

we'll keep a

welcome...

Refugees & Asylum Seekers
MANIFESTO

2007



introduction

This manifesto has been prepared by a coalition of organisations, community groups and faith groups across Wales. We believe the next Assembly term offers real opportunities to improve the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in Wales and to strengthen relationships between refugee and receiving communities.

We call on Assembly candidates to pledge their support to the key principles and actions set out in this manifesto.

who are refugees and people seeking asylum?

Asylum seeker: a person who is fleeing persecution in their homeland, has arrived in the UK, made themselves known to the authorities and exercised their legal right to apply for asylum.

Refugee: a person who has been recognised by the government as needing protection in the UK because if he or she returned to their home country they would have a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

refugees and asylum seekers in Wales

There are fewer than 2,500 people seeking asylum in Wales - that's less than 0.1% of the total population - and around 10,000 refugees. Most asylum seekers and refugees live in Cardiff, Swansea and Newport, with a small number living in Wrexham and a handful of people outside these areas.

If all the refugees and asylum seekers in Wales sat in the Millennium Stadium, they would only fill the first 16 rows.

rebuilding lives in a new country

Refugees and asylum seekers have been forced to flee their homes and face a difficult challenge in rebuilding their lives in a new country. Most refugees and asylum seekers arrive with few, if any, family or friendship networks and are unfamiliar with the different systems and institutions. They may have qualifications, skills and work experience that are not recognised here or face discrimination.

living in poverty

Over 95% of people seeking asylum in Wales receive accommodation and support from National Asylum Support Services (NASS) and without this would be destitute¹. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work. They are forced to rely on state support, set at 30% below the normal level of income support. Many are living in poverty and experience poor health and hunger².

Asylum seekers come to the UK seeking protection from war and persecution. They do not come to the UK to claim benefits and, in fact, know very little about the asylum system before they arrive³.

The vast majority of asylum seekers whose claims have been refused⁴ are not entitled to any legal source of income, and are destitute, surviving on the charity of friends, family and community groups. A small number of asylum seekers whose claims have been refused qualify for support under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This provides only for accommodation and either full board or vouchers – no cash.

Many asylum seekers whose claims have been refused cannot currently return home because there is no safe route of return or because their lives would be placed under threat. In some cases, this is accepted by the government. Other asylum seekers whose claims have been refused are simply too frightened to return because of potential persecution or because their countries are in the midst of upheaval and war.

A number of organisations and groups in Wales and across the UK have grave concerns about the quality of decision making on asylum claims and believe this is leading to claims being rejected unfairly.

“Wales ... can be proud to be an inclusive, multi-cultural and multi-faith country ... those who have sought sanctuary here have settled and become such an important part of our society.”

First Minister Rhodri Morgan AM

Refugee Week 2006

This manifesto is supported by:

Amnesty International; Asylum Justice; Cardiff Asylum Seeker Support Group; Children in Wales; Church Action on Poverty; Commission for Race Equality; Cytûn – Churches Together in Wales; Displaced People in Action; Newport and District Refugee Support Group; Oxfam; Refugee Voice Wales; Save the Children, Wales; Swansea Bay Asylum Seeker Support Group; Welsh Refugee Council.

¹ Welsh Assembly Government Refugee Inclusion Strategy consultation document, November 2006

² Joint study by OXFAM and the Refugee Council, July 2002

³ Home office Research Study 243 – Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers, July 2002

⁴ An asylum seeker whose claim has been refused is used to refer to people whose asylum applications and any subsequent asylum appeals have been finally rejected.

welcome people seeking safety from persecution

Refugees and asylum seekers arrive in Wales in search of a place of safety from persecution. This is reflected in the countries of origin of the highest numbers of asylum seekers in Wales – Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Iran and Turkey - all countries with poor human rights records or places where war and conflict is on-going⁵.

The 1951 Refugee Convention guarantees everybody the right to apply for asylum and has saved millions of lives. Most refugees flee to neighbouring countries, some of the poorest in the world. The UK is home to just 3% of the world's refugees⁶. We share a global responsibility to protect refugees.

Wales benefits enormously from the economic, social and cultural contribution that refugees and asylum seekers make to our society. If welcomed into society and made to feel part of it, refugees can more easily invest in its future, benefiting everyone.

Sadly, basic misunderstandings around refugees and asylum seekers are widespread and lead to hostility and discrimination. This can be reflected in isolation, poor service provision, community tensions and even physical and verbal attacks.

As leaders in our communities, politicians have a responsibility to provide accurate information and to challenge dangerous myths on asylum and refugee issues. We are lucky in Wales to have some strong leadership in this area.

In signing our pledge card, candidates commit to responsible campaigning before, during and after the Assembly Elections by publicly challenging myths and promoting better understanding of refugee and asylum issues.

“Wales has a proud tradition as a country with a warm welcome or croeso. In return for our welcome, they [refugees] bring their experiences and energy and enrich our national life.”

Mike German AM

Refugee Week 2006

⁵ Wales Consortium for Refugees and Asylum Seekers data for May – Nov 06

⁶ British Refugee Council. <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/practice/basics/facts.htm#factthree>

empower refugees to rebuild their lives

While some asylum seekers and refugees come from English speaking countries, a significant proportion arrive in Wales without English or Welsh language skills. Not being able to communicate – whether in the local shop or with services providers – presents obvious difficulties for the individual but also for integration and building trust across communities.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes not only build language skills, but also aim to develop a better understanding of life in the UK.

Without Assembly Government funding, asylum seekers could not afford to go to language classes. However, ESOL provision is currently insufficient to meet demand and is struggling to respond to the diversity of language needs. An increase in ESOL provision is needed, with information and advice on appropriate courses made available.

Access to education and training is a key aspect of enabling people to rebuild their lives. In Wales, asylum seeking people between 16 - 18 years are rightly entitled to the same support in accessing further education and training as other young people⁷. However, misunderstandings at official level mean that many are turned away.

The new Assembly Government will need to put measures in place to make young people aware of their rights and ensure institutions providing further education and training fulfil their responsibilities.

In signing our pledge card, candidates:

- *Support continued Welsh Assembly Government funding of ESOL classes for asylum seekers and increased ESOL provision to meet demand;*
- *Commit to enforcing existing guidance enabling all 16-18 year asylum seekers to access further education and training on an equal footing with other young people.*

⁷ National Planning and Funding System (NPFS): A Guide to Eligibility for Funding, January 06

provide fair and equal access to services

The National Health Service embodies the principle that everybody should have the right to access health care in the UK, free at the point of delivery, whatever their economic status.

However, in April 2004, the National Assembly for Wales passed regulations⁸ to introduce charging for secondary healthcare for refused asylum seekers. This is despite the fact that most are destitute and have no means of paying for their own medical care.

Under these regulations, charges apply to all forms of secondary care, except treatment provided in Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments. “Emergency” treatment given in any other hospital department is still chargeable. Where treatment is considered ‘immediately necessary’ the Trust is not obliged to check whether the patient can afford to pay before they provide treatment, but they must seek to recover the costs afterwards. The charging system covers almost all health needs, including maternity care.

No patient is too vulnerable to escape charging. Children are eligible for charging, people with acute mental health problems or learning difficulties are eligible for charging, and elderly patients with dementia are eligible for charging.

These regulations are inhumane and are resulting in unacceptable levels of suffering and hardship amongst some of the most vulnerable people in society.

In signing our pledge cards, candidates commit to giving asylum seekers whose claims have been refused exemption from charges for treatment by National Health Service Trusts.

⁸ NHS (Charges to Overseas Visitors) (Wales) Regulations 2004

protecting children and young people

Although immigration policy is a non-devolved area, the provision of the majority of services that asylum-seeker and refugee children in Wales receive is the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government, Local Authorities and other public bodies in Wales.

Asylum seeker and refugee children are children first and foremost. Children arrive in Wales with their families and also as separated or unaccompanied children. Children newly arrived in the country are among the most vulnerable groups of children in the Wales.

By virtue of their journeys to Wales and also the conditions in their countries of origin such as conflict, extreme poverty and instability asylum seeker and refugee children may have additional significant physical and emotional health needs. Many asylum seeker and refugee children have had long periods of disrupted schooling, presenting specific challenges on their arrival in Wales.

The needs of separated children in Wales is particularly great, and specialist advocacy provision for this group of children is vital to ensure that they are properly safeguarded within the context of the asylum determination process and that their support and care needs are met by all responsible agencies.

In 2002 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the appointment of guardians to unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children and a review of current independent advocacy services be considered.

In signing our pledge cards, candidates commit to ensure the provision and availability of accessible and well-funded independent advocacy support for separated children seeking asylum in Wales.

“Immigration has enriched Welsh society and widened the horizons of the whole British people to the rest of the world. Wales has gained from economic and cultural benefits. In order to help refugees who come to Wales we must tackle poverty, fight for social justice and build strong community relations.”

Nick Bourne AM

Refugee Week 2006

develop a strong evidence base

Research on the needs and experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Wales is scarce, with a particular dearth of information on people who are destitute. There is also a lack of basic data, including the number and profile of refugees.

This makes it extremely difficult for both statutory and civil society organisations to plan services effectively.

It also makes it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of policies. In many areas, work is already underway to make a positive difference. Without a proper understanding of the impact these measures have on people's lives over time, it will be difficult to assess their success and learn lessons for future action.

In many cases, qualitative and quantitative information is available from different sources. The Assembly Government needs to take a lead in collating and analysing this information.

It is equally important to make this information publicly available. Widespread misunderstandings around refugees and asylum seekers fuel hostility. Most people want to know more and have more information from trusted sources⁹. Making well-researched and robust information publicly available should reduce widespread myths and associated hostility and discrimination.

In signing our pledge cards, candidates commit to develop mechanisms to gather and make available robust quantitative and qualitative information on the profile, needs and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Wales.

“We in Wales have a long tradition of welcoming refugees from all over the world and they have become a valued part of our community.”

Ieuan Wyn Jones AM

Refugee Week 2006

⁹ *Asylum: understanding public attitudes*, Miranda Lewis, IPPR 2005