

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES IN SOUTHEND



Communities and Sanctuary-seekers Together - CAST
March 2015

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Under the **1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees**, asylum seekers must show that they have a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, and are unable or unwilling to seek protection from the authorities in their own country. The definition is forward-looking, so even if an asylum seeker has suffered terrible harm in the past, they will not get asylum if there is no risk of anything happening to them in the future. It is not always necessary to have been persecuted in the past for a future risk to exist — sometimes events that occur after a person's arrival in the UK can give rise to a future risk of persecution in their own country.

Source: Asylum Aid

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CAST	Communities and Sanctuary-seekers Together
SBC	Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
NASS	National Asylum Seeker Support
CART	Churches and Refugees Together
ARE	Appeals rights exhausted
NRTF	No recourse to public funds
PCT	Primary Care Trust

Definitions¹

Refugee

In the UK, a person is officially a refugee when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the government.

Asylum Seeker

A person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded.

Refused asylum seeker

A person whose asylum application has been unsuccessful and who has no other claim for protection awaiting a decision. Some refused asylum seekers voluntarily return home, others are forcibly returned and for some it is not safe or practical for them to return until conditions in their country change.

'Illegal' immigrant

Someone whose entry into or presence in a country contravenes immigration laws.

Economic migrant

Someone who has moved to another country to work. Refugees are not economic migrants.

Appeals rights exhausted

Once an asylum seeker has exhausted all appeal rights, they are known as appeals rights exhausted.

¹ http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_research/the_truth_about_asylum/the_facts_about_asylum

About the author

Elsa James is a socially-engaged artist, arts educator and creative activist based in Southend. She has a participatory and research-based practice, with a particular interest in, and commitment to, marginalised, culturally diverse and vulnerable groups and communities including asylum seekers and refugees, young people, older people, ex-offenders and LGBT groups.

Acknowledgements

A very big thank you goes to those who have provided valuable information, guidance and support, in particular to Stanford Biti and Mara Chrystie from CAST, John Barber from Southend Homeless Action Network, Derek Edwards from Southend Citizens Advice Bureau, Simon Wallace from The Forum, Southend Central Library, Ade Butteriss, Leo Lord and Kat Brijlall from Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, and Reverend Melanie Smith from Crowstone St. Georges Reformed Church. Most of all, I am grateful to all those who gave up their time to share their stories and experiences.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to highlight the current situation in respect of asylum seekers and refugees living in Southend, in particular with regard to provision of services and the impact this has on their lives.

Research was carried out over a period of five months, working two days a week for a total of thirty-three days. The research also forms part of the *On Our Way Project* for which Communities and Sanctuary-seekers Together (CAST) received a small grant from Metropolitan Migration Foundation.²

The report is based on evidence gathered through a review of existing literature, informal interviews with key players, and a focus group discussion with refugees, asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers. In total, the focus group discussion included 8 people, (5 men and 3 women) - 5 were from Zimbabwe, 1 from Democratic Republic of Congo, 1 from Angola, and 1 from Uganda. Their time living in Southend spanned from the longest being 24 years, to the most recent being 3 years. In addition to the focus group discussion, supplementary informal conversations were carried out over the research period with a further 3 refugees and asylum seekers (2 men and 1 woman) who all came from Zimbabwe.

Direct quotations from the focus group discussion and informal conversations are presented in boxes, and in italics. Each box represents an individual. Any names that are used are pseudonyms.

Before I started my research, I knew very little facts concerning the UK asylum policy, law or processes, and realised that most of my knowledge had been formed by the national mainstream press, which largely tended to be negative - confusing asylum seekers with economic migrants and illegal immigrants.

To my knowledge, the only comprehensive and concise literature about Southend's asylum seekers and refugees was contained within a report that John Barber wrote in 2009 called *Missing Communities*³ commissioned by local registered charity, Southend Community-in-Harmony Partnership.⁴ Whilst the purpose of the *Missing Communities* report was to establish who the new ethnic minority communities living in Southend were, asylum seekers and refugees only made up a small part of the report.

² <http://www.metropolitan.org.uk/about-us/initiatives/migration-foundation/>

³ <https://jrbpublications.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/missing-communities.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.community-in-harmony.org.uk>

Key findings

- The personal stories presented throughout this report emphasise that asylum seekers, failed asylum seekers and refugees are characterised by their experiences of war, conflict and persecution, and that have resulted in physical and emotional scars.
- Many expressed a strong need for their stories to be told (or put out there) because they felt like invisible members in the community.
- Many do not feel they are currently supported by the provisions of services through the local authority.
- Many showed disappointment and anger about the current lack of local authority services in comparison to what the authority had previously provided for asylum seekers and refugees.
- It is almost impossible to gather statistics on the number of asylum seekers living in Southend, although these statistics are regularly updated via Southend Central Police and passed back to the UK Border Agency.
- Churches provide an important service standing in solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees in their struggles, suffering and hopes, and assist with providing physical space for meeting and coming together.
- Currently, networks with other asylum seekers and refugees provide the most important and reliable source for signposting and information, even though this can sometimes be given inaccurately.
- Because of fear and shame, asylum seekers and refugees need a safe environment that they can claim as their own.
- Asylum seekers are one of the most vulnerable members in our community, therefore, the provision of a permanent venue would provide the environment needed whereby such individuals can access the right advice and service for their needs.
- Men were able to express their experiences more openly than women - provision dedicated for asylum and refugee women needs would be beneficial.

About CAST

Communities and Sanctuary-seekers Together (CAST) is a grassroots community activist group based in Southend-on-Sea. The group came together in 2012. The members and management team are overwhelmingly asylum-seekers and refugees. 6 of the 8 members with positions of responsibility in the management team are current or former asylum-seekers. The CAST community meet twice a month to plan, run and evaluate projects and events.

CAST is committed to supporting destitute and homeless asylum-seekers by developing a hosting and advice network. They host Friendship Projects to address the needs and celebrate the achievements of refugees and newer communities in Southend-on-Sea and the east of England. They bring people together to tackle isolation and loneliness through their Friendship Projects, which build relationships of trust, respect and solidarity. Friendship Projects are run in Family Centres, churches and residential homes across Southend involving refugees and established Southenders, through participation in mosaic arts, music and poetry activities.

In 2013, they held their first conference, and in July 2014 a Refugee Rhythms concert, which was widely enjoyed by over one hundred people. They celebrated Black History Month in October 2014 with an international Film Festival. In January this year, they exhibited a photographic exhibition about a bear arriving at Southend Victoria Station - a local take on the Paddington bear story as the modern migrant who learns to adapt, to an extent and find a place in his new host society.



CAST members participating in a mosaic friendship project, Trinity Family Centre, Westcliff

Refugee Rhythms Concert, The Railway Pub, Southend, July 2014



Welcome to
Southend Victoria



Victoria Bear, photo by Lynette Adams

About Southend-on-Sea

Southend-on-Sea is a town and seaside resort in Essex. The district has Borough status as a unitary authority. It is located within the Thames Gateway on the north side of the Thames estuary, 40 miles east of central London, and is home to the longest iron leisure pier in the world, extending 1.34 miles into the Thames Estuary.

Southend is the seventh most densely populated area in the United Kingdom outside of the London Boroughs, with 38.8 people per hectare compared to a national average of 3.77.

- 29.9% of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) in Southend are classified as falling within the 30% most deprived areas in the country, using ONS population figures this equates to just over 56,000 residents. Southend also has 8.4% of LSOA's (just over 16,200 residents) that fall within the 10% most deprived in the country.⁵
- Westborough is the most densely populated ward in Southend with an estimated 119 people per hectare. This compares to an estimated 42 people per hectare for Southend as a whole.⁶
- The top five non-English languages spoken in Southend are: Polish, Chinese, Bengali, Shona and Czech.⁷
- According to the 2011 Census 87% of residents in Southend classify themselves as white-British. This compares to 79.8% for the whole of England.⁸

Victoria and Milton wards have the highest percentage of ethnic minority population. Southend has the highest percentage of residents receiving housing benefit (19%) and the third highest percentage of residents receiving council tax benefit in Essex.

⁵ Communities and Local Government - 2010 Indices Multiple Deprivation

⁶ Office of National Statistics - 2013 Mid-Year Estimates

⁷ Office of National Statistics - 2011 Census

⁸ Office of National Statistics - 2011 Census



Above Southend High Street, below Westcliff area

National Context

The last decade has seen a time when numerous conflicts were taking place around the world leading to a significant expansion in the numbers of people seeking asylum (Vertovec, 2006).⁹

Key Facts

There were 24,257 asylum applications in the year ending September 2014, an increase of 2% compared with the previous 12 months (23,805). The number of applications remains low relative to the peak number of applications in 2002 (84,132).

Most applications for asylum are made by those already in the country (90% of applications in the year ending September 2014) rather than by people arriving at port. Applicants tend to be young and male. Of those who applied for asylum in 2013, over three-quarters (78%) were between the ages of 18 and 39, and 73% were male.

Nationalities applying for asylum

In the year ending from September 2014, the largest number of applications for asylum came from nationals of Eritrea (2,932), followed by Pakistan (2,891), Iran (1,999) and Syria (1,802). Grants rates for asylum, humanitarian protection, discretionary leave or other grants of stay vary between nationalities. For example, 83% of the total decisions made for nationals of Eritrea were grants, compared with 20% for Pakistani nationals, 54% for Iranian nationals and 84% for Syrian nationals.¹⁰

Demographic data, available through 2012, show that main applicants are predominantly male adults from conflict-ridden nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, although a large share came from Europe in the early 2000s, due to conflicts in areas such as Kosovo. In 2012, asylum applicants (excluding dependents) were 72% male and 28% female. 43.6% applicants aged 60 or older were female, but males comprised at least 58% of every other age range. Children and young adult main applicants were especially likely to be male.¹¹

⁹ http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Publications/working_papers/WP_2006/WP0625_Vertovec.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2014/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2014#asylum-1>

¹¹ <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migration-uk-asylum>

MYTHS & TRUTHS ABOUT ASYLUM SEEKERS

Myth – Asylum seekers come here and abuse the welfare system and increase the Council Tax

Truth – They are not allowed to claim mainstream benefits. Their benefits are paid by the National Asylum Support Service and not from local Council Taxes. Benefits amount to £5 per day. This is less than 70% of income support and is below the official poverty line.

Myth – Asylum seekers drain NHS resources

Truth – Refused asylum seekers are only allowed access to primary health care (A&E). Migrants actually make up a huge number of health professionals in this country –approximately 23% of doctors and 47% of nurses in the UK were born outside the UK.

Myth – Britain takes on the majority of the world's refugees.

Truth – The UK hosts only 1.5% of the world's refugees. In Jan 2011 the UK ranked 11th in the world in terms of the number of refugees it hosts. The majority of asylum seekers end up in their neighbouring countries (from UNCHR) statistics

Myth – Newspapers only print the truth about asylum seekers.

Truth – This is not true at all. Studies of press coverage have shown that newspapers have often made scapegoats of asylum seekers to further their political interests. Many refugees have been victimised in this way, from the Chinese in the 1900s, to the Jews in the 1920s and 1930s, to Roma people in the 1980s and people who are still fleeing persecution in for instance in Congo and Iran up to the present day. The negative image of asylum seekers is often based not on fact but on this longstanding practice of vilification by media sources.

Sources: IPPR Research paper 'Asylum in the UK', Refugee Council 'Press Myths', Independent 'Asylum – The Facts', Salford City Council website www.salford.gov.uk, UNHCR, ACPO, General Medical Council, Commission for Racial Equality, Mori.

Southend's History with Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Around the year 2000, SBC set up a temporary Asylum Seeker Team comprising Social work and administrative staff. The team, based within the Social Care Department, were complemented and supported by colleagues in Education, Health and the voluntary sector. At that time the team was funded by a home office grant, which was payable to local authorities who supported asylum seekers under the interim regulations of the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Act. However, a reduction in the monies received from the home office grant led to SBC taking up the cost of the shortfall.

Legal Obligations and Duties background

Traditionally, local authorities had the responsibility for assisting destitute asylum seekers. Prior to the introduction of the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Act, the 1948 National Assistance Act provided local authorities with the legislative powers with which to support asylum seekers who claimed destitution. The 1999 Act removed this responsibility from the local authorities by creating and legislating for the National Asylum Seeker Support (NASS), a home office agency charged with providing housing and subsistence to asylum seekers claiming to be unable to support themselves. NASS was responsible for the identification and establishment of dispersal and cluster areas, a policy aiming to reduce the number of asylum seekers in London and the South-East by providing said clients with accommodation in the north of England and Scotland. As Southend was never a dispersal area, it did not have any legal obligation to host asylum seekers new to the UK.

Despite not being a dispersal area, SBC kept responsibility for the asylum seekers supported prior to the establishment of NASS. Their clients were assisted under the interim regulations of the 1999 Act. The council also had a small number of clients who they supported on behalf of NASS, because such individuals would have been unsuitable for dispersal perhaps because of mental health problems or because children have become established in a local school.

Under Section 21 of the 1948 National Assistance Act, people who are destitute and debilitated in some way should be assisted by the local authority by the provision of basic food, shelter and warmth. Therefore, *displaced persons* who have no recourse to any other funding and who are destitute and debilitated by serious mental and/or physical illness can legally access support from the local authority for their basic living needs. SBC under the auspices of this legislation, supported those who were debilitated and those who cannot access public funds.

Hosting displaced persons

By 2003 Southend was hosting displaced persons of varying status. A number of these being asylum seekers awaiting decisions from the home office. Some were already given full refugee status, some being appeals right exhausted (ARE) - either awaiting deportation or trying to evade deportation.

Service Provision provided

To address the needs of the displaced persons, SBC together with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the voluntary sector established the provision of an asylum seeker Day Centre and the Globe Surgery, which included a nurse practitioner-led practice with GP support. The Day Centre operated twice-weekly from Clarence Road Baptist Church, based in central Southend. This was staffed by Social workers from the Asylum Seeker Team, a Counsellor and Specialist Health Visitor, including teaching staff from the Adult Education College and volunteers from Churches and Refugees Together (CART). Officers from the Community Liaison branch of Southend Police made weekly visits including an Education Welfare Officer.

The Day Centre comprised

- Social Work surgery – childcare, mental health needs, etc.
- Assessments for NASS support
- Assessments for S21 support
- Assessments for support under interim registration
- Advice obtaining funding/benefits
- Assistance with identification of housing in private sector/liaison with landlords on behalf of clients
- Counselling – both supportive and psycho-dynamic
- Health Visiting advice as necessary
- Information about and referral to the Globe Surgery
- Access to Community Liaison branch of Southend Police
- Access to Education Welfare Officer
- Advocacy work (by professional staff and volunteers) – helping clients to understand and work with utility companies, solicitors, the home office, immigration, housing departments etc.
- Workshops
- English classes (provided by Adult Education College)
- Second-hand clothing stall (run by volunteers)
- Befriending (by volunteers)
- Refreshments (provided by volunteers)

The aim of the multi-disciplinary Day Centre staff was to provide a warm and welcoming environment for this client group and offer a 'one-stop shop' service to persons who may otherwise not access appropriate advice and help. Southend also

recognised that the services was used by the 'hidden' population of displaced persons living in the town.

Churches and Refugees Together

Churches and Refugees Together (CART) known as the predecessor to CAST, comprised of a group of cross-denominational volunteers, including some asylum seekers and refugees. Three CART volunteers are currently members of CAST, and one CART volunteer is a CAST member of the management team. CART provided an invaluable support role for the Asylum Team at the Day Centre including being responsible for the fund-raising that paid the £50 daily rent for the Centre and the cost of refreshments, and other miscellanies throughout the year.

In addition to providing a warm and friendly reception, prior to a client seeing a member from the Asylum Team, CART volunteers would be asked on several occasions to accompany asylum seekers on visits to local MPs, where the Asylum Team would otherwise be unable to, being representatives from local authority.

Southend Town takes more asylum seekers

Southend has been forced to reopen its doors to new asylum seekers, it has been revealed. It was previously deemed "not conducive to the health of the Southend community" to place any more asylum seekers in the town.

Now the Government has done a U-turn after a new agency took over managing asylum seekers across the region.

Southend Echo, 2000

Southend Asylum seekers set for hotel crackdown

Asylum-seekers lodging in Southend now face even more uncertainty, after councillors voted to oust them from some of the town's hotels.

Southend Echo, 2001

The Current Landscape

Since the Asylum Seeker Team was merely temporary, the Day Centre including all of the supporting services around the centre disbanded between 2005-06.

The staff at SBC that were interviewed for this report say there are no official statistics to account for the borough's asylum seekers or refugees, but recognise that the borough will inevitably have those that have 'gone under the radar' or 'hidden' whose claim for asylum has been refused.

As mentioned previously Southend is not a dispersal town, so the assumption is that the asylum seeker population in Southend is decreasing. However, given the fact that SBC has a history of asylum seekers, the number of refugees and the number of people given leave to remain is more likely to be increasing. The majority of people that seek help from Southend Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) fall into this latter category. Furthermore, it is a well known fact that a person would 'rather remain destitute than apply for government support because of fear it will result in deportation'.¹²

Citizens Advice Bureau

When I came here, people told me not to go to Citizens Advice because they only give advice to British people.

Derek Edwards, Immigration Case Worker at Southend CAB explains that most clients that have used CAB in the last few years are appeal rights exhausted - that is to say they are not new cases. People whose cases have been with the home office for many years are known as Legacy cases. A huge amount of litigation and costs involving solicitors and barristers over many years has been expended. Derek believes most have failed as the home office have taken a harder stance recently on legacy cases.

Derek hears first-hand a wide range of issues relating to the needs of asylum seekers, refugees and refused refugees, which includes issues around their children being bullied in school accompanied with the added pressure and impact of being aware that they are children of asylum seekers. Other educational issues are around learning English, however what is now becoming a growing issue is when their children have to leave school and are unable to obtain student loans, grants and tuition fees for university courses because of the links to a parent or parents income with HMRC. For these young people, finding themselves mixed up in gang culture is becoming a norm.

¹² Coping with Destitution, Oxfam GB Research Report, February 2011

There are pressing health concerns around issues such as HIV and AIDS due to fear of seeking medical care and advise will link them back to the home office and result in them being deported. There are now growing mental issues due to the stress of excessively long waiting times for an asylum case to be heard by the home office. Other issues include relationship matters and rights to cash if one of the person has entered the UK on the back of a spouse. And a very big issue that Derek says comes up frequently at CAB, which is causing a great amount of stress is when the UK Border Agency enforcement officers frequently stop and search clients to check immigration status. Plain clothed officers will pay visits to local hotspots, or stand at bus stops. They are also known to carry out a numerous of raids on a cluster of roads on Westcliff that have high numbers of bedsits and temporary accommodation.

You see, you have about four or five roads near here going upwards where you have plenty of bedsits...these roads are always having raids from the UK Boarder Agency.

Reporting in at Southend Central Police Station

There are many asylum seekers, some of whom took part in the focus group discussion, that report in at Southend Central Station, this is also known as signing. Some asylum seekers are asked by the UK Boarder Agency to attend reporting meetings at a reporting centre or police station - sometimes daily, weekly, fortnightly or monthly whilst their case is being processed. During the research period attempts to obtain current statistics that would represent the number of asylum seekers reporting in at Southend Central Police station were made. Enquires were made through the Data Protection and Freedom of Information department at Essex Police Headquarters. After a long period of going back and forth, Essex Police final response was that they do not hold the information requested. They said that front office police are sent a weekly spreadsheet from the home office but the information is then submitted straight back to the home office and copies are not retained.

You see, Mariam has just texted me. After someone has signed in at the police station, we just text each other so we know they are fine and have not been taken.



Road in Westcliff housing many bedsits



Bedsit advertisements in shop window, Hamlet Court Road, Westcliff

The Role of the Church

And the LORD said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus, 3.7-8)

Traditionally the church plays an important role for asylum seekers and refugees, offering a safe place where community can be built with others. Churches can also engage in taking political action to try to support the plight of asylum seekers and refugees, especially those who are vulnerable.

Crowstone St. Georges Reformed Church, Westcliff-on-Sea

The Crowstone St. George Reformed Church has strong ties with CAST supporting many of their activities, projects and events. More recently the church was used as a cinema venue when CAST held their Film Festival during Black History Month, and it was also used as the venue to host the focus group discussion for this report. However due to their location - the church sits on the cusp of Milton ward and the more affluent Chalkwell ward, much further away from the heart of both Victoria and Milton wards where there are more temporary and short term accommodation, so the church finds it harder to engage directly with asylum seekers and refugees simply because they are not in their immediate locality.

Reverend Melanie Smiths interests and involvement with CAST are partly to help the church to think through issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees, which will in turn have a strong influence with the likelihood of providing more direct services and work in this area. In January 2014, the church opened up a food bank which offers more potential of asylum seekers coming through the doors.

Trinity Methodist Church, Westcliff-on-Sea

Trinity Church and family centre has continued to support CAST in their endeavours, as the space where CAST hold their monthly meetings. CAST have held drumming working and other friendship project there. Their Tuesday community lunch, offering a freshly cooked hot meal for £2.50 has sustained many asylum seekers and refugees, among other groups in the community. The church also run a Zimbabwean Fellowship service on a Sunday



Zimbabwean Fellowship Service held on Sundays at Trinity Methodist Church

Personal Stories

Two out of every three asylum seekers, who flee persecution in their home countries due to civil war or for political or ethnic reasons, are refused sanctuary in the UK by the Home Office. Many asylum seekers simply find it impossible to prove their stories. The Independent Asylum Commission found that there was a 'culture of disbelief' in the Home Office. Furthermore, cuts in legal aid have led to many solicitors giving up immigration work meaning that some asylum seekers are unrepresented at their hearings and many struggle to make appeals.¹³

The following stories highlight the plight of the men and women asylum seekers and refugees that took part in the focus group discussions. See Appendix A for the discussion framework guide.

How I came to live in Southend

I came to Southend because that's where my brother-in-law and my sister lived. I arrived and on Friday/Saturday with my ten year old daughter, and then, Monday morning, 4am I was at Croydon, at the Home office, queuing to claim asylum. I didn't claim asylum at the point of entry as I didn't want my child to experience anything to do with the police, or the authorities.

My wife came here first, and the reason she came is because she had a sister living here. So that made it a safe place to start from. So when she came she claimed asylum, but she was declined - refused refugee status. And then she appealed against that decision. Fortunately I got a visa through my work place, where I was teaching in Zimbabwe, through a programme called Connected Schools. I didn't want to remain in the country because the situation was horrendous. If you google 2008, 2007 the political situation in Zimbabwe was so volatile...there was so many kidnappings, people were being beaten, killed unlawfully, arrested, and I was a teacher - teachers were a target, the first target...assumed to be members of the opposition, so when I got this opportunity I said I'm not coming back. That's why I decided to come here. And of course it made it easier that my wife was here.

¹³ <http://www.cityofsanctuary.org/content/about-asylum-seekers>

Illegal work

Looking at my background, I'd been a school teacher in Zimbabwe...so, when I came here in Southend-on-Sea, I stayed with my sister not knowing that after three months, I would have overstayed, so I had no option but to look for some survival means. I was actually scared to tell them that I'm leaving the house... because you see the houses you have here in the United Kingdom, they are very small, and not very convenient for extended families. So I moved from where I was staying with my sister, I did not even tell anyone how I was going to get money for my accommodation and things of that sort, but eventually I got a cleaning job. And I worked as a...in Zimbabwe we call them a garden boy...I worked for a doctor in Benfleet, cleaning his cars, the swimming pool, the house...and I use to work on a Sunday. I would start 9 o'clock. Sometimes I would walk from Southend or get a bus which goes down London Road, I will drop off at the BP petrol station, then walk down to Benfleet. I would work from 9 up to 3, and then I would get cash, once I got the cash...one weekend it was for my rent, the next weekend I would send money back home to my wife, and then with a bit of money/change I would spilt between myself and where my sister and my daughter was living, I had to look after her as well, she still my obligation.

Eventually I got another job, another illegal job, as another cleaner... worst thing was that I worked in a car workshop where they use to repair police cars and ambulance cars. It was torture I think...I was run over by a car because every time I would get into the workplace, I would just freeze, I would loose concentration everything because of that fear of going into the workplace. And then I stayed in Basildon hospital for about two days to three days and then I was discharged. And the person who actually hit me with the car..it was not his fault, it was my fault. You see, this work place was in Laindon, if anyone knows where Toomey is? At the Toomey roundabout, there is a very big clock, so when you are far away can hear the clock ticking. So EVERY time when I got out at the bus stop and I tried to cross the road, the moment I look up at the clock and hear the clock ticking, it would effect me quiet a lot. And when I got into the workplace, because they fixed police cars everyone would enjoy hitting the siren, and I would be reminded that I am illegal, so to me it was not fun and I would think that the police have come for me! Eventually I left that job...

I am...

I was in the paper several times, and in one of the stories in the Echo papers...if you go into the Echo 2008/2009 you will see..I had my actual name in the paper, but where I was working at that time, I was using another name, so one of my bosses came and challenged me and said, why is it that in this paper you are Emmanuel, and here you are using a different name? But I was honest enough and I told him, this is it...I am an asylum seeker, it's been four years now and the home office have not responded...And so he said, ok my friend, pack your things and go. I left, I got myself another cleaning job...and that's how I would survive.

The Process

In 2008, it was during the European elections I was pushing hard for my immigration status. I had to go to surgeries, and every time I was getting brushed me off, but one day, I thought that I had no choice because I'm a family man...I locked him in his office, I told him I'm not going to leave this office until you call the Home Office and tell me where they are with my application. So he thought I was joking...I was angry and I was prepared to do anything...of course by that time now, I was like a walking ghost...the asylum process was too much for me. I could not even explain to my wife, that this is what I am going through, I could not even explain to my daughter, this is what I'm going through, and, I could not show anyone, that this is what I am going through. Because in my culture, a man never fails. Anyway eventually after he called the Home Office, and then the Home Office said we grant him permission to work. By now it was the 8th January, and the paperwork didn't arrive until June, after six months! The process.... its a cruel process.

My case was sewn up within six months...so it went by the book! No one can explain how that happened! Because my wife was here two years before me and her appeal was still with the home office . She had to use my case and put our documents together for her to refresh her case. And that's how she got her's as well. But she didn't get her letter until after four months later. So that's why I am saying I was so lucky. I can't explain how that happened, maybe the detention had something to do with it. To be honest if my case had taken as long as many other people, it would have been a nightmare, that's where you have to use other means of survival... like Emmanuel was mentioning. It's not legal and permissible to do that, but you have to eat. You have to have shelter. How do you survive? This is where with these [CART, CAST] organisations, when they were emerging, you quickly joined them because we knew that... I went through this process, I do not want any other person to go through the same process.

UK Visa and Immigration Office, Croydon

I remember the first day when I when for my screening, the way the security guards treated you in Croydon, it was as if I had murdered someone. They strip searched me, everything... it's so inhuman, it's so inhuman.

Torture back home

What they [the police] use to do, they would take the strap, put you underneath, and then sit on you, and then your leg would be there, then they would beat you there [pointing to under his feet]. If you see my brother, he can't walk. You know when you get beaten under your foot, it's murder...it's like you are being killed... slowly.

Support

Personally there was no help for me, we help each other here as individuals... extended family, or friends and other well wishers from the same country. There was no network apart from the MDC, which is the party that we belong to, because of our beliefs and political views. But that party had no financial resources to look after everyone here [in the UK]. The only thing that MDC did was to facilitate you to know each other, it was a meeting point, where we could see fellow Zimbabweans and talk about politics in Zimbabwe. We found out about others who had their cases dealt with and they were now working and contributing money towards the struggle back home. And also they would help us with...any form of help...say for example if someone has got a pair of shoes that he doesn't like anymore or a jacket to keep yourself warm...because you can't work. So the main predicament is there is no support for a person who is an asylum seeker in Southend.

Claiming asylum

I didn't know where I was suppose to claim, because I came though Manchester because that's where the Connected Schools programme was based. So I had to participate in that workshop, but I didn't want my colleagues to know what I was intending to do. I requested to the coordinator that I needed to come down to Southend and see a relative, but then in the end I told him the truth but asked him not to tell my colleagues. He understood what I told him and he facilitated me with the journey to come down to Southend. And then when I got here I went to the home office and claimed my asylum...they put me in some holding cells, and then they told me I was not going back to Southend. So I was to go to a detention centre, in Cambridge. It's called Ockenden Detention Centre. There was another guy from Sri Lanka, he had just arrived on the plane that morning. We were detained together, in the same holding cell. Just like a prison. We had a picture of us taken by a very ugly camera, it was frightening...I've never seen anything like it. It was not a normal camera. It was something that was so scary. So we were then put into a blacked-out van, and as we were driving, maybe somewhere through London by now from Croydon, the other guy became sick and he vomited in the van. After some distance they pulled over, and they just kept talking on their phones and on their radios, and they were just looking at us...I felt that it was not right. we were sitting there for almost an hour. They didn't clean the vomit. Eventually we were driven to Gatwick, that's where we were put in the cells...it was a proper prison cell. So, myself and my Sri Lankan colleague, we had communication problems because his English was not very good. We slept in the cell and then the following morning we were taken out in a different van and we went to Ockenden Detention Centre. It was there where people from the home office came, and they interviewed me. After we were both interviewed they ask if we knew where we wanted to go...I said yeah I've got relatives in Southend, my colleague in London. We were both given a letters to say that we were now asylum seekers. And we we given warrants, travel warrants, so that's how I came to Southend. After a week or two I got my ART card, it's just an identification to say your case is being considered. When you are asked who are you, you produce that. But it was stated that I was not allowed to work.

Networks

Through these [CAST] organisations they play the role of helping, sign posting... someone has got a problem and it is a legal requirement...you don't know where the lawyer is. All this time I could have gone to citizens advise bureau, but I didn't know about them, how would I know, I'm just coming from the back of beyond. You are coming from Africa, you don't know the set up, the system. If there was a system that my fellow Zimbabweans knew about, which could help me, help me to go through certain channels, so that I get the assistance, talk about my problems and my needs at that particular moment. There was no system in place that I could use. That's as far as the system [SBC] is concerned.

Fear

There are so many people out there who are afraid to come out in the open and say 'I am living like this' ...because there is fear, we were brought here because of 'fear'. Even here [in the UK] it's hard to acknowledge that a police man is a friendly person who is there for us, to protect me or save me when I'm in need of his help. Look, we are used to policemen back home, where the policeman is your enemy, especially when your views that are different to the government...and you see the brutality that the police in Zimbabwe carry out on people in the opposition party. So that fear, it doesn't just go away when you come here. Sometimes I would spend three days inside the house afraid to walk out of the door, I think they might snatch me... put me back on the aeroplane. You are always afraid. That's what Emmanuel was saying he got to the point where he was breaking down mentally, and he was afraid of cars, even a clock ticking...obviously he was now getting mental. So we have got these issues...it's happening as we speak, people are breaking down, because if you spend ten years, and the system does not recognise you to be existing, and every day of those ten years you have fear, you know the impact is massive.

Stigma

Because taking out that card, you are judged already, its says BORDER AGENCY. Once, a long time ago I wanted to do some voluntary work, in the community, it was a new youth programme, so they said to me you have to be CRB checked. And I was asked for my passport and of course I didn't have my passport, so they said we can't CRB you with this [the ID card]. This was something I was passionate about and I ended up not doing it because they saw the card and made assumptions.

Health

And also you need medical attention when you are not feeling well...you just keep it to yourself because you have 'no resource to public funds'. Because when you get to the hospital they start asking you your status. This is where the local authority can come in, I think as long as your case is pending, being processed, there should be a mechanism where people can access some of the basic facilities. Like you know a person who is young can go to school here whilst a case is being processed. You want to live a normal life until the home office decides otherwise. And because this can be sometimes ten years waiting, you have a wasted life of a human being. And the stress that you go through...you are likely to live a shorter life. Because there is no intervention during this period of suffering. So it is vital that the authorities can put in place the basic things like health and even shelter. If you have children 18 years of age, university aged, they are not allowed to go. Maybe the home office has got too much work to do and it takes long to make decisions, but at the same time you are human being, you are living, life is just wasted, you are just doing nothing not working and actually depending on others. Many fellow Zimbabweans have not been to see a doctor for ten/fifteen years, and then when they go now, it's too late. They have never in been inside of a GP.

For example if you have health issues, you need to get directed to a doctor in time. Because most of the people, when they go to seek medical help eventually, it becomes like a suicide thing. It's not unusual to hear people are dying in their houses, because they were afraid to go and seek medical help. So like I said because of the stress that is related to the asylum seeking process, people have developed several health issues like, high blood pressure, sugar [diabetes], and cancers as well, because you eat, not because you enjoy eating... you just eat what is there, because you are stressed. The digestive system does not work properly because you are just putting things in there and your system is upset. So if there was a team like there was before, that will be a step forward towards helping some of these pressures.

Holding British values

My situation is different, I was brought here by my parents. I was born in Uganda, at that time it was a British colony so I had a British birth certificate, so I came here for my own rights. I came to Southend because there was some Indian family living here so they just gave us a room/accommodation for a year. I was very small, I was only seven years old when Idi Amin was throwing Indian people out. So my father took me back to India first, I stayed there for ten or twelve years. Then my father came here. That Indian family in Southend sponsored us. It was me my mum and my two sisters. And also all his friends from Uganda came here [UK] because we all had British passports. 95% of us came here from Uganda.

The first time when I came from home, because things were very tough with my husband, he was a politician with Mr Mugabe, and when we had the divorce he started embarrassing me at my place of work, I was working at Harare hospital and so I quit my job through that. Then I said where can I go now. I looked at many places that I can go but decided its better to come to England because my father when he was a teenager, he was a soldier in the UK. Then I thought back to what my father said about Britain and said its better to come there. I needed to leave because I thought that my husband was going to harm me and I was very scared. My husband said to leave my children. My friends at my church brought a ticket for me. My first place to stay when I got here was in Grays, and I was always running, like they said when you see police, you think maybe they are coming for you. You walk on another street when you see them. This was 2004 up to 2012. Then from Grays I came here to Southend. Then it was after that I decided to go to the immigration, because the way I was living was too much. You know when you are becoming old, you have more sickness. Here I met other fellow Zimbabweans who advised me to go to immigration as well because you can't get help if you are not in the system.

Questions

I got a date to go to Croydon, and they started asking me so many questions, and it's difficult, you don't even know where to start, what to say. And you are just scared they are going to say just go back. And when I go back...what is going to happen? It's just to die. So its better if I die here, than to give myself. Then, they said they will call me, when they called me, they said I need to go to Birmingham. Then eventually I got a card, like the one he was showing you. Then after that, the immigration wanted more ID because I didn't have a birth certificate. Then after that, they called me to the immigration and this time they were saying no you are not a Zimbabwean, maybe you bribed the ID. They kept asking me all the same questions. Then after that they said they called me and said I need to get a lawyer. So now it was 2013, in February and eventually I got the correct papers. So now I could work, go to the job centre, but you have to tell them every thing... it's very hard.

What I find most difficult is that all this is very mentally stressful. When I'm reading here what local services would benefit you in Southend, it's not as easy as it looks. Because people are scared to even use services because they are not readily accepted. Always asked so many questions. So its very very mentally stressful ...you are not free.

Language

For most Congolese people the biggest barrier was the language. So when you come from a country and you do not speak English, and you are new, the language is a barrier. It's hard to communicate, it's frustrating and it's very very difficult. And when you go to the home office, for the first big interview, you say something and it is being translated, you find that most of the cases are refused because of that. They [UKBA case owner] will tell you, you know, what you have said the first time and what you said on the second time is different. But it's not your fault because the person who interprets, is someone who has just leant French in school and doesn't know it very well, and the way they translate is not always correct. That is very very painful. You can't choose someone yourself, they provide the interpreter. And when you see them writing, you don't know what they are writing. UKBA should have the best translators!

Confusion

That's another thing, because of the complexities involved in immigration matters now, where there are the EU people, who are coming and looting benefits and so on and asylum seekers has literally no access to anything, The only thing that is free for an asylum seeker is oxygen. Even water to drink, you don't have public

And some people don't understand why you left your country when you explain to them, maybe because of the media or by ignorance. So when you show them where you come from and you say I was living in a mansion, I had swimming pool, I'm educated but I had to leave it all behind because of fear. And the way I live here in a room...its not the way I want to live, but I have to.

Moving forward...what is missing?

Knowing that Southend had an Asylum Team before, and that that team got disbanded, it has actually made life extremely difficult. It wasn't that smooth when they were there, but at least it elevates some of the basic problems. You know that you have somewhere to go and to get assistance. Whether it's limited, but at least you have expressed your problems to some body.

If there is no provision put in place, it will be by chance that people will be sign posted in the right direction and receive valuable advice. That person will have to trust in me first, because people are scared. People just don't talk. With the nature of the job I do, some people they come and talk to me, and you can tell that this is a Zimbabwean, but there is no way you can ask him, because he will deny it, and say I'm South African! I use to do the same, I didn't want to disclose my identity for fear and yet there is nothing to fear...it's a right I had under the United Nations... if you claim asylum, you have got a right to live there until things get better in your country and you go back. But many people came to this country thinking that maybe in two years it will be over, and then four years went by, five years, ten years, and some people are now almost 20 years here now.

Organisations like CAST, if they can get support from the authorities, then they can also go a long way towards alleviating some of these problems. To deal with some of the issues like language barriers...in CAST we have people who speak French, and if a person speaking French has got problems, we can direct her or him to Matilda. And Matilda will appreciate their plight, much more effectively and in an efficient way. If I were to be given someone who spoke French, I wouldn't know what to say apart from 'je t'aime' [laughter].

There is a lot of asylum seekers in this area, and many of them are they are 'underground'

Yes, even in the schools, the children are being bullied. If there could be somewhere, somewhere where they can go...talk about their problems, what they go through...

If we had a set up with at maybe two people or even just one person, maybe twice a week for some specific time...you know where there is an office, where you can go as an asylum seeker and ask for help... it will take so much stress off. It will also help prevent some people living illegally and doing all illegal things because there is no one to listen to you, there is no just help.

Yes, some guidance, because even in our own networks/our community, we do not know the correct information, so we then pass on the wrong information. When new people arrive they can seek help from out that citizens advice bureau is confidential. Instead people have said don't go there, they will give your address to home office.

Yes, you know when information is informal, it is adulterated so many times, to the point that, something which is not real becomes a fact. And then it is taken as a fact by people, and of course that doesn't help because it's not a fact. So with the right information, the dos and the don'ts given to you by someone that can be entrusted with you information. And what this will do is provide a space where you will have 'emptied' the pressures in you.

Conclusion

The men and women that participated in the focus group discussions and informal conversations anticipate the stories shared living as asylum seekers, and refugees in Southend will be heard by many more. They have lived in total isolation, engulfed by a sheer sense of invisibility among members of the local community for years.

Clearly, the services provided by the Day Centre and the Globe surgery were of immense benefit at the time, and served the borough populace as a whole by ensuring valuable time of other local services was not wasted. And surely having the provision and facility to provide asylum seekers with a service at the beginning of their needs saves time and money in the long-term.

It is clear that Southend's asylums seekers, failed asylum seekers and refugees need a safe environment that they can claim - where they can share their problems and issues, and receive the right legal and medical advice.

Failure to serve the needs of one of our most vulnerable groups living in our community, will result in further distress and the suffering of chronic problems, which would have a serious impact upon Southend.

Appendix A

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

13 February 2015

Information

WELCOME - Thank you for agreeing to be part of this focus group discussion.

You have been invited to take part in this focus discussion to explore the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum that live in Southend and the surrounding area. The results of the discussions will be used in a report to enable CAST members and management to better understand and support the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. The results will also be used to recommend strategies for sustainability, ensuring the local authorities address asylum seekers' and refugees' needs and concerns.

During the discussion I will take notes and record the conversations. This is simply to make sure that I record the information you give accurately. The discussion will be strictly confidential and the information you provide will be anonymised so that it will not be possible for anyone reading the report to know that you have taken part in the discussions.

Before the discussion begins, please take 2 - 3minutes to fill out the participant demographics information sheet attached.

Topic guide questions

- How did you come to live in Southend?
- What did you know about Southend before you came here?
- Did you plan to come here or elsewhere in the UK?
- What was your plan to survive?
- What were the circumstances under which you decided to leave your country of origin?
- Did you use the services of an agent?
- Describe your initial experience of life in Southend?
- Which local services have you used? And how have they helped you?
- What service or facility would be beneficial to you in Southend?

Focus Group Participant Demographic

1. Your age:
 - 20 – 30 years
 - 31 – 40 years
 - 41 – 50 years
 - 51 – 60 years
 - Over 60 years

2. Are you:
 - Male
 - Female

3. Do you have dependants with you in the UK?
 - Yes
 - No (please go to question 5)

4. Who are your dependants (please select all that applies)?
 - Children
 - Spouse/partner
 - other relative
 - other, please state.....

5. Do you have other family members in the UK?
 - Yes
 - No (please go to question 5)

6. How long have you been in the UK?

7. How long have you lived in Southend?
.....

8. What is your immigration status
 - Asylum seeker
 - Refused asylum seeker
 - Refugee
 - other, please state
.....

9. County of origin

