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**BRIEFING NOTE on Asylum & Refugee Issues**

**LIFT THE BAN**

***March 2019 Issue #2***

SWVG supports people currently based in the Southampton area who are seeking asylum in the UK. This edition of our regular briefing note highlights an aspect of Government policy that we believe need to be changed to help them – the right to work for asylum seekers.

**The Right to Work for Asylum Seekers**

SWVG is a member of the **Lift the Ban** coalition 1 - comprising more than 150 organisations from across the UK, including the CBI, the TUC and the Church of England - who have come together to call on the Government to give people seeking asylum the right to work.

The aim of the national campaign, co-ordinated by Refugee Action, is to win the **right to work** for people seeking asylum and their adult dependants, six months after lodging an asylum claim or further submission.

*What is the current position ?*

Since 2002, people seeking asylum can apply to the Home Office for permission to work only if they have been waiting for a decision for over 12 months, and then only for jobs that are on the Government’s restricted Shortage Occupation List.  For the adult dependants of people seeking asylum, no application to work is permitted - this impacts women, who are more likely to be dependents of their partners. 2

We believe that this amounts to a **ban on asylum seekers working**. It is unclear how many currently have permission to work, because the Government does not collect this data, as the numbers granted are too low.

*Why the need for change ?*

Asylum seekers want to work. Due to the backlog of cases in the asylum system (half of claims do not get a decision within the Home Office target of 6 months 3,4), many asylum seekers are forced to rely on benefits for an extended period of time, increasing the burden on the UK tax payer.

This adds to the psychological pressure for asylum seekers coming to Britain – they are denied the earnings, dignity and self-worth which employment can bring; but refugees bring skills (an estimated 74% have completed secondary education, with 37% holding a university degree)5 and many could contribute to the UK economy through working and paying taxes.

At SWVG, we see at first hand how refusing asylum seekers the right to work impacts upon all elements of their lives. It reduces their ability to support themselves and their families, negatively affects their emotional and mental wellbeing, and hinders integration for those who are granted refugee status. It also actively de-skills them and reduces their employability.

We work with people who want to work, but are prevented from doing so. They are forced to subsist on asylum support of just £5.39 per day. Trapped in this state of limbo whilst their claim is considered for an extended time, their physical and mental health is affected. It is a policy which is not only inhumane but makes no economic sense, particularly at a time of low unemployment.

There are penalties for employers who take on someone not entitled to work. This creates an administrative burden for employers who have to operate extra checks; there is evidence that this discourages them from taking on legitimate candidates.

Policy has been motivated by fear of a so-called ‘pull factor’ – that allowing asylum seekers to work could encourage more people to come to Britain. However, at SWVG we know that many asylum claimants have put their lives at risk to seek sanctuary in Britain from persecution. A study of those arriving shows that 72% were unaware that they would be prevented from working in the UK. 5  The ‘pull factor’ is a myth.

*Why should people seeking asylum have the right to work ?*

In March 2018, the Government’s Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, published by Sajid Javid – then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and Home Secretary at the time of writing – set out the Government’s ambition ‘to build strong integrated communities where people – whatever their background – live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities.’

The UK can do more to support those asylum seekers who are eventually granted Leave to Remain and become entitled to work, as a number of them end up destitute or reliant on benefits; because of a lack of Government support for learning English (see our October 2018 Briefing) and adapting their skills to the UK job market, the voluntary sector has to provide much of this support.

A starting point is to **allow people seeking asylum, and their adult dependants, to work six months after lodging an asylum claim or further submission, and unconstrained by the shortage occupation list.**

If half of those currently waiting for the outcome of an asylum claim for more than six months were able to work full-time on the national minimum wage, then the Treasury would receive an estimated £31.6million per year in income tax and national insurance contributions. Savings from reduced asylum support for those in work are conservatively estimated at £10.8million per year. 5

**In a recent survey, 71% of British voters polled supported the right to work for asylum seekers 6. Recent parliamentary debates have shown that this has widespread support in all the main political parties. We believe that the economic – and as well as the human – argument is compelling.**

1. <http://lifttheban.co.uk/>

2. [Home Office Guidance Note on Permission to Work & Volunteering for Asylum Seekers](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/583192/Permission-to-work-v7.pdf), January 2017

3. [Immigration Statistics to June 2018](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-june-2018) : Total decisions pending 24,918; outstanding after 6 months 12,949

4. [House of Commons Library : Briefing Paper Number SN01403, 6 March 2019: Asylum Statistics](https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN01403)

5. [Refugee Action Report: Lift the Ban](https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban-report/) (publ. October 2018)

6. Nationally representative research by ICM reported in [Jill Rutter and Rosie Carter (2018) ‘National Conversation on Immigration: Final report’](http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/national-conversation-final-report/), September 2018

**About SWVG**

Our visiting team of more than 40 trained volunteers are all engaged in our core work of weekly one-to-one befriending and practical support to asylum seekers and refugees in the Southampton area. We co-operate with other organisations including CLEAR, The British Red Cross and Southampton City of Sanctuary.

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