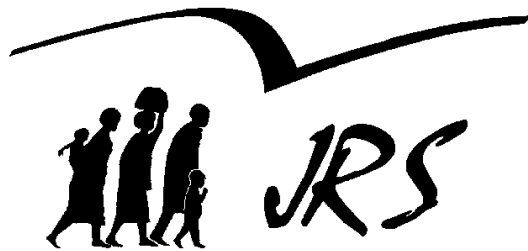


## Home Office Consultation

# Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration



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### **Mission Statement of Jesuit Refugee Service UK**

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic non-governmental organisation, at work in over 50 countries, with a mission to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced people.

The purpose of JRS UK is to accompany, to serve and to advocate on behalf of all asylum seekers from their first arrival until they are satisfactorily settled. This work is carried out in collaboration with other JRS offices round the world, other Church and secular organisations, voluntary and governmental, which are active in the same field.

### **Values Statement**

JRS is grounded in Catholic social teaching and draws on the principles of Ignatian spirituality in discerning with whom we work. All Members share a common set of values and principles concerned with justice, the dignity of the person and a responsibility to carry out the social mission of the Church.

With a priority to working wherever the needs of displaced people are urgent and unattended by others, JRS offers a human and pastoral service to refugees and the communities who host them through a wide range of rehabilitation and relief activities. Services — pastoral care, education for children and adults, social services, counselling, and health care—are tailored to meet local needs according to available resources.

### **JRS UK's work**

The main focus of JRS UK's work is with asylum seekers in detention through visits, phone calls and letters. We produce news sheets to keep them in touch with events in their country. When they are released we keep in touch with them and offer practical support.

JRS UK neither carries out any casework nor offers immigration advice to asylum seekers. JRS UK "signposts" the services offered by other NGOs and by legal practitioners in this area.

Our comments in this response are based on our experiences of working with refugees and asylum seekers.

### **Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration – JRS UK response**

#### **When should integration start?**

While welcoming the Home Office's efforts to address integration needs of refugees, the first point we must make is that asylum seekers cannot be ignored in looking at integration. Integration, if it is to be done well, must start while the individual is still an asylum seeker. We fully endorse the inclusion of asylum seekers by the Scottish Executive in drawing up the Scottish Refugee Integration Forum's action plan. They recognised the need to look at integration as a process which of necessity starts at arrival. In our opinion this is the only approach, which makes any sense, whatsoever, if issues of promoting good community relations are to be addressed and if a smooth transition is to be made from the status of asylum seeker to refugee. This is especially so since asylum seekers who are supported financially by the government are dealt with by NASS, not the normal benefits system. They therefore need a lot of support in making the transition.

## **Paid Employment**

A key aspect of integration is the ability to look for paid employment. Having permission to work contributes to the dignity of an individual and to his or her levels of self-confidence. While recognising that it may not be politically expedient for the government to reinstate permission to work for asylum seekers who have not had a decision in their cases within 6 months, we would encourage the government to reinstate this permission to work. In our experience working helps asylum seekers to gain language skills, develop other skills, develop self-confidence, make friendships within the settled community and helps contribute towards a better understanding or an appreciation of asylum seekers and refugees by British people. We also know how much asylum seekers and refugees appreciate being able to contribute to society by working, and so helping to give back a little to the UK of the sense of security and well-being they have themselves received.

A subsidiary aspect of being able to work is that asylum seekers will already have National Insurance numbers, which will help them in the transition between the status of asylum seeker and of refugee. We note that the consultation states that “National Insurance numbers are now being issued to all asylum seekers who receive favourable decisions from the Home Office at the same time as they receive their asylum decision letter. The same change will be made as soon as possible in the case of asylum seekers who successfully appeal to a tribunal against an initial refusal.”<sup>1</sup> However, it is our experience that refugees can experience extreme delay in receiving the asylum decision letter, particularly if an appeal has occurred and if the individual has been released from detention after a successful appeal. Without the letter it is impossible to access benefits, housing or employment.

While allowing asylum seekers to work would not improve the lot of those held in detention it would remove a basic obstacle to accessing the labour market for the vast majority of asylum seekers granted refugee status, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to remain in the UK – getting the asylum decision letter in a timely fashion and getting a National Insurance number.

## **Transition from NASS to mainstream services**

At the moment, in our opinion, the support structure for asylum seekers, as it is not part of the mainstream benefits system, is a barrier to effective integration. Refugees have to make the transition to mainstream benefits in a very small window of time – only 28 days, the time NASS supports refugees after status is granted. In that time the refugee must access alternative accommodation, get a National Insurance number, obtain employment or benefits. We therefore welcome the proposal of dedicated caseworkers to assist refugees make the transition. This will, hopefully, help refugees overcome some of the difficulties they may face.

## **Contributing to Communities**

As noted above, being able to access paid employment while still an asylum seeker, improves public perception of asylum seekers and refugees and allows the asylum seeker to feel as if he or she is contributing to British society.

Promoting a positive image of refugees is essential if integration is ever to be fully successful in the UK. With a positive image there is less likely to be racially motivated violence or harassment of asylum seekers and refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> Page 24, para 4.4

However, many government policies contribute to a very negative image being promoted. Withdrawing free secondary health care from asylum seekers who have received a final refusal or who cannot pursue an appeal due to inability to find a solicitor to take their cases forward, detention of asylum seekers both in removal centres and in the prison system, electronic monitoring of asylum seekers all contribute to a view in the general public's mind that asylum seekers and refugees are criminals, health tourists or generally not to be trusted. A fair asylum process which treats asylum seekers with dignity and respect would go a long way to promoting a positive image of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK.

### **Access to Health Services**

As noted repeatedly in the consultation document, given the trauma that asylum seekers may have gone through and the physical hardship they may have suffered, both in their country of origin and in the UK, good health care is essential to the refugee's integration into British society. Unfortunately health problems may have been exacerbated due to changes to the NHS regulations withdrawing free (non-urgent) secondary health care to "failed" asylum seekers and proposals to do the same to primary health care services, means that it is more difficult for asylum seekers to get registered with GPs. It is also in our experience that asylum seekers who have managed to get new evidence in their cases can make a new asylum application and get refugee status from that second case. Meanwhile any health problems they may have suffered may have worsened while they were technically "failed" asylum seekers, due to stress, not being able to access health care and being left destitute. This will have a huge impact on their ability to integrate fully into British society, as they may be left with ongoing health problems (physical and mental), which may delay or prevent them from getting employment, and which may hinder them from attending job centre or benefits agency interviews.

### **Refugee Integration Loan**

JRS UK is deeply concerned at the withdrawal of back-payment of benefit from asylum seekers who receive a positive decision in their cases. The document states that the loans "will be financed from the savings made by ending back-payments of Income Support to new refugees, the amount of which depended on the time each refugee had spent awaiting a decision and bore no relation to the needs of the individual."<sup>2</sup> However, to our mind there would have been little to stop the loan from being an additional option as well as having the back-payments of benefit. The interest free loan could be used to meet extra integration needs (such as large items of furniture e.g. fridge, cooker, bed).

Louise Zanré, 20 October 2004

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<sup>2</sup> page 33, para. 5.10