



Welcome to the July edition of the WERS newsletter!

In the last newsletter I wrote about the plight of the growing number of destitute asylum seekers in Newcastle whose applications for asylum had been refused. This edition looks in more detail at two aspects of the inadequate and inappropriate government provision of so-called support for those who are unable to return to their home countries.

Destitution: the fight for survival Healthcare

Since the last newsletter, two important reports have been published: the Refugee Council's 'First do no harm: denying healthcare to people whose asylum claims have failed'; the second, 'Shaming Destitution' produced by the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB), which focusses on the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) section 4 support for asylum seekers whose applications have been turned down but who are temporarily unable to leave the UK. I would urge you to read both of these publications which can be found on the organisations' websites:

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk and
www.citizensadvice.org.uk

In 2004 the Government introduced the NHS (Charges to Overseas Visitors) (Amendment) Regulation which extended the existing legislation to include asylum seekers whose cases had failed. The inclusion of failed asylum seekers in the so-called 'health tourist' bracket is despicable. This week a client brought to WERS an invoice for £1,700 for ante-natal treatment that she had received from Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Trust. Another client had received a second letter from the Trust saying that if her account of £1,488 was not settled within seven days, the case would be handed to the debt collection agency.

The letters are causing distress and anxiety as the women have no means of paying and do not know what action the Trust will take. Realistically one would like to think that there is little that the Trust can do, but there is a growing fear amongst refugee agencies that clients may not seek medical treatment because of their inability to pay, choosing instead to risk the potentially dangerous consequences.

The Refugee Council also cites evidence that the regulations are having an unintended impact on access to primary care services, making it even harder for failed asylum seekers to get even basic care. To date WERS has not encountered that problem in Newcastle, but we recognise that confusion within the health service regarding regulations and guidelines could well result in problems in primary care. WERS wholeheartedly endorses the Refugee Council's recommendation that the Regulation is amended specifically to exclude asylum seekers whose claims have been refused from liability to pay for treatment.

Section 4

Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (previously known as hard-case support), amended by both the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 and the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Act 2004 was a recognition by Government that, for a number of reasons, some failed asylum seekers were temporarily unable to leave the UK. This could be due to ill-health or late pregnancy, or the lack of a viable route of return to the home country. In any event the support was designed to be a short-term measure for a small number of asylum seekers, providing hostel accommodation with no cash support.

Since 2003 there has been a huge increase in the number of asylum seekers in receipt of section 4, many of whom have been on section 4 support for many months. According to the Refugee Council as from June 2006 there are some 5,000 people from more than 70 different countries in receipt of section 4 support. A large percentage of those who apply for support are turned down, however, and many more are too frightened to apply because of, with very few exceptions, the requirement to agree to voluntary return to the home country. Applicants must now meet one or more of the five criteria for eligibility for section 4 (these can be found on page 4 of the CAB report) and if granted the support will be given accommodation and vouchers to the value of £35.

The return to vouchers has caused widespread misery. I believe that it is impossible to live without cash. Clients have regularly to report to Immigration at North Shields - for most living in Newcastle an 18 mile round trip. They are unable to make phone calls or buy clothing and shoes. Many clients are given luncheon vouchers which cannot be spent on toiletries, nappies or baby milk. In Newcastle some accommodation providers regularly give out nappies and baby milk but in many areas that is not the case. In their desperation to get money, clients are exploited by people who exchange their vouchers for cash, sometimes giving as little as 50% of their value. All the arguments put forward when asylum seekers were given vouchers in the past remain valid: the stigma, the restricted choice of shops and goods that can be purchased, the long distances some clients must travel to reach the shops where the vouchers can be used the list goes on.

WERS supports the Citizens Advice Bureau recommendations which include bringing the level of section 4 support in line with ordinary NASS support (section 95) and providing section 4 support in cash instead of vouchers.

Hardship Fund

The hardship fund was within a week of running out when the Gift Aid from the last financial year (some £4,000) arrived in the nick of time! This hand to mouth existence is somewhat nerve-racking however! I had confidently assured the Executive Committee that the fund would not run out but was becoming increasingly edgy. Once again we have received the most wonderful support from far and wide, including a sponsored cycle ride, special collections and new standing orders. We therefore live to fight another day! Thank you!

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – CHANGE OF DATE

The WERS Annual General Meeting is now set for **15 November at 6.30pm**. I had previously written to WERS members giving a date in the previous week but our venue, Westgate Baptist Church was not available. I promise I will not change it again and offer my apologies for any inconvenience caused by this change!

WERS Counselling Service

We are delighted to welcome Val Adlparvar to the Counselling team. Val has extensive counselling experience which includes work with asylum seekers and refugees within Newcastle Primary Care Trust and WERS is most fortunate to have 3 counsellors of such high calibre. WERS is grateful to Awards for All for funding this expansion of the service.

Money advice

We also welcome Paul Bradley from a4e who is providing a new weekly service at WERS which offers financial advice to clients, particularly those who have got into debt or those with refugee status who are struggling to pay their utility bills or manage their money. Paul is in the office from 9.30am to 11.30 am on a Friday morning. No appointment is necessary.

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Office & Clothing Store Opening times:

Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri: 9.30am – 1pm

Wednesday: 11am – 1pm