Review of services for refugees, asylum seekers, and unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Tower Hamlets

16/03/2022

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# Introduction

This report presents the findings from a review into council services for refugees, asylum seekers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in Tower Hamlets. The review highlights the challenges faced by refugees, the gaps in service provision in the borough and recommends how services can be improved to effectively cater their needs. The research undertaken to support this review considered national, regional, and benchmarking data and insights from council services, local partners and personal accounts from refugees and asylum seekers themselves. It supports the Mayor’s manifesto commitment to review services for refugees and those fleeing harm.

# Definitions

**Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)**

“Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)” are children and young people who are seeking asylum in the UK but who have been separated from their parents or carers. While their claim is processed, they are cared for by a local authority. The child must be under 18, be applying for asylum on his or her own right and is not being cared for by an adult who by law has responsibility to do so[[1]](#footnote-2).

The council has a continuing obligation to support any child over the age of 16 who is, or has been, a ‘looked after’ child, until they are 21 (or 25 if pursuing a programme of education or training). A young person should be provided with support akin to that which a parent would normally provide.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**Asylum seeker**

An “asylum seeker” is a person who has applied for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees on the grounds that they have a well-founded fear of persecution should they return to their home country[[3]](#footnote-4). This is any person who, from fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, social group, or political opinion, has crossed an international frontier into a country in which he or she hopes to be granted refugee status.

**Refugee**

A “refugee” is someone whose asylum application has been successful and therefore has permission to stay in another country having proved he or she would face persecution at home[[4]](#footnote-5). According to UNHRC (UN Refugee Agency UK), refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.

# Key findings

A lot of good work is being carried out to support refugees and asylum seekers in the borough. Refugees and asylum seekers are satisfied with many aspects of the services they receive from the council. However, there are also some common concerns being raised by refugees and asylum seekerswhich impact on their stay in Tower Hamlets. Furthermore, council departments come face some common problems when providing services for refugees and asylum seekers. The key findings from the review are outlined below:

* Although much work is being done to support refugees and asylum seekers through different council departments there is no central co-ordination function that enables efficient delivery of the refugees and asylum seekers work.
* In Tower Hamlets unlike many other boroughs there is no platform that enables effective collaboration between Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations, refugee groups, statutory service providers and housing providers
* Settling into the unfamiliar environment is often challenging for asylum seekers, refugees and this creates additional stress and anxiety. Some of the key reasons identified in this report are:
	+ Not having access to appropriate information, advice, and guidance
	+ Language barrier exacerbated often by not having access to appropriate ESOL classes, translation, or interpreting service
	+ Financial hardship
	+ Being unable to register with different services
* Funding and resources of the council are being stretched to fulfil the increasing demands of refugees and asylum seekers
* UASC and UASC care leavers appear to be more satisfied with the services they receive
* Mental health and dental health are common health issues raised by asylum seekers, refugees and UASC but often they are unable to get access to these services due to long waiting lists.

# Recommendations

Based on the findings of the review the following recommendations are being made:

**Key recommendations**

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| **Recommendation Description** | **Comments / Additional resources required** |
| 1. For effective co-ordination of the work of refugees and asylum seekers in the council and across the borough:
2. Recruit a Refugee and Migrant Lead to co-ordinate the work of refugees and asylum seekers
3. Clarify the leads for different elements of work to support refugees, asylum seekers.
 | At present co-ordination related to refugees and asylum seeking work takes place in Housing department. It is proposed the following: Strategy, Improvement & Transformation lead on:* Overarching horizon scanning
* Engagement with VCS and faith organisations
* Council / borough wide policy i.e. Borough of Sanctuary

As part of this review Place Directorate have commented, as per benchmarking with other authorities, that the council’s response to humanitarian crises needs to be people focussed. While currently led within housing, this is the first duty to be discharged (and in emergencies by the Home Office rather than the council ) and very little housing involvement thereafter, while ongoing coordination is needed across the lifecycle of resettlement for families concerning wrap around people based services (e.g. safeguarding, health , SEN, early help,)This is demonstrated by Afghan resettlement which has now been transferred to Children’s Services (Early Help) to co-ordinate wrap around resettlement services for the above reason. The co-ordination role within Children’s or HAC will involve* Responding and coordinating refugee settlement scheme in line with government programmes
* Coordinate interventions related to asylum seekers
* Develop council practice in supporting refugees and asylum seekers
* Lead on council/partner network to co-ordinate activities
* Horizon scanning
* Develop policy and procedures for delivering this at local level

Given the current climate it is anticipated a dedicated resources is required for a Refugee and Migrant Lead and recommended that this be at Grade L with annual costs between £65k to £70k depending on spinal point. **This additional resource will need to be identified.** |
| 1. Establish a migrants and refugees’ forum for Tower Hamlets where different stakeholders can meet, discuss issues, share resources, and collaborate on services, campaigns, and initiatives to make work with migrants and refugees in the borough stronger and more effective.
 | The Refugee and Migrant Lead will coordinate this forum. While no immediate resources needs are identified, work to engage and involve refugees and migrants may require some resources.   |
| 1. Explore developing a welcome programme for refugees and asylum seekers that will incorporate ESOL, digital skills, understanding society, and enable opportunities to build social connections to support their integration
 | The Refugee and Migrant Lead to explore funding from Home Office and Department for Housing, Levelling up & Communities and other funding sources.  |
| 1. Refresh and annually update the *Welcome to Tower Hamlets* pack and have it translated into different languages for the benefit of refugees and asylum seekers. Publish it online, explore printing hard copies and ensure council department and partners are aware of the welcome pack
 | The Refugee and Migrant Lead to update but may involve annual costs of approximately £5k for design, website, and printing.  |
| 1. Provide training for front line staff to improve their ability to deliver effective and inclusive services for refugees and asylum seekers
 | The Refugee and Migrant Lead to work with local, regional, and national organisations to explore designing a local programme and identify and secure additional resources. This is estimated to be approximately £10k.  |
| 1. Work with other London boroughs where possible to lobby central government to offer adequate funding to address the funding gap and to enable local councils to offer the right support.
 | Refugee and Migrant Lead work with SIT and Mayor’s Office to co-ordinate borough wide lobbying.  |
| 1. Signpost asylum seekers and refugees, especially those who do not have access to ESOL programmes, to existing social mixing activities and programmes.
 | Asylum seekers who have been in the UK for less than 6 months are not eligible for most ESOL programmes. Others who are eligible may be on waiting lists of ESOL programmes. The Refugee Resettlement and Migrant Lead can work with other activities delivered by VCS organisations to enable them to informally develop English language skills and help them settle.  |
| 1. Explore working towards achieving the Borough of sanctuary[[5]](#footnote-6) status through the national charity ‘City of Sanctuary’ in order to build a culture of welcome and inclusion for those fleeing harm and embed good practice.
 | Discussions to take place with new administration post-election.  |

# National Context

* The UK is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and is obliged to consider any application for asylum made in the UK by a person who claims to be fleeing persecution[[6]](#footnote-7).
* In the UK, asylum seekers and refugees make up around 5% of the immigrant population[[7]](#footnote-8) and around 0.6% of the UK population[[8]](#footnote-9). The majority of asylum-seekers do not have the right to work in the UK and so must rely on state support. Housing is provided, but asylum-seekers cannot choose where it is.
* Waiting times for Home Office decisions on asylum claims can often take several years, which can impede the process of adjusting to a new environment. As of 31 December 2020, around 70,000 people were awaiting an outcome on their asylum claim[[9]](#footnote-10).

The UK government over the years have arranged various refugee resettlement schemes to help vulnerable people fleeing their countries.

* *Vulnerable Person Resettlement scheme (VPRS):* In February 2021, the UK met its [target to resettle 20,000 refugees under the VPRS.](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-resettlement-schemes-factsheet-march-2021/vulnerable-persons-and-vulnerable-childrens-resettlement-schemes-factsheet-march-2021)  Following this, the government launched the [new UK resettlement scheme](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-global-resettlement-scheme-for-the-most-vulnerable-refugees-announced) (UKRS), bringing to an end the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), and the Gateway Scheme. [[10]](#footnote-11)
* *Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) :* The UK Government established a bespoke resettlement scheme in 2021 for current and former locally employed staff in Afghanistan. Launched on 1st April 2021 any current or former locally employed staff who are assessed to be under serious threat to life are offered priority relocation to the UK regardless of their employment status, rank or role, or length of time served.[[11]](#footnote-12)
* *Afghan Citizen’s Re-settlement Scheme(ACRS):* In addition to the ARAP scheme the government has introduced the Afghan Citizens’ Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) which was confirmed on 18 August 2021 and was opened on 6th January 2022. The Government will resettle more than 5,000 people in the first year and up to 20,000 over the coming years. [[12]](#footnote-13)
* Home Office published its new policy statement entitled ‘New Plan for Immigration’ which concluded consultation in May 2021.The new Nationality and Borders Bill is now in its final stages in parliament. If it becomes law it is likely to have far reaching consequences for people seeking asylum in the UK. UNHCR believes the UK’s Nationality and Borders Bill would penalise most refugees seeking asylum in the country, creating an asylum model that undermines established international refugee protection rules and practices[[13]](#footnote-14).

# Benchmarking

Across London, there is no set model for councils to deliver services for refugees. There are a range of different approaches used by local authorities, with some having more resourcing for council-led services than others..

* Croydon Council has a dedicated service supporting asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants through an Immigration and Asylum Support Service (IASS)[[14]](#footnote-15). The service is organised into 4 teams: Emergency Rapid Response, Immigration, Adult, and Children and is staffed by immigration workers, social workers, and a team manager.
* Similarly Islington Council has a NRPF, Refugee and Migrant Service, the remit of which includes 1) statutory 'safety net' support to families and adults with no recourse to public funds at risk of homelessness 2) operation of national NRPF Network advice, guidance, and data services 3) delivery of refugee resettlement programmes in Islington
* London Borough of Lewisham in May 2021 has been recognised as a ‘Borough of Sanctuary’[[15]](#footnote-16) by the national charity ‘City of Sanctuary’. This is the first council to be recognised. This follows the council’s approach to be an open and welcome borough and developing ‘Lewisham Borough of Sanctuary 2020-25’ strategy.
* London Borough of Islington is also striving to become a recognised Borough of sanctuary. On 8th July 2021 a [full council motion](https://democracy.islington.gov.uk/documents/s25183/Motions%20to%20Council%208%20July%202021.pdf) was passed that sets out their determination to join a network of cities and towns which promote the inclusion and welfare of people who are fleeing violence and persecution in their own countries.

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| Recommendation:Explore working towards achieving the Borough of sanctuary status through the national charity ‘City of Sanctuary’ in order to build a culture of welcome and inclusion for those fleeing harm and embed good practice. |

# Local Context

Tower Hamlets has one of the fastest growing populations nationally and has an estimated population of 324,745 residents. The largest driver for population growth in recent years has been international migration, contributing more than half the borough’s population (ONS mid-year estimates 2018). Italian nationals make up one in five of the borough’s economic migrants. Asylum seekers and refugees are a small portion of migrants living in Tower Hamlets who come from various countries including, Syria, Somalia, and Afghanistan.[[16]](#footnote-17)

## Refugees and asylum seekers in Tower Hamlets

The data below provides a picture of the different categories of refugees and asylum seekers who are living in the borough.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Numbers** | **Data source and date**  |
| Asylum seekers\* receiving section 95 support in Tower Hamlets | 102*(Dispersal accommodation = 51* *Subsistence = 51)* | Home Office Immigration Statistics, Year ending June 2021[[17]](#footnote-18) |
| UASC and Care Leavers who were UASC  | 108 | Data received from council’s Through Care Service forOctober 2021 |
| Vulnerable Syrian Refugee resettlement programme | 6 families*2 of these families have been settled in 2021.* | Data provided by Housing Options Team in September 2021 |
| Asylum seekers in the borough as part of Operation Oak staying in temporary accommodation | 720+ | Data provided by housing partnership team as of August 2021. The figures are changing regularly.  |
| Afghan families being resettled through the ARAP scheme | 5 families  | Under the ARAP scheme, LBTH have offered support to 5 families  |

\*Asylum seekers refers to main applicants and dependants on section 95 support, which will include most though not all people seeking asylum, and includes those in dispersal accommodation as well as those receiving subsistence

\*\* Operation Oak – a Home Office programme designed to disperse asylum seekers around the country between December 2020 and June 2021.

* No data was available on the number of people who have gained refugee status by making a successful asylum claim.
* Data on adult asylum seekers at a local authority level is limited to those who are in receipt of Section 95 support, which is a special scheme that provides housing and support to asylum seekers whose claims are ongoing and who do not have adequate accommodation or enough money to meet living expenses for themselves or their dependants.
* Although data was not available on the number of No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) cases who were asylum seekers for Tower Hamlets, there is data from NRPF Connect providing London wide figures. As of 31st March 2021, NRPF Connect supported 1017 family households across London where immigration status has been recorded with 12 percent of them having an asylum.[[18]](#footnote-19) This can provide a sense of the proportion of those with NRPF being asylum seekers in Tower Hamlets.
* A snapshot from Adult Social care shows that in October 2021 there was approximately 41 NRPF cases being held by the council of which 20 of these cases were experiencing delays. However, its unknown how many of them are Appeal Right Exhausted (ARE) asylum seekers.

* As of 26th October 2021, the council was supporting 108 UASC and care leavers who were UASCs aged between 14 and 24. Majority (87.8%) are male and between the ages of 16 to 20 year olds.[[19]](#footnote-20) A detailed breakdown of UASC and UASC leavers was not available from this period for the purposes of this report.

However, a more detailed data from January 2020 shows that there were 37 UASC being looked after by the council. In addition, there were a further 86 care leavers who were UASC aged between 18 to 25 years old.

## Needs and Services for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees have more specific needs than other migrants in the UK. Some of the needs include

* Food
* Accommodation
* Education
* Health care
* Language
* Employment
* Support in general to navigate through the system: language barriers and being unfamiliar with the system

The council supports asylum seekers and refugees directly and indirectly in a range of ways through various services. Appendix 1 maps out the different council services that work with refugees and asylum seekers. Most of the services mentioned are available to all residents and are not specific to asylum seekers and refugees. However, for most of the services very little information was available regarding the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers attending these services

## Services provided externally

An important part of supporting refugees in the borough is the services that local organisations provide. The organisations fill in where council may not have resources to do so or is not accessible for refugees and migrants.

The biggest provider of support to asylum seekers in the borough comes from Care4 Calais which provides welfare support, advocacy, and clothing.

Praxis Community Projects provides expert advice, housing, and peer support to people with migrant backgrounds in Tower Hamlets, helping to resolve problems with immigration, housing, homelessness, and welfare benefits. It organises community groups to provide activities and support to unaccompanied young migrants, to trafficked women and young mothers experiencing problems with their immigration status[[20]](#footnote-21).

# Statutory requirements

There are various statutory duties local authorities have to fulfil for asylum seekers and refugees.

## UASC and UASC Care Leavers

Local authorities have a duty to protect and support unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC).

*Section 17 of the Children Act 1989* places a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need within their area by providing services appropriate to those children’s needs. The group normally have more complex needs than other looked after children due to the complex circumstances they have faced. The support to address these needs must begin as soon as the child is transferred to a local authority or found in the local area.[[21]](#footnote-22).

An unaccompanied child will become looked after by the local authority after having been accommodated by the local authority under *section 20(1) of the Children Act 1989* for 24 hours. This will mean that they will be entitled to the same local authority provision as any other looked after child

Local authorities must also have regard to the Department for Education’s statutory guidance “Working Together to Safeguard Children” when assessing the needs of children and articles within the European Convention on Human Rights, namely Articles 3 (the prohibition of torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment) and 8 (the right to respect for private and family life).

## Adult asylum seekers and refugees

Home Office duties:

* Under section 95 of the *Immigration and Asylum Act 1999*, asylum seekers can apply for support while waiting for their claim (or appeal) to be considered. Support can be for accommodation and/or subsistence, according to their circumstances and on condition that they satisfy a destitution test. The Home office can provide this support. If provided, accommodation is offered in a dispersal area.
* The Home Office can also provide housing and financial support to an asylum seeker who becomes appeal rights exhausted (ARE) when their asylum claim is unsuccessful if they do not have accommodation and/ or cannot afford to meet their essential living needs. This support is provided under *section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.* No data is available for numbers receiving Section 4 support.

Local authority duties:

* Local authorities have a duty to assess all individuals (including refused asylum seekers) if they appear to be in need of care services under *Section 47 of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990.[[22]](#footnote-23)*
* Local authorities have a duty to provide care under *Section 21 of the National Assistance Act 1948.* The Slough judgement clarified local authorities’ responsibilities under Section 21 of the National Assistance Act 1948. It clarified what care means in this context and ruled that to qualify for support, an individual has to have a care need above and beyond the provision of accommodation, such as personal care or household tasks.[[23]](#footnote-24)
* *Section 42 of the Care Act 2014* requires local authority adult social services to carry out an enquiry where a vulnerable adult is being treated abusively and cannot protect themselves. Abuse includes physical, psychological, sexual, and financial abuse, modern slavery and trafficking and female genital mutilation and requires an authority to intervene. The act recognises self-neglect as a form of abuse also. The category of self-neglect is particularly important in relation to refugees because anxiety over immigration status can lead someone to avoid seeking help from the NHS.
* *Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002* prevents local authorities from routinely providing support to refused asylum seekers who are in the country unlawfully. There are some exceptions to these exclusions but they do not prevent local authorities providing assistance to refused asylum seekers if to do otherwise would be a breach of an individual's human rights under the Human Rights Act 1998. This means that local authorities should assess refused asylum seekers if care needs have been signalled, but it does not necessarily mean that they should provide support.[[24]](#footnote-25)

# Findings

## Co-ordination

* Services are delivered to asylum seekers and refugees by different departments from across the council often in isolation. This often means resources are not being used effectively for the benefit of asylum seekers and refugees. There is currently no central co-ordination function or a council lead for the work with refugees and asylum seekers. This makes it harder to improve, monitor and evaluate the services for refugees and asylum seekers and impacts upon the efficiency in delivering new initiatives.

* There has been limited retention of learning and expertise from previous refugee resettlement programmes due to the ad hoc nature of the work. This means when a new refugee or asylum seekers’ initiative takes place in the borough, work starts from scratch, often with new set of staff and often led by a different team. To set things up again is time consuming, requires intense work from staff and any good practice or learning from previous experiences are lost. Staff have reported struggling to access information, reports, list of partners, monitoring tools, contacts from previous pieces of work which affect their ability to deliver effectively and efficiently; for example for ARAP it has been challenging to find information on the Syrian experience and contracts for case workers could not be found.
* There are some examples of different methods of co-ordination from various local authorities that the council can look into and draw on.
	+ Brighton and Hove City Council has a refugees and migrants project officer who provides co-ordination support for the city council’s programmes of work to welcome refugees, asylum seekers and other newcomers into the area.
	+ Greenwich council has a No Recourse to Public Funds Team which also leads on resettlement under the Health and Adults Services. It works closely with key stakeholders in Housing, Education, DWP, Health and Employment agencies to support the resettlement of Syrians, Afghans, Calais Migrants as well as the emerging Ukraine crisis.
	+ Often refugee resettlement officer / coordinators are recruited by local authorities to coordinate and deliver the refugee resettlement programmes. Recently Islington council has advertised for refugee resettlement officer in order to deliver the refugee resettlement service.
	+ Lewisham council has a Sanctuary Programme Manager whose primary role is to coordinate the delivery of the Borough of Sanctuary commitment. The co-ordinator also has a role to work with colleagues across the council and partners in the borough to improve services for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants
	+ Some councils bring together different council services for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants under a centralised service with dedicated staff to enable better co-ordination and delivery of services. Croydon council for example has an *Immigration* and *Asylum Support Service (IASS)* and Islington council has a *NRPF, Refugee and Migrant Service* (please refer to section 6 on benchmarking for further information)

It is recommended that the council has a refugee and migrant lead who coordinates the work with refugees and asylum seekers work in the council and across the borough.

**Where the co-ordination function can sit within the council**

Services being delivered to refugees and asylum seekers sit across different directorates. At present the Housing department within Place directorate has led both the direction of policy and coordination of refugees and asylum seekers (covering the ARAP scheme as well as supporting the council’s response to asylum seeker arrivals from Calais in hotels in the borough via Operation Oak)

While coordination on these has been led by Housing in name, the Home Office fulfil the duty of procuring emergency accommodation with little local housing involvement and the majority of immediate council input falling to Children and Culture and Health Adults and Communities regarding early help, safeguarding, health services including the treatment of trauma and urgent health needs.

Where move on accommodation will later be required during a transitional phase, once permanent housing is sourced (often into the private rented sector, supported by housing options), involvement from housing services then falls away, while engagement from people based services including health, safeguarding, education ,SEN or engagement with VCS organisations continues. Continued co-ordination from people-based services also provides greater oversight of those supported throughout the whole journey of the resettlement process should any risks and issues require.

For the above reason, the coordination of those resettled under the ARAP scheme has been transferred from Housing to Early Help (Children’s and Culture) who now permanent housing has been secured, will undertake an initial assessment of those arriving under the ARAP scheme and play the lead role in the coordination or services.

Benchmarking outlines a range of options around how co-ordination can take place amongst people based services, to ensure a holistic approach is delivered, but also outlining a key role in understanding and determining what the council’s response should look like to each crisis, all of which will be slightly different.

Below is a summary of some key functions based on the 2 key roles.

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| Coordination function *Sits within either C&C or HAC**Led by a member of staff (grade L)** Coordinate refugee re-settlement programmes in line with government programmes
* Coordinate interventions related to asylum seekers
* Develop council practice in supporting refugees and asylum seekers
* Lead on council/partner network to co-ordinate activities
* Development and dissemination of information resources such as Welcome Pack for migrants, refugees, asylum seekers
* Source / provide relevant training to front line staff
* Identify and apply for relevant funding
* Horizon scanning
* Develop policy and procedures for delivering this at local level
 | Enabling function *Sits within Strategy, Improvement & Transformation Division (SIT)** Policy and procedure development i.e. Borough of Sanctuary
* Engagement and collaboration with VCS and relevant stakeholders
* Overarching horizon scanning
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| Recommendation:For effective co-ordination of the work of refugees and asylum seekers in the council and across the borough: * 1. Recruit a Refugee and Migrant Lead to co-ordinate the work of refugees and asylum seekers
	2. Clarify the leads for different elements of work to support refugees, asylum seekers.
 |

## Collaboration with external organisations

VCS organisations play an important role in supporting refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants. With the resources being limited in all sectors to support refugees and asylum seekers there is even bigger need for collaboration. Currently there is limited partnership and collaboration between the council, VCS, and other sectors to support the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in the borough. Collaboration is limited to a project or service level working with specific organisations rather than on a strategic level.

There is a need for different stakeholders to meet, discuss issues, share resources, and collaborate on campaigns and initiatives to make work with migrants and refugees in the borough stronger and more effective. Many of the London Boroughs have various types of forums, platforms where organisations, refugee groups and other stakeholders can meet and collaborate to make the work with refugees and asylum seekers more effective.

The forums operate in different models and can have different purposes. In Islington for example, the Islington Refugee and Migrant Forum is a refugee led independent organisation created to act as a common voice for refugees, to improve their quality of life and support their integration into the community.  Whereas Camden council has a Children, Schools and Families Refugee Forum which provides a platform for refugee communities to consult with officers in the Children, Schools and Families Directorate on education, employment, and training. This is open to school representatives, refugee community representatives, refugee parents and professional and voluntary/statutory bodies working with refugees.

In Tower Hamlets there appears to be no forum or platform where effective collaboration can take place. Previously New Residents and Refugee Forum was being funded by the council that was being led by Praxis.

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| Recommendation* Support establishing a migrants and refugees forum for Tower Hamlets where different stakeholders can meet, discuss issues, share resources, and collaborate on campaigns and initiatives to make work with migrants and refugees in the borough stronger and more effective.
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## Orientation and welcome

One of the key challenges identified by asylum seekers and refugees was orientation to new environment which in most cases is totally different from where they may have come from. There is a lot for them to navigate through in terms of understanding the language, culture, systems, processes and how to access services. As many of them are vulnerable this experience can be a stressful one.

Information, advice, and guidance

Appropriate information, advice and guidance is vital for those fleeing harm being able to access services and settle into the new environment. It is particularly important to asylum seekers and those who have gained refugee status through a successful asylum claim. This is because they do not have a designated person supporting them (i.e. case worker, personal adviser) unlike refugees being settled through a resettlement programme or UASCs and care leavers who were UASCs. Majority of those fleeing harm in the borough are asylum seekers and those who have gained a refugee status through a successful asylum claim. Asylum seekers and refugees reported being unaware of services that maybe available to them which can help with their settling in process.

There is no updated information resource that the asylum seekers, refugees could access which provides a comprehensive overview of services, activities, and provisions that can be accessed by them both online and in published form. A Welcome to Tower Hamlets pack was developed for new migrants through the Controlling Migration Fund (CMF) which is available online but requires updating. Even if they have access to this information often due to the language barrier may not be able to benefit from the information. The resource may also need to be tailored to benefit refugees and asylum seekers including information about relevant community groups.

Some services provide their own list of services to asylum seekers and refugees but it is likely to be limited and does not normally include information of different community groups. For example, Housing management teams provide service users with induction packs, but these are not locality specific leaving them lacking sufficient information.

Workshops or a welcome programme for asylum seekers and refugees residing in Tower Hamlets can be helpful in bridging the information and connection gap and help orientate to the new environment more comfortably. The welcome programme can combine ESOL learning, skills development to help with employment, social mixing activities, understanding the society, and enable opportunities to build social connections locally to help with their integration. It could also screen for additional needs – making referrals / signposting to agencies as required.

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| Recommendations* Develop a welcome programme for refugees in Tower Hamlets that will incorporate ESOL, digital skills, understanding the society, and enable opportunities to build social connections locally to help with their integration
* Refresh and periodically update the *Welcome to Tower Hamlets* pack and enable it to be translated in some key languages for the benefit of refugees and asylum seekers, published both online and in print and ensure services are aware of the welcome pack
 |

Language:

Most of the asylum seekers and refugees in the Borough do not have a good level of English language skills which is a key barrier for accessing services, gaining employment, and integrating into society. Asylum seekers who have been in the UK for more than 6 months are eligible for most ESOL programmes running in the Borough and many do access the ESOL programmes through Idea Store Learning and the ESOL for Integration Fund (EFIF) programme.

Asylum seekers who have been in the UK for 6 months or less are not normally eligible for free ESOL programmes in the Borough due to stipulation in the funding requirements of the ESOL provision. This has meant many of the asylum seekers have not been able to access ESOL provision in the first 6 months of their stay which slows down their orientation if successful with their asylum claim.

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| Recommendation: Signposting of asylum seekers and refugees especially those who do not have access to ESOL programmes to existing social mixing activities and programmes  |

Employment:

Council can provide employment support to eligible refugees and asylum seekers via Work Path. Careers Young Work Path also can provide support for education, employment and training to young refugees and asylum seekers. However as most know little to no English they have to be signposted to ESOL classes first.

Registering and experience of using council services:

Many asylum seekers and refugees reported not being able to register for services due to their status as refugee / asylum seeker or not having the appropriate documentation such as not having an ID and proof of address to register for a services including with Idea Stores and GPs. Not having the appropriate ID is often due to delay from the Home Office and affects their ability to access services.

To provide an effective service there is a need for front-line staff to be aware of the contexts and needs of refugees and those seeking asylum and how best refugees and asylum seekers can be supported. Staff can also struggle to understand the status of asylum seekers and refugees in-order to determine eligibility. Some of the services engaged in this review process felt the need for front-line staff to have training to be able to work effectively with asylum seekers and refugees.

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| Recommendation: Training for front line staff to improve their ability to provide an effective service for refugees and asylum seekers  |

Financial hardship

Challenges with finances can also be a barrier to accessing services. Refugees and in particular asylum seekers reported suffering from financial hardship. They described the cost of living as very expensive with transport being major expense. Therefore they (in particular asylum seekers) may often restrict themselves to activities at a walking distance or go to services that pay for people’s transport costs. They often struggle to buy essential items such as clothing or food due to budget so rely on charity food and clothes donations. For the asylum seekers the amount provided by the Home Office was not sufficient to cover their living expenses. As asylum seekers have restriction on work they are mainly reliant on funds provided through the Home Office.

## Funding and resources

Like many other local authorities, the council fund and resources have been stretched fulfilling the demands of work with refugees, asylum seekers and UASCs which can affect the quality and sustainability of the work being delivered. Its specially has been the case in the last year due to a large number of asylum seekers being temporarily accommodated in Tower Hamlets Hotels as part of Home Office’s Operation Oak. A lot of staff time has had to be allocated for this purpose.

The arrival of the large cohorts of asylum seekers in temporary hotel accommodations has meant that the schools are also stretched. The number of local school places are limited. As there is no funding available to schools through the DfE for these temporary places, there is a resource issue for schools.

The funding gaps to support refugees and asylum seekers exist mainly because of areas that the Home Office do not cover but also due to Home Office funds not being sufficient, in which case the council has to top up due to statutory responsibilities. For example:

* When age is being disputed by an asylum seeker the council must continue to provide funds until assessment concludes whether the asylum seekers is a child or not. There was a total of 26 disputed claims in the month of September 2021 alone
* For UASCs care leavers the council has to significantly top up the Home Office amount of £270 per UASC per week so their accommodation and other needs can be met

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| RecommendationCouncil to work with other London boroughs where possible to lobby central government to offer adequate funding to address the crisis and to enable local councils to offer the right support. |

## Health

Mental health and dental health are the 2 key health issues raised by asylum seekers, refugees and some UASCs. Many of them are dealing with severe and ongoing trauma, but although eligible, reported that they mostly have had little to no access to mental health provision due to waiting times. The waiting and uncertainty also exacerbate the deterioration of their mental health.

The asylum seeker population have the same access to the neighbourhood mental health teams (the replacement for CMHTs), crisis services and talking therapy services as the general population. There has been a small community talking therapy outreach service which has done outreach for asylum seekers in the borough but this is not aimed at those in the initial hotel accommodation. The talking therapy can only be effective when someone feels safe and this usually requires their basic physical needs to be met and to be in a safe and stable environment, so those in the initial dispersal hotels are not in a suitable situation to benefit from talking therapies generally. To provide for their mental health needs the main focus is on social prescribing and primary care medicine to ensure their basic social and physical needs are met. The short-term nature of the hotels and the risk of dispersal at short notice mean that it is not safe or effective to meet their longer-term mental health needs.

Dental health access on the other hand is extremely limited across London for the whole population which also affects refugees and asylum seekers.

Many asylum seekers are refused registration with GPs because of their lack of ID - this is something that will be picked up in the Inclusion Health Strategy

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## Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

UASCs and UASC care leavers who were interviewed generally appear to be more satisfied with the services they receive from the council. However it must be noted that only 7 UASCs or UASC care leavers were interviewed so this may not be a true reflection of experiences of all UASCs. The services for UASC are mostly provided by the council’s Through Care Service. UASC and UASC care leavers are provided with support for education, health, and accommodation by the council.

## Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE) asylum seekers

It’s not as clear how the council is supporting those who are appeal right exhausted (ARE) especially as data does not identify those ARE separately. They have no recourse to public funds and only eligible for subsistence from the council if they meet threshold. As the threshold is high in most cases AREs do not meet the threshold. The council has a comprehensive NRPF guidance which provides a detailed guidance on identifying, assessing, and supporting NRPF clients which includes ARE asylum seekers.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Mapping of services

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| council Services | Description |
| Housing Options | * Checks eligibility for welfare / housing benefits. If eligible their details are passed onto the welfare benefits team.
* If they are not eligible then signposted to adult social care
* Provide accommodation for resettling refugees through refugee resettlement schemes
 |
| Adult Social Care | * Carries out NRPF assessments to see if Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE) asylum seekers are eligible for subsistence.
* Signposts asylum seekers where appropriate for relevant support
 |
| Children Social Care | * The *Through Care Service* provides services for UASC and care leavers who were UASC including support for education, health, and accommodation.
* CAMHS is accessible to the UASC, and care leavers who were UASC. CAMHS in Social Care provide an emotional wellbeing service to looked after children including UASC
 |
| Strategy Improvement and Transformation | * Providing advice and guidance to services on complying with public sector equality duty
* Commissioned ESOL for Integration Fund (EFIF) which can support eligible asylum seekers and refugees with ESOL learning and social mixing activities. Some asylum seekers and refugees have been attending the programme.
* Working with voluntary and community sector to support community as whole and where relevant with refuges and migrants
* *Controlling Migration Fund (CMF): Oversaw the delivery and commissioning of the CMF programme from 2018 to 2021. It was open to all migrants and* 19 refugees participated in the programme:

Controlling Migration Fund was a mutlifaceterd programme funded through MHCLG and ran in Tower Hamlets from 2018 to 2021. The different aspects of the programme were:* + Working with migrant residents and local community organisations to create the practical Welcome to Tower Hamlets guide.
	+ Providing local English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and conversation classes to improve skills and access to jobs.
	+ Volunteering opportunities to help migrants to improve their language, future job prospects and to contribute to their local communities.
 |
| Idea Store Learning  | Eligible asylum seekers and refugees can attend ESOL programme in Idea Stores  |
| Work Path | * For care leavers who were UASC and not in education, employment, and training (NEET) they can join training and employment.
* Refugees and asylum seekers can register with Work Path for employment and training however will need to have English skills
* Can refer to ESOL classes if they require to learn English first
* Will have an adviser who can help them through their journey
 |
| Public Health  | * Working with NHS colleagues to ensure regular outreach vaccination clinics for asylum seekers in the Home Office commissioned hotels under Operation Oak
* Providing public health advice and input to the borough’s asylum seeker healthcare co-ordination group (led by Primary Care)
* Commissioning partners to host outreach vaccination clinics for refugees who are undocumented
* Promoting trauma and mental health training to faith leaders who are welcoming refugees into their congregations
* Commissioning translated materials based on insight around vaccine hesitancy to enable access to information
* Promoting online GP registration to asylum seekers and undocumented refugees to enable access to Primary Care
* Delivering engagement in the Home Office hotels around vaccination and other public health measures related to Covid
* Promoting open access vaccine clinics to other partners who may support people who could benefit (i.e. Praxis, Care4Calais)
* Currently developing an ‘inclusion health’ strategy – based on the needs of asylum seekers and refugees that have surfaced over the pandemic, for launch in April-May
 |
| Poverty Team  | * Have a Residents Support Scheme which asylum seekers and refugees can apply to. Provides through this crisis grant and community care grant.
* For ARAP provided vouchers as part of the wrap around service
* Provides essential food items to the food hubs who distributes to the foodbanks. Refugees and asylum seekers can have access to this
 |
| Early Help & Children and Family Service (EHCFS)  | * Operation Oak

With consent, hotel management teams refer all families to the EHCFS. Initial assessments are carried out and if required families are escalated to social care (adults & children), allocated family support workers, signposted to other services, clothing audits carried out and school places applied for.* Where families need additional support, family support workers are allocated and through assessments and support plans are put in place.
* ARAP/ACAS

Allocated worker will welcome all arrivals and provide support as required following the TH action/welcome plan. Signpost and link with internal and external agencies as required. |
| Neighbourhood Mental Health Teams | Cater for the mental health needs of people aged 18 to 65 who are residents in Tower Hamlets including for asylum seekers and refugees.Support people in terms of NRPF assessments to help make decision on whether they can receive subsistence / accommodation support. |
| Rough Sleeping Service | Support referrals to immigration advice services that will help to clarify their status and subsequent entitlements in the UK. Council’s Rough Sleeping service also provide welfare checks, support clients to register with a GP, access primary care, take up the COVID-19 vaccine, access food and hygiene facilities and support with finding accommodation and employment |
| Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership | Independent domestic abuse advocates can be the key link with female refugees fleeing abuse and this is helpful because the independent advocate can be a link with social services and other agencies to ensure that help is given without the person at risk having to speak directly to a social worker if they find this difficult.  |
| Central Safeguarding Team | Central Safeguarding Team he majority of safeguarding enquiry work is done by social workers in the area where the vulnerable adult is seeking help, localities teams, hospital, community mental health team and learning disability team. However, when safeguarding situations are particularly complex or high risk of serious harm to any person (danger of some-one dying or receiving life-changing injuries) then one of the three social workers in the Central Safeguarding team can take the case. Not all refugee situations are high risk although some can be.  |
| High Risk Panel | This is a multi-agency panel including adults and children’s social services, police, housing options services, benefits advice and health agencies which helps social workers dealing with difficult safeguarding situations where there is a high risk of harm to any person and the safeguarding enquiry is challenging or has become stuck. Some cases of vulnerable refugees have been referred to the panel for advice. |
| Refugee resettlement and other initiatives | * Other than the regular services there are a few initiatives specific to refugees and asylum seekers. They however are run for a limited period of time.
	+ council runs refugee resettlement programmes when required, such as the Syrian resettlement scheme and currently resettling Afghan refugees through ARAP. An action plan has been developed and co-ordination meetings are held to help resettle the Afghan migrants. Currently 5 Afghan families are being supported.
	+ Operation Oak, a Home Office initiative has resulted in over 400 asylum seekers being placed in hotels in Tower Hamlets. The unexpected arrival has resulted in council providing intense and prompt support from various council departments, specially from health and education.
 |

## Appendix 2: Hearing the voices of UASCs

Telephone interviews were conducted with 7 young adults who were either UASC or UASC care leavers all of them aged between 16 to 18 years of age, 6 were male and 1 female. Their stay in Tower Hamlets have varied from 3 months to over a year. Majority of them have lived in Tower Hamlets for over a year but no one has been here for 2 years or more. They come from Ethiopia, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Sudan.

**The key findings were:**

* Majority of the participants had a very positive experience of living in Tower Hamlets with 5 out of 7 participants giving their experience rating as 10 – the best rating possible.
* All of them were very happy with their social worker or personal advisors assigned to them and the contact from their accommodation provider. They find them to be very responsive to their needs.
* All the interviewees live in shared accommodation. Majority of them are happy with the accommodation. However, 2 people mentioned issues with their flat mates dampening their experience.
* Some of the interviewees were not aware of different services they can benefit from. For example, gym or library. Information perhaps has not been filtered to them effectively.
* In most cases if they have any health issues generally, they are able to get support quickly. One of them was able to have access to a psychologist to help their sleep. Some of them have dental issues which they are trying to get help for. One person mentioned difficulty in getting dental appointment and had to wait many months.
* Finance: Although majority of the asylum seekers did not mention finance as an issue some of them mentioned that their finances received is not enough as there are weekly costs which stretch their finances - regular travel, cleaning etc.
* Sometimes there may be a small gap in communication which can cause anxiety amongst some of the UASC or UASC care leavers. Some of the anxieties relate to delay in paperwork from Home Office. One of them currently experiencing delays with regards to receiving ARC ID from the Home Office. One of them was expecting to get permanent accommodation but has not heard back regarding her situation from the personal advisor or relevant people from within the council.
* Those who may not have an ARC ID yet from the Home Office cannot open bank account and therefore access some services as often ID is required for registration. Some places do not take cash payments so without bank card cannot always make purchases.
* Generally happy with their education and specially being able to go to college. This has allowed many of them to socialise, make friends and start the process of integration. All of them are doing ESOL classes and some are also doing Maths. The other subject some of them are doing include IT, Business administration, geography, and history.
* All of them have received support to get in touch with family back home if they have any. Some are however reluctant due to concern of safety for their family members.
* All participants were positive about their future.

## Appendix 3: Hearing the voices from refugees and asylum seekers

We have been able to hear the voices from refugees and asylum seekers through ELATT and Bromley by Bow Centre (BbBC) who are both third sector organisations where refugees and asylum seekers attended their ESOL for Integration Fund (EFIF) social mixing activities. At BbBC 12 individual refugees and people seeking asylum attended. Of these 6 already have refugee status, while the others are at different stages of the process. Children were not counted in these families. We decided not to “spotlight” them by putting them in a specific group, but to ensure that they were able to participate alongside all the EFIF groups.

ELATT arranged a two-hour focus group with six asylum seekers in addition to the summer programme activities that they participated in. They are from a range of countries - Sudan, Iran, Eritrea – and are operating at a range of English language levels – Pre-Entry to Entry 3. They are living in hotel accommodation provided by the Home Office in the borough. The focus group was facilitated by an ESOL tutor who was able to support the learners to express themselves in English and learners who spoke the same language also interpreted for each other.

**Key Challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers:**

Regardless of their very different contexts, they all faced two immediately impacting challenges: orientation and finance. In addition, there was evidence of stress in various conversations, sometimes not said but visible. This was usually when discussing the strain of living in a state of crisis, separation and with no knowledge of where they might be sent to on any given day.

Orientation

The arrival in a completely new place is described as a deeply disorientating experience. This is as much physical as it is psychological. They described getting confused with everyday situations, even about left and right orientation. Examples are crossing a road and catching a bus.

Access to Money & Financial Hardship

This is a big issue for both refugees and people seeking asylum. They described the cost of living as very expensive. Transport was a major expense. They were very pleased to have had access to study some English, however, the cost of travelling two to three times a week to class and back represents a significant proportion of the weekly budget. Therefore they (in particular asylum seekers) may often restrict themselves to activities at a walking distance or go to services that pay for people’s transport costs. They often struggle to buy essential items such as clothing or food due to budget so rely on charity food and clothes donations.

For many of the people seeking asylum, there was particular mention of the difficulty of living in hotel accommodation where there was no access to cooking facilities and where they were given a restricted diet that often does not meet health or cultural requirements. And even though meals were provided, they were strictly available at set times, so if you had appointments in the day, they would have to miss a meal. This meant they often had to choose between having lunch or being able to attend important appointments. It also meant that they were not able to take advantage of majority of the food supplies from food banks as these are usually cupboard items that require either cooking or heating.

Asylum seekers in the borough struggle with being turned away from key services, including accessing college for ESOL classes, healthcare, libraries, and recreation facilities. They are dealing with severe and ongoing trauma and have little or no access to mental health provision. Participants said their mental health was affected by the waiting and uncertainty.

Some of the other barriers mentioned included:

* Language barriers
* being able to communicate effectively. This includes having access to the facilities to communicate- internet, phone, email or in person.
* Not being able to register at the library without ID or proof of address
* Not being able to go to college for first six months as an asylum seeker
* understanding what the services are. Many of them mentioned not knowing about local services such as Idea Stores, sports and recreation and no advice or signposting at their hotel
* Unwarranted gatekeeping at the hospital
* understanding the role of council, knowing what to expect
1. <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/asylum-migration-and-refugees/unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-uasc> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Leaving-Care-Support-June-2018-FINAL.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/asylum-migration-and-refugees/refugees-and-asylum-seekers> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/asylum-migration-and-refugees/refugees-and-asylum-seekers> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The Borough of Sanctuary is part of the national City of Sanctuary movement, which aims to create a network of towns and cities throughout the UK that are proud to be places of safety and inclusion for people seeking sanctuary. In order to become a Borough of Sanctuary council’s need to commit to the principles and values of the City of Sanctuary movement. These are set out in their charter which can be found in full here: https://cityofsanctuary.org/about/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/insights/migration-statistics-how-many-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-are-there-in-the-uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. [Briefing-Asylum-and-refugee-resettlement-in-the-UK.pdf (ox.ac.uk)](https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Briefing-Asylum-and-refugee-resettlement-in-the-UK.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. [Briefing-Asylum-and-refugee-resettlement-in-the-UK.pdf (ox.ac.uk)](https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Briefing-Asylum-and-refugee-resettlement-in-the-UK.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. [How many people do we grant asylum or protection to? - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2021/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2021/09/13/factsheet-uk-support-to-resettle-afghan-nationals/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. [Afghan citizens resettlement scheme - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/afghan-citizens-resettlement-scheme#full-publication-update-history) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/uk-immigration-and-asylum-plans-some-questions-answered-by-unhcr.html#:~:text=The%20UK%20Government%20intends%20to,was%20announced%20in%20May%202021>. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. <https://www.croydon.gov.uk/adult-health-and-social-care/immigration-and-asylum-support> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/community_and_living/borough_statistics/Borough_profile.asp> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Section 95 support by local authority data,  <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. https://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/nrpf-connect/nrpf-connect-data/data-by-region [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Information gathered from the Children Social Care Through Care Team [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/community_and_living/Support_for_refugees.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/asylum-migration-and-refugees/unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-uasc> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide37-good-practice-in-social-care-with-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/background/legislation.asp [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide37-good-practice-in-social-care-with-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/background/legislation.asp [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide37-good-practice-in-social-care-with-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/background/legislation.asp [↑](#footnote-ref-25)