

One Planet Leeds

**Newsletter of Abigail Housing, LASSN, Leeds City of Sanctuary, Leeds Refugee Forum, Manuel Bravo Project, Refugee Action Leeds, Refugee Council Leeds, RETAS and SOLACE.
Working in partnership to support asylum seekers and refugees in Leeds.**

Spring 2012

Valleys out of Mountains

Social Security for Refugees and Brits Under Attack

Having found a degree of sanctuary in the UK, asylum seekers used to expect to be able to enjoy the same relatively generous benefits system as British born people, once they were given their leave to remain. It seems those days may soon be over as the Coalition government drive through a series of welfare reforms which will change the landscape of the benefits system by something approaching Biblical proportions.

Leeds Revenues and Benefits talked through these changes with a group of 50 voluntary sector workers at an event organised by Leeds Christian Community Trust on 6 January 2012. The key elements for new refugees are as follows.

April 2011

Changes to the Local Housing Allowance formula – the first of a number of changes to this – all of which are designed to drive Housing Benefit payments down and so effectively deter private landlords from offering accommodation to benefit claimants.

January 2012

Change to the Shared Accommodation Rate age limit, which will effectively place a ceiling of around £61.50 per week on Housing Benefit paid to anyone under 35 years old renting private sector accommodation. As access to more affordable social housing and supported housing is becoming more and more difficult due to public sector spending cuts, new refugees are being forced to look to the private sector for their first post NASS housing. The age limit change will mean that new refugees under 35 will probably all have to live in shared housing if they are forced to look in the private sector.

April 2013

Monies paid to Councils for Council Tax benefit by Central Government will be changed and reduced,

forcing all benefit claimants to contribute towards their Council Tax for the first time. The details of how much and when are still to be worked out.

Social Housing tenants may have their Housing Benefit reduced if they are under occupying their accommodation, e.g. a single person living in a 2 bed Council flat. This is currently being debated in the House of Lords.

A possible Housing Benefit cap of £500 per week is being discussed in Parliament. If agreed, this will seriously affect the ability of large families who rely on Housing Benefit to pay their rent.

Responsibility for the Social Fund will move from the Jobcentre to Local Authorities, but without a ring fence. Each Local Authority will have to decide how to manage this pot of money, but the change seriously threatens Crisis Loan payments, which are currently available to new refugees in the first month post decision whilst they wait for the Jobcentre to process their initial claim for benefit, as well as Community Care Grants which a lot of new refugees rely on to pay for essential furniture and equipment as they move into unfurnished social housing.

October 2013

The 'migration' from JSA / ESA / Housing Benefit to Universal Credits begins! A brave new world for all who claim any kind of benefit where all benefits will be rolled into one payment, which will be paid monthly in arrears. Benefit claimants will be expected to apply on line. 'Conditionality', i.e. payment of benefit depending on claimants evidencing their efforts to find work, will apply to all, including those in work. Everyone will have to provide evidence that they are looking for a job which will end any reliance on benefits.

John Hebden

Refugee Council will be running a training course on [Refugee and Migrant Entitlement to Housing and other services](#) on Thursday 8 March.

Overcoming Prejudice Through Art

The Platforma Festival 28 November to 3 December

The end of 2011 saw the first ever Platforma festival, bringing together organisations and individuals interested in refugee-related arts from across the country for two days of presentations, art and workshops in London. Funded by the Baring Foundation and Arts Council England for a minimum of 3 years, Platforma's regional networks or "hubs" are beginning to form strong regional co-ordination between artists, activists and refugee organisations.

Coming Together

Its self proclaimed aim is to "bring together groups and artists of any background or political status (e.g. refugees and non-refugees), whose work examines the varied experiences of refugees both before and after they arrived and settled in their host country." With groups from Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and London all travelling to London for the event, the Platforma festival was a clear success.

Multiculturalism

Focusing on the possibility of the condition of exile to create a "double perspective that never sees things in isolation", the festival showcased a wide variety of artistic production that challenged what Hassan Mahamdallie, author of *Defending Multiculturalism* and Senior

Strategy Officer for Arts Council England, called the "monocultural vision of arts production." If we are able to harness the positive capabilities of *thinking* as exile, we have an increased capacity to challenge and deconstruct cultural norms that re-enforce prejudice and isolation. Considering things from the outside looking in, we are better positioned to acknowledge the huge gulf between lived experience and political ideology.

The Power of Art

With a disproportionate amount of funding given to 'national heritage' institutions, it is refreshing to see a progressive network of refugee-related organisations and individuals being supported by mainstream

From *Write for Life's* creative writing project with victims of torture to Goldsmith's Applied Drama students who created short theatre pieces in response to statements made by the UK Border Agency, the arts are able to facilitate a radical approach to the sensitive issues of asylum and refugee experience in the UK.

The freedom of expression, thought and identity showcased at the Platforma event is testament to what the arts can do for those who are faced with isolation, restriction and prejudice in their everyday life. In the words of a young Palestinian boy in Juliano Mer Khamis' film 'Arna's Children', "When I'm on stage, I feel like I'm throwing stones."



Camp by Faith Pearson

fundes. The creative arts have the incredible capacity to emotionally engage people with an issue that is often simplified and dehumanised in the media.

<http://www.platforma.org.uk/>
<http://vimeo.com/34600695>

Lorna Gledhill.

Correction to the legal aid article in our last issue

In the last issue of One Planet Leeds, we mistakenly reported that 20% of the UK's asylum seekers were dispersed to Leeds. In fact, Home Office immigration statistics show that it is only 2%. At 30 June 2011, 272 asylum seekers were dispersed to Leeds. 2,339 were dispersed to the whole of Yorkshire and Humber.

Statistical information on asylum seekers and refugees can be found by visiting www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/statistics

Thanks to Philippa Tyler, Migration Yorkshire.

The Leveson Inquiry: Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Media

Hostile Reporting

For the past decade, Refugee Council and other asylum seeker and refugee support organisations have fought against the increasing negativity and bias of media reporting on asylum seekers and refugees. The current Leveson inquiry has presented a new opportunity for change.

The Leveson inquiry, which began in November 2011, is an on-going public investigation into the culture, practices and ethics of the British media. Instigated by the phone hacking scandal in July 2011, it aims to overhaul certain illicit practices used by some right-wing tabloid newspapers in the UK, many which have since been brought to light.

Refugee Council and the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum (MRCF) have both made submissions to the inquiry requesting consideration of the unfair and inaccurate representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the press over recent years.



Prejudice Towards Asylum Seekers Not a Concern for the Press Complaints Commission

Both Refugee Council and MRCF have said that the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has failed to prevent inflammatory and hostile reporting on refugees and asylum seekers and this has had a negative effect on public perception. The PCC Code of Practice says that prejudicial or pejorative reference's to individuals' race, colour, religion, sexual orientation or any physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided. However, this does not address reporting on asylum seekers or refugees because they do not belong to a single race or religion.

Stronger Enforcement Needed

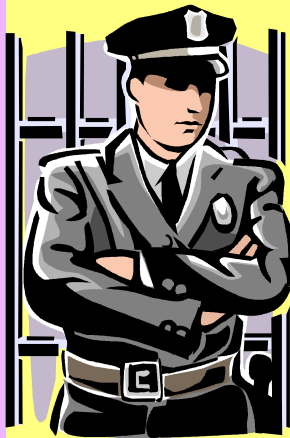
With the first report from the inquiry due out in September, the Refugee Council said: 'new and stronger guidance on immigration and asylum, and more rigorous enforcement of both the Code and guidance would help to stop the kind of prejudicial coverage that has impacted on the policy debate and the lives of asylum seekers over the last decade.'

Jane

Press Complaints

In 2008, a complaint to the Press Complaints Commission was made concerning an article in The Daily Telegraph. It was alleged that the story would lead people to equate asylum seekers with foreign criminals, and that it inaccurately reported the number of asylum seekers allowed to stay in the UK. The newspaper's response was to place responsibility for the misleading nature of the story upon a Home Office letter to MPs. However, they did agree to correct their inaccurate reporting of numbers allowed to stay.

If you are concerned about the negative portrayal of asylum seekers in the media, please consider joining Leeds Press Gang. Further information available on LASSN's [news and blog](#) webpage.



Asylum Seekers Housed by Prison Guards

Group 4 Security (G4S) are the preferred bidder to take over the contract to house asylum seekers

in Yorkshire. There is a history of allegations of abuse against them. Last year they lost the contract to escort asylum seekers being removed from the UK after the death of Jimmy Mubenga while in their custody. Asylum seekers face the prospect of G4S or their sub-contractors becoming their housing provider.

Demonstrate

South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG) are organising a demonstration on Thursday 1 March, 12.30pm at Sheffield Town Hall, to stop G4S profiting from housing asylum seekers. If you have experience of United Property Management, G4S's regional sub-contractor, please contact dignitynotdetention@yahoo.co.uk or via 0114 241 2780.

When the Stranger is Not Welcome

All of the world's major religions place great importance on welcoming the stranger. In fact, I once heard an American Bishop preach that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because the inhabitants had been inhospitable to visitors. Whilst that may be a controversial interpretation, all the major holy books do include teaching about this issue.

So, what about the UK? How do we, as a nation, treat the stranger amongst us? And, what about Leeds? How do we treat those who have fled persecution abroad? How do we treat those seeking asylum in our city? How do we treat those who have been refused?

Successive UK governments have wanted to appear to be tough on immigration / asylum. This is fed by the media, with newspapers to sell and the public, anxious about jobs and homes. The result is an asylum system which could lead others to accuse the UK of being unwelcoming to those who have had to flee.

On Saturday 22 September 2012 there will be an event at St George's Church, Leeds, specifically to raise awareness of the asylum system and particularly those whose cases have been refused. Why does this happen? What can we do for those who are rendered destitute as a result? Please put the date in your diary and watch out for more information as the event takes shape over the next few months.

John Hebden

Mbole Kapola (1968-2012)

When Mbole came to the UK in 2000, he was hoping that the hell he had been through in the Congo was over and he could start a new life, free of persecution. But it was not to be. When he died suddenly 10 February 2012, he was still an asylum seeker waiting for his umpteenth appeal against deportation to the Congo, where all his Congolese friends and Mbole himself knew that he would not survive for long.



Most of the last two years of Mbole's life were spent in detention centres, not because he had committed any crime but because the Home Office were determined to deport him. Mbole and his friends were equally determined to prevent that from happening because they understood that being sent back to the Congo was to all intents an outsourced death sentence.

Mbole escaped from the Congo after his entire family, including his parents, wife and two children, were all killed because of his father's political involvement with a Rwandan group. Months of torture in the Congo left their scars on Mbole. He suffered from chronic back pain and his leg never fully recovered after he was stabbed in jail. His body had all the signs of being tortured and his mind was clearly troubled by all of his experiences.

In the three and a half years I knew Mbole, he was detained four times, for months at a time, while the Home Office tried and failed to deport him. On each occasion his solicitors submitted a bail application on the basis that he had committed no crime and was unlikely to abscond. 'Where would I run away to?' he asked me, shrugging his shoulders.

Mbole was a kind, gentle man, who liked to go out of his way to help other people. He was a regular church goer and volunteered at Oxfam. Whenever anyone helped Mbole or showed him kindness, he always said 'God Bless You', even a judge on one occasion who had just ordered his release from detention.

Mbole was looking forward to a fresh start in 2012. His asylum case was waiting for a decision in the High Court – the last chance saloon. We still don't know whether he would have been successful or not, but at least in the last few weeks he was feeling hopeful.

The last third of Mbole's life was one of relentless persecution either by the Congolese authorities or the UK asylum system that never believed him. In the end Mbole's body was ground down by the adversity he faced, with the full power of the State up against him. But he did score one victory, they never succeeded in deporting him. God bless you Mbole, and may you now rest in peace. There will be a mass for Mbole in March.

Andrew Hawkins, SOLACE, 0113 249 1437, info@solace-uk.org.uk.

Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network

1,000 Welcomes

Saturday 31 March 2012, 9.30 – 1.00 pm

**Amharic Farsi Norwegian
Fullah Mandarin Japanese Russian
Greek Hindi Pashtu Arabic**

Come and enjoy a time of learning, fun and fundraising
Learn how to welcome new arrivals in Leeds in 10 languages
Have a ½ hour taster lesson in each of four different languages
Raise money to support refugees and asylum seekers

Where?

LASSN's Offices at Ebor Court, Westgate
Leeds, LS1 4ND

What will happen?

We are aiming for 100 participants each to raise a minimum of £20 sponsorship to donate to LASSN. Participants will learn to say "Welcome" in 10 different languages and learn more about 4 different languages and cultures in 4 half hour sessions.

How?

Apply to LASSN at admin@lassn.org.uk,
0113 373 1759 for sponsorship forms and further information.

We look forward to welcoming you!

The End of an Era for English at Home

After 10 years of managing the English at Home project, Gerard Godon is retiring. Over the years Gerard has managed 238 volunteers and helped 320 refugees and asylum seekers learn English.

He's going to be missed by everyone at LASSN and all those he has helped. Gerard has brought laughter and caring into every situation he enters. He gives of himself and gets alongside everyone he meets. We all wish him the best in the future and are sure he'll be a real asset to whatever he does in retirement.



Gerard (right) with Carol Hey, LASSN volunteer tutor since 2007 at the 2011 Celebration of Volunteers awards, St George's Crypt.

LASSN plans to keep English at Home going with our current volunteers and we are still looking for new people to join.

Donate to LASSN from 9am 1st March 2012 via Localgiving.com and we actually receive **double the amount you donate!** See www.lassn.org.uk for details.

RETAS has a vision to see asylum seeker in West potential, and works to of these groups through their education, training Our charity has been service since 2003, and Harehills - the heart of operate within a multicultural section of the city with a high percentage of refugees living locally.



every refugee and Yorkshire achieve their support the integration providing help with and employment needs. delivering its unique with our centre based in the community – we

As well as delivering specialist employment and training services, we have recently begun working in partnership with City of Sanctuary to assist newly arrived asylum seekers within the region, helping them orientate and access support services through volunteers who provide individual support.

We also run empowerment programmes encouraging refugees and asylum seekers to develop confidence, and provide them with the option of taking part in our awareness-raising initiatives where they can tell their stories to schools, businesses and community organizations, to bring to light their experiences to dispel myths and misconceptions associated with asylum.

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

Please look out for RETAS's March Match fund at localgiving.com/charity/retasleeds, an opportunity to donate towards our work and double your money!



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.



How does it feel?

How does it feel? To be without a home, like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone. It's 1965 and Bob Dylan is fed up with his life as a superstar rock musician. He writes himself a ten-page rhyming poem, displaying profound insights into the mindset of the social outcast.

A Thousand Miles From Home

But, how does it feel, if you are thousands of miles from your home, family and familiar culture having had to flee life threatening persecution? After a stressful journey across two continents and through a dozen alien countries, you eventually arrive at a place which you've heard can give you a lot of the things you have been forced to leave behind – a house, a job, some home comforts. But, there is a problem... the authorities don't believe your story and you have no evidence to back it up. They say you are not welcome. How does it feel? Without a home; a complete unknown.

Abigail

In 2004, John and Anne Hebden provided some temporary hospitality to someone in just this situation. She was called Abigail and she had fled the terrors of Robert Mugabe's Zanu PF militia having just seen her husband and son murdered simply because of their associations with a different political party. She obviously couldn't return to Zimbabwe. However, the United Kingdom Border Agency wouldn't give her asylum either. How does it feel? No home, no job, no money to buy the simple necessities of life – destitute, on the streets of Leeds. John and Anne thought that this

situation was not acceptable.

Seven years later, John and Anne are four years into a revolutionary project, named Abigail Housing. It aims to provide all the basic necessities of life to people who have been refused asylum in the UK but who cannot safely return to their country of origin. Given that these people have no recourse to public funds, this is not easy. Houses with nil or pepper corn rents have to be found. Then they have to be heated and lit and Council Tax has to be paid. The residents need food, clothes, toiletries, cleaning materials and, ideally, something worthwhile to do with their long days.

Whilst Anne was responsible for the charities first house, opening in May 2007, John set about creating a refugee housing project in late 2007. He had spotted that even asylum seekers given leave to remain end up being homeless and his project aimed to provide a supported home for new refugees.

As we begin 2012, Anne's destitution project has finally run out of charitable trust money and donations. It is now funded entirely out of the charity's reserves. But, these will not last long. How does that feel? Abigail Housing has housed over 300 asylum seekers and refugees in four and a half years.

So, how can you help?

Do you own any property or know someone else who does? Would you commit to regular monthly giving? Do you have good quality household goods in your cellar that you'd be happy to donate? Are you planning to run the Leeds 10k next year and would like a good cause to support? Do you have a gift of intercession and feel inspired by the Abigail Housing prophetic journey? In 1965, Bob Dylan had an international hit single; in 2012, Abigail Housing need to find some more single duvets!

For more information, please call Anne on 07908 364112 or John on 07743 189314.



As the year begins, the Leeds City of Sanctuary movement is excited and optimistic about the year ahead. We have already been approached by a number of schools wanting to engage in the **'Schools of Sanctuary'** initiative. A School of Sanctuary is a

school that is committed to being a safe and welcoming place for people whose lives were in danger in their own country. It helps its students, staff and the wider community to understand what it means to be seeking sanctuary and extends a welcome to everyone as equal, valued members of the school community. It is a school that is proud to be a place of safety and inclusion for all.

A new event we are launching this spring is the **'Sanctuary Weekend'** over 27 to 29 April. We are encouraging faith groups across the city to use their gatherings that weekend to consider their contribution to creating sanctuary for those having fled their home countries. They may wish to include a prayer or study from scriptures on the topic, to pray for those seeking sanctuary in Leeds or to invite a refugee to share their story.

Another interesting piece of work we are involved with is the recently established **'Welcome to Leeds'** project. RETAS and City of Sanctuary Leeds are working in partnership with the Refugee Council wraparound service to pilot this volunteer-led scheme to support asylum seekers newly dispersed to Leeds from initial accommodation centres in Barnsley and Huddersfield. We are able to match up volunteers with asylum seekers who are being sent to live in Leeds, to ensure they are offered a personalised welcome. If you would like to meet someone on their arrival and give some time to showing them key places during their first couple of weeks in Leeds, please contact Lesley@retasleeds.org.uk. Training will be provided.

For more information about Leeds City of Sanctuary or to sign our pledge of support, please feel welcome to explore our website www.cityofsanctuary.org/leeds



Leeds Refugee Forum and the UK Border Agency

Leeds Refugee Forum enjoys working in partnership with many different organisations to achieve our aims of supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds. One successful partnership is with the

UK Border Agency. This began 2 years ago when I attended a question and answer session featuring Jeremy Oppenheim, the UKBA regional director for the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, where he stated he would like to talk more to community organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in the region. So I invited him to come to LRF which he duly did along with Anne Mckillop and Simon Walker, senior staff in the Local Immigration Team in the summer of 2010.

Since then LRF has hosted a series of lively debates, with refugees and asylum seekers giving their frank views and experiences of the UK asylum system directly to these senior staff. These exchanges may not have changed UKBA policies, but hopefully raised awareness of the impact the asylum system has on individuals. Maybe case owners and other UKBA staff will be encouraged to treat asylum seekers with more humanity and see people as real individuals with genuine fears and concerns about their situations.

A spin off from these meetings was a workshop I facilitated with UKBA staff in November 2011 for frontline staff working for organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers, where topics such as family and individual returns, the COMPASS review, and section 4 were discussed in more detail. This proved popular with staff from 14 organisations attending, and there was a lot of interest in holding another session in the early Spring to include a representative from the new UKBA accommodation provider when this is confirmed in February 2012.

I believe credit should be given to UKBA staff for coming out of their familiar environments to the 'lion's den' of Leeds Refugee Forum's One Community Centre, and for continuing to want to work with LRF in this way. Perhaps UKBA are not the most obvious choice for LRF to work closely with, but I do believe it is better to talk constructively and honestly and build a good working relationship with UKBA in this region and to extend this opportunity to others, than not to talk at all.

Gift of The Gabon Tackles Africa

Political Turmoil

When it comes to Africa and the Middle East the last twelve months has been turbulent to say the least. It was just over a year ago that Tunisia's former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted from office and thus began an extraordinary wave of uprising across the region. This was subsequently followed by a revolution in Egypt, civil uprisings in Libya, Bahrain and Syria and other major protests in countries like Algeria and Morocco. This January there is still unrest in Egypt, Syria and Morocco as the struggle to determine power and governance continues.

Africa Cup of Nations

There is, however, another event in Africa this January where, at least for a few weeks, some attention can be turned from North to mid-West where the Africa Cup of Nations 2012 football tournament has got underway. Memories of Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi are faded and replaced by the sights of Yaya Toure and Demba Ba as some of the best African footballers on the planet descend on co-hosts Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. This is the 28th Africa Cup of Nations and the first to be staged by either of the current co-hosts. Three-time defending champions Egypt did not qualify for this year's tournament and so make way for the likes of Ivory Coast, Ghana and Senegal to try and bring home the 2012 title. Hoping to upset the odds, however, will be Zambia, Mali and Niger who all enjoyed successful qualifying campaigns finishing top of their respective groups. Co-hosts Gabon and Equatorial Guinea will of course be hoping to use their home advantage to help propel them into the latter stages.

African Talent

Perhaps the most exciting thing about the Africa Cup of Nations, however, is not the teams who compete but the star names that play for these teams. Over the last few years the English Premier League has seen an unprecedented influx of African talent many of whom are signed up by England's biggest clubs. Nigerian midfielder Jay Jay Okocha, who joined Bolton in 2002, was one of the first of this incursion and soon became a cult hero with fans dubbing him the player 'so good they named him twice'. In the years that followed, London giants Arsenal and Chelsea in particular continued this tradition by bringing in Ivory Coast's Kolo Toure and Salomon Kalou, Cameroon's Alex Song, Ghana's Michael Essien and Togo's Emmanuel Adebayor. Perhaps the most notable African signing was made by Jose Mourinho in 2004 when he brought Ivory Coast's Didier Drogba to Chelsea for a club record £24 million. Drogba has gone on

to score 150 goals for Chelsea and is now one of the most famous people in his country. Indeed last September he joined the Truth, Reconciliation and Dialogue Commission as a representative to help restore peace to his homeland and that was after he had been named as one of the world's 100 most influential people by Time magazine.



During the last two years, in the Premier League, the rise of African footballers has not stopped. Arsenal have added Ivorian Gervinho to their ranks, Kolo Toure is now a fixture in table-topping Manchester City's squad and the current second highest goal scorer in the league is Newcastle's Senegalese forward Demba Ba. Added to that list is another of big-spending Manchester City's latest recruits in Yaya Toure. Brother of Kolo, the Ivory Coast midfielder arrived from Barcelona in 2010 having won two Spanish league titles and a European Cup and has almost immediately become one of the Premier League's best players. In 2011 he not only scored the winner in helping City win the FA Cup, their first major trophy in 35 years, but also won the African Footballer of the Year award.

Hope Amidst Chaos

Many of these players will be involved in this year's Africa Cup of Nations making it possibly one of the best in its 55-year history. It will also be one of the most intriguing given it is being played off the back of, and in some cases in the midst of, chaotic events in the north of the continent. It remains to be seen whether this event, and the people taking part in it, will have any sort of positive, coming-together effect on the region.

An African national and former professional footballer currently living in Leeds predicts...
Tournament favourites: Ivory Coast
Player to watch: Yaya Toure
Dark horses: Mali

Joel Hebden