Refugee Council: 28 days later: experiences of new refugees in the UK

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Aims

The report documented the experiences of newly-granted refugees to learn about the issues they face, the support they need and receive, and whether there are ways processes and policies can be changed to make the transition from being an asylum seeker to becoming a refugee more smoothly. It focused on people’s experiences of the first year after they have been granted refugee status, particularly in the initial 28 day period. The research had three main aims:

- Examine the experiences of refugees in their first year of transition after gaining status.
- Identify the support needs of newly-granted refugees.

Make recommendations to improve policy and practice

Methodology

This report is a result of interviews conducted with eight refugees, and an overall data collected as part of Refugee Council's day-to-day support of new refugees (consisting of 469 advice sessions provided to 127 individuals between January 1st 2013 and 31st December 2013).

Interviews:

- Interviews were conducted with four men and four women who had been granted refugee status within the preceding year. They were aged between 20s and 50s.
- They came from: Afghanistan; Bangladesh; Cameroon; Colombia; Eritrea; Iran; and Sri Lanka.
- All had been granted refugee status since March 2013, and had waited between a few weeks and one year to receive a positive asylum decision.
- All participants were living in London. Initially, six had been based in other areas while awaiting decisions on their claims (the North West, Scotland, Wales, and Yorkshire and Humberside) and had moved to London once they had received a positive decision.

Advice sessions:

118 were provided to clients in London, 202 in West Midlands, 141 in Yorkshire and Humberside and 7 in East of England

Key issues

Home Office policy is that those who are in receipt of Asylum Support will

cease to be entitled to accommodation and cash support 28 days after their notification of being granted refugee status. Therefore, refugees have to secure housing and the means to support themselves and their families very quickly.

Between October 2008 and September 2011 a Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) was funded by government and delivered by sector agencies across the UK, including the Refugee Council. As part of RIES, users were able to access: an integration advice service for 6 months; an employment support service for up to 12 months; a mentoring scheme which lasted between 6 and 12 months. REIS was abolished in 2011.

The report identifies some of the key issues in relation to 28 days move on period:

- **Access to services**: To access many services, refugees need to have the correct documentation and proof of immigration status. However, three of the eight interviewees did not receive their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) before the end of the 28-day period. Two people waited for three months before being allocated a National Insurance Number, this made it difficult for them to open bank accounts and access private rented accommodation. BRPs are also not widely recognised, therefore refugees spent money on gaining more readily

recognisable identity documents such as drivers' licences and foreign passports. An interviewee stated: "I mean…if they give you 28 days…you don't know where you are going to go….what you are going to eat. A little bit confusing as well as chaotic." – Manuel.

- **Housing**: The Refugee Council was approached for advice relating to finding accommodation 190 times (just over 40% of the sample), and none of the interviewees had access to their own accommodation at the end of the 28-day period. One interviewee's experience was summarised as follows: "Stayed in Church Hall for two nights and then moved into a hostel in a northern city for a month. Moved to London for medical treatment. Lives in shared accommodation but it is overcrowded and he has to sleep in a bath. Receives Housing Benefit."
- **Welfare benefits**: navigating the welfare system is rather challenging, even for people who were born in the UK and has no problems understanding and reading English. It is unsurprising that 43% of the Refugee Council sessions related to welfare benefits, and all of the interviewees were accessing some kind of mainstream welfare benefits. According to one interviewee: "homelessness and lack of NINO caused delay in claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. Received first payment 3 months after asylum decision."
- **Employment and education**: In absence of tailored advice, refugees have difficulties finding a job, and by the time of the research project, only one of the interviewees had managed to gain employment. One person they interviewed felt : '…as a refugee, JobCentre Plus is for job

seekers. We are not only job seekers also we are refugees. They press every time ‘do six job applications every week, you can’t do that like this, you need to do more, do this do that’ it is not a peaceful, easy place.” – Ahame

- **Sources of advice and support**: At the time of the research project, there was no nationwide co-ordinated service available to support new refugees similar to the extinct Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES). “I think most asylum seekers, when they are protected by the Home Office or the government, they think the transition when you are granted everything is going to come fast and easy. It’s not…”

Conclusion

The research states that 28 days is a short time to find accommodation and secure financial support by those who are unfamiliar with the country’s systems and language. Researchers argue that newly-granted refugees are being left with no support, and once their asylum support has ended they need to rely on the generosity of friends and faith groups and charities in order to eat and find shelter.

Recommendations

- Home Office should support refugees until they have full access to other means of support.

- It is most likely that the newly granted refugees will not have any savings. Therefore, if they are seeking privately rented accommodation the government should support them in paying a deposit.
- The Home Office should ensure that refugees receive their relevant documentation in a timely manner, as well that the staff are trained properly so to ensure the provision of support throughout all the asylum-seeking process.
- Government should produce guidance to inform banks and service providers about the documents issued to refugees and encourage their recognition as evidence of identity.
- The Government should re-instate RIES.

All service providers need a good understanding of what kind of documents refugees may have in their possession.

Web Link
http://www.fergusreilly.org/An_Tairseach/Advocacy_files/28%20Days%20Later%20-%2...
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Place
UK - inc. Yorkshire & Humber element
Year
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