

Wolverhampton Over 50's Forum Housing Sub Committee Report

Meeting with Wolverhampton City Council Asylum Seeker Co-ordinator Mike Finnegan on 30 January 2003

The Housing Sub Committee arranged to meet the Asylum Seekers Co-ordinator, Mike Finnegan for him to explain to the Forum what service is provided for them. The meeting was held at Brockfield House in Heath Town, one of the asylum seekers projects.

Mike commenced by asking if the group had a formal agenda but was presented with a list of questions which he would do his best to answer plus any others that arose.

He explained to us the difference between asylum seekers and refugees using a 'set of traffic lights' as an analogy.

- Mike said we should think of illegal immigrants as being the **RED** on the traffic lights i.e. without permission to be here.
- They are followed by asylum seekers being the **AMBER** on the traffic lights - they are waiting for their application be heard for asylum.
- Finally, Refugees are the **GREEN** on the lights as they have been granted asylum and can remain here in this country. They will be treated as other UK citizens.

He outlined the work of NASS (National Asylum Support Service) a Home Office funded department. NASS pay for accommodation and place asylum seekers who have no choice about where they are placed.

The IND (Immigration Nationality Directorate) have information about all the areas of the world that are experiencing problems. This information can be used to check out an asylum seekers story. It is 100% accurate with no margin for error.

Mike outlined the financial help an asylum seeker gets in addition to their NASS funded accommodation and used the scenario of a 25 year old unemployed single man born here in the U.K. He will receive Housing Benefit, Council Tax plus £57.00 Income Support Benefit. He would have to pay for his own water food and fuel bills.

He further explained that a 25 year old asylum seeker would get 70% of the Income Support Benefit of £37.77 per week to cover clothes, food and travel expenses. All other expenses including accommodation which is furnished to a basic standard, water and heating are paid for.

There are approximately three and a half thousand asylum seekers in Wolverhampton. NASS block purchase accommodation and services from the Voluntary Sector as well as the City Council and they are not included in the figures.

The figures do not include Refugees of which there are 500 plus in Wolverhampton. It is difficult to be precise because Refugees are free to move around the country.

Mike explained the West Midlands has the fastest growing number of asylum seekers outside London. He also advised that 95/100 asylum seekers who are granted Refugee status in the West Midlands will opt to stay in the Midlands as opposed to 50/100 in Manchester who will opt to leave.

He stated the numbers of asylum seekers have grown in recent years. Three and a half years ago there were 2 dozen asylum seekers in Wolverhampton, this figure has now grown to 3½ thousand.

The numbers in the West Midlands are high because NASS contracts with both Local Authorities and the Voluntary Sector to provide accommodation in multi-ethnic communities. This can be achieved cheaper in the West Midlands than other areas.

Mike was asked why some areas in Wolverhampton i.e. Heath Town have a higher population of asylum seekers than others. Mike explained this was because of the availability of accommodation often in areas where others do not want to live.

Mike was also asked how many more will come here to Wolverhampton. He stated that each time asylum seeker decisions are made and some are required to leave or become refugees, the figure of asylum seekers remains at three and a half thousand because more are brought via NASS to the accommodation in Wolverhampton so the number of asylum seekers remains static. The refugees, (who have refugee status and are treated like everyone else) are the group that rises in numbers.

Mike was asked why Wolverhampton City Council do not refuse to take any more asylum seekers but he was unable to answer this question. A member referred to a doctor based in Derby who refused to have any other than asylum seekers on his lists. Mike commented that in his experience doctors would refuse to take on asylum seekers, not specifically deal with them.

A question was raised as to who funds their education and college courses but the group were told it was free to anyone who needs it.

Mike was asked to explain the large cheques sent to asylum seekers from the DSS. He advised that when an asylum seeker was granted refugee status the 30% reduction in benefit that had been deducted whilst waiting to become

a refugee was given back to them. It was back dated to the date they sought asylum and paid to them in full. As it can take up to four years to sort out this can be a considerable amount of money.

Mike advised that the Government now had targets to get asylum seekers applications dealt with in 6 months.

Mike explained that asylum seekers used to be able to apply for Work Permits to enable them to work but they are no longer allowed to. They have usually held the low paid jobs no one else wants.

The group then raised a list of questions for Mike to answer and he agreed to give a written response. He then took members of the group to view one of the flats asylum seekers are allocated upon arrival.

The flat consisted of one bedroom, lounge and kitchen. All basic furniture and equipment was supplied inclusive of bed linen and curtains and the property was fully decorated.