

Refugees Still Welcome? Will things be better or worse in 2018?

By John Murphy, LCRF Trustee

Writing this in the last 24 hours of January, and taking advantage still of its mythical double-face to look back to last year and forward to this, what indications are there that life will be better or worse for asylum seekers and refugees by the end of 2018?

Here are 3 issues which were regular concerns last year and where we look for progress over the coming months:

1. The Move-on Period

Let's begin with something positive.

2017: The problem of people being granted refugee status, but having to wait several weeks or longer for their National Insurance Number (NiNo), has frequently resulted in new refugees becoming destitute.

2018: The good news is that, from 8th January 2018, a NiNo will be printed in the Biometric Permanent Resident card; ie new refugees will receive status *and* their NiNo together. This will avoid the terrible experience of becoming a refugee but then being made homeless at the end of a 28-day period from the date of decision.

Less clear is how the provision for destitute asylum seekers in Temporary Accommodation will be affected by changes being introduced following the Immigration Act 2016. TA is being replaced by immigration bail.

Keep up to date: look out for and come to the London Churches Refugee Network meeting on Wednesday 21 February, when Marie-Anne Fishwick from the Asylum Support Appeals Project will update on this and related items. Sue Lukes, Director of Migrant Works, is also speaking that evening.

(LCRN: 21 02 2018, 18.00 – 20.00 hrs, refreshments at 17.30. Trinity House, Chapel Court off Borough High Street, SE1 1HW)

2. Unaccompanied children refugees in Europe

2017: the Government's resistance to attempts by Safe Passage and other groups to ensure that child refugees in Europe could gain access to the UK seemed part scandalous, part mealy-mouthed. The numbers were capped well short of what had been asked for by the Dubs Amendment.

Related to this is the systemic issue of the legal barrier obstructing child refugees already in the UK being from having their parents reunited with them here; also, that parents granted

refugee status here are prevented from bringing their adult (ie over-18 year old) dependents here as of right on the basis of family reunion.

2018: The recent meeting between Theresa May and Emmanuel Macron at Sandhurst gives some hope for children stuck around Calais. According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), the Sandhurst Treaty, while renewing the existing agreement by which UK Border staff work at the French port and elsewhere, states that the UK has agreed, in ECRE's words, *'to accelerate the examination and transfer of unaccompanied minors from France to the UK'*. This feels like taking a brick or two from the wall that has been built in the public's mind by some of the media.

Action point: Family Reunion Bill - 16 March. An opportunity for us all to remove another brick in that wall: the Private Member's Bill on Family Reunion is due to be read on 16 March, and the Refugee Council are leading a campaign to get us to write to our MPs to support it. Also, look at the initiative of the Refugee Council and its **Advocacy Network** – <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/advocacynetwork> . Sign up for the Newsletter with its content of information and invitation for contributions.

3. Accommodation conditions for asylum seekers

2017: Much of the accommodation provided by companies commissioned by the Government has been roundly condemned as uninhabitable, due to its dreadful condition.

Just before the end of 2017, Yvette Cooper, Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, commented on the Government's response to the H.A.'s report of a year earlier. Referring to reports from charities of *'unclean, vermin infested damp conditions'* she asked: *'what exactly it will take before these shameful conditions are acknowledged and meaningful action taken?'*

2018: Refugee Action is launching a campaign this March to gain groundswell support for the Government to overhaul the asylum system. Accommodation is only a part of the system that fails so many people with a credible fear of persecution and claiming protection, but achieving 'dignity' in the system overall has to include decent accommodation.

Even in the context of press vilification of refugees and asylum seekers, we can surely hope that the public will support a campaign to ensure people are provided with habitable rooms that do not threaten health - so entailing NHS expense. Decent accommodation must be a minimum for those fleeing persecution, as for everyone.

LCRF will monitor progress on these main items as the year progresses.