



Northern Ireland Community of
Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Strategic Plan

2016 - 2020

Introduction

NICRAS is a refugee and asylum-seeker-led organisation which provides advice and support to refugees and asylum-seekers and challenges the many barriers they face. Its services include:

- Advice to refugees and asylum-seekers
- The provision of emergency food for those who are destitute
- English Language classes
- Social activities to reduce isolation and the impact of traumatic experiences
- A youth group
- Input to public policy developments

Emigration

Throughout its history people from the north of the island of Ireland have emigrated to other parts of the world. Over 80 million people in the world have Irish blood. In the US alone, 36.5 million residents claim Irish ancestry. Over 20,000 people still leave Northern Ireland each year to study, to take up jobs or to see the world. The Troubles and high unemployment contributed to outward migration in the 1970s and 1980s.

Immigration

There have also always been incomers to Ireland, from pre-historic times onwards: Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century, Scots and the English in the seventeenth. Huguenots and Jewish people came to escape persecution. Italian and Indian communities developed from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Small numbers of Vietnamese refugees came in the 1980s and larger numbers of Chinese people migrated from Hong Kong around the same time.

In the past 30 years, declining birth rate led to a reduction in the numbers of people in Northern Ireland available for work. So, when violence reduced and the economy began to expand, there was a shortage of workers, and skills gaps also emerged.

The 2011 Census indicates that 95.49% of the people living in N Ireland were born in the UK or the Republic of Ireland. Of the remaining 4.51%, 45,407 were born in the rest of the European Union, and 36,046 in other countries. The greatest number of people came between 2004 and 2009. Since 2009 and the economic recession more international citizens have left Northern Ireland each year than have come.

In the early 2000s people from Portugal and its former colonies came to work in Mid-Ulster, mostly in the food industry. The largest groups of people from outside Europe, working in the health sector, are from the Philippines and India. Since 12 new countries joined the European Union in 2004 the majority of people have come from Central and Eastern Europe, with the greatest numbers from Poland and Lithuania, but there are people here from many other countries.

The motivations of people coming to Northern Ireland vary considerably. Most people are recruited in their home country by agencies or respond to advertisements or. Some come because friends have had good experiences. A large number come here in order to improve their English. Others want to leave areas of high unemployment or where wages and salaries are very low. A small number of migrants to Northern Ireland each year are refugees who are fleeing violence and persecution.

The UK Border Agency in 2012, for example, was considering 140 applications from individuals, or people with dependents. In October that year 80% of applicants receiving support were from only five countries: China (147), Zimbabwe (34), Nigeria (35), Sudan (36) and Somalia (38). The nationalities of those coming to Northern Ireland tend to reflect the parts of the world with the greatest instability and violence.

At the end of 2013 there were 494 people in National Asylum Support Service supported accommodation while their applications were under consideration.

Refugees

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

In short a refugee is someone who is unwilling or unable to return to a country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of persecution. To qualify as a refugee in the UK, a person must:

- Apply for asylum to stay in the UK
- Have left the country of origin due to fear of persecution
- Apply on entry to the UK, or as soon as risk of persecution becomes apparent if already in the UK
- Qualify as a refugee following a decision in the asylum process

Asylum-Seekers

The UN High Commission for Refugees defines an asylum seeker as: “someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated.”

The process for seeking asylum in the UK (including Northern Ireland) is as follows:

- Initial claim of asylum through an approach to an appropriate official
- Screening for initial registration
- Appointment of a caseworker
- Asylum interview
- Decision

The UK received 29,400 asylum applications in 2013. Per member of the population this is 16th in the list of host countries in the EU (The five countries with the highest number of asylum-seekers are all outside the EU).

Unfortunately the Home Office does not routinely publish asylum figures that are disaggregated by region and, therefore, the total numbers of refugees in Northern Ireland are uncertain. Figures are, however, available for asylum seekers in receipt of support (known as ‘Section 95 support’). As of June 2013, there were 344 asylum-seekers in dispersed accommodation and three receiving subsistence only in Northern Ireland (total 347).

Figures suggest that applications in Northern Ireland remain at less than 1% of the total.

Following the abolition of the UK Border Agency in 2013, asylum applications are dealt with by UK Visas and Immigration and immigration law enforcement and removal is dealt with by Immigration Enforcement. As a first point of contact for many asylum seekers, however, the Border Force is responsible for immigration control at ports and airports.

Asylum Seekers are not permitted to work or claim social security benefits, which has major implications for their lives, often resulting in poverty and destitution.

Individuals, once refused, may remain in Northern Ireland for a significant amount of time while evidence is being gathered for: making a new application for asylum; appealing a refusal; or because, though refused, they cannot return to their country of origin because it is unsafe. During this period, there is still no entitlement to work or received asylum support.

Asylum seekers are initially housed in a temporary emergency accommodation (often hostels), then move into rented share accommodations with other asylum seekers.

Asylum Support

A destitute asylum seeker may be able to receive accommodation and/or subsistence (financial) support from the Home Office. If an asylum claim has been refused and there is no ongoing appeal, a person may be able to apply for Section 4 support (see below). If they have additional care needs (due to serious illness or disability), they may also be able to get support from the local government authority (social services/housing services).

The current levels of Asylum financial support are as follows (2015 figure):

- Qualifying couple (married or in a civil partnership): £72.52
- Lone parent aged 18 or over: £43.94
- Single person aged 18 or over, excluding lone parent: £36.95
- Person aged at least 16, but under 18 (except a member of a qualifying couple): £39.80
- Person aged under 16: £52.96.

In addition:

- A woman who is pregnant, or with children under three, can receive extra money to help buy healthy food.
- A baby under the age of 12 months receives an extra £5 a week. Pregnant women and children aged between one and three years receive an extra £3 a week. A pregnant woman may be able to receive a £300 maternity payment, if she meets certain requirements. This money is to help with the costs of having the baby. It can be received only once. The maternity payment must be applied for very close to the time when the baby is born. This must be 8 weeks (or less) before the baby is due to be born, or within 6 weeks after the birth.

Understanding Processes within the UK

To facilitate understanding of the Asylum processes we have provided two charts:

Chart A:

The process for seeking asylum

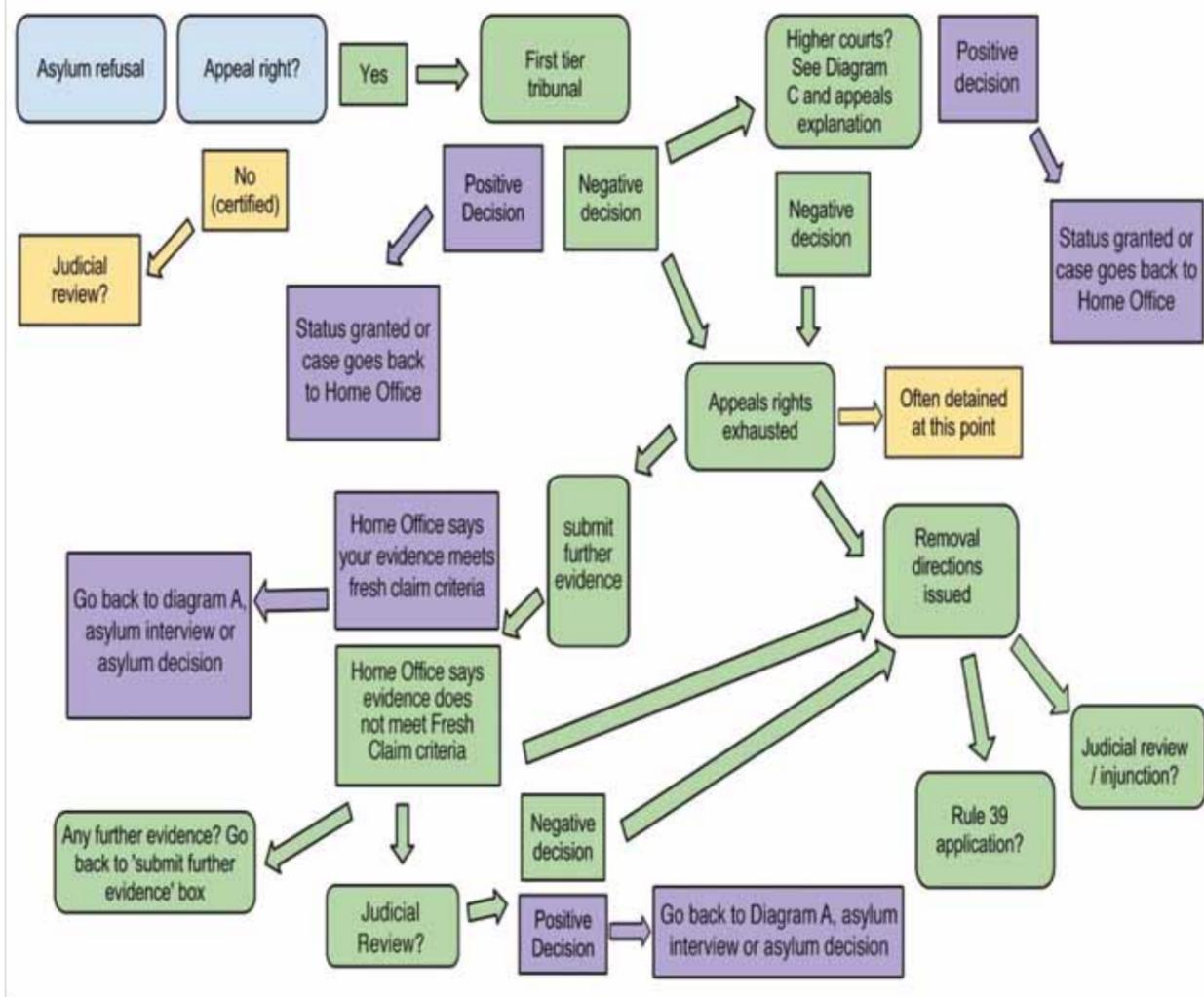
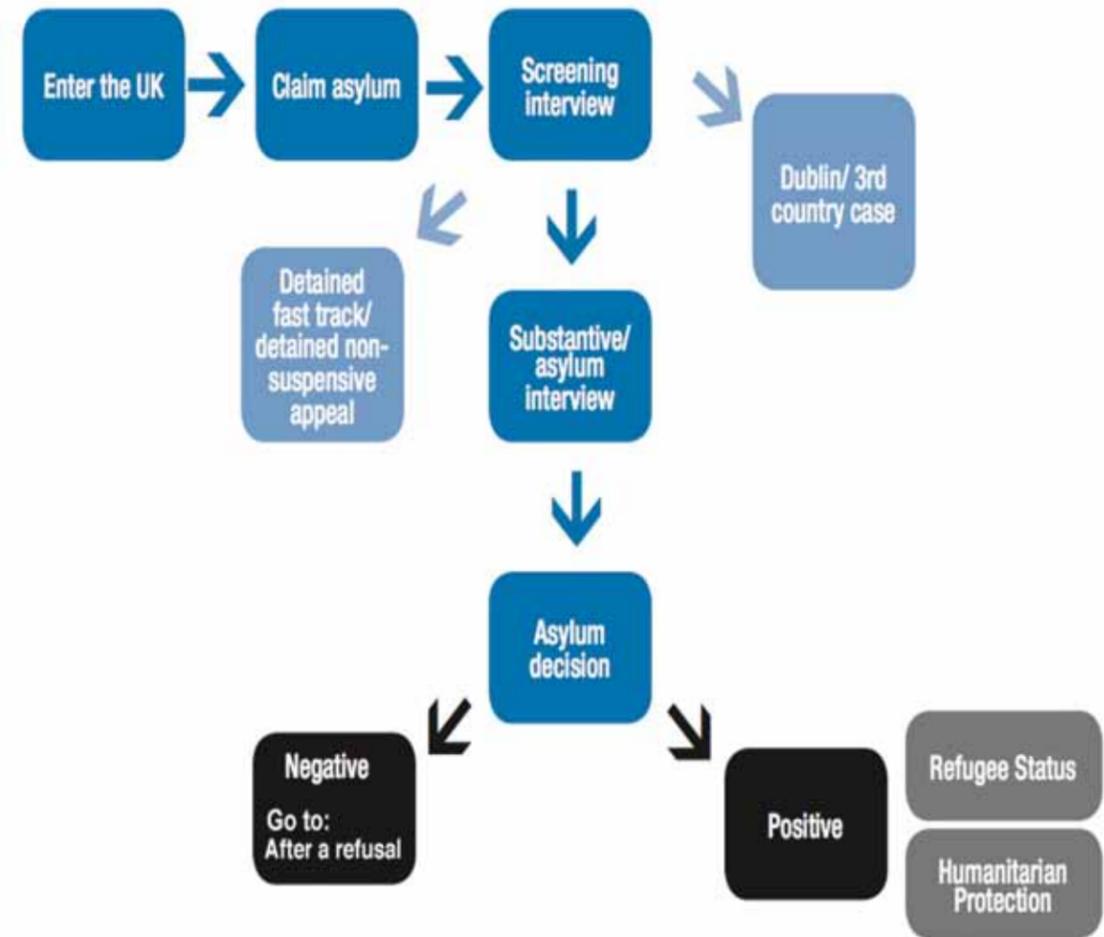


Chart B:

The legal process for those seeking to appeal a refusal of an asylum claim¹.



¹ Charts A and B are available at: <http://righttoremain.org.uk/toolkit/legalprocess/asylum.html>

Statutory Responsibilities

Asylum and Refugee matters are the responsibility of the Home Office and policies and practices are formed and enforced by Westminster Government. The Home Office, operates an Immigration Enforcement Office in Belfast (Drumkeen House) and there is an Immigration Removal Centre in Larne (Larne House). While asylum is not a devolved matter, Northern Ireland government departments have important responsibilities in relation to:

- Health care
- Legal aid
- Welfare benefits
- English language courses
- Education
- Housing

Additionally OFMDFM has overall responsibility for issues relating to minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland.

The Needs of refugees and asylum-seekers

Many asylum-seekers and refugees face very significant problems that NICRAS tries to respond to, including the following:

- English Language difficulties
- Social isolation
- Lack of understanding of local systems
- Poverty caused by asylum-seekers not being allowed to work (support are £36.95 per week as of August 2015)
- Destitution and the lack of financial support for refused asylum seekers
- Lack of knowledge about local communities, local ways of doing things and managing facilities such as heating systems which are very different to peoples' past experience
- The transition from asylum-seeker to refugee status and obtaining employment
- The lack of a guarantor to access private rented accommodation
- The lack of qualification equivalency to obtain appropriate employment
- The lack of formal education or qualifications amongst some groups
- Homelessness
- The lack of mental health provision for those who have been significantly tortured or abused
- The lack of access to expert immigration legal representation

Strategic Plan

The following strategic plan has been developed following discussion with refugees and asylum-seekers as well as with staff, volunteers, professional advisors and partners. We recognise the importance of professionalism in all aspects of our work and in working in partnership with other relevant organisations.

NICRAS' Mission

To inspire and enable refugees and asylum seekers to break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

NICRAS' Vision

NICRAS' vision is of a vibrant, welcoming, just and inclusive society which promotes diversity, equality and effectively respects the human rights and dignity of refugees and asylum seekers.

Values

The following values underpin all aspects of the work of NICRAS:

Dignity

Everyone has the right to be treated as an individual with equality, dignity and respect. We are open to those of all nationalities, languages, faiths and cultures. We will oppose injustice and anything that excludes or marginalises people.

Excellence

Everyone has the right to expect services to be of the highest standard, reflecting the needs and aspirations of refugees and asylum-seekers. NICRAS is committed to being professional in all aspects of its work.

Integrity

We are committed to operating to the highest standards of honesty, transparency, confidentiality and accountability

Participation

As a refugee and asylum-seeker-led organisation we are committed to promoting everyone's confidence, skills and ability to take control of their own lives and have a voice in society

Independence

We work as an independent community based organisation. However we value meaningful collaboration and partnership work which benefit refugees and asylum seekers.

Aims and Priorities

Policy Influence

Aim: To be an effective voice for refugees and asylum-seekers on relevant issues

Priorities for 2016-2020:

- Develop and review relevant public policy positions, informed by refugees and asylum-seekers, staff and volunteers
- Develop, implement and review an annual programme of campaigns on key public policy issues to address during the year
- Build working relationships with, and Influence, key policy-makers and decisionmakers in promoting the organisation's public policy objectives
- Strengthen public affairs influence through development of relevant networks and organisations
- Build the organisation's public policy expertise and influencing capacity
- Facilitate appropriate research to inform the organisation's policy positions and influence the public policy agenda

Service Development

Aim: To provide services which meet the needs of refugees and asylums

Priorities for development 2016-2020:

- Expand and develop appropriate high quality advice services for refugees and asylum seekers
- Provide practical support to refugees and asylum-seekers in poverty or destitution
- Develop the programme for young people
- Regularly assess the needs of members and review the need for the development of additional services
- Develop appropriate partnerships in relation to service provision
- Ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers are aware of the full range of services that organisations can offer and signpost service-users, as appropriate, to other relevant services
- Develop ways of demonstrating the impact of each of the services/ programmes
- Regularly review and improve the advice service documentation and recording and reporting

Excellence

Aim: To ensure that all the organisation's activities are delivered to the highest standard and continuously improve

Priorities for 2016-2020:

- Develop, pilot, implement, audit and review a framework of clear best practice standards and procedures for the NICRAS advice service
- Ensure that all services continuously improve through reflective practice
- Regularly survey the satisfaction of service-users, partners and commissioners to promote continuous improvement
- Maintain an effective complaints procedure and regularly review complaints to

ensure learning is used to improve standards

- Develop and implement a programme of internal and external evaluation
- Ensure that all the organisation's services are fully accessible regardless of disability, language, or other cultural barriers

Marketing and Communications

Aim: To ensure effective communication with the organisation's internal and external stakeholders

Priorities for development 2015 – 2018:

- Strengthen the organisation's external profile with the general public
- Communicate effectively with refugees and asylum-seekers (newsletters, social media, conferences)
- Strengthen communications and working relationships with each of NICRAS' external stakeholders and partners
- Make effective use of technological developments (inc. the website and social media) to promote communications
- Ensure effective internal communication (board, staff and volunteers)
- Refugee Week celebration

Human Resources

Aim: To ensure there is the appropriate staff complement and structure to achieve agreed plans and staff are effectively managed and given the opportunity to develop

Priorities for change 2016-2020:

- Ensure the organisation has the appropriate number and structure of appropriately skilled and experienced staff to achieve its aims and objectives (requires funding)
- Ensure all staff are effectively managed and appraised and given the opportunity to learn and develop
- Ensure that NICRAS complies with all its legal responsibilities in relation to employment, and acts as a good employer
- Promote and manage the diversity of staff
- Promote effective participation of staff and volunteers in decisions that may affect them

Volunteering

Aim: To recruit, retain and develop effective volunteers

Priorities for Development 2016-2020:

- Develop, implement and review a volunteering plan
- Identify appropriate volunteer roles and ensure they are relevant role descriptions
- Recruit and select appropriate volunteers
- Make effective use of short-term volunteering, placement and intern opportunities
- Ensure all volunteers receive an appropriate induction, training, recognition and support
- Effectively communicate and consult volunteers and provide other opportunities for participation

Premises and Physical Resources

Aim: To ensure the organisation has the premises and other physical resources it requires to achieve its plans

Priorities for 2016-2020:

- Ensure the organisation has the appropriate premises from which to deliver its services/programmes
- Ensure the NICRAS premises are effectively and efficiently managed to provide a welcoming, healthy, productive and safe environment for service-users, staff and volunteers
- Ensure the organisation has the appropriate physical resources it requires to achieve its aims and objectives, which are effectively maintained/serviced

Income Generation

Aim: To ensure that the organisation generates sufficient net income to enable it to achieve its aims and priorities and be sustainable

Priorities for change 2016-2020:

- Develop, implement and review an income generation plan
- Maximise funding and contract income from statutory sources
- Maximise net income from charitable trust and foundations
- Develop the organisation's opportunities and ability to identify and tender successfully for contracts
- Develop appropriate income-generating social enterprise(s)
- Maximise net income from individuals (donation and gift aid)
- Maximise net income from community fundraising and events

Finance

Aim: To demonstrate best practice in effective financial planning, management and reporting and effectively promoting and demonstrating value for money

Priorities for change 2016-2020:

- Effectively and efficiently plan and monitor organisational finances through budgeting and variance reporting
- Ensure the finances of the organisation are effectively and efficiently managed and reported, through appropriate financial policies and procedures and independent professional internal and external audit
- Ensure the organisation has the appropriate financial policies and procedures to protect it from theft and fraud and these are effectively implemented and audited

Information and Communication Technologies

Aim: Effectively utilise ICT to help achieve organisational aims and objectives

Priorities for 2016-2020:

- Ensure the organisation has the appropriate hardware and software systems
- Ensure there are cost-effective support, trouble-shooting and maintenance arrangements for ICT in place
- Ensure that staff have the appropriate skills to optimise the use of ICT

- Ensure there are appropriate policies and procedures in place in relation to the use of ICT and these are effectively implemented and regularly reviewed

Governance

Aim: To ensure the governance of the organisation complies with the requirements of the law and best practice

Priorities for change 2016-2020:

Board Membership

- Ensure the Board has the appropriate up-to-date skills and experience in appropriate depth (board members and advisors) and is appropriately balanced in terms of age, gender, region of origin, cultural/religious background, etc.
- Ensure there is a clear statement of the responsibilities of the board, individual Board members, as well as each of the office-bearer roles, which are regularly reviewed
- Ensure there is a succession plan in place to fill office-bearer roles
- Ensure there is an appropriate and effective governance structure (e.g. effective subcommittees with clear terms of reference)

Induction and Training

- Ensure the trustees/directors are clear about their responsibilities as directors of a company limited by guarantee and trustees of a charity
- Ensure all board members are thoroughly inducted and their training and development needs of Board members are regularly assessed and addressed

Legal Compliance

- Ensure the organisation complies with the requirements of the company and charity law and its Articles of Association
- Ensure that The organisation complies with all its legal responsibilities in relation to the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults
- Ensure compliance with all relevant health and safety requirements
- Ensure that the organisation identifies and complies with other legal responsibilities

Risk Management

- Ensure The organisation identifies and manages risk effectively

Planning and Monitoring

- Ensure the organisation has appropriate strategic and operational plans, which are effectively implemented, and progress regularly monitored by the Board

Employer

- Ensure compliance with employment law and best practice
- Obtain the funding to appoint a NICRAS Manager and ensure the Manager is effectively supported, appraised and managed

Membership

- Promote, develop and involve the membership of the organisation

Continuous Governance Improvement

- Regularly review the Board's governance performance; develop, implement and review a governance action plan.

Glossary

The Refugee Convention

Asylum claims are considered under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (and its incorporation into European and UK immigration law). To be granted refugee status, it is necessary to show that a person has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside his/her country of origin or normal residence, and cannot get protection from their own country. While the Refugee Convention does not define 'persecution', an explanation is given in the *Qualification Regulations*, which are the application of the Refugee Convention in UK law. This is therefore the definition the Home Office use to assess whether a person is at risk of persecution if removed from the UK. The Qualification Regulations state that persecution consists of an act that is 'sufficiently serious by its nature and repetition as to constitute a severe violation of a basic human right' or 'an accumulation of various measures'. Discrimination is not the same as persecution, but if it is repeated or is very serious, it may then be considered persecution.

Humanitarian Protection

The Refugee Convention provides protection for those facing a specific individual threat. It also allows for 'subsidiary protection' when there is a risk of serious harm, but not because of an individualised threat of persecution. If someone establishes they would be at risk under these circumstances, they may be granted Humanitarian Protection.

Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR)

ILR is a form of settled status. It can be granted at the later stages of various immigration applications (such as family migration visas - see below). ILR does not have a time limit, but it can be revoked under some circumstances (such as serious a criminal conviction).

Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR)

A time-limited form of leave to remain in the UK that was introduced in 2003, granted outside of the immigration rules. The government has recently restricted the circumstances in which DLR can be granted. It was the leave granted to unaccompanied asylum seeking children whose asylum claims have been refused but cannot be returned, but since 2013 this leave is now called 'limited leave'. It was also the leave granted to people excluded from refugee status/humanitarian protection but whose rights under Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights would be violated if they were returned – these people would now generally be granted 'restricted leave'. Successful human rights claims based on Article 8 often used to result in the granting of DLR, but the Home Office states that successful Article 8 claims would result in leave currently covered by the Immigration Rules. The Home Office guidance outlines medical cases, exceptional circumstances, and trafficking cases where DLR may be granted. There is also reference to ECHR cases "where return would result in a flagrant denial of the right in question in the person's country of origin". Those people currently granted DLR – and the number will be very small - have access to public funds and are entitled to work.

Refugees and people with Exceptional Leave to Remain

If someone has been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain as a refugee or ELR he/she can claim all the main street benefits (subject to the general rules of entitlement). The only exception to this is if they have been granted ELR subject to the condition that they do not have 'recourse to public funds'. If this applies seek expert immigration advice. If someone has been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain as a refugee they can claim

backdated income support, housing benefit and/or council tax benefit to cover the period that they were excluded from these benefits. They must claim within 28 days of receiving the Home Office letter granting Indefinite Leave to Remain as a refugee. Their benefit will be backdated to the date the benefit stopped due to an asylum claim being refused - if he/she claimed asylum 'on arrival' before 03.04.00; otherwise; to the date of the asylum claim; or 05-02-1996, if this was later.

Section 4 support

Provide accommodation to persons with Temporary Admission (TA), those released from immigration detention and those on immigration bail. Cash payments are not made under Section 4. Supported persons and their dependants who receive Section 4 support are generally provided with accommodation and an 'Azure' pre-paid payment card to cover food and essential toiletries only.

Section 95 support

Section 95 of the 1999 Act enables the provision of support to asylum-seekers or dependants of asylum-seekers who appear to the Secretary of State to be destitute or be likely to become destitute within 14 days.

Section 98 support

Section 98 of the 1999 Act provides that the Secretary of State may provide or arrange for the provision of support for asylum seekers or dependants of asylum seekers who appear to the Secretary of State to be destitute or likely to become destitute pending the consideration of their support application under Section 95 of the 1999 Act.

Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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