

# Is the government changing its stance towards asylum seekers? Don't hold your breath



*Olivia Bridge discusses the latest changes in government policy on matters concerning asylum seekers. She argues that far from improving the currently insufficient and controversial system, the government appears to have no desire to step down from its hostile environment policy.*

The UK is currently experiencing an unprecedented rise in support for asylum seekers: 47% Britons believe refugees ought to be eligible for [British Citizenship](#) while 52% claimed they deserve more governmental support, according to the Aurora Humanitarian Index study. It's surprising that Brexit has played a crucial role in this shift of opinion because while tighter border controls were one of the rallying points for Leave campaigners, 39% of the population now believe leaving the EU has bolstered migrant support.

However, the latest [Brexit white paper](#) appears out of touch with this theory and offered no comfort to future asylum seekers and refugees. The paper promises a 'whole of route' approach in which 'interventions at every stage of the migrant journey' are to be made. The UK-EU alliance hopes that 'no new incentives are created to make dangerous journeys to Europe', controversially and paradoxically, by tightening Europe's external border. Migrants evading persecution and extreme violence will have to travel along more dangerous paths than the fatal ones they were already taking. The document also foresees that refugees can be deported, either to their home country, or to a country they briefly travelled through.

The paper appears ambiguous and diluted in the eyes of campaigners who want significant change. While the UK seems willing to help asylum seekers, the Home Office will first dispute over ownership with the EU and shuttle unwanted refugees back and forth – even though this policy was already in place under the Dublin Regulation since 1990. Like always, EU countries are able to deport migrants back to the first safe country of entry. The policy was reinstated in the European Court of Justice only in July 2017.

The only real push for change in the document is minuscule at best. The white paper promises to 'enable unaccompanied asylum seeking children in the EU to join close family members in the UK'. Children will no longer face going into authoritative and local care while their parents are deported elsewhere – a scandal that was exposed by the charity Bail for Immigration Detainees in 2013. Refugee minors can now cross into the UK and be reunited with their family members. The government finally recognises the humanitarian need of keeping families together, yet it is hardly cause for celebration.

The most progressive U-turn in recent news regarding immigration stands outside of the white paper entirely. A judicial review triggered by the Children's Society now means that lone children in immigration cases will be entitled to legal aid. The five-year-long legal battle occurred when cuts to the scheme came into force in 2013, a scheme thought to have affected around 15,000 migrant children. The suffering that these children endured to get to the UK was exacerbated by the hostility of British organisations and officials when they got here. Now, children travelling alone and without any family or a support network to rely on will be granted one.

However, the UK is still home to some of the largest immigration detention centres in Europe, holding as many as 3,500 migrants at a time and is still the only country that has no time limit on how long a person can be detained. This means that traumatised migrants seeking asylum from unimaginable terror are hunted by British detention vans and can be locked away in detention centres indefinitely.

In 2017, the average cost to hold one individual in detention was estimated at around [£86 per day](#). Since the Home Office can take longer than 52 weeks to respond to appellants, the government is pumping a considerably large sum of money into a failing system. In 2017, only 32% of asylum applicants were immediately accepted and of those who were rejected and went to appeal, 35% were overturned. To add insult to injury, the Home Office mistakenly detained over 850 migrants between 2012 to 2017, even though the majority were actually living in the UK legally. The hiccup cost the Home Office £21 million in compensation, causing many critics such as the working party JUSTICE to take a stand against Home Office incompetence. Fortunately, the government have now introduced new guidelines that came into effect in July 2018 that mark extremely vulnerable and 'at risk' migrants exempt from being imprisoned in detention units. The move comes as [a number](#) of detainees [commit suicide](#) while [their application status is pending](#) or is unfairly refused by the Home Office.

Yet even if asylum seekers are now avoiding detention, they still don't get off scot-free: they face extreme poverty instead. They live on a pittance allowance of £5-6 per day ([£37.75 per week](#)) with around an extra 42p a day given per child and for pregnant mothers. Migrant families are keen to start work and earn a living yet doing so would endanger their pending immigration status. Running the risk of breaking immigration law by working illegally, refugees in this position face detention if not deportation.

These slight tweaks to policies are just a drop in the ocean when it comes to weighing up the problems of immigration in the UK. There are still no adequate sanctuaries for refugees and families, let alone the red-carpet roll-out that some critics of the white paper are claiming exists. The government have only restored human rights to refugee children that should never have been taken from them in the first place. Migrant families will still live in destitution and poverty. Strengthened borders will only promote more life-threatening routes. Immigration detention centres are still in dire need of reform.

In reality, the government are offering no real revolutionary reform with migrant matters in mind. The white paper's blank absences speak for themselves: the government has no desire to step down from its 'hostile environment' at all.

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## About the Author



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