Audit Commission report critical of Britain's compulsory dispersal of refugees

Richard Tyler
6 June 2000

An official report issued last week warned that the government's compulsory dispersal policy for refugees and asylum-seekers faced "severe problems". The report by the Audit Commission was based on detailed fieldwork carried out in 10 councils and 5 health authorities. It found that many refugees were placed in substandard housing.

The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act established a National Asylum Support Service (NASS), which allocates accommodation outside London and the southeast, where most asylum-seekers arrive. The report notes that dispersal was ostensibly aimed at creating language-based "clusters" across the UK, but "in practice, the availability of accommodation is likely to be the determining factor in the final placement".

Some 4,000 asylum-seekers and their families have been sent to live outside London. About half were dispersed under the compulsory scheme, which came into effect on April 3. Most have been sent to Yorkshire, Humberside and the northwest, although some went to Scotland. Just over 30 percent of those asked to move while the scheme was still voluntary refused to leave London. There are 94,000 asylum seekers currently awaiting a decision regarding their case. Most presently live in London and the southeast, where the major ports of entry are located.

Under the new legislation all refugees are forced to exist on a level of income well below the poverty line while they await a decision on their claim to asylum. Those with no other means of support receive only the equivalent of 70 percent of welfare benefit rates paid to UK citizens, the official "poverty line". Single adults over 25 can expect about £36 a week, and couples with one child £84. Of these sums, only £10 is paid in cash, the rest being given in vouchers that can only be redeemed at a limited number of outlets. The vouchers, unlike welfare benefits, are not an "automatic passport" to other local services such as free or reduced admission to sports and recreation facilities.

The Audit Commission report writes that "The Government justifies providing financial support below income support rates on the grounds that the property will be furnished and utilities will be included as part of the accommodation." However, the real reason is to make the UK as unattractive as possible to those seeking refuge. This is tacitly admitted in the report, which states: "New national support arrangements for asylum seekers aim to fulfil the UK's international commitments while discouraging economic migration ... by minimising cash payments to asylum seekers and providing only a basic level support."

Refugees with children may find they cannot obtain a school place, which is a legal obligation. The report noted that although "few authorities visited by the Commission collected information about the number of asylum-seeking or refugee pupils in their schools," there is "some evidence that asylum-seeking children find it difficult to obtain a school place." Research by the Refugee Council suggests that in 1999 there were 2,000 children of refugees and asylum-seekers without a school place.

"Some schools are resistant because they cannot offer the language and other support that the child requires, and/or are concerned the new arrivals will adversely affect GSCE and key stage test results."

Unaccompanied children who arrive in Britain and claim asylum face a precarious future: "many authorities do not offer 16 and 17 year-old unaccompanied children a full needs assessment ... evidence suggests that over one half of children over 16, and 12 percent of those under 16 were in bed and breakfast, hostels or hotel annexes in October 1999." Lacking parents or adequate adult supervision, such children can easily become the victims of abuse.

The Audit Commission was scathing in regard to the lack of training and basic information in areas now being forced to re-house thousands under the dispersal policy: "Few councils visited during the Commission's fieldwork had trained staff to raise their awareness of the needs of asylum seekers and refugees, or their rights and entitlements to services ... 37 percent of councils do not have translation and interpreting services and 55 percent do not produce written material in languages other than English." Moreover, the Commission found that only 12 percent of social services departments have a refugee strategy in place to cope with the potential influx into their area.

Those who are dispersed outside London will find their access to vital legal services severely restricted. Less than half the 423 contracted immigration law firms are based outside London. "In the short term, this could well undermine the new dispersal policy as, without adequate legal support locally, many asylum seekers may be unwilling to live outside London or other major cities." The report observes that even a major urban centre like Liverpool only has two immigration law firms.

Although enjoying the same eligibility for National Health Service (NHS) treatment and care as any UK resident, the report notes, "many experience difficulty in getting access to health services.... Barriers to accessing services include the low priority of this group within health authority plans, asylum seekers' lack of

© World Socialist Web Site

knowledge about the UK health system, language difficulties, low awareness among NHS practitioners and NHS bureaucracy."

The above average need for health services by refugees, many of whom arrive in poor condition, places greater burdens on local doctors' budgets and engenders more administrative work. Language difficulties make consultations up to three to four times longer: "As a result of these issues, some practices have closed their lists to asylum seekers, limiting access to healthcare to a small number of practices that then bear an unfair share of the work."

The report cites one case of a Latin American woman "who visited her GP to find out about pre-natal care when she was three months pregnant. No interpreter had been arranged and she spoke very little English. Because of communication difficulties, the doctor thought that she did not want her baby and arranged a termination: the mistake was discovered only when she went into hospital. In another similar case, the mistake was not discovered and the termination went ahead."

The report continues: "The pressures on housing stock in London have forced councils to house many asylum seekers in what they know is unsuitable accommodation. For example, the Commission's survey found that over one-third of family households were in bed and breakfast accommodation, hostels or hotel annexes."

The shortage of accommodation in which to house asylum-seekers has created conditions for a particularly odious social type to prosper: the "asylum millionaire".

The *Observer* newspaper recently exposed how unscrupulous landlords are cashing in on the government's new dispersal policy. Its article highlighted businessman Graham King, whose family has interests in two caravan parks, gaming machines and numerous bars and clubs in the southeast, and "often does business from his mobile phone in the back of a black stretch limo". According to one Whitehall source, King's firm could make a profit running into millions housing asylum-seekers. King, the son of a Conservative councillor, is presently negotiating a contract for 7,500 places worth up to £150 a head a week.

In Liverpool, the *Observer* found asylum-seekers and refugees living in a crumbling 15-storey "Landmark" apartment block, which the local council had condemned as unfit for its own tenants. The "Landmark" and its nearby twin, "The Inn on the Park," are in Liverpool's Everton Park district, one of the poorest inner-city areas in Western Europe. The tower blocks are owned by Farial Sabbagh, described by the *Observer* as "one of a band of asylum entrepreneurs making fortunes from the Government's dispersal of tens of thousands of refugees". Only last month, the Home Office signed a new contract with Sabbagh to house 600 asylum-seekers.

Residents complain of a lack of privacy; Landmark staff have access to all apartments. They are also made to sign contracts saying they are not allowed visitors without the prior permission of the owner. Conditions in the block are atrocious, with apartments lacking adequate ventilation and heating. Many residents lack basic items such as cups and cooking utensils, legally required under the Home Office contracts signed with Sabbagh.

In Newcastle, seven asylum-seekers were jailed May 10 after protesting against the atrocious conditions in the Angel Heights Hostel. Denied visitors, the refugees are forced to live under curfew conditions. The residents have made repeated complaints about their conditions after being dispersed to Newcastle from Kent, and in March they staged a hunger strike. Following a first complaint, their weekly allowance was cut from £7 to £5. The seven were released on conditional bail on June 2, but will have to attend court to face criminal charges.

In perhaps one of the most damning parts of the report, the Audit Commission noted, "Negative press coverage can inflame local public opinion and create a climate in which fair treatment is hard to achieve. At present, press coverage of asylum seekers is overwhelming negative. The Commission analysed 161 local press articles collated by the Refugee Council in October/November 1999: only 6 percent cited the positive contribution made by asylum seekers and refugees." The Commission also found evidence of the consistent under-reporting of racist attacks on asylum-seekers.

The Audit Commission limited its research and comments to the local press. If they had included pro-Labour national dailies such as Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper, then the negative coverage would have been closer to 100 percent. The media witch-hunt of defenceless refugees has reached a fever pitch with Conservative and Labour front bench politicians competing for column inches, claiming their party would be tougher on "bogus asylum-seekers". Conservative Shadow Home Secretary Anne Widecombe recently proposed that all those entering Britain and making a claim for asylum should be "detained" until their application is assessed.

New Labour points to its record to show they are not an "easy touch" for asylum-seekers. Home Secretary Jack Straw's immigration service has deported over 105,573 people since Labour came to office in 1997. Many of those who have arrived in the recent past come from countries such as Yugoslavia and Iraq. After British bombs have destroyed their homes and livelihoods, New Labour does not want them when they arrive in the UK and claim asylum.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site