



An early intervention Rights-based approach to the protection and support of people entering the asylum system in Glasgow

Alan White

In the build up to the United Kingdom's 2010 General Election the words "immigration" and "asylum seekers" were used by politicians in all of the main parliamentary parties in an apparent attempt to gain political leverage through accusations that other parties would be soft on such issues (Montgomerie, 2010). However, being soft on asylum seekers is not a policy which has been present over the past decade in the United Kingdom. As with numerous sectors in society, asylum service provision budgets have been cut by almost 20% in some areas. (Twinch, 2011). As budgets have been cut some services have passed from the public to the private sector (NCADC, 2011) and others, such as the Immigration Advisory Service, have collapsed altogether as funding dried up (Bowcott, 2011).

Where does this leave those who come to the United Kingdom fleeing persecution and death? There are numerous sources which suggest that certain aspects of the asylum system, primarily detention and forced removals, in the United Kingdom impact very negatively on these people (Amnesty International, 2011).

Focusing on the preparation and support which asylum seekers receive prior to their substantive interviews in Glasgow, this research was carried out as part of a Collaborative Masters Dissertation partnership with the Unity Centre and sponsored by the Glasgow Refugee Asylum and Migration Network. The project aims to produce both an

academic dissertation and a pilot project working with the Unity Centre based upon the findings of the dissertation. The Unity Centre is a small, grassroots organisation based in Glasgow which was set up in 2006 to help provide support and solidarity to asylum seekers. In the five years since, thousands of asylum seekers have registered with the Unity Centre and it has expanded to include a charity, Unity in the Community, and various community projects in addition to its main support work. However, the vast majority of the work done by the Centre is with asylum seekers who have already had their applications refused and this research aims to investigate whether this type of organisation could help provide support at a much earlier stage and what type of support this would entail.

Detention and forced removals of asylum seekers have drawn a large part of the ire of NGOs, activists and charities. However there are other aspects of the asylum process which remain less researched and less clear with regards to their fairness and impact on asylum seekers. One example of this is the interviewing and decision making processes at the first instance of an asylum claim. This research attempts to address one of the areas of significant importance for asylum seekers; their substantive interview. The substantive interview is the main fact-finding exercise for the Home Office as they assess an asylum seeker's claim for protection in the United Kingdom and such interviews can last anywhere

up to 8 hours with legal advice before the interviews generally being limited due to time, and financial, constraints (Refugee Council, 2008).

Interviews were organised with asylum seekers in Glasgow; both those who were yet to take part in their substantive interviews with the Home Office and those who already done so. The respondents were asked about what support they had received prior to their interviews, whether or not this was sufficient and their perceptions, or experience, of the substantive interview and the asylum process more generally. It became apparent in each interview that there were gaps in both the provision of information at this stage of the process to asylum seekers and therefore gaps in the knowledge of the next steps for asylum seekers. The research concluded that there was a significant lack of understanding of both the content and significance of the substantive interview to the asylum seekers' claims. Additionally, the overall level of support and information which was provided for asylum seekers at this stage was very low and the research shows the need for an improved support network and a new model of support targeting disparities in knowledge at this early stage.