

# Birmingham: a City in Need of Hope?



The purpose of Hope08 is to give meaning to the message of hope that Jesus came to bring. At the heart of this message is meeting the needs of those in our communities, be they physical, emotional or spiritual. Part of the Hope08 vision is to see collaboration between churches and community groups, focusing our energies on prayer and activities, creating a lasting legacy of both physical and spiritual change in the lives of communities and individuals.

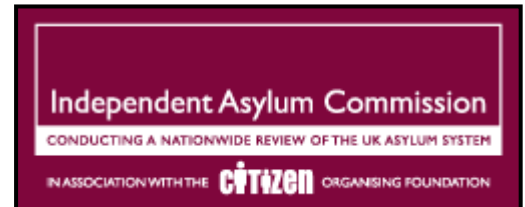
These pages are dedicated to highlighting the issues and needs of different people groups in our city. They are designed to increase our understanding and encourage action.

## The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37)

# In Need of Hope: Asylum Seekers

In this article, we'll investigate the difficulties facing asylum seekers, through speaking to local people who work on the ground with asylum seekers and by highlighting some of the issues raised by the Independent Asylum Commission's interim report.

This report, *Fit for Purpose?* was published in March 2008 and is the result of a two year citizen's investigation into the UK asylum system. If you want to read the full report, you can access it [here](#). The IAC states that:



*"... the UK asylum system is improved and improving, but is not yet fit for purpose. The system still denies sanctuary to some who genuinely need it... and is marred by inhumanity in its treatment of the vulnerable... The Commission has found that the treatment of asylum seekers falls seriously below the standards to be expected of a humane and civilised society."*  
(Fit for Purpose yet? The Independent Asylum Commission's Interim Findings  
<http://www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk/>)

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# Asylum and Birmingham

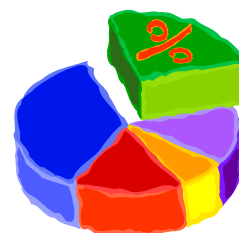


**Birmingham** is the second largest dispersal town for asylum seekers in England. (Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb1407.pdf>, page 21, accessed 02/04/08). Asylum seekers are sent to Birmingham by the National Support Service for Asylum Seekers (NASS) while their claim is being processed. At the moment, there are about 2,000 asylum seekers in Birmingham. Most are living in shared accommodation in houses owned by private housing associations that have contracts with NASS. The

Border and Immigration Agency (part of the Home Office) are also using 260 of the Housing Department's flats and maisonettes that cannot be rented out easily to accommodate people.

## UK Facts and figures

(Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb1407.pdf>, accessed 02/04/08)



- In 2006, **23,610** people claimed asylum in the UK. Out of those, 6,225 applications were successful. 16,330 refused asylum seekers were removed from the country, leaving 1,066 left on the streets
- In 2006, **22% of appeals** against initial decisions were successful
- The **UK ranks 12th** amongst European Union countries in terms of asylum seekers per head of population
- In 2006 the **top six refugee-producing countries** were from (in order) Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iran, China, Somalia and Zimbabwe

## Why should we care?



Linden Sanders, Karis Neighbour Scheme, Ladywood:

*"These are real people and regardless of why they've come here, and regardless of whether this country has a duty to grant people asylum here, they are still human beings that have basic needs that need to be met. In some cases it might be that the correct decision is to send a person back to their country of origin, but while that decision is being made we have to treat these people with dignity and respect as fellow human beings."*



Gëzim Alpion, lecturer and playwright:

*"I think we have a responsibility as human beings towards any fellow human being who is in danger. This is sanctioned by certain conventions. England has always provided a safe haven for refugees and that's something that we should be proud of. But there's always more that can be done."*



Jeremy Thompson from RESTORE:

*'... there is so much biblical teaching on welcoming the stranger, taking care of the alien, about God being a God of justice and caring for the poor and needy in both the Old and New Testaments. There's a lot of really strong biblical material that you can present to people and then say that refugees and asylum seekers are some of the marginalised people of our generation. They are the people in need, that other people seem to sideline and forget and label negatively, but here's an opportunity to serve them. My experience is that you meet some incredible people who have persisted and have had great courage.'*

Here are some classic examples of the biblical content mentioned by Jeremy above:

[Deuteronomy 10: 17 — 19](#)

[Jeremiah 22: 3- 4](#)

[Proverbs 31:8](#)

[Proverbs 29:7](#)

[Isaiah 58:6-7](#)

[Matthew 25:31-40](#)

## The Great Misconception



There's a lot of confusion amongst the British public about the nature of asylum seekers and why they come here. Asylum seekers are **not** the same as economic migrants or illegal immigrants. The Border and Immigration Agency states that:

*Asylum is given under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. To be recognised as a refugee, you must have left your country and be unable to go back because you have a well-founded fear of persecution because of your race, religion, nationality, political opinion; or membership of a particular social*

*group.* (Border and Immigration Agency, Home Office

<http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/asylum/claimingasylum/whocanclaim/> Accessed 02/04/08)

Many British citizens hold misconceptions about the nature of asylum seekers, thinking that they come here to earn money or so that they can exploit the benefit system. The assumption is made that since most asylum claims are rejected, most asylum seekers are lying cheats – there is great trust in the legal decision-making process (see section of this article 'The legal decision-making process'). The media has a tendency to portray asylum seekers in a negative light, associating them with disease, crime and words such as 'flood' and 'swarm'. This negative press often means that asylum seekers are regarded with distrust, superstition and even open racism and violence.

Therese O'Toole, a researcher at Birmingham University, told me that movements of asylum seekers into Britain often correlate with conflicts and wars that are happening around the world. In some ways, it should be obvious that conflict and war creates asylum seekers. However, the public often fail to see this relationship. Dave Stamp from ASIRT: *'There's a weird disjunction going on between the reality that people see quite routinely – you turn the news on and you see what's going on in Iraq, you see what happens in Sudan, you see what happens in Zimbabwe and people are quite horrified by that but when people come here from those situations they're instantly disbelieved.'*



Although Britain has historically welcomed people seeking refuge from persecution, asylum seekers and refugees are now regarded as a problem area. Lumped together with economic migrants, they become part of one of the most contentious issues in the political arena: Immigration. Protecting the rights of asylum seekers and refugees is low on the list of governmental priorities. Indeed, for a politician to do such a thing would be political suicide.

Government policy and the opinions of politicians are responsive to public demands and the media is largely responsible for fuelling ignorance and fear.

Almamy Taal, from the Refugee Council (West Midlands) and Birmingham Law Centre, works with asylum seekers and was one himself. He knows people who have been the subject of misunderstandings, racism and abuse, but says that the answer is in education: *'It's important not to get angry about it but to try and understand why people are behaving like that, to build trust. The main problem is ignorance or a lack of education. People are misled by the media.'*

I did a quick search of tabloid papers online and found the following headings:

**ASYLUM CLAIMS ROCKET** (Daily Express, 18.03.08)

**THE ASYLUM SEEKERS PUSHING UP OUR TAX** (Daily Express, 06.04.08)

**SHOULD ALL ASYLUM CHEATS BE DEPORTED?** (Daily Express, 07.02.08)

**Asylum rejects get free NHS** (The Sun, 12.04.08)

**ASYLUM SEEKERS EAT OUR DONKEYS** (Daily Star, 2003)

**SWAN BAKE: Asylum seekers steal the Queen's birds for barbecues** (The Sun, 2003)

If you want to know the truth behind the last two headlines listed above, check out Nick Medic's (a freelance journalist) article [here](#). The moral of the story is: **Beware!** Don't believe everything you read in the papers!

Dr Gëzim Alpiön, Lecturer in Sociology and Media Studies at the University of Birmingham is all too aware of the link between a negative public opinion of asylum seekers and the press: *"Of course, there are misconceptions about asylum seekers. One would argue that one of the sources is found in the way that the British media operates. The British media has been largely responsible for creating and fostering negative stereotypes about foreigners."*



One misconception that we tend to hold about asylum seekers is that they are financially poor and low down the social scale in their own country. In fact, many that come to Britain have a home, professional qualifications and a decent job. We might think that we are flooded by asylum seekers and that they all want to come here because of all the benefits. However, the truth is that the vast majority of asylum seekers seek refuge in poor neighbouring countries. Britain houses only 3% of the world's refugees (UNHCR, 2005 Global refugee trends, 9 June 2006).



Gëzim Alpiön is also a playwright. His new play about asylum seekers, *If Only the Dead Could Listen* (2008) was performed at Wolverhampton's Arena Theatre and Birmingham's MAC Theatre in February 2006 and March 2008. The script was based on his earlier play, *Vouchers*, which centred on the vouchers system (now largely abolished). Gëzim sees his play as a way of informing the public about the issues facing asylum seekers in ways that research can't: *"Unfortunately, the readership of research is rather limited. You reach a wider audience with plays and art. For me, the play is no longer about vouchers and asylum seekers but about humanity and dignity; more importantly, perhaps, the play is about educating ourselves. We should employ both research and art to raise awareness."*

Education is clearly what's needed. One of Almamy Taal's roles at the Refugee Council is to challenge the negative media coverage about asylum seekers. He does this by sending newspapers positive stories about how asylum seekers contribute to society and has been involved in making informative documentaries with the BBC.

## **INTERVIEW:** *Ginnie Odetayo, Befriender of asylum seekers*



Ginnie first volunteered as a befriender to asylum seekers in 2004 with Restore in Birmingham.

### **Why did you volunteer as a befriender to asylum seekers?**

Something that motivated me initially was the fact that I had previously travelled and lived abroad myself and so I knew what it felt like to be in a different country on my own and had empathy for the feeling of loneliness that can generate! However, I soon discovered that such feelings are compounded and multiplied a hundred-fold for those who have been forced to leave their country to seek asylum. I continued to volunteer since the more that I saw and learned about the asylum issue, the more compassion I had, and I wanted to stand by their side and help as best I could, in my own limited way.

### **What do you do to support asylum seekers?**

With Restore, essentially it's about providing friendship and social support. One of the key things that asylum seekers experience, aside from the legal wrangling, racism and difficulty in accessing services, is social isolation. Often, they have no friends or contacts, particularly if they've been moved around the country by the Home Office. They have few people to turn to, even for a chat, or some company. I usually ask to be paired with mums with small children because we've automatically got something in common. So I'd just do with them what I'd do with normal 'mummy friends' – go for a walk in the park and talk about the kids, and just try to bring some moments of normality into their lives. A lot of the time they are stuck in very bad accommodation with access to very limited resources and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. In many cases they're facing imminent deportation back to the countries that they've fled from in the first place. You can feel very helpless as a befriender, observing all this suffering, but not being able to 'fix' it for them; you can just stand alongside them, and help them to feel less alone in what they are going through.

### **Do you think the asylum system works?**

No system is failsafe. Because of the increase in immigration that occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s, the government has had to crack down for political reasons. However, the system is now so tight that some of the most vulnerable people, who should be receiving our protection, are being sent back to torture, rape and sometimes death. In fact I think that some of the easiest people to target with the harsher measures are the most vulnerable and the most honest – the people who don't just slip through the net, that don't just run off and hide, crash on someone's floor and get illegal work. They present themselves to the Home Office and genuinely expect to be believed and to be treated fairly. Although the system has been tightened, there still needs to be space for compassion, discretion and support, especially for women and children. The Home Office now comes out with the most unbelievable justifications to send people back to the most dangerous of places, all for the sake of reaching politically determined targets. I understand that we must have limits to immigration but this is now manifesting as a complete absence of compassion, and often, a total denial of human rights. I think as a country, we're walking on dangerous ground – we're no longer the good Samaritan, but we are openly choosing to 'cross to the other side'. Many asylum seekers are so clearly suffering and yet we're choosing to look the other way because it inconveniences us to have them here. I often wonder how British people would expect to be treated if one day we had to flee to other countries in order to escape civil war, torture, rape, persecution. I think we'd expect a whole lot more than what we're prepared to give right now.

**A lot of people think that asylum seekers come here to sponge off the system. What would you say to that?**

It's ludicrous. Who in their right mind would uproot themselves from their family, their country, their livelihood and their education to come and live on their own in a tower block in the middle of Newtown or Hockley and be subject to racism, with nothing but vouchers to live off? Who would choose that as an option? These are desperate people. Only desperate people would risk life and limb to escape from what must have obviously been a horrific and usually life-threatening situation. I think there's a lot of ignorance in the UK about who asylum seekers actually are and why they're fleeing their country. Often, they are just dumped in England by the agents who helped them escape and they have no idea as to which country they have just arrived in – that is not an intentional decision to 'sponge'! Stereotypes about asylum seekers abound and they desperately need challenging in our society. Asylum seekers are no different to you or I. They are usually well-educated, dedicated to their families and wish to earn a decent livelihood. The only difference between 'us and them' is that we had the good fortune of being born into a relatively safe and stable country, and they did not. If British people could hear more about the personal stories and lives of asylum seekers, and more importantly could imagine placing themselves and their family in the situations that they are facing, I think that there would be greater compassion. There has to be more compassion. When I sit with Sarah from Uganda (one of the ladies I befriend - not her real name) on her sofa, I am often choked inside knowing how similar we are (she's just a few years younger than me, has a degree, and small kids), and yet the circumstances into which she has been placed could not be more polarised from my own. It's just so hard to reconcile and to understand. As a Christian, it's deeply challenging, you just think why God, how, this just doesn't make sense? What about all your promises for protection and safety and justice? It's challenging.

**Do you think your faith has had a role in motivating you and having a heart for these people?**

I think it must do. God places callings in your heart. I think God's love has given me great compassion for these women. He cares deeply about them. He cares desperately. And I guess he moves some people to walk in that love. I don't pretend that I'm the perfect befriender – I'm not! But I do my best. The bible speaks a lot about welcoming the stranger - with good reason.

**Would you encourage people to befriend?**

Absolutely! If you take the time to have coffee with your mates once a week why not just do that with a friend who happens to be an asylum seeker every couple of weeks? It's about letting them know that you care, that you will listen and that you are there to help out. Just giving them a lift to the doctor's surgery every now and again can be a big deal - sparing someone a three hour trek with multiple bus changes through Birmingham with two screaming kids can mean a lot! Just small gestures like that can make a real difference and help them to feel less alone. I would encourage people to volunteer. It doesn't take much of your time but it has massive rewards for both you and the people that you're supporting. I think all of us as Christians have a duty to connect and support people less fortunate than ourselves, especially when they are here on our doorstep. We can't sit in a Christian bubble – we have to look to where there is need in our city and reach out, even if it's uncomfortable for us. I gain so much from befriending on a personal level. Not only does it give me a greater perspective on my life, but I have learnt so much from the women that I've met - the strength and dignity that they have and their desire to keep going and be the best that they can for their children in the face of such adversity is humbling..





## **PROFILE: Charity in Birmingham**

**Karis Neighbour Scheme, Ladywood, Birmingham  
Linden Sanders: Manager**

Karis Neighbour Scheme plays a number of roles in meeting the needs of asylum seekers and other poor and vulnerable people in the community. This includes:

- Providing DIY and gardening in the home to improve living environments and personal well-being
- Advocacy (making phonecalls, helping people fill in forms, making appointments for them etc.).
- “Welcome to Ladywood” befriending drop-in group once a week for asylum seekers and refugees. Volunteers organise arts and craft activities for families and play activities for the children
- Free English classes for asylum seekers and refugees every Friday

Karis has two full time and three part-time staff but is hugely dependant on support from its team of 80 volunteers.

Linden: *“We run a befriending group for asylum seekers and refugees, called the Welcome to Ladywood drop in. Every Thursday afternoon we hire out the local church hall for two hours for people to come to if they are new to the area or just want to meet other people and socialise. We’ll have volunteers that will put on arts and crafts for families or play activities for the children. Once we get to know people they’ll often tell us about other needs that they have. Then often through that they’ll come here for some advocacy. For example, they’ve got a leak in their house and we can phone up the council and get it repaired for them .So it’s a good point of contact.*”

*“On a Friday we have an English class. This was a response to the need for people to learn English but not having the funds to pay for formal lessons. So we have volunteer teachers, mostly retired teachers who give their time to teach English. Language is a major issue – not being able to express what you want to express and understanding what’s being fed back to you can leave you feeling powerless. Our English classes are really well attended.*”

*“In this area there’s a lot of temporary council housing, so a lot of asylum seekers are housed here by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). It’s hard for people to settle and feel part of the community because in the back of their mind there’s the worry that at any point the Home Office could send them back to their country or disperse them to another part of the UK. Often they are just left for months, sometimes years without any notification from the Home Office as to what is going on with their application for asylum. One person here had to wait nine years before a decision was made.”*

*“I think there’s a sense that some of their dignity is taken away from them. A lot of decisions are taken out of their control. If they’ve got a voucher for Asda provided by NASS, they’ve no choice but to shop there. If they had the choice they might go to the market or a shop that sells food that they are used to eating. Often people have come from tragic conditions, a war zone or they’ve been persecuted. They arrive in the UK seeking refuge, only to find they’re plunged into a very confusing and complicated system, which in itself can cause a lot of distress.. Many of them have left family behind, it’s a new culture, they don’t know anybody here, they’re an alien in a foreign land. That can be really difficult.”*

*“Access to healthcare can be a problem. Officially, asylum seekers are allowed access to the NHS. But some medical centres say that if you’ve not been granted Leave to Remain in this country they can’t register you on their books. It’s not always straightforward because asylum seekers don’t fit into the normal category, no NHS number, no documentation, no passport etc, this can hold up access to these services.”*

*We learn a lot from the people who arrive in this community. We learn about their country. Many come from a Muslim background so we’ll hold a party at Eid, and they’ll bring food that they’ve cooked from traditional recipes and it’s about celebrating that diversity. It’s nice for them to have an arena where they can celebrate their own traditions and culture and we can share in that with them. We recognise that’s important to them. Then at Christmas we’ll provide a Christmas party and explain the Christmas story to them. So it works both ways.”*

# Justice for the poor? The decision-making process



The Independent Asylum Commission (IAC) reported that: ‘... a ‘culture of disbelief’ persists among decision-makers. Along with lack of access to legal advice for applicants this is leading to perverse and unjust decisions. The adversarial nature of the asylum process stacks the odds against asylum seekers, especially those who are emotionally vulnerable and lack the power of communication...’

(Fit for Purpose yet? The Independent Asylum Commission’s Interim Findings <http://www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk/> )

Decisions on asylum cases are made based on the applicant’s first interview, Country of Origin Reports (produced by the Home Office [http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country\\_reports.html](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html)), and sometimes a doctor’s medical report or other specialist evidence. The interview is designed to determine the applicant’s reasons for leaving their country and to assess their credibility. However, the process, which forms the basis of the decision to grant or refuse asylum, is often flawed. The IAC reported that ‘*The interviewing skills of caseworkers have been criticised by both the Medical Foundation and UNHCR. Of particular concern is the lack of preparation by caseworkers before they interview applicants including an insufficient knowledge of country information, lack of familiarity with the key issues and facts of the case or those of related cases. There are also issues around the accuracy of transcription in interviews.*’

Almamy Taal, who works for the Refugee Council (WM) and the Birmingham Law Centre, has experienced this first-hand through his own experiences of seeking asylum and those of the people he now works with: ‘*The interview process is not a fair process. These people are fleeing persecution, they are victims of torture, women have been raped. They don’t feel open and confident talking about their ordeal. At the first interview they often don’t tell about their experiences. That costs them a lot – the Home Office rejects their application saying that they lied. There’s also a problem with professional interpreters. Often they don’t speak enough of the language or they are from the same country but a different dialect. So there is confusion between the asylum seeker and the translator. The asylum seeker usually can’t speak English so he can’t communicate that he doesn’t fully understand the questions. Sometimes, the interviewer deliberately changes the formulation of the questions when writing them down so it looks like they answered the questions wrong. They are asked to sign the completed document of questions and answers. They can’t read English to check if it is faithful to the truth.*’



In the interview, when individuals claim to have been persecuted due to their faith, questions are asked of them in order to try and prove that faith. Much criticism has been aimed at the choice of questions used. Dave Stamp from ASIRT told me about one man he knew who claimed asylum on the grounds of being persecuted because of his Christian faith: ‘*I’m aware of one guy who was asked to give the number of books in both the Old and New Testament, which he had no clue about. And I’ve spoken to other*

*people who I know to be practising Christians and they looked puzzled! I’ve heard of a guy who was at a tribunal. The guy was asked to name the people who were hanged with Jesus. And he said ‘hanged?’ and the Home office representing officer went ‘oh no, no, not hanged, what was it, um’ and didn’t know the details of the question they were asking in the first place. Everything is designed to trick people, to catch people out. The questions are obscure and misleading.*’ The types of questions used indicate that the people judging whether an individual has genuine faith do not themselves have any understanding of those faiths. Christian faith is not determined by biblical knowledge. And when these questions are not answered ‘correctly’, the individual is accused of lying and their claim is refused. (Incidentally, the men that were crucified on either side of Jesus are not actually named in the Bible.)



The IAC has also criticised the use of Country of Origin Reports as reasons for refusing claims. These reports provide information on the country’s level of persecution and human rights. The IAC have found that country information has been found to be bias and inaccurate in places and that they are

interpreted too rigidly. If an applicant claims to have experienced persecution for a reason that is not outlined in the Country of Origin Report, they are accused of lying: *“Particular sources become the only ‘truth’ and anything at odds with them and the conditions they portray is disbelieved.”*

Ginnie Odetayo, a befriender of asylum seekers in Birmingham agrees that the Country of Origin Reports are used in a very generalised manner. *‘I’ve known women who have suffered from legitimate political persecution or in the case of one woman I know, a genuine threat to her life. What she went through was atrocious – both in Uganda and on her journey over here. The courts believed her story pretty much but deemed it safe for her to go back. She’s utterly terrified at the prospect to the point of having suicidal thoughts... They have these Home Office reports called Country Reports. They’ll read through the profile about Uganda and say ‘they’ve got a few women’s organisations over there’ so the prosecutor will argue that they will be supported when they are sent back, which is naive rubbish. They say things like ‘the police are a bit corrupt but it wouldn’t be unduly harsh to send you back’, knowing full well that the returnee would not be protected from the danger she faces at all. You only have to get on Google to see that the reality on the ground in Uganda is completely different! The police force is corrupt – she wouldn’t receive protection from the people who killed her family at all. Women’s organisations on the ground are few and far between and any charity working in Uganda is stretched to its limits already...’*



Dave Stamp from ASIRT gave me another example of an Iranian man who was refused his claim: *‘When he came to see us he came in with his refusal letter. His claim for asylum was based on his membership of a political party in Iran. His refusal letter said ‘we don’t believe that you’re a member of that political party, we don’t believe that you have any affiliation with that political party and the reason we don’t believe you is that because when we asked you to name the leader of your party you gave a name – and that’s not right. The leader of the party you claimed to be a member of is...’ And I was looking through the letter of refusal and I thought that is quite interesting – if you’re party activist how can you not know the name of your party leader? And he said ‘I do know, have you got a computer?’ He led me to the computer – Google search – I mean, that’s how technical it was. Google, typed in the guy’s names and there it was straight away – 50 references to the man that he named being the leader of the party he referred to. Plain and simple. So the information they used was just wrong... the political party that my friend belonged to was the Communist party of Iran. Anyone who knows anything about communist parties knows that they split – that’s what happens. So what had happened was this party had split – there were two factions and the Home Office just didn’t have information about the other faction... This guy had been through horrific abuse in his country of origin, came here, tried to get protection, his claim was refused. But not only was his claim refused but he was also called a liar. The letter quite plainly said ‘we do not believe you, you’ve made this story up, this has no credibility.’ It’s incredibly abusive... if you actually wanted to find out the truth and the justice of something, if you looked at someone’s claim for asylum that described quite horrific instances of torture and abuse and it had a name on it that didn’t tally with some information that you had, you’d say well what’s going on here, who’s this person then? And you’d try and find out. And as I say I found out in 30 seconds. So if you did have a commitment to get to the root of what someone was saying it wouldn’t necessarily be difficult.*

As well as incompetence on the part of the Home Office, Dave told me about another flaw in the system: *‘To be recognised as a refugee under the 1951 convention what you need to demonstrate is that on the basis of objective evidence there is a reasonable likelihood that you would experience persecution... You can’t demonstrate absolute certainty about stuff, which is one of the jokes of the system. People don’t have letters from the person who burnt their house down or raped their wife to say ‘this is my name and this is what I did and this is why I did it’. So the proof that people are expected to bring doesn’t exist. But the fact that they don’t have the proof is used again to undermine their credibility. Although if they do have something that looks like that they say to you ‘no-one would write that, that’s a forgery!’*



There is a lack of competent solicitors and free legal advice in the West Midlands and this has a profound impact upon asylum seekers. Dave Stamp works for ASIRT, one agency in Birmingham that provides free legal representation for asylum seekers: *‘About 70% of all asylum cases are heard without any representation at all*

so they have no chance of succeeding. We can take on a few of those but we're under-resourced... It's basically been whittled down so that a Legal Services Commission funded representative can only do LSC funded work for 5 hours on the entire case. So that means meeting the person, going into the details of why they came to the UK, going through the details of what happened in their country of origin, how they got here, all of that has to be done in 5 hours, more often than not with an interpreter – obviously doing anything with an interpreter takes twice as long... According to the government that was specifically designed to stop solicitors abusing the system... by stringing out appeal after appeal and milking cash of the legal aid system. But what's actually happened is that most of the decent practitioners have come to the conclusion that they can't possibly do a case justice in 5 hours so they don't do legal aid funded work – asylum work – any more or they can't afford a business on it in any case.

So instead, what Dave calls 'shoddy practitioners' take advantage of this by representing asylum seekers, taking money off them, but putting very little effort into their case – in his own words, 'minimum effort for maximum profit'. In this way, asylum seekers are particularly open to abuse in the system. 'The odds are really stacked against them. So organisations like ours provide a really valuable service.'

In 2006, roughly 74% of asylum claims were rejected.

## Lonely and Destitute



Destitution amongst asylum seekers is a stark reality. Even for those that are given Refugee status and allowed to remain, it's not an easy ride. In attempting to integrate into British society, they face new challenges and barriers. One barrier is destitution. Linden Sanders from Karis Neighbour Scheme in Ladywood comments: "When asylum seekers are given permission to remain here as refugees, they're usually given a month's notice on their NASS accommodation and stop receiving NASS support. They haven't been allowed to work while their asylum application was being

processed so they've got no money and potentially face the prospect of becoming homeless. At this point they can claim benefits or look for work but it usually takes a month or more to get it sorted and money in their pocket. There's a delay. This is when charities like Karis come in, providing people with food parcels, making calls to chase the benefits up, help fill in job applications and help them find accommodation."

A number of charities working with asylum seekers in Birmingham (Refugee Council, ASIRT, ARROW, Red Cross WM, Coventry Refugee Centre, Restore, Birmingham Law Centre and Karis) have set up a project called Hope Housing. They pay nominal rent to housing associations that have accommodation that's not being used. This gives people who have found themselves destitute following a refusal of asylum a roof over their head when they're not eligible for any other support. Linden: "If a person's case is refused, a number of people go underground to avoid being found. This often means sleeping on the streets. People are not necessarily detained or deported straight away, they're just left. In many cases people would rather be destitute on the streets than return to their country."



Almamy Taal coordinates the distribution of the Asylum Seekers Destitution Fund at Birmingham Law Centre (BLC). He helps destitute asylum seekers to fill in applications for grants, signposts them to other services and helps with claims for National Asylum Support Service Section 4 Support (minimal financial support for refused asylum seekers who are in 'exceptional' circumstances). Almamy comments: 'Destitution amongst asylum seekers is a huge issue in the West Midlands. We [the Refugee Council] conducted research into the issues of destitution amongst asylum seekers. The problem needs to be sorted out. Many are living on the streets and have no support from the government... Asylum seekers become destitute due to circumstances beyond their control. When they arrive [in Britain] they have two possibilities – the first and best is to apply for asylum at the port of entry. The second is to apply once inside the country within a 'reasonable amount of time'. The

Government calls 'reasonable' five working days. If they apply after this time, they are unlikely to be supported by NASS. Many are brought into the country by outside agents and don't know how the asylum system works. They were never told. So they get trapped in the system destitute and with no support.'



Dave Stamp from ASIRT told me the story of one woman's experiences of claiming asylum in the UK: 'A client of ours came to see us yesterday who has just been given status, just been given leave to remain in the country... She's been a client of ours for about four years. When she came to us, she'd had her claim refused, she was thrown onto the streets, she was made destitute. She was from Somalia. No-one has been able to return to Somalia for about 15 years, even people that fill in a form to go back voluntarily, I think about 3 have gone. There isn't actually a government to receive people. The airlines don't fly to Somalia. So you have this insane situation where no-one can go to this place, and yet people who come out of there who claim asylum on the basis that it is as dangerous as everyone claims it to be, are refused any leave to remain and then thrown onto the street. So this woman was street homeless. She was approached by someone who said 'come with me, we'll find you somewhere to live'. And she became a prostitute. Then having no control over what was happening to her at all, she ended up with a client who had taken a particular liking to her, who bought her from her employer and took her to – well, we think it was Glasgow, though to be fair she never knew. She thought she was somewhere in Scotland. She's in slavery in possibly Glasgow, managed to escape from there. By the time she did that she'd lost all her papers – she didn't have any control over what was happening to her – and she was pregnant. She ended up here and we managed to find her somewhere to stay temporarily, which was through a faith group. We managed to get her into maternity care, we arranged for HIV and sexual health tests. Happily she wasn't HIV positive... she had the baby, we managed to arrange Section 4 Support from the UK Border Agency for her. So she's been living on Section 4 Support where you received £35 a week in tokens for yourself and for the baby, so no cash. She's been living like that for the past three years. But now actually came in yesterday with her piece of paper saying 'I've got leave to remain'. To have been able to work with someone who was at that level of despair and actually work through the whole process with them, see them have their kids and raise them and then finally she's got leave to remain. But why on earth did she have to go through all that before getting it?

## Barriers to Integration



So what about when an asylum seeker is granted indefinite leave to remain and given refugee status? How can they then begin to integrate into British society?

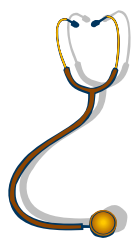
Therese O'Toole, an academic in the Department of Sociology at the University of Birmingham, has recently published a report entitled **Refugees' Experiences of Integration**, co-written with Gaby Atfield and Kavita Brahmabhatt. Their research covered two localities, Dudley and Haringey (London) but much of their findings are

common to other refugee populations. The report uses 'refugee' to apply to both asylum seekers and those with refugee status.

A key aspect of their research involved interviews with refugees in order to gauge their own perceptions of the concept of integration. In **Section 5: Refugees' perceptions of integration**, it is revealed that many respondents felt that it was very important for them to adopt the British 'way of life'. When asked what integration meant for them they mentioned the following activities: having a job, speaking English, going to school or university, having accommodation, having money, having a national insurance number, obeying laws, paying bills, knowing where things are, having a passport, mixing with British people, feeling accepted, feeling safe, making friends, knowing how to do things, having the same opportunities as British people, having the same status as British people, having the same legal rights as British people, being the same as British people.

**Section 6: Refugees' social networks** highlights the role of different social networks in integration of refugees into British society. These can be informal such as friendships or formal such as education courses, neighbourhood groups or religious institutions. These networks were presented as having a significant – though varied – role in the integration of refugees into British society. It was found that most refugees wanted to participate in social networks in order to improve their English, make friends, to feel less isolated or to receive education or learn about Britain. Social networking has been seen to have a positive – even vital – impact on the well being of refugees as well as helping them to access vital services and to integrate.

This research reveals that it is not always easy and straightforward for refugees to access social networks and integrate: *'Structural barriers such as laws, policy, public services and public attitudes posed significant barriers to respondents' access to, and participation in, social networks.'* (Section 6: Refugees' social networks, pg.41). Barriers include a lack of money, lack of knowledge of services and support available, inappropriate service provision, lack of access to education and training, negative media, racial discrimination, uncertainty about the future, lack of English, lack of childcare, mental health, lack of confidence, and fear. Fear and racial discrimination was a common theme: *'Respondents mentioned that there was a great stigma attached to being an asylum seeker. Several commented that they would never tell anyone they were an asylum seeker because people would not accept them and would question their right to be in the UK.'* (Section 5: Refugees' perceptions of integration, pg.30)



Another barrier is gaining suitable employment. It is very difficult for refugees to use their previously earned professional or technical skills in the UK workforce. Almamy Taal, who volunteers with the Refugee Council (West Midlands) and Birmingham Law Centre, comments: *'Even though many asylum seekers have high qualifications and degrees from their own country, they are not considered valuable here. They have to re-qualify and that takes a long time. Finding work in the UK is not dependent on qualifications but on work experience. They need referees too. They can't get a job without doing unpaid voluntary work in this country. I know people who were doctors in their own country, now they work in factories.'*

Therese O'Toole told me that mentoring plays a vital role in the integration of refugees and asylum seekers. It provides friendship, access to other people and networks and also teaches the person about the British customs and procedures, for example, like 'how to get a job' or how to access certain services.

I spoke to Shari Brown and Jeremy Thompson from RESTORE in Small Heath, about their befriending scheme. RESTORE was set up in 1999 by Christians in the Ladywood area in order to offer a welcome to asylum seekers from Kosovo and is now a project of Birmingham Churches Together. The charity has a focus on befriending, raising awareness and advocacy. RESTORE currently has about 60 volunteer befrienders.

Jeremy heads up the befriending scheme at RESTORE. *'Befriending is a scheme that works by matching a person from Birmingham with an asylum seeker or refugee or family to offer welcome and support. That can be in all sorts of ways. Befriending offers the opportunity to meet someone from the local community who can provide friendship. For many people it provides them with informal practice with their English and somebody who will listen to them. We hope that over time trust will develop so that people will feel the freedom to share if they want to. We're not prescriptive about what the befriending relationship should be like. A lot of our client group may have a network of friends from their own country or their English class but it's much more difficult to build relationships with the host community, so it's a stepping stone to help towards integration into society. For people who want to befriend, we have a training course – 6 hours of training – where we give input on asylum issues, give people a run down on the asylum application process so they gain an overview of what people go through in the process...'*



RESTORE also runs social activities because they can't provide 1-to-1 befriending for everyone. This includes a summer holiday programme of day trips for families and social events for lone men

throughout the year: *'We know that taking people swimming or to the museum does not resolve their key problems, but we are aware that these activities help to take people's minds off their difficulties for a short while. A lot of people are referred to us by health professionals. In the section on our referral form for 'reasons for referral' the words we most often read are 'depression', 'isolation', 'needs social interaction'. So that's why we befriend. When I meet the client for the first time and ask about their needs, if they say 'well, I want to meet more people or I want to meet people from Birmingham, or I need help with my English'.... then I feel that befriending may help with those things.'*

Jeremy: *'It's not about changing someone's situation with the Home Office but about standing alongside somebody and walking with them through what can be a very difficult journey, whether it's receiving a difficult decision or whether it's waiting and waiting and waiting for any decision at all. It's a very up and down ride for many asylum seekers and emotionally very difficult. So somebody who's not involved in the process but who is alongside you on that journey can be very helpful.'*

While there are a lot of support groups helping refugees and asylum seekers in Birmingham, it seems that a lot more could be done. Public opinion towards asylum seekers needs to change.

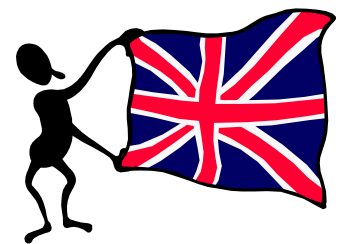


Channel 4's recent Dispatches programme *Immigration: The Inconvenient Truth* highlighted some of the social problems that have arisen from increased immigration both of economic migrants and asylum seekers. A lack of integration was clearly seen as a major underlying issue. This compounded:

- a lack of understanding between people of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds
- geographical segregation between people of different ethnic backgrounds
- fear and confusion over our identity as British citizens.

Birmingham is a very diverse and multi-cultural city and that is something that we should be proud of. But even here, there is obvious geographical segregation between different immigrant groups. We all have a role to play in creating social cohesion. Multiculturalism is now an integral part of the fabric of 'Britishness'. For integration to happen, the host society must seek to embrace immigrants (both economic migrants and refugees) as key contributors to the evolution of the British culture and tradition. Dr Gëzim Alpion's research at the University of Birmingham explores questions of multiculturalism and British identity:

*"The mistake that is made by some papers is that they see the national identity as fixed rather than fluid. National identity is not set in stone. We have to bear in mind the changes that Britain has gone through from the end of WWII when the British Empire came to an end. Our notion of 'Britishness' has evolved. What we understood as 'Britishness' when Scotland and Ireland joined the Union two or three centuries ago was different from the 'Britishness' of the first half of the twentieth century and from the 'Britishness' of today. Society is always in a flux."*



I asked Gëzim Alpion, lecturer and researcher at the University of Birmingham, how is it possible for us to create social cohesion between the 'native' white British and refugees from other countries and ethnicities?

*"If communities are given ample opportunities to educate their children, if their English improves, if they are treated as equals in the job market, then I think they will realise that they are valuable members of the British society. We should not see immigrants as spongers but as law abiding citizens who are keen to earn their living and contribute to the British economy and culture."*



## Is there hope for the future?

Ginnie Odetayo, befriender of asylum seekers in Birmingham:

“You have to have hope because if you didn’t have hope there would be nothing else. In the case of Sarah [not her real name] the only thing that we can cling to is hope that somehow God will

work things out for her, that he will provide for her and protect her. As a befriender you’re perhaps in a better position to remind them of hope because their circumstances can wear them down to the point of losing all hope. Sometimes, standing alongside people, perhaps praying with them or supporting them, showing them that there is someone who still cares and is looking out for them, you can inject a little bit of hope. As for the system changing, Liam Burns [Immigration Minister] has set his course – we can but pray that it will change. The legal system is very very tight now and they will look for any reason to deport people, particularly to countries like Nigeria and Uganda. Because they’re not experiencing out and out civil war, they consider these to be ‘safe’ countries. However that doesn’t accommodate issues of domestic violence, rape, tribal fighting or other instances of social persecution, which are still genuine forms of persecution, threat and danger to life - this is particularly true for female asylum seekers. But I think that the government is afraid to set a precedent by recognising these issues.”

Shari from RESTORE: *“I do have hope that’s bound up with faith. Faith is challenged. One of our befrienders rang up this very week when her friend was returned to Uganda – there was a sense of injustice. The befriender had phoned the day of the friend’s arrival in Uganda to say the couple she’d contacted had got to the airport to meet her Ugandan friend and were going to host her that night, a couple doing missionary work. I’m heartened that the church can do that. Even in a global context we can try and make a response. So there is some joy in this circumstance despite the sadness of losing a friend and feeling it was done in an unjust fashion. I also want to believe in the general public. Too often I hear the argument “if we gave asylum seekers the right to work then we wouldn’t have a deterrent and people would come in floods”. I just feel that if more people knew about the situation of destitution or the reality of persecution, if they heard asylum seekers’ stories, I think hearts would open and there would be a more generous response. Befrienders hear the stories and there’s a sense of outrage and a desire then to change things, to make a difference. If people are prompted into action, that is a very hopeful sign.”*



Jeremy from RESTORE: *“Politically I find it quite hard to be hopeful. And if we get party political – then if the current government is so negative I can’t see it improving with any other government. Having said that there are individual MPs who are excellent advocates. If there is someone in their constituency they will do what they can. Not every MP does that but there are MPs like Clare Short who are excellent people and real allies, not just for us but for the asylum seekers themselves. But there has to be hope. And there is the whole spiritual dimension. We’ve seen situations where people have prayed for individuals and sometimes I wonder ‘how would it have been if they hadn’t prayed?’ ... What really gives me hope is the way I see people respond: our Restore volunteers have real compassion for people and some give so much beyond what we would ever describe befriending to be on our training course. There is also the hope you see when people are given refugee status and can then rebuild their lives - and that’s the hope we have for all our clients.”*

## **I asked Jeremy and Shari from RESTORE what their Hope or vision was for how things could be in a perfect world.**

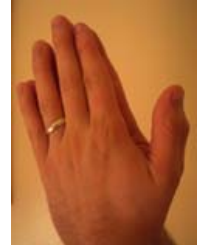
Jeremy: *'There would be a better understanding by the general public about what asylum seekers and refugees have experienced and why they fled to the UK. These people have come because their lives were at risk, or they had been imprisoned or tortured. Instead of very negative media coverage which feeds the government policy that we should get rid of as many people as possible because that will make the public happy, we would willingly fulfil our obligation to welcome and support those fleeing persecution. Many refugees have a lot to offer – many were professionals in their own country.'*

*'Allowing people who are seeking asylum to work would be beneficial for the individual's mental wellbeing. Many would rather work than be given handouts. Financially it would be better for the country as we wouldn't be giving out as many benefits to asylum seekers. But the government policy is that asylum seekers can't work because if you let them work it will encourage more people to come to the UK. Asylum seekers would be housed in better quality accommodation. It's variable but I've seen some places that are awful. The press report that 'asylum seekers are living in luxury' but I could show you a few places that would redefine their understanding of luxury! More resources for legal assistance so that asylum seekers have access to better legal advice, and better representation in their cases. More resources for the voluntary sector that are seeking to help as a lot of agencies struggle to keep going financially... and there would be more volunteers, more people to do the work.'*

*'In an ideal world when you think about our compassionate God, a God who loves us unconditionally, it would be great if as refugees and asylum seekers came off boats or planes and said 'I've been persecuted' or 'I've been tortured' that we not just physically embraced them but we welcomed them and helped them to rebuild their lives from that point, rather than pushing them into areas where other people don't necessarily want to live..., and then left to wait until somebody makes a decision. That's the difference that I'd really love to see. And in the meantime we just have to chip away and help a little bit where we can.'*

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## **What can you do to help?**



Jenny Phillimore, researcher at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham said: *'It's a combination of local, regional and national action... Where local organisations can help is by providing information around local services, translation and building social capital – building social knowledge – mentoring – when it works, it's fantastic. A proportion of people are connecting with others via faith or community groups... Those that are, are doing a lot better'.*

## **How you can specifically help organisations in Birmingham**

**[ASIRT](#) (Asylum Support and Immigration Resource Team)**, Small Heath, 0121-772-6700

- **Volunteer immigration advisors:** 'We've had approaches from people who are looking to work in law at some level and if people would be interested in volunteering with us, we could register them with the Office of Immigration Services Commission and get them competent as immigration advisors and they could help with representations, fresh claims of appeal.'
- **Give money:** 'We have a vulnerable women's travel assistance fund which is specifically for women who are either pregnant or have young children who are being expected to travel long distances, either to sign at Solihull for their report and restrictions or to go to the supermarket to use their tokens because you have no control over what supermarket you go to. So we provide bus passes for people in that situation.'
- **Offer temporary accommodation:** 'If people felt that they were able to offer temporary accommodation to people in destitution, they can speak to my colleague Eddie, who is looking to coordinate a hospitality scheme around that.'

- **Write to the media:** ‘writing to the media, challenging negative representations, challenging some of the nonsense that gets written about asylum seekers and refugees. And also rewarding and congratulating the press when they get it right. We have managed to get some positive and accurate coverage during refugee week a few years ago. So when people see things like that write in and say ‘well done’.’

[RESTORE](#), Small Heath, 0121 766 8764

- **Volunteer as a befriender (training days coming up in June)**
- **Help out with one off events and activities**

[KARIS NEIGHBOUR SCHEME](#), Ladywood, 0121 689 6081

- **Donate food** to our food store which enables us to provide food parcels to families and individuals who are in particular need. Please contact Karis Neighbour Scheme for a specific list of food and toiletries required.
- **Become a “Friend of Karis”** – We recognise the need for a wider support group of people who would be willing to support us financially, with their prayers and with friendship. In return you will receive a regular newsletter to keep you up to date with our work and you will be invited to various Karis events. Please contact Harry Naylor at the KNS office for more details.
- **Join our team of 80 volunteers.** We have a number of opportunities for volunteers. Please contact the KNS office for details of current vacancies.

[BIRMINGHAM LAW CENTRE](#), Coventry Rd, 0121 766 7466

- **Give money to the Birmingham Destitution Fund:** ‘Birmingham Law Centre has been running an asylum seekers Destitution Fund which gives some kind of temporary respite for people in destitution. So people can contribute to those funds.’

## Other things you could do locally

- **Pray**
- Set up a **local group to provide information** to asylum seekers and refugees about the British system, procedures, etc.
- Set up free **English classes** or volunteer with Karis to teach English
- Provide education for children in schools about asylum seekers and refugees – perhaps through local projects or **Theatre in Education?**
- **Campaign: West Midlands Anti-Deportation Campaign**, Handsworth, 0121-507-1805
- **Volunteer** with the [Refugee Council](#)

## How you can help nationally

- **Lobby** the government to change policy
- [Campaign](#) with the Refugee Council
- Join the **campaign** [Strangers into Citizens](#)
- Join campaigns or donate money through [Refugee Action](#)
- Counter the negative press by **raising awareness** about the issues facing asylum seekers and refugees

## Stories of Asylum

### [Token Gestures \(The Guardian\)](#)

“As a failed asylum seeker I know that using vouchers to buy food can be frustrating and humiliating. There has to be a more humane system”

### [Ali's Story \(ASIRT\)](#)

### [Stories of women detained awaiting deportation at Yarls Wood Immigration Removal Centre in Bedfordshire.](#)

## Other Links

### [Fit for Purpose yet? The Independent Asylum Commission's Interim Findings](#)

<http://www.humanrightstv.com/channel/7> - watch and listen to the testimonies given at the Independent Asylum Commission hearings

[www.refugee-action.org](http://www.refugee-action.org)

[BBC Asylum Day 2003](#) – interactive elements

[Celebrating Sanctuary](#) – Birmingham City Council article

['Celebrating Sanctuary?! What Sanctuary?!'](#) Report by Birmingham NoBorders on Indy Media Brum

### [ASPIRE \(Asylum Seekers Pursuing Integration, Refuge and Empowerment\)](#)

The ASPIRE Development Partnership aims to pilot creative ways to ensure individuals and organisations can support asylum seekers.

[BASHOT \(Birmingham Asylum Seekers Health Outreach Team\)](#), Aston, 0121 327 8901

## Contributors

Thank you to all the following who contributed to this article:

### **Dr Gezim Alpion**

Lecturer in Sociology and Media Studies at the University of Birmingham. He received a PhD from the University of Durham, UK, in 1997. His books include Vouchers (2001), Foreigner Complex: Essays and Fiction about Egypt (2002), Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity? (2007), Encounters with Civilizations: From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa (2008), and If Only the Dead Could Listen (2008). His features have appeared in The Middle East Times, The Guardian and The Birmingham Post.

### **Linden Sanders**

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### **Almamy Taal**

Almamy Taal is a communications representative for the [Refugee Council](#), West Midlands. He coordinates the Destitutions Steering Group and the distribution of the Destitution Fund at [Birmingham Law Centre](#) (BLC). He answers general enquiries, signposts people to community care, requests emergency support and undertakes advocacy work. He represents the Refugee Council on various steering groups in the Midlands and plays a significant role in creating positive media coverage of asylum seekers.

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Lecturer in the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham, author of several journals, articles and books on the subject of migrants and in particular refugees.