



Like any other child?

Children and families in the asylum process

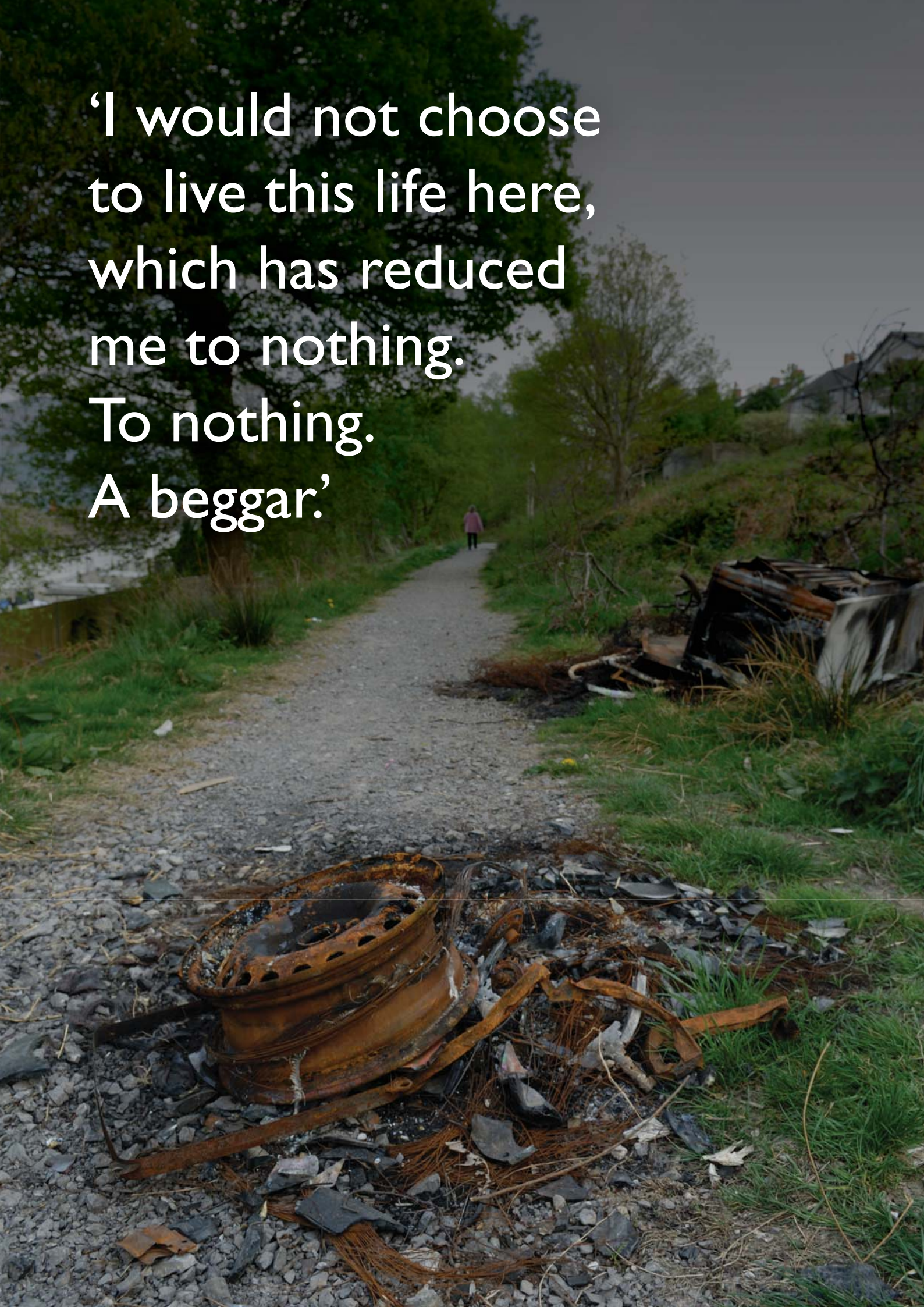
John Reacroft

BELIEVE IN CHILDREN



Barnardo's

‘I would not choose
to live this life here,
which has reduced
me to nothing.
To nothing.
A beggar.’



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John Reacroft

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Personal note

I met asylum-seeking families all over the UK during the research for this report. While I was in Glasgow I noticed that my hotel room overlooked the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre where three years previously I had a brief discussion with one of the world's most famous refugees, HH the Dalai Lama. This encounter had a profound impact on me. On that occasion the Dalai Lama had just given a public teaching to 9,000 people on 'Inner Peace, Outer Harmony'. I found myself reflecting on refugees' contributions to the world.

The model I was using to conduct interviews with families was devised by Professor Eugene Heimler and the recommendations were tested for their robustness using Sir Karl Popper's methodology. Both were refugees from the Holocaust.

That day I met several unknown asylum seekers who wanted to make their own contributions to society but who were not allowed to work while their asylum applications were being determined, despite this process taking years. This was something I was told again and again. Refugees, both famous and unknown, want to offer something to the societies which provide them with refuge. They should all have that opportunity.

John Reacroft
Principal Policy Officer
Barnardo's

Acknowledgements

Many people helped with the production of this report. First we would like to thank the 17 families who were interviewed. We have included 10 of their stories in the report, but have incorporated suggestions from all of them into the recommendations. We changed all the names of the families to preserve their anonymity. The families have told their stories in order to benefit others in similar situations. They deserve to be listened to.

People who helped and their organisations

We are extremely grateful for the feedback and discussion with colleagues at all stages of the research and in the development of recommendations. Views expressed in the report are not necessarily those of the individuals listed below or their organisations.

Syd Bolton, Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture; Laura Brownlees, Save the Children UK; Sarah Cutler, Refugee Council (England); Jane Dykins, Refugee Council (England); Nancy Kelley, Refugee Council (England); Louise King, Save the Children UK; Adrian Matthews, 11 MILLION – Office of the Children's Commissioner for England; Lisa Nandy, The Children's Society; Sylvia Potter, Copy editing and information services; Jill Rutter, Institute for Public Policy Research.

Barnardo's staff who contributed

This report is the result of a big team effort in Barnardo's and everyone listed below contributed towards the report.

Tam Baillie, David Bassom, Sarah Brody, Jenny Carnegie, Melonie Crusz, Betsan Evans, Jane Glover, Maggie Hamilton, Julie Harris, Lorraine Hart, Brook Hayes, Lesley Haywood-Singh, Brian Houston, Yvonne Huddart, Dustin Hutchinson, Andy James, Margaret Kelly, Carolyn Martin, Joan McGovern, Cathy McMahan, Juliet Ramage, Gloria Da Rocha, Anisha Sharma, Hannah Stott, Jackie Vining, Alison Webster, Suzanne Westbury, Alison Worsley.

Foreword



Reading the horrifying accounts in this report – and the sober analysis which accompanies them – three things are clear. First, asylum-seeking families come to the UK with high hopes for their future. They seek protection from a perilous past. But too often they find themselves facing abject poverty, racial harassment and demoralising uncertainty.

Second, they are often desperately keen to contribute to the communities where they are placed. They are keen to work and to pay their way. Often they are resourceful individuals with skills which would be of immense benefit to the UK. Their children are eager to learn and are highly motivated.

Third, this country should be able to treat more humanely the relatively small number of children and families who arrive in the UK to seek asylum. For contrary to what some say, we are not 'flooded' with asylum seekers. Asylum applications are currently

at a 15-year low – for which the Home Office deserves much credit – and taking into account the size of our population we come 12th of the 25 countries of the European Union in the numbers of applications received. We do not take more than our fair share of asylum-seeking families.

When Thomas Barnardo got to work in the harsh conditions of London in the 1860s he made it his business to turn no child away. Every child mattered to him. But 150 years later the shocking truth is that, despite all our assertions that every child matters, children in asylum-seeking families do not seem to matter to our society quite as much as others.

Barnardo's does not challenge the reality that not all families applying for asylum can be allowed to stay. Indeed – although some will be surprised at this – Barnardo's welcomes new procedures which mean many families will be returned to their country of origin more promptly. But when families are here awaiting decisions about their future they should be respected and their children protected, and they should be treated with dignity. Most importantly, the children of asylum seekers should always be treated as children first and asylum seekers second.

Martin Narey

Martin Narey
Chief Executive
Barnardo's

January 2008

Introduction

This report is about one of the UK's most marginalised groups – asylum-seeking and refugee children and families. Since 2002, we estimate more than 40,000 children have arrived or been born in the UK in asylum-seeking families. There could be over 100,000 in total caught up in a backlogged asylum system which includes cases going back more than 10 years (see section below for details). They have received little attention from policy makers. In dealing with their parents' asylum claims, we have largely ignored the needs of the children as children. One asylum-seeking mother asked why her disabled child couldn't be treated like any other child, which provided the title for our report.

These children should be treated as children first and asylum seekers or refugees second. They have all the same needs other children have. In addition, they are living in families which have experienced trauma, loss and displacement. Some of them face racial harassment in the UK. They live in temporary accommodation with no say about where they live or how long they will stay in an area, and no control over the conditions in which they have to live. Even if they get leave to remain, they can then spend years in temporary accommodation, or in unaffordable

and insecure private rented accommodation, usually the poorest quality available.

Asylum seekers are invariably very poor and live below the minimum benefits levels other households would receive, but the Government's pledge to halve the number of children in poverty by 2010–2011 and eradicate child poverty altogether by 2020 does not apply to children of asylum seekers.¹

Barnardo's has worked with large numbers of asylum-seeking families in London since before the Government's dispersal programme, which was established in 1999. Since the dispersal programme was introduced, Barnardo's services throughout the UK have been working with asylum-seeking families, offering support and assistance, including in some cases food parcels.

Asylum-seeking families from every part of the UK participated in this report and contributed their views to the recommendations we make. The stories of a small number of these families are told here. These stories illustrate the effects of asylum policy on children, from first arrival, through the asylum process and beyond the final asylum decision.

Asylum legislation over the past 15 years has increasingly restricted asylum seekers' access

The number of children involved

Over the past five years 47,300 dependents have sought asylum with their families (Bennet et al 2007). Around 81 per cent are under 18 so 38,300 are children (extrapolated from Bennet et al (2007) Summary Table). Families continue to have children after arriving in the UK. It is quite difficult to estimate the numbers of these accurately. To arrive at an approximation, we have assumed that this is at a similar rate to the average national birth rate for the rest of the population (11.74 per 1,000 average rate over the five years – see Table 1.1 Crude birth rate: all births per 1,000 population of all ages, in National Statistics, 2006). There have been 262,910 asylum applications over that period, an average of 52,582 a year so an average of 617 births year, 3,087 in total. We estimate that since 2002 there have been around 41,387 children in families seeking asylum in the UK.

The backlog

There is no agreement on how big the backlog is. The Government estimate is that there is a backlog of 400,000 to 450,000 electronic and paper records and the National Audit Office estimates that there are 283,500 unsuccessful asylum applicants who are still here (see Home Office, Border and Immigration Department, n.d.e). The Government does not think that the backlog of records equates to the number of asylum applicants. If we assume that the proportion of asylum seekers with children is roughly constant (based on 2005 figures, Bennet et al (2007) Summary Table, we have used 16 per cent as an estimate of the proportion of asylum applicants who are dependent children) and that asylum seekers have children at the same rate as the general population (based on National Statistics, 2006, Table 1.1 Crude birth rate: all births per 1,000 population of all ages, we have used 11.74 per 1,000 as an average rate) and we go back 10 years, then out of 400,000 asylum applications (the lowest estimate of the backlogged records) there could be around 111,000 child dependents (64,000 arriving with their families and 47,000 being born here).

to support, both while their application is being processed and if they are turned down and then classed as 'failed asylum seekers'. There have been six major pieces of legislation over the past 11 years, with the sixth, the UK Borders Act, receiving Royal Assent in October 2007. There have been some improvements; for example, we welcome the proposed code of practice *Keeping children safe from harm*,² which has been introduced by the UK Borders Act, but would still like to see more done to protect the interests of children seeking asylum with their families. The overall effect of asylum legislation has been to make it more difficult for families with children to have decent, or even tolerable lives. Children are living in increasing poverty and insecurity.

The UK Government has entered a reservation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, so that it does not apply to children subject to immigration control in the UK. All the UK Children's Commissioners and major children's voluntary organisations in the UK, including Barnardo's, urge the Government to withdraw this shameful reservation. The Westminster Government strap line 'Every Child Matters' is a deceit while such a reservation exists.

Asylum numbers in the UK are declining and, contrary to predictable but hysterical media reporting, the UK does not take more than its share. When the relative size of the domestic populations is taken into account, the UK ranks twelfth out of the 25 EU countries in terms of asylum seekers per head of population. In 2006, including dependents, there were 210,000 asylum applicants in the 25 member countries of the EU. Of these, 28,320 were in the UK, with fewer than 4,000 being families with children.³ By comparison, there were an estimated 591,000 long-term migrants who arrived to live in the UK in the same year.⁴ The numbers of asylum seekers have continued to

fall, and three-quarters of the way through 2007, they are running at seven per cent fewer than in 2006, the lowest level since 1992.⁵ Quite simply, we can afford to treat the relatively small number of children and families who arrive in the UK to seek asylum more humanely.



Summary of the report and recommendations

The New Asylum Model (NAM)

'Maria was five and a half at the time. She didn't understand what was happening. She was crying.' Naomi (interviewee one) speaking about her immigration interview and her daughter's distress on witnessing this.

'When my son hears a bang at the door he runs screaming from the room... Even at home sometimes when you are upstairs and he is downstairs, he will bring something upstairs. You ask him why he can't stay downstairs and he says he's scared.' Olivia (interviewee ten) describing the trauma her son Michael, age seven, experienced following the family being taken into detention at 5.30am, prior to deportation (which was later postponed).

Concern

Since March 2007 all new asylum applications have been processed using the New Asylum Model (NAM). Barnardo's welcomes the NAM procedures and believes they could provide a more compassionate approach to families and children.

The NAM has introduced several features which should improve the asylum process in the UK. Cases are determined much more quickly, which removes the terrible effects of prolonged uncertainty for families and children. The NAM has the potential to be a much fairer and more humane system, providing of course that the quality of decision making is not compromised by the speed of the process and steps are taken to ensure that families receive adequate legal advice and representation. Another welcome development is that under the NAM every new asylum case has a single case owner who is responsible for the applicant's case throughout the asylum process.

However, we do not think that this will be enough to protect children's interests. In order

to ensure that children are treated as children first and asylum seekers second and that their needs are addressed throughout the asylum process, we think that families with children who apply for asylum should be allocated specially trained case owners, as already happens for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Recommendation one

To give the responsibility for processing the cases of asylum-seeking families with children to specialised case owners; these case owners should receive training to enable them to address the needs of children throughout the asylum process.

The 'legacy' cases

'It has been so, so difficult for all of these years to imagine that we could be sent home to die.' Pauline (interviewee eight) who is a 'failed asylum seeker', but cannot return to her country of origin and has been in the UK for six years.

Concern

Although the NAM will deal much more quickly with new asylum cases, there remains a backlog. There is no agreement on how big this is. There could be 400,000 cases with around 111,000 child dependents which need to be resolved.⁶ We support the Government's aim to clear the backlog by 2011. In doing so, we urge the Government to take account of the needs of children who have settled in the UK and who may have spent years attending schools here, or have been born here. Many of these children will be unable to cope with deportation to countries they can barely remember, or in which they may never have lived.

Recommendation two

In clearing the asylum backlog, the Government should take into account the needs of children who have spent several years living in the UK, or who have been born here.

The right to work

'You have no right to work. You just sit home waiting for benefits and you can't do anything... I became sick and started treatment with antidepressants.' Serena (interviewee five), who was not allowed to work for four years.

Concern

Most asylum seekers in the UK are denied permission to work and as a result of the asylum backlog many have waited years for decisions on their cases. These families want to support themselves and contribute towards society and the UK economy. Many of them have skills which would be of benefit. It makes very little sense to force them to remain on very low levels of state support. The poverty they experience combined with feelings of worthlessness can make it very difficult for parents to provide happy and secure homes for their children. If asylum seekers were allowed to work, we would expect to see improved family life, more opportunities for children, and families who are able to regain their pride and work their way out of poverty.

Recommendation three

To allow asylum seekers to apply for permission to work if they have waited more than six months for their application to be finally determined and where the delay in reaching a decision cannot be attributed to the applicant.

Asylum seekers' support

'We are among the poorest of the poor... we live on very little money, the bare minimum.' Pauline (interviewee eight).

'Why can't she just be treated like any other child?' Mary (interviewee three) speaking about her daughter Ann, who has cerebral palsy.

Concern

Asylum seekers are supported by a benefits and housing agency called Asylum Support, which is part of the Border and Immigration Agency in the Home Office and runs parallel to the benefits and housing systems used by the general population. Adult asylum seekers receive 70 per cent and children 100 per cent of standard Income Support levels. The 70 per cent rate is intended to reflect the fact that asylum seekers in Asylum Support accommodation do not pay utility bills. However, asylum seekers who are not living in Asylum Support accommodation may be responsible for their own utility bills and some asylum seekers receive subsistence-only support, with nothing towards the costs of their accommodation or utility bills. We believe that asylum seekers should be paid the same level of benefits as other claimants and simply be responsible for their own utility bills.

Asylum-seeking children and families are only entitled to limited additional payments and not to the full range of benefits paid to other families such as Child Benefit, Educational Maintenance Allowance or the Family Premium, which together could give a family with one child an extra £64.00 a week. If they are looking after children with special needs, asylum-seeking families are also not entitled to benefits such as Disability Living Allowance or the Disabled Child Premium which can be paid to other families; even at the lowest payable rates, these allowances would give a family with one disabled child an extra £80 a week in addition to the other benefits.⁷ These benefits

are an acknowledgement of the extra costs of caring for a disabled child; asylum-seeking families also need to meet these extra costs.

Benefit levels in the UK are modest, necessitating many UK families' existence at well below the Government's own poverty line. To pay benefits to asylum-seeking families at below these modest levels is cruel and forces some families into severe poverty. We believe that asylum-seeking children and families should be able to access the same level of benefits that other families with children receive.

Recommendation four

To give all asylum seekers entitlement to the same benefits as other claimants in the UK, or to levels of support equivalent to this, including all allowances for children.

Concern

Section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004 allows the withdrawal of asylum support from failed asylum-seeking families. Although there are no plans to implement this provision widely, we are very concerned that the New Asylum Model allows case owners to use section 9 at their discretion and suspend asylum support. We think that it is both inhumane and ineffective to use, as tools of asylum policy, the threat of destitution and of taking children into care because their parents cannot then support them. Section 9 should be repealed.

Recommendation five

To repeal section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004.

Concern

It is demeaning that some asylum-seeking families who are 'failed asylum seekers' can be paid subsistence in the form of vouchers, rather than cash. These vouchers have to be used in specific shops. Families can end up

travelling long distances, although they have no cash to pay for transport, to supermarkets which do not always have the items they need. They then have the humiliation of having their shopping checked to see that they have only bought allowed items. We think that subsistence for families with children should always be paid in cash.

Recommendation six

To end the practice of providing some asylum-seeking families with vouchers instead of cash benefits.

Asylum seekers' accommodation

'When I moved into the temporary accommodation, I couldn't believe I was in the UK. The house was infested with cockroaches, there was no heating, and there was bad dampness.' Mary (interviewee three).

General concerns

Asylum-seeking families with children are housed in temporary accommodation while their asylum applications are determined. Life in temporary accommodation can be very difficult and children often do not have a decent family life as a result. There are five areas where we recommend improvements:

- to the dispersal process
- to reduce racial harassment
- to the standards of accommodation
- to the stability of accommodation
- to the process after leave to remain is granted.

Dispersal accommodation

'I received a letter from NASS⁸ giving me a week's notice to say you are being moved to Yorkshire... In the letter they sent they said that you are not allowed to say "no".' Mary (interviewee three), who was caring for a disabled child and wanted to stay in Manchester where she knew someone who could help her.

'The reason I stayed with my niece was really my mental state. I needed support and I felt much better staying with someone I knew.' Carol (interviewee nine), who wanted to remain in London, but was dispersed to Glasgow. Her daughter, Diana, had four changes of school in four years as a result of this.

Concern

Following the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 asylum seekers began to be dispersed away from London and the South East to every part of the UK, except Northern Ireland.⁹ The majority of refugees and asylum seekers remain in London, with up to 500,000 in the capital.¹⁰ Whilst accepting that it may be very difficult to accommodate families in London and the South East, we think that there are many legitimate reasons why families might prefer one dispersal area over another – for example they may have family or friends, or members of their own communities in particular locations. If a family has a reason for preferring one dispersal area over another or compelling reasons for staying in London, they should be able to have this taken into consideration when it is decided where to house them. At present, families get one offer of dispersal accommodation on a 'take it or leave it' basis. If they refuse, they receive no support to find or pay for housing.

Recommendation seven

To allow asylum-seeking families with children a right to express reasonable preference about the regional location of their accommodation before dispersal and for this preference to be taken into account.

Racial harassment

'There was a lot of trouble. People outside throwing stones, writing on the walls telling us "get out of here". I lived there for two years.' Carol (interviewee nine) describing what happened to her and her daughter when they were dispersed from London to Glasgow.

Concern

Some families experience very serious problems as a result of racial harassment, which can occur in both the dispersal regions and in other areas. Several of our interviewees were housed in areas which had a record of such harassment and we think that this should be a consideration when deciding where to house asylum-seeking families.

Recommendation eight

Not to house asylum-seeking families with children in areas where there is a history of harassment or reason to believe their presence will aggravate community tensions.

Standards of accommodation

'There are nine families in this house, with one kitchen and three bathrooms.' Meiying (interviewee two), who lives with her son and eight other households, all with children, in a hostel.

Concern

Many asylum-seeking families are housed in very poor quality accommodation. We would like to see the temporary accommodation used to house asylum-seeking families with children meeting the same minimum quality and managed to at least the same standards required for housing statutorily homeless households with children.

Recommendation nine

To house asylum-seeking families with children only in conditions which would be acceptable for UK families living in temporary accommodation.

Stability of accommodation

'It was very difficult for the children. We wanted them to be able to settle in one place, but as soon as they settled they decide to move us... after we moved three times we decided not to have any more friends because it is too

painful to leave the loved ones behind. Tina (interviewee seven), who has had six different temporary addresses.

'Please I can't change the school; my youngest has been in counselling for five years, he can't open up to people. There is something sad inside him. I can't change his school.' Ardiana (interviewee four), who has leave to remain but is now homeless, pleading unsuccessfully not to be moved into temporary accommodation where her son would be unable to continue to receive the counselling his school has arranged for him.

Concern

Many families are repeatedly moved from one temporary accommodation to another. Children's schooling is disrupted and support services the family has managed to find may become inaccessible. Even after receiving leave to remain in the UK, families may continue to be moved from one temporary accommodation to another.

Recommendation ten

To ensure that asylum-seeking families with children are allocated to accommodation which they can occupy for the duration of their asylum applications.

Recommendation eleven

If asylum-seeking families with children have to be moved during their asylum applications, or have to move areas after being given leave to remain, they should not be required to move distances which entail children changing schools.

Accommodation after leave to remain is granted

'We obtained this flat, but it was empty and we were sleeping on the floor.' Naomi (interviewee one).

'The worst thing is the housing. I'm struggling, struggling.' Tina (interviewee seven), who is still homeless four years after being given leave to remain in the UK.

Concern

Once a family has been given leave to remain in the UK they will have 28 days' notice to leave their temporary asylum accommodation, but they do not automatically have anywhere permanent to go. They will have to apply to the local authority for assistance and are entitled to make a homelessness application. However, some households do not receive even basic advice on how to go about this.

Recommendation twelve

To give asylum-seeking families with children who are granted leave to remain in the UK assistance to obtain decent, secure and affordable tenancies.

Recommendation thirteen

To allow asylum-seeking families with children who are granted leave to remain in the UK to stay in their temporary asylum accommodation until they obtain secure accommodation.





Conclusion

We have a great opportunity now to improve life for children of asylum seekers, who are some of the most disadvantaged in the UK.

Fewer asylum seekers are applying to remain in the UK than at any time in the past 15 years and only a small proportion of these are families with children.¹¹ The New Asylum Model will ensure that new asylum applicants are dealt with quickly, with dedicated case owners overseeing individual cases throughout the process. And a start has been made to clear the backlog of unresolved cases.

Until now, policy makers have not given children seeking asylum with their parents the consideration they deserve. We can change this. Because there are fewer applicants, we

can now give these more attention. We should be able to put more resources into making sure that asylum-seeking families understand each stage of the process and receive proper legal support, and that the decision-making process is fair and safeguards the welfare of children. These children should not have to live in poverty and sub-standard housing. We can treat children in asylum-seeking families as children first and as asylum seekers second; and we should do this.

If implemented, the recommendations in this report will enable us to make progress towards ensuring that every child in the UK matters, regardless of their immigration status.

Barnardo's concerns and recommendations

Background to the report

All the families interviewed for this report use services provided by Barnardo's. The interviews took place in Belfast, Cardiff, Glasgow, London and Manchester during 2007 and were arranged by Barnardo's projects in each of those areas. All the interviewees included in the report are either asylum seekers, or have leave to remain in the UK following a successful asylum application. Seventeen families were interviewed, 16 of whom had made asylum applications, and 10 of their accounts are given here.

Families were asked to speak about:

- their experiences of seeking asylum in the UK
- the effects on children of these experiences
- things which they would have liked to be different.

Within these three areas, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured model which has some similarities to counselling methods.

The interviews were fully transcribed and then minimally edited to ensure that they were comprehensible narratives and to reduce their length. Finally, brief commentaries were added.

The law and asylum seekers

Asylum legislation over the past 15 years has increasingly restricted asylum seekers' access to support while their application is being processed, and if they are turned down and classed as 'failed asylum seekers'. There have been six major pieces of legislation over the past eleven years, with the sixth, the UK Borders Act, receiving Royal Assent in October 2007.

The Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 restricted access to housing. The Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 removed rights to mainstream benefits and forced families with children to be supported by local authority social services departments. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 removed all entitlements to benefits from

all asylum seekers and set up the National Asylum Support Service and the compulsory dispersal of asylum seekers away from London and the South East. It also introduced payment in the form of vouchers, rather than giving asylum seekers cash subsistence payments. This practice was suspended in 2002, but has now been reintroduced (see below). The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 removed all welfare support from some applicants, forcing them into destitution. Under the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act 2004, failed asylum-seeking families with children can have all their entitlements to housing or support removed (section 9), forcing them into destitution. Despite an

unsuccessful pilot scheme, this sanction can still be applied to families with children at the discretion of case owners. The Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 reintroduced the possibility of paying asylum-seeking families with children in vouchers, rather than cash, if they are 'failed asylum seekers'.

There have been some recent improvements, particularly since the introduction of the New Asylum Model. We also welcome the proposed Code of

Practice *Keeping children safe from harm*,¹² which has been introduced by the UK Borders Act, and to which the Border and Immigration Agency must have regard when dealing with any asylum-seeking child. But we would still like to see more done to protect the interests of children seeking asylum with their families. The overall effect of asylum legislation has been to make it more difficult for families with children to have decent minimum standards of living. Children are living in increasing poverty and insecurity.

The New Asylum Model

Following the publication of a five-year strategy for asylum and immigration,¹³ the Government has implemented a New Asylum Model (NAM), and since March 2007 has been processing all new asylum applications using this. Although it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the NAM, we think it has several welcome features.

Cases will now be determined much more quickly, which removes the terrible effects of prolonged uncertainty for families and children. The NAM has the potential to be a much fairer and more humane system, providing of course that the quality of decision making is not compromised and steps are taken to ensure that families receive adequate legal advice and representation.

One of the worst features of the arrangements prior to the NAM is that many families with children spend years in the asylum system without final decisions being made on their asylum applications. During this time, children settle in school, new family members are born, and connections with countries of origin become weaker. Among the families interviewed for this report, the majority have spent years waiting for final

decisions. For example, Tina (interviewee seven) waited for nine years and Ardiana (interviewee four) for five years. These families, and others, speak graphically of the stress of prolonged waits, not knowing if they are going to be able to stay in the UK. Serena (interviewee five) and Pauline (interviewee eight) both describe becoming mentally ill during this time. We think it is in everyone's interest that cases are dealt with as soon as possible and welcome the fact that there is a target for this to be accomplished within 100 working days.

Another welcome development is that in the NAM every new asylum case has a single case owner who is responsible for the applicant's case throughout the asylum process. However, we don't think that this will be enough to protect children's interests. In order to ensure that children are treated as children first and asylum seekers second and that their needs are addressed throughout the asylum process, we think that families with children who apply for asylum should be allocated specially trained case owners.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are already allocated specially trained case

owners who specialise in dealing with their cases. However, there are more asylum-seeking children who are in the UK with their parents and carers than are unaccompanied. In 2006 there were 3,800 children in asylum-seeking families compared with 3,245 who were unaccompanied.¹⁴

If asylum applications continue at roughly the same rate, or with a modest increase, we can expect no more than 4,000 families with children under 18 to apply for asylum each year. The NAM target is that case owners take on around five new cases a month each, so 4,000 cases would require around 67 case owners to specialise and be specially trained. Training could comprise five days in addition to the basic training given.

We would expect to see practices such as the immigration interview described by Naomi (interviewee one) ended. Naomi's daughter witnessed a long immigration interview and became distressed on seeing her mother questioned. Naomi said, 'I was interviewed for two hours and asked about 80 questions. Maria was sitting there; it was

horrible, horrible. I felt like I was in custody, like I have killed someone. Maria was five and a half at the time. She didn't understand what was happening. She was crying.' We also think it is unnecessary to subject children to the trauma of forced removals which affect children like seven-year-old Michael long after the event. The family were taken into detention at 5.30am, prior to deportation, which was later postponed. Back at home, his mother Olivia (interviewee ten) reported 'When my son hears a bang at the door he runs screaming from the room... Even at home sometimes when you are upstairs and he is downstairs, he will bring something upstairs. You ask him why he can't stay downstairs and he says he's scared.'

Recommendation one

To give the responsibility for processing the cases of asylum-seeking families with children to specialised case owners; these case owners should receive training to enable them to address the needs of children throughout the asylum process.

The 'legacy' cases

Although the New Asylum Model will deal much more quickly with new asylum cases, there remains a backlog. There is no agreement on how big this is. We estimate that there could be 400,000 cases with around 111,000 child dependents which need to be resolved.¹⁵ These cases are now the responsibility of the Case Resolution Directorate in the Border and Immigration Agency.

Families who have spent long periods of time in the UK will find it very difficult to leave. Pauline (interviewee eight) has been in the UK for six years. She is a 'failed asylum seeker', but cannot return to her country of origin because

her children have never lived there and there will also be no medical care for two HIV-positive family members. She said, 'It has been so, so difficult for all of these years to imagine that we could be sent home to die'. This can be contrasted with the relief felt, for example, by Serena (interviewee five) when the family were given leave to remain after five years, 'As soon as I found out that I could stay, I felt safe. I couldn't believe it; they gave me the letter and I opened the letter... I just lie down, I just say "Oh my God". When I saw it, I shouted, I shouted, "Jesus Christ! I can't believe this, it's like..."' After another year, this family were

reunited with two children who had been left with friends in Cameroon for the whole of the five-year asylum process.

Most of the children in families interviewed for this report had spent years in the UK as asylum seekers and had settled in the UK and in school. Some children had been born in the UK, but all of them might have been deported and some of them still could be. Many of these children will be unable to cope with deportation to countries they can barely remember, or where they may never have lived.

We support the Government's aim to clear

the backlog by 2011, but it is essential that the needs of children who have settled in the UK and who may have spent years attending schools here, or have been born here, and who may still have to wait several years for their cases to be resolved, are taken into account when these applications are finally determined.

Recommendation two

In clearing the asylum backlog the Government should take into account the needs of children who have spent several years living in the UK, or who have been born here.

The right to work

Most asylum seekers in the UK are denied permission to work and as a result of the asylum backlog many have waited years for decisions on their cases. Many of the interviewees felt strongly about this. For example, Serena (interviewee five), who was not allowed to work for four years, said, 'You have no right to work. You just sit home waiting for benefits and you can't do anything ... I became sick and started treatment with antidepressants.' Mary (interviewee three), who has not been allowed to work for three years, said 'All my life I've worked, and now I'm beginning to think that I've become redundant'. Or Pauline (interviewee eight), who had a responsible job before seeking asylum in the UK but has not been allowed to work for six years and said, 'I would not choose to live this life here, which has reduced me to nothing. To nothing. To a beggar. I cannot live without antidepressants now because it is too much for me to bear and whilst you are like that you begin to lose hope in the future.'

It makes very little sense to force these families to remain on very low levels of state support and without contributing to the



economy. Some asylum seekers are allowed to work, but only if they do not get an initial decision on their asylum application within one year. In these circumstances they can apply for permission to work and carry on working until the application has been finally determined.¹⁶ However, if they do receive an initial decision within a year of applying for asylum, then they cannot work, even if it takes several years for the application to be finally determined. This

means that some asylum seekers who have been in the UK for several years are allowed to work and others are not solely on the basis of the date they received an initial decision on their asylum application.

The poverty experienced by families who are not allowed to work for years, combined with feelings of low self-esteem and sometimes humiliation, can make it very difficult for parents to provide happy and secure homes for their children. If asylum seekers were allowed to work, we would expect to see improved family life, more opportunities for children, and families who regain self-esteem as they become self-sufficient. These families would also contribute towards the economy through taxation.

Under the New Asylum Model, it should be exceptional that new asylum applicants have

to wait more than six months for their cases to be finally determined. This is not the case for the large numbers of asylum applicants who are still in the backlog waiting for a final decision. Some of these applicants may have to wait for this until 2011. We think all asylum applicants who have been in the UK for more than six months without a final decision on their cases should be allowed to apply for permission to work and that there should be a presumption that permission will be granted.

Recommendation three

To allow asylum seekers to apply for permission to work if they have waited more than six months for their application to be finally determined and where the delay in reaching a decision cannot be attributed to the applicant.

Asylum seekers' support

Asylum seekers are supported by a benefits and housing agency called Asylum Support, which is part of the Border and Immigration Agency in the Home Office and runs parallel to the benefits and housing systems used by the general population.

Adult asylum seekers receive 70 per cent and children 100 per cent of standard Income Support levels. The 70 per cent rate is intended to reflect the fact that asylum seekers do not pay utility bills. However, asylum seekers who are not living in Asylum Support accommodation may be responsible for their own utility bills and some asylum seekers receive subsistence-only support, with nothing towards the costs of their accommodation or utility bills. We believe that asylum seekers should be paid the same level of benefits as other claimants and simply be responsible for their own utility bills.¹⁷

Even then, they will not be well off. An adult asylum seeker over 25 or a lone parent over 18 currently receives £41.41 a week.¹⁸ A couple receive £64.96. The payments for children are £47.45 for those under 16 and £35.65 for those at least 16 but under 18.¹⁹

Asylum-seeking children and families are only entitled to limited additional payments, currently an additional £5 for a pregnant woman and £3 for a child between one and three years old.²⁰ They are not entitled to the full range of benefits paid to other families such as Child Benefit (£18.10 for one child and £12.10 for other children), Educational Maintenance Allowance (£30.00 per child) or the Family Premium (£16.43). An asylum-seeking family with one child can be at least £64.00 a week worse off than other comparable families.

Carol (interviewee nine) can't afford to let

her 11-year-old daughter Diana join in activities with other children. She said, 'It is a problem really for my daughter because I can say that I've got an intelligent girl, who is keen to do things, to go out, to participate in sports and things which are not provided for free... It is paining for me really to always remind her about our budget... I can say that she is not a demanding kind of child, but it's very expensive.'

If asylum-seeking families are looking after children with special needs, or have special needs themselves, they are also not entitled to benefits such as Disability Living Allowance (DLA) Care Component (£17.10 – £64.50), DLA Mobility Component (£17.10 – £45.00), the Disabled Child Premium (£46.69) or the Enhanced Disability Premium (Child) (£18.76) which can be paid to other families. Even using the lowest figures in these ranges, an asylum-seeking family with one disabled child is missing out on an extra £80 a week in addition to the other benefits described earlier. Thus such a family is potentially nearly £150 worse off than a similar family with UK residency. These benefits are an acknowledgement of the extra costs of caring for a disabled child; asylum-seeking families also need to meet these extra costs.

Mary (interviewee three), speaking about her daughter Ann, who has cerebral palsy, complained 'this disability that she's got would still be the same, whether or not I've been granted leave to remain. Why can't she just be treated like any other child? I think the Government should really look into a case where an asylum seeker has disabled children; those children should enjoy the same benefits as other children.'

Pauline (interviewee eight) described the unfairness of the current system: 'Here in Scotland, when a child is above the age of 16 and chooses to stay at school, they get a weekly education attendance allowance of £30. Our children get nothing. In fact, when

they get to 16 their living expenses are reduced by £10. So that is pushing families deeper into poverty...'

Benefit levels in the UK are modest, necessitating many UK families' existence at well below the Government's own poverty line. To pay benefits to asylum-seeking families at below these modest levels is cruel and forces some families into severe hardship. Some families have spent many years living like this due to protracted asylum processes. We believe that asylum-seeking children and families should be able to access the same level of benefits that other families with children receive.

Section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004 allows the 'withdrawal of asylum support from failed asylum-seeking families whom the Secretary of State certifies have failed without reasonable excuse to take reasonable steps to leave the UK voluntarily, or to place themselves in a position in which they can do so'.²¹ This is intended to encourage families to return voluntarily to their countries of origin at the end of a failed asylum application process. Although the Government must be able to remove people who have no right to stay in the UK, we think that it is both inhumane and ineffective to use, as tools of asylum policy, the threat of destitution and of taking children into care because their parents cannot then support them. We should ensure that children's needs are met throughout what is a traumatic process.

Our report in 2005, *The End of the Road* outlines our detailed concerns about section 9.²² All the local authorities interviewed for that report believe that section 9 is incompatible with the Children Act 1989 and the equivalent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland.²³

As well as being inhumane, we think section 9 is ineffective. Pilot schemes were operated in London, Leeds and Manchester

between December 2004 and December 2005, but out of the 116 families in the pilot only five (four per cent) actually left the UK voluntarily.²⁴ Although there are currently no plans to implement section 9 widely, we are very concerned that this legislation has not been repealed and that the New Asylum Model allows case owners to use section 9 at their discretion and suspend asylum support. Section 9 should be repealed.

One of the most demeaning aspects of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 was the payment of subsistence in the form of vouchers rather than cash. This practice was suspended in 2002, but we were disappointed to see the provision reintroduced in the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 for some families with children who are 'failed asylum seekers'. Since the vouchers have to be used in specific shops, families can end up travelling long distances, although they have no cash to pay for transport, to supermarkets which do not always have the items they need.

They then have the humiliation of having their shopping checked to see that they have only bought allowed items.

There are also families supported by local authorities who are paid subsistence in vouchers rather than cash. We think that subsistence for families with children should always be paid in cash, not in vouchers.

Recommendation four

To give all asylum seekers entitlement to the same benefits as other claimants in the UK, or to levels of support equivalent to this, including all allowances for children.

Recommendation five

To repeal section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004.

Recommendation six

To end the practice of providing some asylum-seeking families with vouchers instead of cash benefits.

Asylum seekers' accommodation

Asylum-seeking families with children are housed in temporary accommodation while their asylum applications are determined. Life in temporary accommodation can be very difficult and children often do not have a decent family life as a result. For example, Mary (interviewee three) commented on her accommodation, 'When I moved into the temporary accommodation, I couldn't believe I was in the UK. The house was infested with

cockroaches, there was no heating, and there was bad dampness.'

There are five areas where we would recommend improvements:

- to the dispersal process
- to reduce racial harassment
- to the standards of accommodation
- to the stability of accommodation
- to the process after leave to remain is granted.

Dispersal accommodation

Following the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, asylum seekers began to be dispersed away from London and the South East to every part of the UK, except Northern Ireland.²⁵ This was intended to provide an opportunity for asylum seekers to be better housed and to reduce the strains which had been placed on London and the South East. At the time of the 1999 Act there were over 90,000 asylum applications, including dependents, a rate which continued to rise, reaching a peak of 103,080 in 2002. There are now substantially fewer asylum applications and the comparable figures for 2005 and 2006 are 30,840 and 28,320 respectively,²⁶ with the figures three-quarters of the way through 2007 showing the level of applications running at seven per cent below than in 2006.²⁷ There is now much less pressure on accommodation as a result of new asylum applications.

Dispersal was not popular with asylum seekers, primarily because wherever people have come from they can find members of their own communities in London. Out of 11,355 subsistence-only asylum applicants in the UK at the end of December 2006, 8,110 were in London.²⁸ The majority of the UK's refugees and asylum seekers remain in London, with up to 500,000 in the capital.²⁹

Whilst accepting that it may be very difficult to accommodate families in London and the South East, we think that there are many legitimate reasons why families might prefer one dispersal area over another, for example they may have family or friends, or members of their own communities in particular locations.

Mary (interviewee three), who is caring for a disabled child, wanted to live in Manchester, where she knew someone who could help her. She went to Manchester and was initially allocated accommodation there, but was then

told she had to move. She said, 'I received a letter from NASS³⁰ giving me a week's notice to say you are being moved to Yorkshire. They just said to Yorkshire. And I tell you I have never been so stressed... In the letter they sent they said that you are not allowed to say "no". If you say no then we take away your accommodation and that's it.' This decision was only overturned while the transport to Yorkshire was waiting outside the Manchester accommodation.

Some asylum applicants find it very difficult to live outside London. Barbara (interviewee six) chose to live in one room with her partner and four children rather than in dispersal accommodation where she didn't know anyone. She said, 'I can't separate from my partner, because my partner helps me a lot... I can't stay in Plymouth with four children and my partner is here in London.' Carol (interviewee nine) wanted to remain in London, but was dispersed to Glasgow. Her daughter, Diana, had four changes of school in four years as a result. She explained why she wanted to remain in London. 'The reason I stayed with my niece was really my mental state. I needed support and I felt much better staying with someone I knew.'

If a family has a reason for preferring one dispersal area over another or compelling reasons for staying in London, they should be able to have this taken into consideration. At present, families get one offer of dispersal accommodation on a 'take it or leave it' basis. If they refuse, they receive no support to find housing, or with the costs of this.

Recommendation seven

To allow asylum-seeking families with children a right to express reasonable preference about the regional location of their accommodation before dispersal and for this preference to be taken into account.

Racial harassment

Families who seek asylum in the UK can face racial harassment, which can occur in both the dispersal regions and in other areas. Out of the 10 cases in this report, four had experienced racial harassment: interviewee seven in East London, interviewees eight and nine in Glasgow, and interviewee ten in Stockport, Greater Manchester. One of the families interviewed in Belfast, but not included in the report, also reported harassment from local children who ganged up throwing stones at a hostel occupied by nine Chinese families.

Olivia (interviewee ten) also alleged that she was assaulted and racially abused by immigration staff.

Glasgow has received more dispersed asylum seekers than any other city, 5,010 as at December 2006 compared with the next three cities in size, Leeds (2,040), Birmingham (1,835) and Manchester (1,355). Carol (interviewee nine) described what happened to her and her daughter, Diana, when they were dispersed from London to Glasgow. 'There was a lot of trouble. People outside throwing stones, writing on the walls telling us "get out of here". I lived there for two years.' In deciding where to house asylum seekers, areas which have a record of such harassment, or where there is reason to believe their presence will aggravate community tensions, should be avoided.



Recommendation eight

Not to house asylum-seeking families with children in areas where there is a history of racial harassment or reason to believe their presence will aggravate community tensions.

Standards of accommodation

Many asylum-seeking families are housed in very poor quality accommodation. Meiyang (interviewee two) lives in a hostel with her baby son, John, and eight other families, all with children. She described it: 'There are nine families in this house, with one kitchen and three bathrooms. Too many people living in the same house... Living in this house has a lot of tensions. For example, at meal time everyone wants to use the kitchen and the kids start fighting and that creates a lot of unhappiness.'

Ardiana and Tina (interviewees four and seven) spent time living in B&B accommodation. It is generally agreed that this is unsuitable for families with children, and homeless households now may only be housed in these conditions for a maximum of six weeks, but this rule does not apply to asylum seekers, who can be kept there indefinitely.³¹

Many asylum-seeking families are housed in very poor quality accommodation, but it is very difficult for them to do anything about it. Mary (interviewee three) tried to improve her situation but with no effect and said, 'I complained to the housing provider several times but it was falling on deaf ears'. Olivia (interviewee ten) was given decent accommodation, then told to move out of it. 'At first they gave us a house, it was all right that house, but afterwards they moved us to a flat. They said that the house was not for asylum seekers and that we were only put there temporarily. [The flat] was awful, the wallpaper all coming off and the carpet dirty... everything was just messed up. It's

still bad. If we complain to them they say "you are asylum seekers, you have to accept what we give you".'

We would like the temporary accommodation used to house asylum-seeking families with children to be of the same minimum quality and managed to at least the same standards required for housing statutorily homeless households with children.

Recommendation nine

To house asylum-seeking families with children only in conditions which would be acceptable for UK families living in temporary accommodation.

Stability of accommodation

On first arrival in the UK, families will have to be housed in very temporary accommodation, for example hostels or B&B, but this should only be for the shortest possible time. However, many families are then repeatedly moved from one temporary accommodation to another. Children's schooling is disrupted and support services the family has managed to access may become inaccessible. Tina (interviewee seven) has had six different temporary addresses and said, 'It was very difficult for the children. We wanted them to be able to settle in one place, but as soon as they settled they decide to move us... after we moved three times we decided not to have any more friends because it is too painful to leave the loved ones behind.'

Even after receiving leave to remain in the UK, families may continue to be moved from one temporary accommodation to another. Ardiana (interviewee four) has leave to remain, but is now homeless, and tried to persuade a local authority homelessness department not to move the family into a distant temporary accommodation where her son would be unable to continue to receive

the counselling his school has arranged for him. She pleaded with them, 'Please I can't change the school; my youngest has been in counselling for five years, he can't open up to people. There is something sad inside him. I can't change his school.' This plea was ignored.

Recommendation ten

To ensure that asylum-seeking families with children are allocated to accommodation which they can occupy for the duration of their asylum applications.

Recommendation eleven

If asylum-seeking families with children have to be moved during their asylum applications, or have to move areas after being given leave to remain, they should not be required to move distances which entail children changing schools.

Accommodation after leave to remain is granted

When a family is given leave to remain in the UK they will have 28 days' notice to leave their temporary asylum accommodation, but they will not have anywhere permanent to go. They will have to apply to the local authority for assistance and are entitled to make a homelessness application. However, some households do not receive even basic advice on how to go about this.

Naomi (interviewee one) ended up in a bare flat with no heating, lighting or cooking facilities; she said, 'We obtained this flat, but it was empty and we were sleeping on the floor'. And her daughter, Maria, complained, 'Mummy let's go back home. In Africa we never sleep on the floor.' Naomi had to agree, 'I said "Yes, we never slept on the floor but we are not in Africa now"'.

Tina (interviewee seven) is still homeless four years after being given leave to remain in the UK. In her opinion, 'The worst thing is the housing. I'm struggling, struggling.'

The Government has a target to reduce by 50 per cent the numbers of homeless households in priority need in temporary accommodation by 2010.³² In practice, this has meant that families who should be accepted as homeless and placed in temporary accommodation are instead being diverted into unaffordable and insecure private rented accommodation. Families who agree to this have very little chance of then obtaining social housing. Ardiana (interviewee four) for example, has ended up in a private rented house and on the general waiting list for social housing, rather than being classed as homeless and in priority need. She also cannot get Housing Benefit to make up the full cost of the rent, leaving the family to live on less than minimum benefits levels. Asylum seekers who are given leave to remain need good advice to ensure that this is not what happens to them.

Meiyang (interviewee two) had been wrongly advised and thought she could stay in the temporary accommodation she had been placed in as an asylum seeker after she received leave to remain in the UK, but she should actually have left it the day before the interview for this research. She said, 'If they say you have to wait, then what should I do? The housing said I would not be asked to leave here. Maybe they have made arrangements for us to stay here a bit longer.' This was not the case.

Recommendation twelve

To give asylum-seeking families with children who are granted leave to remain in the UK assistance to obtain decent, secure and affordable tenancies.

Recommendation thirteen

To allow asylum-seeking families with children who are granted leave to remain in the UK to stay in their temporary asylum accommodation until they obtain secure accommodation.

The case study families



Interview one

We didn't even have a blanket

Naomi sought asylum from the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2001. She came to the UK with her daughter Maria, who was five years old at the time, leaving her husband and three children in the Congo. She has indefinite leave to remain in the UK and lives in a council flat in South London.

The accommodation offered to Naomi and Maria when they arrived in the UK was unsuitable for family life. They lived in a B&B then a hostel and had to share facilities, such as the bathroom and kitchen, with other households whom they didn't know. The asylum process was traumatic for both mother and daughter and took no account of Maria's needs as a child. The transition from asylum seeker to being granted leave to remain in the UK was only the beginning of further problems, particularly with housing, language tuition and finding work. Some serious problems remain six years after arrival in the UK.

I have been in the UK for six years, since 2001; before that I was back home in Africa, in the Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo. When Kabila came into power I had to go. At the same time, I had some problems with my husband, it's a long story... we had split up. Then I came here.

I came with my daughter, Maria, and left my husband and three older kids back home. About eight months ago they went to America. I haven't seen any of them since I left. Maria hasn't seen her dad or her brother and sisters for six years. Maria only remembers them with pictures. She was very attached to her dad; then everything was put on me. I was a dad, I was a mum, I was everything to her and it was quite difficult for her. Very difficult, very difficult.

Naomi and her daughter lived in hotel and hostel accommodation for most of the first year they were in the UK. During this time the family was only provided with £30 subsistence a week. This was because the right to benefits had been removed from some asylum-seeking families and had forced them to depend on social services support via the Children Act 1989. Food parcels were provided by Barnardo's.

When we arrived we went to the immigration office and they gave us an address for a hotel. You had to share everything. It was a small room with two small beds. We had to share a kitchen and bathroom. You had to share everything with four people that you don't know. It was very hard. It was very very hard. I stayed there for about three

months. After that the Home Office wrote to us to say that we had to move from the hotel to a hostel. That was better than the hotel. We had a bigger room and our own kitchen, but we had to share the bathroom. We stayed there for about seven months.

I was crying all the time. You come from your own country and you just jump down in your life. You go somewhere where nobody knows you and you don't know anybody.

After I got leave to remain in the UK, they gave me Income Support, but in the hostel I got £30.00 a week to buy food and every single thing. It was nothing. It was horrible. Some days maybe we just eat bread, or just drink milk; that's it, yeah that's it. Barnardo's was helping with some food, some clothes, everything.

When you go to the shop you can't afford things. Maria asks for things, 'Mummy...' and I was desperate. Sometimes when I came back from the shop, I start crying. I can't give her things. Kids they love things like chocolate. You can't afford it all the time. I was crying all the time, all the time. And when I was crying, she was crying too. I have to just be strong and talk to her and try to make her understand, but at that age it was so difficult for her to understand the kind of life we were in.

The family had to attend an immigration interview in Liverpool, although they were living in London. No provision was made to care for Maria, so she had to attend the interview with her mother. The interview was traumatic for Maria. It was fortunate that a solicitor who was able to advise her accompanied Naomi, but this did not help Maria understand or cope with what was happening to her mother. The fact that Naomi was caring for a child, or the needs of Maria herself, were not taken into account in the conduct of the asylum and immigration process.

I remember when they said we have to go to Liverpool for an interview. They sent me a train ticket and I was supposed to leave my daughter in London. I told them that I had nobody here who I can leave my daughter with, so they gave me a ticket for her too.

I tried to explain to Maria before we went. She asked me 'Mummy where are we going?' I said 'We are going somewhere, where some people will be asking me questions'. She asked me 'Why do people have to ask you questions?' and I told her 'Because we came here, we are not from here and they have to ask us questions about why we came here'.

We had to go there early in the morning with the ticket and a piece of paper with the address. My solicitor was waiting there for us.

I remember that day. I don't know why they sent us to Liverpool. I was sick that day. We had to get up at about four in the morning, to go to the station. Four o'clock with a child! It was about 6.00 pm when we got back to London.

I was interviewed for two hours and asked about eighty questions. Maria was sitting there; it was horrible, horrible. I felt like I was in custody, like I have killed someone.

Then there was one question, then another question, another and another question. One question after another, and Maria looked at me and she started crying and I

I was interviewed for two hours and asked about eighty questions. Maria was sitting there; it was horrible, horrible. I felt like I was in custody, like I have killed someone.

looked at her and said 'What?' And still they don't finish asking questions.

Maria was five and a half at that time. She didn't understand what was happening. She was crying. I was crying and when I was crying she was crying. She was crying a lot. I was with my solicitor and I was questioned by two people. I had never been questioned like that in all my life; it is the first time. They don't believe you, they don't!

At the end they say just 'OK, go and wait, we will write to you'. And after a month, I receive a letter, yeah and it was positive. I think we got indefinite leave to remain so quickly because I brought all the documents. That day I cried too, it was like happiness. I was lucky, but it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy at all. Everything was difficult. I wouldn't go through that again.

Getting leave to remain was not the end of the family's problems. They then became a homeless family as defined in housing legislation and had to wait for permanent accommodation. Not being able to speak English exacerbated other problems. Without support from Barnardo's, the family would have experienced more severe problems. The family was being dealt with by social services, but they were not given basic information to help them claim their housing and benefits entitlement. At one point, Maria and Naomi spent two weeks living in a bare flat with no heating, lighting or cooking facilities.

“ This flat was empty, empty, empty. We just ate cold food out of cans. ”

Then, with Barnardo's help we obtained this flat, but it was empty. Nothing was inside; it was empty, empty and we were sleeping on the floor. We slept on the floor for about two weeks. That was in September 2002. We were lucky; it was quick. Most people we knew before, in the hotel, still have a problem until now. We were lucky. The Government should build houses. There is so much space here that they can build houses on.

Barnardo's told me that I can apply for a grant and got all the papers. They went with me to the interview. I didn't know about the grant, I went to the social services and they never told me about that. They knew that I'm moving home because when you are moving you have to tell them and to give them a new address. They could tell you and help you to fill the form to get that grant, but they never do it. Jenny [a Barnardo's welfare rights worker] told me about it.

We slept on the floor, we didn't even have a blanket. I got a quilt and some stuff from Barnardo's and slept on that for two weeks. Maria was saying 'Mummy let's go back home'. She said 'In Africa we never sleep on the floor', I said 'yes, we never slept on the floor but we are not in Africa now'.

This flat was empty, empty, empty. We just ate cold food out of cans. Sometimes I would go to the café with Maria and buy food. That was it. It was September; the cold had set in already. There was no heating, no electricity. For one week, no light.

I couldn't speak any English at all. But you know kids, they learn quite quickly, so if I had to go to the hospital, I had to go with my daughter who was like my interpreter. Otherwise, when I went to the hospital I had to take my dictionary. My daughter was about five and a half, or six. She was too young. She was too young.

Gradually, Naomi and Maria began to settle in the UK. Finding courses and learning English was difficult and finding work remains a major obstacle.

Now, we manage, we manage. My English is not really good. When I came I couldn't speak a word, I sometimes was very down. I didn't know how, where to start learning, Jenny told me that there's a course and you can practise your English, you can improve your English and you can do something else with your life.

I studied English and now I am doing a care worker course in college. I am looking for a job, but everywhere I go, they need experience. I have to do something, but am only doing a part-time job for now. It's just five hours a week but it gives me experience. When you apply for a job they don't want you if you tell them that you don't have experience.

The rest of my family are in America now. We didn't decide yet what to do, because we just got our [British] citizenship. Maria feels comfortable here. She doesn't want to go to USA. She tells them that they have to come here.

There are still wars where I come from in the Congo. I come from the East, it's a place where most of the time there's war.

Interview two

There are nine families in this house, with one kitchen and three bathrooms

Meiying has been given leave to remain in the UK, four years after applying for asylum. She sought asylum from China. Meiying and her son, John, live in a hostel in Belfast with eight other Chinese families, all with children. Although Meiying didn't speak about this, one of the other families living there described local children ganging up and throwing stones at the hostel. On the day of the interview and after being wrongly advised by the housing authority, Meiying was unaware that she was no longer entitled to stay in the hostel now she has leave to remain in the UK. She was at imminent risk of eviction.

I came from the south of mainland China to the United Kingdom to seek asylum. After a few days in the UK, the person who helped me to escape arranged for me to come here. Back in China I had some problems with the Government policy. I came here on my own. Since I came here I had one child, he is three years, 11 months old. I have been in the UK for four years. I came in June 2003 and then John was born in March 2004.

Now I have been allowed to stay in the UK. I found out two weeks ago. I am very happy. Before that I didn't know if I was going to be allowed to stay or not. It was very worrying. I thought that I might be sent back.

The accommodation is unsuitable for family life, with nine households sharing facilities.

There are nine families in this house, with one kitchen and three bathrooms. Too many people living in the same house. The children fight too much and create tension. There are nine children. Each family has one. Living in this house has a lot of tensions. For example, at meal time everyone wants to use the kitchen and the kids start fighting and that creates a lot of unhappiness.

All the nine families are from China, so that is a positive thing about this arrangement because we don't feel lonely. Another positive thing is because the families here don't speak English. If we are not living together we will have a communication barrier with local people. The Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities has been helping me throughout the process. Once they had arranged for me to stay in this house they come once a month to check who is still living in this property.

John has health problems which a doctor has said may be due to the conditions the family live in.

When John was young he got ill very frequently and I believe it is because of this place. He had a lot of asthmatic problems and also got a skin rash. My doctor said to me that it could be because of the environment, so I requested to change housing. I was not happy living here because it is not very clean. But the response I got was that unless you are disabled then they will not move you out from this property, you have to stay here.

At the beginning when I first moved into the house I couldn't sleep because all the kids have a different sleeping pattern and the house is always noisy. I had sleep deprivation when John was young because if he was asleep the other children would make a noise and then wake him up. There was always someone making a noise. It took a long time to get used to, but now I have been living here for so long I am quite used to this environment. If it wasn't because of John's health, then I would actually quite like living here because I don't feel lonely.

This house is only for me and my son; my husband is not allowed to stay here. He was also an asylum seeker and then we met and married, but then because of different circumstances we are not allowed to live together, so I am here on my own with my son. We wanted to live together after the register of our marriage. We proved to the authorities that now we are a couple and asked if we could live together – they said 'no'. Actually I asked two questions. The first one was 'Now we are married, can we live together?' and the second was 'Now we are family can we have our own place?' and the answer was 'no' to both. At this time he was under appeal [of a refusal of asylum]. Now he also got his leave to remain two weeks ago.

Now I have got leave to remain, I can move to my own property and I am looking forward to that because it will be my own place and there will be no more tension over the kitchen. I am ready to move on. I am really pleased that this is going to happen, to have my own house and space with no more tension.

After I received the letter from the Home Office, I made an appointment with an interpreter to go to make an application for public housing. The housing said they didn't know about it and asked me to come back here and wait. So at the moment I don't know how long I will need to wait, or where I am going to live.

Meiying had been given a month's notice to leave the asylum accommodation when she was given leave to remain, as is standard practice. She had gone to the housing authority and had been wrongly told that she should go back and wait because she could remain where she was. However, Meiying had a letter saying that the accommodation had to be vacated. The notice to leave had expired the day before she was interviewed for this report. A letter from the housing authority made it clear that they had not taken a homelessness application, although this should have happened. Meiying cannot read English and did not understand what either of the letters were saying or what she should do. She thought that an arrangement had been made so that she could stay where she was, but the correspondence showed that this was not the case.

I had sleep deprivation when John was young... the other children would make a noise and then wake him up. There was always someone making a noise.

I have been told that I can stay here until I receive a letter from the Home Office. My solicitor has finished my case so he will not look at this. I filled in a homeless application form and I am waiting for them to contact me because that is what they promised to do.

If they say you have to wait, then what should I do? The housing said I would not be asked to leave here. Maybe they have made arrangements for us to stay here a bit longer.

Because of this move, it is going to affect John's schooling. He should be starting nursery. He has already started to go to the local nursery in September so I am going to take him to this local school until we know where we are going to move to and then I will make another application.

The interviewer had to advise this family to make a homelessness application to the housing authority the same day.

Interview three

A week's notice to say you are being moved to Yorkshire

Mary lives in Manchester with her youngest child Ann, who is 14. They came from Zimbabwe in 2004. One child was left in Zimbabwe and one, who is adult, lives in Canada. Ann has brain damage and cerebral palsy. Mary came to Manchester because she knew someone who lived there who could help with childcare. The family had great difficulty finding suitable accommodation for their first 18 months in the UK.

When I came to the UK I didn't apply for asylum at the port of entry. I came to Manchester and stayed for a week because my child was very sick, so I stayed for a week and then went to Liverpool to apply.

The reason I chose Manchester was because there was one person I knew who was living here, she's the sister to a friend of mine. I didn't know whether I would be given accommodation and I wanted someone who could assist me with the child. During the first week I was staying at my friend's house. Ann, my daughter, was 11 then. My child had suffered brain damage and she was incontinent. She has cerebral palsy. So you can imagine staying at other people's houses, people didn't feel really comfortable with that.

After I applied for asylum I had to wait for another week. It was just a nightmare going to those people. I think I spent three days going there every day in the morning, spent the whole day there, then at four o'clock they tell you 'You have to come back tomorrow. We couldn't find a house for you.' And eventually I was given temporary accommodation, in Manchester. It was the worst and in the worst area.

When I moved into the temporary accommodation, I couldn't believe I was in the UK. The house was infested with cockroaches, there was no heating, and there was bad dampness. I complained to the housing provider several times but it was falling on deaf ears.

Then I heard about a project that supports newly arrived asylum seekers. The manager there came to visit me. She asked me if I have complained, I said I've tried, but it doesn't look like they listen to asylum seekers. They don't realise we are also human beings like them. She called someone from Scope, because my child has also got cerebral palsy, she teamed up with a guy from there to complain. That's when I was then moved to another apartment. It was emergency accommodation in a different area. I was told that you're only supposed to be there for up to six weeks, but I lived in the emergency accommodation for one and a half years before I was eventually moved into a nice accommodation.

Now my daughter can go to the toilet, because she's going to a special school and they've really worked with her. She has suffered brain damage and loss of speech. But now she does say things and I understand what she is saying. Even the friends that

I lived in the emergency accommodation for one and a half years before I was eventually moved into a nice accommodation.

she plays with outside can understand what she is trying to say. Of course you can't understand everything but she is very improved.

The family were living in suitable temporary accommodation, but were then given a week's notice that they were being moved to Yorkshire.

In August 2005 I received a letter from NASS giving me a week's notice to say you are being moved to Yorkshire. They just said to Yorkshire. And I tell you I have never been so stressed, because I have integrated with this society here. I've got Barnardo's, the Children's Trust, the local doctor and my child is picking up. Everyone worked together, to send a petition to the Home Office to say I shouldn't be moved out of Manchester.

In the letter they sent they said that you are not allowed to say no. If you say no then we take away your accommodation and that's it. The Home Office don't deal with people. People were saying to them 'Can't you see this person has got a special needs child?' But the Home Office doesn't look at it like that; they look at the numbers, not the people. They don't even know what sort of person this is; they just look at the Home Office reference number. That's it.

On the last day a van was waiting outside to pick me up. The guys had come and I tried to get them to talk to the manager at Refugee Action. I told them that there are some negotiations that are still going on. But the guy just decides he doesn't want to listen to you, he told me 'Me no speak English'. And he started trying to force his way into my house. Then my mobile rang, it was the refugee project, they told me 'Congratulations, Mary you're not going'. Then I just gave the phone to the guy and they said 'OK' and went back to their office. But you can imagine what it does to you psychologically.

I think it took about nine people to stop the move. I had been trying to get my child into school for about five months. I was weeping 24/7. And if I moved to another area, it would mean her staying with me at home for quite some time before she eventually got into school. I don't know why it took so long to get my daughter into school. I've never really bothered to find out. I thought maybe it was just the system in this country. I think there's a lot of bureaucracy.

We shouldn't have to move so many times. Maybe there are some times, way beyond your control, that they have to move you out because perhaps the owner of the house has sold it, but not for them just to come up and say 'move out of Manchester'. You know when you think you are starting to settle down. You have other things to worry about; you've got your case to worry about with the Home Office, where you keep on getting letters. And then you get something else on top of that.

The threatened move affected Ann, who was aware that something was happening.

When they were trying to move us Ann kept coming to me saying, 'Why are you upset?' I didn't tell her, I just said 'I'm ok I'm ok I'm trying to sort out this house thing'.

People were saying to them 'Can't you see this person has got a special needs child?' But the Home Office doesn't look at it like that.

But because of the brain damage, after two minutes she asks me again, 'Why are you upset?' And when she saw me packing our stuff, she kept asking if we were going back to Zimbabwe. I said 'No, not now'. She doesn't want to go back. I think I know the reason she doesn't want to go back, she says things to me about people being beaten up. Because she always sees these things on the news and she's so scared.

The family were refused asylum and also refused discretionary leave to remain, despite Ann's disability. They are still trying to get permission to stay, but Mary is not allowed to work during this process.

I was refused asylum but the High Court said that my case should be considered because of my child's special needs. But when it went back to tribunal, the tribunal said 'No'. They feel that Zimbabwe is well equipped and has got all the medical expertise. That's the situation at the moment. I've filed for a new application still on medical conditions, and on the basis that I'm politically active, you know, I belong to the opposition party.

At least the Government could give us permission to work. Yes fine they are giving us money to buy food, but that's not enough. All my life I've worked, and now I'm beginning to think that I've become redundant, you know? It's so frustrating, so so frustrating. Because you want to be able to go on with life, because like right now I can't plan anything. Yes they can allow you to go to college to do some access courses, but that's it. You can't go to university because you're an asylum seeker. Years are going, you're losing time. If I was working at least, then it would give me something to do rather than just sitting at home. I volunteered for one charity, I sit on the Trustees' Board, but that's not enough I tell you. They are just wasting resources; that's the way I feel. And with my background I'm not used to getting handouts. We believe that people that are able should be working. I can work in anything to do with administration, because I have been a bank manager for several years. I could work in a bank or any financial organisation.

The way things are set up, your life is in a twilight zone. I think they just try to frustrate you so much so that you might just one day decide to volunteer to go back to your country. But you know it's not about going back to your country. If Zimbabwe was still OK, like it was when we got our independence, honestly speaking there was no reason why a person like me would be here in the UK. I really feel wasted. I could be doing something, contributing to this economy.

Because the family are still asylum seekers, Mary cannot claim disability benefits to help with looking after Ann. The local authority does have some power to help, but appears not to be doing as much as it could.

And also, because I haven't been granted status, the leave to remain, I've got to support Ann myself. I can't even claim any disability benefits. It's not just the monetary benefits that I want but even respite. You know, having to cope with a child everyday of their life, 365 days a year it's not easy I tell you. Because she's not

“The way things are set up, your life is in a twilight zone.”

aware of danger, once she gets indoors, you know, wherever she goes I have to follow. You need to bath her in the morning, she can't bath. I have to dress her up. You know do all these things. And they still say we cannot give you any type of support because you don't have leave to remain. But this disability that she's got would still be the same, whether or not I've been granted leave to remain. And you wonder why they come up with these policies. Why can't she just be treated like any other child? I think the Government should really look into a case where an asylum seeker has disabled children; those children should honestly enjoy the same benefits as other children.

Attending hearings to do with the asylum claim is a problem because there is no help with childcare.

When I went for a hearing I said to them 'I want to bring in my child' but the judge just said that they never allow that. You have to sort out yourself how to look after the child during the hearing. Fortunately now she's in school, so usually it's during the time and she will be in school when I have to go there. Before she started school I had to get someone to come and sit with my child in the house. They're not interested how you are going to cope. It's none of their business. Fine, they can give you a ticket to go there, but they say find childcare yourself, that's not their area.

Ann knows that she can't have things she wants, but doesn't fully understand why.

My daughter knows there is something that's called 'papers'. People from my country call this leave to remain 'papers'. She's hearing when I'm talking to my friends when they come, we're just talking about 'oh, that will be the day when we get the papers; that will be the day'. And you know even if she wants me to buy her something she will say 'Mum can you buy this and that?' and then she says 'I know; you will buy it when we get the papers!' She wonders why the paper is driving everything. One day she brought me some newspapers and said 'Here are the papers!'

“They don't realise we are human beings like them.”

Interview four

I can't move my son again and again and again

Ardiana sought asylum in the UK from Kosovo seven years ago together with her husband and two sons. After five years they were given leave to remain in the UK, but then experienced problems securing housing. They are now living in unaffordable and insecure private rented accommodation in London. Ardiana cried throughout much of the interview.

I came here from Kosovo seven years ago because there was war in my country. I came with my husband and two children.

It was difficult from the beginning because we had never been out of the country before and we didn't know a single word in English, except maybe 'Hi', and 'Goodbye'. I liked it from the first time that I came here and the boys started school, not straight away but after four months and they were happy then.

All the time I cried.

The family had a major problem soon after arriving in the UK when, as a result of living in B&B accommodation, they failed to receive a letter from the Home Office in time to attend an interview. Subsequently, they were refused asylum.

At first it didn't go how we wanted because straight away, six months after we came, we got refused to stay. It wasn't our fault; it was because we lived in a hotel. They put us in a B&B, all in one room. It was ok because we had left our country because there was war there, so anything here was ok. We were sent a letter to go for an interview to the Home Office, but we didn't receive all our mail. The people who worked for the B&B didn't work all the time there. They would come once a week or maybe twice and bring up the letters. We received the letter from the Home Office late and we couldn't go for the interview, so we got refused to stay.

I love my country, I love my family, but even today it's not safe. There are still bombs in the mountains close to our house. The children can go out and never come back because of the bombs.

The family found the uncertainty, which continued for five years, very difficult to cope with.

All the time I was scared in the street when I saw police. I thought they're gonna catch me. I was scared when someone rang the bell. I was scared because people said they come and take you in the middle of the night. You heard lots of stuff, lots, and some are true and some are not true. All the time I cried. When my husband went out I was scared maybe they gonna catch him. Sometimes they catch you when you go and sign. Every time I thought about this, until the day I got leave to remain.

I don't know how much I cried, I can't explain. Not just crying, but inside I am just

thinking, 'Oh my God what is going to happen? Are things going to get better?' Waiting was the worst thing, but it was worth it in the end because we could stay here.

Eventually, the family were given leave to remain in the UK, but one of the children, the youngest son Valmir, by now had quite serious psychological problems. Ardiana's husband had also become ill with depression. The family continued to have great difficulty with accommodation. They were placed in a B&B for a second time when they made a homelessness application to the local authority. This was followed by an offer of temporary accommodation, but so far from the area where they had been living that they would have had to change the children's schools. The youngest son was receiving additional support, including counselling, in his current school and Ardiana didn't want to move him.

It's not good for the boys to change the school and sometimes you can't change the school at all. It was a long journey; it would take two hours to get to school.

I was thinking if we go back what is going to happen, how things are going to go. I was very sad and I am sad, I can't take things, I cry a lot and I feel sad inside me. It's the same with my little boy. Thank God we got to stay because of family amnesty. Thanks to the Government, or Queen, I don't know which. We received the form to say we got to stay, oh my God we were so happy. If you get to stay you don't care about anything else, but you still want to be in your own house, to be comfortable and have your own sofa and things. My husband got no sleep because he got depression and the beds are very bad. Because of the bed it's not comfortable at all at night, and the landlord won't give you a nice bed and you can't afford yourself.

When I got to stay in the UK it was the best thing actually ever and I cried. But after that things didn't go ok with the house. The homeless people put me in a B&B for a long time and after that they offer me a house, very far away, very far. I didn't want to go but when you're homeless you have to. It's not good for the boys to change the school and sometimes you can't change the school at all. It was a long journey; it would take two hours to get to school. They said 'change the school'. I said it's still temporary accommodation and I will have to move again after this. I said I can't move my son again and again and again.

They told me the offer [of temporary accommodation] is going to be the last. They threatened me on the phone and they said to me 'because you refused that you are not going to get a house, you are going to wait'. I was very very very unwell, I said 'Please I can't talk right now, I can't speak, if you have got anything, write to me and we're gonna meet, have a meeting an appointment or something'. I said 'Just please I can't change the school, because my youngest, everybody knows, he has been in counselling for five years because he can't talk to people, he can't open up to people. There is something sad inside him. I can't change his school, first of all, and second what about if you offer me second house again in a year's time, I can't change the school again, because he has got exams.' He is in year 10' he has got GCSEs in year 11. I said 'Can't we have somewhere just a bit closer?' My youngest, oh my God, he's so thin, he doesn't eat. He has done well in school, I don't know how he did it but he is so clever... I didn't want him to change the school because he is clever, but he doesn't open to people, and he doesn't eat. He is so tiny. If you say something to him,

or if you are cross, he just cries straight away and he feels sad and that's why I didn't want him to change his school. School provided the counsellor for Valmir. There was a lady he felt comfortable with.

Because the family refused to move to another temporary accommodation they had to find their own accommodation, or else be declared 'intentionally homeless', which would mean that the local authority had no housing duty towards them. As the only accommodation they could find was more expensive than could be paid for by housing benefit, they have to pay the difference from their other benefits, resulting in hardship.

I said 'OK then, I can't let my children suffer', and they gave me five days to look for a house myself. I didn't want that because you have to pay the deposit and stuff' I didn't have any money at all and they just said 'Oh we don't care'. I said 'Just give me the deposit, I'll find and look for myself'. They closed the case and I found this, this house. I didn't want that but I didn't have any choice.

I went to see maybe a hundred houses because no one will accept housing benefit, it's very very hard. No one accepts, no one, they said 'No' because they don't know if I will pay the rent. But I know what will happen with the homeless if I move into the other temporary accommodation. I will become homeless again. I lived six months in the beginning in the hotel, then the social services put me in a house and then I became homeless when the landlord wanted it back and they put me in a hotel again. This house costs £184 a week for two bedrooms. I have got to pay £31.50 every week out of Job Seekers' Allowance.

Now that the family have found private rented accommodation they are not entitled to be considered homeless and in priority need, so are unlikely to obtain social housing. Social housing is the only decent, secure and affordable option for poor households, so the family will be disadvantaged indefinitely. Nevertheless, they are very grateful to be in the UK.

The council didn't care at all, AT ALL, sometimes they were rude as well, but what can you say when you can't afford to pay yourself. I have got no chance to get a council house, maybe in 10 years time... but I hope, I pray.

I waited a long time and thank God now I can stay. But it would be good if they do it a bit more quickly because it's so much suffering. It's so hard. I was very unhappy. But it was worth it because I got to stay.

Interview five

You just have to sit at home and look into space

Serena's husband escaped from Cameroon following involvement with a democracy movement which led to the family house and business being burnt down and his imprisonment. He left Serena and three children behind. Serena escaped a year later with her youngest child, David, leaving two children with friends. The family spent five years as asylum seekers, during which time one more child was born. After receiving leave to remain, the family applied for the two older children to join them in the UK. This they were able to do after another year. They live in Cardiff.

When I was back home in my country, Cameroon, with my partner, it was very difficult. He was in some democracy meetings, but it's not like in this country. In Cameroon the democrat party has to fight with the Government party. In this country you can say anything you think. If you want, you can send a letter to Blair, you can tackle Blair. If you send a letter there [in Cameroon], when they receive it they will say 'Who sent that letter?' And they can take you straight away to jail and you can spend all your life there.

I was so stressed because this is not my country and I have no right to do anything. You have no right to work.

The Government party came and they burnt our house down. We had a big shop, they burnt that as well; they burnt everything. They arrested my husband and they took him to jail. I don't even know how he was tried. Later somebody helped him to get out of jail and to travel here [to the UK]. I was left behind with the children. I missed my husband.

One year later, they were looking for him where I was living. They didn't know that he had left the country. I had to move to this country, otherwise they would kill me. The pastor in our church travelled with me as if I was his wife so that I could leave. He managed to save my life. I travelled here with my baby son and left two children with friends. I didn't see them again for six years.

Then I was back with my husband. It was one year since I had seen him. Since then I have had one more child, he is two-and-a-half now. My first one is 16 and the second one is 13 and the third one is nine, he will be 10 soon.

The family were not allowed to work while they were asylum seekers. Although they received basic financial support, they had additional hardship as they had to send money back to Cameroon to support the two children left there. Both parents also suffered mental health problems due to the trauma they had experienced and the difficulties they were experiencing as asylum seekers.

I was so stressed because this is not my country and I have no right to do anything. You have no right to work. You just sit home waiting for benefits and you can't do anything. I was very stressed, I was very stressed. I became sick and started

treatment with antidepressants. Right now I'm still taking the treatment. My husband was so shocked about all the problems back home, he lost his mind. He went into mental hospital for one month; right now he's still taking treatment.

Because of all the problems back home we came here, thinking we are safe. We are safe, but your mind is not quiet because you can't go anywhere. You can't travel to France... you can't go too far. You can't go anywhere; you just have to sit at home and look into space.

At first it was difficult because the immigration come to your house and ask when you are going to go home. Whenever we see immigration [officers] like that, in uniform we are scared because police from my country can shoot you, they don't care. Even though here it's not like that, when they came to my house I was scared. Afterwards, for one month, I can't eat anything. I can't eat anything because I am scared they will send me back. And when you feel like that, you have no appetite, you lose weight. That way is not a good life.

When immigration come to my house, I don't know why they are coming. The worst thing is fright; I am scared they might deport me. They don't always say they are coming, they just knock on the door and you have to open the door because it is the police and immigration. They start checking everything. You are scared. This happened three times. They will come and take a picture and they will go inside a room and check everything. They come to see if you are really at this address. Sometimes they are asking me 'Do you want to go back home?' They write down if you say 'no'.

The family were given leave to remain in the UK.

Things started getting better for me when my husband and I went to court. The judge believed us. Now things are getting better for me because they are letting us stay in this country and they have given me British citizenship. Everything is safe for me now, so I am not scared anymore. I know now this is my country. I can't go back. I'm not from my country anymore.

As soon as I found out that I could stay, I felt safe. I couldn't believe it; they gave me the letter and I opened the letter... I just lie down, I just say 'Oh my God'. When I saw it, I shouted, I shouted, 'Jesus Christ! I can't believe this, it's like...'

My friends had kept my children for five years. They were just friends I left them with. I didn't see my children all that time. Sometimes with the immigration issues here and losing my children was giving too much stress, it was as if my head would explode. I would just cry, every day crying. Every day crying. It was like I don't know what happened to my life.

When I was here, if they give me benefits I have to make sure that I do not use all the money. I can't use all the benefit for myself. I have to save some money and send it home for the children.

It has made a difference since they said you can stay here. Everything starts to change. Sometimes still I feel stressed, but not because I am not sure if I can stay here. I'm sure to stay here; now it is different. I do take treatment [for the depression] but the problem's not serious like before. The sister said I can't stop the

I can't eat anything because I am scared they will send me back.

treatment completely, so like before I was taking two tablets and now I only take one.

I think if someone comes here, the Government should help people and give them a work permit. I would like to say to the Government that sometimes the people who come here, some immigrants, have really really got problems. And I think people should try and understand. I think it's better to save them. The Government should save them. The Government tells some people they are lying and then when they reach back home, they die. I know people it has happened to like that, when they came from Cameroon. When you come from another country to seek asylum and they send you back home, they put you inside jail when you reach there. I just want to say if you can save people in this country, it will be good.

After receiving leave to remain in the UK the family applied for the two children still in Cameroon to join them.

Now my two oldest ones have been in this country for six months. I couldn't believe it when they said your kids have visas. They phoned me to send someone to come and collect their passports. I was not believing that I can see my kids again. Even after they told me I could stay, it took a year and a half before my children could come. At first they told me there is no way your children can come. Why do they give me indefinite leave to remain and my children cannot come and join me? I had to do a test [to prove parentage] then it took about seven months or one year, then they gave the visas.

When I was staying here and I didn't have my children, I was very unhappy because it was so difficult for me. It spoilt my life and it spoilt my children's life, because they are not with me, they do not have affection, family affection for all that time. Your children cannot forget you. To live for so long like this and children are on the other side and you are on another side. You don't know what could happen to them there. They were happy to see me again and their life has changed now. They are really happy.

David, my nine-year-old, remembered them. When we go to airport he said 'that is my brother'. Sometimes at home I would put on the news, some country where there is war there and they are killing people and he asked me 'is this like back home?' 'Are my brothers like this?' I said 'they are safe and I think you will see them'. If you ask him if he wants to go home next year just to visit, he says 'No I don't want to go home'. David remembers everything and he doesn't want to go home.

The family have plans for the future.

I am going to college in September. I just want to do hair, maybe open a hairdressers. I can do some night shift work and go to school in the daytime and I can save some money to open a hairdressers.

My children who just arrived can't speak English yet, but they try their best.

I am going to college in September. I want to do hair, maybe open a hairdressers.

Interview six

I would like a small home for me and my family

Barbara is seeking asylum from Angola together with her two school-age sisters. She has a two-year-old son and a baby. They all live in a one-room flat in London with Barbara's partner: two adults, a 10 and a 12-year-old, a toddler and a baby. Bedding is stored on an outside balcony, unless it rains, because there is nowhere to store it in the flat during the day. Because Barbara left accommodation in Plymouth arranged by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) in order to live with her partner she receives only subsistence support and nothing towards housing costs.

There was war in Angola. My father is dead, but I don't know about my mum. I haven't seen her for 10 years. I have been looking after my sisters since then.

I have lived in the UK for four and a half years or five years, I came here with my sisters and I was sent to live in Plymouth. At that time I was single, then one day I saw my partner and he talked to me and then we started having a relationship. Then we had a child.

It was very difficult because he lived in London. All the time he had to travel to Plymouth to see me and my year-old son. I didn't have any money for travelling which is very expensive. I talked to my solicitor and then we explained to the Home Office that we need to live together as a family. At the moment I am still waiting for the Home Office to decide my case.

As well as living in extremely overcrowded conditions, the family struggle to live on very limited income. Barbara has to choose between living with her partner in these conditions, or living in better accommodation, but without her partner's support.

Since I came to London they will only pay £175 a week for four of us to live on. They won't give me anything for the baby [ie there are five people, one adult and four children living on the £175]. I have to send a certificate of birth.

There is me, my little sisters, my two sons and my partner living in this flat. There is just this room. I sleep on there [Barbara points to a mattress on an outside balcony] with my two babies alongside me. In the night we move it inside. My husband sleeps in the chair. If it is raining we move the beds inside. The girls sleep on the other mattress. We all have to go to bed at eight and a half or nine.

It is very difficult for me and for the children. It is very, very difficult for me. Some nights my partner stays with me, sometimes he stays somewhere else. I don't have family that live here, there is only my partner. I would like a small home for me and my family.

There is me, my little sisters, my two sons and my partner living in this flat. There is just this room.

I have been waiting for five years to see if I can stay in the UK. I just wait now for an asylum decision.

It is very, very difficult, but I can't separate from my partner, because my partner helps me a lot. I need support from someone to stay with me. The first time living in Plymouth with my two little sisters it was very difficult for me. Very, very difficult.

I had a bigger place in Plymouth, but I decided to come here. It is difficult living in such a small place, but he does help me a lot if I have a problem, sickness or health or something like that. Also because partly I am not speaking good English and I need him to help with shopping or something.

I have lived here now for seven months. The children keep saying it is a small place. It is very important for me to stay here in London because my partner is here. I can't stay in Plymouth with four children and my partner is here in London.

There has been a problem with one of Barbara's sisters' schooling following an administrative mistake at the Home Office.

I have got a problem with my youngest sister. The Home Office put on the application form that she is my daughter, but she is not my daughter, she is my sister. And they changed the date of birth. I can't read the paper, but when I moved here my husband says 'Oh this is wrong'. I say 'Wrong, why is it wrong?' Because she is born in '94, but in the paper it says '97. That's made it difficult for her to start school and at the moment she is not in school. They say she is nine years old, but she is 12. The school told me that I have to get my solicitor to write to the Home Office. When we were in Plymouth both my sisters went to school.

So until this is sorted out they will not take her in the school for a 12-year-old. She can't go to the right school for a 12-year-old until you get the piece of paper.

Despite the problems, Barbara and her sisters are happy to be in the UK.

My sisters are happy that we came here and I am glad that we come here and I am happy. Every part of the world is difficult. I think life for me and my sisters is good here.

Interview seven

Every time they made friends, then we had to move

Tina came to the UK seeking asylum from Angola in 1994 with her five-year-old daughter and her niece. Her husband was in jail. She had to wait until 2003 to be given leave to remain in the UK. Tina's husband was able to join the family in 1999, but still does not have a decision on his own asylum claim. Two more children were born in the UK, but Tina and her husband have split up. Tina has lived at six different temporary addresses and still doesn't have secure accommodation. She currently lives in an ex-council flat in London which has been bought by an investor and is being leased back to the council as temporary accommodation. The rent is £441 a week. The pressures caused by insecure housing, combined with not being able to work, have had a very serious impact on the family.

I came to the UK from Angola in 1994 with my daughter and one niece. My daughter was five and a half and my niece, I think, was three and a half. Since then I have had two more children.

We had war for a long time in Angola and in 1992 there was a big democratic election, but the election didn't go so well. The Government thought they were going to lose, but they won and there was fighting with the other party. Actually there were tribal fights everywhere – the whole country. People who belonged to the Government would be killed and so they wouldn't trust anybody. They said my husband was a traitor and they put him in jail. That is why I came here. My husband was in jail until 1999, when he was allowed to come home to visit his family. Then he ran away and he came here.

The family were not allowed to work and since the right to mainstream benefits had been removed from some asylum-seeking families, they were forced to depend on local authority support via the Children Act 1989.

It took 10 years to get asylum. I got the basic benefits but I was not allowed to work. At first we were allowed to study or do something, not just stay at home, but from 2000 we were not allowed to study or do anything and we were not allowed to get benefits. We were supported by social services and that was very difficult.

The family were being forced to move regularly and had addresses in North, East and Central London. They experienced racial harassment in East London.

After the hotel I lived in five more places. We went to Dagenham, then Enfield, then Queen's Park, then Pimlico; then we got this flat.

It took 10 years to get asylum. I got the basic benefits but I was not allowed to work.

After the hotel I lived in five more places. We went to Dagenham, then Enfield, then Queen's Park, then Pimlico; then we got this flat.

It was very difficult for the children. We wanted them to be able to settle in one place, but as soon as they settled they decide to move us. As an asylum seeker I don't know this country and it is difficult to find friends. It was difficult for me and for the children. Every time they made friends, then we had to move. It is not like they move us in the same area, we move far away so we need to change everything. Then we have to build confidence to be in that area. You had to change everything, change doctor, it is really depressing. So after we moved three times we decided not to have any more friends because it is too painful to leave the loved ones behind because sometimes you get attached to the people you know – the people around you.

When they moved us from the hotel to Dagenham, they said they don't have any places here in London so I moved there. And then when I moved there there was like racism, harassment, from the children there, they were harassing me. I was living on the first floor, but they were trying to throw things in my flat, breaking the windows. I had to call the police so much. That was when we were moved to Enfield. And then in Enfield they wanted the flat back because they wanted to build a road and that is when they moved us to Queen's Park. In Queen's Park the council wanted to demolish the flat that I was living in because they wanted to build another road. That's when they moved me to Pimlico. In Pimlico the flat was damp and now they moved me here.

When the family got leave to remain in the UK, they were then entitled to apply for social housing and became a homeless family. Due to the chronic shortage of accommodation where they were living, this was the beginning of another long wait, which is continuing.

Since I got to stay in the UK, in 2003, I haven't yet had to move again. The only thing that changed was that we went from social services to Income Support. But this flat is still temporary accommodation. It costs £441 a week and, of course, it goes up every year. Housing benefit has to pay everything.

To get permanent accommodation you need to have the points. It is difficult because I only have points since I got the indefinite leave to remain, so for the 10 years I've been waiting in temporary accommodation as an asylum seeker that doesn't count. So I have less points and this means I have to stay here for five years or seven.

Each time we have to move, we have to change everything. I would say there is depression. When the parents are not feeling well, it's not easy to look after the children, and then they think that 'Oh Mummy is not there for me anymore'. So they were feeling sad and depressed because it was hurting them inside because they didn't know why they need to move all the time. Basically everything that I was feeling, the children were feeling the same.

Although Tina and her husband had two more children after they were reunited in 1999, the five-year separation had made relations between them

difficult and led the relationship to break down. The children were deeply affected by this.

The two youngest were born after my husband arrived here. But because I had been separated from my husband for five years, it made it difficult for us to live together. We were on and off, on and off, until he just left us. He just left us two months ago for the last time. I had changed and he had changed quite a lot. The way we lived back home is different than here and this had a really big impact on our life. I have no idea where he is now. He hasn't told me.

For the moment because their dad is not here, it is really difficult for the children. They cry for him because he decided not to come and see them.

My husband is not allowed to work or to study. He was spending more time with his friends than with us, so I asked him to leave. Because I asked him to leave he was upset. Because he was upset with me he wanted me to feel the pain he is feeling and he stopped coming to see the children. It is important for the kids to have a relationship with both parents, but he tries to punish me by not seeing them.

Lisa, the daughter who came from Angola with Tina, is now a parent herself. Tina thinks that the experiences Lisa has had in the UK have led to her becoming a parent so young.

My oldest daughter is 19 now. All the changes had a really big impact on her; I think that is one of the things that made her have a child so quickly. If we could have stayed in one place she could have kept the same friends. She used to travel to see her friends and then when she came home I would be upset with her, 'Why you come late?' She was depressed trying to look for love somewhere else. There was no love. She was trying to be happy somewhere else.

The Government should listen to people. Stop moving us to different places. And then don't make us wait a long time for the answers [to the asylum application]. Make our life easier. Treat us as human beings. They weren't listening to us. They were making life really difficult. We ran away from the war, thinking we're going to go somewhere and life will be different, but it's still difficult, really difficult.

The worst thing is the housing. I'm struggling, struggling.

Not being able to work and having to wait so long for a decision on their asylum applications has had a serious impact on both Tina and her husband.

When we are asylum seekers, we are not allowed to do anything. This is the thing the Government should change. Then when you get leave to remain they should help you to find a job. Some poor African people maybe never had the chance to study and then we can't study here, it is really difficult. I mean for me to work here, I need to study first. Then to find a job to be able to afford the

rent is even more difficult. It is extremely difficult for people who get indefinite leave to remain, because you haven't been allowed to do anything, to study or anything. It is so depressing to stay home and you don't have money to travel, so you just have to stay home.

They should decide quickly if we are genuine asylum seekers or not. I don't know why it is difficult for them to decide if we are genuine asylum seekers or not. If they can decide now that we can stay, they could have decided before and told us 'You can stay'.

It's hard to explain what it's like waiting for the asylum decision. It's the worst thing you can think of. Even now I am a British citizen that fear doesn't go away. The fear that I might get sent back didn't go away. Maybe it is going to go away, but I just feel maybe I need to work on it... I still have doubts, maybe especially because I am not settled in the house [ie still living in temporary accommodation].

Having somewhere permanent to live and permission to stay would have made a difference for my husband. He still doesn't [have] permission to stay here. I tried to do my best to help him, but sometimes it is difficult to listen to him. He is constantly in fear of immigration; that he is going to be sent back and that he would have to leave the kids behind.

I know he doesn't think this is his house or that he is a man. He thinks he is supposed to do everything for the family, but he isn't allowed to work; he is not allowed to do anything. He felt like he was a useless man. It's scary.

‘The worst thing is the housing. I'm struggling, struggling.’

Interview eight

We are among the poorest of the poor, because the Government does not allow us to work

Pauline lives in Glasgow. The family are seeking asylum from Zimbabwe, although Pauline was born in Uganda. They have been in the UK since 2001. The family won an appeal against a negative asylum decision, but the judgement was overturned following a subsequent appeal by the Home Office. Pauline and her 20-year-old daughter are HIV-positive following sexual abuse and rape in Zimbabwe. Pauline arrived in the UK with four children and since then has had a fifth child who is now nine months old.

I will start by saying that I am in this position as an asylum seeker because I face persecution in my country. The persecution affected my husband to the extent that he had to lose his life. When I start talking about that I just get emotional, but I will try for the sake of this interview not to lose my head. We also suffered horrific abuses, I was sexually abused together with my eldest daughter and that trauma coupled with the loss of my husband is something that I will never, even as I speak to you today, come to terms with.

So I arrived in this country in 2001, together with my children and we applied for asylum. We went through several processes because initially the application was refused and we went to appeal. The whole process has been really protracted. It has been so, so difficult for all of these years to imagine that we could be sent home to die, because for me now it is a matter of life and death. I know I won't live if I am sent back to my country.

I won an appeal which the Home Office contested. I came from Zimbabwe where I was married and where I was living, but because I was born in Uganda they said they [me and my children] can go back there. If I go to Uganda I will die. My children were brought up in Zimbabwe; if they go to Uganda they are outcasts there. If they send us, we have no one there. We don't know what is going to happen. It could be that they bundle me up anytime and I dread a knock at the door. This affects the children's performance at school. They wonder what the point is if they're going to be thrown out. It's so demoralising. It's so difficult to live with. If they take me now and my five children back to Uganda, two of us would be dead and the others would be orphans.

Following dispersal to Glasgow, the family faced racial harassment. More positively, they received support from Barnardo's and Pauline began to contribute voluntarily in the local community.

When we arrived in Glasgow in August 2001, one of the biggest problems we faced was harassment. Some people came to our door and wrote 'black bastards, go back to your country'. My children faced difficulties in school. Actually my second daughter

Some people came to our door and wrote 'black bastards, go back to your country'.

‘If there is anything we would like to definitely change, it is to give us the opportunity to contribute to this country.’

didn't want to go back to the primary school because of harassment in class and from the rest of the school. Eventually she had to move school and that was much better.

So those were the initial difficulties, but soon after we settled into that area we got in touch with Barnardo's and we were able to meet other people who were in similar circumstances. We were still going through a lot, in terms of mental problems at that point in time, coping with what we had suffered, going through the asylum process, living in a new area with its own problems. And if we hadn't got in touch with Barnardo's at that point in time I think I would have lost my will to live by now. That was helpful to be able to get in touch with Barnardo's social worker who then made several referrals. The children were assessed and there were some activities to do within the Barnardo's project and that really made us begin to feel part of society.

Then I got involved with so many other local initiatives in my area. I became involved with so many other projects, basically to try and create awareness about why people seek asylum and what the issues are and what we want to change. It is very difficult to be in a position of an asylum seeker because people don't understand why we seek asylum.

When we first came there was a misconception that people were coming to get benefits, but back where I come from we don't live on benefits. People know from childhood that they have to look after their own living. And all we wanted was an opportunity to be safe. Every asylum seeker runs away from their home seeking refuge and the only thing they are thinking about is security at that point in time. Asylum seekers are here because of persecution and torture and harassment, they do not have a choice, except to flee. If I had a choice I wouldn't be in this position.

Pauline would like to work, but this has not been allowed.

People think we are here to get benefits. They think we are running away from poverty and looking for a better life. But among asylum seekers there are people who were employed in respectable jobs. I was the head of an organisation. At the time of fleeing I didn't know where we were going. It was a question of running away and taking the children to safety. If it was not for that situation I would have stayed, doing the things that I used to do. I would not choose to live this life here, which has reduced me to nothing. To nothing. To a beggar. I cannot live without antidepressants now because it is too much for me to bear and whilst you are like that you begin to lose hope in the future.

I don't have any words that can explain how we feel, to be regarded the way we are. And we are among the poorest of the poor, again not by choice, but because the Government does not allow us to work. We live on very little money, the bare minimum.

If there is anything we would like definitely changed it is to give us an opportunity to contribute to this country. We have skills we want to share, give us an opportunity to share them. I know we have an opportunity to volunteer and we have been volunteering left, right and centre. But when you have a job then it's a different feeling. I am not saying volunteers don't commit themselves to the job they do, but there is a difference, at least in my own perception. I think I would do better if I was allowed to work rather than to volunteer.

At least when I came I was employable, maybe then the skills were still fresh. But now, God knows, if I am still employable. So that's the problem.

Getting employment would have been the natural way to let people heal from the issues that they suffered. I am poor because the Government wants me to be poor. I've been virtually made poor. It's difficult to imagine. It is terrible when your life depends on the power of someone else.

This has been the first time ever in my life, since I left university in 1991, that I have been unemployed. Asylum has made me redundant. I don't know what I can call myself now, but at the end of the day here I am. Because of the political situation in Zimbabwe I can't go back.

Working would be more beneficial than remaining in the situation where we are. So we are asking the Government to give us an opportunity and see how it works.

The lack of access to higher education and to an adequate income has had a big impact on the family. After this interview took place, the Scottish Executive decided to open higher education to asylum-seeking children who had been educated in Scottish schools for three years or more. The opportunity of higher education remains closed to asylum seekers in the rest of the UK unless they can find the full overseas student fees.

I had the opportunity to acquire an education even from a very basic background in Africa and to imagine that my children are in Europe and will not acquire a university education is something that I cannot understand. Here in Scotland, when a child is above the age of 16 and chooses to stay at school, they get a weekly education attendance allowance of £30. Our children get nothing. In fact, when they get to 16 their living expenses are reduced by £10. So that is pushing families deeper into poverty. I don't know what the assumption is, but in my experience it's cheaper to look after the younger child. Asylum-seeking teenagers want to behave like other teenagers. There are certain things they want to wear and it becomes so difficult to meet their needs when you have no money. Then I got a letter last week saying when my daughter is 21 the money will come down further.

They do give the children an education here, but after school the door is closed. All my daughter's formative years, her educational opportunities, her time has been wasted in this asylum process.

My understanding of asylum is that it is protecting vulnerable people who are fleeing from persecution. Now it is becoming a political issue, a hot potato, and the 'success' of asylum policy depends on how many people have been deported back. We want Government to consider that protection should be more important than reducing numbers.

You know there have been a lot of campaigns about the dangers of detaining children. I know what can happen. I have seen it happen. That's something the Government has really got to look at, because it kills the mental ability of a child. They will live with that memory forever.

Interview nine

Mummy, now promise me I am not moving school again

Carol is from Zimbabwe. She claimed asylum in the UK in 2001 but was refused. An appeal was unsuccessful. She initially lived in London, but was dispersed to Glasgow with her daughter Diana, where they faced two years of racial harassment.

I am from Zimbabwe. I came to the UK in 2001 to claim asylum because I got involved with the opposition political party, MDC, which was against the Government, ZANU-PF. At my workplace, I was with the personnel department and I managed to mobilise the young people. But when I got involved I started having problems. I got stoned and threatened. I got attacked and robbed. My life was not safe at that time.

The main reason really I left is because my daughter was kidnapped. She was four. I got anonymous phone calls saying if you want your daughter back, you had better stop what you are doing. I went to report it to the Police, but they told me they can't report a person missing because I had to look for her [in the neighbourhood]. I was panicking, not knowing anything, but the following day I just heard a knock on the door and I saw my daughter. You know at that age she didn't know much, she just said that she was with an uncle. It was not someone she knows because I don't have an uncle or a brother.

I went to my mother's place, but they have ZANU-PF people planted all over and they were checking out where I was. Then I started getting problems with the union, so I went to stay with a friend in another area, but there were still threats and everything. I was really terrified because I knew what those people can do, you can get tortured, get killed.

I was fearing for my security so I thought it was time to leave. I left in 2001 and came straight to the UK. The reason I chose the UK is because it is far away.

When I claimed asylum, they said that they believed I was involved in politics, but they didn't believe that my life was at stake. So that was the reason they refused me asylum here. And the judge stated that after four or five years if I go back home no one would remember me.

The family stayed in London, but only received subsistence support because they had not agreed to be dispersed away from London and the South East. Carol wanted to remain near her only family member in the UK for support.

I claimed asylum at Gatwick Airport and I stayed in London for a year before I came to Glasgow. My niece has been here for 10 years and I could stay there. My daughter went to school in London. From the first week I came here, I started getting subsistence. I didn't get dispersed because I had somewhere to stay. Also my solicitor was telling me to stay in London. But the Home Office wrote to me to say that my

solicitor wasn't recognised so I should get another, so that was another problem.

The reason I stayed with my niece was really my mental state. I needed support and I felt much better staying with someone I knew. She helped me to come around and be strong and to try and get a new life really. Mentally I was in that state of giving up on life and everything and saying it's hopeless, because of pain, because of the worry, because of everything that happened. I had a good job, you know, and a good income but you have to come and live like this and if I was on my own I don't think I could have managed.

I requested to live near my niece, but I was told you can't choose. So I had to move in with her. The accommodation was not enough for all of us because when I first came, she was single with one child, but then she married somebody and now she's got another child. That's when I went back to tell them my situation had changed.

When the family couldn't be accommodated by the niece in London any more, they were put in temporary accommodation then dispersed to Glasgow. As a result, Diana has been in four schools in four years. The family experienced racial harassment at the first address in Glasgow. They received support from the local authority, which had to escort Diana to school.

So after some time they put me in temporary accommodation in London for two months and my daughter went to school there. That was a different school. She went to the first school, then she went to the second school in London, then we moved to here, to Glasgow. We lived in one area then we had to move here. This is her fourth school.

The first place I lived in [in Glasgow] was a one-bedroom flat; you could just hear everything upstairs to the left and to the right. Most of the places around there were boarded up. It looked like an area where people didn't want to live really. Just a few people on drugs and people on alcohol. And there was a lot of trouble. People outside throwing stones, writing on the walls telling us 'Get out of here'. I lived there for two years. I was lucky because I was upstairs, but the people downstairs got writing on their doors. You get scared. My daughter never went to play outside. And she never walked to school because social services take her in the morning and bring her back after school. When I came to Scotland I got a lot of support from social services. I can say they helped me a lot.

Even stepping outside really makes you feel fear. Asylum seekers are getting assaulted. You just do your things, come quickly and close your door and stay indoors. But since I moved here the place is quiet and I haven't had trouble, so I think this side [of the city] is better.

I can't do anything, so that is the difficult bit which I feel very strongly about. Because being a single mum, not working, not being able to plan for your child. And the other thing is the uncertainty of not knowing when they are going to come and get you. The fear that is installed in us asylum seekers because, you know, if you get a knock you can't be sure who is at the door you think maybe it is the Home Office. The most frustrating thing is that you can't plan because you don't know what is

And there was a lot of trouble. People outside throwing stones, writing on the walls telling us 'get out of here'.

going to happen to you. It's like your life has ended and that removes all your confidence and that's the hard thing.

I made an initial appeal [against the refusal of asylum] and it was refused again. But I haven't heard anything since. At the moment because of the situation back home on top of my own problems it really is a big risk for me to go home. The relations between Britain and Zimbabwe are not fine. Once they know that you claimed asylum in the UK you are marked for the rest of your life. It is really terrifying.

If the Government decided to send me back to Zimbabwe, you've got no choice really. But if the worst comes to the worst, I think I would rather die than go back to that, torture or something. I don't want to get to those extremes to say that I would rather die or kill myself. Also because my daughter's life is here now. It is four years, she can't remember much about Zimbabwe, so her life is here. So it's a bad situation. They push you to the wall. If I go back home I will die. It's those situations which worry you everyday. You want to live, you want to be there for your daughter, you want to do the right thing, but at times things are just beyond your control.

6 You want to live, you want to be there for your daughter, you want to do the right thing, but at times things are just beyond your control. **9**

Diana finds life difficult when she can't join in with activities at school.

It is a problem really for my daughter because I can say that I've got an intelligent girl, who is keen to do things, to go out, to participate in sports and things which are not provided for free. She has got her own ambitions and things and I find it difficult because I can't encourage her to do some of the things she wants because of our situation. I just want the best for her. She is 11 now. It is paining for me really to always remind her about our budget, whereas, maybe if I was working, I can manage some of the things which could make life positive. Because she is growing up as well she demands too much, because maybe the other children at school, her friends they have these things. She gets frustrated, you know. I can say that she is not a demanding kind of child, but it's very expensive. It is ordinary things which if I were working I could give her.

We are living on very little. My life has been on hold, but you know there's a certain point where you say 'OK this happened, but let me get on my feet and try to move on'. But you are told you can't do this because you are an asylum seeker. You've got your ambitions, you want to go to school or you want to work, but when you try to go somewhere and they say 'Oh no, you can't do this,' why? 'Because you're an asylum seeker'. It pains. It is like you have committed a crime by coming and seeking asylum. We came here for protection and so we should be protected. Like now I have to really beg at college for my HNC (Higher National Certificate) course because you're not allowed to do it as an asylum seeker. I am capable of doing it in one year, but because I am an asylum seeker I have to do it over three years, it really pains me.

Diana was particularly affected by the moves from one accommodation to another and the school moves which were a consequence of this.

When we moved in here my daughter said 'Mummy please promise me that we are not going to move home again', which is a promise I can't give. She said 'Mummy now promise me I am not moving school again'. It pained me when I looked at her. I can't promise her that. I don't know what is going to happen if the case is thrown out again. You don't know, you just have to be hopeful, you can't do much; it's just sitting and waiting. That's really bad. To me it's torture, because mentally you try so hard. You're not settled. You hear that people are being deported; the next person could be you. When you've got to sign [as a reporting requirement] you just don't know, you think maybe today's the day [they deport us]. It takes long, the queue is long. They pick people up when you go to sign in and send them to detention. It's a terrible situation. You can leave your details at a unit near the Home Office when you go to sign, because when you go to the Home Office, they take off your mobiles, they take off everything. It's not a guarantee that they won't detain you [ie leaving your name with someone while attending the interview], but it's just so someone knows.

Diana understands what's happening and she hopes and prays also. She likes to travel. Like last year she had an opportunity to go to Ireland with the other children, but she couldn't go because she had no passport. She is asking 'When can we get our passports back?' So it's those kinds of things. When we went to the solicitor for something she asked him 'Are we going to be sent back? I don't want to go back to Zimbabwe.' It's those things which affect a child and shows she is worried.

Interview ten

They handcuffed me and my husband in front of my little boy

Olivia lives in Stockport, Greater Manchester, with her husband and seven-year-old son, Michael. She has serious health problems. The family came to the UK in 2005, seeking asylum from Malawi, but have been refused. Eventually, the family were taken at 5.30am into detention prior to forced removal from the UK. Due to a mix up, the family were not deported and were able to return to Stockport. Michael remains traumatised by this and the family now experience harassment in the neighbourhood as a direct result of the way the attempted deportation was carried out.

[We] got some sponsorship from within the church for tickets and airfare, so we came over here and told the immigration that we are here to claim asylum. We had to sleep the whole night at the airport. It was November and the weather was freezing. We had to sleep on the chairs and stay there without food. When we asked them 'Can't you find us somewhere maybe where we can sleep because my little boy is not feeling very well and I suffer from epilepsy?' I was having problems with my chest as well. They said 'No, this is not a hotel'. My son still had burns which were not properly healed.

Then they took us to the detention centre in the morning and gave us some soap to have a wash and a bed to sleep. In the evening they took us back to the airport for interview. Then they said 'You are qualified to claim asylum, you can get in'. They took us to a hotel and from there they took us to another hotel. After that they picked us up and drove us to Stockport.

The family were given a house in Stockport, but were quickly moved to a very poor quality flat. At this point the full extent of Olivia's health problems became clear:

At first they gave us a house, it was all right that house, but afterwards they moved us to a flat. They said that the house was not for asylum seekers and that we were only put there temporarily. [The flat] was awful, the wallpaper all coming off and the carpet dirty, everything was just messed up. It's still bad. If we complain to them they say 'You are asylum seekers, you [have] to accept what we give you'.

After we arrived here in this country, I got sick myself, they discovered that I am HIV-positive and on top of that I developed TB. I have epilepsy as well and then I had a stroke. I couldn't move the whole of one side.

The family were refused asylum and subsequently taken into detention to wait for deportation. It was 5.30am when the authorities arrived. There appeared to

be no consideration of how this might affect a six-year-old child.

Then they refused our asylum and tried to deport us. They came in at half past five in the morning. We were all in bed. They just came and banged at the door and then they came in. They had the keys; I think they managed to get them from the asylum people. My husband woke up and said 'Who is this?' They said 'It's immigration; don't move, stay where you are'. We didn't know that the Immigration can come like that.

I was really poorly and the doctors had written a letter to them saying that I cannot fly to Malawi because of my health. I suffer from epilepsy and my husband told me that I had a fit, but when I collapsed they didn't bother about me. Maybe they were thinking that I was faking it. But I had a crutch next to me and if they look at the doctor's report it definitely shows that I am taking all these tablets for epilepsy and everything.

It was like they were coming to arrest a criminal. When I woke up I saw two women standing there and some men were with my husband, telling him 'Let's go to the van, let's go'. My little boy was crying and screaming. They told him 'Don't scream, we're not here to arrest your mum and dad, we're just taking them for questioning'.

They told my little boy 'Go and pack your clothes'. He was only six. They wouldn't let me change my clothes or take my medication with me. I was in my pyjamas, so they just saw a dressing gown somewhere and put it on me. I was walking with the crutch, but they took it off me. They said 'Maybe there are bullets in this crutch'. They told me 'Someone is going to bring you your clothes', but they lied to me. I think to me they were sort of lying all the time to try and calm me down. They said I wasn't going to be deported. When we arrived at the detention centre there were no clothes; no sign of clothes.

We were kept in detention for a week and I was without medication for three days. During those three days without medication I was having fits. Then they managed to get me some medication.

We were all in one room together. My little boy was so frightened. He is still frightened now. While we were in detention, he couldn't sleep during the night; he couldn't eat during the day. He was so scared.

After a week, the family were to be deported.

When they came to take us to Heathrow they handcuffed me and my husband in front of my little boy. He was screaming, but they didn't bother about him. I had a fit and I collapsed on the floor. Two big women jumped on me and handcuffed me.

It took about two hours to get to the airport. We were handcuffed all the way. They had given me my crutch, but because I was handcuffed I couldn't use it. So one woman was holding me one side, but I think she thought I was faking it and she banged my head against the wall. When I said, 'Why are you banging my head against the wall?' she lied, she said 'Oh you spat on me', I said 'No, no, no in my life, never in my life can I spit on somebody'. They put me in one van and my husband and my little boy in another van.

They knew that I was ill and they had people to escort us to Malawi, including one

“They told my little boy “Go and pack your clothes”. He was only six.”

doctor. But then they said they were no tickets for us. They told us we were not going and they took the handcuffs off us. On the way back to the detention centre there were two women who were abusing us, telling us 'You just come in this country to claim benefits, you lazy bastards'. I just said 'No'. We are not in this country just to claim benefits. If we were given a chance to work we will work and move on with our lives. We don't feel comfortable claiming benefits.

So if I am given a chance to work I will go and work and contribute something to the economy, not just relying on benefits all the time. Because even the benefits they give us is not enough for survival. We get £100 a week. But out of that we have to pay all the bills, everything except the rent for the house. There's the bills, electricity and then food, and then the boy will need uniform, school uniform, and then we need clothing as well. So you can see we are surviving through, we come here to Barnardo's to beg and you give us some extra things. If they let us work maybe we can support ourselves and we would not have to rely on benefits.

They took us back into detention, but after four days our lawyer got an injunction against the Home Office and they released us.

When the family were released from detention, they were left with no money and no way to travel back to Stockport, which was 200 miles away.

When they released us they just took us to a big gate and said 'You're released, you can go home'. I said 'From here we don't know where to go to, how are we going to get home?' We didn't have any money and we don't know where we are. They told us we had to find our own means to get home. I refused and said there's no way we can go anywhere. Then an immigration officer, a lady, saw that I was ill and gave us some tickets to travel.

Back in Stockport, the impact of the experience on Michael became clear:

After we came back to Stockport, there was massive difference because we were scared. We have nightmares almost every night. When my son hears a bang at the door he runs screaming from the room. If we ask him, 'Why are you screaming?', he says it's the police at the door. All the time he's disturbed. Even at school teachers say 'Your son has been acting like he doesn't want to stay close to some other children, he's got a spirit of fear'. Now he's going through some sessions, just to make his mind forget all about those things. It's something like counselling. Even at home sometimes when you are upstairs and he is downstairs, he will bring something upstairs. You ask him why he can't stay downstairs and he says he's scared.

The immigration make us report once a month, but one time I went there I had a fit while I was standing in the queue so they told me to send in sick notes instead and I did that for 12 months. But then they sent me a letter saying because I didn't report I am liable to six months imprisonment. After reading that letter I had a fit as well. Then they said sorry we did that by mistake! I think

‘We didn't have any money and we don't know where we are. They told us we had to find our own means to get home.’

they should be more accurate in the way run their things. We are so frightened, especially after that detention. We are not free, we've got fear.

Following the detention, the family had problems with neighbours who had witnessed the attempted removal and formed a negative opinion of them. The family are still grateful, however, to be in the UK.

One of our neighbours was saying that we were arrested and maybe we are criminals. And then another neighbour said it was something to do with immigration.

It was the way they arrested us at half past five [am]. I think they came in six cars. Four policemen went on one side and then they surrounded the whole building. My husband was taken out with two men this side, two on the other side and two at the back. I was taken out in pyjamas. Our neighbours now seem to think we are criminals.

They should understand that when we come in this country, it's because we have got problems back home. We really appreciate that they accepted us in this country. So we really appreciate all the UK Government does, especially for my family and for all asylum seekers, because I know if I was in my country by now I could have been dead and my son would have been an orphan.

“One of our neighbours was saying that we were arrested and maybe we are criminals.”

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*n.d. indicates that the document did not have a date. Different documents are differentiated by a letter following, eg n.d.a.

Notes

- ¹ See H M Government (2007) page 3 footnote 3 'In line with the definition used in the national statistical collection, the Family Resources Survey, this Delivery Agreement is focussed on children under the age of 16 (or under 18 in formal education or training), and therefore does not include those aged 16 and over who are not in full time education, employment or training and *does not specifically cover the children of asylum seekers.*' (Our emphasis).
- ² Home Office, Border and Immigration Agency (2007).
- ³ All these figures are from Bennet, K; Heath, T and Jeffries, R (2007) Home Office Statistical Bulletin 14/07: Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2006.
- ⁴ National Statistics (2007).
- ⁵ Home Office (2007) '16,520 principal asylum applications have been lodged this year; a 7 per cent fall compared to the same period in 2006, and the lowest since 1992.'
- ⁶ See page 6, The backlog.
- ⁷ A fuller list of benefits asylum seekers are not entitled to claim can be found on pages 18-19.
- ⁸ National Asylum Support Service, now Asylum Support in the Home Office Border and Immigration Agency.
- ⁹ Only asylum seekers who apply for asylum in Northern Ireland are housed there.
- ¹⁰ It is difficult to estimate numbers, but the GLA's 'guestimate' is that up to 500,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including dependents, are in London; see Mayor of London (2007) page 9.
- ¹¹ See Introduction and footnote 5.
- ¹² Home Office, Border and Immigration Agency (2007).
- ¹³ H M Government (2005).
- ¹⁴ Bennet, K; Heath, T and Jeffries, R (2007).
- ¹⁵ See page 6, The backlog.
- ¹⁶ See Border and Immigration Agency (n.d.a) in relation to immigration rules.
- ¹⁷ See Home Office, Immigration and Nationality Department (2006).
- ¹⁸ All figures in this section are for weekly payments.
- ¹⁹ See Home Office, Border and Immigration Agency (n.d.b) for all these figures www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/applying/asylum-support/cash-support
- ²⁰ See Home Office, Border and Immigration Agency (n.d.b).
- ²¹ See Home Office, Border and Immigration Agency (n.d.c).
- ²² Kelley and Meldgaard (2005).
- ²³ In Scotland, The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and in Northern Ireland, The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.
- ²⁴ Home Office, Border and Immigration Agency (n.d.d).
- ²⁵ Only asylum seekers who apply for asylum in Northern Ireland are housed there.
- ²⁶ All these figures are from Bennet, K; Heath, T and Jeffries, R (2007) Home Office Statistical Bulletin 14/07: Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2006.
- ²⁷ See footnote 5.
- ²⁸ Bennet, K; Heath, T and Jeffries, R (2007).
- ²⁹ Mayor of London (2007).
- ³⁰ National Asylum Support Service, now Asylum Support, in the Home Office Border and Immigration Agency.
- ³¹ The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order SI 2003 No. 3326 only applies to statutorily homeless households. Asylum seekers are not entitled to make homelessness applications.
- ³² See Department for Communities and Local Government (2006) page 5. All local authorities are expected to contribute to the achievement of a 50 per cent reduction in temporary accommodation use by 2010.

Published by Barnardo's
Tanners Lane
Barkingside
Ilford
Essex IG6 1QG

Barnardo's Registered Charity Numbers 216250 and SC037605

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ISBN 978-1-904659-10-5

‘All of my daughter’s formative years, her education opportunities, her time has been wasted in the asylum process.’



www.barnardos.org.uk/asylum