

STAR News

THE QUARTERLY UPDATE FROM STUDENT ACTION FOR REFUGEES

Issue 39 Autumn 2008



THREE OUT OF THREE FROM THE INDEPENDENT ASYLUM COMMISSION

The Independent Asylum Commission (IAC) recently released their third and final report of conclusions and recommendations into the UK asylum process: Deserving Dignity, completing an in depth analysis of the entire process and system.

For the past two years IAC has been conducting a nationwide citizens' enquiry into the UK asylum system. Led by a team of commissioners answerable to the public, the result is a comprehensive digest of evidence gathered from several hundred individuals and organisations; collected through public hearings, written and video testimony and research. In addition the reports outline realistic and practical recommendations for change that safeguard the rights of asylum seekers and value the views of the British public.

One of the most important aspects of the IACs work has been that it has got the public talking about asylum – an ugly word among many – and thinking about it in different terms, those of sanctuary. The reports capture the public perceptions of asylum in the UK and the values British people think should underpin how refugees are treated. Something that is essential in beating the prejudice that surrounds refugee issues today.

The final report, 'Deserving Dignity', is the last of three reports of the Commission's conclusions and recommendations. It calls for a review of detention policy, an end to child detention and gives a whopping 90 recommendations to improve the treatment of people seeking asylum. Deserving Dignity has been praised by charities such as the

Children's Society, Barnardo's and the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams added, "This is an important report that makes sensible and clear recommendations about how we should be treating some of the most vulnerable people in society. I cannot but support the calls within the report for a root and branch review of the detention of asylum seekers, having witnessed first hand the conditions inside our immigration detention centres and heard the often heartrending stories of those held there."

The reports can be viewed on the IAC website www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk

Testimony from the hearings can be viewed online at www.humanrightstv.com

PERFECTING THAT STAR QUALITY AT COMMITTEE TRAINING 2008

Mmm summer: the student holiday, ice cream in the park and of course...STAR committee training!

STAR members from Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Liverpool, London, Newcastle, Southampton, Sussex and Warwick gathered in central London for this year's committee training. The day was an opportunity for old and new committee members to meet with STAR staff, Regional Coordinators, partners in the legal and charity sector and fellow STAR members.

Choice was the theme of the day as all the students chose which workshop sessions to attend:

- A caseworker from DOST Children and Young Peoples Services and a trainee solicitor talked STARs through the asylum process including new policy changes
- The trends in the asylum process session looked in more detail at the asylum system with the Refugee Councils Media Officer.

Getting warmed up for the day's activities...



Step 1: A healthy set of lungs, some tape, hands and teeth for construction.



Step 2: Stand back and admire your work.



Step 3: Take a seat in your balloon armchair, very slowly...



North East England Regional Coordinator Richard and STAR students from London, Warwick and Sussex explore making links.

- STAR staff and Regional Coordinators advised members on how to run a successful STAR group
- A game of arrows and cards introduced the new national campaign, Let Them Work
- Sheets of paper filled with marker pen mind maps, DIY wall calendars and group discussion tackled issues of communication and partnership building, project management, planning and best practice for campaigning, volunteering and raising awareness.

Committee training is key to planning, in a practical way, how to continue the good work from last year's campaign and get some more good stuff for this year's campaign. Getting representatives from

the different parts of the STAR community face to face is not a regular feature but with upcoming campaign advisory groups, training sessions and the launch of the members' forum communication will continue to grow, and is why committee training is so important.

STAR members agreed that the day had left them more confident about refugee issues and had polished up their skills to run a STAR group. The praise does not stop there; the day was hailed as fun, creative, enthusiastic, effective, friendly and engaging! The students also evaluated points for improvement for next year to add more great adjectives to the list – thesaurus at the ready!

See you next year!

TAKING ACTION

SERVE BEER AT FESTIVALS AND MAKE MONEY FOR STAR

STAR teamed up with the Workers Beer Company again this year to raise funds at festivals throughout the summer.

STAR volunteers at festivals, including Glastonbury, Leeds and Reading, worked six-hour shifts for the Workers Beer Company bar each day. In return, each volunteer received free travel and entry to the festivals to witness music as diverse as CSS to Jay-Z. Most importantly all their wages went to STAR's kitty! Last year, volunteers raised over £1500, a huge contribution to the work of the STAR national support office – assisting the student network.

The Workers Beer Company employs thousands of volunteers to serve drinks at outdoor events, from small community gatherings to large music festivals, to raise money for grass root organisations.

One student who volunteered at the Latitude festival in Suffolk, said, "It was great. It's a lovely festival, really chilled out. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed all the non-music stuff like the theatre and the poetry, but the bands were awesome too."

If this sounds like your thing, look out over the next few months for the opportunity to volunteer in summer 2009.

BACK TO UNI

Welcome back STARs, hope you enjoyed the long-but-still-not-long-enough summer and for all the lucky ones with a bit more to go, well enjoy!

The approaching freshers' fair is a great place to recruit some more STARs. By now STAR groups should be in possession of freshers' packs – a freshers stall in a box – and raring to go! As always, the STAR national support office will be there at the busy start of term to support groups with their stalls and with early term meetings – to support groups in raising awareness about refugee issues and about STAR. Please get in touch to arrange a visit.

MEMBERS FORUM IS GO GO!

The members' forum on the STAR network website will be well and truly alive and kicking this September ready for the start of the new academic year.

There are master discussion topics ready and waiting for your posts right now!

See you in the forum...

PICNIC IN THE PARK WITH LIVERPOOL STAR

Liverpool STAR ended an active year by joining in with a fun-filled summer picnic, which took place on the second May Bank Holiday. Around twenty-five students, refugees and staff from a local refugee support centre Asylum Link attended. We all bought food together and walked to a quiet part of Sefton Park. People were keen to attend – Asylum Link is closed on Bank Holiday weekends and exams had all finished.

We played football, Frisbee and bat and ball games before sitting down to have a good lunch, made up of a mixture of home made salads, hummus, fruit and nice bread. This was a great opportunity for newcomers and old friends to enjoy time together.

Community volunteering like this is greatly important. The picnic involved refugees and students together, taking part in an especially happy occasion. I would recommend a summer event like this to STAR groups for next year.

Patrick Scott-Graham, Liverpool STAR

A STAR member enjoys the fresh air at the Liverpool picnic



NATIONAL SUPPORT UPDATE

STAFF CHANGES AT THE NATIONAL SUPPORT OFFICE

At the end of the summer Natasha King, Student Outreach Officer, and Russell Brooks, Volunteering Support Officer leave STAR for pastures new.



"After three years at STAR I'm off to become a student again myself. It's been such a privilege to be involved, and apt to be moving on after three years at the same time as so

many STAR members who have been involved throughout their degrees. I have always been in complete awe at all of you who give up your spare time to support refugees and working from the National Support Office I have seen exactly how much your work is valued by other organisations supporting refugees too. I'm really excited to see where STAR goes now, onwards and upwards. I don't suppose I shall ever be able to spell "STAR" in anything other than capital letters again!" **Natasha**



"Hello STARS! It has been a real privilege to have this role and get to work with such a fantastic group of passionate, skilled and fun student volunteers for nearly two years. I still find myself

blown away on a regular basis by the impact you have for refugees and the sheer volume of activities you manage to make happen in your spare time! You've been absolutely great to work with - best of luck with all you do in the future."

Russell

We welcome Kim Hawkins as the new Volunteering Support Officer from September. STAR, at the time of print, was recruiting a new Student Outreach Officer.

MEET STAR's NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE EMMA WILLIAMS



Hi Emma. Congratulations on becoming the new Chief Executive at STAR. Could you tell us a bit about yourself, life before STAR?

I've been working with refugees in the UK for the past 13 years. For five years I ran a Vietnamese refugee community organisation in East London. From 2000 to

2008 I was National Development Manager at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, which is a human rights charity that provides rehabilitation and advocacy to survivors of political torture. While I was there I set up four new centres for survivors of torture in Manchester, Glasgow, Newcastle and Birmingham. STAR groups often helped me in my work.

We all know how great STAR is as an organisation! What do you feel makes it stand out from the rest?

The amazing student volunteers! When I saw the job advertised I jumped at the chance to work for STAR because I have met with so many incredible STAR members doing fantastic work across the UK. The work of the groups really makes a positive difference for refugees on the ground and the campaigns have an incredibly high profile.

We are just about to start the new academic year with a new campaign and strategic plan, the refugee children's programme and more, what are your three main wishes for STAR in 2008/2009?

When I got the job at STAR one of my former colleagues said to me "STAR are fantastic – don't change them!" With that in mind my three wishes for this year are:

1. That the groups continue their excellent work with refugees in their communities
2. Establish the new refugee children's programme as a valuable service for young refugees
3. That STAR is able to persuade others to be compassionate and supportive towards refugees.

In your avatar (see picture above), you are holding a plate of star shaped baked goodies, what do you like to do outside of STAR?

I really enjoy living in London and love being a tourist in my own city. I go to galleries, the theatre and festivals as much as I can.

Thank you very much Emma. Hope you enjoyed your STAR biography!

Dates for your Diaries...



6-7 September

STAR Refugee Children's Programme training, Bristol

21 September

International Day of Peace

17 October

International Day for the Eradication of Poverty

24-30 October

Disarmament Week

25 October

Community Service Volunteers (CSV)
Make a Difference Day UK

9 November

International Day against Fascism and Anti-Semitism

15-16 November

STAR National Conference, London

5 December

International Volunteer Day

10 December

Human Rights Day



The only UK conference for students on refugee issues.

Issues and action workshops, talks and debate on destitution, access to education, torture, refugees worldwide and much more. £25 per delegate

Book now at www.star-network.org.uk/conference

NEWS IN BRIEF... THE LATEST ON ASYLUM AND REFUGEE ISSUES

UK Border Agency must safeguard refugee children

STAR is a member of the Refugee Children Consortium (RCC) which is a group of NGOs working together for the rights and needs of refugee children to be promoted, respected and met to the relevant domestic, regional and international standards.

After relentless campaigning by the RCC, the Home Office UK Border Agency (UKBA) now has a legal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of refugee children. This duty is part of Section 11 of the Children Act 2004.

Two of the RCC members: Barnardo's and The Children's Society have broadly welcomed the news that the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) have taken a lead on this issue and undertaken a positive dialogue with the RCC. However, they are disappointed with the delay and call on the DCSF to continue to engage with the RCC to ensure this is an equal duty to Section 11, which is not simply to have regard to a code of practice.

This announcement, made in June by the Home Office and DCSF is part of the upcoming Immigration Bill. This inclusion should ensure more robust protection for children and young people in the care of the immigration system.

UNCHR reviews the British asylum system

In July, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) published findings from its fifth audit report on the British asylum system. At the Government's invitation, UNHCR has audited the Home Office's first-instance asylum decisions since 2004 under a project called the Quality Initiative. Decision-making in detention centres was the main focus of the report.

The audit expressed concerns over the UK Border Agency's Detained Fast Track Initiative – a quick process to determine refugee status, sometimes within three days. The report concluded that this emphasis on speed hinders fully comprehensive decision making by the caseworker.

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Registered Charity Number 1079042 Registered Company Number 3902118