**SYMAAG General Election May 2015 Pledges Briefing**

**A Guide for Candidates**

Those seeking asylum should have the right to work whilst in the U.K.

At present those seeking asylum and protection in the U.K. are not allowed to work. In fact those who do seek to work to support themselves and their families whilst waiting for the outcomes of asylum claims and appeals can be imprisoned.

Single asylum seekers receive ‘support’ at around £5 a day; which has been frozen since 2011.The ban on work leaves them and their families impoverished. The majority of asylum seekers have secondary or higher education and become demoralised not being able to use their skills to support their families.

Replace azure cards with adequate cash support for asylum seekers whilst in the U.K.

The Azure Card replaced the voucher system in 2009.The cashless support is available to those asylum seekers who have exhausted the claims and appeals systems and who cannot return to their countries of origin and vulnerable claimants who would be destitute without support. The card is loaded weekly with £35.39.The card is not accepted in all supermarkets; it often does not work or is refused because of till problems .It does not allow purchase of many items essential for a decent life. It causes users to be embarrassed and stigmatised when using the Card. British Red Cross research in 2014 found that

*“The Azure card system has a real impact on users’ mental health.*

*Azure card users feel embarrassed, anxious and trapped.”*

*“The Red Cross advocates that the Azure payment card should be abolished.*

*We call for one integrated form of support throughout the asylum seeking process*

*– from the person who has just arrived in the UK to someone who has been refused asylum. This support (excluding accommodation costs) must be in the form of cash, as with other benefits”*

(The Azure Payment Card: the humanitarian cost of a cashless system: British Red Cross 2014)

End the indefinite detention of asylum seekers and migrants without time limits; and introduce judicial oversight for immigration detention. End the detention of children.

According to Home Office statistics (26 February 2015) 30,365 asylum seekers and migrants were detained in Immigration detention centres in 2014. 38%of those detained were released or given right to remain as refugees. As at the end of December 2014, 3,462 people were in detention, 24% higher than the number recorded at the end of December 2013.Despite promises by politicians in 2010 to end child detention, during 2014 99 children entered Immigration detention.

Claiming asylum is not against the law those detained in Immigration centres have not committed any crime and yet they can be detained for years .Many people self-harm in detention, some commit suicide. There are well document incidents where those managing centres, often private companies like international security companies SERCO and G4S, have been found to have been committing human rights abuses. In recent months there has been widespread publicity on the plight of women who have been detained in SERCO’s Yarl’s Wood detention centre in Bedfordshire who have suffered such abuses.

Unlike prisons there is no limit on how long people can be detained in Immigration detention centres. The U.K. is the only country in the E.U. without time limits. Even Putin’s Russia has a two year time limit on immigration detention. In the U.K. people are detained in immigration detention centres by the decisions of Home Office civil servants not the courts.

There is an undeniable case for the immediate introduction of time limits on Immigration detention and allowing oversight of detention through the courts and by magistrates and judges.

Give those seeking asylum full access to healthcare and to English courses.

There have been attempts in recent years to deny health care to asylum seekers. These measures have been successfully opposed by hospital doctors and GP’s, health care workers and asylum rights organisations. Most asylum seekers have been traumatised by their experiences and their health damaged. On humanitarian grounds it is important to retain and improve health care for asylum seekers at all levels of the NHS.

Migrants and asylum seekers are reminded constantly by media and politicians that they ‘should’ learn English if they want to settle in the U.K. Of course the real situation is that asylum seekers are eager to learn English in order to build on the qualifications and skills they bring to the U.K. but they are prevented by having to wait six months before they can enrol on a course. When they qualify they find that classes and courses have been cut or closed – this has happened across South Yorkshire. This trend must be reversed and the next government should provide the resources to offer full access to English courses for asylum seekers.

Restore and give adequate legal aid for immigration and asylum cases; and enough time to make legal representations.

Asylum seekers and migrants were one of the first groups to be targeted for cuts in legal aid. Free access to justice was seen as a pillar of the welfare state, but massive cuts in legal aid for asylum and immigration cases were made in 2010 and 2011, resulting in the collapse of the two major voluntary sector providers, the Immigration Advisory Service and Refugee Migrant Justice. But the ongoing demonising of foreigners and asylum seekers ensured then that few voices were raised against cuts which of course affected immigration lawyers - the butt of attacks by successive home and justice secretaries. Now the cuts in legal aid and access to justice has affected everyone and asylum seekers are continuing to see their access even more restricted – time limits on appeals on claims, making it more difficult to lodge appeals, and putting newly arrived asylum claimants into ‘fast track’ procedures with totally inadequate legal support and advice.

If we are to have a fair and humanitarian asylum system based on clear legal rights and the international treaties and conventions U.K. governments have signed on our behalf (like the UN Refugee Convention of 1951) then adequate legal aid has to be restored and enough time guaranteed to make legal representations.

Keep families together, whatever their income, by abolishing the income threshold for family members’ visas.

New rules on family migration came into force on 9 July 2012.These rules imposed a new minimum income requirement of £18,600 for British nationals and permanent residents (‘UK sponsors’) seeking to sponsor a spouse or partner from outside Europe, rising to £22,400 to sponsor a child in addition and a further £2,400 for each further child included in the application; and the new rules on sponsorship of adult dependents from outside Europe applying to come to the UK.

Official enquiries, and well publicised cases, have demonstrated how unfair and inhuman these rules have proved to be. A particular injustice is where someone has the necessary means to sponsor an elderly relative to join the family in the U.K., they are often told that they have proved that they can therefore support grandfather or grandmother outside the U.K. and the visa is denied.

In South Yorkshire in many of the poorer areas household income in working families is actually lower than the income requirements necessary to sponsor spouses and children. All parties talk of ‘family friendly’ policies but the rules on family migration keep families apart. The 2012 rules on family migration should be repealed and income thresholds for sponsorship of family members abolished.