

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK

English for Life in the UK

Season 2 - Episode 24 - The Asylum Process and Experiences

May 2021

Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for those people who want to improve their English by listening to native speakers, talking about a range of subjects and in doing that, to learn more about life in this country.

Those of us who record this podcast either work or volunteer for an organisation called the St Augustine's Centre, which is an independent charity, supporting all those in need in our local area but, in particular, we specialise in support for asylum seekers, refugees and recent migrants.

The next two episodes of this podcast are linked and they are about our work. So in this first episode, we are going to look at the idea of asylum seeking and refugee status. What does it mean? What are the experiences of some of those people who have gone through this system, in the United Kingdom? So I have interviewed some of our staff and volunteers from the Centre, but I've also interviewed some of our Centre members - that's the people that we work with, who are themselves either asylum seekers or refugees.

We have not used their names because, in some cases, this could be sensitive. We hope this episode may be of interest to a wider audience and not just those learning English. In the second of these episodes we will go on to talk about the work of our charity in supporting asylum seekers, refugees and others.

(Music) (2 minutes 36 seconds)

Mark My name is Mark and I am one of the volunteers at the Centre. I started off by asking Nikki, one of our immigration advice workers, to tell me where the right to asylum comes from.

Nikki Yes - that right to claiming asylum is an important human right and it's backed by the Refugee Convention - the United Nations' Refugee Convention - and is recognised by many countries around the world, not just the UK. So, that right under the Refugee Convention: it basically states that individuals have a right to claim asylum if they have this well-founded fear of persecution and those reasons may be based on their religion, their race, their nationality, it could be because of their particular social group or it could be because of their political opinions. But anyone that can fit that definition has a right to claim asylum.

Mark And, of course, it is important to recognise that Britain has a long history of welcoming and providing sanctuary for people who have been persecuted. It goes back, for example, to the Huguenots: Protestants that were being persecuted under Catholic regimes, in Europe. Then the Jews in the - in various parts of the world, in the nineteenth century and, of course, fleeing INaziism in the twentieth century. In the 1950s, there were people fleeing Soviet Communism, and in the 1960s, the Ugandan Asians who were fleeing persecution.

Today, Britain welcomes refugees from all over the world. But we perhaps should say that the numbers are not that high - certainly, in comparison with some other countries. For example: in 2019, the UK had 5 asylum seekers per 10,000 in our population. The average across the European Union was 14. The UK is only the 17th highest country in the EU, for receiving asylum seekers. In 2020, there were 29,000 people seeking asylum in the UK - that compares with 120,000, in Germany.

And, in fact, the number has been reducing recently, not increasing. The countries with the highest number of asylum seekers, by population, are places like Turkey, Liberia, Jordan, and in Europe, it's Sweden. So, I then went on to ask Nikki about how the asylum process works - or is supposed to work - in this country.

(6:05)

Nikki When a person arrives in the country - so when they first arrive, at that entry, for example it might be the airport or more typically, it could be a boat or a lorry that they arrive on - they are supposed to claim asylum, at that point of entry. Now, obviously, that doesn't happen in every circumstance, and some people may have actually travelled to the UK for different reasons, to begin with - perhaps as a student, or to work, and then come on a different type of visa and then there's been a change in circumstances, back home, which has meant that they're in fear of persecution and so, then, they claim asylum, later on.

So - yes - those are the two main ways - but once somebody actually claims asylum, in theory, then, they have a short interview with the Home Office and then they're supposed to be given initial accommodation, if they're destitute that is, and then move to ... to be housed in Home Office asylum accommodation, which is usually when we will meet people, in Halifax. And that's then their more permanent asylum accommodation until a decision is made on their claim.

But it doesn't always happen in reality - and especially right now, given Covid and other circumstances. A lot of new arrivals are actually being placed in hotels and barracks, too.

Mark Yes - I'd seen some things on the news about some pretty¹ horrendous conditions that some of them have been in.

Nikki Exactly.

Mark So - let's take the case of people who have arrived in Halifax. They're in the accommodation that's been provided - it is actually under contract isn't it? So it's contracted out², but they're provided with some accommodation. So what's the process then and typically, how long does that last and - you know, what's involved for the individual who's claiming asylum?

Nikki So, the process then is really that the person and the family will remain in that accommodation, like I said, until a decision is made. Whilst they're in that accommodation, it's likely that they would be asked to go to a main interview with the Home Office, but before that happens they'll have to try and find a solicitor and that's often when - you know, the role of St Augustines, we'll come into it, because we have case workers that specifically help people try to find a solicitor, under legal aid, and so that's free and that's another thing asylum seekers are entitled to - in most circumstances, anyway - are entitled to legal aid.

So we help them find a solicitor. They'd have their main interview with the Home Office and, you know, already, we're talking 6 months, at least, could have passed, if not longer. After the interview, they're then waiting on a decision. And at St Augustine's Centre, we often see people who can be waiting on decisions for years. It's not a short process - it's lengthy; it varies, obviously, depending on the circumstances. But it's a long wait for people and throughout that time, they can be still attending St Augustine's for all different types of support.

Mark Where do most of the asylum seekers, who we end up seeing and supporting, where do they come from? I know it's quite a large number of countries - which ones would you say are the main ...

Nikki Well, I actually have had a little look at the latest statistics from the Home Office, which I believe ended in March 2020 and they ... the statistics show that the most common five countries are: Iran, Albania, Iraq, Pakistan and Eritrea - but I would also just add - based on what we see at St Augustine's - Afghanistan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria.

(10:03)

¹ this use of pretty means "quite" or "very", depending on the context, eg. in such a phrase as "I had a pretty good time"; but when used with a negative word, as here - "horrendous", it is a deliberate way to soften, but not to negate, or deny, the awful circumstances.

² contracted out - a way of organisations providing a service or a facility, by arranging with other organisations or commercial companies, to agree by a legal, business contract, to provide that service.

- Mark Just in general terms, what would you say the main reasons are, that people are seeking asylum? So, what is the fear of persecution that is most often the ones that people will be making their case around?
- Nikki Yes. It is ...That is a difficult question - it just varies considerably. But going from, again, what we see at St Augustine's and the people we are supporting, I would say that, obviously, there's a large number of people that are fearing persecution because of war and conflict and violence. But then, something really important to highlight, there's often a personal, more personal reasons, which again will vary - so it might be to do with somebody's political opinion, could be their religion, could be to do with conversion, conversion to Christianity, for example, that's commonly seen at St Augustine's. People who are part of like a particular social group, such as, for example, women, may be experiences of FGM³ or fears of FGM, honour ... honour killings and crimes too, so honour issues within the family. That's often seen - that's amongst men and women. And then there's also issues, you know, around slavery and trafficking: there is a separate process for that, but often the two connect in some way. Yes - so I would say those are possibly .. I think it's really important to bear in mind that it's often a personal fear and it might not be the state that they fear, it might be a non-state actor, it might be somebody within their family even, that they fear.
- Mark So - obviously, each individual case is different but it could, on the one hand, be that the country, the government or the state of that country, if it's at war, for example, is something that's leading to their fear - but it could also be some personal circumstances to do with their family, or their life before they arrived here.
- Nikki Yes - almost certainly - then, it can be a combination of both.
- Mark So what would you say are the main challenges that people face while they're in this process... whilst they're going through this process and seeking asylum? What are the big challenges that we experience at St Augustine's?
- Nikki I would say that one of the biggest challenges is definitely to do with people's mental health and their well-being. Many people that we support have been diagnosed with or, you know, are receiving support in relation to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And other mental health issues like depression and anxiety and traumas which existed because of what they've experienced but have been enhanced and actually they've gotten worse, throughout the process, in the time they've been in the UK. And with St Augustine's Centre, because the process itself is so lengthy, it takes such a long time, they're kind of stuck in this state of limbo⁴ - they're just waiting on this decision, which could be positive - it could be negative - they have no idea.

(13:34)

³ FGM - Female genital mutilation

⁴ state of limbo - not being in control of their own destiny, not being able to move forward or back;

Mark Those - some of the other challenges would be language, is the obvious one, that I come up against. You know, there are significant numbers of people who arrive in this country, start the process, and their level of English is extremely limited and you imagine how challenging it must be, to go through this complex process, when actually you have very limited use of the language locally. So clearly, that's something we try to help and support people with. I would say - I don't know if you would agree - I would say the other thing is just: they're not allowed to work; the allowance is an absolute pittance - isn't it? - £5.00 and something, a day, to live on, and you know, really, I feel for the people that I deal with - just in terms of how they're handling day-to-day life and, as you say, that often spills over⁵ into mental health issues.

Nikki Yes - I definitely agree. Because of the work that I do and I work with a lot of refused asylum seekers, I see people at the end of the process, where they could have been here for 2, 3, 4 years already - and they're refused - they're in the UK without leave - and that's an incredibly, incredibly distressing time for people. They are often homeless too. Because they don't have a lot of accommodation and we work really hard at St Augustine's to try and support people to ...not only with their well-being and their health, but to access professional services that can support them - but we try to support them through immigration, to help them try and find a way of staying in the UK. But the whole process itself is very damaging for people.

Mark What happens to those people who get leave to remain? What are the challenges they then face, at that point?

Nikki So - yes. Even once somebody has received their status - their refugee status - there are many, many different challenges, and we do have specific workers at St Augustine's who help people, at that point. It's like a move-on point for them, but the biggest challenge is like ... I think is really adapting and being able to move from a period when they're just waiting in this limbo and then, suddenly: they've got to get everything sorted within your [their] life, rather quickly. So, you're moved out of asylum accommodation - there's a 28-day window, I believe - from when you're given notice and then you have to find housing, suitable housing, and that will often be for families, for example - council housing. But then for other people: they might decide to move away from the area and rent privately - which we don't support - but the council side - you know, we do, but often people, even before they can get into council housing, they might be waiting in temporary accommodation - in like emergency accommodation - because they're waiting on the bid for a house or there isn't enough properties available, at that time - so there might be a period when they're feeling quite overwhelmed and distressed because they've just had to quickly move out of everything. So there's that challenge, for sure.

Then there's the challenge around finding employment which I think .. which is a massive challenge, particularly when you've been out of employment for long periods.

⁵ spills over - has an impact on, results in

Often, employees ... I've heard from people that I've supported, that employers will want experience and qualifications and often people don't have that experience - in the UK, anyway. They most likely do outside the UK, but not within. And, often, employers are very strict around, obviously, language and the skills that people have, in terms of typing and how ... yes, their ability to use things like "Word" or "Excel"⁶. And that's all that stuff that perhaps a person - well, I know - because I've spoken to people about it - they haven't had chance to really develop or possess, because their focus has been elsewhere, and they don't have that experience that employers are asking for, so finding work is really challenging. It is for everyone anyway, isn't it? Particularly for somebody who's been out of work, language barriers, and from outside the UK. It's a real challenge.

(Music) (18:23)

Mark Then I went on to interview a number of people who have experienced the asylum process. Some of them now have leave to remain and, therefore, are refugees - some of them are still awaiting a decision. They come from a variety of different countries and they have been in the UK different lengths of time and, of course, their level of English also varies. But all of them have had some experience of the asylum process. Some of it, more positive than others. So let's hear their voices.

[Please note, we have chosen not to correct the English being used in most cases in these interviews but to leave the written version to match what has been said.]

Interviewee A

To be honest, it's, you know,It can't be easy to speak about my experience, and not just for me, but for all asylum seekers, because I think it was a big tragedy in my life and it was the biggest challenge, as well. Because I had to leave my family, and my friends, my country and all years in behind. When I arrived in the UK, it was a shock to the system. I couldn't speak English - I couldn't understand. It was a strange place and I didn't know anybody here.

(20:10)

Interviewee B

It was very hard to me - I didn't know what I was doing I had no idea what I would find here. I'm always afraid about but I know it was inevitable that I have to face my fear and leave what I know and to go what I don't know. I come to the UK by 'plane. But I didn't go through another country - to come here -

Mark Right - you came directly by plane?

B Directly - yes. I was outside for one week or two weeks I then have ...

⁶ Word or Excel = two Microsoft computer applications that are very popular/common, throughout routine office usage.

Mark When you say "outside" - do you mean you had nowhere to live?

B Yes -

Mark Right

B I didn't have [any]where to live, so I stayed in the city, in Manchester. So someone ...

Mark And what happened then?

B I meet someone who told me to do the asylum and I go to London to do it and, after that, I was in the hotel in Leeds, for 28 days and after, I come to Halifax. When I stay one and half year

Mark One and a half years - and that was waiting for your interview and then for the decision, yes?

B Yes - it was very hard to [be] waiting -

Mark I'm sure.

B The help I had was accommodation, where I could live - and I receive, every Monday, just £37.00 - yes -

Mark It's not a lot of money, is it?

B No, It was not enough, I think.

(22:43)

Interviewee C

Well, Mark - it's so hard for anyone wants to leave country. ...In my country, you know I lived there for 29 years ... so that was half of my age now, my country: different country, different language, different culture so friends I have family I have a daughter and wife - so I lived there - so that was so hard, you know - I had no choice, I had to leave my country because of some things. So, first of all I went to Turkey - after that, I travel by lorry - two lorries and one boat. I think it [was] from France, I came - I arrived to UK, by boat, so when I was in the ocean - in the middle of the ocean - so United Kingdom country and British official, British police, in the ocean - they help us. So if the British police didn't help us, I will be die - I die - so I was so lucky, because the ocean was so hard. I didn't know when I looked - left side, right side - I saw water, ocean - not beach, you know, so I arrived UK by boat, but when I arrive here - so, different country, different culture, different language, it was so hard.

When I arrive I felt alone, and I say to myself, "so what can I do, where can I go?". I want to say it was so hard - to be honest, when I arrive, first of all, it was so hard, you know, I was in the prison for one week, I think six days. So, I was in the prison with many people there - mafia people, people who do drugs, mafia you know. So that time, I am so scared why I am there - I think, yes, that is normal - because this country didn't know who I am, so .. maybe I am terrorist: they had to be sure about who I am, you know. So, that was my first experience when I arrive - 6 days at the beginning. After that, I went to London for, three days in the hotel, I think, because (unclear) ...they travel me to Wakefield, and I was in a hostel. I was there for 28 days after that, they transferred me to Halifax. I have a house there - an address, in Queens Road, it was social housing. I live with three people [from] different countries, so different languages. I got an interview after five months - because of Covid, my interview was cancelled. I was waiting for 10 months for next time, so, you know, it was Covid-19 time - lockdown time - so I was waiting.

(26:52)

Mark And then, how long after the interview, did you find out if you had been given leave to remain?

C That was three months - another three months.

Mark Three months.

C Another three months after my interview. It depends, you know - I know many asylum seekers after this time, and it depends you know - after three months some people, after one month - my friend is waiting for 2 years for an answer. That's so hard you know.

Mark Yes - that must have been a difficult time for you - you must have been worrying about what the decision was going to be.

C Yes - to be honest, I had stress - a lot of stress, at that time.

Interviewee D

I had to wait for three years for my decision from Home Office and when it came back it was a refusal, which my solicitors never updated me on time and I had a very limited time to put an application in to the tribunal, for my hearing, which was all about .. I think I had like three days to do it. They wanted more evidence - that took a bit longer. So during all these years that I was with the Home Office, I was depressed, stressed, and it was draining⁷ - and also apart from that, the Home Office on my screening interview, filled in wrong information about me, and some of the questions were unanswered, which were very sensitive, so I kind of missed the support that I was meant to be given,

⁷ it was draining - the period and process took away her energy, it was emotionally hard, it left her weak

during all that period, because the Home Office did not fill this questionnaire out, so it took an intervention of another organisation to realise my screening interview was wrong - so you can imagine, the Home Office, that was meant to protect me, let me down.

During that period, I had my daughter with me, who was three years old and she really suffered bad mental health problems to the extent that she had to be referred for counseling and because I did my screening interview with her and all she could see was police cars, and a tall building because I went to Home Office in Croydon, so any tall building, it was "Mummy, Mummy .. Home Office - let's run - they're going to come and deport us" - so it was so depressing, and I felt let down for them to have asked me very sensitive questions in front of my child, who has that understanding and that particular time what was going on. So yes - even today she still talks about how I was treated in my screening interview and now she's eight.

Interviewee E

First of all, my nationality is Palestinian, but I haven't been in Palestine ever. I was born in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and I lived there all my life with my family. Due to reasons beyond me, I decide to leave everything in the United Arab Emirates, even my family, parents and friends, and come with my little family, me, my wife and my only little son, to the United Kingdom and apply for asylum. It was like going into the unknown.

I have never visited the United Kingdom before and everything here was new for me and my wife. But because the support which we had from many perfect organisations, we became familiar with the community and the life became much easier. Honestly, I was hearing a lot about how people seeking asylum are suffering and how they are treated in a bad way. But what to do - I don't have any other option at that time. Believe me. Once I reach Heathrow Airport and apply for asylum I got surprised from the way of dealing with me - the officers there was very kind and professional. I don't know [if] I'm lucky, or what I was hearing, just stories from the media. At the airport and at the screening interview, the officers explained to me the whole asylum process and what had been explained to me [was] exactly what happened with me. OK - actually I spend like two nights in London, in a hotel, then, after that they moved me to Wakefield, in Urban House⁸, for two weeks. And after that, I got a house in Halifax, within almost a year, I got a residence in United Kingdom - during this year, the life was a little bit difficult: we should know the country and places; also, we faced some financial problems. But the organisation here helped us much - especially St Augustine's, their staff was so kind and helpful and they really supported us too much.

(Music) (32:16)

⁸ Urban House is the name of an initial accommodation centre for asylum seekers

Mark So that's it for this episode. In our next episode, we'll go on to explain the support we provide at the St Augustine's Centre and again, you will hear some of the voices of those people who themselves have been through the process of asylum seeking and becoming refugees.

If you want to get the transcript - that's the written version - you can do that from our website. Stay listening for the details and how to find out more about our work and how to support us. Otherwise, we will be back again with the second of these episodes, in a very short time. Thank you for listening.

(Music) (33:18)

You can find the transcript - that's the written version of this episode - on our website:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

And that's where you can also find links to all the other episodes, and the transcripts, so you can listen and read along at the same time. That's also where you can find out how to donate, to help our work. We are a charity, supporting particularly, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants but also, all those in need in our local area and we would welcome your support, if you felt able to give it. If you follow on the website, the links to "**Get Involved**" and "**Donate**".

We also have an email address - that's **englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com**

And we would love to hear from you - your thoughts on our podcast and ideas for the future.

We also have a Twitter account : **@EsolSaint**
and there is additional material on that site.

I'll spell out all those addresses:

So, the website: w-w-w-.s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

So that's the website.

The email is: **englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com**

And that's "English for" spelt: f-o-r

And finally, the Twitter account: is : @ [at] [capital E] E-s-o-l- [capital S] -S-a-l-n-t.

(Ends) (35:50)