



Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN

Britain's Hostile Environment: How successive British governments have hardened their hearts and closed doors to asylum seekers

'That which is morally wrong cannot be politically right.'
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In 2012, Home Secretary Theresa May gave a media interview in which she promised to create a '*really hostile environment*' for irregular migrants. She chose a phrase more often associated with war zones, organised crime and terrorism. By 2023, the hostile environment has spread, creating a relentless cruelty throughout and beyond the immigration system.

"The hostile environment destroys people's life; it destroys people's mental health. I have refugee status, but I'm still suffering from the trauma, which will take many years to heal. We claimed asylum upon our arrival at the airport, the immigration officer shouted at us while tossing our passport away... We faced destitution for years, not being able to work, and despite having higher education, my skills were wasted, alongside my confidence." Lena, member of Refugee and Asylum Seeker Voice

A key feature of the policy has been to make every aspect of life unbearably difficult for migrants who are denied access to acceptable documentation - with the idea that it will deter them from coming to the UK. The government adopted the policy despite clear evidence from Home Office research in 2002 that asylum seekers were not choosing where to go based on the public services they might get. The policy was developed through a 'Hostile Environment Working Group', including Ministers for Care Services, Employment, Housing, Schools, Health, and Transport and it was the beginning of an all-out onslaught on immigrants. The hostile environment has settled into our public life.

Since 2012, large numbers of migrants have been fleeing war and conflict, and thousands have been drowned in the Mediterranean, attempting to reach Europe. Instead of organising safe and regulated passage, and addressing the reasons why people have to flee their countries, governments waste millions in failed and dangerous efforts to turn back asylum seekers.

In the UK, immigration checks and border control have in essence been "outsourced" across society. Employers, landlords, colleges, banks, doctors, and local government all have to conduct immigration status checks, enforced by statutory duties, heavy fines and criminal offences. One result has been that migrants, including pregnant women and trafficked domestic workers, have been too frightened to access medical care. There have also been incidents where women have gone to the police to report being raped only to be arrested for immigration offences. So it is likely that serious crimes are going unreported.

Within the Home Office there is an Interventions and Sanctions Directorate whose purpose is to 'make conditions difficult' for migrants who entered the UK without authorisation. Among other activities, it has been responsible for mistakenly sending out immigration enforcement letters to people who are legally entitled to remain. Indefinite detention is another aspect of misguided enforcement; it costs huge sums and it seems completely ineffective in its stated objective.

Those who work with asylum seekers have noticed the official promotion of an increasingly open disparaging attitude. For example, in the past, asylum seekers were given 'temporary admission', but now they are classed as receiving 'immigration bail'. As Kareem, who now has refugee status describes "*I've never forgotten the reporting centres. The officers treated us like we were a bunch of criminals*".

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Money matters. Asylum seekers' below-poverty-level financial support has been cut to less than £7 per day. Asylum seekers have no right to work till they have waited 12 months – and then only if their skills match the shortage occupations list. Others are deprived of work till their asylum claim is granted. They are also barred from holding a driving licence or (in most cases) having a bank account. Asylum seekers are frequently unable to proceed with asylum appeals even in cases of Home Office errors because they are only able to receive a small amount of free legal aid at the start of an asylum claim. This desperate poverty runs alongside people's experience of waiting and waiting for crucial decisions.

If asylum seekers are granted Leave to Remain, there are exorbitant fees for its renewal at 30 months, 60 months and 90 months for people on a 10 year route to permanent residence. In 2023, these costs are approx. £2,600 per person, including the NHS surcharge, for each renewal. These charges leave people unable to afford food and pay bills, and force some into undocumented status. The Home Office charges migrants at least 7 times the actual administration costs. These payments are now being increased by 66%. Even when people have Leave to Remain, many are not allowed access to welfare benefits.



Rules can be changed without any public discussion. While she was Home Secretary, Theresa May made 45,000 changes to the immigration rules. Often, changes in regulations are only discovered by legal practitioners when they come up against them. This bewildering complexity is a key part of the hostile environment.

Illustration by George Sfougaras

The political climate for people seeking sanctuary has grown considerably chillier in recent years despite the UK being a signatory of the UN Convention on Refugees 1951. Prime Ministers have even suggested withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights and replacing it with a Bill of Rights, to allow a more severe crackdown on migration, removing the ECHR human rights protections. This remorseless assault on refugees and migrants goes against the UK public response, which has frequently been compassionate: In 2022, an Ipsos Mori poll of people in Britain found that 80% believed people should be able to take refuge in other countries including Britain to escape war and persecution.

Why are Quakers concerned?

'Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?' (Matthew 7, 9). We believe that public policies and attitudes should *'act justly and love mercy'* (Micah 6:8). But now politicians and media encourage us to do the opposite: to harden our hearts against all who come to our shores looking for help. But nothing is inevitable: as we are reminded by George Fox at a time of persecution in 1663, the Spirit is active in this *'thick night of Darkness'*, and we must *'be of good faith and valiant for the Truth'*.

What can we do?

- **Inform ourselves:** Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) website - qarn.org.uk - can signpost you to many organisations and reports. Our mailing list sends out regular updates. We hold meetings, organise conferences and support one another in our work. Sign up to join our email group by contacting info@qarn.org.uk
- **Ask your Meeting to become a Meeting of Sanctuary:** Meetings of Sanctuary act in solidarity with local refugees and migrants, as well as supporting better policies.
- **Engage with your MP:** Write to your MP. If your MP is a key player, arrange a meeting and invite an expert on detention to join you.
- **Share accurate information:** Write to newspapers. Use social media to challenge hostility and fear. Organise a public meeting. Attend events as a speaker.
- **Help refugees to speak out:** *Migrant Voice* is a migrant-led organisation supporting people to speak about the issues they have experienced. *Freed Voices* is a group of experts-by-experience committed to speaking out about the realities of immigration detention. You can contact them to invite members of the group to speak at an event.
- **Support refugees and asylum seekers:** Volunteer with an NGO working in your area. There are opportunities for volunteer "accompaniers", advocacy workers, and helpers of all kinds. Offer financial support, for example to a local NGO or to *Migrant Voice* or *Freed Voices*.