

SESSION 4

REFUGEE AND ASYLUM RIGHTS



In this session

Students will learn about the rights and protections given to people seeking asylum and refugees under the UN Refugee Convention. They will explore examples of UK immigration policy that raised questions about whether the government was meeting its international legal obligations to refugees.

This is part of our set of sessions in our Further Education pack.

Aims

- To gain an understanding of refugee rights and protections under the UN Refugee Convention
- To analyse the UK's actions on asylum and refugees
- To consider if the UK met its legal responsibilities under the UN Refugee Convention
- To discuss actions to make refugees and people seeking asylum feel more welcome

You will need

- Access to the internet to watch two video clips:
 - [When You Don't Exist](#) (2 minutes 10 seconds) on Amnesty International's YouTube channel (search title)
 - [70 years of the Refugee Convention – a lifesaving document](#) (2 minutes 10 seconds)

Handouts: The UN Refugee Convention 1951 Fact Sheet (one per pair)
UK Immigration Policy Actions (one per pair)

[Guidance for teaching about refugees can be downloaded here](#)

INTRODUCTION 15 minutes

Terminology

Ask students for their definitions of:

- Refugee
- Asylum seeker
- Internally displaced person
- Migrant

Clarify any misconceptions using the following definitions.

Who is a refugee?

A person forced to seek safety in another country from persecution in their own. Persecution can be any serious human rights violation such as torture or arbitrary detention, including the impact of war, that is due to religion, political beliefs, race or such things as sexual orientation or gender identity. Refugees have a right to international protection.

Who is an asylum seeker (person seeking asylum)?

A person who asks for asylum (protection) in another country. The authorities in that country may operate a system to determine whether the person seeking asylum is a refugee. The full rights of a refugee may be delayed to the point at which it is determined the person is a refugee.

Who is an internally displaced person?

A person who has fled their home, for example to escape conflict, violence, or environmental and human-made disasters, but has not crossed an international border to find safety. Their protection is the responsibility of their government.

Who is a migrant?

A person who has moved to another country intending to stay for a prolonged period. This may be to work, study or join family members. Visitors – such as people taking a holiday – are not migrants. Many people who migrate do so as a matter of choice. But for some people the decision to cross a border may be less than voluntary – for example if dire economic circumstances require them to move to find work to support themselves and their family.

Ask students to discuss what they know about refugees and their rights. How do they see refugees portrayed in the media? Take a few responses. Talk about how some media coverage of refugees can reinforce myths, stereotypes, and inaccuracies about refugees.

Film: When You Don't Exist

Play the clip [When You Don't Exist](#) on Amnesty International's YouTube channel (search title). Ask students to note down anything surprising.



Refugee children disembark at Tilbury Docks, UK, 1945
© IWM

Discussion questions

What is their reaction to the clip?
Do they have any questions about what they have seen?
Why were people forced to flee London?
What conditions and treatment did they find?
How did watching it make them feel?

Explain that in the UK refugees have legal rights which the government has signed up to. Why should governments welcome refugees and people seeking asylum?

TASK 1 10 minutes

The UN Refugee Convention

Open the discussion by asking: What rights do and don't refugees have? Take feedback.

Explain that there are international rules on the protection of refugees. The right 'to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution' is a fundamental human right protected in international law.

In 1951, the UK and many other countries signed the UN Refugee Convention. Those who signed agreed upon the legal right of people to flee and not to be sent back to their home country if they faced threats to their life or freedom there.

The class will now explore this Convention and consider whether the UK has been meeting its legal obligations towards refugees.

Key points

- The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol defines the term 'refugee' and outlines the rights refugees should receive without discrimination and the international standards for their protection from the states who are signatories to the Convention.
- At the heart of the Convention is recognition that refugees – that is people fleeing persecution – have a legal right to cross borders to seek asylum (protection) without asking for permission first (for instance, obtaining a travel visa).
- The UK is signed up to the Convention. It is one of (to date) 146 countries who have made a legal agreement to protect refugees and guarantee the rights of refugees to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution.
- One of the basic principles of the Convention is non-refoulement, described in Article 33. It means people who have escaped persecution must not be sent back to their country if this puts them at risk.
- Other rights contained in the Convention include the right to decent working conditions, housing, property, the right to education, the right to access justice, the right to freedom of movement and the right to social protection.
- An important principle underlying the Convention is that all countries must share responsibility for providing asylum to refugees. This is intended to avoid the possibility that some countries leave others to receive and protect disproportionately large populations of refugees.

Watch a video

Play the clip [70 years of the Refugee Convention – a lifesaving document](#) by the UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Ask students to note down what the Convention is and how states should implement it to support refugees.

Alternatively, hand out the *UN Refugee Convention* fact sheet to students to read.

Discussion questions

Are they surprised that refugee rights are enshrined in law?

Do the media ever highlight refugees' legal rights to protection? Why or why not?

What are their views on this?

Do they think politicians are living up to their legal obligations towards refugees?

Any examples?

TASK 2 20 minutes

Dialogue activity

Has the UK met its international legal obligations under the Refugee Convention?

Explain that the class will explore this question through a dialogue activity. This will be a reciprocal exchange of opinions and perspectives, allowing everyone to have their say, with a focus on learning, collaborating, and finding agreement. It is not about winning arguments or a debate.

Divide the class into groups of four and ask them to split into pairs. Hand out a different immigration policy case study to each pair to read.

Teacher note Explain that case studies 1 and 2 are actions the previous Conservative government took, and case study 3 is an action taken by the current Labour government. One pair in each group should receive case study 3 to ensure students discuss previous and current government responses to refugees. Now, with a new Labour government in power as of May 2024, we are seeing a shift in various policy areas.

Give them 10 minutes to write down a few different viewpoints to the question:

Is this action on asylum and refugees meeting the UK's international legal obligations under the Refugee Convention?

They will need to be able to explain the reasons behind each of the viewpoints and the issues they raise.

Give each pair five minutes to share their different viewpoints in their group. Remind them this is a sharing activity and not a debate, therefore it does not aim to prove one particular viewpoint is right, rather it aims to explore a variety of different, reasoned viewpoints on the statement.

While listening, each pair can note down important points to talk about afterwards.

They can also share their own thoughts on what they've heard.

Once both pairs have explained their viewpoints, they need to reach a conclusion about whether the UK government is or isn't meeting its legal obligations towards refugees.

Then ask each group of four to reflect upon their discussion and write down the most important things they have learned.

If time allows, take one idea to explore as a class and give students five more minutes to share their views on it.

Take feedback from each group. What was their conclusion and why?

FINALLY... 10 minutes

Take action

Tell students to imagine they are the Prime Minister and must devise an action plan to make the UK a more welcoming place for refugees.

They should think about specific actions linked to law, government policy, public opinion, the media.

In pairs, ask students to share their plans with each other then choose one action they think would have maximum impact.

If time allows, write some of the chosen actions on the board and ask students to select one they can act on.

Extension

Students can:

1. Draw a map of their local area and label it to show a person new to the area where they can go and what they can do. For each place, they can add a guidebook entry and a picture.
2. Contact their MP, telling them what they have learned. Has the MP spoken about refugees and people seeking asylum before? Ask what they are doing to support them in the area.
3. Listen to an episode of Asylum Speakers with Jaz O'Hara: Stories of migration. Available on Apple, Spotify, Deezer.

SESSION 4 RESOURCE

THE UN REFUGEE CONVENTION 1951

FACT SHEET

FOR THE
STUDENT



The signing of the Refugee Convention in 1951
© Arni/UN Archives

What is the 1951 Refugee Convention?

The UN Convention is a set of guidelines, rights and laws to protect the human rights of anyone forced to flee conflict and ensure they are treated fairly.

It defines who is a refugee, what rights they have and what obligations states have to them when they arrive.

The Convention was amended in 1967 to apply to all people fleeing persecution. It was originally limited to people fleeing events occurring before 1 January 1951 and within Europe (in particular the Holocaust and the aftermath of World War 2).

Why was it created?

The Convention was a response to the significant increase in refugees who were forcibly displaced from their homes because of the First and Second World Wars.

Which countries are party to the Convention?

It was originally signed by 28 countries, including the UK, in Geneva in July 1951. Today there are 146 countries who have agreed to be bound by it.



What rights do refugees have under the Convention?

The rights that refugees have under the 1951 Refugee Convention include:

- The right not to be returned to a country where they face threats to their lives or freedom (Article 33- non-refoulement)
This bans countries from expelling or returning a refugee against their will to a territory where they fear threats to life or freedom.
- The right not to be expelled from their new country, except under certain, strictly defined conditions (Article 32)
- The right not to be punished for irregular entry into the territory of a contracting State (Article 31)
- The right to decent working conditions (Articles 17 to 19 and 24)
- The right to housing and property, including intellectual property (Articles 13, 14 and 21)
- The right to education (Article 22)
- The right to freedom of religion (Article 4)
- The right to access to justice (Article 16)
- The right to freedom of movement within the territory (Article 26 and Article 31(2))
- The right to be issued civil, identity and travel documents (Articles 12, 27 and 28)
- The right to social protection (Articles 23 and 24 (2-4)).

Can someone be excluded?

The Convention only protects people who meet the criteria for refugee status. It does not apply to people who have:

- committed a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity;
- committed a serious non-political crime outside their country of refuge prior to the admission to that country as a refugee; or
- they are guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Definition of refugee

According to the Convention, a refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

With the development of international human rights law, the Convention says it should now be applied without discrimination as to sex, age, disability, sexuality, or other prohibited grounds of discrimination.

Source and more info: unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention

SESSION 4 RESOURCE

UK IMMIGRATION POLICY ACTIONS

FOR THE
STUDENT



Bibby Stockholm
© Graham Hunt/Alamy Live News

CASE STUDY 1

Bibby Stockholm

In 2023, the UK started to use the Bibby Stockholm barge docked in Portland, Dorset, to house men seeking asylum from a variety of countries.

The Home Office said it was an alternative to using expensive hotel accommodation for those waiting for the outcome of their asylum applications. It was initially intended to house about 500 men. No one was offered a choice about whether they were sent there.

The accommodation was described by the government as 'basic and functional'. Most people seeking asylum shared small cabins with up to six people they didn't know. The facilities onsite included a canteen, laundry room, gym, access to a nurse on board, TV, a space for games, a computer room and a multi-faith room.

Those on board did not have a curfew but were asked to sign in and out of the barge – with a 24-hour security team calling them to find out where they were if late.

The Home Office said that the accommodation on the barge met all relevant legal requirements. However, in August 2023, the Fire Brigades Union raised fire safety issues including narrow fire exits and overcrowding, and subsequent improvements were made.

In November 2023, it was decided that fewer people would be housed on the barge with 425 being set as the maximum. Based on this new figure, campaigners said this could work out at 10 per cent more expensive than hotels.

In February 2024, the Home Affairs Committee, after a visit to the barge, found crowded conditions, and said they had contributed to a decline in mental health.

Until the Home Office took over the barge it was used to accommodate about 220 people, such as offshore oil workers, with one person per cabin.

The contract for the Bibby Stockholm was not renewed by the new Labour government past January 2025. By November 2024 all asylum seekers were moved off the barge into alternative accommodation elsewhere in the UK.

LEARNING ABOUT
HUMAN RIGHTS
IN FURTHER
EDUCATION



UK Border Force Patrol Vessel,
Portsmouth harbour, 2022
© David Robinson/Alamy Stock Photo

CASE STUDY 2

The Rwanda asylum scheme

In April 2022, under the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the UK government introduced the Rwanda scheme: to send people who arrived in the UK by 'unlawful means' and then claim asylum to Rwanda, where the Rwandan government would decide their asylum claims. If their claims were successful, they would be granted asylum in Rwanda, not the UK.

The government said this was to address increasing numbers of people making dangerous journeys to the UK, such as crossing the English Channel in small boats. Refugee organisations criticised the plan as cruel and expensive, and raised concerns about the East African state's poor human rights record. The first flight to Rwanda scheduled for June 2022 was cancelled at the last minute after legal challenges.

On 15 November 2023, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the policy was unlawful because Rwanda was not a safe country to which to remove people who were seeking asylum. The court pointed to defects in Rwanda's asylum processing system. A primary issue was nonrefoulement: if people were sent to Rwanda, they could be forcibly returned to countries from which they had fled, where they could face persecution.

In response to the judgement, the government agreed a new treaty with Rwanda, with more assurances that those expelled would be safe. It followed up with its Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, legislation to override the Supreme Court – and prohibit the UK courts from ever again ruling Rwanda to be unsafe: they would have to ignore any facts or evidence that suggested otherwise.

In April 2024, the Bill became an Act of Parliament and law with flights to Rwanda scheduled to begin in July 2024.

However, after a general election in May 2024, the new Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer scrapped the scheme two days after taking office.

Campaigners including Amnesty International repeatedly warned about the harms, unlawfulness and impractical nature of the scheme, including in briefings on the passage of the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 which is still in need of repeal.

The UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, also consistently made it clear that the policy was contrary to international asylum law.



A British passport

© Yau Ming Low/Alamy Stock Photo

CASE STUDY 3

British citizenship rules

In February 2025, the UK government made it almost impossible for any refugee who arrives in the UK illegally to become a British citizen.

Changes to Home Office guidance clarified that citizenship applications will be refused to anyone who enters the UK illegally via 'a dangerous journey', which could be by boat but also by hiding in a vehicle such as a lorry. It applies to those who have already arrived and any future arrivals.

The updated 'Good Character requirements' guidance that workers use to assess if an applicant is of good character states: 'Any person applying for citizenship from 10 February 2025, who previously entered the UK illegally, will normally be refused, regardless of the time that has passed since the illegal entry took place.' It also defines dangerous journeys as including those made 'by small boat or concealed in a vehicle or any other conveyance'.

The government argued its aim was to reduce illegal migration and ensure people enter the UK legally. Previously refugees coming on small boats had to wait 10 years before being considered for citizenship.

The change has been condemned by some refugee organisations including the Refugee Council which estimated that it will prevent at least 71,000 refugees from obtaining British citizenship.

Under UK law, it is now an offence to enter the country without permission despite the UN Refugee Convention stating that asylum seekers and refugees should not be penalised for illegal entry.