

Britain is one of worst places in western Europe for asylum seekers

UK has some of harshest policies, and bureaucratic delays leave many people destitute or homeless, analysis reveals



Members of the rightwing nationalist Britain First group protest against immigration in central London. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Kate Lyons, Eva Thone in Hamburg, Stephanie Kirchgaessner in Rome, Marilyne Baumard in Paris, Naiara Galarraga in Madrid

Wednesday 1 March 2017 13.00 GMT Last modified on Thursday 2 March 2017 10.27 GMT

Britain is one of the worst destinations for people seeking asylum in western Europe, according to a Guardian analysis of policies, data and reports of the conditions faced by the record recent influx of new arrivals.

At the start of a year-long project with three other newspapers on Europe's refugee crisis, the Guardian has analysed the experience of refugees and asylum seekers in the European Union's big five nations – the UK, Germany, France, Spain and Italy – and found the conditions in Britain do not compare well.

Only Italy, on the frontline of hundreds of thousands of people crossing the Mediterranean, fares worse.

The analysis found that Britain takes fewer refugees, offers less generous financial support, provides housing that is often substandard, does not give asylum seekers the right to work,

has been known to punish those who volunteer and routinely forces people into destitution and even homelessness when they are granted refugee status due to bureaucratic delays.

“We know it should be better. We know it could be improved,” said Alex Fraser, director of refugee support at the British Red Cross. “Roughly 3% of asylum applications in Europe were lodged in the UK. I don’t think we will see a reduction ... by making the experience tougher. All it will do is make the experience of people in the system more difficult.

“Given this extraordinary moment we’re having in the world at the moment, record numbers of people seeking protection, we should do everything we can to make the experience of people who have been torn apart from their families better than it is today.”

The refugee crisis has turned European politics upside down. The number of asylum seekers in Europe has soared over the past 10 years. In that time claims have increased fivefold to more than 1.2m last year, unleashing a populist backlash that could yet affect the outcome of elections in France and Germany this year.

Britain consistently has the lowest approval rates for asylum seeker claims of the five countries.

“The average grant rate in Europe is 63-65%,” said Fraser, which compares with a grant rate of roughly a third in the UK, dropping to 28% in the third quarter of 2016, which Fraser called “really low”.

“It also seems like we have got a gradual reduction in grants at initial decision and a higher rate of decisions overturned at appeal and that says something about the quality of decisions,” said Fraser.

Britain has also been rebuked for not taking its “fair share” of refugees. In 2016, Britain received 38,517 applications for asylum (one per 1,664 people in the population). This compares with 722,370 claims in Germany (one per 112), 123,432 in Italy (one per 485), and 85,244 in France (one per 775). The only western European country home to fewer asylum seekers is Spain, which had 15,500 applications in 2016 (one per 2,971).

On top of this, most of these countries are involved in refugee resettlement programmes with more ambitious aims than the UK’s commitment to taking 20,000 Syrian refugees from refugee camps by 2020.

France, which has a similar population to Britain, will take 30,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2017. Germany will begin a new humanitarian programme in 2017 to resettle 13,700 of the Syrians living in Turkey, despite the fact that an estimated 600,000 Syrians have arrived in Germany since the outbreak of war in 2011.

The British government also provides less in the way of financial support for asylum seekers than Spain, France and Germany (though not Italy). While people wait to hear if they have been granted asylum in Britain they are provided accommodation and £36.95 a week to cover food, clothing, toiletries, transport and all other costs.

In France, asylum seekers are given almost double this amount – €11 (£9.40) a day, or £65.59 a week – as well as accommodation. In December 2016, the French Council of State found that this rate was “manifestly insufficient” and ordered the French government to increase it in early 2017.

In Spain, asylum seekers are either housed in refugee reception centres where they are provided with food, clothing and other essentials and a small cash allowance, or in apartments, where they receive up to €300 (£256) a month to cover expenses and food. Germany gives asylum seekers €31.15 (£26.50) a week on top of accommodation, but this does not have to cover their food, as it does in Britain.

The condition of the accommodation provided for asylum seekers in Britain has also been condemned. A recent home affairs select committee report into asylum housing said the quality of accommodation provided to asylum seekers was “disgraceful” and cited cases of mice, rats and bed bugs.

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Britain is also the only country out of the five examined that does not set a maximum time limit for holding asylum seekers in detention facilities and the only country that does not allow unaccompanied children who arrive and claim asylum the right to apply to be reunited with their parents.

Judith Dennis, policy manager for the Refugee Council, said a major concern was the high rate of destitution and homelessness experienced by refugees in Britain.

After being granted refugee status, people stop receiving the support they have been getting as an asylum seeker and must apply to receive mainstream benefits and have 28 days to leave the accommodation provided to them by the Home Office. Because of the difficulties involved in applying for benefits, very few refugees are able to register for benefits in this 28-day period, forcing them to go to food banks and charities for food and meaning many find themselves homeless.

“What we do is force [refugees] into homelessness and destitution almost routinely,” said Dennis. “It’s hard to see how someone without an advocate or a special need that makes them a priority for council housing will be able to move on within 28 days. We would expect the majority of those who have to source private sector housing will become homeless.”

Britain also has the strictest restrictions on asylum seekers working. They are not allowed into paid employment unless they have been waiting to hear about their asylum claim for 12 months. Then they are only allowed to work in occupations featured on the government’s “shortage occupations” list, a limited set of professions including classical ballet dancers, orchestral musicians, medical practitioners and engineers.

Fraser said that while on paper asylum seekers were allowed to work, he had never met one who was able to. “It doesn’t seem to be a reality,” he said.

This contrasts with Spain where asylum seekers can work from the day they apply for asylum and are given their “red card” identification document. Vocational and language training

classes are organised at Spanish reception centres in which asylum seekers first live to help them find work. In Italy, asylum seekers can work after six months. In Germany, asylum seekers can apply for work three months after submitting their asylum claim, with certain vetting conditions. In France asylum seekers can work nine months after applying for asylum in limited occupations.

In a parliamentary debate about the right of asylum seekers to work in January, Sarah Newton, a parliamentary undersecretary of state at the Home Office, said the government opposed giving asylum seekers the right to work in order to ensure “that access to jobs is prioritised for British citizens and those with leave to remain” and to avoid a “pull factor” for asylum seekers.

This project is funded by the European Journalism Centre via a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Share your experiences

If you arrived in the the UK as a refugee or work with refugees, we would like to hear from you. We would like to find out about initiatives that are working well and also the challenges of integrating into local communities.

Share your stories and experiences, anonymously if you prefer, in the encrypted form below. We will do our best to ensure your responses are kept secure and confidential. A selection of contributions will be featured in our reporting.