



Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

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President Lord Roger Roberts of Llandudno

LD4SOS Newsletter February 2021

VACCINES FOR ALL

We all need Covid-19 vaccines to be available to all. We have signed this campaign from <https://www.vaccineforall.co.uk/>, spelled out in detail on our [website here](#), to address the specific issues arising from the Home Office's Hostile Environment, and thus ensure the Department of Health and Social Care makes the vaccine programme work for everyone. Please share with others, asking them to sign.

ASYLUM SUPPORT PAYMENTS

We are very disappointed that the Home Office has ended the system of continuing asylum support payments until Universal Credit or other benefits had been paid. It was introduced as a temporary measure while clearing the backlog of 'positive cases' whose asylum claim had been accepted, but it is still needed to avoid any gap in support. This and other updates on Home Office policies during Covid can be seen on the Refugee Council website [here](#).

It remains Liberal Democrat Policy that for those with a positive decision we would "Increase the timescale from 28 days to 60 days for them to find their own accommodation and income after receiving a decision, and remove the time limit entirely for vulnerable people." For more detail, our policy leaflet "After the final decision is made" is downloadable [here](#)

The measly decision to provide asylum support at just £39.63 a week, without the increase needed in line with social security benefits, has not been reviewed as we would have hoped. The [Asylum Support \(Amendment\) Regulations 2021](#) have been laid before Parliament, write that decision into law, and come into force on Monday 22 February. There is more about this in our [November 2020 newsletter](#). The good news though is that the temporary rise in Section 4 payments to the same level as the Section 95 ones has been retained.

HOME OFFICE FOUND GUILTY YET AGAIN

The Court of Appeal has ruled that the £1,012 fee charged by the Home Office for registering a child as a British citizen is unlawful.

Alistair Carmichael MP says that the fees must be reduced immediately:

"It's shameful that children are being denied their rights by these outrageous, extortionate Home Office fees. The Government should immediately reduce these fees to no more than the cost of administration.

"Instead of wasting taxpayers' money defending her bad decisions in the courts, Priti Patel should get on with fixing our immigration system, so that everyone is treated with dignity and the public can have confidence that it is fair and effective."

This is the latest in a lengthening list of the Home Office being found to be acting illegally. You can see more in our information document ["Home Office Acting Illegally"](#)

GOOD NEWS

This is a heart-warming [story](#) of one of the very few positive things to have come out of the Covid situation. How an asylum seeking doctor from Syria eventually got leave to remain, and is now able to use his skills in the vaccination programme.

CONGRATULATIONS AND THANKS TO REFUGEE COUNCIL

They have just “celebrated” their 70 years of existence, helping hundreds and thousands of people as well as influencing policy. We have sent our congratulations, but wished they could disappear very soon as not needed. Sadly they are likely to be needed even more with the prospect of the “Fair Borders” Bill about to come in.

POOR DECISION MAKING

Since the first national lockdown on 23rd March, BID (Bail for Immigration Detainees) has provided representation in 295 bail hearings for people in immigration detention centres, 260 have been granted. They are proud of this 88% success rate but most of all it reveals poor decision-making and excessive use of detention by the Home Office. You can download our policy document Decision Making on Asylum Applications [here](#)

REPLACING THE DUBLIN REGULATIONS

The evidence given to the Home Affairs Select Committee on Channel crossings showed the extensive use by the present UK Government of the Dublin Regulations to deport would be asylum seekers to other EU countries without allowing them to make their case in the UK.

Our Shas Sheehan has asked in the Lords about Government policy now that EU law no longer applies to asylum seekers arriving in the UK. The answer she received from the Minister of State at the Home Office can be read [here](#), but implies that the new “Fair Borders” Bill will restrict the routes asylum seekers may take and ensure that the Home Office will decide who needs UK protection, a very subjective test.

The UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG), in celebrating LGBT+ History Month for the progress made so far, have pointed to Philip Baldwin’s article in [Gay Times](#) to explain why new 10th December 2020 Home Office Rules enabling removal of asylum seekers to any “safe” third country could endanger LGBTQI+ people.

INDEPENDENT HUMAN RIGHTS ACT REVIEW

LD4SOS Council Member Dr Ruvi Ziegler wrote an [article](#) appraising the positive effects of the Human Rights Act on Seekers of International Protection, written for the *Human Rights in Action Project*. Ruvi's contribution will form part of a joint submission to the [Independent Human Rights Act Review](#) set up by the government to review the Human Rights Act which came into force just over 20 years ago and has 'brought home' the rights protected by the European Convention of Human Rights. The review is expected to report expected in July 2021.

LD4SOS members and supporters who wish to make individual contributions on any aspect of the HRA can do so by 3 March 2021 by emailing <IHRAR@justice.gov.uk>. The IHRAR say: 'We would welcome succinct responses. Please try to keep your response to a maximum of 25 pages or 12,500 words. Consultees should only submit a single response.'

UPDATE ON NAPIER AND PENALLY BARRACKS

The conditions at Napier and Penally Barracks which are being used to accommodate men seeking asylum continue to raise alarm. On 29 January a [fire broke out](#) at the Napier barracks site near Folkestone. Kent police confirmed that there were no reported injuries. Fourteen men were arrested in connection with the fire which it is believed was started [deliberately](#). Heating and electricity in all but one of the blocks was turned off following the incident – during the coldest period the winter – leaving residents in freezing conditions. Charities who reportedly attempted to provide warm blankets and food for the men were turned away.

On 2 February the High Court [ruled](#) that an asylum seeker and potential victim of trafficking housed at Napier must be urgently rehoused in alternative accommodation within 24 hours. The Court heard evidence of the unsafe and unsanitary conditions and lawyers were making urgent court applications on behalf of at least four more asylum seekers (we have not yet heard the outcome).

Home Office [internal documents](#) reveal that the men were placed in barracks because of fears that more “generous” accommodation would “undermine public confidence in the system”. On 24 February, in response to a question from the Home Affairs Committee, the Home Office admitted that nearly 200 of the men at Napier had tested positive for co-vid. Yvette Cooper noted that this was hardly surprising when they were sleeping 20 people in a dormitory. People’s lives have been put at risk to pander to bigotry and seek political advantage.

Our Roger Roberts asked the Government what assessment they had made of the living conditions at Penally, but the [answer](#) on 15 February simply confirmed Government reliance on private consultants, despite the decision of immigration and prison inspectors to enter the two camps reported by The [Guardian](#) on 11 February. We will continue to campaign for these Barracks to be closed. If you want do something you can:

- Read Refugee Action’s analysis [Fires Don’t Happen in a Vacuum](#) and take part in the linked [write to your MP action](#)
- Sign Freedom from Torture's [petition to close the barracks](#)
- [38 Degrees has also opened a petition to close the Napier barracks](#) and
- [Hastings Community of Sanctuary has a petition to close all barracks](#)

NEW DETENTION CENTRE PLANNED

We were dismayed to learn of proposals to build a new Immigration Detention and Removal Centre at [Hassockfield](#) on the site of the former notorious Meldomsley Youth Detention Centre (owned by the Ministry of Justice). Durham County Council had approved [plans](#) from Homes England for 127 new homes on the site.

There is currently little information about the proposal, but it is expected that 80 women will be detained there. Some members of LD4SOS are working urgently, on a cross-Party basis with partner agencies and local and national politicians, to find out more and campaign against this proposal.

It is clear Liberal Democrat policy that the detention estate must be reduced, and 8 out of 10 detention centres discarded; you can read more about our firm policies on Immigration Detention in the UK [here](#)

It is incredibly disappointing that, when there is so much evidence of the cost and harm caused by Detention Centres, yet another one is planned, especially for very vulnerable people on a site with a terrible history. The location, just north of Consett in County Durham, is difficult to reach for legal help and other support, and a very long way from an airport for those who do have to be removed.

Local people are being told that the centre is for “illegals and criminals”. There is no such thing as “an illegal”, all are people, but some have contravened our immigration laws, in varying degrees. All who have had criminal convictions, which vary in severity widely, will have already served their sentence, and would have been released into the community if they were UK citizens.

BUT SUCCESS ON THE YARLSWOOD CAMPAIGN

Following campaigning by local groups the Home Office has confirmed that it is [dropping plans to accommodate 200 people seeking asylum at a site next door to Yarl's Wood IRC](#).

Rosie Newbigging, who crowdfunded for legal action against the proposed site, said: ‘It just goes to show that if you fight back, you might just win’, whilst a local MP, Mohammed Yasin [stated](#): ‘It was a terrible idea to house a vulnerable group of people in hostile, inappropriate and unsafe accommodation in the middle of a pandemic.’ We agree!

NEW CAMPAIGN ON ASYLUM REPORTING

In early February, organisers at These Walls Must Fall joined with Migrants Organise to host a meeting for representatives of over 50 refugee and migrant campaigning groups. This was to discuss a national campaign for change in the immigration bail reporting system, which causes enormous stress and fear amongst many asylum seekers. The constant threat of being arbitrarily detained has a major impact on mental health, particularly during the pandemic.

The next event is on 3 March, when working groups will present outlines, aims, principles and strategy for discussion. There is more info and event registration [here](#). And if you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to get in touch with the organising team via signing@detention.org.uk.

STAR Equal Access Network:

Activists from Student Action for Refugees have launched their Equal Access Network to promote an open, interactive and friendly forum where students from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in the UK can connect and learn from each other's experiences of higher education. For more info join the Equal Access Facebook group or email equalaccess@star-network.org.uk.

GIVE REFUGEES MORE TIME AND SAVE MONEY

When asylum seekers are granted refugee status they have only four weeks before they are evicted from their accommodation, and their benefits (currently £37.75 a week) stopped. During this time they need to do a range of things to ensure their survival, including opening a bank account, finding a new job to get paid or successfully applying for mainstream benefits, and finding somewhere else to live.

Recent [research](#) carried out by the British Red Cross and LSE's Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) has calculated that extending the asylum support available to newly recognised refugees from four weeks to eight weeks could save the UK economy millions of pounds each year by easing the pressure on local authorities, the NHS and charities, who are currently having to respond to destitution and homelessness among this group. Local Authorities would save more than £2million each year as a direct result of giving refugees longer to find permanent accommodation rather than having to use the often more costly Local Authority temporary accommodation. Currently over 5000 people a year would benefit from this simple change.

Liberal Democrat policy is to extend the period that new refugees must find their own accommodation to 12 weeks and that, from three months after lodging their application, asylum seekers should be allowed (and supported) to work.

BEYOND THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

In its final report on the "hostile environment", this [Institute for Public Policy research report](#) assesses six different policy options for addressing its adverse impacts on individuals and communities, and for reforming the current system of immigration enforcement.

In responding to this report Alistair Carmichael said:

"As this report shows, the UK's immigration system is broken and it is hurting us all. The appalling Windrush Scandal should have been the end of the Hostile Environment, but despite their apologies the Conservatives have kept their cruel, discriminatory policies in force.

"People who have every right to live in the UK are wrongfully denied healthcare, made homeless, detained and even deported. Public confidence in the system has been shattered. This has to stop.

"We owe it to the victims of the Windrush Scandal to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again. That's why Liberal Democrats are fighting to scrap the Hostile Environment and build a fair immigration system that works for the UK and treats everyone with dignity and respect.

"We must build a more compassionate UK, where those who choose to come here to work, study or join their families are welcomed for the skills and contributions that they bring."

'Save the date' - Celebrating Sanctuary – week of online events:

City of Sanctuary are inviting groups to hold 'Celebrating Sanctuary' online events during the week **19 to 25 April** and: make a public declaration of support for sanctuary; celebrate the welcome offered to people seeking sanctuary across communities in all parts of the UK; celebrate the positive contribution people seeking sanctuary have made; and develop positive relationships with decision makers at all levels. More information is [here](#).

LD4SOS AT CONFERENCE

SCOTTISH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS CONFERENCE

Fringe meeting

12.45 Friday 5th March 2021

How are Councils in Scotland responding to those seeking sanctuary?

LD4SOS Council member **Suzanne Fletcher** in conversation with **Cllr Fiona Dryburgh** with time for questions.

FEDERAL SPRING CONFERENCE

Our Conference Fringe:

1.00p.m. to 2.15p.m. Saturday 20th March

Refugee family reunion: Brexit and Covid-19 double whammy?

(How) have Brexit and Covid-19 impacted refugee family reunion? What can civil society and Parliamentarians do to create pathways to protection

LD4SOS Council member **Dr Ruvi Ziegler** (Associate Professor in International Refugee Law, University of Reading) will chair a discussion with:

Enver Solomon, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council

Baroness Sally Hamwee, Liberal Democrat Lords Spokesperson for Immigration

There will of course be plenty of time for you to put your questions to our panel.

Our 'Virtual' Exhibition Stall – the Information Booth

The exhibition area will be open for most of Conference. It will be staffed by LD4SOS Council members at the following times:

- Friday 19th March: 16.15 - 17.15
- Saturday 20th March: 13.00 – 14.00 & 16.15 – 17.15.
- Sunday 21st March: 13.00 – 14.00 & 16.15 – 17.15.

In the booth there will be links to information you should find interesting, and you will be able to have text 'chats' with us, or speak to us directly by video link. Please use this opportunity! We look forward to speaking to our members and supporters at Conference and we will have Council members available at all these times.