

Asylum Support Appeals Project Strategic Plan 2019–2024

'With great confidence I can say that every
asylum seeker should use this service'

Destitute asylum seeker represented by ASAP, October 2017



History of ASAP

- In 2000, the government separated housing and financial support for asylum seekers from British citizens.
- Asylum seekers had to apply for a lower level of support to the Home Office, with the right of appeal if refused, but without legal aid.
- People were left to navigate this complex area of law alone, defending themselves against a Home Office advisor despite language and cultural barriers and a lack of technical knowledge.
- A group of solicitors lobbied for legal aid to be reinstated, and when this was refused, they founded ASAP in 2003 to provide free legal representation for asylum support appeals.

Introduction

ASAP's strategic plan for 2019–2024 sets our direction for the coming 5 years. It is rooted in a series of consultations carried out by ASAP in 2018 with current and previous staff, volunteers, management committee members, people who use ASAP's services, and organisations that support them. In total we received feedback from 59 stakeholders, including 21 people seeking asylum. The consultation assessed the challenges facing the sector, the needs of our service users and the work ASAP should continue or develop in the coming 5 years.

Summary of key findings from consultation

Many stakeholders asked ASAP to continue much of the work already in place:

- All stakeholders said that ASAP's free legal representation at the Asylum Support Tribunal would continue to be vital
- All organisations flagged ASAP's training provision and second tier advice as essential, particularly given the funding cuts the sector has faced to advice on asylum support, and the high demand for services
- Many identified ASAP's advice line and the Asylum Support Advice Network (ASAN) as key tools for building skills, alongside the diversity of training tools
- Several commented on the increasing need for ASAP's policy work in the face of the 'hostile environment' and possible erosions of asylum seekers' rights post-Brexit.

Thinking about areas for development:

- Service users highlighted the level of fear and confusion they faced when attending and travelling to appeals, and requested more preparation to understand what would happen on the day
- Staff and volunteers felt that ASAP should focus on developing its service for video link appellants, those with mental health needs, and women, all of whom face additional barriers to accessing justice
- With the aim of building skills in asylum support, organisations requested an expansion of the advice line, and development of shorter training modules. Staff suggested an 'asylum support champions group' to build expertise among advice workers around the UK
- In the policy sphere, respondents suggested better mapping of upcoming policy opportunities, creating a standalone policy role, and making better use of ASAN to monitor trends, gather evidence and raise the voice of smaller organisations
- Internally, respondents felt that ASAP could look to diversify its funding base, improve its communications strategy and increase the voice of those with lived experience at all levels of the organisation.

Analysis of external environment

- Respondents highlighted the uncertainty of the political environment in the UK, and the potential impact of Brexit on the erosion of safeguards relevant to asylum support.
- Others identified the unhelpful narrative of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ refugees within government currently, indicating a likely reduction in rights for those fleeing their countries who do not arrive through a resettlement programme.
- Respondents noted the increasingly challenging funding environment, and the further cuts to legal aid, which impact on access to asylum support as well as peoples’ ability to regularise their status.
- Staff noted the increase in asylum seekers with no organisation assisting them (currently standing at 25%) which reflects the reduction in asylum support advice around the UK and makes it increasingly important that asylum seekers are able to self-refer to us.
- Staff and trustees identified the low level of beneficiary involvement in ASAP, and the need to address this.

Our vision

All people seeking asylum in the UK have shelter, food and support rather than living in destitution.

The Home Office and Tribunal are held to account, to ensure access to justice, dignity and equality for the people we serve.

Our values

We believe in:

- Human rights
- Access to justice
- Maintaining our independence
- Collaboration with other organisations.

We value:

- Openness and transparency
- Listening to the asylum seekers we work with
- Enabling them to explain their perspective within a complex and intimidating system of support.

What we do

We reduce destitution among asylum seekers by protecting their legal rights to food and shelter.

Who we work with

We work with people who have been forced to flee their home countries and seek safety in the UK, who then find themselves destitute and in need of food and shelter. We also work with organisations around the UK who assist them.

Theory of change

The three strands of ASAP's work tie together to achieve our goal of reducing destitution by protecting asylum seekers' legal rights to food and shelter.

1 Our free legal representation at the Asylum Support Tribunal has an immediate impact, reducing destitution for people appealing a refusal or withdrawal of support.

2 We build the skills of organisations around the UK who assist asylum seekers to apply for support, to ensure a high quality application, increasing chances of being granted support as early as possible. This also increases chances of success at appeal.

3 We use evidence gathered through both routes to influence asylum support policy through research, advocacy and strategic litigation. This reduces the systemic barriers asylum seekers face to accessing support.

Goal 1. Increasing quality representation and dignity at the Asylum Support Tribunal for all asylum seekers

We will:

- ✓ Provide high quality representation or advice for all asylum seekers attending the Tribunal.
- ✓ Increase the level of support for video link appellants.
- ✓ Enable other organisations to prepare asylum seekers for the experience of an appeal, to reduce fear and confusion.
- ✓ Reduce barriers to support for women and those with mental health needs.
- ✓ Develop awareness of ASAP among asylum seekers around the UK who cannot access advice locally.

'It made it so easy and quite straightforward.
Sitting in front of the judge alone is quite scary'
ASAP service user, July 2017

'Nobody else is doing this type of work at this level.
It is an invaluable service. Appeals are more likely to
succeed if the appellant is represented'
Solicitor firm, December 2018

Goal 2. Building the asylum support skills of other organisations to ensure asylum seekers across the UK have access to quality advice and information about their legal rights to food and shelter

We will:

- ✓ Review our training pathway, supporting advisors to move from beginner to expert through the development of modular training in a range of formats.
- ✓ Improve refugee sector coordination by managing and supporting our national network of advisors (ASAN).
- ✓ Create an 'asylum support champions' group of expert advisors around the UK.
- ✓ Synchronise our advice line with drop-in services for asylum seekers around the UK.
- ✓ Pilot a second tier 'early intervention' project, supporting organisations with asylum support applications for particularly vulnerable groups.

'The advice which is provided through the helpline and training is top quality and very important to help caseworkers assess support eligibility and know how to challenge Home Office decisions'

Small NGO, November 2018

'Since its establishment the ASAN network has been one of the best initiatives in the sector and has such an incredibly positive impact on advisors, also enabling them to connect with each other'

Advice service working with destitute asylum seekers, September 2017

Goal 3. Tackling the root causes of destitution through policy, lobbying and litigation

We will:

- ✓ Develop internal policy capacity to achieve systemic change to asylum support policy, holding the Home Office and the Asylum Support Tribunal to account.
- ✓ Harness our network of advisors to develop a national evidence base, giving small organisations a voice in the policy sphere.
- ✓ Produce robust evidence based research in collaboration with other organisations, to support our policy objectives.
- ✓ Explore strategic litigation and develop legal arguments where this is more effective than policy or advocacy work.
- ✓ Advocate for changes to policies and practices that currently increase the risk of destitution for women and people with mental health problems.

‘As an independent charity, whose ethos is based on rights, it is imperative this work continues and grows, especially with the “hostile environment” policies... having detrimental effects on people seeking asylum, one of the most vulnerable groups’

Large NGO, November 2018

Goal 4. Maintaining a well-resourced and purposeful organisation to assist asylum seekers and the organisations supporting them

While maintaining high quality financial, HR and operational processes, we will:

- ✓ Strengthen the voice and influence of those with lived experience of asylum support
- ✓ Develop resources for our volunteer lawyers, to support them to deliver a high quality service to destitute asylum seekers
- ✓ Explore the potential to diversify ASAP's funding base
- ✓ Strengthen induction processes and ongoing development for legal advisors
- ✓ Revise and relaunch ASAP's communications strategy linked to the 2019-2024 strategic plan.

ASAP in pictures: what we do, how we work



ASAP builds the asylum support skills of other organisations through training, conferences and an advice line (top right), and an online network of advisors





ASAP's advice line



Above: ASAP provides free legal representation at the Asylum Support Tribunal; below: ASAP influences asylum support policy and practice through research, advocacy and strategic litigation



DEFENDING ASYLUM SEEKERS' LEGAL RIGHTS TO FOOD AND SHELTER

'Unique, inclusive, independent, knowledgeable, impartial... always our clients are at the heart of your aims both strategically and operationally'

Organisation working with ASAP, November 2018



ASAP's staff

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