This booklet is an updated version of one of a series of booklets on equalities issues produced by Bristol City Council. It is part of the Council’s clear policy commitment on equality, diversity and promoting inclusion through tackling myths and prejudice. Previous booklets provide information not just on Asylum Seekers and Refugees, but also on Gypsies and Travellers, Muslims in Bristol and Britain, and Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people. The council will be publishing a further booklet on Sikhs and Sikhism in 2010. All resources are also available on-line at www.bristol.gov.uk/equality.
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Bristol City Council is committed to equality for everyone within the City of Bristol. We have a long history of welcoming new communities, refugees and asylum seekers to the city and this booklet helps put our equalities policies into context, providing useful information for service providers, policy developers and residents. It also shows the contribution of refugees to our economy, cultural life and society, aiming to counter some of the myths propagated in the media. Bristol City Council is committed to working with others to build a strong, inclusive society which celebrates diversity and exhibits respect for everyone.

Barbara Janke
Leader of the Council
In the past decade the debate surrounding immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, has climbed up the political as well as the public agenda. The debate has been characterised by distorted stereotypical representations that have negative implications for the promotion and protection of the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

The often negative portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees by the mainstream media has culminated in a legacy of public hostility against them and against other immigrants. This hostility has been fed by various high profile events over the last decade, including:

- In 2001 following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US
- After the July 2005 London terrorist attacks

In this context the term "refugee" is used to cover a range of different people, including those displaced by natural disaster or environmental change and those seeking a better life for themselves and their families in the more prosperous countries of Western Europe. Sensational stories with eye-catching headlines have been used for many years to grab the attention of readers:

“Swan bake: Asylum seekers steal the Queen’s birds for barbecues”
(The Sun, 4 July 2003).

In other circumstances such stories might be dismissed as outrageous “but the page one treatment they received ensured that they took on the role, at least for a time, of urban myths - to be repeated in queues and pubs, or to the next reporter with a note book or microphone who turns up in search of an opinion on asylum seekers”.
(Jones, 2005)

Public hostility toward asylum seekers and refugees, encouraged by the media, is nothing new. Similar prejudices against would-be immigrants were evident in the 1930s, with overt support for the Fascist movement found in the mainstream press at the time. Publications such as the Daily Mail and its associates under their owner, the first Lord Rothermere, reinforced unfounded fears about the level of migrants coming into Britain throughout the 1930s.

Throughout the last decade, stories about asylum seekers and refugees have become a staple in the tabloid diet. In just one year “our tabloid newspapers have blamed asylum seekers for terrorism, TB, AIDS, SARS, failing schools and failing hospitals...They have been blamed for everything from road accidents to dwindling fish stocks. The Sun blamed them for declining numbers of swans. The Daily Star blamed them for missing donkeys”.
(Maisokwadzo, 2005)

The need to dispel these myths has not gone away since Bristol City Council first published this booklet in 2004 – it is just as important now as it was then. Research projects such as “What’s the story?” commissioned in 2003 and conducted by Article 19, in partnership with the Cardiff University School of Journalism, went some way towards highlighting the disreputable techniques employed by popular media sources when reporting on asylum issues. The research called on the British media to report the issue “fairly and accurately” and not to minimise or sanitise it. However, the bias and prejudice of the
mainstream press continues to spread misinformation and myths about asylum seekers and refugees seeking sanctuary in the UK.

In 2004, the Greater London Authority (GLA) published a report entitled: Media Image, Community Impact, which was conducted by the Information Centre for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (ICAR). The report found “evidence of negative, unbalanced and inaccurate reporting likely to promote fear and tension within communities across London.” Additionally, the report found that most evidence of this was in the national rather than the local press.

Further research conducted by the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research), found that these negative media reports made large portions of the public doubt whether many asylum seekers are “genuine”, further fuelling the resentment and fear of their presence in the UK. Although it is not always easy to determine the exact influence of the media, it is clear that it does play a role in shaping the way people behave and in particular in offering the false “evidence” the public requires to justify existing prejudices. (Lewis 2006 and 2007)

A consequence of this negative and distorted portrayal of asylum issues is an increased feeling of victimisation amongst asylum seekers themselves. Not only do they have to contend with the continuing trauma of the situations they have left behind, they also have to deal with the reality of unfavourable government policies towards them. They feel that the media has passed a collective judgement on them even before their cases have been heard.

This booklet is intended to be used both as a public education resource and as a source of information for service providers. We hope that it will equip city council employees, councillors, other agencies and the general public with accurate facts and information that can be used to challenge negative attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees.
Chapter One

Who is an Asylum Seeker?

The Refugee Council defines an asylum seeker as "someone who has fled persecution in their homeland, has arrived in another country, made themselves known to the authorities and exercised the legal right to apply for asylum".

A handbook published by Refugee Action in 2006 warns the media and the public not to confuse asylum seekers with illegal immigrants defining the latter as 'someone who decides to leave their native country and goes to another to live but does it without telling the authorities.' This is different to asylum seekers, who have made themselves known to the authorities and are legally allowed to stay until their case is assessed.

However, being an asylum seeker does not necessarily make life easier for those seeking refuge. They are not allowed to work whilst their case is being determined, and this can take months or, in some cases that predate the New Asylum Model (NAM) of 2007, years. They have to live where the UK Border Agency tells them and can be "dispersed" to another city at very short notice.

Who is a refugee?

Under international law (the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or the "Geneva Convention") the word “refugee” has a very precise meaning. According to the UNHCR, the most important parts of the refugee definition are:

- Refugees have to be outside their country of origin
- The reason for their flight has to be a fear of persecution and they have to be individually targeted for that persecution
- That fear of persecution has to be well-founded i.e. they have to have experienced it personally or be likely to experience it personally if they return
- The persecution has to result from one or more of the five grounds listed in the definition
- They have to be unwilling or unable to seek the protection in their country.

The Refugee Council defines a refugee as 'someone whose asylum application has been successful and who is allowed to stay in another country having proved they would face persecution back home'.

In the UK, the Home Office recognises refugee status and grants asylum when they consider that someone falls within this 1951 UN Convention definition of a refugee. Since the introduction of the New Asylum Model (NAM) in 2007 there is no longer a right to remain indefinitely in the UK for asylum seekers whose cases are successful. They are granted five years leave to remain, with no guarantee that they will be able to remain at the end of that period.
Who is an Economic Migrant?

Someone who leaves their country of origin because they want to seek a better life is an “economic migrant”. They have made a conscious choice to leave their own country and can return there without a problem. If things do not work out as they had hoped or if they get homesick, it will be safe for them to return home. They do not have a fear of persecution in their country of origin. The Bristol Evening Post (April 19, 2006) describes economic migrants as “those seeking a better life abroad, such as the high number of Brits who emigrate to Australia”.

Who is an Internally Displaced Person?

An Internally Displaced Person (IDP) may have been forced to flee their home for the same reasons as a refugee, but they have not crossed an internationally recognised border. There are more IDPs in the world than refugees due to the lack of resources or safe ways for many to be able to leave their countries, for instance in the case of war or countries being ruled by ruthless dictators.

What is Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR)?

People uprooted by civil war fall outside the UN definition of a refugee because they have not been individually targeted for persecution. Asylum seekers who do not meet the criteria of the 1951 Convention but who nevertheless are unable to return to their country of origin due to genuine fear for their and their families’ safety used to be granted Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR), usually for four years, after which the person was entitled to apply for Indefinite leave to remain.

However, ELR has now been replaced by Humanitarian Protection which is granted to people who, in their country of origin, would face a serious risk to life arising from the death penalty; unlawful killing; or torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Someone who has been refused asylum may be considered for this status. It is normally granted for a period of five years and someone with such status is allowed to work and has access to the benefits system.

In some circumstances an applicant who is not recognised as a refugee or a person who qualifies for humanitarian protection may be granted another type of temporary permission to stay in the UK, ‘discretionary leave to remain’. The period for which this is granted depends on the person’s circumstances, but is unlikely to be for more than three years.
Chapter Two

Do asylum seekers and refugees come to the UK because it is a soft touch?

Global data

It is widely stated in the mainstream media that Britain is the number one destination for asylum seekers and refugees because it displays a "soft touch" towards those seeking refuge in the UK. This is not reflected in the statistics. 2007 is the most recent year for which we have confirmed data. The figures for this year from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show the USA as the top destination for asylum seekers and refugees amongst the industrialised nations (49,200), with Sweden second (36,200), France third (29,200), Canada fourth (28,300) and the UK fifth (27,900).

However, the number of asylum seekers seeking refuge in industrialised countries is a tiny percentage of the number of refugees worldwide. By the end of 2007 the UNHCR estimated that there were 25.1 million refugees worldwide, the vast majority of whom (80%) were displaced within their region of origin, usually in a neighbouring country. At the end of 2007 Pakistan remained the country with the largest number of refugees from other countries (predominantly Iraq and Afghanistan) with 2,033,100, followed by Syria (1,503,800) and Iran (963,500). (UNHCR)

All of these figures are important because they help to expose as false the widely held myth that the UK has a comparatively lax attitude towards asylum applicants, and that is seen as a “soft touch” by people seeking sanctuary. Data held by the UNHCR shows that the number of people applying for asylum in the UK has been falling steadily since its peak of 110,700 in 2002 (UNHCR) and despite a worldwide rise in 2006-07 which was predominantly due to an increase in natural disasters and the Afghan and Iraqi wars.
According to Eurostat figures, applications for asylum in the UK (excluding dependants), fell by 1% between 2006 and 2007 from 28,320 to 27,905. The nationalities accounting for the highest numbers of applications were Afghani, Iraqi, Iranian, Chinese, and Eritrean applicants.

Including dependants, applications to the rest of the EU increased by 13% in the same period, compared with the small fall for the UK. Of the 27,905 applications received in the UK in 2007, 6,805 were accepted and the rest were either rejected (19,479) or were still awaiting decision when the figures were published. So, not only have asylum applications to the UK decreased substantially since 2002 but also almost three quarters (70.5%) of those people whose claims were determined in this period had them dismissed. (Eurostat - Europe in Figures).

A study by the Home Office concluded that most people who chose to come to the UK do so because of its historic or colonial ties with their countries of origin. They also choose the UK because family and friends are here or because English is a global language. It is not because they know about the UK asylum or benefit system (Refugee Action).

An asylum seeker from Zimbabwe (male, 36) said: “I chose the UK because the British government appeared sympathetic to Zimbabweans as SADC (South African Development Community) countries rallied behind the Mugabe government, and because I felt I would be safe here.” (Focus group participation, 4th October 2009)
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) claims "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy, in other countries, asylum from persecution". One of the UNHCR's primary responsibilities is to ensure that refugees have access to proper protection. Such protection includes ensuring that asylum-seekers or refugees are not returned to places where their life or liberty would be at risk, or denying them access to safe territory.

Most asylum seekers arriving in the UK are fleeing persecution because they belong to a minority in their home country, or they are fleeing nations gripped by civil war or ruled by brutal dictators. This is underpinned by an IPPR research report (2003), which concludes that the 10 countries from which the majority of asylum seekers in Western Europe are fleeing are all linked by their chronic underlying instability.

**Myth:** “Government bungles means bogus refugees allowed to stay”  
*Daily Mail*  
*18 August 2006*

**Fact:** “Refugees are those who have been granted asylum”  
*Bristol Evening Post,*  
*19 April 2006*
Chapter Three - Should asylum seekers be detained?

The issue of detention of asylum seekers is being debated within the context of the EU’s work to develop minimum standards on asylum procedures. The UNHCR Guidelines on applicable Criteria and Standards relating to the Detention of Asylum Seekers (1999) set out the limited circumstances in which an asylum seeker may be detained. Detention can be particularly damaging for individuals who may already have been detained and/or tortured in their country of origin and who may be severely affected psychologically by the situations they are fleeing. Detaining such a person after they have fled to what they consider to be a safe country may further exacerbate any trauma they are suffering. It may also be particularly harmful for children who can be detained along with their parents.

The UK has signed the 1951 Convention on Refugees which means that, by law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in the UK and remain until a final decision on their asylum application has been made. The fact that an asylum seeker may have entered the country illegally does not mean that their case lacks credibility or is taken to lack credibility. It also does not mean that they are illegal immigrants as they have declared themselves to the authorities. It is almost impossible for people fleeing persecution to reach Britain without, for instance, resorting to the use of false documents. In recognition of this, Article 31 of the UN 1951 Convention on Refugees prohibits governments from penalising refugees who use false documents.

The criteria set out in the 1951 Convention on Refugees, against which asylum claims are examined, are very strict, and interpretations of them by the tribunals are often not particularly favourable to the people who are seeking asylum. Asylum seekers whose applications fail are not cheats because they have been unsuccessful with their asylum application; making the application is a fundamental human right. The asylum process itself is very complicated and it can be very difficult to fulfil all the criteria even if someone does have a well founded fear of persecution should they return to their country of origin.

Research shows that a large number of asylum seekers have their applications refused on purely procedural grounds, i.e. they have filled a form in wrong or have been unaware of the very short timescales in which things should be done. Many are unable to complete the Statement of Evidence Form, in which they have to outline, in English, their reasons for seeking asylum, within the required ten day deadline (Asylum Aid). Such refusals, therefore, often have nothing to do with the substance or credibility of a person’s claim.
Are asylum seekers taking our benefits, jobs and houses?

Since 2000 (Immigration and Asylum Act 1999) asylum seekers have not been able to claim welfare benefits at all. In addition to this they are not allowed to choose where they live, but are "dispersed" to specific areas of the UK, away from London and the Southeast and often at very short notice. Such support as there is for asylum seekers is administered by the UK Borders Agency (UKBA) and is often still called NASS.

UKBA (NASS) support is very basic indeed. Until October 2009 it was £42.16, or roughly three-quarters of the basic Income Support of Job Seekers Allowance rate. Despite this, the government announced in July 2009 that it would be cutting financial provision for asylum seekers over the age of 25 who are awaiting a decision from £42.16 to £35.15 per week, leaving asylum seekers with only £5 per day to live on. This despite the fact that the government has set the level of Income Support, deemed the minimum that a person needs to live on, at £64.30 for 2009/10. In addition to this, the many and complex changes in the law over the last few years have left a substantial minority of asylum seekers outside the system with no support at all and with no right to work in this country.

Donna Covey, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council said: “We are appalled that the government has moved to cut support to asylum seekers, who are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Of course, these are hard times for everybody and no one should receive preferential treatment. But asylum seekers who are destitute only receive 70% of income support as it is, and are not allowed to work. These changes mean they will receive a little over half of what the government says is the minimum people need to live on” (Ibid).

**Myth:**

“They think it’s great, they love it, they get off a lorry and are given everything… money, a house, payouts.”

*White male resident, Barking and Dagenham (Pillai, 2007)*

**Facts:**

“They get flats no one wants”

*Bristol Evening Post 24 May 2003*

“They …receive a little over half of what the government says is the minimum people need to live on”

*CE of Refugee Council, Donna Covey 30 July 2009*
New asylum applicants who need financial assistance have to apply to the UKBA which may grant support if the asylum seeker “appears likely to become destitute within 14 days”, but no actual money is given and the level at which they are supported is 50% of the lowest benefit level, as explained above. The total number of asylum seekers in receipt of this asylum support was 33,865 in the first quarter of 2008, 31% lower than at the end of the same quarter in 2007 (48,800), according to the provisional Home Office 2009 statistics.

A Report by IPPR (Pillai, 2007) commissioned by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) found a number of worrying trends influencing the reception of new migrants in the UK, as well as questioning the capacity of local authorities to promote integration and increase diversity. The report found that quite a number of research participants had hostile attitudes towards migrants most of which were closely linked to perceived economic threats – specifically job displacement and wage deflation at the low skilled end of the labour market.

The IPPR report findings also pointed to misconceptions about migrants’ entitlements to welfare benefits, housing and other public services. Much of the hostility stemmed from the perception that new migrant communities were given preferential treatment over established communities.

A research report by Rutter and Latorre (2009) commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found that the sale of social housing in many parts of the UK and its use as rental accommodation for migrants has fuelled misconceptions about the allocation of social housing in favour of immigrant communities. Findings of the research claim that ‘perceptions that migrants displace UK-born may arise from the fact that some private rented housing which is now home to migrants is former social housing stock. Local residents may believe it is still ‘owned by the council’ despite it now being in the private sector” (Rutter & Latorre, 2009; 10).

The EHRC report found no evidence in the research to suggest that ‘social housing allocation systems favour one community over another, or to show that migrant populations are disproportionately committing tenancy fraud.’ However it did find that the perception that ‘migrants displace British social housing applicants’ persists’.

The report concluded that more social housing and affordable private housing is needed to address the failure of the social housing supply to meet the demands of the population. All local authorities, including Bristol City Council, allocate their housing stock according to need against a strict set of criteria. If the local authority deems refugees to be in high need, then they will be eligible for social housing. The real issue is the lack of available social housing stock, rather than the unfounded public perceptions of "queue-jumping" of the housing lists by immigrants. (Rutter & Latorre, 2009; 10).
Chapter Five

Are asylum seekers a drain on our health services?

The mainstream media is full of stereotypes and clichés portraying asylum seekers and refugees as carriers of all sorts of infectious diseases ranging from TB and HIV to swine flu. It also asserts that they come to the UK solely as ‘health tourists’. Yet according to research by the Home Office there is no evidence to suggest that asylum seekers come to the UK to get free treatment for existing health problems and many of them have no former knowledge of a free National Health Service.

A Government TB screening pilot in Dover tested around 5,000 asylum seekers over a six-month period and found not a single case of symptomatic TB. What doctors did find however was much evidence of maltreatment and torture - evidence of the very reasons why they were fleeing their country of origin. As for HIV, doctors working with a small group of asylum seekers who are HIV positive say that most were unaware of their status until they were diagnosed in this country.

In the UK, the British Medical Association found that asylum seekers are more likely to become ill once they have arrived in the UK due to poor living conditions and lack of money for basic needs than they are to arrive with pre-existing health conditions. (BMA, 2002).

A joint study by Oxfam and the Refugee Council in 2004 showed that the asylum system, far from making the UK “a land of milk and honey” for asylum seekers, institutionalises poverty. A report produced on the basis of studying 40 organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees revealed that, of those with whom they have contact:

- 85% experience hunger
- 95% cannot afford to buy clothes or shoes
- 80% are not able to maintain good health.

The report also reveals that many asylum seekers do not receive even the basic support they may be entitled to.
because the system is poorly designed and extremely bureaucratic.

In 2006 Oxfam and the Refugee Council jointly commissioned a report by Kelly & Stevenson entitled: ‘First do no harm: denying healthcare to people whose asylum claims have failed’ criticising the Government’s amendment to the regulations in 2004 which slashed the health care support available for failed asylum seekers. The report found that refugees and asylum seekers ‘have complex health needs, arising from trauma and deprivation in their countries of origin, compounded by trauma and deprivation in the UK. Meeting those care needs’, the report argued, ‘should be the sole focus of the NHS, not assessing immigration status and invoicing’.

There was a joint Department of Health and Home Office review in 2007 to examine the rules on charging non-UK residents for access to NHS services in England. However, the changes that came out of this review did not significantly change the rights of asylum seekers to access free health care. The Refugee Council described it as ‘a step forward for our campaign on healthcare – but not far enough...’. Donna Covey, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council said:

“We welcome the fact that the government has recognised the absurdity of charging destitute people who can’t go home for secondary treatment..... However, only a few refused asylum seekers who are unable to return home qualify for ‘Section 4’ support, which means that the vast majority will remain unable to access free care. As a result, people with serious health problems such as kidney failure or cancer will still not be entitled to treatment until their condition becomes life threatening. This is inhumane, and completely cost-ineffective – emergency treatment is extremely expensive... There is no evidence that asylum seekers come to the UK seeking healthcare, and indeed nothing to suggest they put pressure on hospital resources.”

Despite this very limited access to health care, there remains a perception in the popular media that asylum seekers make huge or disproportionate demands on the British health service.
Refugees take from UK society but do not put anything back?

Refugees bring with them a wealth of skills and experience. The Home Office has recognised this and made a commitment, through its Integration Unit, to put such skills to good use. The NHS relies heavily on foreign labour – according to the Greater London Authority, 23% of doctors and 47% of nurses working within the NHS were born outside the UK.

New research undertaken jointly by the Refugee Council and the Zimbabwe Association in July 2009 reveals the range of potential skills the UK is losing by denying the vast majority of asylum seekers the right to work whilst they are awaiting a decision on their claim. Although the focus of the research was the Zimbabwean community, many of its findings also apply to people from other countries, all of whom are keen to contribute their skills and experience to the UK.

The survey of 292 Zimbabweans showed:
- 187 (64%) are educated to GCSE level and beyond
- Only three (1%) were unemployed at home
- 45 (15%) are qualified teachers or lecturers
- Other occupations varied widely – from town planners, surveyors and transport managers to engineers, mechanics and IT specialists
- 184 (63%) said they would like to return to Zimbabwe when it is safe to do so

Donna Covey of the Refugee Council said: “This study shows that denying those who want to work the opportunity to do so is an appalling waste of skills, and indeed of money”…

Myth:
“Four out of five migrants take more from economy than they put back”
*Daily Mail, 29 August 2006*

Fact:
“Many immigrant groups are making positive economic contributions, either through paying high levels of tax and national insurance contributions, staffing our public services, or working long hours in potentially undesirable jobs”
*IPPR 2007 report (economic profile of Britain’s immigrants)*
Why do asylum seekers leave their homes?

The main reason that asylum seekers leave their homes and their home countries is because their safety and lives, or those of their families, are in danger. This may be because:

- of war and civil war
- of ethnic conflict
- of their political or religious beliefs
- they belong to a minority such as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
Personal Testimonies

An asylum seeker from Zimbabwe man, 36) explains why he is seeking sanctuary in the UK:

I was a trained and qualified tobacco buyer who supported the opposition MDC party. I was afraid for my life as all my in-laws had been beaten and some thrown in prison while the others had taken refuge in my home. I also worked for an all white industry with whites who were beaten and thrown off their farms. I have been granted temporary admission into the UK but if things return to normal in my country I want to able to return and contribute to the rebuilding process.

Another asylum seeker from Zimbabwe (woman, 32) laments:

I endured persecution because I did not support the ruling party; I was beaten by young thugs who were the law. I was living in hell. And yet I am not feeling welcome in the UK because I am still waiting for a decision on my asylum case and being told to wait in the queue till 2011 with no right to study or work. If things get settled in Zimbabwe I would definitely go back as I still love my country.

An asylum seeker from Eritrea (man, 28) narrates his ordeal:

My family is held hostage by the government and I ran away to look for somewhere safe. My friends were raped and others sent to jail. I was put in prison for three months for expressing my political views. I pray that things change for the better so that I can go back and help my people.

A refugee from Iraq (man, 27) explains:

I was a police officer. I left my country because my life was in danger. I was shot in the stomach and had to undergo a major operation to remove the bullet. I was also in a car when a bomb exploded; I was terribly injured and I am lucky to be alive today. I was beaten, tortured and locked away. I found myself in the UK because I was looking for somewhere safe. If my country becomes peaceful I would go back and continue my work.

A refugee from Somalia (man, 48) hares his experience:

I finished my degree in medicine and was about to start work as a doctor in the radiology department in Mogadishu hospital when the war broke out. I was living a good life with my family and never dreamt of leaving to settle in another country. Unfortunately with the start of the civil war I had to find somewhere safe to live.

A refugee from Somalia (woman, 28) explains:

I left my country because of fear of persecution, rape and killing and I was looking for somewhere safe to live.
An asylum seeker from Somalia (woman, 22) describes her ordeal:

I was a little girl living with my family. I was going to an Islamic madrassa school and I was a happy child until our house was burned in the civil war. I do consider myself an asylum seeker and not an economic migrant because I did not leave my family and country looking for money or good life. I left my country because my life was at risk. I used to hide from one place to another to save my life. My two elder sisters were raped while my brother was killed as he tried to save us from the soldiers. They kidnapped and raped me, and locked me for three months giving me only water and bread. I am still having nightmare of this experience. On arrival the UK immigration welcomed me well but now I am feeling unwelcome because I have been waiting for over six years for my status and I feel I am wasting with no right to study and work, and I am living a destitute life.

A refugee from Cameroon (woman, 30) narrates her ordeal:

I had my business and was doing a degree in rural sociology. I came here because I was looking for somewhere safe. I left my country for fear of political persecution. I was a member of the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC). This is a pressure group mostly run by the English Cameroon in order to gain their independence from French Cameroon. I feel protected here but not welcome because after being granted refugee status by the court it took over seven months for the Home Office to send my status documents. When my political problem is over I would return to my country and continue my work.

A refugee from Sudan (Darfur) (man, 33) explains:

I was working in El-Fasher University in Darfur as a manager in the Human Resource Department. I left my country because I was looking for somewhere safe to live. I was targeted by the authorities and their militias because of my role as leader of the student union. I was put in prison because of that. I did not choose the UK but when I came here I felt safe.

When we look at the facts outlined in the personal stories of asylum seekers and refugees above it is clear that most people who come to the UK seeking sanctuary do so because they are fleeing either personal political persecution or civil wars. All they are looking for is somewhere that is comparatively safe to live.

In response to the publication of the provisional first quarterly asylum statistics for 2009, Donna Covey, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council said: “These statistics are a clear reminder of why providing sanctuary in Britain is more important than ever. If we just take the top few countries of origin of asylum claimants: Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq – they are all countries where violence and human rights abuses are rife and well documented”.
Key facts concerning asylum seekers and refugees since 2002 include:

- 2007 UNHCR statistics show that the UK is not the first place to which asylum seekers outside their country of origin travel. Amongst the world’s industrialised countries it is the fifth asylum receiving country behind the USA, Sweden, France and Canada. In addition the UK’s ‘increasingly restrictive asylum policies’ debunk the myth that Britain is a ‘soft touch’ for people seeking sanctuary.

- Asylum seekers come to the UK not because they know about the UK asylum, benefits or health system but because of family and friends, because of the UK’s historical or colonial ties with their countries of origin, because English is spoken so widely across the globe, or simply by accident.

- An asylum seeker is neither an illegal nor an economic migrant. He or she is someone who has been forced to leave their country of origin to seek sanctuary elsewhere. When they come to their host country they make themselves known to the authorities as soon as they can.

- A refugee is someone whose asylum has been legally granted by the host government and so cannot be said to be ‘illegal’ or ‘bogus’.

- The facts outlined in the personal testimonies of refugees and asylum seekers who participated in two focus groups for the writing of this booklet suggest that most people seek sanctuary in the UK because they are either fleeing political persecution or instability. They are looking for somewhere safe and are not in search of a better life in the UK. They would be happy to return if things returned to normal in their country of origin.

- The media has an important role to play in how the UK treats those seeking asylum here. It could choose to put why people seek sanctuary and how they are coping with the new challenges of life away from home into context. It could draw on people’s personal testimonies and use accurate data to report stories and issues. It has the potential to dispel rather than reinforce the myths about asylum seekers and refugees, and could prevent hostility towards them.

- There is no evidence that asylum seekers come to the UK seeking health care or that they are knowing carriers of deadly diseases such as HIV, TB or swine flu. The reality is that they often have some complex health needs caused by trauma in their home countries and that these are often compounded by the deprivation they suffer in the UK.

- Despite dwindling financial assistance for asylum seekers and the decreasing number of those in receipt of asylum support (2009 provisional Home Office statistics), most of them are making positive economic contributions, either through volunteering in community organisations whilst their claims are being assessed or by paying high taxes or NI contributions, staffing public services, or working long hours in potentially undesirable jobs (IPPR Report, 2007) once their status has been confirmed. This dismisses the myth that asylum seekers and refugees take more from UK society than they put back.
Bristol City Council has been supporting Celebrating Sanctuary Week in recent years in recognition of the positive contribution immigrants make to our society. Lorraine Ayensu of the council’s asylum support team has stated: "This week is about people coming together to share understanding of different lives". June Burroughs, founder of the Pierian Centre in Bristol which is also actively involved in Celebrating Sanctuary Week has said: "[The week] is a moving and inspiring introduction to other worlds and cultures, and a challenge to negative preconceptions." (Bristol Evening Post—16/06/05)

Asylum seekers are not bogus, scroungers or criminals. They are fathers, mothers, civil servants, doctors, lawyers, students, teachers, workers and businessmen and women who have had to flee from their countries, often in fear for their safety, to try to rebuild their lives in another world.

Britain, and specifically Bristol, has a long history of welcoming persecuted minorities and, when given the opportunities, asylum seekers make a positive contribution to their community and to our city.

Conclusion
About the author

Dr Ibrahim Seaga Shaw is Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Politics, Philosophy and International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, and Project Manager, Refugee and Migrant Support Hub, University of the West of England.

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Disclaimer:

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author or those cited and not necessarily those of Bristol City Council or the University of the West of England, Bristol.

Projects and organisations in Bristol supporting asylum seekers and refugees and useful information sources

Avon and Bristol Law Centre
Free immigration legal advice service, if eligible, for those seeking asylum.
- 0117 924 8662
- mail@abl.org.uk.

Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling
Service provides asylum seekers and refugees with access to specially trained counsellors and psychotherapists in Bristol and Bath. Interpreters are also provided if required. The service is totally free to clients.
- 0845 223 5267
- referralservice@bcpc.org.uk
- www.bcpc.org.uk/

British Red Cross
International tracing and messaging service - to help refugees and asylum seekers trace family members or send messages home. Have office in Bristol.
- 0117 301 2600 0117 353 3293
- 07740 762356
- lcorrales@redcross.org.uk

Bristol Defend Asylum Seekers Campaign
The campaign welcomes new members. Local meetings are held monthly. Information and contact details at www.asylumbristol.org.uk

Bristol Refugee Rights
Drop In Centre for asylum seekers and refugees – Wednesdays 10am till 12.30pm and Thursday 10am – 3.30pm at Congregational Hall, Newton Street off Stapleton Road. Conversation, refreshment, English classes, advice, art and craft activities, gardening and much more. Contact Caroline Beatty on:
- 0117 908 0844 or 07968 092747
- dropin@hotmail.co.uk

Bristol University STAR
Student Action for Refugees group which organises various volunteering and campaigning projects. Contact Oonagh
- os4074@bristol.ac.uk

BWERANI Multicultural Resource Library
Wide selection of play and education, resources which encourage children to develop respect for cultural diversity and global issues. Available on loan to parents/carers, schools & groups in Bristol and South Gloucestershire.
Contact: Sue Lowney, 20-23 Hepburn Road, St Paul’s, Bristol BS2 8UD.
- 0117 915 9805
- bwera@icloud.com
- www.kuumba.org.uk
EMAS
Part of Bristol City Council. Provide support to new arrivals and their parents/carers as well as other services to ethnic minority students.
I 0117 903 1365
I www.emas4success.org

Immigration Advisory Service
The Immigration Advisory Service is a national organisation that offers advice, information and legal advice on immigration and asylum issues, and representation at immigration appeals and tribunals. They have an office in Bristol at:
I 0117 955 7300
I UNIT 7, Hide Market, West Street (use Waterloo Street entrance), Bristol BS2 0BH
I www.iasuk.org

International Organisation for Migration (Bristol)
Assist asylum seekers and irregular immigrants with travel arrangements for voluntary return to their country of origin. Can also advise on refused asylum seekers wishing to voluntarily return. Advice is confidential and free.
I 0117 907 4777

Kurdistan Lounge
A community centre/café in Easton for the Bristol Kurdistan Community.
I 0117 951 6491

Leading Edge Initiative, Children’s Society
Project to support young refugee and asylum seeking people and their families participate fully in school. Run by Right Track. Contact Nisha Hirani on:
I 0117 935 1515
I nih@childsoc.org.uk

Refugee Action
Refugee Action is an independent national charity that works with refugees to build new lives in the UK. They have an office in Bristol at:
I 0117 941 5960
I 9, Hide Market West Street, St. Philips, Bristol BS2 0BH
I www.refugee-action.org.uk

Refugee and Migrant Support Hub,
Human Rights Unit, University of the West of England, Bristol Frenchay Campus, BS16 1QY.
I RMSHUB@UWE.AC.UK

Refugee Women of Bristol
Support group for refugee and asylum seeking women. Drop in every Tuesday 10am – 3pm at the Woodward Community Centre, Alexander Park, off Fishponds Rd. For full information about drop in sessions,
I 0117 353 3288

The Haven
Holistic health assessment for newly arrived asylum seekers based at Montpelier Health Centre, PCT funded.
I 0117 942 6811

Womankind
Counselling service to support refugee and asylum seeking women who have experienced trauma and exile. Women can self refer or agencies can refer by ringing the Womankind Helpline
I 0845 458 2914.

Young Bristol
Lottery funded project in conjunction with Brunel Academy and City Academy to support young asylum seekers and refugees.
I 0117 953 7921
I info@youngbristol.org

National projects / organisations

Don’t believe the type a campaign website to counter press coverage of asylum issues.
I www.dontbelievethetype.org.uk

HARP (Health for Asylum Seekers and Refugees Portal) website to enable you to access wealth of information, practical tools, and articles that have been written by health care professionals, NGOs, academics and research bodies with expert knowledge of working with asylum seekers and refugees.
I www.harpweb.org.uk
ICAR
The Information centre about asylum and refugees in the UK
www.icar.org.uk

Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims against Torture
Founded in 1985, the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture provides care and rehabilitation to survivors of torture and other forms of organised violence.
www.torturecare.org.uk

RefEd
To join RefEd - the refugee education email discussion list
www.refed.org.uk
refedsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

Student Action for Refugees (STAR)
STAR has groups all around the UK for students and other young people aged over 16.
www.star-network.org.uk

UK Lesbian and Gay Asylum Group
Approximately 80 countries consider homosexuality illegal, in five of these the death penalty can apply. UKLGIG assists LGBT people who have come to the UK to seek a safe haven from persecution, and supports LGBT activists who are working to change the attitudes and legislation in their home countries.
UKLGIG, 32-36 Loman Street
London, SE1 0EH
020 7922 7811
www.uklgig.org.uk
References:

- Kelley, N & Stevenson, J (2006) First do no harm: Denying health care to people whose asylum claims have failed (A Report commissioned by Refugee Council and OXFAM )
Web site resources:

www.article19.org
www.asylumaid.org.uk
www.cre.gov.uk
www.ecre.org
www.equalitynow.org
www.equalityhumanrights.com
www.guardian.co.uk
www.observer.co.uk
www.homeoffice.gov.uk
www.doh.gov.uk
www.ippr.org
www.mori.com
www.oxfam.org.uk
www.unhcr.org
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk
www.refugee-action.org
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