



# Liverpool Asylum Screening Unit: Unannounced Inspection

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## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the UK Border Agency for its help and co-operation throughout the inspection. In particular we are grateful for the assistance in arranging interviews and focus groups with staff at short notice.

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## FOREWORD

I am pleased to present the report of my recent inspection of the Liverpool Asylum Screening Unit (ASU). This was the first of the programme of unannounced inspections that I intend to conduct throughout the year and which I referred to in my Inspection Plan for 2009/10.

The ASU is a centre run by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) where a person is registered as an asylum applicant and begins the process of applying for asylum. Anyone claiming asylum in the UK must first be 'screened' by an Immigration Officer. Screening is the process of establishing an individual's name, age and nationality. It also considers how an asylum applicant reached the UK, as it may be the case that the UK Government has no responsibility for considering their asylum claim. This inspection focused on the ASU in Liverpool. There is also an ASU in Croydon.

The terms of reference for this inspection were:

'To examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the UK Border Agency by way of unannounced inspection of frontline services to ensure that practice is consistent with policy and declared service standards, and that the UK Border Agency is delivering fair, consistent and respectful services.'

In this inspection, I found that staff were on the whole professional and committed to their work, but were hampered in the level of service they could provide to customers by inadequate accommodation and working conditions.

I was disappointed to find that, although an appointments system had been introduced in the Liverpool ASU, this still meant that customers had to wait for significant periods of time.

I have set out both a summary of the good practice we found together with four recommendations which I believe would strengthen the operation of this unit.

**John Vine CBE, QPM**

## SUMMARY OF GOOD PRACTICE

### IMPACT ON PEOPLE SUBJECT TO UK BORDER AGENCY SERVICES:

- generally, staff demonstrated empathy, professionalism, a caring approach and were courteous and respectful to customers irrespective of their status
- staff were trained how to deal with children and young people, and demonstrated skill in handling a customer who presented as vulnerable and distressed
- an innovative Pre-screening initiative to provide customers with an audio presentation of useful information regarding the screening process while they waited, was commendable and well received by customers.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### **We recommend that the UK Border Agency:**

- **introduces a formal monitoring system to facilitate effective queue management and ensure that customer queuing and waiting times are as short as possible**
- **reviews its provision of information to customers, particularly about the time they are likely to have to wait**
- **takes immediate steps to make improvements to its ASU accommodation and facilities in order to bring these up to an acceptable standard for customers and staff. In particular to address:**
  - **privacy for customers and**
  - **the needs of children**
- **ensures that information on display is up- to- date, consistent with current UKBA branding, and relevant.**

# THE INSPECTION

## **Methodology**

Due to the unannounced nature of this inspection, we arrived at the ASU in Reliance House, Liverpool, at 9.15am, and announced our presence to the senior manager on-site. There was no warning to the UK Border Agency in advance of our visit, other than a reminder that an unannounced visit was likely in the near future at an unspecified location.

We inspected the operation of the Liverpool ASU against criteria covering the key theme: Impact on people subject to UK Border Agency services. Details of the General and Specific criteria are set out below. Full details of our core criteria are published on our website [www.ociukba.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.ociukba.homeoffice.gov.uk).

<b>General Criterion:</b>
UKBA staff and staff of commercial partners are welcoming and engage positively with customers and other users.
<b>Specific criteria:</b>
Customer queuing and waiting times are as short as possible and adhere to UKBA guidelines/Service Level Agreements.
UKBA staff are professional, courteous, and respectful when dealing with customers irrespective of their status.
UKBA staff can identify and sensitively support vulnerable and distressed customers especially children.
<b>General Criterion:</b>
Facilities and services meet the needs of customers and are conducive to ensuring 'business' is progressed.
<b>Specific criteria:</b>
Accommodation, whether interview rooms, waiting rooms etc. are welcoming and clean.
The facilities afford customers privacy.
The cultural needs of the diverse customer base are taken into account when deploying staff.
The facilities are safe and secure with special care over vulnerable and distressed customers, especially children.
The environment fosters proper engagement with customers.
Provision of information via hard copy and web-sites is accessible, clear, easy to use, in plain language and accurate including self serve where available.

We carried out an initial pre-site assessment of policy and procedural guidance available on the UKBA's intranet and internet websites. We also reviewed information the UKBA makes available to customers through its website.

While on-site we:

- toured the ASU to gain an understanding of its end to end processes
- observed a number of ASU processes in action, including:
  - call-up interviews
  - biometrics
  - screening interviews
  - and a detention
- interviewed a variety of managers and staff and conducted staff focus groups
- interviewed a significant number of customers, in the Asylum Screening Unit.

We also visited Initial Accommodation Providers in Liverpool. However, it should be noted that this was purely for information purposes and did not form part of our inspection. We were grateful for the cooperation of the UKBA and its accommodation providers in arranging this visit at such short notice for the following morning.



## FINDINGS – IMPACT ON PEOPLE SUBJECT TO UK BORDER AGENCY SERVICES

### **General criterion**

**UKBA staff and staff of commercial partners are welcoming and engage positively with customers and other users.**

### **Specific criteria**

**Customer queuing and waiting times are as short as possible and adhere to UKBA guidelines / Service Level Agreements.**

In March 2009 the Liverpool ASU introduced an appointments system. We were told this was in response to a significant increase in numbers of people making applications for asylum, which caused severe queuing problems, with customers being forced to wait outside the building for significant periods of time. Staff told us queues were regularly so long that they were unable to see all the waiting customers and had to turn some away.

We were told that the appointments system was working well – the queuing problems had been eliminated and waiting times were now much shorter.

It would appear that the appointments system has remedied the problem of customers waiting outside the building for long periods of time. However, we found that the appointments system has only been of limited benefit in terms of reducing customers' waiting time overall. This was evidenced both by our own observations and the results of our discussions with staff.

Customers who arrive at the ASU without an appointment are asked to call a dedicated telephone number to arrange for an appointment to be made. Basic details are taken from them over the telephone and a letter sent out with an allocated date and time, usually within 5 business days.

The ASU does however see any customers who do not have an appointment if staff consider them to be “vulnerable”. An example of someone who would fall into this category would be anyone who does not have accommodation.

The system operates by allocating ten appointments per day, with all ten appointments being made for 9am. This means that customers have to wait for significant periods of time on the day while they are going through the screening process. We were told that on average it will take around four to five hours to complete the process, with the process taking longer if dependants are screened at the same time as the main applicant.

The letter advising the customer of their appointment time does not make it clear to the customer the length of time it is likely to take before they are

screened. It also makes no mention of the limited refreshment facilities available for customers in the waiting area. It would be useful if the letter advised customers that they should ensure they bring anything they may need while waiting, for example, food and drink for themselves and their children.

We found that there was no formal monitoring system of customer waiting times and no targets set regarding the maximum length of time customers should have to wait.

Staff told us that they try to operate an ad hoc prioritisation system where they will not necessarily call customers in strict order – they try to prioritise customers who are more “vulnerable”, for example, families, elderly people, or disabled people.

When customers arrive in the ASU they are not provided with information regarding likely waiting times or the possibility that they may not be seen in strict order. They are also unlikely to be updated on anticipated waiting times by staff while waiting. Staff told us that customers sometimes complain if they perceive people are being seen out of turn.

The lack of a formal monitoring system to ensure effective queue management is an area the ASU needs to address urgently. This was clearly illustrated on the day of our inspection when one of our inspection team was approached by a customer in a distressed state who had been waiting for around 5 hours with a young baby, and had yet to be screened. While it was not clear how this had happened at the time, the UKBA needs to ensure that its processes are tightened up to prevent future occurrences of this nature.

### **UKBA staff are professional, courteous, and respectful when dealing with customers irrespective of their status.**

We observed staff demonstrating empathy, professionalism and a caring approach to customers. We saw a number of instances of good practice, where staff were dealing with difficult situations in an environment which was less than ideal.

We noted examples of staff being very patient and understanding, ensuring that customers were treated fairly, understood the process, and knew what would happen next.

Staff in the biometrics unit demonstrated a friendly manner and took care to support customers through what could be a difficult process for them.

We observed an individual being detained, and noted that this was carried out tactfully and in private to ensure there was no embarrassment for them. Staff informed the individual of his entitlement to use the phone, legal advice and medical services.

We also received very positive feedback from the majority of customers we interviewed regarding how they felt they had been treated by staff.

However, we observed a few specific instances where customers received service which fell short of the standard required. Examples of this included a member of staff sending a text message while conducting a screening interview, and an interpreter having to correct a member of staff regarding a potentially significant misunderstanding during a screening interview. Two of the customers we interviewed also gave negative feedback regarding their treatment by individual staff members.

### **UKBA staff can identify and sensitively support vulnerable and distressed customers especially children.**

Managers told us that all staff had received 'Keeping Children Safe' training. Staff responsible for conducting interviews with customers had also received specific training on interviewing children and young people. This was substantiated in our conversations with staff.

We were told that the identification of potentially "vulnerable and distressed" customers takes place at the earliest opportunity, usually at the front desk before customers even get to the ASU waiting room.

We were told that staff use their experience and judgement to identify customers who may require special care and consideration, and would prioritise them accordingly.

We observed a particular example where a young customer alleged that she had been a victim of trafficking for sexual exploitation. This clearly vulnerable customer was handled with care and sensitivity so as to cause her the minimum of distress. The Chief Immigration Officer was quick to offer support and direction to the officer interviewing the customer, and steps were taken to refer the customer to the appropriate authorities.

Staff told us that if a customer was distressed or in a vulnerable state, and they thought that being interviewed in the ASU would cause further difficulties for them, they had the option to take the customer to be interviewed in a private interview room on the second floor. Although this option was mentioned by several staff, it was not clear how often it was actually exercised. Staff also mentioned that interviewing customers on the second floor was problematic due to a lack of available computer facilities.

## Recommendations

### **We recommend that the UK Border Agency:**

- **introduces a formal monitoring system to facilitate effective queue management and ensure that customer queuing and waiting times are as short as possible**
- **reviews its provision of information to customers, particularly about the time they are likely to have to wait.**

## **General criterion**

**Facilities and services meet the needs of customers and are conducive to ensuring 'business' is progressed.**

### **Specific criteria**

**Accommodation, whether interview rooms, waiting rooms etc. are welcoming and clean.**

Liverpool ASU introduced an innovative new Pre-screening initiative towards the end of 2008. Although this was temporarily suspended due to the increase in asylum applicants earlier in 2009, when we inspected the ASU we were told it had been in operation continuously for around four to six weeks.

The Pre-screening initiative involved the recording of information for the customer into the 22 most common languages generally spoken by asylum applicants. This information advises customers of useful information under the following headings:

- *What is a Refugee?*
- *What will happen today during the Screening Process?*
- *Next steps in your Asylum Application*
- *Your rights as an Asylum Applicant*
- *Your responsibilities as an Asylum Applicant.*

Customers we interviewed provided very positive feedback about their experience of the Pre-screening initiative. Several customers said they found it welcoming and that it had a very calming effect on them, allowing them to sit quietly and relax while listening to the recorded information.

When we interviewed managers and staff, they told us that the accommodation for both staff and customers was neither welcoming nor

clean. They said that they had repeatedly complained about the accommodation but little in the way of improvements had been effected.

We found the accommodation to be inadequate. It was extremely cramped, both in terms of the space available in the biometrics room, the waiting room, and the space behind the counters where staff were working.

We also noted that the accommodation was dirty, with stained carpets and seats, as well as, torn upholstery in evidence. Staff told us that there were regularly complaints about carpets being infested with biting insects, necessitating the carpets having to be sprayed with chemicals. We also noted torn posters displayed on the wall – many of which were out-of-date.

Although there was a disabled toilet available, we noted that this doubled as a baby changing facility. This could cause problems given the number of families waiting with children.

There were refreshment facilities provided for customers although these were very limited. Staff also commented on the lack of a rest area for staff to use.

All of the customers we interviewed to some extent provided negative feedback on the accommodation. Comments included mention of the:

- lack of hygiene
- poor ventilation
- inappropriate temperature
- dirty carpets and chairs
- lack of childcare facilities.

We were told that the UKBA plans to consolidate its Liverpool operations and estate into one building, and is due to begin moving out of its current buildings towards the end of 2009. This is due to take place on a staggered basis depending on when existing leases expire. However, we were told that the lease on Reliance House is not due to expire for approximately two years, so its operations and staff may not be consolidated into the new building for some time.

### **The facilities afford customers privacy.**

We have already reported that we were told there was scope to take “vulnerable or distressed” customers to private interview rooms on the second floor, if it was felt this would help alleviate distress and afford more privacy. However, it was not clear how often staff exercised this option and, on the day of our inspection, we did not observe anyone being taken to the second floor to be interviewed.

Customer interviews in the ASU generally take place in one of seven booths which form a line at one end of the waiting room. Customers sit on one of two

small stools in front of a screen facing the interviewing officer. Audio facilities enable the customer and the interviewer to hear each other.

Staff expressed concern that the facilities did not afford adequate levels of privacy for the customer as their conversations could easily be overheard by people in neighbouring booths. This was particularly likely if family groups were being interviewed together crammed into one booth.

We noted that the interview booths were not effectively soundproof and that several of them had ripped upholstery with foam fillings exposed.

The interview booths contain two microphones – one to enable the interviewer and the customer to speak to each other, and the other for the interviewer to broadcast to the waiting area when they are calling a customer for their interview. On the day of our inspection we observed a member of staff accidentally broadcasting part of a customer's screening interview to the entire waiting area. This was commented on adversely by a number of customers when we interviewed them.

### **The cultural needs of the diverse customer base are taken into account when deploying staff.**

We were told that all staff received mandatory equality and diversity training. However, other than this there was no specific training for staff in identifying and accounting for cultural needs.

Staff and managers told us that they were confident and comfortable in their ability to account for the cultural needs of their customers. Examples given included, making the windows in the biometrics room opaque so that women would feel comfortable removing their head coverings to have their photographs taken.

We also noted that a question had been incorporated into the asylum screening interview asking if the customer had any preference as to the gender of the person conducting their asylum interview. While the UKBA could not guarantee any preference would be accommodated, all reasonable efforts to accommodate preferences would be made. Our observations confirmed staff asked this question of customers.

We were told that generally requests of this nature were accommodated and it would not mean customers should have to wait much longer than those who expressed no preference.

## **The facilities are safe and secure with special care over vulnerable and distressed customers, especially children.**

Customers who we interviewed told us that although they felt safe in terms of not feeling threatened they did have concerns around health and safety issues, primarily in relation to the high temperature and lack of cleanliness in the waiting room.

Staff and managers expressed concern over the lack of a segregated waiting area for children. This caused difficulties when they had to interview unaccompanied children and young people as they did not feel it was safe to leave them alone in the main waiting room. Staff told us they would try to get around this problem by leaving the children in the care of the biometrics staff in the biometrics room, taking them to a private interview room or leaving them in the care of the on-duty Social Worker. The Social Worker confirmed to us that this was not an uncommon occurrence, although looking after children and young people in this way was not part of her role.

Staff accepted that none of these solutions were ideal but given the limitations of the accommodation available, they had little choice in the matter. However, we were told that managers were currently considering making changes to the ASU process in relation to children so that an officer could meet the child as soon as they arrived in the ASU, take them to a private interview room, and stay with them for the duration of their visit. At the time of our inspection it was not clear if, or when, these process changes would be implemented.

Managers were fully aware of the likely impact of Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, which comes into force later this year. Section 55 highlights their need to: “discharge their duties regarding the welfare of children – having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in the United Kingdom.”

## **The environment fosters proper engagement with customers.**

Staff told us that they felt the environment was not conducive to facilitating proper engagement with customers. One officer said “the environment is dreadful”. Problems cited included noise levels; poor quality microphones and feedback from them. The main staff concern was the lack of privacy for customers. They thought that customers were likely to perceive that officers were not focusing on them as individuals due to the various distracting elements in the environment.

Some of the customers we interviewed told us that they felt unable to engage properly with staff for a number of reasons – the most common being the:

- lack of privacy
- fear of being overheard
- lack of childcare facilities.

The comments made by staff and customers were substantiated by our observations. We observed a very noisy and chaotic environment which did not allow for effective engagement between staff and customers.

The waiting room services several different customer groups as a Public Enquiry Office, not just asylum applicants – this adds to ASU customers' confusion.

Both the waiting room and the staff areas are busy and cramped, with high noise levels caused by children running around and interviews being conducted in booths without adequate soundproofing.

The area directly behind the booths in the staff area houses the Chief Immigration Officer. This area appeared to be somewhere staff tended to gather to talk to the Chief Immigration Officer, thus increasing background noise. Staff told us this was a problem and that they often had difficulty hearing what customers were saying to them.

**Provision of information via hard copy and web-sites is accessible, clear, easy to use, in plain language and accurate including self-serve where available.**

The UKBA website provides details of the ASU facilities in Liverpool and Croydon. The listing for Croydon provides detailed information on the facilities available there. The listing for Liverpool had been updated to provide details of the appointment only system in operation as well as the telephone number to use to make an appointment. However, it provided no details of the facilities available in Liverpool and as a result could be potentially misleading for customers.

Staff were very proud of the Pre-screening initiative implemented to provide customers with information about the screening process in Liverpool ASU. We were told that there are plans to possibly extend this system to the Croydon ASU, and that several refugee organisations are considering whether they could make use of the system.

We observed that there was an inconsistent approach to branding throughout Reliance House. We saw posters in various locations throughout the customer areas which were old, torn and out-of-date. For example, we saw posters for Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) and Border and Immigration Agency (BIA) – neither of these organisations having existed for some time. There was no visible UKBA branding inside the public entrance to the building.

We observed that there was very limited information available to customers while they were waiting to be called for their interviews, or to have their biometrics taken. We noted out-of-date posters on important topics such as complaints, the rights of customers, and assaults on staff. There were some



leaflets available for customers although these were limited in number, content and languages. They were also not particularly visible.

Since 20 July 2009 Liverpool ASU has been piloting the Online Immigration Appointment Booking System, working in conjunction with the Legal Services Commission. This new system enables staff to book legal appointments for customers during the screening process.

Managers and staff told us that the success of the pilot was currently limited as they could only offer legal appointments to customers who reside in the North West of England, and the booking system was not very robust. We were told that they were currently working with the Legal Services Commission to try to extend the pilot to cover the West Midlands and Leeds. Managers told us that all staff in the ASU were aware of the Legal Services Pilot and knew how to book appointments. However, our observations highlighted several cases where officers did not ask customers if they needed legal representation, and at least one of these fell within the pilot's geographical boundaries. One of our inspection team pointed this out to the officer and found they were unaware of how to book an appointment.

However, we observed one officer asking the customer if they needed legal representation and successfully booking a legal appointment for them.

### **Recommendations**

#### **We recommend that the UK Border Agency:**

- **takes immediate steps to make improvements to its ASU accommodation and facilities in order to bring these up to an acceptable standard for customers and staff. In particular to address:
  - **privacy for customers and**
  - **the needs of children****
- **ensures that information on display is up-to-date, consistent with current UKBA branding, and relevant.**