal immigrant', 'desperate', 'foreigners', 'bogus' and 'scroungers' are the ones most commonly associated with asylum seekers (MORI Attitudes Survey 2002). Wigan Council has a duty to promote a more balanced approach.

Local communities have traditionally welcomed people from other countries with customary northern qualities of friendliness and hospitality - a welcome often repaid in kind with significant contributions to many of our townships and industries. We understand that times have changed and so have the challenges local communities face today. However, we still have a duty to promote a better understanding between everyone, no matter what their background or racial group.

Of course, people are entitled to make up their own minds. But through the information we give here, we hope to improve the quality of debate and encourage people to make more informed judgements on a complicated issue.

### What is an asylum seeker?

An asylum seeker 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 live in; and
- is unable or unwilling to return home through fear of persecution (1951 Convention on Refugees).

Terms that have been used incorrectly to describe asylum seekers include the following.

- **Economic migrant** - this refers to somebody who voluntarily leaves their own country aiming for a better life in another country;
- **'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 the Government makes a final decision on their asylum application.

### How many people seek asylum in the UK and why?

In 2002, there were 85 865 applications for asylum. That's about a quarter of the total for the whole European Union - the highest in the European Union. In terms of applications as a percentage of the total population, the UK is ranked eighth in Europe; Austria is top.

According to the Home Office, most asylum seekers see the UK as democratic and prosperous, safe and tolerant, with an attractive ethnic mix and internationally popular language.

The reasons why people flee their own countries vary enormously. For example:

- they may have held a political opinion they were mistreated for;
- they may not be able to practise their faith openly;
- they may belong to a particular ethnic group that is mistreated; or
- they may have experienced psychological or physical torture.

It is a myth that all asylum seekers are really just economic migrants. Their main countries of origin are not the poorest in the world; they are countries dominated by conflicts and abuse of human rights (Amnesty International).

### Did you know?

- Most of the world's 12 million refugees are given asylum by the world's poorest countries, such as Pakistan and Iran (United Nations High Commission for Refugees 2002).
- The public overestimates by 10 times the number of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, believing that the UK hosts about 23% of the world's refugees. The real figure is less than 2% (MORI Attitudes Survey 2002).

## Are they genuine?

This is a matter for the government to decide. Generally, the Government will refuse any application it does not consider to be genuine.

In 2002, almost half of the asylum seekers were accepted as having a reason to fear persecution. On the first decision, about 10% of applicants (8,100 people) were granted refugee status. Also a further quarter were given 'exceptional leave to remain', meaning that although they did not qualify for full refugee status under the convention, they could remain in the UK for humanitarian reasons. Another 13,000 cases which to begin with the Government refused, were later won when the applicants appealed (Home Office statistics).

Applying for asylum is often a desperate measure and not an easy option. Over the 18 months to July 2003, research by the Institute of Race Relations identified 742 people who died trying to reach Europe. The actual number of deaths is certainly much higher (European Race Bulletin 4).

We appreciate that not all people applying for asylum are genuine. We recognise that smuggling people into the country and illegal entry are serious issues, and we believe that the right steps are now being taken to deal with them.

### Did you know?

- Home Office research found little evidence that asylum seekers had advance knowledge of the UK welfare system or immigration procedures. Research found that the level of choice that individuals have about where they seek asylum is limited and many don't even know that the UK is their destination because they arrive through an agent (Robinson & Seagrott 2002).
- Since the closure of the Sangatte centre in France in December 2002, asylum applications have fallen by about 40% and should continue to fall.

## Why do they come to Wigan?

Before 2000, asylum seekers arriving in Britain were housed only in London and the south east. This put great pressure on public services and led to exceptionally high housing costs, forcing the government to change its policy and disperse asylum seekers throughout the country. Councils could choose not to take part, but could not prevent asylum seekers arriving in their areas as the Home Secretary can use special powers to direct asylum seekers to specific areas. Greater Manchester authorities decided to take part through the North West Consortium.

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 introduces a new framework for 'processing' asylum seekers. Our new policy has meant that we have distributed asylum seekers across the borough more effectively than any other council we know of. We will use the new processing framework to benefit local communities by gaining more influence over how many asylum seekers we receive and how they are dispersed.

We will also be able to make sure that asylum seekers receive a full induction covering issues we know local people think are important, such as following UK laws. As a result, asylum seekers who break the law will be less able to argue in court that they were ignorant of our laws.

## How many asylum seekers are in Wigan borough?

The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has decided that the borough can support 1,533 asylum seekers, although the actual number is currently only half that. Compared with other boroughs, Wigan has received fewer asylum seekers than could reasonably have been expected. Also, thanks to our strategy in dealing with government agencies and their

private-sector housing providers, we have reduced any negative effect.

### Did you know?

- Government agencies, including NASS, have said that our 'Policy Framework for Asylum Seekers', which brought together the council, police, private landlords, churches and voluntary groups to manage asylum issues, is a good example of best practice. Without it, we would have had many more asylum seekers. These would have probably been housed by private landlords in the cheapest housing available (usually in our most deprived areas), placing those communities under even more stress.
- In June 2003, there were 921 asylum seekers living in the borough. By May 2004, there were 658. We expect these numbers will continue to fall.
- More overseas students now study at Wigan and Leigh College, and are often mistakenly assumed to be asylum seekers.

## How long will they be here?

This depends on individual circumstances. The government tries to make decisions within six months, but there is a backlog and complicated applications may take longer. Many asylum seekers want to go home and frequently do so when it is safe.

### Did you know?

- In 2002, nearly 14,000 people (legitimate asylum seekers and their dependants) left the UK to return home (Home Office statistics).
- From the information on council-supported asylum seekers only, 31% remain in the borough for less than six months, 25% for 6 to 12 months and 44% for more than one year.

## What do they live on?

A single, adult asylum seeker, aged over 25 has to survive on a maximum £38.92 a week. The weekly rate of income support for single British citizens is £55.65; a single pensioner receives £79.60 per week.

### Did you know?

- Support for asylum seekers with families is 30% lower than the standard rate of Income Support.

## How much are they costing people who pay Council Tax?

Accommodation and support costs are funded by the government's NASS. There is no extra cost to council tax payers as the government pays for our costs.

The Treasury has allocated £1 088m for 2003/04 as part of its Comprehensive Spending Review (IPPR Factfile 2003).

### Did you know?

- According to the government's own figures, immigrants contribute £2.5billion more to the state than they receive in benefits and state services (Gott & Johnson 2002).
- Asylum seekers are not allowed to work and we work closely behind the scenes to support government agencies in identifying illegal working. Since July 2002, only those with full refugee status, "Humanitarian Protection" or "Discretionary Leave to Remain" have been allowed to start work.
- We carry out basic redecoration when properties are used for asylum seekers. Unlike other council tenants, asylum seekers do not receive decorating allowances.
- We provide properties which are furnished with a basic package of furniture, including carpets, curtains, beds, cooker, fridge, pots and pans, etc. The package does **NOT** include any luxury items such as TV, microwave, or washing machine.

## Does educating the children of asylum seekers affect my own children's education?

Our Education Department receives additional government funding for each asylum seeker's child in our schools. This

money is used to employ extra staff to support schools in their work with asylum seekers so that other children are not disadvantaged. In fact, schools have told us that having pupils from different cultural backgrounds has made the educational experience of all children richer and more varied.

### Did you know?

- The same conditions for getting a place at school apply to asylum seekers as everybody else. A number of children who the Asylum Seekers Team have referred have been refused their first choice of school.

## Are asylum seekers spreading infectious diseases?

No. In fact, a report by the British Medical Association (BMA) in 2002 said that: their health may actually get worse after coming into the UK; and the UK is failing to help vulnerable people who have been persecuted and possibly tortured or raped.

### Did you know?

- Asylum seekers have the same rights as any UK citizen to access health care and children's education.
- Migrants, including refugees, make an enormous contribution to the NHS, which relies heavily on foreign labour. 27% of health professionals were migrants in 2000 (Labour Force Survey 2000).

## Is the asylum system a route for terrorists?

Since September 11th 2001, public perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers have become mixed up with outrage at the increase in terrorism. However, asylum seekers are far more likely to be fleeing terror themselves, or abuses human rights committed by governments in the context of the so-called 'war on terror' (Amnesty International 2003).

### Did you know?

- People who have committed serious crimes are excluded from protection under the UN Convention on Refugees. States can also expel people who they regard as a threat to national security.

## Are asylum seekers pushing up crime rates?

No. Most asylum seekers abide by the law and are more likely to be the victims of crime rather than committing crime.

### Did you know?

- A report by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) found no evidence of a higher rate of crime among refugees and asylum seekers. In fact, having escaped from danger in their home countries, asylum seekers are more likely to be the victims of crime in the UK (ACPO 2001).
- Local police will take action against people who break the law, whether or not they are asylum seekers.