

# **Destitution of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Birmingham**

**“I have moved from one prison to an even bigger one”**  
(Destitute asylum-seeker in Birmingham, February 2005)

Commissioned by Restore of Birmingham Churches Together and the Church  
Urban Fund. Conducted by Richard Malfait and Nick Scott-Flynn.

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## **Introductory Note**

This report represents the findings of the short Study that looked into the issue of destitution amongst asylum-seekers and refugees in Birmingham. This Study was conducted on behalf of 'Restore of Birmingham Churches Together' by Richard Malfait and Nick Scott-Flynn over the period of October 2004 – March 2005. It is not an exhaustive study of the issue but more a snapshot of views and impressions. It is principally intended to further the understanding of the issue in the City and contribute to the current efforts to help those affected: destitute asylum-seekers and refugees. We were not able to consult the full range of people involved in this issue and we hope that those who are concerned will be able to use this Study to take this important work forward.

## **Acknowledgements**

The funding made available from the Church Urban Fund has made this Study possible. Equally significant has been the acknowledgement by the Fund and Restore of the importance of this issue and the need to address it. The Study would not have been possible without the valuable time given by all those stakeholders who contributed. The input and guidance from the Steering Group for the Study has been most valuable as has been that of the organisations sponsoring the April Conference on the issue. Thanks should also go to the Tudor Trust for their financial support in this respect. Finally, special thanks should be given to those destitute asylum-seekers and refugees who were willing to share their experiences and thoughts for the Study. We hope that their situation will improve.

## **Definition of Destitution**

There are different ways of describing destitution but fundamentally it is where someone has been deprived of the basic necessities of life or is without the means of bare subsistence. Evocatively, the Oxford English Dictionary gives the definition; 'Abandoned; forsaken, forlorn'. These definitions are appropriate for this study which has looked into the circumstances in which asylum-seekers and refugees are denied or deprived of the basic necessities of life. This definition applies whether the destitution is brought about by accident, through the administrative inefficiency of the asylum and welfare systems, because of deliberate policy or the lack of knowledge about entitlement due to poor access to legal advice. Some may argue that there are alternatives to destitution for some asylum-seekers, such as returning to their home country. However it is simply not possible for most asylum-seekers to choose these so-called alternatives. They are not viable options and cannot be seen as an excuse for this country to be denying basic necessities to a group of very vulnerable people whose vulnerability is often made much worse by their being destitute.

## **Executive Summary**

This Study set out to achieve a number of things:

- Get an idea of the actual numbers of destitute asylum-seekers in Birmingham.
- Analyse the main causes of destitution amongst this group.
- Get a sense of how those who are destitute survive.
- Map out what provision exists for this group and what key gaps there are.

Highlight some of the ways that the issue is being approached elsewhere in the country.

While this Study may not have unearthed anything that was not already known to the key players involved with refugees and asylum-seekers in Birmingham, we believe that there is a value in confirming some of this knowledge. We also feel that in addressing these issues we have been able to make a number of recommendations that those concerned can take forward in this challenging area of work.

### Setting the Scene

It is a cold winter's evening in a Midland's town. A young mother and her 6-year old son are sleeping in a bus shelter. A passer-by stops and asks them if they have anywhere to go tonight. In their broken English they explain they have nowhere. He has heard of a house that will take people in, nothing fancy, just a warm meal, a bed and some friendly faces. No questions about status asked. Tonight they are safe. Their luck has been good for once. It could so easily have been otherwise.

It is hard to believe that this is happening in Britain in 2005. The laws of this land have deliberately created a new underclass, the 'new nomads' as one stakeholder put it. Not allowed to work, not allowed to claim support, not allowed to exist. If they remain hidden and out of sight then perhaps the problem does not exist. But of course it does and this small study has confirmed that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of destitute refugees and asylum-seekers in Birmingham. Importantly, there are also many individuals and organisations who find this situation unacceptable, who are determined to provide both practical and moral support to those most affected: the refugees and asylum-seekers themselves.

We found that there is enough interest and concern amongst the majority of stakeholders in Birmingham to put time and effort into finding ways to better approach this issue. Some organisations identify that there is an increasing demand from destitute refugees and asylum-seekers that is distorting their other work. Others are just very frustrated at their inability to address the needs of this group and are looking for help with this. In other words, many see this as an important issue and there is enough momentum there to justify devoting time and effort to continue to address the issue (see our recommendations later).

Asylum-seekers and refugees have become destitute in Birmingham through a mixture of causes. Sometimes they simply 'fall out' of what is a very complicated system of welfare provision and asylum legislation. In other instances they are the victims of bureaucratic mistakes or confusing and unhelpful implementation of the laws and provisions that do exist. Some become destitute as a deliberate result of Government policy. In seeking to address the issue it is clear that there is no one single solution or course of action available to the voluntary sector to remedy the problem. Ultimately the policy and practice behind the causes of destitution need to be changed, and that is not something in the power of the voluntary to achieve alone. However there is much that those in Birmingham who are concerned about the issue can do to ensure that the issue is addressed and relief provided to the best extent possible. Rather than just one action it is a mixture of activities at different levels, as suggested below.

## Recommendations

### Mapping the issue

The absence of accurate figures on destitution serves no one except the Government. In order to both efficiently provide what support may be available and to inform any campaigning and lobbying, it is vital that proper figures are obtained. We would recommend devising and implementing a citywide standard for recording information about destitute asylum-seekers and refugees. A mechanism to collate this information on a regular basis should also be established. The British Red Cross and Refugee Action use a form in Leicester. This is included in the appendices as an example that organisations in Birmingham may want to follow.

### Giving a clear message of what is on offer

Different organisations and individuals are trying to tackle the issue of destitution in a variety of ways in Birmingham. We were given the impression that this was not well co-ordinated, sometimes causing confusion and a possible overlap amongst providers. We would strongly recommend that those offering any sort of service co-ordinate to produce a specific information leaflet for advisers and refugees themselves that explains what someone who is destitute should do to obtain support, such as where they could go. Many of those interviewed didn't know about other groups and services providing support. Several asked for a 'central signposting list' or up-to-date list with contact names and information for both signposting and networking purposes.

### Take forward the recommended actions from the Conference of Birmingham-based providers held on April 15<sup>th</sup> in Birmingham

During the course of this Study an early recommendation was made that a conference should be held that brought together the principal stakeholders in Birmingham who are working with destitute asylum-seekers. Consequently a conference was held at the British Red Cross on April 15<sup>th</sup> 2005 that looked at a draft version of the report of this Study and used this to decide upon actions that were required. The key recommendations of the Conference are included at the end of this report in the write-up of the day. In this sense the Conference formed a key part of this Study and we would recommend that these actions be taken forward as described.

### Develop a best-case scenario

To inform how to take the work forward we recommend developing a best-case scenario as to how to support destitute asylum-seekers and refugees. Given that it is not possible to change the law at the moment such a scenario would, we think, help focus what provision there is. It would look something like: *'If a destitute asylum-seeker walked into the local CAB at 5.00 PM on a Friday afternoon, the worker on duty would know where to refer them to and what for.'* It could include the development of a 'safe house' as well. This would help with the development of a clear message (see above). It would be useful to develop such a scenario amongst all of the interested parties.

### Develop ability to research the issue

We would recommend that any provision to destitute asylum-seekers and refugees be coupled with some good quality research into what is happening to the individuals concerned. For example, someone could track what happens to such clients over a consistent period of six months. There are models from the mainstream homeless sector where homeless people have been asked to keep diaries of their experiences. More sophisticated research has used cameras. Of

course this would need resources, but it may be something that a University or Trust would be interested in. The Tudor Trust and others have remarked upon the lack of solid research about what is happening to the destitute and would be more open to projects that assist in providing as well as researching.

#### Link to return

Choices, the voluntary return project, has noted an increase in interest from clients who have found themselves destitute. We would recommend a meeting with Choices to see if they are keeping proper statistics on this and what other useful information they may have about destitute refugees and asylum-seekers.

#### Develop a rota amongst service providers

Two of the most difficult aspects of the situation are its unpredictability and the patchwork nature of provision. It would be enormously helpful to develop some sort of rota with other providers so as to at least share the issue.

#### Enhance support from mainstream providers

Many stakeholders felt that there needed to be more engagement from so-called 'mainstream' providers, or in other words organisations that are not refugee specific. This includes homelessness organisations and housing providers. It was felt that they either need to be much more explicit about what they do provide for this group or clear about making their services accessible.

#### Approach traditional anti-poverty organisations

Ironically, after years of developing the welfare state the country now seems to have taken a step back and created a new group of poor. It would be valuable to approach some of those bodies some traditional anti-poverty organisations with regards to working with this new group of poor. This could include some of the trusts such as Tudor and Barrow Cadbury. There are also NGOs that have a core of supporters seeking to support those excluded from the mainstream.

#### Providing hostel space for particularly vulnerable groups

We were told consistently that there are very few asylum-seekers or refugees sleeping rough on the streets of Birmingham. Based on the experience of mainstream drop-in centres, nightshelters and those working with street homeless it would be fair to say that at any one time there seem to be fewer than 50 people needing somewhere to sleep. However, some of those that did need accommodation were particularly vulnerable, such as single parent women or those with medical problems such as diabetes. While it seems at this stage not practical to recommend setting-up a hostel for all destitute asylum-seekers and refugees, there may be scope for establishing or formalising a 'safe-house' for particularly vulnerable groups. This could be something that would attract funding and potentially those housed therein would be able to be moved-on if appropriate support was given regarding their Community Care and Immigration situation. We would recommend approaching some of the Housing Associations about this.

#### Setting-up a hostel for refugee women

Many felt that destitute refugee women were particularly vulnerable and that specific provision should be established for them. There are parallels with providing 'safe houses' in other contexts for vulnerable women. This might be something that it is possible to raise funds for. It could also be possible to involve Housing Associations.

### Block-booking bed spaces in mainstream homeless provision

This had been tried in the past and is indeed used elsewhere in the country. A variation is paying for rooms in private rented accommodation. In Birmingham there seems to have been pressure on keeping bed spaces open for a specific client group (refugees) especially when demand from that group is very unpredictable. There were also reports of resentment from 'mainstream' clients towards refugees and asylum-seekers, which in itself would act as a deterrent to refugees trying to access the services. We would recommend further dialogue with the main homelessness providers to explore what is the best way (if at all possible) of guaranteeing spaces. However what might be more efficacious would be to develop smaller refugee-specific accommodation for vulnerable groups such as refugee women.

### Hosting Schemes

There should be a more organised rota for referrals to hosting schemes. A more co-ordinated hosting scheme would be better – for example with more hosts offering more options for short notice accommodation requests and perhaps for 'move-on' destinations. Hosts could be put in contact with each other for peer support and information sharing purposes. Better coordination could also involve a central person or organisation to provide hosts with:

- information about hosting;
- induction into the hosting scheme;
- reassurance for prospective new hosts;
- training/ guidance on boundaries etc;
- some kind of vetting procedure;
- networking contacts;
- signposting information for guests about other sources of support;
- matching guests to hosts (e.g. women).

### Setting-up a drop-in Centre

Previous attempts to do this in Birmingham have failed, largely it seems because the venue chosen was not one that refugees and asylum-seekers would normally go to. There are also 'mainstream' drop-in centres that attract some asylum-seekers and refugees, and this in itself should be encouraged. However we would recommend some fine-tuning regarding the mainstream provision, and perhaps better signposting. A more radical approach could also involve setting up a drop-in at one of the existing refugee organisations (MRC, Refugee Council). However this would be a major undertaking and not something that we sensed there was an appetite for. It could be discussed at a wider forum.

### Have a meeting with city-wide representatives of Social Services

A significant percentage of destitute asylum-seekers and refugees are particularly vulnerable due to bad health, having children, being old or having mental health problems. Consequently many may fall under the responsibility of the Social Services. However, getting initial Community Care assessments, let alone positive decisions, seems to be a major problem in Birmingham. Much time is spent in appealing or challenging negative decisions. We would recommend a meeting with appropriate officials to discuss this.

### Support for staff

Nearly all stakeholders mentioned the emotional pressure on staff and volunteers working with destitute asylum seekers and refugees. It seems clear that this needs to be addressed. We would recommend a specific support group be established for such staff and volunteers across the organisations. This could involve bringing

in outside support from an organisation such as the Medical Foundation. It would serve several purposes including: supporting staff, helping them to develop best practice, providing a fertile arena for keeping the issue tracked and alive. A similar group operates in Newcastle.

#### Hold a focus group for Restore volunteers

We would recommend organising a specific meeting with Restore volunteers to talk through the issues so far arising in the study.

#### Influencing Regional Policy

Currently in development is a Regional Homeless Strategy being devised by Birmingham University in conjunction with a wide range of stakeholders. This is aimed at devising co-ordinated methods to tackle homelessness across the region in the coming years. We have been in touch with the people coordinating this but did not feel mandated or qualified to represent the voice of destitute asylum-seekers and refugees. We have read the draft strategies and there is no specific mention of destitute asylum-seekers. However, there is reference to refugees being evicted from NASS accommodation and a concern around ensuring that any moves to tackle general homelessness do not reduce available accommodation for refugees. We would recommend that a coordinated effort is made by those agencies involved with destitute asylum-seekers and refugees to ensure that their perspective is included in the final strategy. It may be that some of the ways that they hope to tackle general homelessness will be applicable to this client group (at the least this includes better co-ordination). It is unlikely to have no effect, either direct or indirect. In this respect we would recommend meeting with the people at Birmingham University (and perhaps sharing our report). (We will include extracts from the strategy in the appendices).

#### Campaigning

The Study touched upon the strong desire of many individuals and organisations to campaign against the causes of destitution amongst asylum-seekers, principally the legislation. However we were not able to go into any depth as to what would be the best way to campaign, advocate or lobby. The Study also concentrated very much on what might be practically possible with respect to the issue at this stage, However some stakeholders believed that an advocacy approach that picked out certain areas of concern where there is a chance of a Government concession might be feasible, such as highlighting the lack of proper access to legal representation for asylum-seekers. Others felt it would be good to target the lack of access to local authority care for vulnerable groups. When asked about the one change which would most help their lives (apart from a change in the fundamental legislation), destitute asylum-seekers said that permission to work would make the biggest difference. We would recommend maintaining the campaigning front and continue combining this with practical assistance to asylum-seekers.

#### Awareness Raising for non-Refugee organisations

Some organisations and individuals, particularly from faith groups or mainstream non-refugee agencies, were unclear about what others in the refugee sector were doing. For example some had never heard of B-Mag. They were also struggling to keep up with the ever-changing information on the legal situation. Consequently we would recommend that some awareness-raising be done for groups and organisations who don't work with refugees and asylum-seekers as their main client group, or who feel somewhat left out of the 'refugee organisation circle'. This could be coupled with a 'newsletter' or bulletin circulated widely.

### Other stakeholders

There are a large number of stakeholders in Birmingham with an interest in this issue. This Study has covered only about half of them. There would be value in bringing the other half into a dialogue and finding a way to maintain it (for example the Police, Housing Associations, Birmingham University). We would recommend that contact be made with Stoke CAB to ascertain what they are learning from their survey in that city.

## **Specific Issues**

### ***Numbers and Profile***

There is a wide range of figures quoted as to how many destitute asylum-seekers and refugees there are in Birmingham and the West Midlands. The National Asylum Support System (NASS) estimates that there are only 30 in the region (this figure was given to us unofficially). This contrasts to the 10,000 estimated by the Regional Consortium for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers. The Refugee Network estimates that there are somewhere between 5-10,000 in the region. Some stakeholders reported a reduction in the numbers of destitute asylum-seekers and refugees that they had seen in the last year. However this may be because they were not able to offer appropriate services to this group so people simply did not go back to those places. In contrast others, such as the British Red Cross, said that they had seen an increase in numbers. Based on the figures from those stakeholders providing direct services, we would estimate that there are between 1-2,000 destitute asylum-seekers and refugees in Birmingham. We would also suggest a working figure of less than 50 destitute asylum-seekers and refugees presenting themselves as in need of accommodation each week. However what is clear is that no one has an overview and there is no proper system for recording and collating information across the city. We feel it is vital that all of those involved with supporting this group come together to devise such a system. Without the figures, so much is made more difficult. It is harder to organise services for this group if there is vagueness about numbers. It also makes it more difficult to campaign and raise money for projects.

It is worth noting that Stoke CAB are monitoring and researching the situation in Stoke. In Leicester there has been good coordination amongst those organisations working with destitute asylum-seekers to record their work in a concerted way. Both examples are worth noting and perhaps emulating in Birmingham. An example from the Leicester recording mechanism is included later in the report.

### ***Profile of Clients – Causes of Destitution***

The main cause of destitution appears to be asylum-seekers having come to the end of the asylum process and having had their case turned down, so-called 'end-of-process' clients. We would estimate that this accounts for approximately 60-70% of the total showing-up as destitute.

The proportion of destitute arising because of initial refusals for support under Section 55 is declining. The legal challenges to Section 55 in 2004 have resulted in far fewer refusals by NASS to provide support. Some involved with lobbying the Government (NACAB for example) believe that this issue has almost been won and that the Home Office will not press it further. Consequently, we believe that this group constitutes less than 10% of the destitute.

The remaining 20-30% are made up of people who have somehow fallen through the net, people who have complicated cases that may have a positive resolution in sight. Such a resolution might be a successful outcome to their asylum claim. In one case we came across, a destitute refugee had no idea that he had been granted refugee status and could therefore have claimed support. Other examples include cases where people are particularly vulnerable and have the prospect of eventually obtaining Community Care. Finally, there are a number of people who find themselves evicted in the transition phase between being in NASS supported accommodation and being given a positive decision on their asylum claim. This happens because they have insufficient time to arrange move-on accommodation due to delays in getting the required paperwork from NASS and the Immigration Service. Some stakeholders suggested the need for a 'Transition' hostel, but we do not have enough evidence to comment on the demand for this service. We do know, however, that in the Regional Housing Strategy (University of Birmingham) they refer to this last category as causing a noticeable amount of homelessness in the region and have called upon NASS to improve their systems in this respect.

### ***Nationalities***

In the absence of consistent records it is hard to give exact figures on the nationalities of those who are destitute. However, most stakeholders believed that the majority were from the following countries: Iraq (Kurds and others), Afghanistan, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Iran, numerous African Countries and EU Accession countries.

### ***Gender and Age***

The absence of exact recording mechanisms makes it hard to give definitive percentages on the age or gender breakdown of destitute asylum-seekers in Birmingham. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of destitute asylum-seekers are male, making up about 75-80% of the client group (this proportion was mirrored in the 28 destitute asylum-seekers that contributed to the Study). However, many stakeholders were keen to stress their concerns about the particular vulnerability of female destitute asylum-seekers. They saw some as being prey to exploitation for sexual purposes. Others were the sole carers for young children and needed specific support. Of note was the plight of destitute women asylum-seekers who are HIV positive for whom it was suggested very tailored support was needed. For people in this situation, return to their own country is doubly difficult given the lack of resources there for such a health need.

Similarly, although it was felt that the majority of destitute asylum-seekers are aged between 20-40, there was concern about the elderly being extremely vulnerable even though not great in number.

### ***Lack of Access to Legal Representation***

Approximately one third of the destitute asylum-seekers interviewed had received either very poor legal advice about their asylum claim or no legal advice or representation at all. Changes in the Legal Aid system combined with a shortage of accessible, affordable and appropriately specialised solicitors have made it extremely hard for asylum-seekers to exercise their rights. Many of those interviewed for the study talked of appeal dates being missed because of the inefficiency of those who had helped them make their original asylum claim. Others talked of the difficulty in finding adequate legal representation, or the delays in

doing so that led to their NASS support being cut-off. A recent Amnesty International report<sup>1</sup> has highlighted the poor quality of initial Home Office asylum decisions. Given this, it is hardly surprising that many asylum-seekers appeal against a refusal. However, to do so is often complicated and time consuming and best done with good legal representation. Such representation is often hard to obtain, especially if the person is destitute. This is a major area that needs addressing.

#### **Section 4, Sections 9 & 10 – the legislative complexity**

There are several legal provisions relating to assistance to destitute asylum-seekers. Most notable has been the so-called 'Section 4' (from the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act) that allowed for support to failed asylum-seekers if they gave certain undertakings, such as a willingness to return to their country at a point in the future. This provision has recently been amended (Immigration and Asylum Regulations 2005) to place the support on a firmer statutory footing and gives the Home Office the power to only offer such support if the person also undertakes to do community work (so-called section 10). Section 9 withdraws NASS support from families with children whose asylum application has failed unless the family is complying with efforts to remove them from the UK. This section has not been fully implemented in Birmingham yet as the Home Office are testing it out in 3 pilot areas in the UK. However the expectation is that the effects on some families will be devastating, leading to children being taken into care.

The Government may say that the support offered by these legal provisions goes some way to meeting the problem of destitution amongst this group. However, the overall effect of these is a further restriction and tightening of any support available. Many asylum-seekers will not sign up for section 4 support as they do not feel able to commit to returning to their home country.

Another implication of the legal provisions is that asylum-seekers need access to good advice to help understand the implications of what they may be signing.

#### **How do the Destitute Survive?**

It seems that the vast majority are relying on the support of friends and people from their communities. Very few are sleeping on the streets and the assumption is that most are sleeping in very overcrowded accommodation.

*“We have gone back to the 50s and 60s when newly arrived immigrant communities survived through kinship but often in atrocious conditions, such as having 14 people in a small terraced house.”* Quote from stakeholder.

Some are accessing the services provided by the organisations and individuals consulted in this Study; the value of this should not be underestimated. However, others are either working in the hidden economy and some are, it is thought, inevitably turning to crime, including drugs. Some women in particular are thought to be involved in prostitution.

*“We [the UK] are creating a reservist arm of criminality with a risk of people drifting or being pushed into illegal activities. We have instances of prostitution for example.”* Quote from stakeholder.

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<sup>1</sup> Get it Right- how Home Office decision making fails refugees. Amnesty International UK, February 2004

Again, it is difficult to quantify any of this and by definition those involved in illegal activities are hard to identify. However some of those organisations involved in working with the homeless draw parallels to poverty in the UK 50 years ago:

*"I remember working in Kings Cross in London and doing street work with young women who had come down from Northern cities to work in prostitution. The only difference now is that instead of being from Sheffield they are more likely to be from Romania."* Quote from stakeholder.

It is also clear, based on their experience with other homeless groups, that they see and are worried about the deterioration in the mental and physical health of destitute asylum-seekers and refugees. For example: experience shows that TB tends to spread in overcrowded housing situations and that any chronic illness can only get worse if someone is trying to survive below the poverty line. It would seem that the physical and mental health needs of this group are something that could be specifically addressed but at this stage we are not clear how. Perhaps some collaboration with mental health projects or the Medical Foundation might take forward the thinking on this.

There needs to be a way to define and articulate the value of providing emotional and moral support, something done particularly well by befrienders but also by many giving some service to this group. The value of this should be acknowledged and not underestimated.

### ***Who is providing what?***

The services on offer consist mainly of the following:

- General Advice
- Legal advice and representation
- Signposting and referrals onwards
- Befriending
- Hosting
- Emergency Accommodation
- Clothing (sometimes in kind, sometimes in vouchers)
- Sleeping material such as blankets and sleeping bags
- Baby items
- Money (direct payment to destitute asylum-seekers)
- Tracing and Messages (the British Red Cross say that this is well utilised by the destitute)
- Food (sometimes in kind, sometimes in vouchers)

### ***Hospitality Schemes***

Several individuals and organisations in Birmingham are providing temporary free accommodation to destitute asylum-seekers. Such hosting or hospitality is often provided on an emergency basis (that is, with very little notice). Some of this accommodation is provided in a coordinated way with others and small funds are made available for items such as bed linen. Although only reaching small numbers of the total of destitute asylum-seekers, the importance of these schemes cannot be understated with regards to the positive difference they make to the individuals accommodated. It was felt by some hosts interviewed that the benefits were mutual, with both parties enjoying the experience. It was also felt that it worked

better based in individual's homes rather than institutional settings such as church halls. These schemes benefit from the flexibility of not being formalised, although this also is a potential weakness as spaces are not guaranteed. There are also potential risks involved in bringing strangers into one's house. However these are felt to be outweighed by the emotional and physical support that they offer to destitute asylum-seekers. Such schemes are a key part of the mosaic that makes up what support is on offer. They should be encouraged, albeit with the recommendations suggested below (see recommendations on hosting).

### ***What are the key gaps?***

There was a general consensus about the following key needs that are not adequately catered for at present:

- Good legal advice and casework advice.
- Short-term respite accommodation.
- Open-ended accommodation.
- Support with mental health needs.
- Knowledge of who is doing what (signposting information and service information handouts).

### ***Co-ordination and Information Issues***

See the recommendations on this above.

### ***Campaigning***

There are several campaigns addressing the issue of destitution of asylum-seekers and refugees. There is of course a value in being involved in these at a Birmingham level as well as nationally. There are some in the national field that believe that it is only by changing public opinion that the issue can be addressed:

*"The Government agenda (and that of the main opposition) is clearly driven by what it believes the public want. We need to change what the public want, not target the MPs."* (An advocacy officer in a refugee agency).

There are also others that believe the way to campaign on this issue is by crudely suggesting that it is in the best interest of the authorities to not have asylum-seekers left destitute as they will ultimately be more of a burden on the health system if they become ill on the streets. A parallel was drawn with needle exchange schemes for drug addicts that are designed to prevent the spread of HIV. Local and central Government support such schemes.

### ***What next?***

Sadly the situation is very likely to get worse. Although the numbers of asylum-seekers nationally has decreased, this has not necessarily been mirrored in the numbers of people coming to Birmingham, which continues to be a city that many refugees are attracted to. It is also clear that the Government intends to launch yet more asylum legislation in 2005. Tony Blair's New Year message contained the following:

*"In 2005 we will continue to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour and increase our efforts to ensure the integrity of our borders and remove failed*

*asylum-seekers from Britain. We will set out further proposals on asylum and immigration in the early New Year."* Tony Blair 29<sup>th</sup> December 2004

It is clear that the Government intends to make it even harder for 'end-of-process' refugees and asylum-seekers to stay in Britain. Those that do will find it increasingly hard to survive as they continue to be denied access to services, benefits or the right to work. While we would recommend continuing with and contributing to the various campaigns that exist nationally and locally to challenge this, we feel that in the short term there is an equal desire to focus on practical steps that may be taken, hence the balance of our recommendations below.

### ***Provision of direct assistance, such as money***

Within the City there is the notable scheme run by B-Mag that makes payments of cash to some destitute asylum-seekers. This is done in partnership with other organisations in the City. While the levels of payments are not the same as those of asylum-seekers on NASS support or refugees on Income Support, it is clear that they offer very direct relief. The British Red Cross provide direct assistance with food vouchers that can be exchanged at supermarkets as well as other material assistance of clothes for example.

The main challenge in providing this type of support is obviously the cost involved. The voluntary sector cannot adequately replace the financial provision that was once given by the State. It is however a very important aspect of assistance, both materially and symbolically and should be encouraged while the present situation of destitution remains. It should also be done where possible in conjunction with seeking long term solutions to the problem of destitution.

## **Methodology**

This Study has been conducted in the following way:

- Meetings with the Steering Group for the Study.
- Interviews with key stakeholders (see below) in Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester and London.
- Analysis of documents relating to destitution and refugees and asylum-seekers.

For most of the interviews a standard questionnaire format was used and every attempt was made to ensure that stakeholders could contribute in an open manner with which they were comfortable. Interviews were held over a period between October 2004 and March 2005.

The questionnaire which was used for the Study is available from the Consultants (see contact details at end).

**Glossary – a description of some of the terms and acronyms used throughout the report.**

Term or acronym	Description
Refugee and asylum-seeker	The majority of those who are destitute are technically asylum-seekers, or asylum-seekers whose claims for asylum have failed. We have however used the term 'refugees and asylum-seekers' throughout the report to cover all those who find themselves destitute in this context. Some have in fact been granted refugee status but don't know it.
End-of-Process	Those asylum-seekers who have exhausted all the avenues to pursue their asylum claim which has been turned down.
NASS	The National Asylum Support System (part of the Home Office)
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
NACAB	National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux
MRC	Midlands Refugee Council
ASIRT	Asylum Support and Immigration Resource Team
CARM	Campaigning for Asylum-seekers, Refugees and Media

## Example of Recording form used in Leicester

January 2005  
Dear Colleague,

I am writing to you as a partner agency of the Voluntary Sector and Multi Agency Forums, to invite you to take part in a survey of destitute refugees and asylum seekers in Leicester. You may recall recent discussions on this issue at previous meetings following which members of the Voluntary Sector Forum agreed to monitor the numbers over a month period in early 2005. The strategy group of the Multi Agency forum has also been working to ensure that destitution remains a priority on the Leicester strategy for New Arrivals currently being developed with the Leicester Partnership.

The dates for this survey have been agreed as running from January 17th – February 18th to try and give us a full picture of the extent of destitution in Leicester. I want to urge you to involve as many people as possible in your organisation to participate in this monitoring. Destitution amongst asylum seekers and refugees is set to continue to be a problem in 2005 and many agencies and forums around the country have highlighted this as a priority campaigning area. We have also had an interest in seeing the results of our survey from partners in Birmingham and nationally and it looks like our survey will be a pioneering attempt in the UK to try and assess the numbers affected in a particular region.

This form has been developed by a number of Voluntary Sector partners and we hope that it will be a useful and practical way to gather the information. We have consulted widely with forum members to ensure that it is effective. If you have some difficulty with the information we are collecting, please try and gather as much information as possible and continue with the survey, any comments we will gratefully receive for the evaluation at the end of the period. Some organisations that people go to for help have been listed on the form as we believe these to be the organisations that provide a high level of help to destitute clients. If you feel that your organisation should have been listed, please accept our apologies and let us know.

I enclose 4 numbered monitoring forms and a stamped addressed envelope for your use. If you require further forms please photocopy as necessary or contact me for more copies. We have also emailed a copy of the final form to all members of the Multi Agency Forum prior to the survey commencing. Please return all forms as soon as the survey period has ended, if possible by 25th February but at the latest by 4th March. If you did not use the monitoring forms, please return them to me in the envelope or email me at \_\_\_\_\_ so that I can be sure that we have collated all the forms.

We have tried to find a suitable confidential way of identifying clients so that we can assess how many different people are affected. We are aiming to do this through a client's date of birth. Please check that your client is happy to give this particular information, as well as general consent to record their personal circumstances of destitution that the form asks. We have also asked for an anonymous case reference although this information is not essential. It may help you to assess whether a client has visited more than once over the month. The form has an explanation on the reverse for each column, please ask those who will be using the form to familiarise themselves with these in advance of using the form.

On behalf of the Voluntary Sector Forum, many thanks for participating in this survey.



EXAMPLE FORM:

<p>AGENCY USE: NO OF REPEAT VISITS</p>	<p>At the end of the month, if you are able to, please assess how many times the same person came back to you so that we can identify the number of repeat cases.</p>											
<p>WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT?</p>	<p>Please note down, if they are happy to give this information, where they slept last night.</p>											
<p>REASON FOR DESTITUTION</p>	<p>If known, please identify the reason for destitution as follows:  <b>A</b> = New arrival - not yet in system, <b>B</b> = Failed section 55, <b>C</b> = Fully determined failed asylum seekers or not initiated new legal proceedings, <b>D</b> = Home Office (IND or NASS) or Mainstream services administrative errors or delay, <b>E</b> = Non - priority housing group  <i>Refugee = F = Other / Not known</i></p>											
<p>RISK ASSESSMENT</p>	<p>Please carry out a risk assessment on this person:  <b>1</b> = Low level of risk, receiving some community support.  <b>2</b> = Moderate risk, destitution is having an obvious effect on their well-being (health and ability to access resources for support,  <b>3</b> = High vulnerability, no support mechanisms, poor health and personal circumstances, probably rough sleeping.</p>											
<p>DEPENDENTS</p>	<p>Are they responsible for any children or adults other than themselves?  Please give a number of additional people.</p>											
<p>OTHER SUPPORT IN MONITORING PERIOD</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="779 264 1361 440"> <tr> <td data-bbox="1272 264 1361 440">OTHER</td> <td data-bbox="1272 440 1361 1372" rowspan="7"> <p>If the place or organisations where they have been getting support is not listed, please write the name here.</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="1160 264 1272 440">FRIENDS</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="1048 264 1160 440">FAITH</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="936 264 1048 440">RASAP</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="824 264 936 440">LASS</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="712 264 824 440">TOC H</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="600 264 712 440">RA</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="488 264 600 440">LWP</td> <td data-bbox="488 440 600 1372" rowspan="7"> <p>Please tick whichever agency has also been seen for assistance since the monitoring period started. It is NOT whether they have ever visited this agency before but whether they have also received assistance between the period 17th Jan – 18<sup>th</sup> Feb  <b>RCO</b> = Refugee Community Organisation,  <b>BRC</b> = British Red Cross  <b>LWP</b> Leicester Welcome Project (Welcome &amp; Women's),  <b>RA</b> = Refugee Action,  <b>TOC H</b> = St Margaret's Day Centre,  <b>LASS</b> = Leicester Aids Support Services,  <b>RASAP</b> = Rasap project at Racial Equality Council,  <b>FAITH</b> = Faith group support,  <b>FRIENDS</b> = Friends &amp; family.</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="376 264 488 440">BRC</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="264 264 376 440">RCO</td> </tr> </table>	OTHER	<p>If the place or organisations where they have been getting support is not listed, please write the name here.</p>	FRIENDS	FAITH	RASAP	LASS	TOC H	RA	LWP	<p>Please tick whichever agency has also been seen for assistance since the monitoring period started. It is NOT whether they have ever visited this agency before but whether they have also received assistance between the period 17th Jan – 18<sup>th</sup> Feb  <b>RCO</b> = Refugee Community Organisation,  <b>BRC</b> = British Red Cross  <b>LWP</b> Leicester Welcome Project (Welcome &amp; Women's),  <b>RA</b> = Refugee Action,  <b>TOC H</b> = St Margaret's Day Centre,  <b>LASS</b> = Leicester Aids Support Services,  <b>RASAP</b> = Rasap project at Racial Equality Council,  <b>FAITH</b> = Faith group support,  <b>FRIENDS</b> = Friends &amp; family.</p>	BRC	RCO
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BRC												
RCO												
<p>CLIENT'S ASSESSMENT OF LENGTH OF DESTITUTION PERIOD</p>		<p>Please ask the client how long they think they have been destitute, it is important that we record what their assessment has been.</p>										
<p>1<sup>ST</sup> VISIT?</p>		<p>If this was the first time that the client visited the agency with a destitution problem during this monitoring period, please tick here. It is NOT asking if it is the first time the client has ever visited the agency.</p>										
<p>DATE OF BIRTH</p>		<p>Their date of birth, if they are happy to give this information. This may help us more accurately assess individual numbers.</p>										
<p>AGENCY CASE REFERENCE</p>		<p>This is the agency's individual system of identifying clients. This monitoring is confidential so anonymous identification will be ideal.</p>										
<p>DATE OF VISIT</p>	<p>This is the date when the client visits the agency with a destitution problem.</p>											

## Stakeholders interviewed

A total of 65 people were interviewed for the study. As well the people listed below, 28 refugees and asylum-seekers were interviewed, either individually or in focus groups. Many of these people were destitute at the time of the interview or had been in the recent past. Their names have been withheld.

First Name	Surname	Position	Organisation
Adrian	Randall		Birmingham City Council
Akram			Iranian Self-help group
Bhopinder	Basi		B-MAG
Cathy	Stevenson		British Red Cross Leicester
Chris	Owen		RESTORE
Dave	Forster		Birmingham City Mission
Dave	Stamp		Birmingham City Council
David			Elmwood United Reformed Church
David	Barnes		West Midlands Consortium for Asylum-seekers and refugees
Deborah	Hennessy		Midlands Refugee Council
Farhana	Sheikh		West Midlands Consortium for Asylum-seekers and refugees
Gethen	Davies		Amnesty International
Guy	Cirhuza	Destitution Worker	British Red Cross
Howard	Saunders		Steering Group
Jackie	Graham		St. Martins
Jacky	Embrey		RESTORE
Jenny	Phillimore		Birmingham University Urban Studies Centre
Joe	Bailey	Community Worker	Salvation Army
Bishop John	Austin	Bishop of Aston	
Lisa	Goodson	Research Fellow	Centre for Urban and Regional Studies The University of Birmingham
Sister Margaret	Walsh		Brushstrokes
Mike	Murkin		St. Martins
Muhammad	Imran	Education and Community Projects Officer	Islamic Relief
Nigel	Bennett		Fireside
Pat	Smith	Services Manager	British Red Cross
Penny	Walker		Coventry Peace House
Philip	Williams	West Midlands Regional Manager	Refugee Council
Representative			Birmingham City Police
Richard	Stanforth		Individual
Richard	Sudworth		Sparkalive
Richard	Becher		Elmwood United Reformed Church
Richard and Ruth	Tetlow		St Johns and St. Peters
Shari	Brown		RESTORE
Suzanne	Bisani		New Communities Network

## **Appendix 1 - Notes from the focus group discussion on asylum seekers and destitution, held on 12<sup>th</sup> March in the Albert Hall, Birmingham.**

**Context:** This one-off focus group was set up as part of the short study into destitution of asylum seekers undertaken by Nick Scott Flynn and Richard Malfait and commissioned by 'Restore' in Birmingham. The aim of the occasion was to enable destitute (or formerly destitute) asylum-seekers to feed their experiences and views into the study and for this to supplement and be recorded alongside the experiences and views of other stakeholders as recorded in the Final Report for the study. Seventeen asylum-seekers (14 men and 3 women) took part in the group, all of whom were currently or had recently been destitute and not in receipt of NASS, Social Service or other forms of statutory support. Members of the steering group for the study and the consultant were also present.

**Ground Rules:** All participants were assured that no personal identifying information would be recorded or included in reports or public correspondence. Participants were invited to offer a first name (not necessarily their real name) when contributing to the discussion.

**Process:** Participants were welcomed and thanked for accepting the invitation to take part. Questions and responses were translated into French and English to assist participants who were less confident in communicating in English. The discussion was based around the following 3 questions:

What has been your story since arriving in the UK?  
How have you managed to survive from day to day since becoming destitute?  
What would help you or other destitute asylum seekers?

### ***SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT CONTRIBUTIONS***

Participants contributed views and relayed their personal stories on a voluntary basis. The following bullet points provide a summary:

**Male, from the Democratic Republic of Congo:**

My country didn't have an election for 43 years.  
We are not here as tourists!  
We left everything behind to come here for refuge.  
I was imprisoned and shot in the stomach.  
My dad was a diplomat and had to help to get me out of the country.  
Dictators came to replace dictators.  
I've never wanted to be an asylum seeker.  
My country used to welcome others who were in trouble and needed protection (outside DRC).  
I have lost 4 members of my family at home since I came here – they buried my dad 2 days before my appeal (un-successful).  
It seems like a nightmare since I have come here.  
I had some Social Service support but have been living without electricity or gas before this in November and December.  
I have also lived with friends who have helped me when they can.  
I have been getting some support from the Sycamore Centre.

If I could get to Canada now I could integrate (language).  
My solicitor has let me down (that's why I am destitute).  
My application and appeal has been rejected – but if I am sent home or volunteer to go I will be killed. I have to get to Canada somehow.  
Being here and in this situation has made me ill - I need to find a psychiatrist to help.

**Male, half Congolese and half Burundian:**

I had NASSS support until November 2004.  
Then I lost the support of my solicitor – I had to ask Social Service to get me a Solicitor. They sent me to ASIRT.  
I was trying to make myself understood in English (but couldn't very well).  
I have had no support since November apart from some money from BMAG.  
I met someone who sent me to the Red Cross and they tried to see how to help me (but couldn't).  
I have survived by sleeping in a restaurant and have depended on friends to give me some food.  
At the moment I can only take a shower outside.  
I need some accommodation.  
If I could at least have the right to work I would be able to support myself.  
It is too dangerous for me to go home (even though the UK government wants me to go).

**Female, country not specified:**

My story is similar to the others.  
I lost my support and was evicted from NASS accommodation in January.  
Since January I have been staying a few days at friends' houses and the moving on.  
The Red Cross have advised me to go to BMAG for a small grant.  
It is so stressful to have to go and beg.  
I don't know how long I can make my BMAG money last – maybe 2 weeks?  
It would help if I could have permission to work until I can go back home.  
I need an operation now (but can't have it).  
I have lost all my confidence.  
It is very hard to get advice – if you can't work and earn, you can't pay for legal advice.  
Many solicitors are not very genuine in their representation – sometimes it might be better to represent yourself.  
I don't know how it will end or how I will survive in the future.  
At least allow us to work.

**Male, from Zimbabwe:**

I came in 2002 but my asylum application has been refused.  
I have worked illegally for a friend to survive and have been staying with him.  
I am not feeling well anymore (since being here).  
I went to the Sycamore Centre with my child but they just sent me to Social Services.  
I was not helped by the system to explain my story properly (interpreting).  
I just need somewhere to sleep – at least for my children if not for me.  
The problem is not so much the end decision on asylum - it is more the amount of time it takes for the decision to be made. The waiting (and surviving) is so hard.  
I was in a better situation in Zimbabwe than I am here (even though I was in danger).

When asked why he wouldn't or couldn't go home (now that he is at end of asylum process) Thomas replied:

I would go home if I could – but now they would know that I left the country to seek asylum and that makes it very dangerous for me. I would be a target.

**Male country not specified:**

I did go home (assisted by Immigration). The UK government promised to help me return successfully and I believed them. But in reality they put me in lot of danger (by drawing attention to me, lack of discretion & sensitivity on documents etc). I signed to say I would return and trusted them with my safety – but then they treated me like an animal.

They used false documents that were easy to spot by the authorities.

They thought that once I was gone I wouldn't come back – so they didn't care whether they put me in danger.

**Male, from Afghanistan:**

My story is similar to many others.

I lost my NASS support when my asylum claim was rejected.

Now I'm sleeping in New Street Station most nights. Other nights I sleep in a Church.

I've now got mental health problems.

My mother and father are dead and I have no other relatives at home.

My case has been dismissed.

I was 19 when I got here (21 now?) and I've lost a lot of weight.

I need somewhere to sleep.

**Female, country not specified:**

I have been in prison (detention?) here for 8 months – but I didn't steal or do anything wrong. It was for claiming asylum.

I have now been destitute for about 6 months.

My friends have helped me with places to stay and food.

The Red Cross have been very helpful for me.

I am diabetic and being homeless makes it hard to look after myself.

I was trying unsuccessfully for a long time to find a solicitor that will help me but they all want money.

My last solicitor did not focus enough on my case – they did the work for the money not for me. They wouldn't provide a translator and it was hard to explain myself in poor English. The time limits for my case (appeal?) were missed.

Everyone thinks we are criminals – but the biggest criminals are solicitors who take the case just for the money.

I have to stay because going back home worries me more than staying here (even with no rights or support).

Now I am making a fresh asylum application but there are no guarantees.

**General comments and contributions:**

Most present agreed with the comment of one contributor that they were often perceived as criminals and treated so by the system (for example having to report each Friday to the police).

With all the bad press I don't want to stay here – but I can't go back to my own country.

I have to report monthly to an Immigration Officer and when I asked to come on a different day (a one off request) I was told, "you don't tell me what to do, I tell you!"

I overheard an old woman in the Post Office queue complain about asylum seekers taking everything – I was embarrassed/ashamed. The media creates such a bad image.

We have a very low self-esteem because of how we are treated and perceived. When they see your face they don't see an asylum seeker.

One participant estimated about 500 people sleeping rough in Birmingham – another felt this was an underestimate.

Many people have been to ASIRT when solicitors have closed cases. Many times a case is closed before completion (time limits?). When this happens it is very hard to find a new solicitor.

Solicitors often don't research and prepare for our asylum cases properly.

It's not possible to have confidence in the solicitors.

I applied for asylum 25 years ago and am all right now (status) – but at times I have been afraid of my own shadow.

### **One wish, the key message**

As the session drew to a close, each participant was asked to name one thing that would make a difference to his or her situation (accepting that asylum application decisions and Government rules could not be changed by Restore). The individual's responses were:

12 x I want to be able to work and support myself (and family).

2 x I would wish for a good solicitor.

I wish for somewhere to live with my family.

I really need somewhere to live.

I want the system to be neutral / fair.

## **Appendix 2 - Report of the Conference on Destitution of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Birmingham, held on Friday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2005 at the British Red Cross Offices.**

In 2004-5 the Church Urban Fund and Tudor Trust granted funds for a short study on 'Destitution of Asylum Seekers in Birmingham'. The purpose of the study was to gain greater clarity about the extent of destitution in the City, learn more about how people without statutory support are coping, and explore what possible responses could be made to the situation.

This conference was organised to enable a wider group of interested parties to both hear about the study and take the issue further. Specifically it aimed to enable participants to:

- \* Share an overview of the plight of destitute asylum-seekers and refugees in Birmingham and further input into the Study.
- \* Hear about and discuss the main findings of the study on destitution in the City.
- \* Discuss and decide upon possible courses of action to address the issue.
- \* Agree priorities and next steps.
- \* Seek commitments to viable action.

These notes seek to provide a summary of the main areas covered during the conference including bullet points of the views and ideas expressed by participants during working groups and within the general discussion of the day. The discussions and working groups were preceded by the presentation of the main findings and recommendations arising from the short study 'Destitution of Asylum Seekers in Birmingham' that was undertaken by Nick Scott-Flynn and Richard Malfait during 2004 and 2005. *Finalised copies of the report produced as part of the study are available from Restore.*

The conference was sponsored by the Tudor Trust, the Refugee Strategy Network (Voluntary Sector Organisations Working with Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the West Midlands) and supported by the CARM (Campaigning - Asylum Seekers/ Refugees - Media) network. Asirt, Amnesty International, the British Red Cross and Restore were principally involved in organising the day.

### ***Purpose of these notes***

As there was a strong desire from participants to see concrete actions arising from the conference, the following write-up begins with a summary of the key action points agreed. These are then followed by the notes from the rest of the day, including the smaller workshops held on specific topics. These notes also contain recommendations with indications of who offered to take issues forward. In several instances there is no key person or organisation identified to do this, but it is important that the ideas remain on the table as it were.

All of these notes together are meant to both maintain a record of the views and ideas expressed on this important issue throughout the day as well as provide a tool to help those taking forward specific actions. Several ideas were both aspirational and ambitious and they may take some time to achieve. They are however vital as a beacon to guide all of those working towards alleviating the plight of destitute asylum-seekers and refugees. The outrage expressed by so many participants at the injustice of the position of destitute asylum-seekers was matched by a very strong commitment and energy to do something about it.

<b>MAIN ACTIONS AGREED</b>	<b>SUMMARY OF FOLLOW UP COMMITMENTS</b>	<b>VOLUNTEERS?</b>
<p>Setting up a Co-ordination Working Group and working towards a 'Destitution Support Coordinator' post.</p>	<p>The majority of conference participants favoured the setting up of new / distinct group (to be temporary at this stage) to help quickly achieve better coordination of destitution support services in Birmingham. A new representative working group will therefore be set up with the following remit:</p> <p>To look into and progress a consultation, role development and fundraising process for a prospective 'Destitution Support Coordinator' type post – post title and employing organisation to be agreed.</p>	<p>Nigel Williams (Refugee Council) to call first meeting to bring together the key players, particularly representatives of other networks.</p>
<p>Setting up an agency wide 'self monitoring survey' on Birmingham destitution (e.g. like in Leicester).</p>	<p>Conference participants supported a destitution monitoring survey based on the Leicester model to be taken forward in Birmingham as soon as possible - the planned working group may also play a lead role in progressing the initiative (subject to further discussion &amp; capacity).</p>	<p>Nigel Williams, Gethen Davies (Amnesty International)</p>
<p>Supporting and taking part in a monitoring exercise (as above).</p>	<p>Strong support by most participants was expressed in principle to help develop and take part in such a survey.</p>	<p>All participants.</p>
<p>Destitution Support 'Service Information Directory'.</p>	<p>Strong support was expressed for an easily accessible and comprehensive database or list of what services and support is available in Birmingham, who they are provided by, how they can be accessed and referred to, contact information etc.</p> <p>All recognised that such a resource needs an investment of time to set it up and subsequently to maintain it (this could potentially become part of a 'Destitution Support Coordinators' role).</p> <p>Restore have a version of such of a tool that could simply be updated and expanded at this stage. Strong support was expressed for this and agencies were invited to forward service information for inclusion. Restore are happy to follow through but need extra support. Pat Smith (Red Cross) will liaise with Restore to progress.</p>	<p>Pat Smith (Red Cross) Shari Brown (Restore) Potentially staff and volunteers from Restore and Red Cross.</p>
<p>Approaching Trade Unions to encourage interest in the issue and</p>	<p>There was strong support for encouraging more involvement and advocacy regarding destitution and asylum seekers by Trade Unions. Dave Stamp offered to make contact</p>	<p>Dave Stamp (ASIRT)</p>

potential advocacy.	with local representatives and explore further.	
Co-ordination of provision of emergency accommodation.	There are several people currently offering hospitality to destitute asylum-seekers. It was suggested that this could be better co-ordinated to help spread the provision of this vital role and avoid too much pressure being applied on some individual hosts.	Gethen Davies volunteered to take this forward.

**Summary of the rest of the conference**

WHAT DO YOU HOPE FOR FROM TODAY?  
(Participants were asked their expectations of the day and made the following comments)

Commitments to action Understanding issues More experience Practical support on finance Political engagement Support & finding solicitors Extent and effect of destitution on families Where to refer to and other sources of support More coordination and action Knowledge of networks	Learn more about problems A sense of hope Understanding needs Concrete actions What can be done? More info on access to services Meeting needs of children and families Cross referral network Achievable actions to be taken forward Increase in quality of advice re accommodation
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MORNING SESSION

Following on from the Report Presentation, participants broke into groups to discuss the following questions:

- What do you think are the priority issues and needs regarding destitution of asylum seekers in Birmingham?
- What would you like to add to the report from the Short Study?
- What can we take forward?

The following is a summary of the responses:

What do you think are the priority issues and needs regarding destitution of asylum seekers in Birmingham?

\* We need to properly survey or map what is going on (i.e. numbers of destitute, circumstances, duration etc.) **(Gethin Davies offered to take this forward)**  
 \* We need hard data – could we all apply the form developed by Refugee Action and the Red Cross in Leicester?

- \* Clearer categories of destitution needed - different issues need different solutions.
- \* We need a good map / database of what support is available, where, for who and how to access - but this needs updating regularly and who would be responsible?
- \* We need a coordinating network or body to better coordinate our different responses to the situation.
- \* We could get funding for a network coordinator - at present we lack time / capacity to coordinate ourselves (**Nigel Williams offered to coordinate?**)
- \* The numbers reported seem low (Refugee Council reports a sharp increase since January this year).
- \* We need to encourage / pursue the establishment of sustainable funds to assist destitution crisis.
- \* The dialogue with faith groups / trade unions etc. needs developing more. (**Dave Stamp offered to help contact Trade Unions**)
- \* Campaigning work with media / trade unions etc. (but there are sensitivities around this).
- \* Improvement of legal provision essential – how do we do this?
- \* Campaigning & awareness – we are all advocates & must act as such in our communities – appoint asylum-seeker and refugee awareness officer (FT).
- \* Campaigning against legal cuts needed.
- \* The shortage of solicitors and bad practice needs addressing – we should all make complaints to Legal Service Commission when there is poor representation.
- \* There is a need for better training for solicitors - but this costs and who is responsible?
- \* Information about useful legal precedents and cases needs to be available and shared.
- \* More accommodation for destitute asylum-seekers is needed.
- \* More involvement of mainstream organisations such as Social Service Departments, Shelter etc. needed.
- \* More involvement of communities needed (both host and refugee).
- \* More involvement and awareness of MPs needed (could we organise a meeting?).
- \* Need to influence Government policy e.g. on 'right to work' or support for those who can't) – it was noted that statutory services and local MPs had been invited to attend the conference but were not represented on the day.
- \* Increase awareness of larger community of issue (**John offered to raise issue in WORCS**)
- \* There are health & safety and legality issues / risks in hosting and providing emergency accommodation.
- \* Refugee / asylum seeker destitution needs recognition and addressing as a housing issue (not just an asylum seeker issue) – we should involve other non refugee agencies (i.e. Shelter etc.)
- \* We need to be able to demonstrate the size of the problem and its housing nature with good sound data.

What is missing in the Report so far, what would you like to add / emphasise?

- \* Definition of homelessness is missing. A limited and clear definition is critical – we cannot address the issue if don't know exactly what it is (or what we think it is).
- \* More statistics and 'hard' information is needed – we suggest 'Leicester' type forms be sent around to all orgs.
- \* Are Iraqi Kurds represented in the figures? (Nearly 1500 failed asylum-seekers have been in the Refugee Council since January!). This is a big increase since Refugee Council were interviewed for the Study in December)
- \* Sleeping on kitchen floor is not 'housing'. Statutory agencies need to recognise that there is a major homeless crisis in this city, and that there is widespread statutory overcrowding. A potential disaster waiting to happen.

- \* Creation of underclass caused by the state policy of enforced destitution is de facto apartheid.
- \* Sexual exploitation of vulnerable women is taking place.
- \* Unscrupulous individuals and agencies are exploiting many asylum seekers in a desperate situation (i.e. not just women) – there is a link to the issue of illegal working (e.g. cockle pickers).
- \* There are longstanding legal, insurance and health and safety obstacles to providing emergency accommodation and shelter.
- \* Need to emphasise that state policy is criminalising people – raises community safety issues and that there is a cost to Local Authorities incurred by not supporting care needs.
- \* We need for the issues to be reported in a sensitive way (especially local media).

What can we take forward?

- \* Ask what the Government is planning to do about the issue of illegal work / workplace exploitation?
- \* Promote issues of application for work permits.
- \* The City Council needs to be lobbied about the situation of statutory overcrowding.
- \* Could we set up a Drop In centre? (It could coordinate local responses; provide information, a hot meal etc.).
- \* Coordinate / contribute to campaigning in the community to combat demonisation of asylum-seekers.
- \* All of us being more involved.
- \* Better coordination and networking of information for help providers and for clients (signposting).
- \* Pushing for better quality and availability of legal advice.
- \* Coordinating and cohesively pushing politically for the right to health, accommodation etc.
- \* Development of more 'hosting' accommodation and money supported by better coordination and information provision for referring purposes (e.g. to help avoid or deal with 5 p.m. Fridays referral problems and to enable 'move on' possibilities).

## AFTERNOON SESSION

During the afternoon sessions, participants joined one of the following workshops:

- Hospitality & Accommodation
- Co-ordination in the City
- Section 4 (Sections 9 and 10)
- Social Care and Health Needs
- Volunteers and needs of staff
- Campaigning

Output from each workshop is summarised below:

## COORDINATION IN THE CITY

- There is urgent need for coordination of the agencies (here today) as a result of current gaps and duplication.
- Coordination would enable: regular contact between groups' e.g. via e-group; sharing of information regarding resources; supporting coherent action or direction for action; information/provision sharing; directory, training, and websites development / maintenance.
- A funded Destitution Coordinator post is essential for the above – but to be employed by whom?
- A Coordinator would spearhead coordination of work, responses to policy, provide a named focal point – service an umbrella network linking existing groups (e.g. regional Strategy Group) / CARM (+ volunteers).
- Specific areas of coordination (role and remit) would need to be very clear (working for the network not just the 'employing agency').
- Role could include fundraising support, coordination of statistics recording & research.

**Setting up a small working group** - We propose a small working group be set up to put together action proposal on areas arising out of today (e.g. could include fundraising for a Coordinator, coordination of more local research / monitoring, interim development / maintenance of the Restore service directory etc.). We need to identify named people to participate and a meeting date as quickly as possible (starting today!). This group could then consult and progress action towards getting a 'Coordinator' in post (liaising with Refugee Strategy Network, CARM, New Communities, MRC, Refugee Council etc. **Nigel Williams has volunteered to coordinate first meeting of the working group (will email invite and info).**

**Interim Information / Signposting Directory** – Restore already have a useful document with signposting information but this needs further development and routine maintenance (updating etc.). The prospective Coordinator could take this on in the future but meanwhile Pat at British Red Cross has offered to assist Restore in updating and circulating the current directory (maybe with a Red Cross volunteer).

## SECTION 4, 9 and 10

- We need to lobby for the right of asylum-seekers to work or be supported (e.g. the Bishop, MPs, British Association of Social Workers, voluntary organisations etc.)
- Section 4, 9 & 10 – these are human rights issues!
- The City Council should take more responsibility for providing support.
- Campaign on Section 10 is needed
- Collate or initiate research and raise awareness on economic benefits of asylum-seekers working.
- We could provide training to other groups and clients on making Section 4 applications.
- We need to agree and take forward action collectively and quickly.
- We should try and involve asylum-seekers in our organisations as interpreters (and volunteers?).

## SOCIAL CARE AND HEALTH NEEDS

- Asylum seekers experience high stress re: uncertainty both about their immigration status and lack of basic provision.
- Sexual health: There is particular concern regarding women with health needs.
- What are other agencies e.g. those working with sex workers – doing to address these concerns among asylum-seekers?
- As immigration legislation affecting asylum-seekers becomes increasingly draconian, health & social care workers are coming to see their role as the policing of someone's immigration status rather than the assessment of need.
- Educational and training role is needed to communicate such difficulties and issues with frontline statutory services – who's going to take this forward?
- Legislative guidance and knowledge needed to help people access their rights - agencies need to look for a case that's prime for Judicial Review (though difficulties arise because cases seldom reach JR).
- We need to cohesively challenge the myth of health tourism.
- We need to share information (or knowledge of websites & other sources) relating to pertinent legal judgements – e.g. Westminster appertaining to SSD responsibility.
- Shared awareness / advocacy needed on basic questions, for example:
- NHS – if someone has a health problem, where do they go?
- If they can access health care can they access prescription?
- Can they access A & E.?
- SSD reluctant to offer services to 'failed' asylum-seekers esp. if S has not been applied for – this still routinely needs strong advocacy.
- SSD are challenging definitions of destitution by saying that people are surviving with community support (e.g. sleeping on friends floors) – needs confident / informed advocacy.

## HOSPITALITY & ACCOMODATION

- Hospitality scheme could be further developed if volunteers can be found (but needs to be managed, coordinated, rota developed, training & support provided to hosts). **(Gethen Davies volunteered to take this forward).**
- Could B-MAG funds be made available to hosts, esp. refugee hosts?
- Could a Night-shelter be set up (model on Coventry Peace House)?
- Information and Signposting resource needed – i.e. giving up to date info on what's on offer.
- We should remind mainstream homelessness agencies of their radical roots! (And campaign on the issue of statutory overcrowding).
- We should lobby/consult Trade Unions (e.g. on illegal working issues) – **(Dave Stamp offered to follow up).**

## VOLUNTEER STAFF SUPPORT

When staff and volunteers are working with destitute clients, we need to ensure effective:

- Recruitment
- Training (tailored/appropriate/matching/inclusive, ongoing, accredited (?) relevant, shared between organisations?)

Issues discussed / point made:

- There is under funding of asylum-seekers advice and advocacy. This impacts the amount of support that can be offered by individual agencies (could we pool limited resources?).
- Use of volunteers is vitally important.
- Clients can very effectively be engaged as volunteers (and benefits are mutually shared) – but they have different needs. This needs recognising and responding to.
- Volunteers can and in fact are already contributing 'on the frontline'.
- Criminal Record Bureau checks (police checks) can take a long time (esp. for asylum-seekers & refugees) – they also have limited value for people who have not been in the UK long (i.e. with no UK convictions).
- Confidentiality /child protection issues need careful consideration at recruitment stage (volunteers and paid team members) and throughout subsequent management.
- Where do we get specialised training and how do we fund it? (could the Medical Foundation provide training around mental health issues?).
- Everyone's resources are usually in short supply (e.g. money, time, general capacity).
- Good supervision of staff and volunteers requires a realistic time commitment, empathetic and supportive qualities required in supervisor.

Recommendations for working with both volunteers and paid staff:

- Standardised, detailed, careful interviewing.
- Good induction & training.
- Good written procedures (re service provision & volunteer policy /practice).
- Structured, regular supervision.
- Professional counselling when necessary (even on the phone).
- Empathetic support from the team and a good supervisor.
- Regular, relevant, tailored training.
- Staff and volunteers commitment to attend training.
- Recognition of boundaries (for all).
- Job / role descriptions (for paid staff and volunteers respectively).
- Caseworker debriefs for staff and volunteers.
- Effective supervision.
- Emotional support.

For working with volunteers:

- ESOL support as needed.
- Recognising that the work is not for everyone (especially work with destitution).
- Volunteer shadowing of paid staff / experienced volunteers.
- 24 hour on call support for volunteers / staff working in community (i.e. telephone).
- Regular volunteer meetings.
- Volunteer expenses need to be paid immediately.
- Clear service and volunteer expectations from the beginning.

## **Contact details**

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