

Photograph © Allan Glenwright



A wide range of clothing is available at Washington Asylum Seekers Project

## home from home

**Refugees and asylum seekers don't get the best press, but in the North East an energetic group of voluntary sector organisations is earning the region a national reputation for the warmth of its welcome.**

Stop ten people in the street and ask them how many of the world's asylum seekers apply to enter Britain each year and most will say 'about 25%'. The real figure is ten times less than this, yet the national press still runs stories about the 'hordes' of 'illegal immigrants' who are 'swamping' the country and criticises any funder that offers a grant to refugee or asylum seeker group.

The first thing to do is to sort out the vocabulary. A refugee is someone who has been granted the right to live in Britain. An asylum seeker is someone who has applied to the Home Office for that right and is awaiting a decision. An illegal immigrant is someone who comes into the country and stays here without permission.

The North East has always welcomed individuals and families fleeing war or persecution in their home countries, but it was not until the early 1980s that any single group arrived in large numbers. At the end of the Vietnam War, two million people left Vietnam (mostly by boat) seeking refuge in any country that would take them. Britain was one of their destinations and a small number of 'boat people' came to the North East. In the years that followed, there was a steady trickle of new arrivals until, in 1999, the Government announced the introduction of a system of 'dispersal'.

During the 1980s and 90s, conflicts across the world (in Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq and Rwanda, among other places) had meant a sharp increase in the number of people seeking asylum. In Britain the main points of arrival are the ports and airports in the South East, which was already overcrowded. The aim of the dispersal policy was to distribute asylum seekers around the

country, and by May 2003 the North East was finding homes for up to 6,000 people a year. So how did the region respond?

One of the myths about refugees and asylum seekers is that the Government gives them everything they need. While there are basic benefits that can be claimed, in the North East most of the day to day practical support is provided by local voluntary sector organisations. 'What new arrivals need, above all,' says Daoud Zaaroura, Chief Executive of the North of England Refugee Service, 'is information. They need information about what their rights are but they also need to know about the place they have come to. What are the codes of behaviour? How do people earn a living here? How do you register with a GP? The best people to answer these kinds of questions are local people, which is why the voluntary groups are so important.'

The North of England Refugee Service was one of the first groups in the region to offer such services, starting life in 1989 with one desk in Gateshead's Citizens' Advice Bureau. It now has offices in Newcastle, Sunderland, Wallsend and Middlesbrough and a small team of paid staff and volunteers, supporting asylum seekers and refugees who want to settle in the area.

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At the last count NERS was working with people from 97 different countries speaking more than 30 languages.

The way the dispersal system works is that people who speak the same language should be able to live near each other. In Washington, Tyne and Wear, there are 53 houses or flats reserved for asylum seekers and refugees. A few years ago most were from Sri Lanka, Iraq and Iran. Today the largest groups are from Angola and Zimbabwe. As soon as a family is housed, they are asked if they would like to meet someone from the Washington Asylum Seekers Project (WASP), an initiative of the local churches run by more than 30 volunteers. If the answer is yes, WASP volunteers will call round to say hello and to deliver a welcome pack of basic foodstuffs. They will offer to accompany family members to register with the local GP and to show them the area and how to get around. Last July WASP made a successful application to the Northern Rock Foundation for a grant to pay the salary of a full-time administrator and volunteer coordinator. 'It will make a big difference to have someone here full time,' says Andrew Hoseason, a volunteer advice worker. 'There is such a lot of work to do. It has been taking up to four years for asylum seekers to get an answer from the Home Office and although newer cases are being dealt with faster, people need a lot of support through the process.'

Down in Houghton-le-Spring, on the border between Sunderland and Durham, the Houghton Racecourse Community Association has used a grant from the Foundation to set up a state of the art IT facility known as the Access

Point. It is free to everyone in this former coalfield area and is being enthusiastically used by asylum seekers and refugees. 'We have people here from all over the world,' says IT project worker Vince Woodhead, 'Russia, Estonia, Iran, Chad, the Congo. We teach IT courses and some people use the equipment as part of their English language training.' Access to email and the internet is giving people unprecedented opportunities to keep in touch with what is going on in their home country. They can listen to news programmes and read newspapers in their own language and they can email friends and family.'

The Community Association was founded in 1997 and moved into the centre (two council houses knocked together) in June 2000. 'Local people have been involved since the very beginning,' explains volunteer coordinator Anne Ramshaw. 'We have about 20 refugee or asylum seeker families on the estate and they have fitted in well. We have been really very lucky. Everyone knew that families would be coming here, and so we did a lot of work on some of the myths about asylum seekers and refugees. The community was well prepared and that meant that when the first people arrived, they were welcomed.'

This sense of feeling welcome is not unique to Houghton-le-Spring. In Washington, Andrew Hoseason has noticed that when people are granted the right to stay, they often choose to remain in the area. 'It might be partly because of the facilities and services we have to offer,' he says, 'but I think it has more to do with the people. We do have a reputation for being friendly.'

Daoud Zaaroura agrees. 'We have asked people why they want to stay in the North East and they always talk about the friendly faces and friendly communities.' It is as a direct result of the number of refugees deciding to stay, that the North East has given birth to the country's first forum of community organisations led by refugees. The Regional Refugee Forum North East was formed in 2001. Its members all represent particular groups: people who speak the same language or come from the same country, young people, women and so on. The aim of the forum is to hear and articulate the collective voice of the refugee community in the North East. The Home Office has been so impressed by the Forum's effectiveness that it has asked Forum representatives to sit on a Home Office working group.

But is everything really this rosy? No, says Zaaroura. 'There are incidents from time to time and there are extreme views we have to counter. There are times of crisis too.' In January, the Home Secretary announced that if people did not claim asylum the moment they arrived, or very shortly afterwards, they would forfeit the right for their case to be considered and all financial support would be withdrawn. 'These are the hardest situations,' says Zaaroura. 'We have had stories of people sleeping on the streets, in cemeteries, even in telephone boxes, because they have nowhere else to go.' But those moments are short-lived and the quality of life for refugees and asylum seekers in the North East is better than in many other places. 'There are still caring communities in this part of the country,' says Zaaroura. 'People ask how you are. That's what makes the difference.'

Photograph © Allan Glenwright



GCSE maths tuition is one of the opportunities on offer at the Westgate Road Iranian Centre

## Further information

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The NERS will provide contact details for all other refugee and asylum seeker projects in the North East.