

Evidence from the South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG)

Introduction

1. SYMAAG welcomes the establishment of the Race Equality Commission. Britain has suffered from a long history of racial abuse and discrimination. Despite its aspiration to be a City of Sanctuary, Sheffield has not been free of racial abuse and discrimination. SYMAAG's focus is on asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in our City and our evidence draws attention to the problems they face. Many of these problems are caused by Government's hostile environment policies, but we believe that these problems can at least be alleviated by action within the City by our public bodies, voluntary associations and individuals. This paper is organised as follows:

1. Summary.
2. SYMAAG's mission and activities.
3. Asylum seekers.
4. Refugees.
5. Migrants.
6. Conclusion and recommendations.

Summary

2. SYMAAG's mission is to campaign for action to improve the position of asylum seekers and exploited migrants. The situation which we campaign about is as follows:

- Many of our City's BAME population are relatively new arrivals. Many suffer from the Government's hostile environment policies. Asylum seekers can spend years in poverty, barred from work and in limbo seeking leave to remain. Some are detained. Some become homeless and destitute, unless helped by ASSIST.
- The asylum housing provided by the Mears Group is often of poor quality. Urban House in Wakefield, which houses more than 200 asylum seekers, has suffered a Covid 19 outbreak and conditions are still not adequate.
- Refused asylum seekers may not qualify for secondary care in the NHS and may receive grotesque bills for treatment.
- Those who have been given refugee status often face a struggle to establish themselves and get work.
- Post Brexit, migration will depend on high income thresholds and costly fees which discriminate against migrants in ordinary jobs.
- The Home Office uses extensively its power to detain asylum seekers and other migrants indefinitely.

3. We recommend that the Commission should:

1. encourage the Council to review organisations they support to make sure that they follow an anti-racist agenda.
2. call for radical improvements nationally in the way in which asylum seekers, refugees and migrants more generally are treated;
3. use its report to help Sheffield's indigenous population understand the problems which migrants face;

4. support and encourage the many steps which local voluntary organisations are taking to support refugees, asylum seekers and migrants;
5. discourage the City Council of this City of Sanctuary from collaborating in the hostile environment policies of the Government; and
6. propose a timetable for the implementation of its proposals and ways in which progress in implementation can be monitored.

SYMAAG's Mission and Activities

4. SYMAAG was established in 2007 to campaign for action by Government and others to improve the position of asylum seekers and exploited migrants. Its first action was a march to Lindholme Detention Centre near Doncaster to protest at the detention of asylum seekers and migrants in prison conditions. SYMAAG quickly became an international group of volunteers, combining local activists with those with first hand experience of the asylum system. It is now led by refugees, with local activists also playing an active part. There are no paid staff. In the pandemic, it has remained highly active, meeting regularly on zoom.

5. SYMAAG works closely with other asylum organisations. It also works with local MPs in raising issues with the Home Office. In 2013, SYMAAG organised what was probably the biggest demonstration in the country against the Government's Immigration Bill - this was the 'hostile environment' legislation which led to the shocking Windrush scandal. In recent years, SYMAAG has highlighted the inadequacies of asylum housing (see below).

Asylum seekers

6. In evidence to the Sheffield Fairness Commission in 2011, the Sheffield asylum organisations argued that: 'asylum seekers are arguably the most unfairly treated people in Britain.' Here are some of the disadvantages that they suffer:

- A lack of safe and legal routes to reach the UK, leading to extremely hazardous journeys in lorries or small boats. This can cause deaths and increase the mental and physical health problems that many asylum seekers experience.
- Asylum seekers are normally not allowed to work.
- Newly arrived asylum seekers and some long standing asylum seekers, particularly those with dependants, normally receive £37.75 per person each week and live in asylum housing provided in Yorkshire by Mears Group. This housing is often very unsatisfactory (see paras 7-10). During the pandemic, some asylum seekers were placed in hostels or hotels without any income at all, leading to protests; more recently there has been a small cash payment.
- Decision making in the Home Office can be long delayed. Moreover, there are suspicions of a 'culture of disbelief' in the Home Office – a tendency to disbelieve what asylum seekers say about their experiences unless they can produce irrefutable documentary proof, which often is impossible. A Zimbabwean member of SYMAAG recently received leave to remain after a 15 year battle. Another member has been seeking leave to remain for more than ten years.
- Asylum seekers without dependents and whose claims have been rejected by the Home Office normally cannot receive public funds or housing, leading to destitution and homelessness. ASSIST has been invaluable in tackling this problem in Sheffield, but cannot support all those needing help.

- Asylum seekers find it difficult to obtain legal help after their first claim is rejected. South Yorkshire Refugee Law and Justice, founded in 2011, helps some of them but cannot meet the growing need.
- Many asylum seekers are required to report regularly at Home Office premises, such as Vulcan House in Sheffield. Reporting was abandoned during the first lockdown but has now been reintroduced, despite the health hazards during the pandemic. At our request, Paul Blomfield MP has raised this with the Home Office.
- Refused asylum seekers without an active claim are not normally entitled to secondary care in the NHS eg operations, advice of consultants. Simba Mujakachi, one of our members, had a stroke and received a bill from the NHS for £100,000 for the treatment he had received. We and others launched a national campaign called Justice for Simba.
- The Home Office can detain asylum seekers indefinitely. Habeus corpus does not apply. In this respect, our system is among the most severe in Europe.

7. In the last year or so, SYMAAG has drawn attention to problems at Urban House, which is adjacent to Wakefield Prison and managed by Mears Group. Newly arrived asylum seekers are normally sent there by the Home Office before moving into longer term accommodation in Sheffield or other parts of the region. Before the pandemic, we criticised the grim and over-crowded conditions there and the unsatisfactory food. We began to bring food and clothing for people there. This was gratefully received.

8. Then Covid turned Urban House into a serious health hazard. In March 2020, residents protested for soap in the bathrooms, PPE, translated health advice, decent food and an end to unrelated people being forced to share small bedrooms. SYMAAG helped gain widespread media attention and political support for residents' demands. Our housing expert, John Grayson, documented and supported residents' battles and called for Home Office oversight and inspection. In July, the Covid outbreak that we feared actually occurred. A resident told the Independent: 'Everyone is full of fear, stress and anxiety. We're talking about life or death. In here, there are more than 200 people all living together all day, sharing toilets, and eating areas. There is no respect for anyone.' Urban House was evacuated and its inhabitants moved into other accommodation. Now Urban House has been re-occupied and we fear that not much improvement has occurred.

9. In view of the shortage of decent food and clothing for asylum seekers, we helped to form Yorkshire Refugee Foodbank along with Calais support networks, Councillor Zahira Naz, Kurdish community organisations etc. YRF is now well established and providing vital practical support to asylum seekers around Yorkshire.

10. We understand that Mears Group are now tending to use large hostels instead of houses and flats. Apparently, they are taking over a student hostel in Sheffield. In view of experience at Urban House, this needs careful watching to see that the same problems do not recur.

11. We work with ethnic communities and their organisations and campaign with them. For example in 2019-20 we held a demonstration with the Eritrean community to highlight the abuses suffered by refugees stranded in Libyan detention centres and the European Union's role in preventing refugees crossing the Mediterranean. Again, we joined the Yemeni Community Association in demonstrating against arms sales to Saudi Arabia and their use against Yemen causing many people to flee. We also worked alongside newly-arrived Yemeni refugees who were housed in Sheffield hotels with no income or support.

Refugees

12. The Home Office uses the term ‘refugees’ to refer to asylum seekers who have been given leave to remain. When people obtain refugee status, their problems are by no means over. After 28 days, they are ousted from asylum accommodation. This is not enough time in which to find a new home, obtain a National Insurance number, claim benefits and start looking for work. They are put at risk of homelessness and destitution. Fortunately, in Sheffield the Spring project and linked organisations help refugees through their transition. Some refugees suffer additionally because the Home Office denies them recourse to public funds - a major problem if they need help from public bodies because of sickness, unemployment or other difficulties.

13. Refugees may find it very difficult to obtain work, particularly currently when so many people have been made redundant as a result of the pandemic. They may lack fluency in English which can be a serious handicap in obtaining employment. Despite sterling efforts by schools and colleges and SAVTE (Sheffield Association for the Voluntary Teaching of English), there are insufficient resources devoted to the teaching of English in the City.

Migrants

14. Ever since the Conservatives set an unrealistic net migration target of 100,000 a year for the 2010 Election, the Government has been devising ways of making life in the UK more difficult for migrants. This has led to discomfort, heartache and disappointment for many migrants.

15. First, the cost of getting indefinite leave to remain or to obtain British citizenship has escalated. A migrant applying for indefinite leave to remain in the UK must pay £2,389. The fee for registering a child is over £1,000, though the actual cost to the Home Office has been calculated as only £372. Then there is the Immigration Health Surcharge of £624 a year in addition to the taxes which migrants like all citizens pay. If you wish to become naturalised as a British citizen, the cost is £1,330. For migrants in low paid jobs, these are hefty sums to pay.

16. Secondly, the Government has introduced a discriminatory income based system for determining whether people in the UK can migrate into the UK or bring in spouses or dependants. The general income threshold for migrants entering the UK after Brexit for work is now £25,600, which will exclude many workers. Someone wishing to bring in a spouse into the UK has to earn at least £18,600, or substantially more for children. These are thresholds that many people cannot meet. When they were first introduced in 2012, we held a protest meeting at which a Yemeni explained that people in his community could not earn enough to bring a loved one into the country. Following this meeting, the City Council passed a resolution condemning the new rules as ‘detrimental to the multi-cultural vitality of Sheffield.’

17. Thirdly, the Government has used extensively its power to detain migrants indefinitely- in our view one of the worst features of the UK immigration system. For 10 years we campaigned for the closure of Morton Hall detention centre and we were pleased that it was closed in 2020. But in 2021 it will revert to being used as a prison and migrants will probably continue to suffer there.

18. The Home Office has used its extensive powers to involve local authorities and local police forces as partners in its hostile environment policies. 1600 Sheffield residents (a higher proportion than most cities) were arrested between 2013 and 2017 as ‘suspected illegal migrants’ with immigration enforcement staff based at police stations. In 2019, we discovered that Sheffield City

Council had made 'several referrals of undocumented migrants to the UK Border Force' via its Private Housing Standards team. We asked the Council how this could be compatible with Sheffield's proud position as Britain's first 'City of Sanctuary'. We eventually received an assurance that SCC policy and practice on its attitude to hostile environment policies would be 'reviewed'.

19. At least three Councils in the UK (Haringey, Oxford and Lewisham) are unwilling to share data concerning rough sleepers or homeless people with the Home Office. We look to Sheffield City Council to make a similar pledge.

Conclusion and recommendations

20. Many of Sheffield's BAME population have arrived in the City in the last two decades from a huge range of countries. There are now many different ethnic communities, large and small. Asylum seekers may have had terrible experiences in their own countries, hazardous journeys and long periods of marginalisation as asylum seekers before they eventually may - or may not - have gained refugee status. All this can take its toll on their physical and mental health. Fortunately, a large number of voluntary organisations are dedicated to providing support. The best up to date account of their efforts is the *Review of Needs, Services and Facilities for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants in Sheffield* (March 2020) - see <https://sheffield.cityofsanctuary.org/2020-review/> Among other things the Report points out that: 'Racism, sexism and unconscious bias are endemic in society. Organisations working in this area are not immune.' We suggest that the Council should review organisations they support to make sure that they follow an anti-racist agenda.

21. We see the Commission's work as highly important. But there is a risk that its Report will gather dust and fail to be implemented. It will be vital that the Commission proposes a timetable for implementation and recommends ways in which progress in implementation can be monitored.

22. We **recommend** that the Commission should:

1. encourage the Council to review organisations they support to make sure that they follow an anti-racist agenda.
2. call for radical improvements nationally in the way in which asylum seekers, refugees and migrants more generally are treated;
3. use its report to help Sheffield's indigenous population understand the problems which migrants face;
4. support and encourage the many steps which local voluntary organisations are taking to support refugees, asylum seekers and migrants;
5. discourage the City Council of this City of Sanctuary from collaborating in the hostile environment policies of the Government;
6. propose a timetable for the implementation of its proposals and ways in which progress in implementation can be monitored.

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