

# **FACT SHEET ABOUT ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES**

*Compiled by The Coventry Refugee Centre February 2003*

## **NUMBERS**

There are about 7,000 asylum seekers and refugees in Coventry at the moment. The biggest number are Kurdish people from Iraq - perhaps 3,000 but there are also people from some 75 other countries including Afghanistan, Iran, the Balkans, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast and Sri Lanka. Many of the Kosovans have now returned home.

## **WHY THEY COME**

For safety. They have fled wars, violence and oppression. There are wars going on all over the world. Some, like Afghanistan are seen on our television screens but most are not. There are very few people who are economic migrants. It is very difficult to leave your home, your family, your friends, your culture and your language and so you only do it if you really have to. Most asylum seekers are only able to go to neighbouring countries or have no idea where they are being taken. According to Home Office Research Study 243 those who have enough resources to get to a Western country and can make choices, decide in the following order 1) presence of family and friends 2) shared language: English is a world-wide language 3) cultural affinity 4) perceived affinity. The level of support you get as an asylum seeker is not a factor. They perceive all western countries to be free and democratic. Many have a much richer standard of living in the country they have come from than they do here. Asylum seekers are resourceful.

## **HOW THEY GET HERE**

For those who travel by lorry the journey is long and frightening, often taking several weeks, with many changes of lorry. Families often get split up. Children are often drugged by the agents to keep them quiet. Others come by plane.

## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ASYLUM SEEKER AND A REFUGEE**

An asylum seeker is someone who has registered a claim for asylum with the Home Office but has not yet had a decision. A refugee is someone who has received a positive decision and been given permission to stay here, either indefinitely or for a limited time, usually 4 years.

## **WHERE THEIR MONEY COMES FROM**

Most asylum seekers get their support from NASS (the National Asylum Support Service) which is part of the Home Office. Adults get 70% of income support rates, children get 100%. Asylum seekers used to be able to work if they still had no decision after 6 months but this was stopped in July 2002. When they get permission to stay here they can work and access the benefits system like anyone else although the transition is usually a very difficult one. Under a new law, since January 8<sup>th</sup> 2003, most new in country applicants (apart from families) have been refused any money or accommodation while their asylum case is being decided. This has caused significant destitution and is being challenged through the courts.

## **WHY SOME HANG AROUND IN GROUPS IN THE CITY CENTRE**

This can be for several reasons:- because this is common in their culture; because they aren't allowed to work; because they feel isolated and alone here and feel better if they are with friends; because their rooms are often bleak. (Most of them don't hang around in groups and women especially tend to stay at home).

## **WHY THEY HAVE MOBILE PHONES AND LOOK SMART**

It is easy to get second hand mobile phones and this links them to friends who may speak better English and also for many, to the families they have left behind. They will buy a mobile before anything else. Their smartness come from pride in their appearance. They may only have one pair of trousers but they will be clean and well pressed. Like other young people in Britain, they will strive to 'look good'.

#### **WHY SOME YOUNG MEN MAKE INAPPROPRIATE COMMENTS TO YOUNG WOMEN**

Most young men here are from cultures where they are not used to seeing young women dress like they do in the West and also where they may not be used to having a lot of contact with young women at all. This does not excuse inappropriate comments which can annoy and frighten, and refugee community representatives and people who work with asylum seekers and refugees are constantly trying ensure that newcomers are taught the norms of this country.

#### **WHY SO MANY ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES SEEM TO BE CRIMINALS**

There is a lower rate of criminal activity amongst refugees and asylum seekers than in the host community but some feuds still carry on here - for example between Russians and Chechnyans. Some of the accusations of crime by 'someone of Eastern European appearance' as reported in the local paper have turned out to be deliberate and false slander against refugees. (before asylum seekers arrived in the City, other minority groups were scapegoated as bad).

#### **ARE THEY TAKING HOUSES AWAY FROM OTHER PEOPLE**

Most asylum seekers live in private rented accommodation - often of poor quality, provided by private sector housing providers who lease properties and then get a contract with NASS. They are not able to be housed in public sector housing until they are given permission to stay here as refugees. Because they have to leave the NASS property within a month of the positive decision they are often homeless. As refugees, they are entitled to apply for housing just like other citizens but the Council gives no special priority to their applications just because they are refugees. Most vacancies of social housing occur in limited areas of the city (Wood End, Stoke Aldermoor, Willenhall, Henley Green, etc.) and if refugees want to be housed quickly, they have to accept property in those areas. Many are subject to racism and hostility in those areas.

#### **ABOUT THE DRIVING LESSONS**

Many people think asylum seekers get free driving lessons - and even cars! This is not true. The Refugee Centre is running an education programme about what driving documents you need to have and why it is important, and how to have and keep a roadworthy car. The aim is to make the roads safer for everyone. The driving lessons are only available to people who are eligible to work and they have to pay for them. The scheme is also open to the host community.

#### **WHAT THE CITY COUNCIL PROVIDES**

The City Council also has a contract with NASS to provide 229 homes. It also looks after about 50 under 18s who arrived on their own and 100 other people who came before the NASS system started. This support is all paid for by central government and not by Council tax. It also provides education but most schools report that the presence of asylum seekers and refugees is very beneficial to other students.

**The Daily Mail, the Express and the Sun run campaigns against asylum seekers and refugees. Don't believe everything you read in the papers.**

**If you would like more information please contact Penny Walker on 07960 552040**