



Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN

Asylum seekers and refugees: What do Quakers hope for, after the 2024 General Election?

We are not for names, nor men, nor titles of Government, nor are we for this party nor against the other ... but we are for justice and mercy and truth and peace and true freedom, that these may be exalted in our nation, and that goodness, righteousness, meekness, temperance, peace and unity with God, and with one another, that these things may abound. Edward Burrough, 1659

We are committed to working for a world where dignity and rights are upheld regardless of migration status and not on the basis of citizenship or perceived deservedness. Quaker Statement on Migration, 2020
[https://guno.org/sites/default/files/timeline/files/2020/AQuakerStatementOnMigration.Final .pdf](https://guno.org/sites/default/files/timeline/files/2020/AQuakerStatementOnMigration.Final.pdf)

Why are Quakers concerned?

Quakers are calling for the UK to welcome refugees and uphold international law. We believe that the life of the Spirit is in everyone. Compassion and justice should be the central principles of immigration policy. Based on our experiences alongside refugees, we celebrate when people are given sanctuary and can rebuild their shattered lives. We see how refugees' skills can help communities to thrive.

Yet, in a society with huge concentrations of wealth, we are told that if we treat asylum seekers humanely, it must be at the expense of lower income UK citizens. This is not true. People and their human rights come first; there is plenty to go around if fairly shared.

The recent Illegal Migration Act is the culmination of punitive migration policies and puts the UK in a shameful "race to the bottom" internationally. As a result of these policies, 180,000 people are now in an asylum limbo that is deeply harmful to people who have already had to flee their homes. It is cruel and a waste of public money.

During this election, as Quakers, we ask MPs and voters to support fair and humane practical alternatives – policies that will allow the UK to have a credible role in international arrangements on migration and asylum. We have 6 policy recommendations, developed alongside other organisations with shared concerns, including those led by people with lived experience of the asylum system. Currently, the hostile treatment of asylum seekers is a costly failure – with these same resources we could invest in positive and proven approaches to welcoming and integrating refugees.

What needs to change?

1. A humane, coordinated international response: Currently, low and middle income countries around the world are hosting 83% of the world's refugees. In the UK in 2022, refugees made up just 0.54% of the population. Countries whose economies have only 1.3% of global GDP are hosting 40% of all refugees. The overwhelming majority of people worldwide who are fleeing war, disasters and persecution remain displaced in their own country or living

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in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Only a tiny proportion make their way to the UK, and they often do so because they have a link to our country.

Alongside 145 countries, the UK has signed several important international laws concerning refugees and should fully uphold them. These Conventions, including the European Convention on Human Rights set standards to protect refugees, including the duty of governments to properly consider claims for asylum. Now, with many more people suffering climate-related disasters and conflict, countries need to work together through the UN and EU to plan a humane and fair response – as well as addressing the reasons why people have to flee their countries.

We recommend working constructively with other countries, especially in Europe, to assist refugees. A coordinated response, with participation of refugees, would take into account each country's resources, our past colonial connections, as well as the disproportionate contribution of wealthier countries to causing the climate emergency. We recommend that the UK should seek to play a positive role in the EU's shared arrangements focused on assisting rather than excluding refugees, especially in times of crisis.



2. Faster, fairer decisions: Now, more than two-thirds of asylum seekers have to wait over six months for an initial decision - nearly a ten-fold increase since 2016 – with many people waiting much longer. This delay causes undue suffering and expense, and it prevents people starting to work, pay taxes and integrate in society.

“Salt” - Illustration by George Sfougaras

We recommend investing in provision of effective legal help so that people seeking asylum can properly present their case. This would remove the financial and emotional cost of appeals and delay. **We recommend** a well-resourced system of processing claims with justice, compassion and dignity as guiding principles.

We recommend ending the use of unsuitable and crowded hotels and barges. The current backlog is a legacy of the hostile environment that has been created by Government policy. By tackling this backlog, the use of 'contingency accommodation' can be solved. Dialogue with those who have personal experience should be central to finding ways forward.

3. Lift the ban on asylum seekers working: Currently asylum seekers may not work until their claim has waited for 12 months and then they can only work in jobs on the Shortage Occupation List. Nearly all asylum seekers are keen to work, and it causes huge harm to them to be kept in limbo, living on less than £7 per day. In March 2023, 128,812 people had been waiting for more than 6 months for a decision on their initial claim. Because these individuals are not allowed to work, the UK economy loses tax revenue, employers face labour shortages, and many asylum seekers are vulnerable to entering exploitative work – even slavery. A *yougov* poll in 2022 found that 81% of the UK public supported the right to work of people seeking asylum. **We recommend** lifting the ban on working, especially after 6 months.

4. Safe and regular routes: Currently, unless you are coming from Ukraine or Hong Kong, or you are among the handful selected through a UN resettlement scheme, there is almost no

way to get permission in advance to travel to the UK. Asylum seekers can only claim asylum once they arrive, and refugees who have a claim to asylum in the UK do not have access to safe, regular routes. For desperate asylum seekers, this multiplies the risk of dangerous journeys, exploitation and slavery. In 2022, 45,755 people arrived in the UK by small boats, mostly from Iran, Albania, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. Between 2018 – 2022, 61% of the people arriving on small boats were eventually granted refugee or humanitarian protection status or other leave to remain once they got their initial asylum decision – showing that most of them have a strong claim to asylum in the UK.

We recommend using a similar system of online, fee-free permission to travel to the UK as we used for Ukrainian and Hong Kong nationals. This would minimise the risks and enable people to travel safely. As a comparison with the numbers arriving on small boats and seeking asylum: By March 2023, 169,300 Ukrainians had come to the UK on the special visa scheme, and over 160,000 eligible people from Hong Kong applied under the visa scheme.

We recommend a radical amendment or repeal of the so-called Illegal Migration Act that, in the context of the lack of ways to apply to come to the UK, has effectively brought a ban on claiming asylum – violating our commitments under the Refugee Convention. This shameful Act may mean that people seeking sanctuary, including children, will be incarcerated on a massive scale, leaving thousands in limbo for long periods. The Act leaves victims of slavery unprotected and empowers the traffickers. The Act goes against people’s values in the UK: 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. People should not be punished for having to arrive through irregular routes: The right to a fair hearing of their asylum claim should be reinstated. When the UK flouts international conventions, it encourages other countries to do so.

5. Alternatives to immigration detention: There are circumstances where the individual’s claim to asylum is found ineligible and they are due to return to their home country, if it is safe. **We want to end immigration detention because it is unjust and inhumane.**

“Indefinite detention is a torture, it melts your brain. I’ve seen intelligent people forget how to write their names inside. Healthcare has everyone drugged up on sleeping pills. You forget court dates, you don’t trust anyone, even your solicitor or visiting groups. You confuse your story, you get in fights. Ultimately, your claim suffers. It is a vicious cycle.”
Gabriel, from Freed Voices – refugee who had been held in immigration detention

The UK regime has no time limit for such detention, despite continuing evidence of the extra mental damage this causes. The current removal and detention centres are widely seen as a disgrace to the UK. In March 2023, 1,591 people were being held in immigration detention. During the whole of 2022, a total of 20,446 people were held in detention and most were then released back into the community to continue their asylum claim. The new Illegal Migration Act is expected to massively increase the numbers in detention.

We recommend that people should not be locked up without judicial oversight.

We recommend that child asylum seekers should never be imprisoned.

Supportive alternatives to detention are better and cheaper. From 2019 – 2021, an ‘Alternatives to Detention’ pilot, supported 20 women asylum seekers in a community setting with one-to-one support, English classes and access to lawyers. This was much better for the

women's health and wellbeing and cost half as much as immigration detention. Successive cross-party parliamentary inquiries on immigration detention have also urged the use of alternatives whenever possible.

6. End exorbitant fees for migrants who have 'Leave to Remain': Currently, those who are given a "Discretionary Leave to Remain" are required to contribute to the wider costs of the UK immigration system. They are charged about £2,600 to update their visa every 2.5 years. The total cost is around £13,000 for each person. These charges leave people unable to afford food and pay bills, and force some people into undocumented status. Most of the estimated 170,000 people who are on this 10-year route are in low paid occupations, often care workers, cleaners and nursing assistants. The Home Office charges migrants at least 7 times what the actual administration costs. In 2023, these payments are being increased by 66% so that migrants bear the brunt of the costs of public sector pay increases.

We recommend reducing the number of years to 5, before applying for permanent residence, and reducing the visa renewal fees to cover only the cost of administration. Individuals, who are already paying UK taxes, should not also have to pay an NHS surcharge, which the government now plans to increase to £2,587 per renewal. We also recommend introducing a fee waiver for permanent residence applications.

What can we do?

The general election gives Friends opportunities to urge the restoration of protections for refugees and for Britain to uphold its obligations under international law:

- **Suggest alternatives:** This leaflet makes recommendations for workable, fair and cost-effective alternatives instead of an asylum system mired in its own cruelty. During election events, hustings, or other outreach, try to offer positive suggestions.
- **Share information with the candidates:** Visit local political party websites and find the candidates email IDs. Email them about the issues. QARN website will have a model email that can be adjusted, with suggested questions to ask at hustings.
- **Correct the lies:** During the election, some politicians will try to spread misinformation and misuse language about migrants. It's a narrative of fear of migration that prevents good policymaking. Protection of refugees should not be turned into a divisive issue. We can challenge this in our day-to-day conversations, local and national media and other platforms.



- **Help refugees be heard:** *Freed Voices* is a group of experts-by-experience committed to speaking out about immigration detention in the UK. *Migrant Voice* is a migrant-led organisation supporting people to speak about the issues they have experienced. You can contact these organisations to invite members to speak at an event.
- **Visit the QARN website:** qarn.org.uk - for more ideas, or sign up to join our email group by contacting info@qarn.org.uk

"Gedling" - Illustration by George Sfougaras