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12 JUL 2005

UNHCR Report on the Quality Initiative

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for our constructive meeting on 13 June and for UNHCR's continued support during the Quality Initiative (QI). The United Kingdom has a long and honourable history of offering a safe place to people fleeing from persecution. We remain fully committed to the principles of the 1951 United Nations' Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. I consider that the QI represents a real contribution to on going quality improvements in the asylum decision-making process.

I have now considered the recommendations in the first report of the QI and would like to update you on progress made to date. The Quality Initiative Team has developed an objective assessment form which allows for the overall measurement of a caseworkers initial consideration performance. The same principles are currently being applied in the development of an objective assessment of asylum interview quality.

I consider that high quality training is a crucial element in the delivery of a robust and fair asylum system. Existing processes already require a caseworker to remain on 100% checking until they are considered competent and are continually assessed after their training. Limited efficiency procedures and action plans are in place for poor performing caseworkers. These current processes have directly contributed to the considerable reduction in the time it takes from application to initial consideration and improvements in the quality of initial asylum determinations.

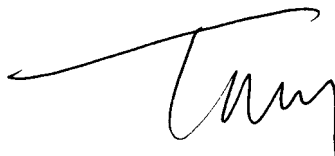
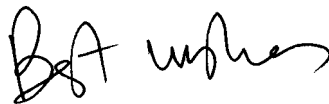
However we are not complacent and are designing new asylum processes and management structures to further improve our asylum consideration and processing. External recruitment requiring two A' levels is now in place, however it is not considered that a degree level qualification is necessary for external candidates provided a comprehensive and realistic competency or accreditation framework is adopted. Minimum qualifications for internal candidates would not be in line with current Home Office policy, equality or diversity guidelines. The training of caseworkers, including accreditation, within the developing processes of the 'New Asylum Model' are currently being actively investigated and I am pleased that meetings between IND officials and members of your team will be taking place shortly.

Home Office Country of Origin Information (COI) material is based on a very broad range of source documents including UNHCR, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports, and most of the relevant material collected on Refworld. Home Office COI products are intended to act as a signpost or detailed index to the original source documents all of which are available to caseworkers unedited in hard copy and, in most cases, from the Internet. Our new COI products are now being provided in a format that enables direct electronic access to original unedited source documents on the Knowledge Base.

IND considers that an effective way to quickly provide caseworkers with direct access to UNHCR documents would be using UNHCR's Refworld via the Knowledge Base. However, following extensive work by our IT specialists and detailed technical discussions with UNHCR's Protection Information Section in Geneva, it has become clear that the existing Refworld product is not suitable for application on our large network. We will continue to investigate how this could be taken forward.

The well being of all members of staff, including asylum caseworkers, is of paramount importance to the Home Office. Absence and turnover figures are monitored on a monthly basis. Although there is little evidence of significant levels of work related stress amongst ACD staff, the pressures associated with asylum determination have been recognised. Support for our caseworkers is available from line managers and a number of internal organisations such as Welfare Services. A stress awareness seminar is now mandatory for Senior Caseworkers and a Care Team in Asylum Casework Group (North) also provides a structure where caseworkers are trained and available to support colleagues. This scheme will shortly be rolled out in other Asylum Groups.

I would again like to thank UNHCR for their continued assistance in improving asylum determinations and look forward to reading the second Quality Initiative report later this year.



TONY MCNULTY