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Introduction from our Chair, Irene Austin

At Herts Welcomes Refugees we welcome and support those who arrive seeking sanctuary here. We are aware that there has been a lot of anti-refugee rhetoric recently, particularly during the riots in the summer of 2024.

Our volunteer, Dr Marianne Coleman, has been privileged to take testimonies from 35 young men who found their way to Hertfordshire and have now been given leave to remain in the UK.

For the contributors' own safety, these harrowing stories have been amalgamated into our 'Forced to Flee' report, ensuring their anonymity. They make powerful reading and show that the parents of the young refugees had no choice but to send their sons away, despite the danger they would then face: 'In all of the cases the individuals had left because they were in danger of imprisonment or losing their life.' This dispels the myth that they are economic migrants.

As the British-Somali poet Warsan Shire says in her poem Home 'no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.' We hope you will read these stories which show that these young men were forced to flee their homes, the terrible journeys they had to make and the courage they have shown in their quest to claim asylum, a universal human right.

Forced to Flee: from the author, Dr Marianne Coleman

Between March and July 2024, I interviewed 35 single people, only one of whom was a woman. Details of her leaving and her journey have not been included as she experienced severe trauma.

All of those interviewed were under 35 years of age, the majority were under 25 when they left their home countries and several were aged only 18 or 19. They had all claimed asylum in the UK during 2022, and after approximately two years, had just been given refugee status.

It was clear that the circumstances in which they had left their home country, the enforced separation from their families and the difficulties of the journey had impacted on the physical and mental health of the young people and some of them have been deeply traumatised by their experiences. Despite this, they are all keen to improve their English, to find work and contribute to society.

Dr Marianne Coleman, Herts Welcomes Refugees volunteer

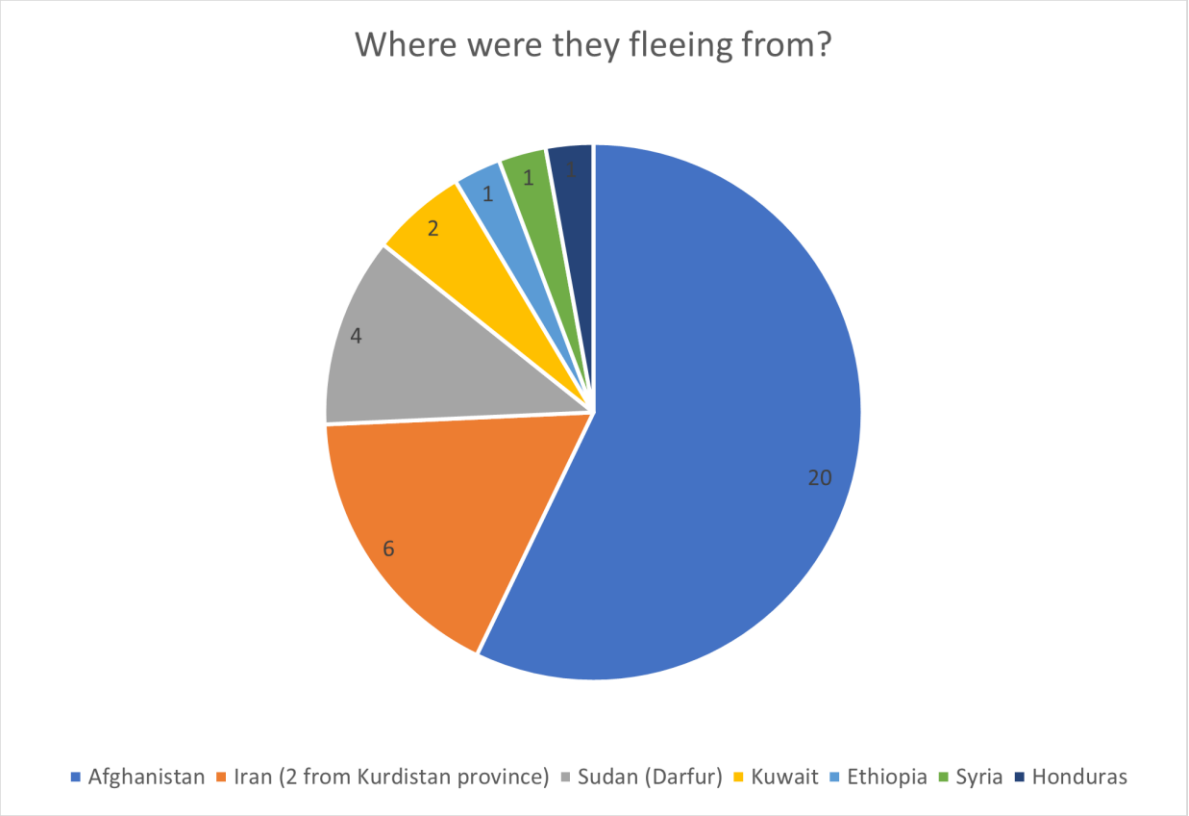
***Update October 2026**: 'I have now interviewed well over 150 young men and the findings on the reasons why they leave remain the same.*

One change has been the increase in the numbers coming from Sudan, where there is continuing civil warfare. There is also an increase in numbers from Eritrea as well as Ethiopia. In Eritrea, there is no end date to compulsory military service, a situation which has been likened to state slavery.

This edition of the report includes an updated Appendix, The Facts about Immigration. More facts are available at https://www.hertswelcomes.org.uk/factsandfigures.htm.l'

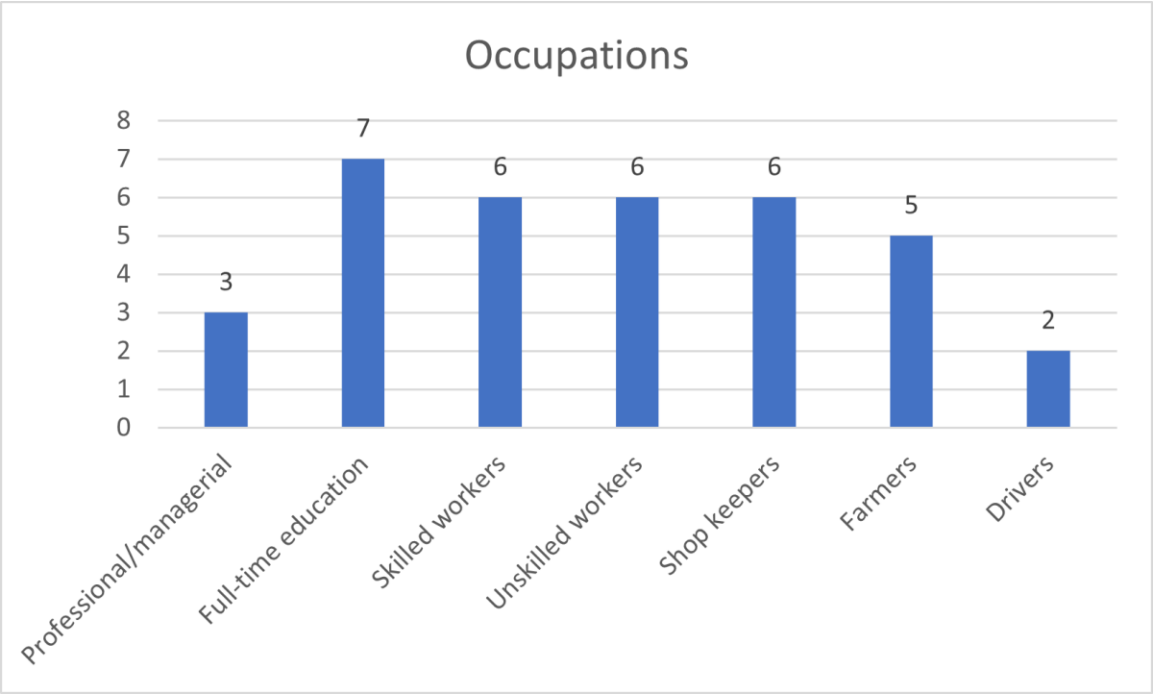
Where were the refugees fleeing from?

In 2024, the largest proportion of our interviewees came from Afghanistan and Iran. This was in line with national statistics for that year. Afghanistan and Iran were the top two countries of origin of asylum seekers crossing the Channel in 2024, and the vast majority of asylum seekers from these two countries were then granted refugee status.



Typically, they had been living in extended families, including parents, siblings and, in ten cases, their wives. Only three had a child or children.

What were they doing in their home countries?



In the category ‘unskilled’ two could not work as they did not have citizenship in their home country and one could not work as it was simply too dangerous to leave the family home. That family were relying solely on food aid.

Why did they leave?

In all of the cases the individuals had left because they were in danger of imprisonment or losing their life. In general they had not wanted to leave but were urged to do so by family in order to save their lives.

All of the Afghans had left their homes and families because of the actions of the Taliban. They, or their families, had been loyal to the government prior to the Taliban takeover, sometimes in direct government employ or providing goods and services to the government. Several reported that family members had been killed by the Taliban and others had suffered beatings.

> *When the Taliban arrived in Kabul, they came through the city checking all the houses, and about ten days after their arrival they got to his house, and his brother, who was then 19, objected and resisted, and the Taliban took him away. The family have not seen or heard from him since. No one knows where he is. His mother cries all the time. When they first took his brother, he looked for him for two weeks, running the risk of the Taliban capturing him, like his brother, so his mother told him to leave the country so at least one of her sons would survive.*

One young man had started university where he was in the first year of studying economics.

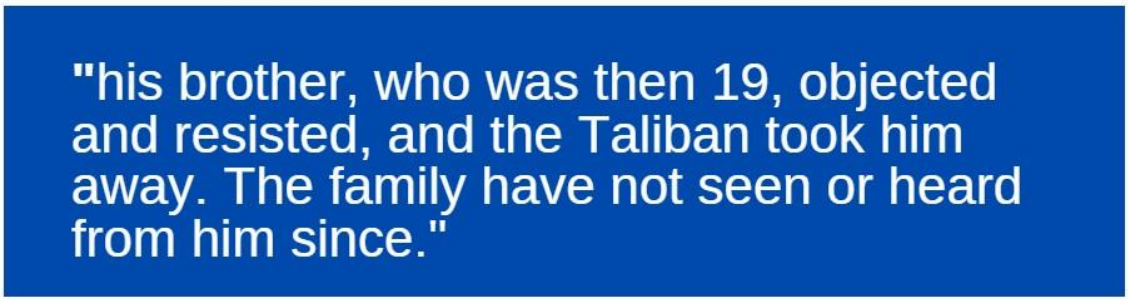
> *His father was the head of a tribe, a respected man in the area, and he supported the government before the Taliban took over. During one Friday prayers he asked people not to let their sons work with the Taliban. Because of that, the Taliban targeted him and, during a subsequent Friday prayers, they came and killed him.*

The Afghans commented on the severe restrictions that the Taliban placed on the women and girls:

> *He has five sisters and they are continually distressed and fearful because of the restrictions on them. The Taliban do not allow women to go out at all unless they are covered and accompanied by a man, and they are not allowed to study. They are fearful as the Taliban capture any woman who is not accompanied by a man and put them in prison. There is also the fear of rape and forced marriage to a member of the Taliban.*

The Taliban takeover of government has led to families being split apart, and in some cases, losing contact with each other, causing additional levels of stress for those who have survived, both in the UK and in the home country.

> *He with his father and brother fled to the border with Iran where they split up and lost each other. His father stayed in Iran and his brother was caught and deported from Iran back to Kabul. He was beaten and spent about six weeks in jail. ..... His mother, who has diabetes, is sick with the worry about her family.*



Of the six refugees from Iran, two from the Iranian province of Kurdistan, all had left after expressing opposition to the government. In addition, three of them knew that their lives were in danger following their conversion to Christianity.

> *They tried to force him to answer questions. He was forced to sign a paper to say that he recognised he was breaking the law. They told him that if he went to church, he would be killed. They tried to get him to renounce his Christian beliefs. They beat him even more than his friends. After a while they let him go. He felt broken and sad, he did not want to renounce his religion and he tried his best to continue as a Christian but it was really hard.*

One young man who had joined a demonstration against the government had been fired on with rubber bullets. His conversion to Christianity led to him being stopped by non-uniformed police:

> *They tied his hands and feet, put a bag over his head and put him in a car. When they arrived, they took the bag off, and tried to ask him if he was Christian. He tried to tell them that he was not going to church any more. They reminded hm that he would be killed if he did not renounce Christianity and he had to sign the paper to say he would not be Christian. They put a bag on his head again and then let him go, and he had to walk for an hour in pain. At last, he found he was close to home. They had taken his phone so he had not been able to contact his family. When he reached his family, they were shocked and got him some medical help. He recovered physically but not mentally and as a result he was not able to work.*

The Sudanese

The refugees who had left Darfur, in Sudan, left a lawless, war-torn country where any anti-government action was repressed. One of the young men had lost all four of his brothers in civil war. Another recounted how:

> *The police randomly arrested people and he was arrested along with a group of other young men, and put in prison where he suffered regular beatings with wooden batons and was often kicked by the guards. This happened during the day and also during the night when the prisoners were sleeping.*

Inevitably the difficulties meant that communications were disrupted and families split up through no fault of their own.

> *He is very worried about his wife and his parents who he feels are in a very bad situation. The internet has been disabled by the government and it is not possible for him to be in contact with either his wife or his parents. Not knowing how they all are is very stressful for him.*

In all cases the refugees were leaving largely because of the lawlessness and arbitrary treatment that they might receive if they stayed. In most cases they feared for their lives and had either witnessed the death of a close relative, received death threats or experienced physical and mental abuse themselves. Generally, they were leaving supportive and loving extended families unwillingly and would have stayed in their home countries under different and more tolerant governments.

The decision for them to leave was generally taken by their families who saw their going as the only way to ensure their survival.

The Journey

The routes and the length of time of the journey varied. For a small number, people smugglers handled the whole journey, presumably having been well paid. In a few cases asylum seekers were given false passports and were then able to board a flight usually to an interim country where they changed planes, and then into the UK, claiming asylum at the airport. Most of the refugees from Afghanistan and Iran were helped to leave their countries with the financial support of a member of their extended family, typically a member of an older generation, an uncle, or a father-in-law who had contacts elsewhere, often Turkey.

The majority had a difficult and dangerous time and for some the journey took months, or even years. In two cases young men had lived for several years in other European countries but in the end had not been allowed to stay.

"The majority had a difficult and dangerous time and for some the journey took months, or even years."

From Afghanistan and Iran

Source: The Financial Times https://www.ft.com/content/38969e06-a9eb-4dbb-a336-597b8e298196

Those who came from Afghanistan or Iran tended to take the same route, through Iran to Turkey then Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France and finally England. Typically, they were passed from one operative to another, sometimes walking, sometimes in a lorry or car. The journey was miserable and they were abused by the people smugglers and kept short of food and water. In addition, they were ill-treated by border guards and police as they tried to cross boundaries.

The route out of Afghanistan into Iran and from Iran to Turkey often involved walking through the night across mountains to avoid border guards. Frequently they were stopped and sent back. One young Afghan recalled:

> *They were two months in Iran and he tried nine times walking to cross the border into Turkey. The weather was very cold. Each time they were stopped and arrested, and every time they suffered beatings and the Turkish police used electric prods on them. Finally, he got through.*

A fairly typical journey exposed the cruelty of police and border guards, particularly in Bulgaria where appalling abuse occurred. Typically the police took any possessions, beat them and set dogs on them.

> *When he was in Iran, he tried three times to go to Turkey. On one occasion, the police captured him and deported him back to Iran. Once he was kidnapped in the dark, and those that captured him beat him, kicked him and*

injured him and asked ransom money from his family. Finally, he got to Turkey where he remained for four months although two of the months were spent in jail. The police threatened him with deportation back to Afghanistan. He managed to go to Bulgaria and twice the police took his clothes and shoes and deported him and those he was travelling with back to Turkey. It was very hard in Bulgaria where he was for two months in a camp. The police beat them and what little food they had was bad. When he got to Serbia the police stopped them and said they were not allowed to stay, and they took their money and phones. They walked for two days and got to Hungary, walking in very cold weather, but the police did not allow them to enter. After one day in Hungary, they were moved to Austria. He was 15 days in a camp in Austria and then went to France.

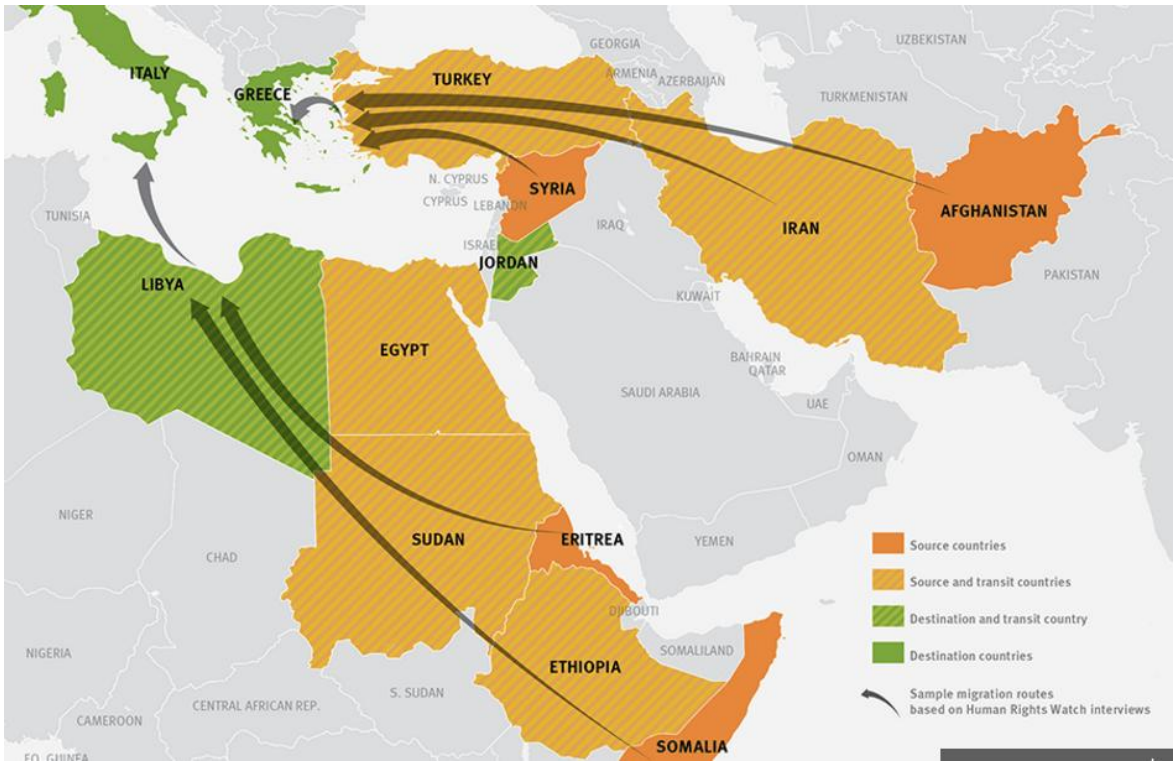
"those that captured him beat him,
kicked him and injured him
and asked ransom money from his family"

Some Afghans and Iranians spent considerable amounts of time in Turkey, usually in Istanbul, where their conditions could be considered as modern slavery. Since they did not have official papers, they lived in fear of being exposed to the authorities and being deported back to their home countries. As a result, they were exploited, paid very little and kept in miserable conditions.

Many of the asylum seekers did not know where they were, or where they were going:

When they left Istanbul, he could not tell which countries they went to. They were in the forest, and when they got to a river, they quickly crossed it into the next country. They then walked for two days and then he knew they were in Greece. There, they were put in a small room and the people who had been managing their journey took their phones and money, beat them and would not let them speak. When they left this room, they were put in a container which he thinks, at one point was put on a big ship and they were in the container for two days. He was with many people in the container and it was hard to breathe and they did not have enough water.

From Sudan and Ethiopia



Source: The Financial Times https://www.ft.com/content/38969e06-a9eb-4dbb-a336-597b8e298196

The young men from Sudan and Ethiopia left war torn countries and earned money under difficult and inhumane circumstances in Libya to finance their journeys.

> *In Libya he met a trafficker who said he would take him to Tripoli but only after he had worked for two months on his farm. After two months another man made him work for a further two months with livestock and then he then took him and other young men to Tripoli. He was mistreated in Libya, there were armed groups who beat him and burned him with burning plastic and he has scars as a result. They cursed them all the time. He had been mistreated on the farm, not as badly as by the armed groups, but it was humiliating and included beatings and being denied rest.*

"He was mistreated in Libya, there were armed groups who beat him and burned him ... and he has scars as a result"

One young Sudanese suffered through being caught between opposing armed forces in Libya:

> *They threatened to shoot them, but when they told them that they were Sudanese they just took all of their money and everything else, only leaving their clothes scattered on the ground. Then the soldiers took them to Benghazi where there is an army base. They were given food and put in a prison. In the prison they were forced to stand for a long time, given prison clothes and interrogated. They were each put in a different cell, but in each cell, there were 25 other people. They had to take shifts in sleeping. They were there for six months and interrogated three times.*

Getting to the UK

The majority of the young people interviewed ended up at the Channel coast. It was typical for them to have to make several attempts to cross the Channel. When they were able to get on a boat it was overcrowded and dangerous. The people smugglers made them carry the boats to the water and left them to make the crossing with minimal information. In a number of cases the boats leaked or were swamped, and passengers were in danger of drowning before being helped to get to shore.

"The people smugglers made them carry the boats to the water and left them to make the crossing with minimal information"

Key Findings and Conclusion

Key Findings

- The young men interviewed left their home country because they were in fear of imprisonment or death. Some had seen family members murdered.
- Generally they had not wanted to flee.
- Most of the men were employed or had skills or professions at the time they left their country.
- The men described having loving and supportive families from whom they were now separated.
- Most of the young men undertook dangerous journeys to seek asylum and spoke of abuse during the journey.
- Many of them didn't know where they were going until they arrived in the UK.
- The countries most of the men had fled from are recognised for their lawlessness and arbitrary treatment.

Conclusion

This report dispels the myth that young men arriving on our shores are here as economic migrants. The report provides evidence that the young men had jobs and stable families at home and were forced to leave their homelands because of ill treatment and fear of persecution. Their journeys were dangerous and they encountered further abuse as they attempted to make their way to safety.

Herts Welcomes Refugees supports those who, like these young people, have arrived here seeking asylum. This support continues for those granted refugee status in the UK as they rebuild their lives here.

Acknowledgements

Herts Welcomes Refugees would like to thank, and acknowledge the help of the young refugees, some of whose stories are summarised here. Informed consent has been sought and received from those whose interviews are featured.

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Appendix: The facts about immigration

Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Article 14: 'Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution'.

1951 UN Refugee Convention 'a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.'

The Convention defines a refugee as **someone having 'a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'**

Context UK Immigration Statistics 2025

- **Study** routes accounted for 53%
- **Work** routes accounted for 29%
- **Family** routes accounted for 9%
- **Limited Formal Asylum Schemes** (Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan) accounted for 3.4%
- **Other (Irregular) Asylum routes** (mainly the small boats) accounted for 5%

Of irregular immigrants how many stay?

- Rate varies according to country of origin and differs year by year.
- The proportion of asylum claims initially allowed in 2025 was 42%, (76% in 2022). Around three quarters who were refused appeal against the decision and in 2025 40% of appeals were successful and the Home Office granted asylum to a further third on the basis that the initial decision was incorrect.
- Almost all from Sudan (94%) and Eritrea (87%) are successful with initial claims.
- In 2025 countries like India, Bangladesh and Turkey had a much lower initial success rate (between 1% and 19%)

How many people apply for asylum across Europe? What proportion in the UK?

In the year 2025 the number of first-time applications in the European Union and European Economic fell by 27% compared to 2024, (669,365 compared to 1.11 million).

- Spain received the most applicants, 141,035,415, (21% of the total).
- Italy was second (126,635) followed by France (116,370), Germany (113,170) and the UK (82,600).
- UK is 15th in Europe on terms of asylum seekers per head of the population.

Useful Sources of Information

- Asylum statistics – The House of Commons Library (2025)

https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01403/SN01403.pdf

- **The truth about asylum - Refugee Council**

https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stay-informed/explainers/the-truth-about-asylum/

- Facts about Asylum – Refugee Action

https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/facts-about-asylum/