



Legal Aid Cuts Push Asylum Seekers to the Margins

The Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) was a nationwide charity largely funded by the government to provide legal advice and representation, or legal aid, to asylum seekers facing the British court system.

Due to its sudden closure in July, leading to the loss of 200 staff, along with the closure of Refugee and Migrant Justice less than 12 months ago, legal aid provision for asylum seekers has suffered a devastating blow.

Not only are asylum seekers left without legal representatives when they go to court, but files containing crucial evidence are currently inaccessible, locked in the IAS offices in Leeds.

When asylum seekers come to the UK, they are faced with an intimidating and stressful process. An initial interview, held in a crowded, open-plan room, establishes the identity of applicants and their circumstances. This information is used for cross-examination in later interviews.

Claimants are then dispersed across the UK, with Leeds receiving around 20% of them. A second, more detailed interview often takes place before the claimant has had access to expert advice.

For an asylum claim to be successful, it needs to be logical and coherent: the applicant needs to be able to explain their case clearly and make sure their claim is properly constructed. Home Office interviewers are quick to note any discrepancies. Often people are asked to re-live the most disturbing periods of their lives - a traumatic process that can compound mental problems.

Due to government efforts to speed up the asylum process, claims that have been rapidly processed are attracting a backlog of appeals. The appeals process can be very drawn out, with asylum seekers agonisingly organising evidence and preparing their own defence.

Although legal aid is not required for all asylum applications, universal access to advice beforehand would enable claimants to be aware of what is required, thereby preventing many appeals and saving money overall. In addition, in some appeal cases, expert knowledge of human rights law is needed, something that an asylum seeker could not be expected to know.

There is only one small law firm in Leeds that still represents asylum seekers requiring legal aid. Stories of destitute individuals travelling miles to apply for a lawyer's support are becoming ever-more common.



Due to the drastic cuts in legal aid, increasing numbers of asylum seekers are dropping off the radar of the UK Border Agency. Disillusioned by a system that has failed them, they may find poorly paid, unregulated jobs in which they are exploited and not able to contribute to the UK economy through taxes. Many more will, sadly, become homeless in the country where they had hoped to build a new life. Leeds is home to many dedicated charities and individuals who can only watch as unconsidered decisions are made that remove essential legal aid, in order to gain short-term public approval. This actively destroys the lives of asylum seekers and undermines the work of people who give their time to support them.

Jake Davies & Brigid James-Murray

Freedom of Speech

On Tuesday 21st June, journalist and human rights activist James Fallah spoke out in the 'Freedom of Speech' conference, held at Leeds Civic Hall, about his experiences of persecution in Sierra Leone and his commitment to seeking justice in his country. Not long after he gave this speech, James went on hunger strike in protest at the UK Border Agency's mishandling of his asylum case; persistently misleading a sitting MP and repeatedly failing to respond to correspondence from his legal representatives .

After nineteen days James ended the strike when the authorities agreed to reconsider. On 26th August the widespread supporters of the campaign celebrated the news that James had been given discretionary leave to remain in the UK for three years, allowing him to work and have access to other basic rights.

James arrived in the UK in 1998 after fleeing Sierra Leone at the height of its civil war. Following a number of threats resulting from his journalism exposing corruption in the Sierra Leone government, it became dangerous for James to return. He then applied for asylum in 2008 only for his application to be refused, leaving him in what he describes to have been an "immigration limbo" for the next four years. During this time James was housed in Leigh and took up work at the Manchester Refugee Support Network and became an active member of the Manchester National Union of Journalists (NUJ).

As the first trade union in the UK to accept membership from asylum seekers, The NUJ supports their members in the

asylum process and worked with human rights organisation RAPAR to give strong backing to James' case.

Economic journalist from Cameroon Charles Atangana, who also spoke alongside James at the Freedom of Speech conference and won his appeal for asylum with NUJ support in April this

year, commented "James and I can be living proof of the wrongdoings of our government and we are able to share and speak about what we have experienced back home, that allows us to receive a huge support from unions,

community associations and organisations. It is good to join your union as long as you can prove that you are what you say you are and the support will be there."

The wide support for James' case from local communities, national and international organisations is testament to him being a valuable and highly respected member of society. James added "I especially thank my legal representative Bindmans, the NUJ, RAPAR, Harpurhey Community Church, LASSN, the Leigh Journal, the Bolton News, the BBC, Manchester MULE, Salford STAR and members of the international press as far and wide as Paris, India and even my home country Sierra Leone."

When asked why it is so important to voice injustice, James said "It is essential that people speak out and make known the grave injustices that are being perpetrated by the agency [UKBA] in order to achieve its aims. Such injustices, when people fall into them, have the capacity to damage them

even further, not only in their personal lives but also in the community in which they live. They become victims of false accusations of criminality, state benefit scroungers and other uncomfortable labels. I did not take this action specifically for myself, it was also for others who have been trapped in the same



way. I have concerns too for the UKBA. It has to operate within its legal and democratic remit with justice and fairness, otherwise it will lose its credibility and operational effectiveness if cases such as mine keep cropping up." James said his desire now is to return to the community to continue his work.

James ended by saying "The system is designed in such a way that serious human rights abuses are going on but not made public. People like myself who want to expose things like this are always coming across a huge barrier imposed by institutions in order to denigrate minorities here." The action taken by James in response to his case demonstrates his belief as a journalist to stand up and voice the truth on democracy, just laws and human rights for all wherever you are in the world. Whether in Britain or Sierra Leone, these principles do not change.

Sarah Whitehead

Arab Uprising: Quest For Freedom



Despite the West's previous indifference to the dictatorships in the Arab world, their people's call for democracy has now been welcomed. However, there are reservations about the consequences of this quest for freedom.

An emerging crisis

Over a million people have fled from Libya since the violence began (1). The majority of these refugees have fled to neighbouring countries, including Tunisia and Egypt.

The Syrian state is waging a bloody offensive against its own people. Thousands of people have sought refuge in camps across the border in Turkey (2). Pro-democracy campaigners face repression in Bahrain and Yemen.

With power comes responsibility

There are limits to European governments' commitment to this movement towards democratic change. William Hague states that Britain is right to shut our borders to refugees fleeing the violence in the Arab world. Britain has been heavily criticised for intervening in Libya's affairs without taking responsibility for dealing with the exodus of people fleeing to save their lives (3).

This reluctance has led people to take desperate measures, braving the dangers of the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. They have reached the Italian island of Lampedusa and face disgraceful conditions in detention centres.

Amnesty International have voiced their concerns over the lack of access to a fair asylum process, inhumane conditions and expulsions (4).

A contradiction in policy

It is another example of Europe's contradictory record on human rights. Our government is willing to spend millions on weapons to oust Gaddafi in the name of democracy, while we face huge cuts to jobs and services. Despite this, our government is not willing to allow these people fleeing the violence it has played such a big part in, to claim asylum here.



Dan Barron

(1) 1,005,782 - UNHCR Report June 2011 <http://www.unhcr.org/4df9cde49.html>

(2) http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/23/the_arab_spring_s_looming_refugee_crisis

(3) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/arab-spring-refugees-not-welcome-here-says-william-hague-2287795.html>

(4) <http://www.amnesty.eu/en/press-releases/all/eu-must-call-on-italy-to-stop-human-rights-violations-of-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-in-lampedusa-0393/>

International Food Reviews

Merkato International

Merkato is a wonderful Ethiopian eatery located in the Merrion Centre's market. For the unacquainted, it can feel like a maze trying to navigate through the centre, which, at first, feels bizarre as a location. Don't let this put you off as it is one of the most excitingly refreshing eateries I have been to in Leeds.

Whilst the menu is limited, the food is delicious and ideal for a lunch. You could even stop for a traditional

Ethiopian coffee, which is delicious and costs just £1! What the menu lacks in choice it more than makes up for in quality.



What is exciting about it is how you know you are having a unique experience; there aren't many opportunities to eat food from this part of the world. Moreover, it's honest and affordable with most dishes costing in the region of £6. Portions are generous and the injera bread used to scoop

the food (although you can ask for cutlery if you like!) is almost on tap. You are guaranteed to leave full.

Overall impressions were that it is a unique and affordable dining experience. The food is fantastic and you will soon grow to find its rather mismatched location quite charming.

79 Merrion Superstore, Merrion Centre, Leeds.
Open: Mon to Sat 10am to 6pm. Tel: 07961 883500

Darvish

This Persian Teahouse and restaurant is a great find. It is situated at the end of a bustling high street, which has several international restaurants and shops on it, reflecting the diversity of the area.

Discreet on the outside, this restaurant is adorned with intricate décor comprising traditional Persian paintings, ornaments and old shisha pipes, befitting the dining experience on offer.



well as 'doogh'. Give doogh a go if you feel like trying something new. It is a savoury and sparkling drink that at first seems like drinking a mint sauce, but after a few sips, you develop a liking for the taste.

We all had lamb dishes for main courses; the lamb was cooked perfectly in wonderfully flavoursome sauces; it was a real standout meal. We were particularly delighted with the use of Persian lemons in the sauces, which gave them an excellent tangy taste and one that wasn't easily identifiable as lemony at first.

Overall, if you fancy a change and want to eat great food in a beautiful setting, this is the place for you. If you aren't convinced, look out for it on TV this autumn. The restaurant was visited by none other than Jamie Oliver for a new programme!

Details: 283 Roundhay Road, Leeds LS8 4HS. Open: Mon to Fri 5pm to 11pm, Sat 12.30pm to 11pm, Sun 12.30pm to 10pm. Tel: 0113 249 5500. Note: Bring your own wine. www.darvish.co.uk

The food, served and prepared by friendly and accommodating staff, is fantastic and excellent value for money. We spent £10 per person and had a drink, two courses and tea. There is a wide selection of starters and mains, and vegetarians are well catered for, although the dessert selection is limited. The bread is delicious and you can watch it being made in the open kitchen. The drinks selection is good. There are several teas on offer as

Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network

LASSN wants asylum seekers and refugees to be safe, respected, supported and empowered to rebuild their lives free of persecution. We run four volunteering projects: Befriending, English-at-Home, ShortStop emergency accommodation, and Press Gang with exiled journalists.

Great volunteer managers



LASSN is proud of our staff and volunteers – they do a great job. We've always known we have some of the best volunteer managers in the country and now we have the certificates to prove it!

Ali, Katrina and Pauline were all recently awarded national qualifications in recognition of their skills. All three gained an NVQ in Management of Volunteers at the appropriate level for their work, ranging from level 3 (A-level) to level 5 (higher degree).

In addition, LASSN received a Volunteering Good Practice Kite Mark from Voluntary Action Leeds. See our website www.lassn.org.uk/current_vacancies.htm to volunteer – **we promise you will be well supported!**

We are moving on 27th September

Our new address and phone number is: 18th Floor, West Riding House, Albion Street, Leeds, LS1 5AA. 0113 373 1759. Come and visit us – the view is amazing!



Do you have something lying around your house that could be auctioned? It is now easy to donate all or part of any auction sale to LASSN. So whether you are new to ebay or a regular ebayer, have a look at our How To Use ebay guide on www.lassn.org.uk/donations.htm

Need help to get started? Bring an item to our training session on 20th October 5.30 – 7.00 and we'll help you set up an auction. Email admin@lassn.org.uk to book a place.



Leeds Refugee Forum (LRF) helps refugees who have left everything behind in their home country rebuild their lives in Leeds. LRF is a refugee-led organisation directly supporting refugees and asylum seekers as they begin their new lives in the city. Refugees are socially and economically disadvantaged in many ways, but they also bring with them a huge wealth of experience, knowledge, expertise and resourcefulness. LRF aims to help refugees harness these skills to benefit other refugees, asylum seekers, refugee communities and the wider community. LRF identifies, inspires, develops, encourages and supports members of the refugee community.

LRF provides training and resources to help refugees develop new skills and integrate into the local community and potentially find employment. LRF runs One Community Centre (OCC) which provides a valuable resource to the whole Lincoln Green community. Lincoln Green is one of the most deprived communities in the country (in the lowest 3% in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation), but has a diverse and multicultural population including many relatively newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees living alongside the long-term resident white community.

LRF was formed in 2003, became constituted in June 2006, is a company limited by guarantee and became a registered charity in April 2011. Its trustees come from the refugee community in Leeds and LRF's members and users originate from over 30 different countries.



The Manuel Bravo Project

The Manuel Bravo Project provides legal assistance for asylum seekers who wish to appeal a negative decision or submit a fresh claim for asylum. We work in partnership with three Leeds law firms who each provide teams of solicitors working on a pro bono basis. We have recently registered with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) and we hope that this is going to enhance current provision.

A grant from Comic Relief has made it possible for us to offer a specialised service to women who have experienced gender based violence, and we are awaiting the outcome of a bid to BBC Children in Need which would enable us to provide a similarly tailored service to unaccompanied minors. Our plans for the immediate future are to secure funding and increase capacity.

One Stop Service Yorkshire & Humberside

Refugee Council

Hurley House

1 Dewsbury Rd

Leeds, LS11 5DQ

0113 244 9404.

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk



The Impact of Government Funding Cuts on Refugee Council

Government cuts are having a painful effect on the refugee sector. The impact on Refugee Council's operations has been massive: one third of our staff has been made redundant, reducing our capacity to provide advice to vulnerable clients and refugee community organisations (RCOs).

Advice is now provided by a free Own Language Telephone Advice Service (OLTAS) on 0808 808 2255. Clients with complex issues are given face-to-face appointments.

Outreach services have been reduced. The Doncaster Conversation Club continues. Outreach in Sheffield resumes in October. Clients with complex needs require quality advice by appointment at our Leeds office. Destitute clients can only get to the office if they have friends who can pay their fares. This compounds their hardship. Refugee Council's hardship fund helps the neediest but the need is far greater than our capacity to help. We are working with others to pool resources, through a joint client database project.

At the TUC in March, Donna Covey, Refugee Council's CEO, commented: "The Home Office has slashed national funding for refugee and asylum support by 60% overnight. There was no phasing of cuts... RCOs... first in line for local authority cuts... are going to the wall daily".

Cuts were not based on equality impact assessment. Their impact on asylum seekers is disproportionately high compared to other sectors. The plug has been pulled on RIES (Refugee Integration and Employment Service) and there is no mainstream funding to carry on the RIES agenda.

Fortunately, good people are doing their best to support asylum seekers and refugees. Refugee Council has been protecting refugees for sixty years and will continue to do so together with our partners.

Solace Surviving Exile and Persecution

Solace Surviving Exile and Persecution has been providing a therapy and advocacy service to asylum seekers and refugees in Leeds for just over five years. In that time, we have helped over 500 people, mostly asylum seekers with mental health problems arising from the traumas they faced in the countries they originally came from and the traumas they face here in the UK.

It is not often acknowledged that seeking asylum in Britain is a very traumatic experience for the vast majority of asylum seekers whose credibility is questioned relentlessly by both the Home Office and the courts. Unless there is very strong evidence to the contrary, most asylum seekers are accused of being liars by the Home Office and at risk of detention and deportation back to the countries from which they fled.

Several people who we support at Solace have described the asylum system as 'psychological torture'. One of them, a woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who had been imprisoned, tortured and raped daily for nine months, described reporting weekly at the Home Office in Leeds:

"Every time I went to Waterside Court [the Home Office building in Leeds where asylum seekers have to report], there were vans waiting to take people away. You never know if it is your turn to be detained until you have signed your name and you get a card telling you to report the following week. It's a form of torture. It's not like with electric rods or being raped – it's psychological torture. I had terrible headaches, like rods in my head, vertigo and noises in my head, every time I went there."

For a person who is already deeply traumatised, experiences here in Leeds like the one described above can send people over the edge.



RETAS (the Refugee Education Training Advice Service) works to support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers living in Leeds and across West Yorkshire, through providing help with their education, training and employment needs. Our charity has been delivering its unique service since 2003, and with our centre based in Harehills - the heart of the community - we operate within a multicultural section of the city with a high percentage of refugees living locally. We provide a welcoming and friendly environment; delivering specialist services, such as information, advice and guidance and Job Search courses, to help refugees develop skills and access employment and training opportunities. In addition to these services, we provide English language support, running regular IELTS (International English Language Testing System) courses (which are also open to non-refugees) and assisting with ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) provision.

RETAS's empowerment programmes encourage refugees and asylum seekers to develop confidence, providing them with the option of taking part in our awareness-raising initiatives. These initiatives provide training to schools, businesses and community organisations to dispel myths and misconceptions associated with asylum and bring to light the experiences, rights and entitlements of refugees.

RETAS has a vision to see every refugee and asylum seeker in West Yorkshire achieve their potential, and holds firmly to values which encourage and empower clients holistically, helping them to rebuild their lives in the UK.

For more information and our latest news please go to www.retasleeds.org.uk

UKBA Meeting with Leeds Refugee Forum

An opportunity for West Yorkshire UKBA Local Immigration Team (LIT) to find out from asylum seekers and stakeholders, if they are achieving their standards.

The Case Resolution Team has concluded its work on the backlog of undecided asylum cases. The remaining complex cases are being processed by Liverpool Immigration Office. For an update on your asylum case, ring UKBA duty office on 0113 341 2127.

Destitute Asylum Seekers

Katrina Burton, Short Stop Manager, LASSN, expressed major concern over the delays between people applying for Section 4 support and receiving it. "Last year, Short Stop provided 287 nights of emergency accommodation for destitute asylum seekers waiting for Section 4 accommodation. A woman was referred to Short Stop on 22 June because she could not get Section 4 accommodation until 4 July. Without Short Stop, she would have had to sleep rough. The voluntary sector is picking up this statutory duty."

Ann McKillop of UKBA replied that "for people who claimed asylum after 2007, there should be no delays for Section 4 accommodation. If someone is street homeless, the decision must be made within two days; otherwise, it is five days. Then, UKBA writes to them to ask if they still need accommodation. There are delays if UKBA need further information from the applicant."

One person said that it took four days for a decision to be made. Another said they had slept rough but were twice refused Section 4 accommodation.

UKBA deny the assertion that people are told to return to their country of origin even though all appeal rights have not been exhausted.

A member of the audience pointed out that "UKBA's policy encourages people to have children as a way of getting NASS [National Asylum Seeker Support Service] accommodation and avoiding eviction" and that "this policy should be reviewed."

Poor Quality Interpreting

A refugee from Afghanistan told of his experience of UKBA interviews. He was provided with an interpreter who did not speak his language well. His solicitor advised him to request that his interview be tape-recorded but he was told by the interviewer that this could not be done. He was then refused asylum and NASS support was withdrawn. His only option now is to provide fresh evidence in support of his claim, but he is

unable to as he has been living in the UK since 2009 and his wife has died in Afghanistan.

LIT says that "you have the right to an interpreter who speaks your language. An interview can be taped if you request this in advance. You have the right to appeal against what happened."

Working to Survive

An asylum applicant from 10 years ago had his Section 4 support cut, worked illegally to support himself, was arrested and now has a criminal record. He said that "having no support leads people to commit crime."

Where are You From?

A Burmese refugee came with an Indian passport to the UK to claim asylum. Because of the passport, the refugee explained: "UKBA did not believe I am Burmese and I was refused asylum."

"Someone who is accepted by the Somali community as being genuinely from Somalia, has been refused asylum because UKBA do not believe they are Somali. What should they do?"

LIT replied: "If there is an expert who has evidence of this, it should be used to make an appeal."

"Does the right to family life depend on age? What if a family member is mentally ill?"

UKBA policy is that "mental illness should be taken into account when considering dependents aged over 18 years."

When UKBA reviews entitlement to Section 4 support, "the asylum seeker may be asked to get a health declaration from a GP." It was pointed out that if the asylum seeker's English is poor, it is difficult for them to get this.

The response was that "eligibility for Section 4 support must be reviewed every three months to assess if they are still entitled to it."

"Is being active within the community taken into account when a decision is made on someone's asylum claim?"

In reply, LIT says that "decisions on asylum claims are based entirely on the Geneva Convention and humanitarian legislation."

Richie McAndrew

Photo: LewishamDreamer