

What Can We Do?

Campaign for:

- A fairer asylum system.
- Work permission for people refused asylum who can't be sent home.
- Continued support for refused families with children. See Refugee and Asylum Forum briefing document: *Preventing Destitution Within the Asylum Process: Urgent Action Required*, January 2017. <http://lawcentreni.org/Publications/Policy-Briefings/Preventing-asylum-seeker-destitution-RAF-Jan-17.pdf>
- A permanent Executive Office crisis fund.
- No loss of asylum support for refugees until they have access to mainstream support or have found a job.

Do:

- The £10 challenge: could you live for a week on the £10 Red Cross or NICRAS handout to destitute person who is seeking asylum?
- Support / donate to support organisations (see below).
- Challenge negative stereotypes about people seeking asylum and the assumptions that they receive generous public support.

Some support organisations

The Red Cross Belfast provides some financial and practical support. Neil McKittrick Tel: (028) 9073 5350

The **NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS)** is a refugee-run support organisation. 143a University Street, Belfast BT7 1HP. Tel: (028) 9024 6699 info@nicras.org.uk www.nicras.btck.co.uk

Homeplus Drop in Centre provides a range of support services for destitute people in the asylum system, 113 University Street, Belfast, BT7 1HP, Tel: (028) 9031 1836.

EMBRACE Emergency Fund gives small grants to foreign nationals in crisis situations. Approaches should be made through other support organisations (contact details below).

St Vincent De Paul conferences in Belfast provide practical support for people seeking asylum.

Storehouse Belfast assists people with food and material goods. Tel: (028) 9023 6333 www.storehousebelfast.com (Other local foodbanks assist people living in their areas.)

Refugees Welcome aims to link people with a room to spare with people in the asylum system who need somewhere to stay. <http://refugees-welcomeni.co.uk/>
Email: bethwatbrad@gmail.com

EMBRACE NI
Building a Welcoming Community

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EMBRACE Information Sheet 11

Poverty & Destitution in the Asylum System

Winter 2016–17



'This is what the Lord Almighty said: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor."'
Zechariah 7: 8–10

The UK has signed the international Refugee Convention and so people arriving here have the right to apply for asylum and demonstrate how they have experienced persecution. Some people live on their savings or the support of family and friends while their case is being considered but most people arrive with nothing. While they are trying to prove their case they are not allowed to work but if they have no other means of support, they are provided with accommodation and a weekly allowance.

The UK system is not the worst in the world, but it is not ideal either. Asylum applicants have to hope that their National Asylum Support Service (NASS) Section 95 support (£36.95 per week at January 2017) will start quickly and that they can learn to live on that a small allowance, perhaps for years.

Poverty among people seeking asylum in the UK

When NASS support was introduced and people were barred from both seeking work or applying for mainstream benefits, the allowance was set at 70% of income support, but over the years its value has decreased. The rate has not increased since 2011 and most NI MPs were among the 98 who signed Early Day Motion 99 at Westminster in 2016. This asked that the allowance be increased from £5.23 to £7.17 per day, to return it to 70% of Income Support. There was particular concern that allowances for families were being reduced and that children would suffer.

The UK charity, Refugee Action, has campaigned for an increase, arguing that the inability to afford transport or phone calls isolates people and that poverty contributes to poor mental and physical health.

Those who receive NASS support struggle with poverty but those who have no support, face the greater struggle of destitution. (See page 2.)

What is destitution?

Red Cross definition of a destitute person:

'A person who is not accessing public funds, is living in extreme poverty and is unable to meet basic needs, e.g. income, food, shelter ... and who is forced to rely on irregular support from family, friends, charities or illegal working to survive.'

Not Gone, But Forgotten:

The Urgent Need for a More Humane Asylum System

www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/Archive/GeneralContent/N/Destitution%20report%20Not%20gone%20but%20forgotten.pdf

How do people become destitute in the UK asylum system?

- People usually arrive with no money.
- It may take a while to get financial support.
- There can be glitches in the system.
- Support stops if an application is refused, even if the Home Office thinks it is too dangerous for the person to be returned to their country of origin.
- Accommodation is also withdrawn.
- It may take a while to start an appeal or get evidence for a fresh application for asylum.
- Hardship support is increasingly difficult to get. (This limited support of emergency accommodation, plus £35.39 per week on a cashless card, is only given where people co-operate with the Home Office.)
- New refugees also lose asylum support and can be destitute because of delays in getting a job or getting benefits started.
- When family members join a refugee, benefits may stop because of the change of circumstances and take a long time to start again.

How does destitution affect people?

- They go hungry.
- They may become ill – mentally or physically.
- It is difficult to make positive use of time.
- Many sleep rough or sofa surf.
- If they work illegally they are at risk of exploitation and deportation.
- It can be hard to stay in contact with friends, family, the Home Office and solicitors.
- Many are scared to approach charities because they fear removal from the UK and return to persecution or war.

How destitute people feel

'I'm told that it's not safe for me to go back home and at the same time I don't deserve help and support. I don't want to beg, I don't want to steal food,' ... I feel humiliated' (Ali Arshain from Darfur)

'I feel very sad and lost. I sometimes wish I were dead.'

'Everyday is routine. I meet the same people and I do the same things.'

'My friend would let me use her cooker but I don't want to impose or make her bills higher so I don't use her facilities'

'I eat once a day if friends can spare some food.'

(Red Cross clients in *Not Gone, But Forgotten* – see opposite)

Up to 100 people may have been destitute in the asylum system in N Ireland in 2015-16. This is what some of them say.

'My landlord told me to go. ... I had no idea what to do. I walked and walked around the city all night. ... If people are left on the streets, where is the humanity?'

Musa, who was destitute for 5 years as a refused asylum applicant before being granted refugee status in 2015, interviewed at the Law Centre NI

'Angry, think of wife and kids back home. Feel like a burden... Problems with liver made worse...'

Interviewee quoted in *A Place of Refuge: a Monitor of Homelessness Among Destitute Asylum Seekers*, Belfast, PPR (2016)

Read more about the issues and the local situation in a briefing by members of the Refugee & Asylum Forum, *Preventing Destitution Within the Asylum Process: Urgent Action Required*, January 2017. <http://lawcentreni.org/Publications/Policy-Briefings/Preventing-asylum-seeker-destitution-RAF-Jan-17.pdf>

Positive local initiatives

- Free healthcare for all in the asylum system, including those whose application has been refused
- The Executive Office crisis fund for destitute people with no resource to public funds administered through the Red Cross
- City Council Refugee Transition Guide www.belfastcity.gov.uk/community/advice/migrants.aspx
- The support of local charities and NGOs (see overleaf)