

Henri's Story

We know Henri* well. He is tall, wiry and well-informed. He is often quiet but can be chatty, is active, and has some strong views. He comes from one of the largest and potentially richest countries in Africa. Its huge mineral wealth is mined and used in mobile phones across the world.

However the country is wracked by war and some 6 million are estimated to have died in the last 20 years. Its government is deeply corrupt, and warlords carve out enclaves. Rape, killings and torture are everyday occurrences.

Henri tried to organise people to stand up against these abuses, but in the end his activities meant he too became a victim and had to leave.

When he arrived in Britain he spoke no English and had no clue about the complex UK asylum system. To make matters much worse he received poor advice from the legal advisor who was assigned to him. His scars were undocumented, the fate of his family ignored and his poorly written asylum claim was rejected. So he was evicted from his G4S lodgings and made wholly destitute as part of the 'hostile environment' policy.

Henri was homeless for a whole year, sometimes sleeping rough, sometimes at the night shelter run by the church, and sometimes at friends' houses. He was not allowed to work, and he would have been penniless had Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary not provided him with a small living allowance. Despite being a resilient man, his mental health plummeted.

Eventually he was detained by the immigration authorities and was scheduled to be returned to his country, and, as Henri saw it, face likely violence and torture. Only at this point did he get a new competent lawyer who re-shaped his case, ordered a medical report, and presented it all anew to the judge. Friends at City of Sanctuary kept in touch throughout this whole ordeal, and helped pay costs e.g. the £50 train fare for a vital witness to get to court.

His lawyer's final summing up of the case only took a couple of minutes. Two weeks later the judge gave his ruling agreeing that Henri should have asylum. It was that simple ... Henri is grateful for asylum, but what a waste of three years of a man's life, and how unnecessary much of the demeaning process had been. [*Henri's name has been changed to protect his identity]

How You Can Help Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wolverhampton



It may be that the world's problems seem so huge that you can do very little to improve matters. But in recent years **Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary's volunteers** have found we can make a big difference to the lives of people who are forced from their homes in other countries and come here for safety.

Can you imagine arriving in a strange country where you have nowhere to live, little or no money, and you cannot speak the language? How much more difficult it would seem if you were completely on your own. You would hope for some help, and seek out friendly faces.

Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary provides a **welcome**, and assists people who arrive here and need to get their lives back together. And it has been enriching for us all. We don't just give out friendship and help, but we receive them too.

But sadly, from our experience in Wolverhampton, we can see that our present asylum system is quite dysfunctional, and needs reform in many areas.

Asylum seekers in Wolverhampton come from **many countries**, including China, Iran, Iraq and Syria in Asia, and Cameroon, Congo (DRC), Sudan and Zimbabwe in Africa. All these places have **very poor human rights records**.

Refugees are **not new**: there have always been wars and tyrannies that people have had to flee. Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and St Paul are just a few examples from the Bible. In the 1930's many Jewish children came to Britain and later prospered; in 1940 the most successful RAF squadron had mostly Polish refugee pilots. Even Einstein was a refugee. Today we can still enable local asylum seekers to become part of our community and **start their lives again**.

The Bigger Picture

- There are about **900 refugees and asylum seekers in Wolverhampton** out of a total population of 250,000 people.
- **Asylum applications** in the UK peaked in the early 2000s. They fell after 2015 and in 2017 there were about 26,000 applicants.
- Asylum claims are always assessed by the Home Office and the courts, which require evidence that people have a “**well-founded fear of persecution**”.
- About one in three claims are accepted by the Home Office in the first instance. About **half** are accepted after appeal.
- In 2017 a study found that the Home Office **mishandled the evidence** in 100% of the 50 cases involving torture which were re-examined.
- Some claims are processed within **weeks**, whilst other claims take **many years**, in which time asylum seekers are almost always barred from paid employment.
- Asylum seekers initially receive **£37.75 per week** to pay for daily needs. If their claim is refused financial support also ceases.
- Some asylum seekers get a few hours **English Language** lessons per week. If their asylum claim is refused this stops.
- Commercial contracts are awarded by the government to large companies such as **G4S** and **SERCO** to house asylum seekers, who do not get a choice of where they live, or with whom they must share a house. If their claim is refused, they are evicted.
- **G4S** recently lost their contract in Wolverhampton and the West Midlands, following investigations which found that nearly half of all the housing they had provided was unfit to live in.

<https://wolverhampton.cityofsanctuary.org/>

Ways to Help

- 1) **Volunteer time to help with running the weekly City of Sanctuary Drop-in**, e.g. serving tea and coffee, meeting and greeting people or helping people improve their conversational English. Asylum always looks different when it is about people that you can put a face to.
- 2) **Awareness-raising** e.g. organising an event with City of Sanctuary or another refugee organisation at your group or church, writing letters to MP's - with so much misinformation and prejudice around it is vital to speak up for refugees in the UK. See also [Schools of Sanctuary](#)
- 3) **Befriending** individual refugees and families – listening and visiting.
- 4) Fixing a short **holiday** for asylum seekers - a day trip or week away.
- 5) **Destitution**: through no fault of their own, some asylum seekers are made homeless and have ‘no recourse to public funds’ i.e. they are entirely dependent on friends and charity. Could you help our partner charities **Hope Projects** and **Hope into Action** to provide short term housing whilst people get their cases properly re-presented?
- 6) **Donations of household items** - only in good working condition please.
- 7) **Doctors** could help the charity Medical Justice which specialises in medical reports for asylum seekers: <http://www.medicaljustice.org.uk/>
- 8) **Funds**. Small amounts can go a long way with volunteers. Cheques should be made payable to [Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary](#) and sent to our treasurer Erik Pearse, c/o: IFW, 24 School Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 4LF, or email Erik at admin@ifwton.org.uk .

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