



Transcript:

An asylum seeker is a person who has asked for protection but has not received a decision on their claim.

A refugee is an individual to whom the UK government has offered protection.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work for the first 12 months after arriving in the UK.

They are entitled to 70% of income support.

85% of organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers found that their service users experienced hunger.

Narrator: Azeldin was born in Libya where he lived with his young family and worked as a banker until the Gaddafi regime forced him to serve in the army. During his time in the army he was tortured. He subsequently became active in the Islamic political movement against the regime, but this his felt his life was in danger, so in 2001 Azeldin, his wife and his children fled to the UK to seek asylum. Finding help wasn't easy, and it was other asylum seekers and a letter from the Home Office that advised him to visit Refugee Action, and organisation that helps this seldom heard group.

Azeldin El Sharif: When I came to the Refugee Action and they organised for me to go to a company who runs the housing for asylum seekers, and they put me in a really very bad house; rats, not clean, not safe. The conditions of the house is not good for humans, and I didn't know that I can complain to them as well, or ask them. I just shut up. Why? Because it's better, I'm safe now, I'm okay with my family, so I don't need anything else.

Narrator: As well as problems with housing, Azeldin had difficulties with his application for asylum which resulted in him spending time in a Detention Centre in Scotland, completely isolated from his family for

four months. He was finally granted refugee status in 2007. At this point, Azeldin was suffering from depression, so was referred for counselling, and attended a Black Minority Ethnic Mental Health Group. However, he found the best help was filling his time with activities, and a friend told Azeldin about a group called the Manchester Refugee Support Network.

Sophie King: Initially it was an informal network of refugee community organisations, and as it developed, it became ... it managed to attract funding and built up a staff, a team of paid staff, and there is now eight paid staff members.

Azeldin El Shariff: So the first step that he brought me to Manchester Refugee Support Network Advice Centre, and I met Mr Ahmed from the Sudanese Community; he was an advisor in the centre, and he speaks Arabic, so I didn't need an interpreter.

Narrator: Through advice at MRSN, Azeldin was helped to get access to services like improvement to his living conditions, social services, benefits, English lessons, and help with schools for his children. As Azeldin's life improved, he was inspired by volunteers at the MRSN to help other asylum seekers experience in the same struggles as he did.

Azeldin El Shariff: Some of the difficulties that the refugees face here, they know that they have to report if they want to stay in this country, that they don't know anything else like how the system is working in Britain. When I came into Manchester, if the Home Office didn't write a letter for me to go to Refugee Action, I wouldn't know where to go. Because when I come in, I don't trust anybody, I just ... you can say, lost.

Sophie King: Obviously, language is a big factor, the sort of cultural understandings about how systems work and how public services work are also difficult and cause difficulties for access.

Azeldin El Shariff: There is something missing in the middle which is what we need. There are organisations they provide service, and there are people in need, but there is no connection.

Sophie King: Being asylum seekers there's a lot of need for mental health services, counselling support and there's just huge waiting lists. I think there's also a cultural issue around counselling as well, you know, in our culture / society, it's a sort of accepted practice and a common thing, but that's not true for everybody.

Narrator: Azeldin now volunteers at the MRSN and acts as a general secretary for the committee. He also advises newcomers at Dallas Court, an immigration reporting centre, and runs a group that educates the local community about the Libyan culture, and helps integrate Libyans into British society.

From his personal experience, Azeldin understands the refugee community well, building trust and breaking down barriers.

Sophie King: Azeldin wears many hats. He's somebody who really spends his time doing as much as he can for the community, so he is a member of the Refugee and Migrant Forum Steering Group, and has been since its inception, and that means that he is involved in the strategic planning and development of the forum. He has also been a long term member of what we call the Basic Rights Group within the forum which is the group that has a regular dialogue with the UK border agency and has had quite a lot of success in bringing a few changes to the local immigration reporting centre.

Azeldin has been through a lot and the experience of that, and really understanding some of the most difficult parts of being an asylum seeker has enabled him to empathise with other asylum seekers and refugees and has given him a depth of understanding about what the issues are facing communities; not just the Libyan community, but all refugee and asylum seeker communities in terms of health, education, employment, legal advice and immigration issues, and that has enabled him to do a lot really in terms of giving a voice to those concerns.

Azeldin El Shariff: They are farmers, they are gardeners, they are engineers, they are many of them doctors, and they lose skills by staying without any work, or any exercise on their skills; they lose them. So what do we need to do? We need to bring them out of their depression and introduce the

system of volunteering to them. I would love to have an organisation very wide, very diverse, and also a stall every day in front of the Dallas Court or in front of the immigration, the Home Office in Liverpool, having information, different languages, and a group of people, volunteers, standing there, speaking in different languages, introducing the service in the city or in this country. You know, because when they come in, they will not trust anybody, but if they see a group of people with information trying to help them, they will come and ask for the information. They will see there is something, there is a care; there is a social care.

[End of recording]