

Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network

Transition Guide

A guide for Leeds Asylum Seekers Support Network volunteer befrienders helping refugees who have just been given permission to stay in this country.

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Who is this guide for?

This guide is for Leeds Asylum Seekers Support Network volunteer befrienders helping refugees who have just been given permission to stay in this country. It is written to help them deal with the complexities of moving from NASS accommodation and support into the housing/benefits system.

What does it include?

Housing
Benefits
Setting up a bank account
Setting up home
Helping agencies
Family reunion
Your responsibilities as a befriender
Tips
Fast tracking Child Tax Credits
Terms

Could it be used by other people?

Other people are welcome to use it. Bear in mind that the information is local to Leeds and may not be accurate for other areas.

When was it written?

It was written in January 2014. Various parts of the guide may be out-of-date very soon.

How reliable is it?

It is as reliable as we could possibly make it. Neither LASSN nor any of the volunteers involved can be held liable if any of this information proves inaccurate. However we would be happy to receive brief updates for future editions.

How can you contact us?

If you have feedback on this document, please could you email us via our website: www.lassn.org.uk. Please put Transition guide in the title. We are happy to consider adding things, but do want to keep the size of the document manageable.

How much does it cost?

The guide is free but if you wanted to make a contribution to LASSN's Hardship Fund you would be most welcome. You can do this on the LASSN website: www.lassn.org.uk.

Acknowledgements

Huge thanks to all the volunteers who participated in helping us put this guide together and their hard work helping clients through this transition. We hope you find it useful.

TRANSITION TO REFUGEE STATUS FROM ASYLUM SEEKER

LASSN Directory contains contact details for many of the services below. LASSN volunteers are given a hard copy on the training. There is a copy on our website at www.lassn.org.uk.

Housing.

- On receiving a positive decision, refugees have a maximum of 28 days to leave NASS accommodation. However, if there are delays in the system this may be only 2 weeks (not unusual).
- The refugee should immediately apply at Leeds Housing Options Office (Gt. George Street,) for accommodation. This may involve a long interview and if necessary, the refugee should ask for an interpreter. Any special issues affecting housing should be mentioned at the interview: for example any physical and mental health factors and number and age of dependents. This will determine which 'Band' a person belongs to and establishes whether their need for housing is a priority, priority extra or general. There is a space on the Housing Options form to nominate an advocate. Your name could go on there if you are willing.
- The refugee will be offered private accommodation and given a list of council-approved landlords. There is a housing benefit cap now which will affect how much rent they have to pay.
- If they wish to apply for council accommodation or the refugee has no other options, the Housing Office should arrange emergency accommodation if there are children or the Refugee is particularly vulnerable. But they cannot do this unless s/he is literally homeless. Refugees should attend Housing Options again on the day their Cascade contract ends with children and luggage AND be prepared to wait there all day!
- The refugee may be referred to a local Housing Association (e.g. Leeds Federated Housing, Connect or Unity Housing).
- If the Council have no availability, emergency hostel accommodation may be offered, then longer term temporary accommodation.
- From here, support staff MAY help to find permanent housing (e.g. Council Housing, private landlord).
- Bidding for a council property must be done as often as possible. But make sure the refugee only bids for a property they are prepared to accept. Refusal can affect their priority.

Benefits.

- Refugees should continue signing at Waterside Court in Kirkstall (the Home Office Reporting Centre) until very clearly told not to do so.
- <http://www.adviceguide.org.uk> - summarises available benefits
- On receiving status the refugee should claim benefit through the Jobcentre Plus. They will need a National Insurance Number (NINO) to access any benefits but this could take up to 9 weeks! These two should happen at the same time, but they can also be done separately, as the agencies responsible do not act or respond in a consistent manner.
- NINO:
Sometimes the NINO is normally sent automatically with the decision letter to the NASS address or is arranged through the Eastgate Job Centre. An interview will

happen which checks ID (list of valid documents is provided in advance) and the NINO is given soon after.

-The refugee can also apply direct to the NI line for an interview. 0845 600 0643

- Refugees should apply for Jobseeker's Allowance, ESA (Employment and Support Allowance) if they are sick or disabled, or Income Support plus Child Benefit and Child Tax Credits if they have children with them. They can do this by ringing 0800 055 6688. This interview takes about 40 minutes. The refugee will need to give permission if you are answering the questions; otherwise they will ring back with an interpreter. The refugee will need their postcode and lots of personal details so have all information ready to hand. The process is the same for all benefit claimants so many questions are irrelevant. A subsequent interview to show documents will be arranged.
- Parents have to apply for Jobseekers allowance first and when they obtain their NINO can then apply specifically for income support. (0800 055 6688)
- A template for a fast track application for Child Tax Credits is in the appendix of this guide.
- Benefits agencies will pay the first payments by Giro cheque. But a bank account will need to be set up as soon as possible. Then all benefits will be paid direct into the account.

Bank Accounts.

- Options:
 - The Credit Union is the quickest, but costs 75p per week.
 - The Post Office also do a special account aimed at people on benefits, but this has more limitations than a Credit Union account. Jobcentre Plus (JCP) must make an electronic request to open a Post Office account for new claimants:
 1. Contact Jobcentre Plus (JCP) for an interview, or ring them
 2. JCP gives the Post Office your details
 3. The Post Office send you a form to check, complete and return
 4. You then start receiving your benefits in your new account
 - Normal banks and building societies are not keen to help refugees but this is a better long term option¹. It may be worth trying different branches and different members of staff. They must have a utility bill so possibly arrange this before deadline day.
- Once the account is opened, the benefits agencies can be informed for starting direct payments.

Setting Up Home.

- Community crisis grants and loans no longer exist but refugees can apply for a non-cash Local Welfare Support Scheme Award for items of household goods and furniture. Tel: 0113 3760330 for an application form
- Several organisations exist providing free second-hand furniture. There is a charge for white goods and a small fee for delivery. Contact the Befriending Manager to make a referral.
- Changing schools can be arranged through Admissions at Merrion House: 0113 2224414

¹ There has been some success with Santander; Yorkshire Bank; Barclays, Lloyds and Halifax.

Helping Agencies.

- Citizens Advice Bureau, (various offices; see LASSN Directory)
- Welfare Rights Unit, 0113 3760452
- Normally, housing agencies and providers of emergency accommodation have support workers experienced in dealing with benefits agencies and all the other hazards of everyday life.
- Leeds City Council - Leeds Card, Breeze Card

Family Reunion.

Once status has been granted, the refugee's spouse and children may be able to join them in the UK. Normally this is done by applying for a Family Reunion visa, for which legal aid can be given. British Red Cross can help with tracing and tickets. See LASSN Directory for details or contact the Befriending Manager to make a referral.

Responsibilities as a Befriender.

- It is up to you to decide your boundaries and how much time and effort you put into this process. This will depend on your time and your befriender's resources. Ring the Befriending Manager to talk it through.
- Be aware that the transition period is a time of urgent practical demands. Your commitment is likely to increase as the process develops. You may become the main link between the refugee and all the official agencies.
- Note that housing support workers in the short and medium term accommodation should be able to take on this responsibility once housing has been found.
- It is important that the Refugee makes her own decision about all these processes. Try to offer options rather than advice and tell them to talk to people they may know who have been through the experience.

Tips.

- Be very patient and persistent – most government offices have a culture of caution and reserve – they will usually be courteous, but not often provide you with a definite commitment or precise information immediately.
- Your refugee will be asked repeatedly for the same information, and the same ID or other documents. This is normally one-way traffic, as very little response comes back for a long time. Learn to accept this. Get the Jobcentre to photocopy and certify documents so the refugee doesn't have to let go of the originals.
- Get the refugee to register a reliable address for receiving benefits mail whilst between houses.
- Prepare a sheet of answers to frequently requested information (e.g. full name, date of birth, date of arrival, date of status letter, address history, name of doctor, plus all this information for the children) to help maintain a consistent response over time.
- You will need to telephone the benefits agencies on a frequent basis. The call centres are mostly very busy, and you will be holding the line in a queue. If on a mobile, check if you are on a free call or go to <http://www.0800buster.co.uk/> to set up free calls
- The Eastgate Jobcentre and the Compton Centre in Harehills have free telephones near the reception area, which can be used to reach most benefits agencies.
- You are allowed to speak on your refugee's behalf, but the agency may ask to speak directly with them to confirm personal details e.g. full name, date of birth, address, etc.

as a security check. It is worth rehearsing this first. People whose first language is not English have greater difficulty with phones than with face-to-face. It also means that you cannot make these calls on your refugee's behalf when you are on your own (i.e. at a time more convenient to yourself).

- Keep a written "audit trail" of all their claims and communications, including dates and times, and destination addresses of letters and claims posted, to help any follow up.
- Photocopy any forms submitted.
- Try and get the name of the advisor you speak to. If you find someone particularly unhelpful, put the phone down and try again. Or try asking to speak to a manager.

Timescales/ estimates.

Housing: Emergency/Short term accommodation from the last day of NASS support may last up to 2-3 weeks. Longer temporary accommodation lasts up to 6 months, while they are looking for a permanent home

Benefits: Job Seekers can take up to 6-8 weeks so encourage the befriender to try and save some money in the last 4 weeks of support. Child benefit and tax credits are notoriously slow and can take 12+ weeks.

Fast tracking Child Tax Credits

- When helping the refugee claim benefit, ask to claim CTC at same time.
- If the JCP officer says it's not possible, ask to speak to a manager.
- If this doesn't work, take the name of the advisor and the time of call, to make a complaint
- Then ring again and hope you speak to a different advisor
- If both claims successfully made over phone, JCP should send partly completed form to refugee.
- Refugee takes this form to the WFI. The advisor should then complete their part of the form, certify any documents, put copies with the CTC application form and return originals to the refugee.
- If the form hasn't arrived by the time of the WFI, the refugee should ask to complete form TC600 at the interview.
- People claiming ESA will not get a WFI. So they will need to ring the JCP to book a special appointment. Speak to a manager if you meet resistance.
- To improve the chances of this system working, the refugee should give the following model letter to the JCP adviser. This letter is from the JCP adviser to the CTC officer.

Model covering letter for CTC application:

Dear Sir or Madam,

Re:

I would like to request that the above named person's application for **Child Tax Credit** be processed through the **fast track** system and that you identify the applicant's request as a 'move-on case' from UKBA support to mainstream support.

Please certify all original documents that are needed e.g. the Immigration Status Document (ISD) and attach accordingly to the application before submitting.

Kind regards,

Terms

JSA: Job Seekers Allowance

JCP: Job Centre Plus

WFI: Work focused Interview

ESA: Employment Support allowance