

**THE IMPACT AND
INTEGRATION OF
ASYLUM SEEKERS ON
THE COMMUNITY**

**REPORT OF SELECT
COMMITTEE 2**

CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Setting the Scene | 4 |
| Part 1 | |
| To investigate the impact of Asylum Seekers on the Community | |
| 1.1 To establish the numbers and location of Asylum Seekers within the Community | 8 |
| 1.2 To understand the support services available in the voluntary, statutory and private sector and to identify if they meet Asylum Seekers needs. | 11 |
| 1.3 Particular areas of interest include: the needs of the children, single parents, people with a disability, people experiencing emotional health problems. | 30 |
| Part 2 | |
| To examine through the experience of Asylum Seekers and the community the process of integration | |
| 2.1 To understand the Asylum Seekers' experience. | 33 |
| 2.2 To understand local communities' experience. | 36 |
| Part 3 | 38 |
| To consider the role of public awareness of and information on Asylum Seeker issues and the consequent impact on the wider community. | |
| Part 4 | |
| Conclusion | 45 |
| Recommendations | 46 |

INTRODUCTION

Within Wigan Council there is a genuine desire to understand better the issues that may affect Asylum Seekers and the communities in which they live. To this end a Select Committee was set up to record and define some of the issues around the dispersal of Asylum Seekers to the Wigan area.

Members of the Select Committee began collecting evidence during July 2001. Concern had been raised previously about the standard of accommodation in the private sector and whether Asylum Seekers were able to access the appropriate services i.e. health, education etc. Members of the committee were also acutely aware of concerns and misgivings raised by members of the community in connection with the national dispersal scheme.

The committee, over a number of months, has interviewed public and private providers of services. Residents have been interviewed and members of the public have had the opportunity to give written comments, some of who have chosen to remain anonymous

The report follows the terms of reference, that were set down, and uses the information gathered to give a local perspective to the statistical information which has also been included.

There are many issues that have come to light and the committee has made a number of recommendations that will need to be addressed by different agencies and organisations both within and outside of the Borough of Wigan. recommendations can be found at the end of the report.

Members of the committee have tried to report points of view in a factual way and must underline that the opinions of the people who contributed to the report are not necessarily the views of individual panel members.

***Select Committee 2
November 2001***

SETTING THE SCENE

This Select Committee forms part of Wigan Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which has identified a number of service areas in need of review. Overview and Scrutiny is a new process established as part of the Local Government Act 2000 and this review is one of the first to take place.

The intention is that each Select Committee undertakes an investigative process to understand the issue before them, plan information gathering, scrutinise this information and report and make recommendations.

The task given to Select Committee No 2 was to explore "The impact and integration of Asylum Seekers on the community".

This Select Committee recognised that the real experiences of Asylum Seekers, local people, staff from voluntary, statutory and private agencies was of greatest relevance to the review process. As a consequence great emphasis was placed on facilitating evidence hearings, i.e. opportunities for people to come and share their experiences, confidentially if necessary, with the Committee.

Membership of the Select Committee is drawn from elected members who are part of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and elected members from Policy panels. Select Committee No 2 is chaired by Councillor Susan Loudon, and includes Councillor Christine Hitchen, Councillor David Kelly, Councillor Mildred Millington, Councillor Susan Turner, Councillor Jeanette Prescott and Councillor R Robert Bleakley. Council officers, Katherine Fairclough and Hazel Clayton have supported the Committee.

TERMS OF REFERENCE:

The Select Committee at its first meeting established the Terms of Reference for this review and this report is structured around these three main areas.

- 1.0 To investigate the impact of Asylum Seekers upon the community
- 1.1 To establish the numbers and location of asylum seekers within the community.
- 1.2 To understand the support services available in the voluntary, statutory and private sector and to identify if they meet Asylum Seekers needs.
- 1.3 Particular areas of interest include: the needs of the children, single parents, people with a disability, people experiencing emotional health problems.
- 2.0 To examine through the experience of Asylum Seekers and the community the process of integration.
- 2.1 To understand the Asylum Seekers' experience.
- 2.2 To understand local communities' experience.
- 3.0 To consider the role of public awareness of and information on Asylum Seeker issues and the consequent impact on the wider community.

BACKGROUND

The Council has a dual role in relation to Asylum Seekers currently as

- Social landlord (Housing Department) and
- Regulator (Environmental Health and Consumer Protection).

Asylum Seekers are housed in both council and private sector housing and we are expected to take about 1,553 individual Asylum Seekers for re-settlement within all Housing providers. Currently

- the Council aims to provide about 520 places and
- The private sector the remainder.

The Council co-ordinates Asylum Seeker issues primarily through the team based at 50 Broom Road Worsley Hall, they resettle and support people and liaise with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). The private sector is co-ordinated by NASS. There are a number of private providers locally.

The Environmental Health and Consumer Protection Department has a duty to inspect houses in multiple occupation (where several people not of the same household live in a property).

WHY UNDERTAKE THIS SELECT COMMITTEE INVESTIGATION?

Elected members and officers had raised concerns about

- The standard of accommodation in the private sector.
 - Asylum Seekers access to appropriate services i.e. health, education etc
- There was also a desire to understand better the issues that may affect Asylum Seekers within the community.

WHERE ARE ASYLUM SEEKERS RESETTLED?

Within Council provision there are 5 clusters of accommodation already up and running or due to come on stream shortly.

They include:

- Durham Street in Whelley
- Norley/Newtown
- Hag Fold
- Worsley Mesnes
- Higher Folds

Private sector provision is distributed widely around the Borough.

HOW LONG ARE ASYLUM SEEKERS STAYING FOR?

It varies for each individual but the Home Office appears now to be processing claims more quickly. If a claim is refused many people do appeal so the process can go on for sometime. If Asylum Seekers stay for a long period of time, there may be additional pressures on Education, Health services, etc.

WHERE ARE THEY FROM AND WHAT LANGUAGES DO THEY SPEAK?

- Turkey
- Iran
- Syria
- Azerbaijan
- Fiji
- Uganda
- Iraq
- Albania
- Armenia
- Afghanistan
- Congo
- Zimbabwe

The languages spoken are

- Arabic
- Albanian
- Russian
- Turkish
- Farsi
- Kurdish
- English

THE SELECT COMMITTEE PROCESS

The Committee met for the first time on 26 July 2001 and since then has met on 13 occasions. Eight of these meetings have been formal committee meetings and five informal consultation meetings. Witness/evidence hearings have been held on the following dates with the following groups being interviewed or have provided written evidence.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| 23 August 2001 | Health Authority Health Trust Primary Care Team Leigh Police Local Resident Asylum Seeker Team |
| 13 September 2001 | Primary School Headteacher High School Headteacher English as Additional Language Service Citizens Advice Bureau Elected Members Private provider |
| 17 September 2001 | Refugee Action North West Consortium Wigan Police |
| 19 September 2001 (consultation) | Asylum Seekers Churches |
| 4 October 2001 | Press National Asylum Support Service |
| 30 October 2001 | Council's Asylum Seeker Team Director of Housing Chief Executive |
| 8 November | Directors of Council Departments Cabinet members |

A variety of venues have been used for the witness hearings and they have included

- Dorset Road Community Centre Hag Fold
- Bramble House Worsley Hall

- Marsh Green Community Resource Centre
- Leigh Town Hall
- Wigan Town Hall

The Committee decided to tape evidence hearings to ensure accurate note taking. As with any Council committee elements of the meeting were open to the press and public and from parts of the meeting the press and public were excluded. This decision is dependent on the descriptions of exempt information contained in the Local Government Act 1972.

1.1 To establish the numbers and location of asylum seekers within the community.

1. The National Picture

Key Statistics

- The number of applications for asylum in the UK averages approximately **6,000** per month.
- Asylum Seekers enter the UK from many different countries. Currently, there are **118** nationalities, the top three being **Iraq (22%)**, **Iran (16%)** and **Afghanistan (12%)**.
- **11%** of initial applications and **16%** of appeals were successful in July 2001.

The National Asylum Support Service

Increasing numbers of Asylum Seekers entering the UK are destitute, requiring support and accommodation whilst their claim is being considered. Responsibility for co-ordinating the dispersal of Asylum Seekers requiring support lies with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).

NASS contracts with local authorities, housing associations and the private sector for the provision of accommodation for Asylum Seekers. According to the latest figures published by NASS, as at the end of July 2001 **28,802** Asylum Seekers had been placed in accommodation across the country. This has more than doubled since December 2000, when **13,530** people were accommodated.

2. Dispersal Statistics

Figure 1 illustrates how Asylum Seekers are currently dispersed across the country.

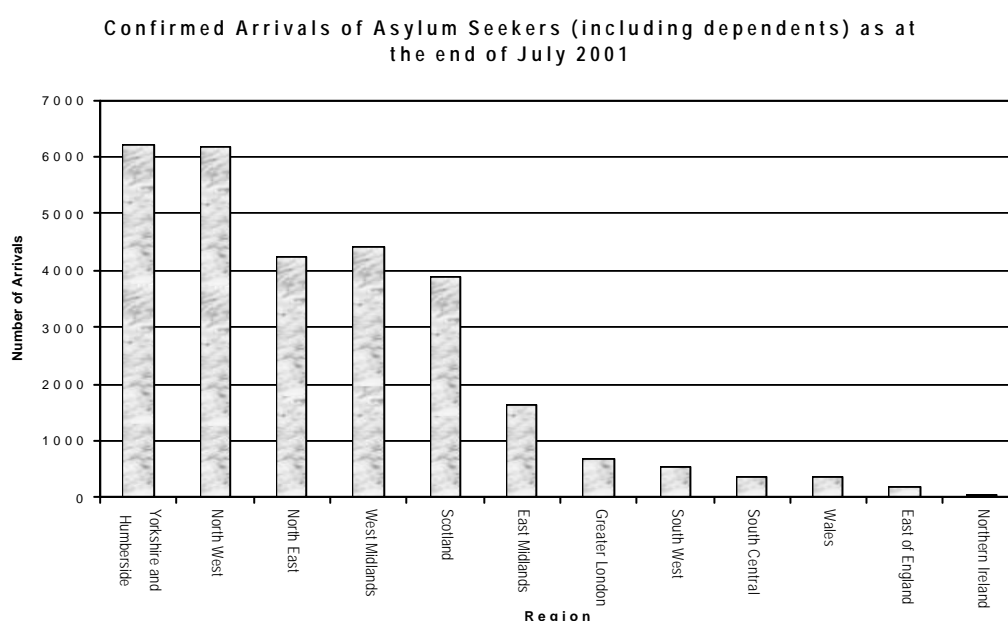
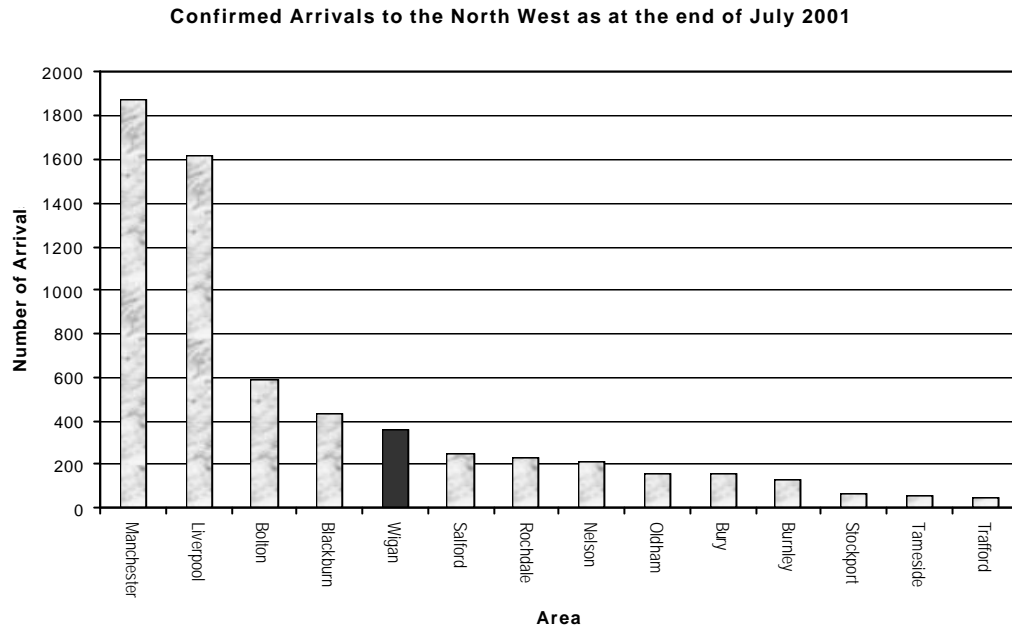


Figure 1

Figure 2 provides a further breakdown of the dispersal in the North West region

Figure 2



As shown in the above graphs, the largest numbers of Asylum Seekers dispersed are in Yorkshire and Humberside (21.6%) and the North West (21.5%).

At the end of July 2001, Wigan had allocated 400 bedspaces, of which 360 were occupied.

2. Asylum Seekers in Wigan

Wigan Council is contracted to provide 518 bed spaces, which are rolled out to NASS at an average of 10 properties every four weeks until 21st January 2002. These bed spaces are located in five cluster areas. Details are provided in figure 3.

Figure 3 Accommodation clusters in Wigan

| Area | Total Bed Spaces | Start Date | End Date |
|------------------|------------------|------------|----------|
| Hag Fold | 48 | Nov 00 | May 01 |
| Norley / Newtown | 238 | Nov 00 | Dec 01 |
| Worsley Mesnes | 98 | May 01 | Jan 02 |
| Higher Folds | 86 | June 01 | Oct 01 |
| Durham Street | 40 | Oct 01 | Jan 02 |
| Total | 510 | | |

In addition to the 518 bed spaces provided by the Council, the private sector provides accommodation for Asylum Seekers in Wigan. The main providers are Clear Springs, Accommodata, Rose Lodge and Landmark. NASS have provided some information on the numbers of people accommodated by each of these providers as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4 Numbers of Groups accommodated by private sector providers
(Note that groups may be individuals or families)

| Provider | Number of Groups Accommodated at 30.07.01 |
|---------------|---|
| Clear Springs | 126 |
| Rose Lodge | 24 |
| Accommodata | 7 |
| Landmark | 2 |

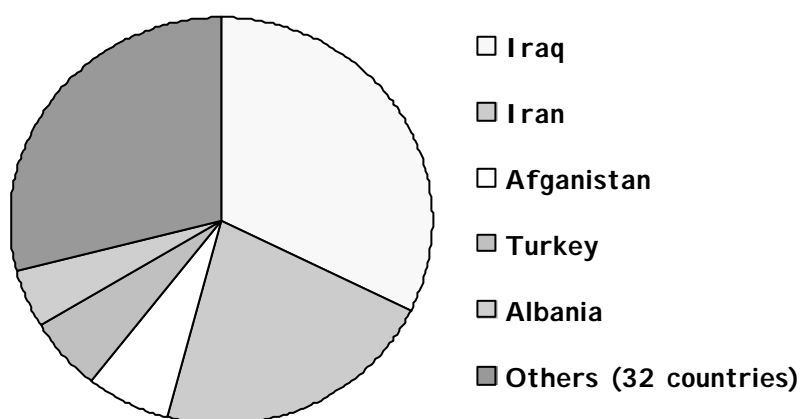
Note that there is some concern that the information provided by NASS may be incomplete.

Countries of Origin

Figure 5 shows the countries of origin of Asylum Seekers living in Wigan.

Figure 5

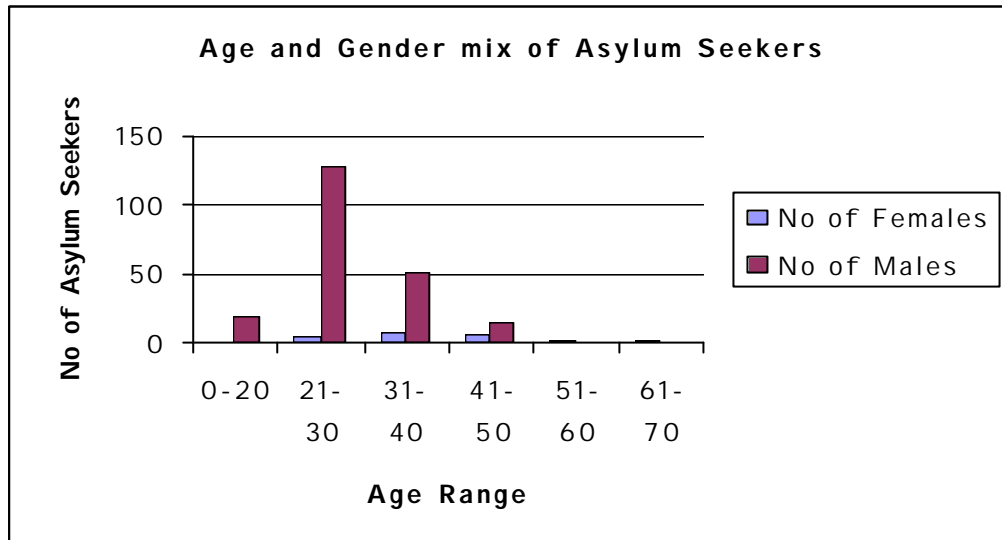
Countries of Origin of Asylum Seekers in Wigan



Age and Gender Mix

The majority of Asylum Seekers are young males aged 21 – 30. An analysis of age and gender is shown in figure 6.

Figure 6



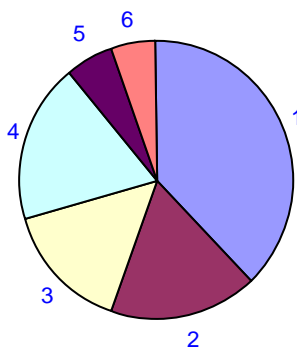
Group Size

There is a significant difference between the group sizes of Asylum Seekers living in council properties and those living in private sector accommodation. Most people accommodated in the private sector are single. Couples and families are more likely to be living in accommodation provided by the council.

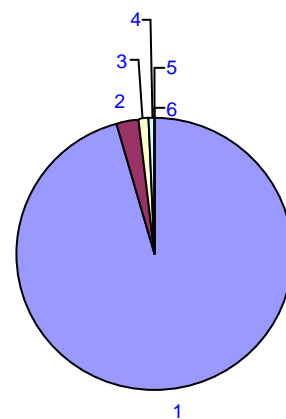
Figure 7
provision

Comparison of group size in Council and private sector

Group Size of Asylum seekers in Council properties



Group Size of Asylum seekers in private sector properties



Sources

- NASS Dispersal Statistics July 2001
- Asylum statistics UK 2000 (Home Office)
- Asylum statistics July 2001 (Home Office)
- Info on number of Asylum Seekers in the borough from G Sutch
- Spreadsheet from NASS providing details of Asylum Seekers in Wigan

1.2 To understand the support services available in the voluntary, statutory, and private sector and to identify if they meet Asylum Seekers needs

One of the Terms of Reference laid down by the Select Committee was; to understand the support services available in the voluntary, statutory, and private sector and to identify if they meet Asylum Seekers needs. In this section we will record our findings and make some recommendations.

The Committee interviewed a number of representatives from public and private agencies, and members of the voluntary sector. These included, the Police, the Health Authority, the Health Trust, National Association for Asylum Seekers, members of the Asylum Seeker Team (Housing and Social Services staff), Citizens' Advice Bureau, church representative, representative from another local authority, and Refugee Action. We interviewed a representative from Rose Lodge, a private provider. We also discussed needs of Asylum Seekers with a number of Asylum Seekers, with local residents and had written evidence from a number of sources.

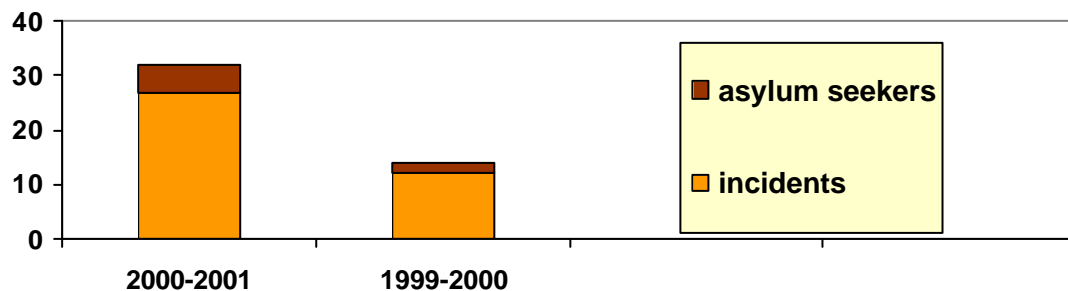
THE POLICE

The Police are part of a multi-agency team that discusses and addresses issues arising from Asylum Seekers. The Select Committee invited representatives from The Police Service to give their views on the impact of Asylum Seekers on the Service.

The Police stated that they thought that the process that the local authority had adopted, of receiving and housing Asylum Seekers, seemed to be working quite well. They felt that there was less impact on the Police than they originally envisaged. There had been major concerns from the local population about the Asylum Seekers arriving and the Police spent a great deal of time trying to prepare them for problem that never occurred. Any problems that have happened have been resolved quickly and in many cases neighbour disputes involving Asylum Seekers usually proved to be genuine neighbour disputes and had little to do with racism. However it was recognised that even a small issue that involves any ethnic minority is more work and a higher cost as the Police Force have to "get interpreters out". The Police commented that they had not experienced problems accessing interpreters but on one occasion to their knowledge it had been difficult to obtain an interpreter that spoke a certain dialect. Although the service was seen as good it was very expensive being £167.00 plus travelling expenses for three hours interpretation.

When asked about racist incidents it was stated that in 2000 -2001 out of 32 racist incidents 5 could be linked directly with Asylum Seekers where they were the victims.

Figure 8.



In the corresponding period of the previous year there had been there were only 12 reported incidents 2 of which involved Asylum Seekers. Therefore there has been an increase of 20 incidents and 3 more incidents involving Asylum Seekers.

However we need to remember that this data includes information in connection with Hindley Youth Custody Centre where there is more of an ethnic mix than in the general population. A good number of incidents reported to the Police come from that source but still have to be recorded with in their local statistics. It was stated that if incidents continue to rise there would be an obvious impact on deployment of resources.

The Police commented that incidents involving Asylum Seekers, in residential areas, were on many occasions reported by the neighbours of the Asylum Seekers. A more recent interview with a Senior Officer within the Local Authority stated that racist incidents appeared high and went un-reported. There appears to be limited knowledge of any far-right activities in relation to Asylum Seekers.

Although the Police knew addresses and location of Asylum Seekers living in council owned property, they could not quantify the number of Asylum Seekers, within the two sub-divisions, living in private accommodation, as they did not know where Asylum Seekers were placed. There was an additional comment that the information was not as forthcoming as it used to be i.e. when Asylum Seekers first arrived. Even in council owned property there appeared to be a lack on information on the "beat". The officers commented that the information had been useful and should continue to be supplied. It was underlined that sharing of information was a two way process It was suggested that the Police might hold information about future neighbours of Asylum Seekers that may influence whether the property provider would choose to place Asylum Seekers next to them.

Officers felt that the relationship between Asylum Seekers and themselves was good, however there was concern voiced about lack of information to the local "beat " officers about location of Asylum Seekers. Community officers felt there was a need to make contact with Asylum Seekers to dispel stereotype views that they may hold of the police.

The Officers felt that rumours damaged efforts to integrate Asylum Seekers. They felt there is a need for people to receive more information about what Asylum Seekers receive, in terms of support, to dispel negative attitudes.

THE HEALTH AUTHORITY

The panel interviewed a representative, from the Health Authority, who is responsible for the allocation of patients to general practitioners (GPs) and an Officer from the Public Health service. The first representative described how the Council's Asylum Seeker Team faxed the information of new Asylum Seekers to their department and then the individuals or families are allocated a GP. The patient must be allocated to a GP in their area therefore the burden is falling on a small number of practises. GPs have found the extra burden difficult and the "cluster system" has put extra pressure on doctors. It was also pointed out that their own personal health seems to have a low priority for the Asylum Seekers. Which only compounds the problems as their general health may be quite poor. It was suggested that a move towards salaried GPs, in certain geographical areas, could alleviate some of the problems. Tied to a number of local issues, a bid to support this initiative, could be a

possible solution. It was recognised that there may be a need to look at two posts to cover gender issues influenced by religious beliefs.

When asked about remuneration for GPs the representative explained that the Health Authority pays for each patient that is on a GPs list and the GP gets a small extra sum per month for each patient who is an Asylum Seeker.

It was recognised that there is a shortage of GPs across the whole of Wigan and the Health Authority is looking to address that problem. However there is a national shortage.

General Practitioners have raised language issues with the Health Authority, and there have been a number of teething problems with Language Line, a scheme set up to interpret over the telephone. Face to face interpreters could not be considered, as the GP can not predict when an interpreter would be needed, however Language Line has a quick response time. The GP pays for the telephone calls. There have been few complaints about the system since the doctors have got used to the system. There was concern however that Language Line it takes too long and the use of this service makes appointments last along time

The Committee asked about other services and it was confirmed that Language Line was available for GPs opticians, pharmacies, and dentists. Services provided at local Clinics came under the remit of the Trust and they would probably provide face to face interpreters.

Access to Dentists were not seen as an immediate issue for newly arrived Asylum Seekers, although provision is needed across the whole of the Borough for them to access the interpretation service effectively. A bid had been put in for a specific community dental service for Asylum Seekers and this service would be an outreach to service the whole of the Wigan and Bolton areas.

It was felt that the Asylum Seeker Team might need to be more aware of whom to contact at the Health Authority for help. It was felt important that the correct information got to individual Asylum Seekers via the team. It was emphasised that information from private providers is not as good as from council housed Asylum Seekers and this was down to good work of the Asylum Seeker Team.

There was a problem with establishing the Asylum Seekers, individual, health history. It was confirmed that many arrive with no medical records and then get treated in different parts of the country. The information is needed to treat the patient and to give a NHS number. It was also suggested that forward planning of where properties for Asylum Seekers were to be allocated would be helpful to the Health Authority.

It was suggested that the Primary Care Groups should be made aware of the arrival of Asylum Seekers to allow services to be prepared. The development of Primary Care Trusts would, it was thought, improve direct provision of services and build closer relationships with local GPs. It was argued that the impact of Asylum Seekers would not be as great in the future in existing resettlement areas as new residents would only be replacing existing Asylum Seekers when they moved on.

There was concern voiced about housing Asylum Seekers in highly deprived areas as these areas already cause extra pressures on GPs. It was observed that there was

already a shortage of GPs and this could be because there are more health problems in these areas. It was commented that no one individual's health issues can be fully met effectively but Asylum Seekers have more complicated issues.

Provision for the health care of Asylum Seekers needs to fit into the ethnic health strategy. Minority communities should get equal access to services and the Minority Partnership Group, which fits into partnerships in Wigan, should be addressing this issue.

Language, interpretation, and translation are a big issue. There are too many languages and there are no opportunities to make economies of scale. It was suggested that we work with other authorities to provide a Greater Manchester Service.

The representative of the Health Authority observed that in other countries the first point of contact for people's health needs was the local hospital and this could cause extra pressures on local hospitals dealing with cases that should be addressed by through a GP. It was suggested that guidelines produced in other languages to how the NHS works could be useful.

It was recognised that there were specific health issues for Asylum Seekers. Some of which were:

- Sickle Cell Anaemia.
- People who have experienced torture. (Only one service provided in London.)
- People who have PostTraumatic Stress Disorder.
- Mental health issues; a need for mental health support for Asylum Seekers in the NorthWest.
- Dentistry.

It was felt important that the health of the whole community needed to be addressed in a strategic way. It was thought that there was a significant role for Public Health Services in the general move towards the integration of Asylum Seekers.

THE HEALTH TRUST

The representatives from the Health Trust felt the biggest problem they had experienced was language and interpretation services particularly in the Accident and Emergency Department (A&E). There is also a problem for health visitors who may have to make a number of return visits to deal with a problem. To try to alleviate the problem the Trust makes use of a telephone interpretation service, the National Interpreting Service UK. When there is a need for face to face interpreters they use the Bury Translation Service. Billinge Hospital could use the Liverpool interpreters because they are geographically nearer. The use of interpreters is also influenced by cultural and religious beliefs and care is taken to ensure the correct gender of interpreter is selected. The cost of interpreters was a major concern but as yet a total cost was not quantified.

There was concern raised about lack of information particularly in relationship to medical records and immunisation schedules. Other countries have different immunisation schedules, and added to an unpredictable length of stay in this country there was concern raised about the ethics of imposing a health schedules on people who may have to return home to a completely different system.

There are particular problems for District Nurses and Health Visitors who visit the home. Language is a problem and the lack of uniform of the Health Visitor appears to cause confusion. If an interpreter is available the Health Visitor will try to visit all the families on the same half day. As they are mindful of the cost of these services they sometimes double up with the school nurse and all visit at the same time. The Trust representative said they were all on a steep learning curve and they were learning something every day. Health Visitors have asked at the Health Visitor Practice Development Forum for more training on cultural issues. However they feel the interpretation service is much more important for the moment. There was a plea for more information from all agencies.

The only other issues that seemed high on the agenda were the financial side and the voucher system especially around children and babies. If there is anything out of the ordinary the voucher system can not cope with it. There was concern raised about the purchase of baby milk and the cost to someone who can not be given milk tokens. The price is much too high for the small amounts of cash available.

Free prescriptions, glasses, dentistry and contraception is available to Asylum Seekers. Costs of fares to visit family members in a specialist hospital in Manchester have been a problem for one family.

NATIONAL ASYLUM SEEKER SUPPORT (NASS)

How the dispersal scheme works.

The dispersal scheme was started April 2000 when NASS assumed responsibility and there are currently 38,000 accommodated; and another 19,000 receive only vouchers. The process comprises of an individual who is claiming asylum, contacting Refugee Action; if the individual is destitute they complete a NASS form and are found Emergency Accommodation. This type of accommodation is available for a week or so and those applications are dealt with by NASS. If they qualify, they will receive help they receive vouchers and will eventually be dispersed. Application is through a means test. Regular vouchers are then received from Post Office. The criteria for NASS support is very detailed – but basically the officer will look at assets/income and if the Asylum Seekers has income or assets they will probably not receive support

The 19,000 who receive vouchers do so because they do not require accommodation i.e. they have family and friends to stay with.

The minimum standards an Asylum Seeker can expect in our area.

The standard should be the same whether in council or private sector accommodation. Any complaints can be referred to the Inspections Team within Environmental Health Dept., of Wigan Council and they negotiate with the provider to get the problem dealt with. If the problem continues the Department serves notice on the provider and copies this to the NASS. Inspection Unit. There is a Contract Manager in each area that checks on the accommodation and the contract. Both accommodation and the contracts are the same for private and council.

How does NASS monitor private providers' contracts?

On a regular basis the Contract Manager reviews the contract and any problems are referred to the Regional Manager. If a contract does not meet the agreed terms, each case will be dealt with individually. To have contract terminated it would have to be a major breach in contract. As far as the NASS representative was aware there were no cases where the contract had been terminated and this would be done by a separate section of NASS.

The number of single men arriving in this area.

The majority of Asylum Seekers who come to this country are single men. Figures from the Home Office website confirm that 81% are all single men. 66% are males under age 35. There is no restriction in cluster areas for families but some accommodation is not suitable for families. Therefore an area has a greater number of single young men.

Impact of the dispersal scheme.

One of the reasons NASS was established was to ensure that placements for Asylum Seekers were distributed widely across the country. It was stated it was difficult to assess the impact that Asylum Seekers had had across the NorthWest. The representative stated that if there were problems NASS would deal with them as they arise.

The representative emphasised that NASS works closely with Police and information is given to the Police about who has arrived and where they are living. Concern was raised about the possibility of this information being available to the local authority. It was stated that NASS already provided information, to the Police, the Health Authority and Trust and to the Education Department. Any specific requests for information from the local authority should be channelled through NASS and they will liaise with lead officer.

The impact of Asylum Seekers on the community - can it be improved?

It was felt that the Consortium set up within NW was working well and that the partnership with the Voluntary Sector is essential. The representative from NASS agreed there was a need for a local Strategic Forum to identify community needs and look for local solutions. It was stated that there was a network already in existence in Wigan and if the Authority had more strategic information we could begin to become more receptive to Asylum Seekers needs.

Problems of unrest were discussed it was stated that NASS have an Investigation section that can look at unrest in local areas this would include racism and harassment etc. however it was pointed out that the local Police should also be notified if any problem occur. The Investigation Team could look at records of problems within areas and if it was perceived to be a problem then this may influence the NASS dispersal programme. It was acknowledged that there were problems within some of the private sector accommodation. The NASS representative stated that if the Committee or the Authority needed further information this could be channelled through the Regional Manager.

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Members of the Committee met with representatives from a number of churches in the Wigan area. The representatives had varied experiences of Asylum Seekers, some over a number of years. The common themes that emerged were that the level of support from the Council was good but the level of support given to Asylum Seekers in private accommodation was varied and should be improved.

It was suggested that a one-stop advice centre for Asylum Seekers could be set up. It was felt that the Citizens Advice Bureau should have a role within the setting up of this. There should be a dedicated specialist team to deal with Asylum Seeker issues. It was also pointed out that there were no solicitors, in Wigan, with experience in Immigration law to advise Asylum Seekers and they have to travel to Preston or Manchester.

There was concern raised about possible resentment against Asylum Seeker children amongst local children. This had been overcome in one area by talking through the children's assumptions of Asylum Seekers. General comments on Asylum Seeker students were that they were hard working, bright and keen to learn. Discussion raised concern about the issue of children moving on quickly to live in other areas.

All representatives agreed that there appeared to be a need for more social activities for the Asylum Seekers and their families. The Church could take a more active role in this using existing meetings such as mother and Toddler groups.

St., John's Church had a two-day "Puppet Project" that took place in the summer for Asylum Seekers and other children in the community. There were a small number of complaints from people who felt that this kind of activity should not be provided for Asylum Seekers. However, it was very successful and the Church intended to hold a future event with the aid of charitable funding.

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Three Asylum Seekers and their families attended a meeting with members of the Committee; all lived in council owned property. Also in attendance were two members of the Asylum Seeker Support Team and an interpreter. The committee asked a number of questions to assess the feeling of the Asylum Seekers; their view of the area they were living in and the support they were being offered.

The Asylum Seekers had been in the Wigan area for approx. 6 months. There had been no problems with neighbours who had been very friendly and helpful. One family had experienced the bullying of their son at school however this had been resolved after the mother had spoken to the parents and teachers. The other children seemed to be settling in without any racist incidents.

One Asylum Seeker had visited a hospital and had found the service good. There had been problems accessing a dentist and she was travelling, with a member of the Asylum Seeker team, from the Marsh Green area to Atherton to see a dentist. The service from GPs was good and the first visit to the GP is arranged with the support of a member of the Asylum Seeker team.

When asked about services that were provided the Asylum Seekers seem very satisfied with what they had been offered. A television was suggested to entertain

the children and to improve their language skills. A washing machine was not as important they said they could wash by hand. One mum asked about play areas and access to a Sunday school. It was suggested that more social activities could be arranged to encourage people to get together. Language seemed to be their biggest barrier.

The general impression after the interviews was of a group of people who were happy with the standard of accommodation and the support services. Towards the end of the investigation other evidence has come to light which appears to demonstrate that not all Asylum seekers are having such positive experiences. This information has been gathered from preliminary research taking place as part of the review of the Community Safety Strategy and indicated racial harassment and abuse are prevalent in some areas.

REFUGEE ACTION

Refugee Action is a charity set up in 1979 to help support Vietnam refugees. They provide a reception centre and community development work and are funded by the Home Office. They also set up Refugee Councils, which are independent bodies in their own right.

They were approached to take on a Reception and Assistant Role and this was confirmed in the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Bill. They have two offices locally one in Manchester and one in Liverpool.

There are two strands to their work, which are the accessing of emergency accommodation and give support on new accommodation and the dispersal process of new arrivals. The dispersal programme has resulted in 23% of all Asylum Seekers dispersed are being placed in the NorthWest and 23% in Yorkshire and Humberside

Refugee Action also provides a "one stop" shop on a drop in basis, which provides general advice. They are having difficulty coping with the 100+ callers each day and signpost the callers to other advice centres like CAB. The other agencies have a problem with accessing interpretation and the wide nature of the enquiries they have to deal with.

Over 70% of Asylum Seekers make their own way to Refugee Action. New clients may come straight from Immigration at Dallas House, Salford. When the Asylum Seeker first arrives Refugee Action explain the dispersal system and find them emergency accommodation. And there has been 2000 applications for emergency accommodation in recent months. Refugee Action visits Asylum Seekers in this accommodation as this is seen as a particularly vulnerable stage for them. Offers of more long-term accommodation will come through NASS. Refugee Action gives out emergency vouchers and an information pack. Once the Asylum Seeker has been dispersed contact with Refugee Action is over.

Refugee Action run an advice line and a client advice line. They also have a Voluntary Return Scheme Worker who provides counselling and advice. They also support project work in communities and give community development support.

Refugee Action is opposed to enforced dispersal, although they commented that the scheme was set up for the best intentions. Originally the focus of dispersal was on clusters of language the scheme is now accommodation led and this problematic.

Local consultation is not good enough. However it was pointed out that where there was no local infrastructure to support Asylum Seekers then local funding is needed.

They suggested that NASS should have more regional representation and more static protocols and it is difficult to keep up with the changes. Vouchers are often delayed and it is not unusual for people to go for several weeks without vouchers.

It was suggested that the regionalisation of NASS would help and that the scheme, which is administered in Croydon, is viewed as unworkable by many Councils and voluntary agencies.

When asked about the standard of accommodation the representative said that local authority accommodation was good but private providers were erratic. It was stated the private providers sometime do not provide what they should do as laid down in their contract. It was suggested that policing by NASS could be better at a local level.

THE ASYLUM SEEKER TEAM

The Committee during the early interviews interviewed the Asylum Seeker team but they then asked the Manager of the team for further information. The team described how they set up a dialogue with Area Housing Managers to identify areas and properties and then discuss the properties with the Ward Councillors. They will speak to any local groups like Residents Associations and try to dispel misconceptions at an early stage.

The designated properties are put on the National Asylum Seeker database. When allocation of Asylum Seekers occurs it is done with the knowledge of the size of the property available and the language clusters that Wigan has shown a preference for. The Asylum Seeker Team allocates specific addresses.

At first there were difficulties when Asylum Seekers arrived in the area as they made their own way on buses and trains. Sometimes they caught the wrong buses, later buses, or did not arrive at all. It was very haphazard. However Asylum Seekers resettled to Council accommodation now arrive by coach at Bramble House and are transported to the cluster area by minibus. It was emphasised that any unaccompanied children making their own way to Wigan would be supported by Social Services.

On arrival the Asylum Seekers have to complete a licence agreement which is their permission to occupy the property. They are given a map of the local area which includes; shop offices, laundrette and local amenities this information will be in their own language. Attempts are made to establish religion and provide information where the nearest place of worship is. They are then taken to the property and are given a Health and safety induction. The Team draw attention to things like the cooker, how the heating works where the stopcock is, where light switches are. They are advised how to lock their doors. They are given Central Watch's (the Council's Security service) telephone number and details on how to contact the Team. In one part of the borough Ward Councillors had funded enhanced food parcels (containing things like meat, orange juice etc and £5 cash) from their Brighter Borough funds.

The following day a member of the Asylum Seeker Team will walk around the area showing local amenities and arrange English Classes. The communities around soon gets to know them and organise things like televisions, bikes and toys for children. Language can be a problem but usually when a group arrive someone can speak English and interprets for the others. It was established that Asylum Seekers, as with other groups, might have members who can not read or write and this has to be worked round. The Team said that the people themselves were breaking down barriers. Young men play football together and they do not need to speak the same language. Community Centres have organised classes and Asylum Seekers attend along with other residents.

The Team was asked how they informed other residents in the area. They said they used local groups and local networks to get the information out. Where there is a new cluster they will knock on doors of near-by neighbours and inform them about what is happening. The committee had heard that the system used in the first cluster, was abandoned and the Team was asked why. The Team said they did not change the system, the additional work was done by a voluntary group. When the Team was set up they used their own forms of consultation. When the Pemberton cluster was set up a resident from Hag Fold went to speak to concerned residents. It was stated that this had reassured local residents, but this has not happened since with the new clusters.

Concern was raised over placing Asylum Seekers next to or with other nationalities that were at war in their own countries. It was stated that NASS had a policy of not dispersing such groups together. When asked did this always work even in the private sector the Team felt that they were not as confident in that aspect of the dispersal. In comparison it was observed that if different languages were living in close proximity they seemed to learn English quicker, it became a common denominator.

The Asylum Seeker Team makes the first visit to the doctor with the Asylum Seeker. The support for the Asylum Seeker is quite close at first but the team members remove the support slowly until the Asylum Seekers knows where they can get hold of a Team member and will contact them when they need to. When schools or solicitors write to them they do so in English so the Asylum Seeker will contact the Team for interpretation.

Access to legal advice was difficult. Solicitors providing immigration advice, in the past, were never in demand in the Wigan area so nothing was set up. Many of the Asylum Seekers have solicitors in the south and NASS does not pay for travel to see a solicitor. In the immediate area the nearest solicitors are in Preston and Manchester. However those solicitors are now getting swamped with work. Asylum Seekers can phone or fax their solicitors from the Housing Department local offices.

The Team felt the cluster system was relatively easy to manage and none of the clusters were too large. They felt the clusters should not be too large so as not to overburden the locality. The Team was concerned about placing Asylum Seekers in highly deprived areas but felt there, again, was a balance to strike between filling empty properties and not swamping an area. They also felt that when residents got to know the Asylum Seekers they found they were good neighbours.

It was indicated that the sharing of information between agencies was poor. A member of the Team said there had been a request from the Fire Station for addresses of Asylum Seekers just in case if they were ever called out to their properties.

When asked about racist incidents the team was emphatic that they take every incident seriously. They notify the Police and a member of the Team will visit. All the Housing Dept. staff has had training in the use of 730D forms. They raised a concern about a particular incident where the Police, when called out, had not perceived the incident as racist although the Team did. Following the incidents covert surveillance equipment has been used and low key anti-social behaviour was observed. After discussions with NASS the Asylum Seeker was moved. However it was argued that the message has gone out to the area that public agencies will not tolerate racist behaviour.

Concern was raised over the appeals system and the abruptness of the removal of unsuccessful Asylum Seekers from their community. They described the plight of one Asylum Seeker once living within the Hag Fold area that has now been deported.

MANCHESTER CITY AND THE NORTHWEST CONSORTIUM

The consortiums five main functions.

1. Represent the interests of the local authorities in the dispersal programme
2. Operational role in terms of the disposal
3. Supporting ethnic communities new and existing
4. Finance and administrative support.
5. Business planning

The North West Consortium executive board meets four times a year and is chaired by a Manchester City Councillor who provides a strategic overview. Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) made a delegated decision to establish the consortium with Manchester taking the lead role. The group contributes to the overall strategy and policy development. There are partnership sub-groups that discuss mutual concerns.

When asked about funding for drop in centres the representatives said that there was £0.5 million per annum nationally. In addition there was the ESF Refugee Integration Fund. Some Councils have been successful in accessing money but it was thought that these funds should not be on a competitive basis.

When asked about the number and nationalities of Asylum Seekers dealt with through the dispersal scheme the representatives said this was a problematic area. They said there was a lack of accurate data from the Home Office and information when it is received was usually out of date.

There is a cluster limit set by the Home Office, which is 1 Asylum Seeker per 200 head of local population. To date there had been 5,000 Asylum Seekers dispersed across Greater Manchester. The Home Office has set the target of 60% of the accommodation to be available in the private sector, 20% in Council property and 20% with registered social landlords. The proportion of Asylum Seekers is 1:4 in Council property, across Greater Manchester, however in Wigan it is 1:5 are in Council property. Wigan had agreed to commit additional properties to avoid having

to use private providers but in the end the contract negotiations took so long that private accommodation was used.

The representatives were asked if they have had any particular problems with accommodation providers. They commented that a lot of the private sector accommodation was in very poor condition. Private providers are driven by profit and they offer limited support services. NASS has no local knowledge and are placing Asylum Seekers in areas where there are already a good number. This creates local unrest, pressure on local amenities and there is a lack of local consultation. The Consortium commented that NASS undermines the Council's responsibility of regulation and support. The Consortium thinks that all properties should be inspected before they come on stream. NASS are compelling single adults to share accommodation; the Consortium has asked what powers have they to do this. There was great concern about the lack of national or regional support services and that the burden this falls on local support services.

The Committee went on to ask the representatives of their experience in Manchester City where they have been receiving Asylum Seekers for a good number of years. They said that in Manchester voluntary agencies have developed in response to Asylum Seekers and refugees. Recently the Council has taken a more proactive role and encouraged voluntary groups to work with refugee communities. They have Manchester Refugee Support Network and they established an Asylum Seeker team based in Social Services Department.

The Council has the capability to be the overview body that could enable voluntary sector groups to develop. There is a need to pump prime initiatives and there is a great need for community development work. There is also support needed to enable people to participate and develop their capacity and there is a need to identify community leaders and establish groups.

In Manchester they have set up a multi-agency forum and have identified there is a need for clear political leadership for Asylum Seeker issues. The multi-agency group is looking at

- ◆ Private sector landlords
- ◆ Employment training and education
- ◆ Health
- ◆ Supporting communities

Religious groups are well established and bonds have been established between elected Members and church leaders. There is good support from education services.

Racist incidents are dealt with along the Police guidelines, and there is a National Asylum Seeker Task Force that provides training and information for all Police forces across UK. However there has been an increase in race hate crime but it is difficult to separate out issues involving or aimed at Asylum Seekers. There are Far Right activities in Oldham, Rochdale and Tameside. Incidents range from violence to verbal abuse and court action has been taken where necessary.

There is good partnership working in Manchester and the Asylum Seeker Team has had a key role. The representatives' from Manchester felt that the impact on communities could be improved if:

- ❖ Policy and strategy are clear and across all tenures.
- ❖ Misconceptions about Asylum Seekers are cleared up.

- ❖ There are opportunities for LA to harness other agencies and services to address Asylum Seeker issues; includes voluntary sector.

Concern was raised about the numbers of Asylum Seekers in the North West. Refugee Action was viewed as an excellent service but they are having difficulty coping with all the new applicants. Funding for advice for Asylum Seekers can be problematic. CABs can use Community Legal Services funding only if they have a franchise and the National Association of CAB have approached Home Office for additional funding for advice services.

EDUCATION

Pre School children

One witness commented that English language classes for pre school children were needed to help them access nursery easier.

The issue also arose as to whether the planners of nursery places were aware of the needs of Asylum Seeker children. For parents to attend language classes crèche or nursery facilities are necessary.

Children's Issues

Asylum Seekers have experienced emotional trauma and very harrowing experiences. Children have not been omitted from any of these disturbing events they have also witnessed and experienced upheaval, change and loss. It appears that cases are dealt with as they arise. English as an Additional Language (EAL) officer commented that his team tries not delve into a child's background. Some children are withdrawn and not communicating but as relationships develop children start to disclose information. Sometime their behaviour deteriorates. Specialist help can be called on at this stage. It was felt that there was a need for support and training for staff working with Asylum Seeker

The Public Health representative said that there was only one specialist trauma unit for victims of torture and that was in London. It was observed that Local mental health services would be unable to meet these specialist needs There are no beds for young people with mental health needs in the area and patients have to be transferred to a hospital in Manchester, where there are psychiatric in patient beds for young people. The voucher system and lack of cash can prevent the family visiting.

Children, who arrive, usually bring very few toys. Local voluntary groups and individuals have been helpful and they have provided toys and games. However better resources are needed.

In school the EAL staff and other staff in school try to ensure that children are not to be disadvantaged because of a language barrier. The EAL officer commented that information from NASS on the numbers and ages of children expected in the Borough was inadequate Children arrive at schools with no prior warning and pupils that are expected never arrive. Problems have been partly addressed by additional funds from the DfES.

As Asylum Seekers may not be staying long in one area, and the children may move on, as continuity is very important for effective learning this can cause the students problems. However generally children seemed to settle in well and a Headteacher

commented of them that they are " bright and keen to learn" There have been problems of bullying at school and resentment expressed by some children towards Asylum Seekers.

LOCAL RESIDENTS

From interviews that were held with people who had direct involvement with Asylum Seekers it would appear that contact with the people helps to break down barriers. Residents living adjacent to Asylum Seekers also have positive comments about their neighbours.

However comments in the local press, and letters received by the committee, give another side of the story. Comments in the local press from individuals who are unhappy with what they see as unfair treatment of foreign people. Many refer to their own situations of living in hardship or unable to get accommodation. Many writers are concerned about jobs and the difficulties of getting jobs locally and those Asylum Seekers could take jobs rightfully theirs. They have voiced their concern about access to colleges and school places for local people. There are comments about higher benefits being paid to Asylum Seekers. The residents feel that the local authority should have consulted them before any Asylum Seekers were dispersed to the Borough.

A writer in the local press highlights Asylum Seekers jumping queues at benefits office. Another partially defended Asylum Seekers by commenting that some of our own people are fraudsters and refers to non-payment of council tax by local residents.

An anonymous letter to a Councillor flags up concerns about a specific property in their area and refers to rumours that were being spread. There was an additional concern, following the disaster on 11th September in New York, about a possible backlash against people who may be seen to be religiously connected with the perpetrators.

Another letter accompanied by a British National Party (BNP) leaflet, firmly comments that the people of Wigan do not want "these economic migrants living in our borough at our expense." The leaflet refers to hundreds of thousands of Asylum Seekers coming to Britain ... paid for by British taxpayers. It raises the questions like shortages of teachers, hospital waiting lists, and 5k new homes being built on green belt land and pensioners having a small income to live off. The BNP calls for

1. A halt to all further asylum seeking and the deportation of criminal and illegal immigrants.
2. they demand local authorities to house local British people before Asylum Seekers
3. That £4 billion per year wasted on Asylum Seekers be spent on schools NHS and pensioners.

Other letters refer to storing up trouble by housing Asylum Seekers. Another speaks of Britain being for the British and that Muslims should be thoroughly investigated. Another writer raised concern about their local town and that the "money " should be spent on their local town not on Asylum Seekers. A resident writes in a local newspaper that no one wants the Asylum Seekers here and asks why has Wigan signed a five-year contract when Glasgow and Liverpool have refused.

Many of the letter writers do not distinguish between private providers and the local authority as landlord. All Asylum Seekers living in the borough are seen as the responsibility of the Council. Some of the letters are may be written from an uninformed position but it is important to recognise that there are concerns and that need to be addressed.

Feelings in the letters columns of local newspapers run high and the interview with the local press confirmed that they receive a good number of letters and comments every week. An interview conducted with representatives' from a residents association in an area, where there are Asylum Seekers living and extra ones are expected to arrive, confirmed residents concerns. In this area the landlord is a private provider.

In one area of Wigan a Residents Association put information forward for the panel to discuss.

Their concerns were:

1. The Asylum Seekers are all young men
2. They do not seem friendly
3. There is a problem with drugs
4. Young people are being invited into the homes of the Asylum Seekers
5. There is loud music
6. New people arrive over night
7. There is a lot more graffiti

The residents felt the experience in a few streets, in their area, was making other residents concerned about who might move into their street. Residents were frightened of making complaints in case they were branded as racist. The representatives felt that even though problems had been resolved with individual Asylum Seekers local people were bothered that the same problems would arise with new arrivals. They reported that there had been racist incidents in their area but emphasised that people would not see themselves as racist.

There was a strong feeling that the Council had let them down. They felt that the Council should challenge the government on the dispersal system. They had spoken to their local Councillors but were unsure of the outcome.

They voiced concern about services and although they felt Asylum Seeker families would be more acceptable than single men they were concerned that the service providers being overloaded did not compromise the services to their own children.

PRIVATE PROVIDER

The committee interviewed a representative from Rose Lodge a private provider. Almost all residents are young men (17 - 18 years) they are usually Iraqi-Kurds, Iranian, or from former Yugoslavia.

The representative advised the committee that the Asylum Seekers usually arrived at rail or bus station where they are met and brought to the accommodation. Occasionally brought in mini-bus direct to property.

They have found translation a problem and have had to resort to asking other residents to help in interpretation. They sometimes use Oakington for translation purposes. Rose Lodge does not have a policy of taking the Asylum Seekers out to

familiarise them with the town. The Asylum Seekers are given information and they sort them selves out. Activities are provided at first but the Asylum Seekers usually make their own social arrangements. Other providers seem to be providing a lower standard of support. However there have been few problems on the issue of cultural conflict.

Asylum Seekers in the private sector access Wigan College for language lessons. They are told to contact Bryan House for health issues. There is a list of GPs for the Asylum Seekers to use. Wigan Youth Service provides some outward-bound activities.

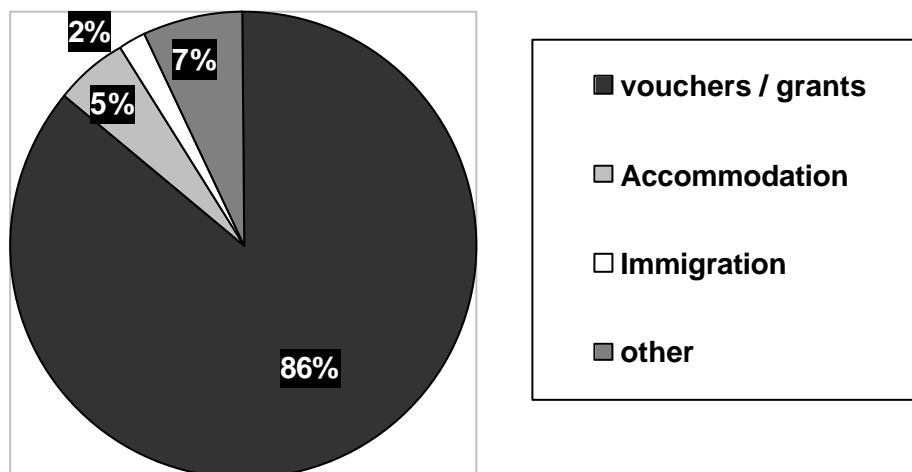
CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU (CAB)

The CAB started to receive a significant number of enquiries in mid 2001 and mostly at the Wigan Bureau. Many enquiries are financial concerns around the voucher system and late payment of vouchers, the failure of NASS to be able to respond to changes in circumstances. Problems with Asylum Seekers wishing to gain employment and enquires to do with appeals and deportations.

There is great difficulty for Asylum Seekers in the comprehension of official forms, which put additional pressure on CAB staff who have to impart information during lengthy interviews. There appears to be delays getting National Insurance numbers and problems identifying locally based solicitors to act for Asylum Seekers. CAB underlines the problems around translation which makes their work more difficult. The staff at CAB believes that the problems are mainly for private sector Asylum Seekers, who do not get any level of advice or support from the contractors.

The time taken attending to enquiries can be on average between 1.5 and 2. Hours.

Figure 9



Enquiries analysis

Difficulties encountered

Language and interpretation services are seen as very problematic as accessing Language Line costs £2.25 per minute. CAB themselves have negotiated for

enquiries in connection with vouchers to be funded via their a welfare benefits contract with the Legal Services Commission. Manchester Central CAB has approached the Home Office for funds to cover costs. Refugee Action is attempting to set up an interpretation service with volunteers.

CAB has found it very difficult to contact NASS as there is no local office. There are comments about regular changes of telephone numbers and fax numbers when the staff are contacted they are unhelpful and appear to be badly briefed. There are frequent system breakdowns and loss of case files. There is a general lack of response from NASS and a failure to record or action telephone enquiries. Refugee Action does not have the resources to deal with the numbers of Asylum Seekers in the North West.

CAB comment on number of problems and these are:-

- they feel the voucher system is inappropriate
- the amount of assistance (money) causes hardship
- voluntary sector organisations had no prior briefing
- health screening is inconsistent
- lack of follow up if asylum is refused

CAB staff feels there should be a standard monitoring system on enquiries and this is to be put in place. They are also looking at regional networking of CABx to extend and share information. Training of staff should a high priority.

The people who work for CAB in the region are also concerned about race relations between Asylum Seekers and the communities they move into. They think there should be an attempt to try to make the dispersal system a more possitive experience for both the community and the Asylum Seekers.

1.3 Particular areas of interest include: the needs of the children, single parents, people with a disability, people experiencing emotional health problems.

This section draws out a series of issues that are highlighted elsewhere in this report.

The Select Committee was particularly keen to see how the needs of certain more vulnerable groups of Asylum Seekers had been accommodated in the Borough. The following groups were identified

Children aged 0-18

Single parents

People with a disability

People experiencing emotional ill health

Children aged 0-18

There is no accurate figure to estimate the number of Asylum Seekers children currently living locally. Many of the agencies interviewed work with children and their parents on a regular basis and provided valuable information on their apparent needs.

Educational needs of children of school age.

There is a need to provide effective support through EAL (English as Additional Language) and other staff in school to enable children to reach their potential. EAL officer commented that one of the biggest challenges facing the service was the lack of accurate information from NASS on the numbers and ages of children expected in the Borough. Lists of potential pupils are received but often they are incorrect, as these children may not come to Wigan in the end.

The EAL service had received some additional funding from the DfES, which meant the team could expand to address their increased workload.

However from the evidence heard school based staff and many pupils appear to work hard to integrate Asylum Seeker children.

One witness commented that "throughflow" could be a problem i.e. children not staying very long in one area, continuity is very important for effective learning.

The same witness commented that children are welcomed by local schools and children generally settling in well. Another witness that "Children bright and keen to learn".

We have however heard of examples of bullying at school and resentment expressed by some children towards Asylum Seeker children

Education and Pre School children

One witness commented that English language classes for pre school children were needed to help them access nursery easier.

The issue also arose as to whether the planners of nursery places were aware of the needs of Asylum seeker children. For parents to attend language classes crèche or nursery facilities are necessary.

Health and Welfare of children

Access to dentistry appears to be poor.

Mothers cannot obtain help towards the cost of baby milk it must be paid for out of the family's vouchers. This means that milk is costly, as it has to be purchased at supermarkets instead of health clinics. Witnesses commented that one mother was no longer able to breast feed because of the emotional trauma she had experienced and was finding it very expensive to feed her baby.

Disposable nappies are also costly and as many parents do not have access to a washing machine this places an additional financial burden.

Many Asylum seekers have experienced emotional trauma and some very harrowing experiences. Children have also witnessed and experienced upheaval, change and loss. A child's needs for emotional health care hasn't really been explored. Individual cases are dealt with as they arise.

The Social Services Department has received a number of referrals via their Central Duty Team for Children's Services. These have focused on childcare and accommodation. In addition since 1999 6 unaccompanied children have arrived in the Borough. These children are supported by Social Services until a more permanent home can be found for them in almost all cases this is with a relative or family friend. Full checks are made of the families willing to take in these young people to ensure that the placements are will meet the child's needs.

The EAL officer commented that his team is reticent to enquire of a child's background. Some children are initially withdrawn and not communicating. As relationships develop over time children may start to disclose information or present more unusual behaviours. At this stage some specialist support could be helpful. Support and training for staff working with Asylum Seeker children may also be of benefit and could be made available within existing staff development programmes.

There is only one specialist trauma counselling unit for victims of torture in London. Local mental health services would be unable to meet this need. We know of one young girl that has been transferred to hospital in Manchester, as there are no psychiatric in patient beds for young people in the area. Some children have exhibited behavioural difficulties.

Access to toys and playthings for children are limited, they often have fled with very few possessions. Local groups and individuals have been really helpful and provided toys and games. But as play is such an important aspect of a child's development adequate resources are needed to achieve this.

Cost of prams prohibitive, Asylum Seekers have no access to maternity grants and have to rely on charitable help to obtain prams and baby equipment.

Immunisation schedules for children this is causing some difficulties, as Health staff are not sure were children are up to with their immunisation programme and should they start them while they are living here?

Single parents

There appear to be particular pressures on single parents due to their sole responsibility for childcare and lack of extended family/friends to act as support network.

This has also been an issue for some women with partners due to cultural and religious behaviour. I.e. Husband refusing to participate in childcare so as to allow the woman respite or time to access language courses because he sees childcare is "woman's work".

Crèche/nursery facilities are needed for children of single parents to provide respite.

Emotional Health

It has been impossible to establish the numbers experiencing poor emotional health but we can surmise that given their experiences and anecdotal evidence the need for support services/counselling amongst all groups appears high. The Social Services Department has received 5 referrals for mental health services, but these requests appear to be on the increase in recent months. Many individuals are experiencing PostTraumatic Stress Disorder.

Access to translation and interpretation when accessing health care is very important as for staff to be culturally sensitive i.e. having staff of the right gender available to deal with personal health or care issues is very important to some group.

Witnesses commented that many couples were experiencing relationship stress caused by trauma; no role for men as providers any longer as they cannot work at first; women unwilling/unable to tell their husbands/partners what they had experienced i.e. rape, abuse during whilst fleeing. Some couples had been separated and later reunited

Free prescriptions, glasses and dentistry and contraception is available to Asylum Seekers.

Costs of fares to visit family members in a specialist hospital in Manchester have been difficult for one family.

People with a physical disability

During this investigation the Committee heard of only one case of an Asylum seeker with a physical disability, this was a referral received by the Social Services Department.

2.0 To examine, through the experience of Asylum Seekers and the community, the process of integration.

THE ASYLUM SEEKERS' EXPERIENCE.

The journey to the UK can begin in the Middle East, Africa, E. Europe, and many other places; it is frequently long, dangerous and expensive and is fuelled by poverty, oppression and despair. Most Asylum Seekers come from Iraq, Somalia or Afghanistan.

The majority of Asylum Seekers to the UK are single men (81%), most under 35 (66%).

On arrival in the UK, they present to Immigration Control, or ask for assistance via Social Services, solicitors and friends. They are directed to the "Gatekeepers", the Refugee Council/Refugee Action and into the Reception System. They will be given temporary "emergency accommodation", whilst the application is being processed by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). If they want accommodation and vouchers they are dispersed to one of the national cluster areas.

Refugee Action gives advice and support at the initial stage prior to dispersal, but with 6000 refugees in the NW now (2000 in emergency accommodation in Manchester) they have been unable to discharge their advice function properly. This general service has been passed on to the Citizens' Advice Bureaux. There can be problems with the vouchers - "it's not uncommon for people to go weeks without any vouchers". NASS is difficult to deal with, as it has no regional facility.

Refugee Action gives dispersal briefings and what support they can with limited staff. The Asylum Seeker is sent to the dispersal point for the journey by coach or rail to Wigan into Council or private sector accommodation via the contract with either the AGMA NW Consortium or one of 9 independent providers who sub-contract to individual contractors.

Those arriving in Wigan, as per the national profile will be mainly young, single men less than 35 years. The main nationalities here are Iraqi Kurds, Iranians, Turks and Afghanis, slightly different to the national profile. The Council was quite specific about the national mix and these groups tend to get "exceptional leave to stay". More often at the end of the process, they tend to have higher levels of professional background and are seen as easier to assimilate in an area with traditionally low levels of ethnic diversity.

Asylum Seekers come into a Borough with very little in the way of settled ethnic minority communities - the 1991 Census showed it as 0.8% of the total population, comprising 2409 people, mainly of Indian and Chinese extraction; if the "cluster limit" of 1538 is reached, this will rise to 3000.

The arrival experience will vary depending on whether they are to be settled in Council or private accommodation: -

PRIVATE

The vast majority of single men are in this category. Rose Lodge and Clearsprings are the major contractors. New arrivals can either make their own way on bus or rail

- "self-rights" - and be met at bus station or train station, or be "bussed up" via mini-bus. .

Private providers appear to rely mainly on other Asylum Seekers who speak English to translate. The newly arrived Asylum Seeker will get brief induction programme; they will be shown the facilities etc. They will get directions to the College. The service varies considerably between contractors.

NASS is supposed to monitor contracts and the standard of accommodation but it doesn't always happen. Most Asylum Seekers live in Houses of Multiple Occupation, some sharing a room with strangers. The Environmental Health Department found that 2/3 properties had not had prior NASS inspection.

The private providers liaise with Bryan House for GP allocation and are sent a list for Asylum Seekers to use.

This seems to be the optimum level of support provided in this sector.

COUNCIL

The Asylum Seeker will be met at Bramble House in Worsley Hall by the Council's Asylum Seekers Team and taken by mini-bus to one of the "clusters" in Hag Fold, Worsley Mesnes, Newtown/Norley or Higher Folds - Whelley will be the next area allocated.

The process is explained in detail in page 20 but in essence it is a process in which Asylum Seekers receive a greater level of support and advice from the Asylum Seeker Team.

They will live on vouchers provided via a private firm, Sodexo. These are picked up at the PO. CAB reports this, as one of the major problems for Asylum Seekers is the non-receipt or cessation of vouchers and extreme difficulties in liaising with NASS to sort this out. Asylum Seekers will arrive with nothing.

Often the emergency vouchers issued via Refugee Action, £90.00 are for 18 days, and will run out and they are left without any money at all. Many Asylum Seekers feel that CAB should be able to provide the vouchers direct and get angry and upset when they discover this is not so.

The value of the vouchers is £35.00 for a single person (£10.00 in cash as "pocket money"), or £104.00 for a family of four - 70% of the benefit level UK. The vouchers can be cashed in certain supermarkets, not others, some give change, others do not (as Home Secretary, Jack Straw ordered they should not).

LANGUAGE BARRIERS FOR ALL ASYLUM SEEKERS

One major problem in looking at integration seems to be language difficulties, most; Asylum Seekers have real problems with English and in trying to access the Health Service. For example problems can arise; doctors are unhappy with their interpretation service and interviews can last up to an hour; dentists are not obliged to take on NHS patients and many refuse because of difficulties in understanding the Asylum Seeker needs. In fact, their teeth are often in a very poor state, having been neglected because of other, more pressing priorities.

GENDER ROLES

A number of witnesses commented on the experience of some Asylum Seeker men. The marginalisation of the husband and feelings of uselessness may cause other problems when he cannot work and provide for his family and cannot understand the different gender attitudes and expectations in Britain.

RACIST ABUSE

Once installed in an area, Asylum Seekers may suffer some level of racist abuse. The Police report an increase in racist incidents, and some individuals in some communities will cause trouble, e.g. name calling, stone throwing; one Asylum Seeker reported bullying at school. The Asylum Seeker Team can be called on to help for Council Asylum Seekers and will respond vigorously working with local Police; sometimes the Asylum Seeker will want to move away from that area.

IMMIGRATION ADVICE

There is a shortage of specialist legal advice and Asylum Seekers will need to travel to obtain it - usually to Manchester or Preston.

EDUCATION

Many Asylum Seekers will attend Wigan and Leigh College for English classes and the College provide other support in the form of computers, gym etc., as well as social contact.

"GOOD NEIGHBOURS"

The North West Consortium has praised the "good neighbours" of the region, who provide a strong counter movement against local animosity. Sometimes it comes from people who were originally hostile. There is strong evidence from many of the cluster areas that Asylum Seekers are seen as good neighbours once they are settled. They are seen as a settling, stabilising force as families, especially if they have children, local people will try to help with clothes, food parcels, toys, bikes etc. Asylum Seekers will often encounter great friendliness in local communities.

In many areas Asylum Seekers have received strong support from the local Community Centre. Special events have been laid on; they make good use of these facilities and strong relationships have been built up. Asylum Seekers are not likely to stay long (6 months is average) in the area and the Committee heard of one recent one deportation that caused much distress.

EXPERIENCE OF SINGLE MEN

There had been sporadic incidents close to some private provider accommodation involving hostilities between Asylum Seeker young men and the local young men. Problems with a group of young men Asylum Seekers using drugs, loud music, local girls invited in etc. This has caused a lot of ill feeling in the locality. The private provider has since moved this group to another area.

Sometimes sport can bridge the divide and this has been reported with football matches between groups of young men.

Asylum Seekers tend to live in national clusters, but some nationalities are fairly isolated. Some seek support from religion - not many attend church, mosque, and synagogue.

Mutual support is available from their own groups however this may hinder the integration process.

The Asylum Seekers interviewed by the Committee were families and seemed fairly happy, but they did have concerns about dentists (as above), school bullying, and wished for more social opportunities.

THE COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE.

Wigan is unaccustomed to ethnic diversity - traditionally a very low ethnic minority population.

ASYLUM SEEKERS TEAM

They undertake a comprehensive process of consultation and preparation with local Ward Councillors, key community figures, prospective neighbours, in each cluster area, to identify properties, inform and advise people in the locality of the likely impact of the new arrivals.

PRIVATE SECTOR ACCOMMODATION

Disparity between this preparation and the experience in private sector areas, for example in one area single young men, were moved into the area without any prior preparation; local Councillors felt they were "kept in the dark" without any knowledge or support back-up at the outset.

One Residents group had experienced some problems with Asylum Seekers in private provider accommodation. This seems to have had a knock-on effect on the proposed cluster at Durham St., Whelley. Residents feel that no one was listening to their concerns.

The proposed redevelopment of the old Hospice site in Worsley Mesnes, has been problematic locally. Again local people felt that they have not been consulted and received no information.

Asylum Seekers are usually resettled in less affluent sometimes socially deprived areas and Council estates - there are already significant problems in some of these areas; e.g. Norley Hall, Worsley Mesnes, Hag Fold.

MISCONCEPTIONS

Many in the local population have misconceptions about the Asylum Seekers. They see them as more privileged e.g. they believe they have goods that local people cannot get from the Council, like TV's and microwaves, they wear "designer" clothes and use mobile phones; they are only here to exploit our system and are not fleeing persecution.

There was initial hostility when Asylum Seekers were first resettled in the Borough and there have been, around the Borough, petitions, threats, racial abuse and harassment.

At another level, other residents have written to the press, often responding to national stories. About 8 to 10 letters are received weekly by the local press, but a few are not published because of racist content. In contrast, some positive letters are received. The press can give a false impression by embellishing stories about Asylum Seekers rights. There seems to be quite a wide level of misunderstanding in communities about how the dispersal scheme works.

But there is also a strong support from "good neighbours", however defined, as residents, Councillors, community groups, churches. The North West Consortium holds up Wigan as an example of good dispersal practice in an area where "diversity" has been very low.

The experience in some areas has been inspirational, where neighbours have rallied on behalf of their new arrivals, the Community Centre has provided a focus for the Asylum Seekers and given support, local Councillors have been fully involved all the way.

Final word from a resident when asked if the Community has benefited from the arrival of the Asylum Seekers: -

***"Yes, I think it's opened their eyes to what other people go through
If you've been a community it doesn't matter who comes into your
community. You've been here so many years, they're the strangers and it's
for us to welcome them and say 'you've had a rough time'. No matter who
it is."***

3.0 To consider the role of public awareness of and information on Asylum Seeker issues and the consequent impact on the wider community.

In this section we consider what the public knows about Asylum Seekers, where they get their information from and the what impact his information has in informing people's views on Asylum Seekers.

THE NATIONAL PRESS

Most people's information on Asylum Seekers comes from the national press. Here is a selection of stories mainly from the popular press:

❖ **The Sun**, 7 March 2001:

"We resent the scroungers, beggars and crooks who are prepared to cross every country in Europe to reach our generous benefits system"

❖ **The Sun**, 14 February 2001:

"Only 12% of those who flood into Britain each year are legally allowed to stay for good".
N.B. ***This figure is wrong***

❖ **Daily Star**, 7.12.200:

"the tide of illegal immigrants".

❖ **Sunday People**, 4 March 2001:

"Thousands have already [come to Britain] bringing terror and violence to the streets of many English towns"

❖ **Mail on Sunday**, 4 March 2001

"Asylum cheats are a threat to our future".

❖ **Daily Telegraph** , 20 February 2001

"they are not in need of political refuge. We know this because they are seeking to reach Britain from France".

❖ **Daily Mail** , 18 May 2001

HAGUE LAUNCHES ASYLUM ASSAULT

"Britain should be a safe haven and not a soft touch. Under the Conservatives' plan all Asylum Seekers would be detained in "secure reception centres" while their applications were being processed".

❖ **Mail on Sunday**, 21 January 2001

NHS GIVES NURSES' JOBS TO ASYLUM SEEKERS

"Asylum Seekers are being invited to become NHS doctors and nurses - to the dismay of patients".

❖ **The Guardian** , 9 August 2001

Article on Sighthill after the murder of asylum seeker Firsat Yildiz

"Mark 16, who calls himself "the General" says he has been in fights with the refugees. Before they came the bored youths of Sighthill used to organise fights with gangs from the other estates. "They're not all refugees. Some of them could be murderers and rapists. They should put them all in a camp."

THE LOCAL PRESS

The next major source of information is the local press. The articles written, by various reporters are, in the main, an unbiased reporting of facts, however no effort is made to put these reports in the context of why people are leaving their home countries and seeking asylum. Generally, no efforts are made to describe the situation from the Asylum Seekers point of view. Only one article gives a positive slant to Asylum Seekers living in our community.

❖ **Wigan Observer**, 10 April -article by Nicola Howarth

"Claims that the former hospice is to be turned into a hostel for Asylum Seekers have been confirmed.

Less than a month ago furious residents contacted the Wigan Observer claiming they had been kept in the dark.

An action group was formed and local people demanded answers from their Ward councillors and called a series of public meetings.

Councillors also claimed they had been kept in the dark and said if there was an application they would be extremely concerned."

❖ **Ibid.** - letter (no date on cutting from Press Office)

"Housing Asylum Seekers disgusts me" - signed

The letter alleges that her family did not get any priority to move from a flat to a house but Asylum Seekers have been housed straight away.

❖ **Ibid.** - 12 June 2001 Richard Bean

This is a report on application for conversion of former hospice into hostel for Asylum Seekers.

It refers to 520 individual letters of protest and 1,000 strong petition and the fact that several "heated public meeting" were held.

One resident described the community as "living in fear" of what would happen if the hostel were set up. It would be a "recipe for disaster".

"John Sloane acknowledged residents fears about "anti-social behaviour" amongst hostel residents but these concerns are only valid if they can be shown to be based on "sound reasons"".

- ❖ **Ibid.**, 4 August 2000 - article by Paula Langin

Racist graffiti sparks police investigation.
An angry Ince resident complained of delay in removing second lot in a week

- ❖ **Ibid.** - 14 August 2001 letter

ASYLUM SEEKERS ARE MILKING US

"How on earth can we afford to accommodate such vast numbers of asylum seekers into this small island of ours ... what they wrongly assume is a land of milk and honey ...we are now known throughout Europe as Johnny Soft Touch it really is sticking the knife in where it hurts." Signed

- ❖ **Ibid.** - 14 August 2001 - article without by-line

"Asylum Seekers will still be welcome to Wigan despite controversy over their entry into the country.... **A support team has been set up to provide assistance to Asylum Seekers who appear to have been more successfully integrated into Wigan than in many other areas** ... A Metro spokesman said, "The integration of Asylum Seekers into the local community has gone smoothly."

- ❖ **Ibid.** - 4 September 2001 - article by Allan Ledward

"A Wigan school could be set to give Asylum Seekers the chance to take part in classes aimed at their integration into the area after a summer project for youngsters proved a huge success. Young Asylum Seekers have this week been putting on performances at the school working with other Wigan youngsters.

Kingsdown drama teacher, Steve Atherton said ... The youngsters that have attended Kingsdown have been a real asset and a credit to themselves.....

Working on this project we've had Asylum Seekers from countries including Estonia and Kosovo and it's been like the United Nations. Hopefully we are helping them feel part of Wigan."

This is the only really positive story about Asylum Seekers

- ❖ **Wigan Evening Post** - 18 September and **Wigan Reporter** - 20 September - Allan Ledward

This article reported on a meeting of this Select Committee.

The first had the headline STRUGGLING TO HELP OUT; DILEMMA OVER ASYLUM SEEKERS and the second SERVICES UNDER STRAIN

"Public services in Wigan say they are struggling to cope with the demands of Asylum Seekers placed in private accommodation in the town."

The report concentrates on the effect on CAB and on local schools.

EVIDENCE FROM LOCAL PEOPLE AND LOCAL AGENCIES

In this section we describe some examples of the issue highlighted by witnesses in relation to public information.

A JOURNALIST

The evidence we had was about newspapers, which are circulated in Wigan. We were told that Asylum Seekers are an issue on which they have had a lot of letters - about 8-10 per week. Some of these are extremely racist. For the past few months this has been the most popular subject for letters - up there with rugby and football!

When the issue is high on the agenda of the national press the local press get the most letters. At least one person has written to complain about a letter they published that was extreme - reminding them that they have to watch what they are doing. Quite a lot of letters and stories have not been printed because they are extremist and inflammatory

Most of the information used by this witness to write about Asylum Seekers comes from the Council Press Office and Council agendas. This witness had produced an article about the Select Committee meeting at Bramble House that he believed was factual and was not sensationalised. Although it could have been if the slant had been taken to emphasise impact on schools and other services of Asylum Seekers.

There is no editorial direction on Asylum Seekers stories and reporters are allowed to follow their own instincts. They do sometimes embellish stories, e.g. they may lead people to think that Asylum Seekers are being provided with washing machines, microwaves and TVs whereas they know this is not the case but would not write something knew to be untrue. He agreed that the headlines of articles can be misleading but told us that sub-editors provide these and the individual journalist has no control over these. Sometimes people do not read the story but just the headline and therefore may reach a wrong conclusion on an issue.

Finally they would be willing to counter the negative stories if they are given positive ones but generally good stories are not news and newspapers are a commercial concern with profit as the bottom line.

A COUNCILLOR

This councillor represents a Ward where Asylum Seekers are accommodated in the private sector. His main concern was that Councillors and other key people in the community were not aware that Asylum Seekers were coming to Platt Bridge. People who need information are not getting it. He believed that NASS is responsible for this, as the Council is given no information about those people who are dispersed via private sector housing.

There have been incidents in this Ward, which so far have amounted to bricks being thrown through windows and name-calling. The worry is that these may escalate into more serious incidents.

In his view he and his fellow Ward councillors are trying to keep a lid on the situation but without any information this is extremely difficult. He was aware that the Police are given details, by NASS, of where Asylum Seekers are to be housed but it seems that this information is not filtered down.

He reported a lot of misunderstandings by locals - people are saying "they" get £100 per week and have designer clothes and mobile phones and are asking where does the money for these come from. He was concerned about the impact of housing Asylum Seekers in areas of deprivation. His view, and that of others, was that we are adding to the problems of deprived areas. To do anything additional to help Asylum Seekers (e.g. giving them sports and travel passes) would cause resentment amongst local people.

THE POLICE

A Police representative commented that rumour damages efforts to integrate Asylum Seekers. More information about what Asylum Seekers receive in terms of support may go some way to dispel negative attitudes. In terms of the Police themselves all officers are receiving two days diversity training.

RESIDENTS' VIEWS

Evidence was received from a variety of agencies and individual residents and Residents Associations and described earlier in this report are their experiences.

All residents pointed to the need for accurate and timely information on the dispersal and location of Asylum Seekers. Not having this information at the right time allowing them to respond to the enquiries of local people had led to anger, distrust of agencies and the growth of misconceptions about Asylum Seekers.

This lack of information had not helped the dispersal process and in some areas has led to strong anti-Asylum Seeker feelings.

One Residents' Association believed that what would improve the situation is for communications to be improved with the community at large, especially to those who are asking what Asylum Seekers are getting and why. If they Residents Association had the correct information they would be able to respond in a positive way to the enquiries.

Residents are looking for honesty and openness from agencies. They have little confidence in local Councillors or the Council in addressing the situation.

HEAD TEACHER

A Head Teacher commented that it would be useful if teachers had more information on the cultural and backgrounds of the children

ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

Here we were told that more information was needed to help schools prepare schools for arrival of Asylum Seeker children. Schools are initially worried about the children who are coming and whether they will be able to meet their needs.

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

We talked to representatives of various churches who felt that the myths surrounding Asylum Seekers, i.e. that they are given special treatment needed to be dispelled. To enable them to tackle these myths it was important that they had the facts and so could then present them to others within the community. They believed that the negative press had a major responsibility in influencing people's attitudes.

They thought there should be more opportunities for Asylum Seekers to meet with people from the local community and that the Churches could take an active role in this. This would not be conditional upon Asylum Seekers joining their Church.

One of the church representatives was also a teacher at a local high school where there are 12 Asylum Seeker children. There was some resentment from local children initially but by talking through their assumptions, discussing where the Asylum Seeker children came from and presenting the facts to them had helped to resolve some of these problems.

NORTH WEST CONSORTIUM/ MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

Recently the Council has taken a more proactive role in encouraging groups to work with refugee communities. Pump priming of community development work is important, e.g. the Kosovo programme. It must be recognised that support is needed to enable people to participate and develop their capacity to identify community leaders and to establish groups.

This witness suggested that clearer leadership and responsibility on Asylum Seeker issues is needed. The dispersal programme has helped councillors to be more focused and this has helped them to plan a multi-agency forum and set up a partnership task force looking at private sector landlords, employment, training and education, health and supporting communities. She recognised that people bring their own experiences of political tensions and so on and that it takes a great deal of sensitivity to overcome this. There is a key role for the Asylum Seeker Team in advising policy-makers and front-line staff on the needs of Asylum Seekers and there needs to be a clear local strategy for Asylum Seekers across all types of tenure.

Religious groups are well established and bonds have been formed between religious leaders and councillors. Some councils are looking at outreach sessions etc to provide a multi-agency response particularly in areas that have little experience of diversity. There is an opportunity for the Council to harness agencies and services to address Asylum Seeker issues - including the community and voluntary sector activity.

Again we heard of the importance in clearing up the misconceptions that people have about Asylum Seekers.

ASYLUM SEEKER TEAM

Information from and communication with the Asylum Seeker Team is a critical aspect of the resettlement programme. Earlier in this report we described how the resettlement process is undertaken.

The Team work hard to help develop tolerance and understanding by sharing the life experiences of the Asylum Seekers themselves.

The information that the Council receives from NASS is considered to be incomplete and unreliable. There is a need for better information about the Asylum Seekers living in the area. In particular, there is limited information about children and those living in private sector accommodation.

Asylum Seekers living in the borough come from many different countries. In placing people into accommodation, consideration should be given to the relations between their countries of origin, so that individuals or families are not living with people who have opposing cultural or political backgrounds.

Most Asylum Seekers in the borough are young men in their twenties. This is particularly true for those in private sector accommodation, where most single people are placed. This is an important point to consider when deciding what support services are required.

Part 4

CONCLUSION

The aim of this report was to investigate the impact that the Government's Asylum Dispersal Scheme has had on our local communities and to understand the support that public, private, and voluntary organisations are giving to our communities and the Asylum Seekers living in them.

The Select Committee has met over a dozen times and interviewed approximately 50 people. The members have taken written evidence from another 30 people; from letters to the local press and to members of the committee. We have referred to, and used, information, in reports, from agencies, department's and organisations. We have recorded and collated that information and have reached a number of conclusions.

Our investigations have highlighted areas of good practice and a good proportion of local people, and officers, working hard to support our communities and the Asylum Seekers living there. However the Dispersal Scheme has not been without its problems. It is the view of the Select Committee that these problems are not insurmountable and it is with that aim that we present our findings, and our recommendations, and request policy and strategy makers to ensure that our recommendations are acted upon.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A time limited, multi-agency group to be set up to address the issue of information sharing and information for Asylum Seekers:

Specific areas to be addressed to include:

- Fire Officers
- Area Police Officers
- Ambulance personnel
- Ward Councillors
- Residents' groups in areas where Asylum Seekers live (not just council estates)
- Information on health services supplied, for Asylum Seekers, in their language.
- Information to frontline workers particularly health workers.
- To ensure that the true image of dispersal scheme is known (public relations)

2. A multi-agency group / forum to be set up to oversee:

- Information broadcasting
- Private sector landlords
- Registered Social landlords
- That consultation with residents is meaningful and consistent
- Use of media for factual and good news stories (see 9. below.)
- The co-ordination of support from voluntary groups and community development
- Direct contact with NASS and the North West Consortium
- Discussion about the concentration of Asylum Seekers under the "cluster system"

3. Ensure political leadership by appointing a Member to be responsible for Asylum Seeker issues or allocate the responsibility to a Cabinet Member.

It may be wise to widen the remit to include ethnic minority groups.

4. To encourage the North West Consortium to set up collaborative working with other public agencies and other Local Authorities to access a comprehensive translation and interpretation service.

To address direct language difficulties and services like "Language Line"

5. Wigan Council to make written recommendations to the Government to review the role of NASS. There should be regional offices set up to deal with the Dispersal scheme.

Specific areas to be addressed include:

- The provision of reliable information on asylum seekers; arrival, accommodation, health,
- Closer monitoring of accommodation provided particularly the private providers
- Accommodation provided by public, social or private providers should be of a similar standard.
- Support services should be the same whether in private or public sector
- Information sharing between all agencies needs to be improved
- Better information to local residents
- Support for voluntary organisations; funding and training need to be addressed

- That NASS protocols are static for at least one year
- To ensure there is local immigration advice
- To address the concentration of large numbers of single young men in particular areas

6. Wigan Council to make written recommendations to NASS and the Government.

Specific areas to be addressed include:

- The voucher system to be more flexible to reflect the needs of individual asylum seeker families and children.
- Delays in payment of vouchers must be addressed
- Standardise protocols and guidelines and for those to remain static for at least one year
- Additional funding to the Local Authority to enable the Asylum Seeker Team to take on a wider role (see 7. Below)
- To ensure that deportation is done in a humane way taking into account the community around the Asylum Seekers
- To address the funding and organisational issues around transition from NASS support to benefits
- An open and guileless arena to discuss problems

7. The Asylum Seeker Team to have wider responsibilities for all Asylum Seekers in the Borough.

Specific areas to be addressed:

- To standardise provision of support services
- Information sharing
- Health care
- Consultation and information sharing with local residents
- Co-ordination of information to Ward Councillors
- Information for Asylum Seekers to be in a form they can understand
- To ensure that guidelines and protocols are adhered to in a consistent manner across the Borough.

8. The Community Safety Team to engage with partners to support the Asylum Seeker Team to address racist incidents within the Borough

Specific areas:

- Young people
- Race hate crime

9. Within the Council a small group to be identified to be responsible for the broadcasting of positive stories in connection with Asylum Seekers / Ethnic Minorities. This group to be led by the Public Relations Team and to include members of Asylum Seeker Team and Elected Members

Specific areas to be addressed:

- Positive impact of Asylum Seeker children on the schools
- Press articles on communities
- Inclusion in local area newsletters
- Exhibition to portray Asylum Seekers in a positive light (art exhibition?)

10. Staff Development and Training needs to be addressed.

Specific issues to be addressed:

- Training for specialist staff coming into contact with Asylum Seekers to enhance their understanding of cultural difference and the need for cultural sensitivity in service delivery.
- Training for all staff in relevant agencies to ensure that Asylum Seekers have their individual needs met; that information on help available to Asylum Seekers is circulated widely and myths are dispelled.

11. To ensure that the needs of particularly vulnerable groups are met the Committee recommends that this report be distributed to the following strategic partnerships for action:

- The Children's Service sub group of the Borough Health Partnership to ensure that strategic planners of health and social care services for children are aware of the issues raised by those working with Asylum Seekers children.
- The Mental Health Services sub group of the Borough Health Partnership to ensure that strategic planners of mental health and social care services are aware of the issues raised by Asylum Seekers themselves and those working with Asylum Seekers.
- That this report be referred to the Early Years and Childcare Partnership to ensure that strategic planning for Early Years recognises the particular needs of Asylum Seeker's.

Susan Loudon
Chairman.

November 2001
Select Committee 2

Addendum

Following feedback from the Asylum Seeker Team, the following amendments to the report have been made:

p.20 para 8: "They are advised *how* to lock their doors"

p.21 para 2: "The team said they did not change the system. The additional work in the first cluster was done by a voluntary group".

p.26 para 6: "...the Asylum Seekers usually arrive at rail or bus station where they are met and brought to the accommodation"

p.33 para 6: "The Asylum Seeker will be met at Bramble House in Worsley Hall by the Council's Asylum Seekers Team and taken by minibus to one of the local "clusters"..."

p.36 para 3: A new sub-heading of "**PRIVATE SECTOR ACCOMMODATION**" to be introduced before the paragraph commencing "Disparity between this preparation..."

Review of Asylum and Immigration
The Government's recent recommendations

In late October the Government discussed recommendations and we thought you might be interested to see how these correspond to a number of the recommendations included within the Select Committee Report.

The Government has stated that "It is still the intention of this government to provide a safe haven for those genuinely fleeing persecution" and that they are committed to maintaining this statement whilst at the same time ensuring that asylum and immigration controls are rigorously enforced.

It is suggested that the current system of vouchers and dispersal will be phased out and the new system to be available early next autumn.

It also recommends that:

Asylum seekers should have ID smart cards to reduce fraud.

There should be better systems for processing of claims.

Accommodation Centres to be trialled with work starting immediately on 4 centre to house in total 3,000 people.

Appeals should be dealt with more swiftly.

There should be removal centres to house those awaiting deportation.

NASS be given a stronger regional structure.

Consultation with Local Authorities and other local agencies should be improved.

Private providers should give proper notice to LA when Asylum Seekers are dispersed.

For those granted asylum there could be language, and education requirements for citizenship.

There should be a change to the work permit system to reduce economic migrants using the asylum seeker route.

Additional flexibility in the voucher system and an increase in the value of the support
And cash to be raised to £14.

Communication with asylum seekers should be improved.

The service delivery of NASS should be improved.

There should be Induction Centres that will be gateways for asylum seekers.

There should be an attempt to reduce local community tension and the impact on local services by reverting to language "clusters".

In addition

The EU is to introduce measures to allow greater co-operation between member states to combat the smuggling of people.

Joint initiative (Police and Immigration) to disrupt criminal activity.

The removal of illegal immigrant workers.