

How long are Asylum Seekers here?

This depends on individual circumstances. The government aims to make decisions within 6 months and new laws have been introduced to help speed up the process. Unsuccessful Asylum Seekers must return to their country of origin & NASS support is withdrawn 28 days after their decision.

Asylum Seekers who are granted refugee status are free to remain here for as long as they wish. Those granted Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) are given a timescale. However, as Asylum Seekers and Refugees are here because their country of origin is unsafe, they are usually keen to return home and often do so when it becomes safe. For example, the majority of Kosovo Albanians have now returned home.

What support do they receive?

Myth: Asylum seekers get more than our pensioners or people on income support.

Fact: A single, adult asylum seeker aged 18-24, receives a maximum of £30.84 a week to live on. (£38.96 for over 25's). This is 1/3 of support for pensioners and 30% below income support levels - the accepted poverty line. Most asylum seekers who fail to declare themselves promptly get no support.

A joint study by Oxfam and the Refugee Council indicated that 85% experience hunger, 95% cannot afford to buy shoes and 80% are not able to maintain good health.

Myth: Asylum Seekers will be deterred from coming to the UK if we crack down on the system of support we offer them.

Fact: Since the UK started to implement policies to restrict asylum seekers' access to benefits in 1996, the number of asylum claims has risen, not fallen. Fluctuations in the number of asylum applications are a reflection of political stability in countries across the world, rather than perceptions of another country's benefit system.

How much are Asylum Seekers costing us?

Myth: Asylum Seekers, refugees and migrants are a drain on the UK economy.

Fact: Migrants more than pay their way in our society. In fact without their contribution, the average UK taxpayer would pay an extra penny in every pound in income tax.

Fact: A recent Home Office report estimated that foreign-born people – including refugees and asylum seekers – contribute around 10% more to Government revenues than they received in Government spending.

Myth: Asylum seekers are taking our housing.

Fact: Under the UK's dispersal scheme, asylum seekers are sent to regions around the country with existing available accommodation.

The Refugee & Asylum Seeker Steering Group brings together all agencies working to ensure that asylum seekers are safe and secure in the borough, and that Refugees are made welcome here.

Myth: Asylum Seekers are draining millions from the NHS.

Fact: Under international refugee law and international, European and UK human rights law, asylum seekers have a right to basic health care and education.

Fact: This statement is completely unsubstantiated and ignores the enormous contribution and experience that asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants bring to the UK.

In fact, the NHS currently relies heavily on foreign labour - according to the Greater London Authority, 23% of doctors and 47% of nurses working within the NHS were born outside the UK.

Myth: Educating children of asylum seekers will affect my own child's education.

Fact: The education department receives additional government funding for each asylum seeker's child in our schools. This money is used to employ additional staff to support schools so that other children are not disadvantaged. In fact, having pupils from different ethnic groups can enrich the educational experience of all children.

Housing

Myth: First Choice Homes Oldham (FCHO) redecorates every council house before it is rented out to asylum seekers. They don't do this for local people.

Fact: Asylum seeker accommodation receives basic redecoration prior to its first use, they are not redecorated for subsequent lettings. Ordinary tenants are entitled to apply for decorating allowances.

Myth: Asylum seekers are allowed to go to furnishing stores to buy furniture and carpets for their homes, paid for by the Council.

Fact: Not true. Asylum seeker accommodation includes basic furniture, including carpets, curtains and beds, which belong to the property, not the asylum seeker. Asylum seekers do not purchase these and luxury items like TVs or microwaves are not included.

Myth: FCHO tenants are made to leave their homes and move to other areas so asylum seekers can have their homes.

Fact: No tenant has ever been made to leave their accommodation by FCHO so that their house can be used for Asylum seeker accommodation. Asylum seekers are placed in already vacant properties.

Myth: Asylum seekers are housed at the cost of local taxpayers and FCHO tenants.

Fact: The cost of providing accommodation to asylum seekers does not come from local taxes or rents. These costs are all met by the National Asylum Support Service.

If you would like more information or would like to discuss the contents of this leaflet further, please contact the Diversity & Cohesion Unit on 0161 911 4166 or email equalities@oldham.gov.uk

Jobs and Benefits

Myth: Asylum seekers are taking all the local jobs.

Fact: Asylum seekers need permission to work and as of July 2002, no new asylum seekers are allowed to work. Those found working have their benefits and support removed. Those asylum seekers granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain (ELR) can work, and their contribution to local economy and skills market can be valuable.

Myth: Asylum seekers' supermarket shopping bill far exceeds their allowance or their voucher value and the Council pays this.

Fact: Asylum seekers no longer receive vouchers, they receive cash - but 30% less than those on income support. They do not receive any further financial assistance from the Council or benefits agencies.

Myth: The DSS will buy a new car for asylum seekers when they have passed their test.

Fact: The DSS does not provide money for asylum seekers to purchase new cars or any other goods. If an asylum seeker is found to own a car, NASS will reconsider if they are destitute, which may result in their benefits being reduced. Once an asylum seeker is granted refugee status or ELR, they may get a job and purchase a car like other citizens.

Health

Myth: Asylum seekers get priority health care over local people.

Fact: Oldham's Health authorities do not prioritise asylum seekers over local people. Asylum Seekers are entitled to register with a local GP and receive most services from the NHS, but they must go through the same processes as everyone else.

Crime

Myth: Asylum seekers are linked to rising crime.

Fact: A report published by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) recently confirmed that there is no evidence for a higher rate of criminality among refugees and asylum seekers. In fact they are more likely to become victims of crime in the UK.

Myth: Nearly all asylum seekers are troublemaking young men.

Fact: A significant proportion of asylum seekers to the UK are women, children and older persons. Furthermore, the Association of Chief Police Officers released a report in 2001, which revealed that asylum seekers are far more likely to be the victims than the perpetrators of crime. It shows that there is absolutely no evidence that asylum seekers have a higher rate of criminality than any other segment of society.

Alternative Formats.

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Tackling the Myths about ASYLUM SEEKERS

Debates around Asylum Seekers in the UK have been hot topics in recent years, particularly within the media and political arena.

Negative images and stereotypes have been conjured up and reinforced by the negative and sometimes derogatory language that the British press has used around the issues of Asylum Seekers and Refugees. In a MORI poll in 2002, when shown a list of words and asked which were most used by the media when referring to Asylum Seekers, 85% selected a negative term.

So, when what we hear about Asylum Seekers is diverse and contradictory, how do we know what is the truth?

This document aims to answer the most common questions people have about Asylum Seekers and Refugees and to combat any common misconceptions and myths.

OLDHAM
Metropolitan Borough

WHAT IS AN ASYLUM SEEKER OR A REFUGEE?

An Asylum Seeker is a person who has made an application for 'refugee status' and is awaiting a decision from the Immigration and Nationality Department of the Home Office.

A Refugee is someone that, under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to Refugees, the government recognises as:

- **Having a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion;**
- **Being outside the country they belong to or normally reside in, and**
- **Being unable or unwilling to return home for fear of persecution.**

Exceptional / Compassionate Leave to Remain: This can be given when Refugee Status is not granted to an asylum seeker, but when the government recognises that the asylum seekers country is unsafe for them to return to. This period of Leave to Remain can vary but is usually no longer than 3 years.

Real life stories: MR. X OLDHAM (CONGO)

After leaving university (Mr X) worked for the Ministry of Social Affairs in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As part of this work he wrote a report investigating social conditions in Congo that included recommendations for improvements. He was also a member of a political party:

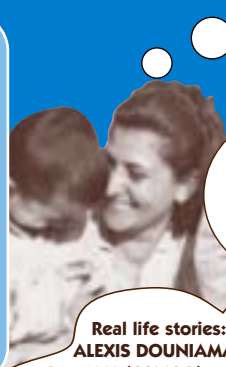
"I was arrested on my way home after work. I was waiting for a bus, and was approached by plain clothed officers who asked me if I was [my name]. I replied, yes, and I was put into a police van. Once I was bundled into the van, they started to beat me and proceeded to take my money, watch and identity card off me."

He was arrested and imprisoned for nearly 6 months. (Mr X) continues

"I was beaten and tortured almost every day because of my political opinion and ethnicity."

He managed to escape from prison to discover that a colleague in similar circumstances had been killed. He therefore felt he had no option but to flee the country as quickly as possible, leaving his wife and three children in hiding in DRC. He came to the UK in March 2002. His claim for asylum was initially turned down but after Appeal (Mr X) has now been given Indefinite Leave To Remain in the UK.

He is now working as volunteer youth worker in Oldham and is keen to develop a career in social work. Hopefully, his family will be permitted to join him.



Real life stories: AYGUN 34. (TURKEY)

Until coming to the UK Aygun and her family lived in Turkey as a member of the Kurdish minority population. However, *"My husband's cousin was killed by the authorities because they thought he was one of the Kurdish guerrillas. Because of this they suspected my husband as well. He was beaten and tortured. They drove us out of our village. They interrogated us, sometimes all through the night, called us 'dirty Kurds' and said: 'We'll burn you all.' My husband escaped to the UK. Then one day they beat me in front of my children. That was when I knew I had to get out. When we made it to the UK I felt like a new-born person because we were safe. I was so happy."*

Yet today, as she waits for a decision from the Home Office, Aygun is once again living in fear.

"Children on the estate are throwing stones at us, smashing our windows and calling us names. They are making racist attacks on us. One of our neighbours threw a lit cigarette at my child. I am afraid to go out and I keep my children locked inside the house. People shouldn't be racist. Then I could let my children go outside and play with theirs."

Story taken from Refugee Action.

Real life stories: ALEXIS DOUNIAMA, OLDHAM (CONGO)

In his early twenties, Alexis had a bright future ahead of him. He had a law degree, a wife Peggy Alda (23) and two young children. But his world was thrown into turmoil when his father and elder brother were killed for being members of a party, which was in opposition to the government. Alexis was warned that his life was in grave danger and he must flee immediately, leaving behind his and their children. He flew to Heathrow, and was sent to Oldham where he moved into a house with four other men. One morning he turned up on the doorstep of the presbytery at St Patrick's RC Church distraught after hearing that his wife and family were still in danger. He said:

"When I first arrived here I looked for a church because I am a Catholic."

Alexis hopes to be granted asylum and would like to study to be an interpreter. He said:

"It is very difficult but now I am feeling better having come to the church and made friends both in and out of the church group. The choir is a very important part of my life. It is like a support system and there is a sense of solidarity"

"It is very frustrating that we can't do any work in the day. I sometimes feel disapproval from people around me and am aware of how the word asylum seeker is perceived." "It is not easy to start everything again."

"If I was to return to my country my life would be in danger. I am still very afraid about my wife and children."

Story provided by Alexis Douniama and St Patrick's RC Church.



Why the UK?

The UK is committed to international human rights and believes that everyone should have the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution. In 1951 the UK signed the Convention on Refugees, which means that anyone has the legal right to come here, apply for asylum and remain in the UK until a final decision on their asylum application has been made.

Myth: Asylum Seekers come to the UK because of its reputation as a "soft touch".

Fact: Many Asylum Seekers do not know where they will end up when they flee their country of origin. Home Office research suggests that when Asylum Seekers have chosen to flee to the UK, it is because of existing community or family links or knowledge of the UK's tolerance, diversity, commonwealth and colonial history.

Myth: Britain takes more than its fair share of Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

Fact: Compared to other Western European countries, in 2002 the UK ranked just 8th in terms of the number of asylum applications as a percentage of the population. Between 1999-2000 Germany received almost two million applications for asylum- in comparison the UK had only 25% of Germany's total (454,445).

Fact: The UK holds only 2% of the world's asylum and refugees. In fact, globally the UK ranks only 32nd. The countries taking the greatest burden are generally poorer countries such as Iran, Jordan and Pakistan.

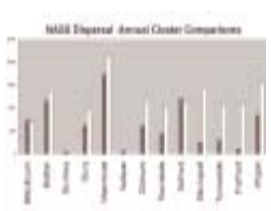
Why Oldham?

Prior to 2000, Asylum Seekers arriving in Britain were housed only in London or the South East, although successful refugees could move around the country at their will. However, the government has changed its policy so the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) now disperses Asylum Seekers across the country into each Local Authority. In the North West this is largely done through the North West Consortium.

How many?

Local Authorities are set 'cluster limits' which caps the number of Asylum Seekers that will be dispersed there at any one time. This is based on 0.5% of the local population. For Oldham this limit is 1096, but in 2002 the number was only 56% of this figure.

Town	November 02	Cluster
Blackburn	724	700
Bolton	1169	1338
Bury	629	914
Manchester	1722	2149
Oldham	612	1096
Rochdale	443	1041
Salford	1216	1130
Stockport	263	1464
Tameside	313	1102
Trafford	116	1102
Wigan	841	1553



Myth: Immigration in the UK is reaching unsustainable levels.

Fact: Not true. Figures show that in 1999, as a result of migration – including other transitory populations such as foreign students and traveller's with/without work visas - the UK's population only increased by 181,500 (0.3%). Furthermore, like much of the EU, the UK's working population is declining. The UN's Population Division reports that low birth rates mean the EU will need to import 1.6 million migrants a year simply to keep its working-age population stable between now and 2050.

Who are they?

In January 2004 there were 462 asylum seeker cases (644 individuals) in Oldham. Of these, 364 (78%) were single people, 98 (22%) families.

Of the single asylum seekers, 28 were female and 336 male. Of the families, 62% were headed by a female, 38% by a male.

Although asylum seekers living in Oldham come from a variety of different countries, the figures from some nationalities are larger than others for obvious reasons. In January 2004, approximately 30% of Oldham's asylum seekers were of Iraqi nationality, 15% Iranian, 13% Afghan and 6% from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Are Asylum Seekers genuine?

Myth: Most Asylum Seekers are not genuine.

Fact: In 2001 & 2002 Over 50% of all Asylum Seekers were recognised by the government as having genuine grounds to seek asylum and were given permission to remain in the country.

Myth: Most Asylum Seekers are healthy single men so they can't be 'real' asylum seekers.

Fact: In many countries men are more likely to be involved in politics or the military, which means they are more likely to be targeted for persecution by oppressive regimes.

Myth: 'illegal asylum seekers'. – Evening Standard 24/09/04

Fact: By definition there is no such thing as an 'illegal asylum seeker'. As the UK has signed the 1951 Convention on Refugees anyone has the right to apply for asylum in the UK and remain until a final decision has been made. It can be extremely difficult for people fleeing persecution to reach Britain without using false documents, so for many reasons a person may enter the country illegally. However, this does not mean that their case lacks credibility, and they are by no means 'illegal'.

Oldham Council is aware that there are many other misconceptions about asylum seekers and how they are treated locally. We want to address these 'myths' head on and put the record straight.