

TIME TO LIFT THE BAN

**WHY THIS PARLIAMENT MUST
LIFT THE BAN ON WORK FOR
PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM**



**LIFT
THE
BAN**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Harmful representations of people on the move have been a prevalent feature of British political and media narratives in recent years, culminating in last summer's racist and anti-refugee riots. Misunderstandings and disinformation about people seeking asylum have become rife in this context.

One common myth is that employment rights act as a “pull factor” for people who seek safety in the UK. In reality, all available evidence suggests that employment rights play little or no role in determining people's choice of destination when they are seeking safety, and are largely unknown to people seeking asylum before they arrive here. But work can nevertheless be hugely important to people seeking asylum after their arrival – for their mental health, self-esteem and independence on the one hand, and for their socio-economic inclusion on the other. Enabling people to join the workforce and fill available vacancies also means national economic growth, as well as saving money.



This Lift the Ban coalition report addresses the above “pull factor” and other myths surrounding the right to work for people seeking asylum, finding that:

- The proportion of people waiting six months or more for an asylum decision has risen sharply over the last decade, from one in four at the end of 2014 (25%) to six in ten (59%) at the end 2024.
- Tens of thousands of people are currently banned from working while awaiting an asylum decision and are made forcibly dependent on state support for (often inadequate and overpriced) accommodation and subsistence in the meantime – with £8 million per day being spent on hotel accommodation alone by 2023.
- Allowing people to apply for work sooner would not only improve their lives, but also enable them to contribute to the economy, reduce public spending on the asylum system, and bolster community cohesion. And lifting the ban to allow people to work from six months is supported by 81% of the voting public, with high levels of cross-party support.
- Contrary to the “pull factor” myth, all the available evidence shows that working rights play little or no role in destination choices for people seeking asylum. The real drivers of destination choice are deeper connections like social networks, shared history and languages.
- Lifting the ban on work would bring the UK in line with other OECD member states. In countries like France, Spain, Italy and Germany, people seeking asylum gain the right to work much earlier – after six months, three months and, in some countries, even less.
- Extending the right to work to those who have been waiting six months for an asylum decision is a common-sense policy change that is popular with voters, businesses and local authorities, and is fairer to people seeking asylum themselves.

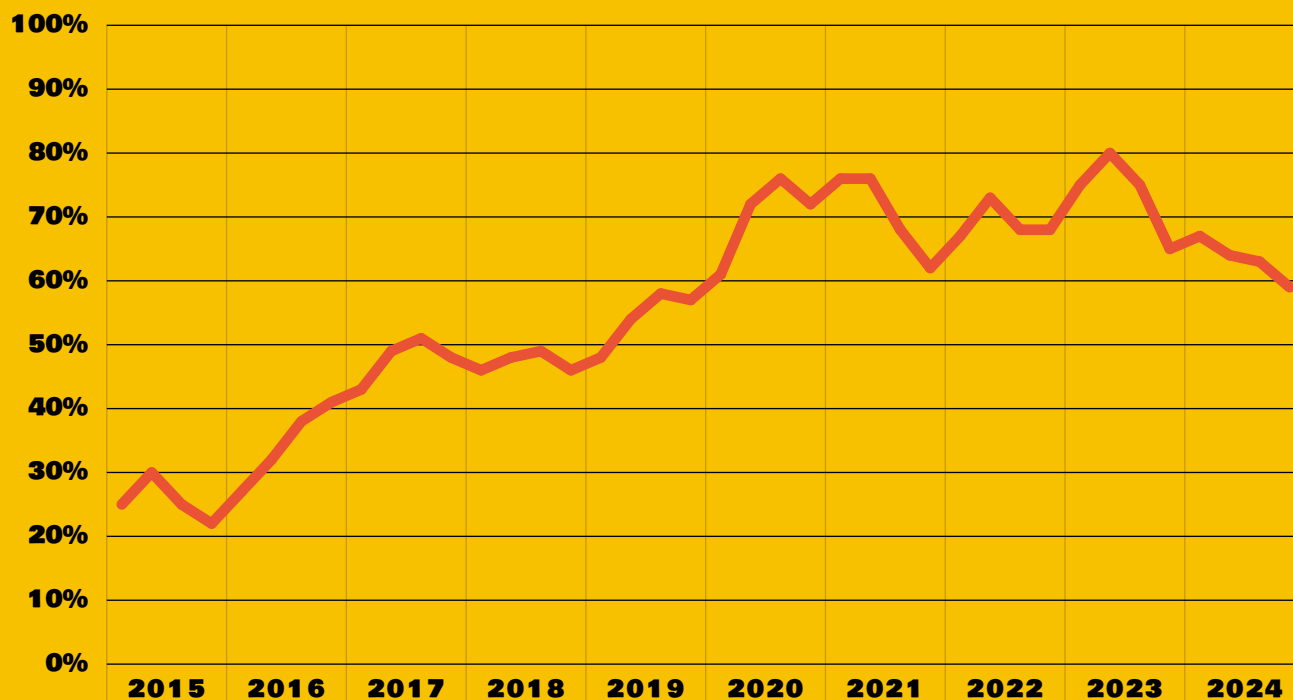
WE ARE CALLING ON THE GOVERNMENT TO LIFT THE BAN ON WORK NOW, ENABLING PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN WAITING SIX MONTHS OR MORE FOR A DECISION ON THEIR ASYLUM APPLICATION TO APPLY FOR ANY AVAILABLE JOB.

1. TIME FOR CHANGE

Currently, people seeking asylum in the UK are banned from working until they have been waiting 12 months for a decision on their asylum application. Even then, they may only apply to work in jobs on the restrictive “Immigration Salary List” (ISL). This narrow list includes professions like “skilled classical ballet dancer” but excludes many other jobs that people seeking asylum may be well placed to undertake. As a government-ordered review of the list found in 2024, the ISL even excludes professions currently suffering labour shortages, like software development.¹

The proportion of people waiting six months or more for a decision on their application, and banned from working in the meantime, has hugely increased over the last decade, from 25% at the start of 2015 to 59% at the end of 2024 (see Figure 1).² In fact, a majority of all asylum applicants have been waiting more than six months for a decision continuously since the end of June 2019.

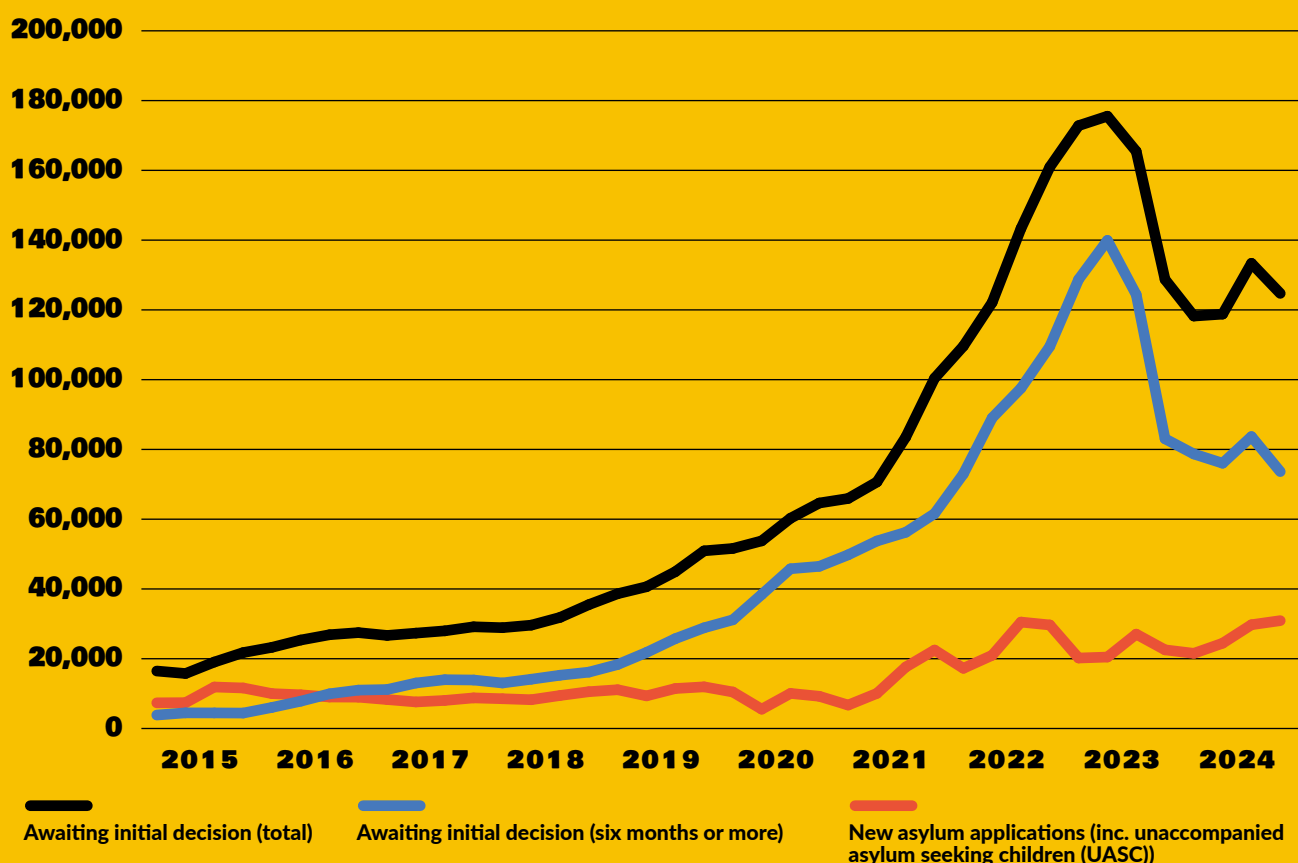
FIGURE 1: % OF PEOPLE (MAIN APPLICANTS AND DEPENDENTS) WAITING MORE THAN SIX MONTHS FOR AN INITIAL DECISION



While they await an outcome on their asylum application, tens of thousands of people are stuck in limbo, banned from working and made forcibly dependent on the state and public spending in the meantime. By 31 December 2024, 73,866 people had been awaiting an initial decision for six months or more, a massive 535% increase on the same date a decade earlier (when 11,629 people were in this position). As the chart in Figure 2 (below) shows, there has been a major increase in the number of applications awaiting an initial decision since 2019. This does not

correspond to the more modest increase in the number of new asylum applications received in the same period and instead reflects a policy under previous governments of allowing the backlog to grow. While the Home Office acted to reduce the backlog in 2023, appointing more asylum decision-makers, it remains high, and saw growth in two consecutive quarters in 2024.³ This backlog meant that by 2023 the cost of asylum hotel accommodation alone had risen to £8 million per day.⁴

FIGURE 2: ASYLUM APPLICATIONS (MAIN APPLICANTS AND DEPENDENTS) AND INITIAL DECISION BACKLOG



In the wake of the UK's racist riots in 2024, the Government committed to building "a culture of cohesion" as a remedy to "deep-rooted weaknesses ... division and decline" the violence exposed.⁵ Given the targeting of asylum hotels, people perceived to be seeking asylum and migrants more broadly during the riots – alongside mosques, Muslim communities, and racially minoritised people and businesses – it seems that this will require undoing the damage done by years of regressive asylum policy. Lifting the ban on work must be a priority in this context. Alongside the use of hotels and mass accommodation sites, the ban has contributed to conditions of de facto segregation in the UK asylum system, actively preventing people from settling in their local communities, ostracising them and making them vulnerable to additional racist "othering" and ultimately to violence of the kind we saw last summer. Allowing people to work from six months onwards will help them to forge links within their communities, decrease forced dependence on state support, and in turn combat social and economic segregation, isolation, and othering of people seeking asylum.

The 2024 General Election brought not only a new government but also a new parliament, with the majority of MPs (335) being elected to the House of Commons for the first time. New MPs were elected across the major parties – Labour, Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats – while new candidates from smaller parties won seats too, and five of the six independents elected were also first-time MPs. This refreshed parliament offers an opportunity to break with some of the failed policies of the past. There is also a consensus among many politicians, the news media, and much of the public, that the current asylum system is in crisis. Among the most urgent and critical changes needed to produce a more humane, rational, and effective approach to migration in the UK is a lifting of the ban on work for people seeking asylum. There is huge cross-party support for lifting the ban among voters,⁶ with good arguments for this policy shift coming from across the political spectrum.

While the government aims to process all asylum claims within six months – a welcome ambition in a system where many people have waited years for an outcome – we must be realistic.

When the current ban was introduced in 2002, the government at the time made an identical argument about processing times.⁷ The six-month processing target was not only missed, there has in fact been a massive increase in the proportion of people waiting longer than six months for a decision in the years since. On top of this, wider socio-economic conditions make the likelihood of the current government meeting its target slim; from the sheer scale of the backlog to the lack of available legal aid representation, there are many reasons to doubt that a universal six-month processing target is achievable in the short term.

There is also no reason that faster application processing and enhanced working rights must be mutually exclusive policies – they should in fact be complementary. Full working rights at an earlier stage would create an effective economic safety net during periods of application backlog of the kind we see currently, enabling people to earn while awaiting decisions and preventing their forced reliance on state support.



Since the last Lift the Ban coalition report in 2020,⁸ at least six other organisations have offered research-informed expert recommendations on the need to lift the ban on work. From 2023 to 2024, major reports were published by:

- the **National Institute for Economic and Social Research** (NIESR), which employed a state-of-the-art macroeconomic model to establish the current costs of the ban, and the potential savings to be made by lifting it (finding that it would increase tax revenue by £1.3 billion, reduce government expenditure by £6.7 billion, and increase GDP by £1.6 billion);⁹
- the **Commission on the Integration of Refugees**, which concluded in its Final Report that the Government should allow people seeking asylum to work after six months awaiting a decision, and should not restrict that work to jobs on the Immigration Salary List;¹⁰
- the **All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Poverty** and the **APPG on Migration**, which jointly found the ban on work to be a component of “destitution by design” in the UK’s asylum system, and concluded that lifting the ban would give people seeking asylum “the chance to support themselves and escape poverty and destitution”;¹¹
- the **Scottish Government**, which proposed a pilot scheme to lift the ban, and argued that current restrictions on the right to work form part of a system that “does not align with the values of dignity, fairness and respect that we believe should underpin policies regarding migration, asylum and refugee integration”;¹²
- the **Institute for Government**, which found that restrictions on the right to work rest on “ill-founded assumptions” and leave people seeking asylum in need of state support and accommodation, as well as more likely to experience poverty and destitution;¹³
- and **Focus on Labour Exploitation** (FLEX), which found that the work ban is putting people seeking asylum at “significant risk of exploitation” through informal employment.¹⁴

2. TIME TO BOOST THE ECONOMY

The international asylum system was created to protect people at risk, enabling them to seek refuge in the face of persecution or violence in their home countries, but it has a range of **benefits to countries receiving refugees too**. The UK's global economic position depends on making the most of the social and economic resources we have, in what are increasingly unstable times. Refugees bring skills and experience that are in demand within the national workforces of host countries, including the UK. In a skills audit of 279 clients¹⁵ supported by Lift the Ban coalition member Refugee Action's Manchester Asylum Crisis team in 2023, individuals were found to have professional backgrounds and experience ranging from agriculture and construction to sales, teaching, painting and decorating, hairdressing, and many other fields.

Enabling people seeking asylum to join the workforce and fill available vacancies means national economic growth as well as saving money. It will economically empower people to support themselves, while also saving on welfare and accommodation costs. Lifting the ban will boost the UK economy by:

- **saving public money:** In 2024, the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) employed a "state-of-the-art macroeconomic model" to analyse the costs to the public of the current ban. The findings of that study showed that lifting the ban could **cut government expenditure by £6.7 billion per year, on average**;
- **reducing labour shortages:** Research by Lift the Ban coalition member the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) found that chronic UK labour shortages have "hit businesses, disrupted plans and stifled growth",¹⁶ with **more than a third of businesses unable to respond to market demand as a result of labour shortages**;
- and **growing the economy:** NIESR's economic modelling found that lifting the ban could **increase tax revenue by £1.3 billion and increase the UK's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by £1.6 billion, annually**.

Lifting the ban would mark a move away from the economically irrational and inefficient policies of previous governments, which saw performing harm and deprivation against people on the move as more important than **fiscal discipline and getting value for money**. One of the key potential beneficiaries of this policy change would be local authorities. In a 2024 parliamentary briefing, the Local Government Association (LGA) noted that much of the financial cost associated with the current asylum system sits with local authorities.¹⁷ Of particular concern are the costs generated in relation to accommodation and public services – necessitated in part by the ban on work, which renders self-sufficiency and access to private accommodation impossible for many people seeking asylum.

While the current asylum system is costly to the state and local authorities, it is also insufficient for the people it is intended to support – lifting the ban is essential to restoring personal dignity and safety to people seeking asylum. People banned from work while awaiting an asylum decision are granted just £7 per day under the current asylum support system, or just £1.26 per day for those in barracks or hotels. This forces them to be entirely dependent upon the state for accommodation, utilities and subsistence costs. It also places them at risk. As a recent Focus on Labour Exploitation report found, the current work ban "can push people into seeking employment irregularly", which may in turn place them at "significant risk of exploitation".¹⁸



3. TIME TO DROP THE “PULL FACTOR” MYTH

Successive governments have portrayed the right to work as a “pull factor”, enticing people to seek asylum specifically in the UK rather than in other countries. This is a myth that must be dropped once and for all. In this context the work ban has been a key plank of the UK’s so-called “deterrence” policy on migration. Yet there is a wealth of evidence that working rights do not affect destination choices for people seeking asylum. As the Institute for Government (IfG) put it in 2024: “despite the decades-long dominance of pull factor orthodoxy in asylum there is little evidence to back it up”.¹⁹ In fact, one widely cited 2016 review of all academic studies on the so-called pull factor since 1997 found that the subject established that **“not one research study has found a long-term correlation between labour market access and destination choice”**,²⁰ while another academic paper concluded that “not only is there no evidence to support the pull factor thesis, there is also a large body of evidence which refutes it”.²¹

A comprehensive scientific study published by economists in 2024 looked at destination choices in tens of thousands of asylum applications from 2008 to 2020, finding that: “employment rights are not highly correlated with the number of asylum applications” and an “employment ban is hardly justified based on this evidence”.²² While working rights bore only a relatively weak correlation to destination choice, the study found that **social networks (connections people have within and across countries because of their migration histories) are “the most dominant determinants of where first-time asylum applicants locate”**. This finding resonates with Refugee Action’s analysis of asylum as a racial justice issue in the UK, which found that people applying for asylum predominantly come from countries that “have histories in which Britain was intimately involved”.²³

The reasons people may specifically seek asylum in the UK rather than another country are multiple and complex, including social networks and shared histories, rather than singular or simplistic “pull factors”. As a leaked,

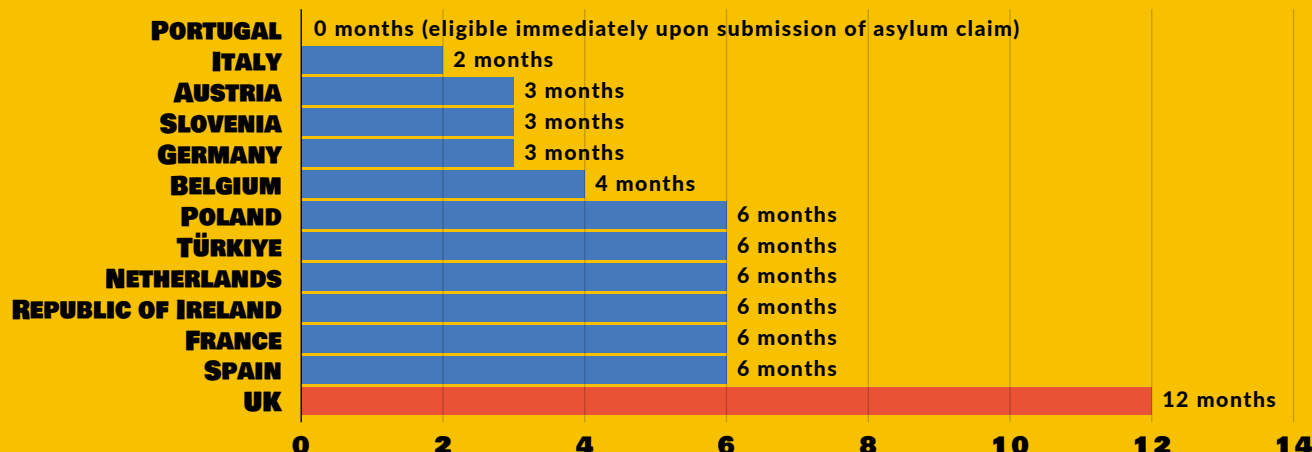
internal Home Office analysis from 2020 states: “Social networks, shared languages and diaspora communities can motivate asylum seekers to reach certain destination countries”.²⁴ The same report goes on to note that:

“The role of welfare policies, economic factors and labour market access as potential drivers of migration to the UK is limited as many asylum seekers have little to no understanding of current asylum policies and the economic conditions of a destination country”.²⁵

Unevidenced assertions about working rights as a “pull factor” in the UK also fail to stand up to scrutiny when we consider international comparators. The UK has one of the longest waiting periods of any state in the region (see Figure 3).²⁶ The length of the UK’s work ban is double – or more – than that in many other OECD countries, where six months, three months, or even less is deemed sufficient to be allowed access to the labour market. Unlike the UK, many of these countries also have few or no restrictions on the sectors and roles to which people seeking asylum can apply. Enabling people to work from six months after the submission of their asylum application would bring the UK into line with other countries in the region, and the UK would benefit from this policy as they do.



FIGURE 3: LENGTH OF TIME (IN MONTHS) BEFORE PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM GET THE RIGHT TO WORK



4. TIME FOR COMMON SENSE AND FAIRNESS

Lifting the ban and enabling people to work from six months after they submit their asylum application is a common-sense and popular policy. And it is popular not only with people seeking asylum and the organisations that support and advocate for them, but with a wide range of stakeholders:

- **It's popular with people seeking asylum:** In a survey of people who have direct experience of the asylum process, 94% said that they would work if they were allowed to.²⁷
- **It's popular with voters and the public:** A nationally representative survey of adults in Great Britain found the overwhelming majority (81%) – and a political cross-section including 81% of Conservative voters and 87% of Labour voters polled – supported lifting the ban.²⁸
- **It's popular with media:** In 2024, the *London Standard* made lifting the ban the centrepiece of its Christmas Appeal, rallying politicians, businesses and organisations in support of the right to work for people seeking asylum.
- **It's popular with businesses:** A poll of more than 1,000 business leaders found that more than two-thirds (67%) wanted to see the ban lifted.²⁹
- **The Lift the Ban coalition's signatories include business groups like the Confederation of British Industry and The Entrepreneurs Network.**
- **It's popular with local government:** Local authorities from Hastings to Hartlepool have joined our coalition to support lifting the ban on work, and 23 of them have passed motions in support of this aim. Metropolitan mayors including Andy Burnham (Manchester), Sadiq Khan (London) and Steve Rotheram (Liverpool) have also backed Lift the Ban. The current ban places additional demand on local public services while people await a decision and contributes to high rates of homelessness when they are granted asylum but struggle to find work due to a lack of UK-based employment experience.³⁰
- **It's popular with politicians:** In 2022 many of the new government's own ministers and backbench MPs voted to lift the ban, including the current Home Secretary and the Minister for Border Security and Asylum. These politicians voted, alongside 230 other MPs of all main parties, in favour of a House of Lords Amendment to the Nationality and Borders Act that would have allowed people seeking asylum to work after six months of waiting for a decision.³¹

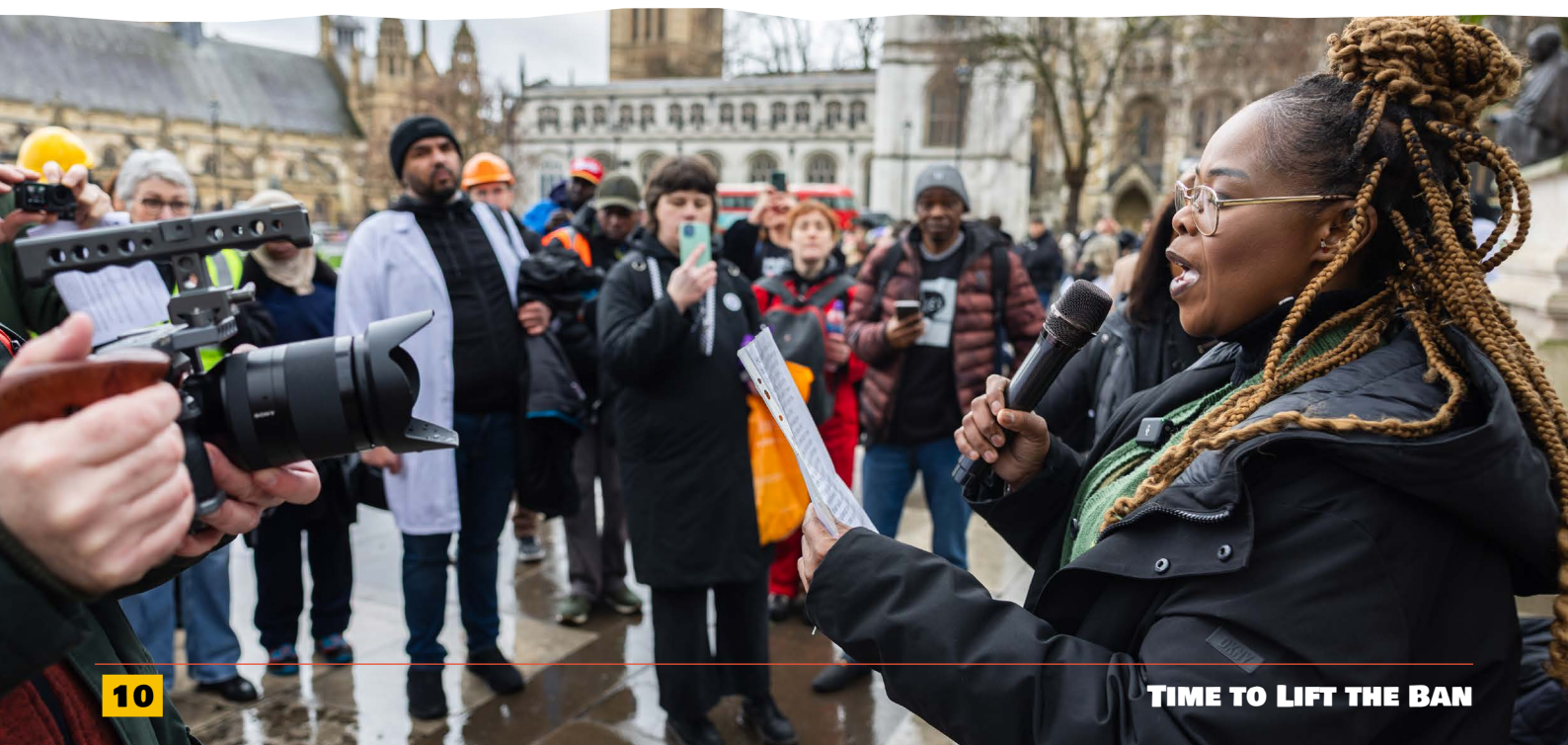
Policies and narratives focused more on “deterrence” and performative punishment of people seeking safety are not only more financially costly than serious, common-sense and fair policy solutions, they also impose an incalculable social cost by stoking division.

The ban on work, in tandem with the use of mass accommodation sites and hotels, can amount to a form of de facto racial segregation for people seeking asylum, which compounds social disintegration, division and conflict. The Commission for the Integration of Refugees recently found that the current work ban is central to integration barriers in the UK asylum system. The ban on work for people awaiting an initial decision on their asylum application “prevents them from being able to contribute to British society and increases the strain on public resources”.³² Policy narratives around “integration” and “cohesion” often imply that an onus to integrate lies with people arriving in the UK, yet current policies like the work ban actively prevent people from feeling at home in their communities and force them into state dependency. This is both economically irrational and fundamentally unfair.

As the European Council on Refugees and Exiles notes, the right to work is “essential in ensuring the inclusion of refugees in their host country and in guaranteeing that people lead a life of dignity”.³³ If you were fleeing war, persecution, or human rights abuses, what would be your first priority? Physical safety, accommodation, family reunion, and physical or mental health support might come before finding employment for many people. But to begin to feel settled in a new

country, to find real security and above all dignity in their new home country, work is an important consideration for many refugees. Many people with lived experience of seeking asylum emphasise the sense of “normality” the right to work can lend to lives that have been violently disrupted, and the sense of frustration and helplessness produced by the current ban. In this way work can itself facilitate safety, including through improved mental health, for people seeking asylum. The right to work should therefore be a core part of a well-functioning asylum system.

The number of people waiting for more than six months for an asylum decision has increased hugely in the last decade. That means tens of thousands more people stuck in publicly funded – and often substandard – for-profit asylum accommodation, left in limbo and banned from applying for work. The right to work and earn a wage would allow many people more control over their own finances and more independence from state support while also reducing the risk of them seeking irregular employment. In this way, it would not only save public money, increase economic growth and raise tax revenue, but also help people regain a sense of dignity and socio-economic inclusion. In recent years too many narratives, policies and practices on asylum in the UK have wrongly treated people seeking safety as a “problem” in need of “control”, rather than what they are: human beings urgently seeking safety. It is essential that we reset our approach to asylum in the UK, and lifting the ban will be a vital component of that new approach.



RANIA'S STORY

Rania holds a Master's degree in pedagogy and is passionate about supporting people with disabilities. In Saudi Arabia Rania "became known for my views on the government and the lack of democracy". She was "very outspoken about my thoughts in articles and through social media ... This caused trouble for me ... The authorities accused me of being part of a political movement that the government disapproved of". She had to leave Saudi Arabia and sought safety in the UK.

While Rania awaits a decision on her asylum application, the work ban has prevented her from contributing in the way she would like to, and taken a heavy emotional, as well as financial, toll:

"One of the hardest parts of being a refugee is the waiting. We are waiting for our main interview, and until then, I don't have the right to work. This has affected me deeply, not just financially but emotionally as well. I have the skills and experience to contribute to society, but I cannot use them. It makes me feel empty and worthless at times, like I've lost a part of myself. I've been doing everything I can to stay positive, including taking courses to improve my English and mathematics. I want to be ready to work as soon as I can."

5. TIME TO TAKE ACTION!

As this report has shown, the need to lift the ban on work for people seeking asylum has never been more urgent in the 23 years since it was introduced. You can take action to support our campaign and get the ban lifted now. Here's how:

- **Government:** Lift the ban: allow people the right to apply to any available job after six months waiting for an asylum decision, and remove the Immigration Salary List restriction.
- **Parliamentarians:** There are many ways you can support our campaign to lift the ban. These include mentioning it in debates (including taking the opportunity to share the stories of people impacted by the ban); submitting written and oral questions; attending and speaking at our events; and joining with local supporters to raise the profile in your constituency. Please get in touch with us for more information.
- **Local authorities, businesses and other organisations:** Sign up to join the Lift the Ban coalition. Please contact us for further information on joining and supporting our campaign.
- **Individuals:** Support the campaign by signing our open letter. Find it at <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/>

- PLEASE CONTACT US AT:
lifttheban@asylumatters.org



ENDNOTES

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- 5 Angela Rayner MP (Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government), HC Oral Answers, 2 September 2024, Vol. 753, Col. 7.
- 6 YouGov and Refugee Action (2022) survey of 1,700 GB adults. 81% agreed with the statement: 'People who have applied for asylum in the UK should be allowed to work to support themselves after waiting six months for a decision on their claim' (81% for Conservative voters, 87% for Labour, 88% for Liberal Democrat).
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- 15 These 279 Refugee Action clients are people who have been supported by the charity in seeking asylum in the UK, from 43 different national backgrounds. The top five nationalities among these clients, amounting to 57% of the survey sample, are Afghanistan (54), Iraq (30), Iran (29), Pakistan (27), and Sudan (20) - all countries historically impacted by British colonialism and in some cases more recent UK foreign policy interventions.
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THE LIFT THE BAN COALITION

The Lift the Ban coalition, made up of over 300 non-profit organisations, think tanks, businesses, trade unions and faith groups, is calling on the UK Government to give people seeking asylum and their adult dependants the right to work:

- unconstrained by the Immigration Salary List;
- and after they have waited six months for a decision on their initial asylum claim.

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