



Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

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President Lord Roger Roberts of Llandudno

DECISION MAKING

Liberal Democrats will review and reform all aspects of current asylum rules and operations that offend basic measures of fairness and justice. In particular we would seek to change the culture of disbelief that affects all people applying for asylum. The Home Office is not fit for purpose and needs radical reform. The political influence must be taken out of decision making.

To improve Britain's record on assisting people seeking sanctuary, Liberal Democrats would:

1. Establish a new dedicated unit for asylum applications, independent of central Government, to improve speed and quality of decision-making.
2. Take political influence out of decision-making on applications for visas and sanctuary and move towards a caseworker-model of support for applicants, to seek just outcomes that are right first time. It is no use moving policy-making to different departments if the Home Office retains control of the process of administering and assessing applications.
3. Provide better training for staff who deal directly with more vulnerable groups such as victims of torture or trafficking, mentally ill people, pregnant women, children and LGBT+ people. Also ensure that all civil servants working in this role are Executive Officer grade by 2022.
4. Train civil service staff better to get decisions right first time, and quickly, with performance targets based on a low level of appeals not refusals, reducing human misery and saving vast amounts of money on costly appeals.
5. Propose to re-establish the 6 month maximum target time for asylum claim decisions that there was in June 2016. All current backlogs that were built up under the former United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA) will be tackled as a priority to give dignity and justice to those who have been waiting for unacceptable amounts of time.
6. Actively promote a change of culture, away from the current unfriendly, poor quality approach towards a more normal customer friendly model, where staff see themselves as caseworkers, there to help people navigate the system and provide appropriate support, whatever the outcome of their application. This would be alongside changes in departmental responsibilities for migration policy.
7. Move towards a caseworker model in order to encourage a change of culture in evaluating cases.
8. There would also be recruitment drives outside the Civil Service to attract professionals with relevant skills and emotional intelligence from other sectors.
9. Improve the appeals process by transferring the cost from the Ministry of Justice to the new dedicated unit for asylum applications, thereby incentivising getting it 'right first time'. Not only do we treat asylum seekers poorly, the Home Office has a shockingly poor record on correctly assessing their claims. Over 40% of appeals against asylum decisions are upheld. This is an unacceptably high number of decisions for the Home Office to be getting wrong. It is vitally important that as many decisions as possible are right first time, as it saves time, money and prolonged misery.

10. Ensure an effective review and arbitration process to allow any decision apparently taken outside the rules to be rectified before reaching appeal.
11. Review and reform all aspects of current asylum rules and operations. The initial focus would be on how the rules affect LGBT+ applicants, child-led family reunification applications and those who fled because of their religious or non-religious beliefs, or who are at risk if returned because they have since converted to another faith or belief. Never, in any circumstances, refuse an LGBT+ applicant on the basis that they could be discreet. The system is riddled with nasty, unfair elements that Government Ministers continue to defend despite the evidence that they are not necessary.
12. Improve arrangements where unification is deemed to be in the interests of the child. The Home Office appears astonishingly unsympathetic; for children wanting their parents to join them, the UK Government is outrageously opposed to copying the rest of Europe in allowing such family reunification. The presumption should be in favour of family reunification except in those rare cases where it is not in the interests of the child. We need to ensure that caseworkers making these decisions have the appropriate training and skill set to understand the key issues and to question sensitively.
13. Support restoring the arrangements for legal aid for seekers of sanctuary that existed before *The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Act 2012*.
14. Ensure that better interpretation and translation services are available at each stage of the process, with safeguards in place to ensure that interpreters and translators dealing with each case have the language knowledge required. This would ensure a common understanding of the issues, and enable the correct decision to be arrived at more quickly and cost-effectively.
15. Use accurate, up-to-date understanding of relevant Country of Origin Information, which must be provided to decision makers.