



REFUGEE SUPPORT
GROUP DEVON

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Re-dispersal shock

After Devon councillors expressed disapproval of Exeter's refusal to take 61 Somali refugees, the government's National Asylum Support Service (NASS) announced plans to remove the 19 asylum seekers remaining from the previous dispersal scheme to Bristol, contrary to recent assurances by Devon.

On 10th February Annette Hughes of RSG wrote: 'Some of you may already be aware of the shocking news from Devon County Council that the asylum seekers supported in their NASS accommodation will be relocated to Bristol in the week commencing 21st February. The 19 people affected were informed yesterday and there are inevitably some very distressed people. Reasons they have been given relate to the fact DCC are closing their programme and contracts on the properties they currently use are ending. This is contrary to the advice from DCC in the summer last year when plans were consolidated that "the people who are already in our care will continue to get support until they get a final de-

cision on their asylum cases – asylum seekers currently living in NASS accommodation in Exeter will NOT be expected to be redispersed to other parts of the country" (I quote from minutes of the multi-agency meeting held in July 2004 – the capitals are as minuted). We have seen 7 people today who are extremely distraught about this move – many of whom have lived in Exeter for at least 18 months and have close personal ties here as well as health issues, voluntary work, support networks etc. We have taken details from individuals and are bringing to the attention of NASS the destruction such moves could cause to them'.

PROTEST: see below right

Exeter Nimbyism row escalates

Exeter Labour council's refusal to participate in the Gateway scheme, reported in the last issue, has caused controversy among local politicians. Ben Bradshaw (whose representations to the Home Office caused the scheme to be cancelled) said that 'the difficulty in Exeter arose because Devon Council did not consult sufficiently with Exeter City Council'. He also repeated claims by Exeter City Council that there simply wasn't room. '[The Council] faces serious pressure on its housing stock. There are currently more than 300 households in temporary accommodation and more than 3000 on the Council's housing waiting lists'. Both points have been disputed however. A letter in the *Express and Echo* says that a crucial

place in which Conservative and Labour politicians did discuss the scheme, and that several of those present represented both Exeter and Devon wards. Meanwhile Lib Dems are asking 'What has happened to the Labour Party?' and Paul Smith, Lib Dem leader on the city council, has pointed to the almost total success of the former asylum seeker resettlement programme in avoiding use of Exeter's social housing. 400 were resettled over the last 3½ years and 'only a handful needed council accommodation'. Another Liberal councillor, Joan Morrish, said that preventing the Sudanese refugees (including 31 children) from coming to Exeter was 'a disgrace'.

(Continued on next page and page 3)

Also in this issue

Nimbyism in Exeter (cont) (pages 2 and 3)

Britain 10th on asylum (page 2)

Britain's ageing population and new government immigration plans (page 3)

Interviews with Polish workers and Tory health check proposals (page 4)

Editors

Annette Hughes,
David Mezzetti and
Jeremy Cushing

RSG management committee

Meetings are held on the first Wednesday in every month at 7pm in Wat Tyler House (see above). Everyone welcome.

Every meeting starts by considering any proposals or requests put forward by asylum seekers, who are particularly welcome. Agenda items to the office if possible two weeks before the meeting, please

PROTEST

to the local MP, Ben
Bradshaw: House of
Commons, London SW1
0AA, email

bradshawb@parliament.uk
or at Labour HQ, 26b
Clifton Hill, Exeter EX1
2DJ; or the Home Office:
Des Browne, MP, Home
Office, 50 Queen Anne's

BRITAIN 10TH IN EUROPE ON ASYLUM

Both parties' recent proposals to change the asylum and immigration rules are based on public perceptions that asylum and immigration are 'out of control'. In fact this is not true, and also in fact Britain is not really pulling its weight.

The number of asylum claims is decreasing. In 2002 we took 103,000, in 2003 60,000 and in 2004 37,000 (estimated). (These figures include dependants.)

This is a decrease of 38% for 2004 over 2003 (or 64% over 2002). This reflects a general trend in developed countries: declines of 35% for the USA, 30% for Australia, 28% for Canada and 20% for the whole EU, between 2003 and 2004. The UK however has the fastest rate of decline.

Last year's figures mean the UK received about one asylum seeker for every 1,000 British inhabitants (again including dependants). In 2002 we were joint 10th (with Finland) in Europe in this respect. Of large countries Austria took the most with one per 270, Sweden had one per 311, Ireland one per 700, France one per 840. A recent article in the *Independent* revealed that 7000 African refugees landed illegally in the Canary Islands (population 1.6m) last year.

Outside the EU the USA took one per 6600 (but the USA has far more illegal immigrants – at least 10m – than we have, many of whom will be refugees).

Although only 49,000 people applied for asylum last year, there were 64,000 decisions (i.e. the government is rolling up past backlogs, which got really bad during Michael Howard's disastrous tenure as Home Secretary). (But see 'removals' below.)

Many asylum seekers who are rejected are probably genuine. 83% of claims were turned down on initial interview, which is often used to justify the claim that 4 out of 5 claims are unjustified. But about 20% of refusals are overturned on appeal, so in fact the government refuses 64% (3 in 4). Moreover bodies working with refugees (like Amnesty International and the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture) have cast very serious doubt on the reliability of the government's processing of claims. In particular claims that people have been tortured are almost routinely disbelieved, and government officials are regularly found to be ignorant of the politics of countries where claimants say they have been persecuted (e.g. by simply not knowing of the existence of a political party or civil rights group whose members have been targeted by police). The government currently claims, for example, that Zimbabwe is a safe place to which to return people opposed to Robert Mugabe. All the countries to which Charles

tical dissidents.

Another reason for supposing that most asylum seekers are genuinely fleeing persecution is that they mostly do come from countries (like Iran, China, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Iraq) where there is serious ongoing political repression. This suggests that people were really refugees (the 'push' factor) rather than seeking work or benefits (the 'pull'). People looking for jobs (or benefits) would be expected to come from nearer countries, and more likely from English-speaking countries. In fact immigrants seeking work do come from just that kind of country: the USA, India, Europe (where English is a second language), Australia and so on.

Removals

The government is often criticised because it does not remove from the country people whose asylum claims are refused. A rough estimate of the number of failed asylum seekers still in the country is 200,000. (Note that this is a cumulative total, *not* an annual amount; note also that in reality nobody has more than a vague idea how many there are in fact.) The government is trying hard to increase the number removed, but the process is expensive both financially (they have to be found, arrested and flown home) and morally (many of them are desperate and are sent back to countries where they will be persecuted all over again; many of them are families and some have children who have known no country other than the UK). Removals in 2003 numbered nearly 18,000, which was 29% up on 2002. The government is planning more detention centres, which will enable failed asylum seekers to be deported immediately.

Britain does not take its fair share of asylum seekers. Britain's GDP is 11.25% of the world's. (Britain has a GDP of about \$1.5 trillion, which comes to \$25,300 per head. The world's total wealth is estimated at \$49 trillion.) But Britain currently hosts only 0.17% of world refugees. (The total number of people who are regarded as 'of concern' by UNHCR is about 17 million world-wide, of whom the UN reports 300,000 as living here.)

By contrast, our tiny refugee problems are dwarfed by those faced in poor countries. Examples of poor countries taking large refugee flows include Tanzania (income \$630 per head) with 150,000 refugees from Congo and 500,000 from Burundi; Pakistan (\$2100) and Iran (\$7000) have a million each from Afghanistan. Currently there is a row over 61 Somali refugees coming to Devon. To equal Tanzania's performance, based on relative population, Devon would have to take 13,500. Since people in Devon are 40 times as rich as Tanzanians this shouldn't give us too much trouble. [JC] *In the next issue:*

Nimbyism in Exeter (cont.)

The whole question was aired on Channel 4 News. Sam Newman of Devon County Council said that as a result of the previous relocation scheme for Afghan and Iranian asylum seekers 430 went through Exeter and only 18 remain. This meant that Devon 'have the skills, the knowledge to help people get to College, get a job, launch new lives'. RSG member David Mezzetti, who works on housing advice through the Exeter Housing Action Group, agreed: 'We've never had a problem with any of the refugees that we've had, who we've worked with and supported. They've all

independent accommodation, they've all got into work, mostly in the private rented sector, and I feel it's very very tame of Exeter City Council to take the line that they have'.

Councillor David Morrish said 'I find this a very strange situation, that the County Council was in fact actively co-operating with government policy at a time when the then Home Secretary [David Blunkett] was very concerned that he wasn't getting local authority co-operation [for the Gateway project], and that in fact the matter was then vetoed by a local MP who is a government minister. ... As far as we were concerned here it was a major

UK HAS AGEING POPULATION

One of the arguments often put forward for immigration is that we can't do without it for demographic reasons: put brutally, we aren't producing enough new young workers to look after us in our old age. This fact is behind a lot of the panic over pensions. Since the 1970s the UK population has risen from about 55m to about 60m. During this period the average age rose from 34 to 38½. The proportion under 16 fell from a quarter to a

fifth. People over 65, by contrast, increased from 13% to 16% and this trend continues. There is also a growth in the 'oldest old' (over 85). The 'natural increase' (births to UK residents) is slowing down, and for some

been making up for this with immigrants. It is these immigrants who will probably look after you and me in our old people's home (as many do already). They and their children may also be paying the taxes which finance our

NEW GOVERNMENT IMMIGRATION PLANS

Following a Tory initiative to exploit public anxiety over immigration and asylum Labour issued a five-year plan, widely regarded as driven mainly by the Prime Minister's anxiety not to lose votes in the general election.

On immigration the plan proposed a four-tier points system for approving people wanting to come here to study or work. It was criticised because it seemed to create a hierarchy of disadvantage, with tier 1 (professionals) able to come here without first getting a sponsor and also able to settle and bring their families after five years, whereas tier 3 (unskilled workers) would have to post a bond (if from 'high-risk' countries, i.e. where they might have been persecuted), not able to claim benefits and having no possibility of eventual settlement. Fees for applicants would double. Tiers 2, 3 and 4 would have to have a sponsor (an employer or, for a student, a college) and sponsors would have to report them if they left their placement. On the other hand, some people pointed out that the system was in some ways less restrictive than the present one, especially in that applicants would not always have to find a job before they came, and could switch employers when here. The Scottish *Herald* said that it might advantage Scotland (woefully short of immigrants) if the Scottish Executive could sponsor immigrants directly. The TUC was also in favour because it would reduce the dependence of immigrant workers on their employers and therefore make it less easy to exploit them. Firms which employed illegal workers would be liable to immediate fines. All sorts of fancy technology would be deployed at points of entry to the UK.

On asylum (whose management by the Home Office was criticised by the Public Accounts Committee on the same day) the right to remain after four years was removed: successful asylum seekers would have their position reviewed after five years and would be sent home if 'home' was now considered safe (as Zimbabwe currently is). Methods to keep track of failed asylum seekers would be tightened up, with a big increase in detention and also the use of other surveillance methods like tagging, fingerprinting and (when available) ID cards. Fast-tracking (at present used only for a small minority) would be increased. The Refugee Council welcomed the fact that the plan did not envisage either quotas or withdrawal from the 1951 refugee convention, but criticised the idea of five-year reviews as 'the most serious

CITY COUNCIL CONCERNS

In response to a request from RSG the leader of Exeter City Council, Councillor Roy Slack, issued the following statement about the controversy over Immigration Minister Des Browne's decision to cancel the Gateway scheme project for Devon and criticisms of Exeter City Council by Devon leaders (see front page and page 2, above). He emphasised that if the scheme did go ahead Exeter would do its best to welcome the refugees.

'As far as I am aware Devon County Council decided in May last year to withdraw from the Asylum Seeker Programme. At the same time they began talks with the Home Office about participating in the Gateway Scheme. This scheme helps refugees (rather than asylum seekers) resettle permanently in this country.

'As soon as the City Council housing staff became aware of the proposal they explained to their county colleagues some of the housing difficulties that would face the refugees. These were very different to the challenges posed by the asylum seekers scheme, which we had jointly resolved very effectively.

'At the same time I was alerted and was involved with a series of meetings with County Councillors. The reasons why large refugee families could not sustain private accommodation in the City are quite complex and linked to the overall operation of the benefits system. After the various discussions, both the City Council's housing experts and I remained concerned that the long term housing needs of the Gateway refugees had not been provided for. We raised these concerns with both the County Council and the Home Office. None the less the County Council resolved to go ahead.

'At each stage I made it clear that I was opposed to a scheme which would ultimately leave these vulnerable people homeless. I did however state that if it did proceed we would do our best to help and support the refugees and treat them equally with the other 3600 plus householders for whom we currently lack suitable housing.'

Asked whether there was a chance the Gateway project might be reinstated after further negotiation Councillor Slack said 'I am not aware of any discussions currently under way about this, nor of any changes that would resolve the housing problems that refugees would face in Exeter.'

INTERVIEWS WITH POLISH WORKERS

RSG volunteer Irene Derczyńska writes: Following the recent *Guardian* article (see last issue), I went with Jeremy Cushing to meet some of the Polish workers at Lloyd Maunder. The first young man I saw told me that he had taken the opportunity to work in England, as he had a wife and children. In England he earned in a week what it would take him two months to earn in Poland, where he had been a carpenter. Since the fall of Communism, widespread unemployment and financial instability continue in the former Soviet Union states.

I then met two further gentlemen, who said that they were recruited by a young Polish woman, who came to Toruń with two English men and promised them a better life in England. They said that the woman had told them that they would be packing salads and flowers in Southampton. However, on their arrival here, they found there was no such work for them. They only managed to subsist because they had brought enough food and money to last a month.

They existed in this way in Southampton for two weeks until they were brought to Devon and began working for Lloyd Maunder. They verified the initial living conditions in Exeter described in the *Guardian* article, and said that Lloyd Maunder effectively rescued them and rehoused them in Cullompton. They were grateful for the help given them.

The company has sorted out their wages, and are paying them directly. They are receiving £5.60 per hour, which is above the minimum wage. They said that their papers, tax and insurance are in order, and there is regular opportunity for overtime, which is paid at the going rate of 150% salary, and more on a Sunday. The family found their house through the help of Lloyd Maunder, who then facilitated the details with the letting agency. They are very satisfied by the way Lloyd Maunder is treating them, and the factory has even laid on English lessons for them on site for two hours on Fridays.

The last couple that I saw were a husband and wife. They said that they came over as a family, which included their daughter and son-in-law, and their granddaughter. Their story backed up that of the others regarding the way they were recruited and brought over to Southampton. They too are now renting a family house in Cullompton, which they found through an estate agent, again with the help of Lloyd Maunder. I have since visited them at their house, and found it to be very clean and presentable. Their granddaughter has started to attend a local primary school in Cullompton, and is now learning English.

The original 32 Poles came in at least two groups in May 2004, following Poland's accession to the European Union. There are now around 100 Poles employed by the company. Many of these are not connected with the original ones, though some are family and friends. They said that the younger ones would probably stay here indefinitely if they were allowed to do so, and make their life here, because of the economic conditions being better than in Poland. The older ones would probably return at some point, because it was more difficult to make a new life elsewhere at their age. These Poles did not feel able to take up the offer of free English lessons, because they are

TORIES PROPOSE DISCRIMINATORY HEALTH CHECKS

As we go to press, Michael Howard has kept up his campaign to exploit anti-immigration feeling by announcing that the Tories would impose compulsory tests on immigrants for TB and AIDS. The tests would be paid for by the testees.

He justified this by saying that it was necessary to avoid health risks to the native population and also the exploitation of the NHS by foreigners who wanted to get free treatment for long-term illnesses. This scheme would not, however, be applied to asylum seekers or people from the EU.

The *Mail*, tirelessly promoting brotherly love and international accord as it always does, responded with the headline 'Our NHS, not the World Health Service' and an article which made no mention of the fact that one-third of immigrants were in fact nurses without whom the NHS could not operate. It also claimed that one-tenth of GPs' patients 'should not qualify for free NHS care'. Assuming that GPs see one-tenth of the population every year, at 60m that would mean 6m seen, of whom 600,000 would be immigrants trying to exploit the NHS. Where they got that from, who can tell. (And has everybody congratulated Ken Livingstone on his splendidly appropriate outburst? His email address is mayor@london.gov.uk.)

The *Guardian* commented that last year 5000 asylum seekers were tested for TB and no active cases were discovered. In 2001-2 an X-ray study of people arriving at Heathrow produced an estimate that about one-sixth of one per cent of people from high-risk countries might have TB. A real danger of flooding the NHS there, then.

The Terrence Higgins Trust commented that there was no evidence that such methods had worked elsewhere (as in Australia).

Legal experts thought that the policy would fall foul of human rights law in that it would be both discriminatory and disproportionate.

The idea of health checks for immigrants (and for that matter for everybody else), only of course if they were free or at least reasonably priced, is not at first sight totally unreasonable. The opposite proposal (of denying health care to immigrants *after* they are living in the UK) has often been criticised as likely to cause health risks by dissuading people from having treatment for illnesses which (like both TB and AIDS) can infect others. However the real objection, as the *Mail* article immediately demonstrated, is that Howard is encouraging people to believe the 'health tourist' myth: that the NHS is put under strain by foreigners who come to this country to gain expensive treatment they would have to pay for back home. Labour politicians have not been innocent of this ploy either in the past. When people believe (as they apparently do) that Britain takes a