



How to restore

CHAPTER 2

We are grateful to the British people for providing us with sanctuary in the UK. In 1976 the life of my husband was directly threatened during the civil war in Lebanon and the Home Office helped us to settle down in England. Our parents also had to flee their homes in the 1920s, and so we appreciate how important it is to be given sanctuary in another country.”

Caroline and Ohannes Koundarjian,
from Lebanon

public support for sanctuary

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The Commission’s Interim Findings focused on the asylum system and the experiences of those who had been through it in the UK. This report reflects more recent input from the Commission’s CITIZENS SPEAK consultation – which was a deliberate effort to give ordinary people a say on sanctuary in the UK.

The Commissioners wanted to know what people thought about the concept of sanctuary, what they thought about the asylum system in the UK, and what values they thought should underpin the UK’s asylum system.

RESEARCH: CITIZENS SPEAK – giving ordinary people a say on sanctuary in the UK

The CITIZENS SPEAK consultation was launched on 25th January 2008. The news of the consultation was sent to CITIZENS groups, the major media outlets, and to one thousand of the Commission’s supporters.

- A CITIZENS SPEAK website was launched (www.citizensspeak.org.uk), with details of the consultation and how people could respond online, by email or by letter.
- A partnership with Friction.tv achieved much greater exposure to the general public via internet videos.
- Citizens were encouraged to host or attend People’s Commissions to debate and discuss the values that they thought were important in relation to sanctuary.

When immigrants get here, one wonders why they didn't stop in a safe country on the way? Perhaps it's because they see a better life here so does that make them an asylum seeker or an economic refugee posing as an asylum seeker?"

Response to CITIZENS SPEAK on www.friction.tv

The CITIZENS SPEAK consultation resulted in:

- 44 emails from the general public, 14 letters from Daily Express readers, 6 letters from Independent readers;
- 19,187 hits and 225 responses to four videos posted on www.friction.tv;
- 520 citizens – as diverse as Young Farmers in Herefordshire, students at Magdalen College, Oxford, elderly people in rural Somerset, and trainee air hostesses in the South Wales valleys – taking part in over 50 'People's Commissions' across every Government Office region in Great Britain.

The majority of those who responded and did not work for a refugee organisation were critical of the asylum system and felt aggrieved by asylum seekers and the government:

- There are too many asylum seekers, and too many of them are 'bogus';
- Asylum seekers tell lies to stay in the country;
- Britain is a 'soft touch' and takes more than its fair share of asylum seekers;
- Asylum seekers are here to steal jobs and scrounge on welfare;
- Asylum seekers get preferential treatment in the allocation of housing and public services;
- Asylum seekers do not leave once their claim is refused, and the government is not effective in removing them;
- Asylum seekers are prioritised over the indigenous population, and are a threat to British culture;
- There was clear confusion between economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants.

Those alleging abuses of the system by asylum seekers were encouraged to substantiate the claim and explain how they knew about the abuse. In none of the cases did the respondent have direct experience or knowledge of the abuse; the sources commonly cited included media and 'word of mouth'.

Public Attitudes Research Project

The Commissioners decided to commission some research into public attitudes on asylum to help them understand the response to the CITIZENS SPEAK consultation. Building on the most advanced research in this area,⁴ they sought better to understand what influenced public attitudes.

- Over 40 interviews with key stakeholders in eight locations across the UK, asked local community representatives, media and authorities what affected attitudes to asylum in their area.
- 16 focus groups in eight locations across the UK, found out about attitudes to asylum and sanctuary from a diverse range of local people split by age and social class.
- An opinion poll tested attitudes to sanctuary and asylum nationally.

Findings

Results of the research into public attitudes

The Public Attitudes Research Project set out to test how the British public really feel about the concept of sanctuary, the asylum system, and the principles that they think should underpin an asylum system.

The concept of sanctuary

The Public Attitudes Research Project made the following consensus findings relating to the term ‘sanctuary’:

- People share a common understanding of the term ‘sanctuary’ as a safe, secure place in which someone can take refuge;
- People view sanctuary as an overwhelmingly positive word and can relate the concept to their own lives positively, many even citing their home, bedroom, the countryside, or a spiritual retreat as examples of their own personal sanctuary;
- People also understand and accept that sanctuary can refer to a place of safety for those from abroad who are fleeing persecution;
- People believe strongly that it is a good thing that the UK provides sanctuary to those fleeing persecution.

Attitudes to the term ‘asylum’

From the Public Attitudes Research Project, consensus emerged in the following areas relating to the term ‘asylum’:

- People do not share a common understanding of the term ‘asylum’ or ‘asylum seeker’, and do not strongly associate it with people fleeing persecution;
- People view ‘asylum’ as an overwhelmingly negative term with associations including mental illness, oppressive and disordered institutions, criminality, terrorism, benefit fraud and ‘bogus’ foreigners. They cannot relate the term ‘asylum’ to their own lives, except in a few cases negatively, citing places of stress and oppression as ‘my asylum’;
- People are not able to distinguish accurately between the different meanings of the term ‘asylum’ or ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘economic migrant’, ‘refugee’, and ‘irregular or illegal immigrant’;
- People have a strong perception that ‘asylum’ is bad, and has a negative impact on their local area.

For me, sanctuary means a safe place – a safe haven for those who need it.”

Birmingham focus group, 18-35, C2DE

To most people the term asylum seeker just means anybody coming to live off our state system.”

Cardiff focus group, 35+, ABC1