

Annual Report Gateshead Council Asylum Team

April 2007 to March 2008



INTRODUCTION

Background

In June 2000 Gateshead Council entered into a 5-year contract with the Home Office. This contract enabled Gateshead Council, in conjunction with other Local Authorities in the North East, to support asylum seekers dispersed to this region from the south of the UK. This branch of the Home Office was formerly known as the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). It has recently been renamed United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA) A further one-year contract was issued in 2005, and the current five-year Home Office contract began in 2006.

Structure

The Asylum Team sits within the Council under the umbrella of Community Based Services, Housing Services.

The team comprises: Team Leader, Accommodation and Support Manager, Five Support Assistants, 1.5 Administrators, (please see appendix 3 for a structure chart). The Support Assistants work closely with our clients, supporting, empowering and ensuring their well-being as far as is possible whilst they are awaiting a decision on their asylum application. The team is funded through the Home Office contract.

Capacity

The Home Office pays the Council for the accommodation and support provided by the Asylum Team, the remuneration being calculated per person (client) per day. The minimum number of clients supported under this contract is 150, the maximum number being 250.

Service Delivery and Service Standards

The number of clients accommodated by the Council at the end of January 2008 was 232. Of these, 170 were adults and 62 were children. (appendix 1. e)

The majority of single asylum seekers are accommodated in one bedroom flats, and a small number in two bedroom flats. There are also 3 x four bedroom flats in use. Families are usually accommodated in maisonettes. The accommodation is provided in various areas throughout Gateshead. (appendix 1. a)

The vast majority of asylum seekers supported by the team are housed in Council property, although a small number of clients (six currently) are accommodated in flats provided under a tenancy agreement with NomadE5.

The Asylum Team strives to offer an excellent service to asylum seekers who are awaiting a decision from the Home Office. Our motivation is to ensure that we give our clients the support we would wish our brothers, sons, daughters or ourselves to have if we were in the appalling situation of having to flee our homes to seek sanctuary.

The outcome of each individual's asylum claim can take anything from 2 months to several years. The length of time each asylum seeker resides in Gateshead therefore varies greatly. The most recent policy from the Home Office however seeks to ensure that the majority of decisions made on newly arrived asylum seekers are made within six months of their application for asylum. This timescale does not apply to people whose cases are

complex and who are awaiting evidence, for example medical or political, relating to their asylum claim.

The Home Office contract requires that our clients are housed in safe, well-maintained accommodation, that they have access to health services, and access to education for children. Our support workers, who will shortly number five, have the demanding but very rewarding role of meeting new clients and ensuring they have the support required to maintain their dignity and comfort as far as possible whilst they await a decision on their asylum application.

We make regular property inspections, which enable us to maintain safety for our clients, and a good standard of accommodation. We ensure access to health services, education, community support, and use of interpreters whenever necessary. We also aim to add value to the contract whenever additional measures are required. This includes such things as:

- Arranging contact between newly arrived clients and people who speak their own language, in an effort to minimise feelings of isolation.
- Taking people on local transport for their first visit to Immigration, solicitors, hospital etc, to ensure that they understand how to make future journeys independently and safely.

Staff are also prepared to support clients outside working hours on specific occasions, such as:

- Taking a client to a music performance by their fellow countrymen, such as a recent visit to the UK by exiled Tibetan monks. This allowed this particular client, who had been extremely isolated, to speak to someone in his own language for the first time in months.
- Taking a group of clients to a film workshop at the local university to give those who wished it the opportunity to tell their personal story and have it validated in writing and performance.

There are two private housing providers within Gateshead who accommodate asylum seekers: Angel Group and Kimberley Housing Group. Both of these are national organisations, which have local offices in Newcastle. Approximately 12 families are currently accommodated by these two housing providers. Approximately 30 single people are also accommodated by them. The majority of their housing is in the Bensham and Saltwell areas of Gateshead.

Performance

Key Performance Indicators

The work of the Asylum Team is guided by the contract with UKBA, and adheres to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These KPIs are reported to UKBA on a monthly basis and inform on the following requirements:

Ensuring that the property is of a good standard.

Ensuring that newly arrived asylum seekers are greeted, taken to their new accommodation, and the facilities are explained to them.

Providing interpretation as required.

Providing information on local resources.

Assisting to register with G.P. and other health services as required.

Assisting with registration in education.

Promoting access to our complaints procedure.
Providing specified reports to BIA.

Since the commencement of the NASS contract, the team have achieved a hundred per cent success in meeting the KPIs.

A rigorous performance management regime, which imposes financial penalties for any failure, is strictly enforced by the Home Office. No penalties have been incurred to date by Gateshead.

Trends

Overall numbers of clients had not fluctuated significantly until February, March and April 2008. The decrease in numbers at that point is attributable to the number of families being given a positive decision under the Case Resolution programme.

The Home Office has, between January 2008 and June 2008, undertaken a Case Resolution exercise to consider the status of those families who claimed asylum prior to 2004, and received a negative decision, but were unable to return to their home country as there was and is no safe route of return. In Gateshead we anticipate that approximately 20 to 25 families may receive a positive decision, and will therefore become refugees rather than asylum seekers. This will lead to a decrease in the short term in the numbers of asylum seekers accommodated by the council. We anticipate that over the next 6 months we will recover these numbers by receiving approximately 10 new asylum seeking families, and a higher number of single people than previously. (appendix 2,a and b)

Why seek asylum?

The UK was one of 142 countries which signed an agreement at the Convention on Refugees in Geneva in 1951. This agreement states that all signatory countries have a duty to offer a place of sanctuary to any person fleeing persecution whilst their case is heard.

Many of the asylum seekers in Gateshead have suffered horrendous treatment or torture by government officials, police, army, or political or ethnic factions. Many asylum seekers require medical treatment for back, foot or head injuries. Many of them do not know what has become of their parents, siblings, or even their children.

The majority of asylum seekers seeking sanctuary in Gateshead are between the ages of 18 years and 30 years. Two thirds of them are male, one third female. (appendix 1.d) As the statistics illustrate, asylum seekers are fleeing from areas of the world where armed conflict and human rights abuse is widespread. (appendix 1.b) It is often the young adults, students and professional people who are most likely to be perceived as a threat to the ruling powers. As a result, they are the ones who are targeted, suffer torture, forced amputation, are taken away in the night and "disappeared", falsely imprisoned, or killed. In 2003 approximately 65% of those people seeking asylum were granted Leave to Remain in the UK (i.e. become refugees). In 2008 this had reduced and 19% of asylum seekers were granted Leave to Remain.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Gateshead

Many of the clients that we have the privilege to work with are remarkable people who are of great benefit to Gateshead. Our clients include surgeons, GPs, marketing directors, pharmacists, teachers, administrators, cleaners, factory workers, mechanics, clergymen, musicians and artists. Asylum Seekers are not allowed to have paid employment. We have individuals volunteering for Oxfam, North of England Refugee Service, Mental Health Matters, Shop Mobility and other local charities, local and national. We have people who are members of local football teams, cricket teams, martial arts and athletic clubs. All these

people have overcome great obstacles, and continue to face problems every day without complaint or 'special treatment'. These people are adding to the cultural richness of the North East and we are lucky to have them here.

Customer Satisfaction

We recently received the following feedback from a focus group held within the council: "The refugees and asylum seekers who attended the meeting were extremely complimentary about the Asylum and Refugee Team - staff from the team are very committed to providing a high level quality service. People also commented that they found the staff to be understanding, patient, kind and supportive in addressing individual needs." The team has not received any complaints from clients this year, and in fact only one complaint since 2000. We do include the corporate complaints leaflet in our Welcome Packs, and this has been translated into several languages. Some complaints are received verbally but these have all been directed at the decision-making process of the Home Office and Immigration Service, which is outside the control of the Asylum Support Team.

JOINED UP WORKING

Anti-social behaviour

On occasion it has become unwise to continue placing asylum seekers in certain properties as a result of extreme racism and threat to individual asylum seekers. On these occasions TGHC have taken these properties back into their general stock, and identified alternative properties for the Asylum Team to use.

When the perpetrator of any such racist offence is known to TGHC, the local housing office and neighbourhood relations team work closely with the Asylum Team to support our client and resolve the issue.

An example of this was the case of a tenant who, over a period of time, persecuted an asylum seeker living in the same high-rise block. Joint home visits were made, investigations carried out, and the tenant responsible was eventually summonsed to court for his behaviour towards the asylum seeker and other tenants in the block. The asylum support worker who had been witness to one of the racist incidents was asked by TGHC if she would be willing to attend court to testify, which she did. The case was proven and the tenancy was brought to an end.

Making Services More Accessible

On two occasions joint work has been carried out to simplify the wording of letters which are sent out to asylum seekers by TGHC. As there are more than thirty languages in use in Gateshead, the cost of translating all letters used by TGHC would be prohibitive. It is important therefore to omit any unnecessary words, phrases or sentences from letters, and to use plain English, as many asylum seekers will be able to understand some of the content of a letter, but will use a dictionary to translate other words. (appendix 1. b)

Training

Training on "Working with Interpreters" has been provided by the Asylum Team to front-line staff at TGHC. This included information and advice on how to use both face to face and telephone interpreting. Training has also been provided on "Awareness Raising – Asylum and Refugee Issues". This training challenges myths and misconceptions, gives local and global information, and enables staff to feel empowered to challenge racism.

Working with Police

The team is very committed to partnership working with the police. Student police officers in their first weeks of training spend three days shadowing members of the asylum team. This enables the police students to understand the facts about asylum, to dispel myths, to see first hand the difficulties asylum seekers face, and to learn the importance of using interpreting.

The police students inform us that these three days open their eyes to the issues faced by asylum seekers, the traumas they have suffered, the loss of their families and homes, the pressures of waiting for a decision with little to fill their time, and the racist attitudes of many members of our communities.

Awareness-raising sessions are also carried out by the Asylum Team for new police recruits at police headquarters in Durham.

The Asylum and Refugee Team work have good links to a dedicated Police Liaison Officer, and to two Racist Incident Officers. The local community beat police are also equally supportive to both workers and service users.

Working with Fire Service

The Fire Service have been instrumental in checking that all properties have a working smoke detector installed, in giving safety advice, and in assessing risk with service users.

Links to the Move On Service for Refugees

The asylum team continues to work very closely with the Move On Service for Refugees, to ensure that clients who are fortunate enough to receive Leave To Remain are given the support they need to take the next step into living more independently as a refugee.

Health

The Health Visitor who has been attached to the team since 2000 continues to work with the families accommodated in Gateshead, prioritising the health of children, ensuring that each child has the relevant inoculations in line with the World Health Organisation, and referring families on to specialist health services as appropriate.

A local Women's Health Project is very active in offering useful courses, advice and support to women in Gateshead, and offering a warm welcome to asylum seekers and refugees.

Links Across Council Services

Services within the Council with which the Asylum Team also has strong links include:

- Social Services, Children and Families.
- Social Services Disabilities Team, supporting failed asylum seekers with additional care needs.
- Learning and Children, Pupil and Parent Services.
- Community Support and Community Safety.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Predicting Future Numbers

It is not possible to project future numbers or to plan ahead, as our clients arrive in the UK as the result of world crisis, political turmoil, and human rights abuse. At any one time there are more than sixty conflicts taking place around the world (Amnesty International)

therefore all we can currently be certain of is that people will continue to be forced to flee their homes to seek sanctuary in safe countries.

Customer Satisfaction

The Asylum Team receives much positive verbal feedback, confirming that their work is greatly appreciated by their clients. A consultation is planned to capture this customer feedback more formally, but will need to be carried out with sensitivity to people's situations.

Private Landlords Association

Enquiries are taking pace with The Gateshead Private Landlords Association regarding the possible use of accommodation as an HMO for approximately five further clients.

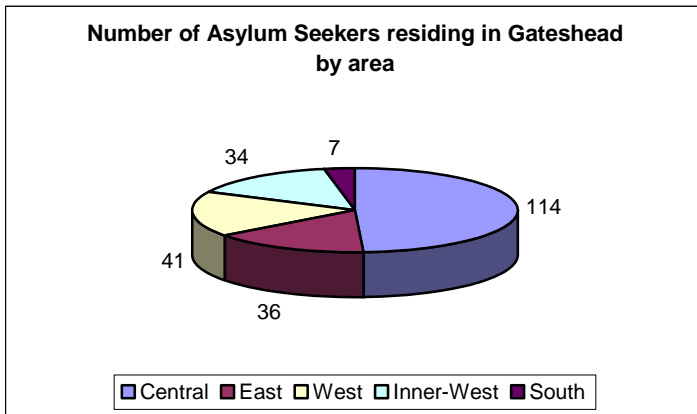
Appendix 1:

Statistics:

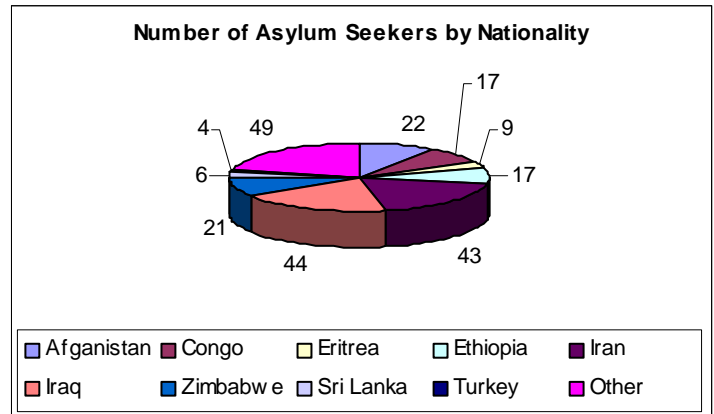
This is a snapshot in time – 7th January 2008.

The figures illustrated here are representative of the fairly static numbers of asylum seekers supported in Gateshead over the previous two years. The following three months saw a drop in numbers as a result of the Case Resolution exercise carried out by the Home Office

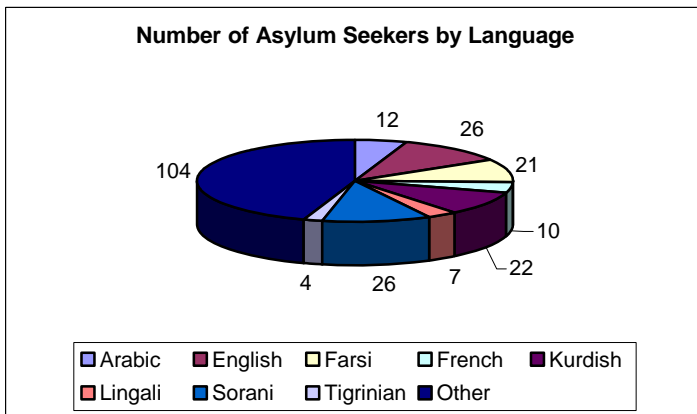
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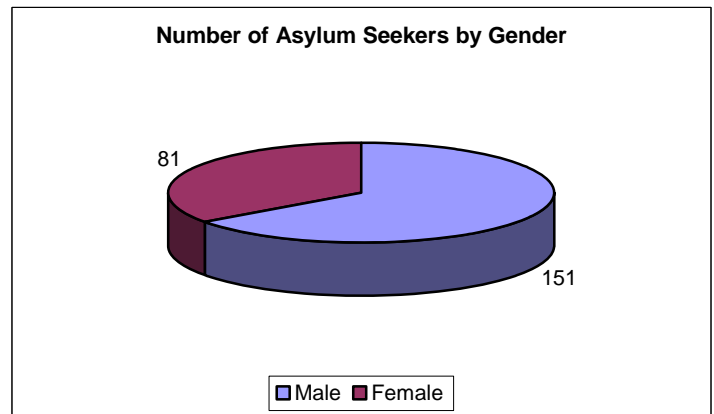
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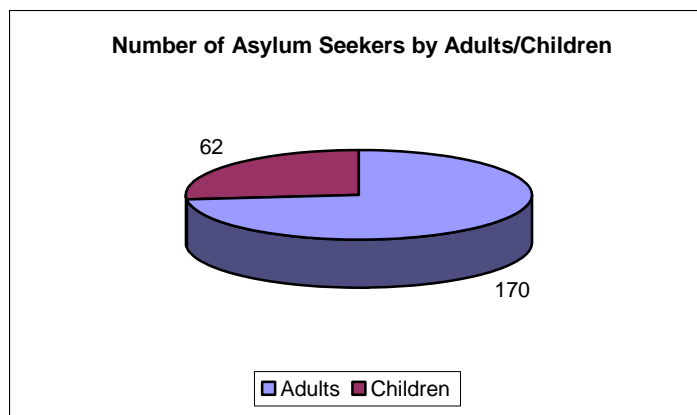
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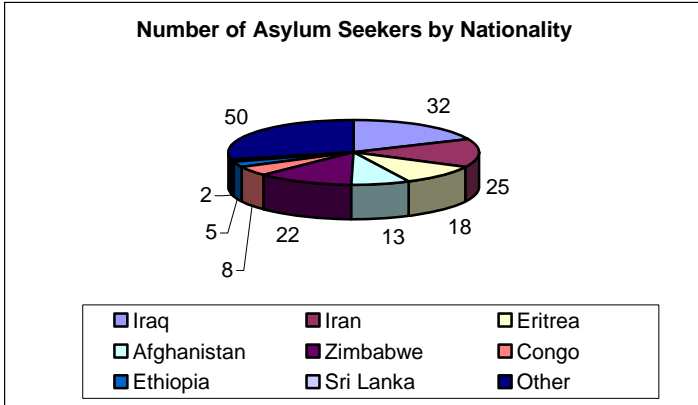
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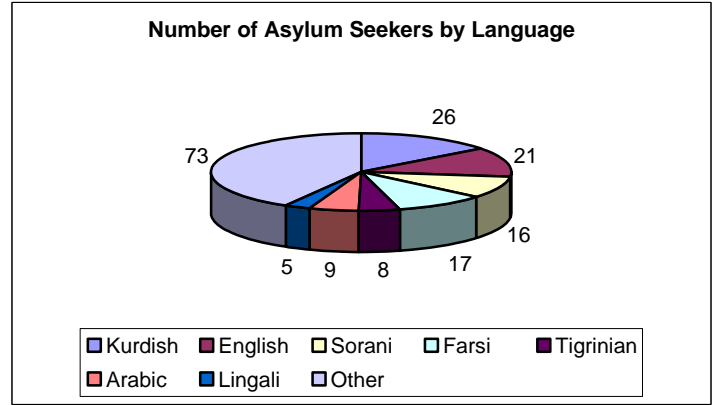
1st Quarterly Statistics – April 2008 to June 2008

The graphs below illustrate the average statistics for Asylum seekers in Gateshead from the period of April to June 2008.

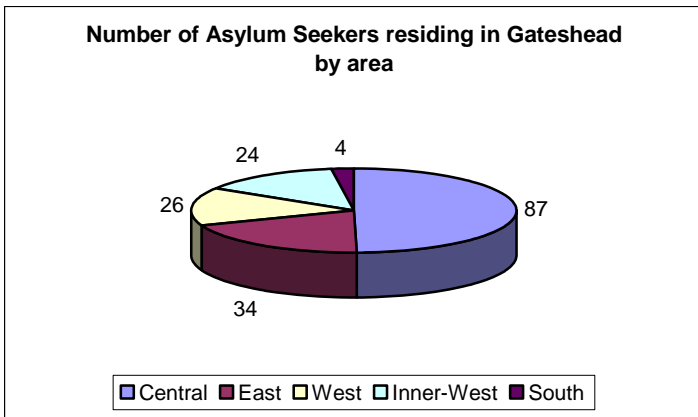
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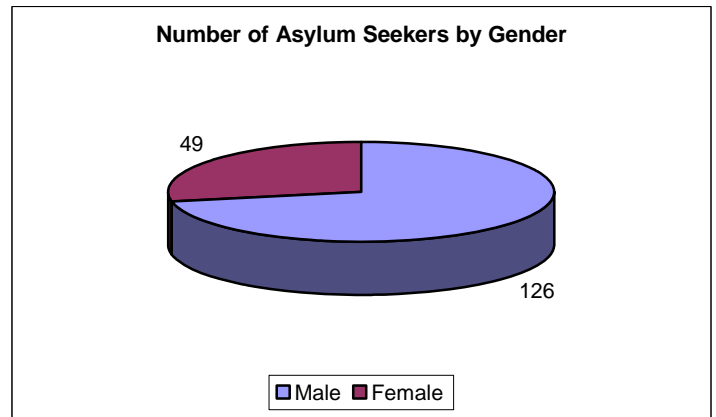
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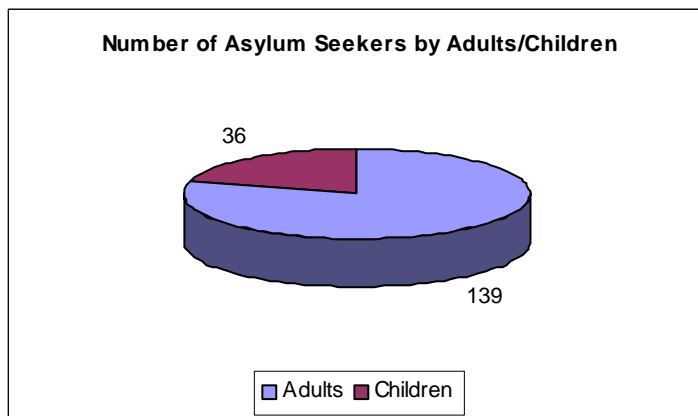
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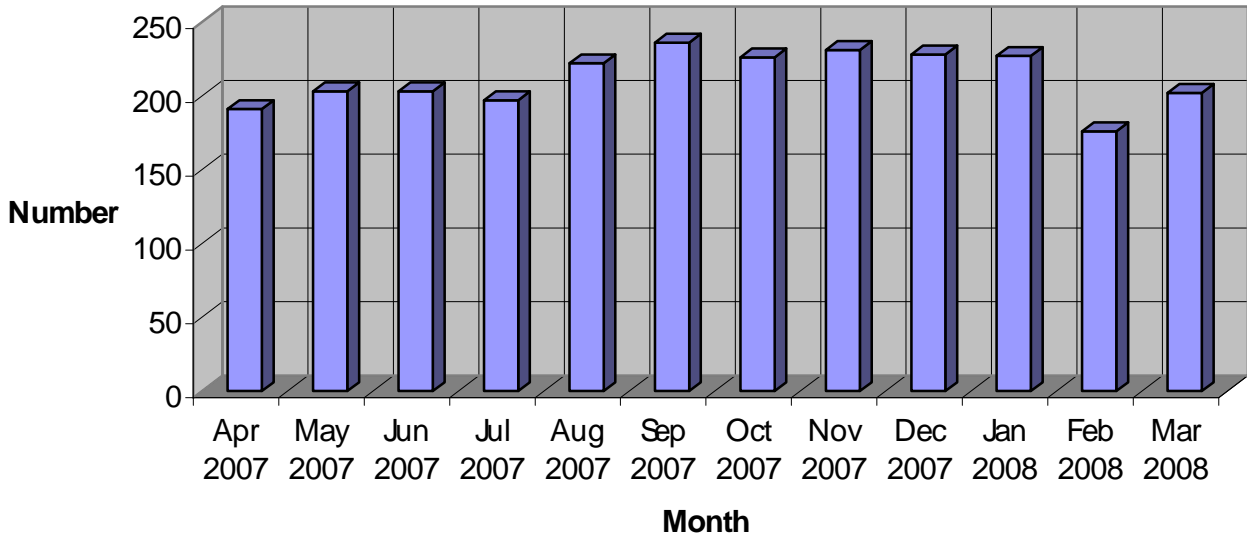
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Appendix 2:

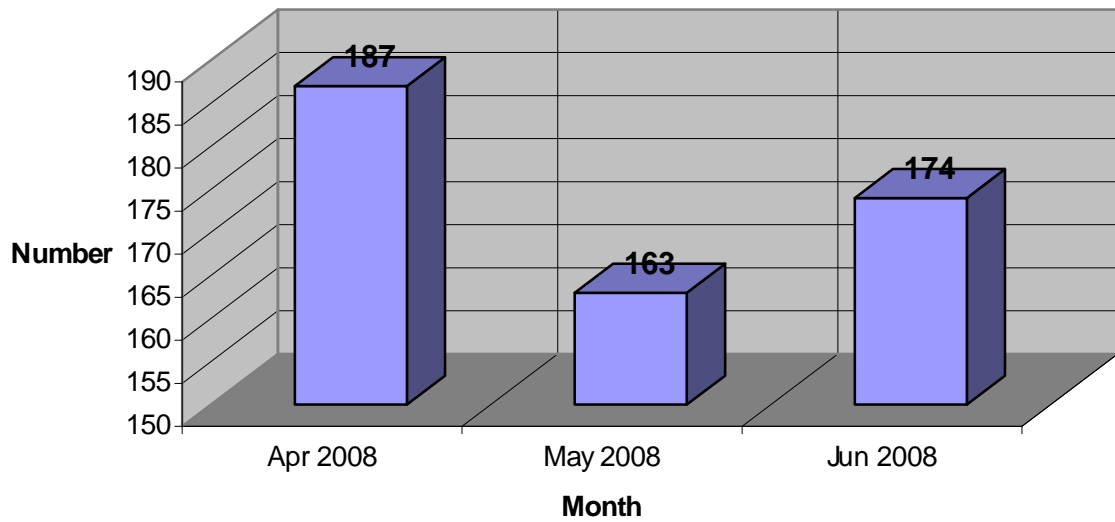
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Number of Asylum Seekers - Financial Year View, April 2007 to End of March 2008

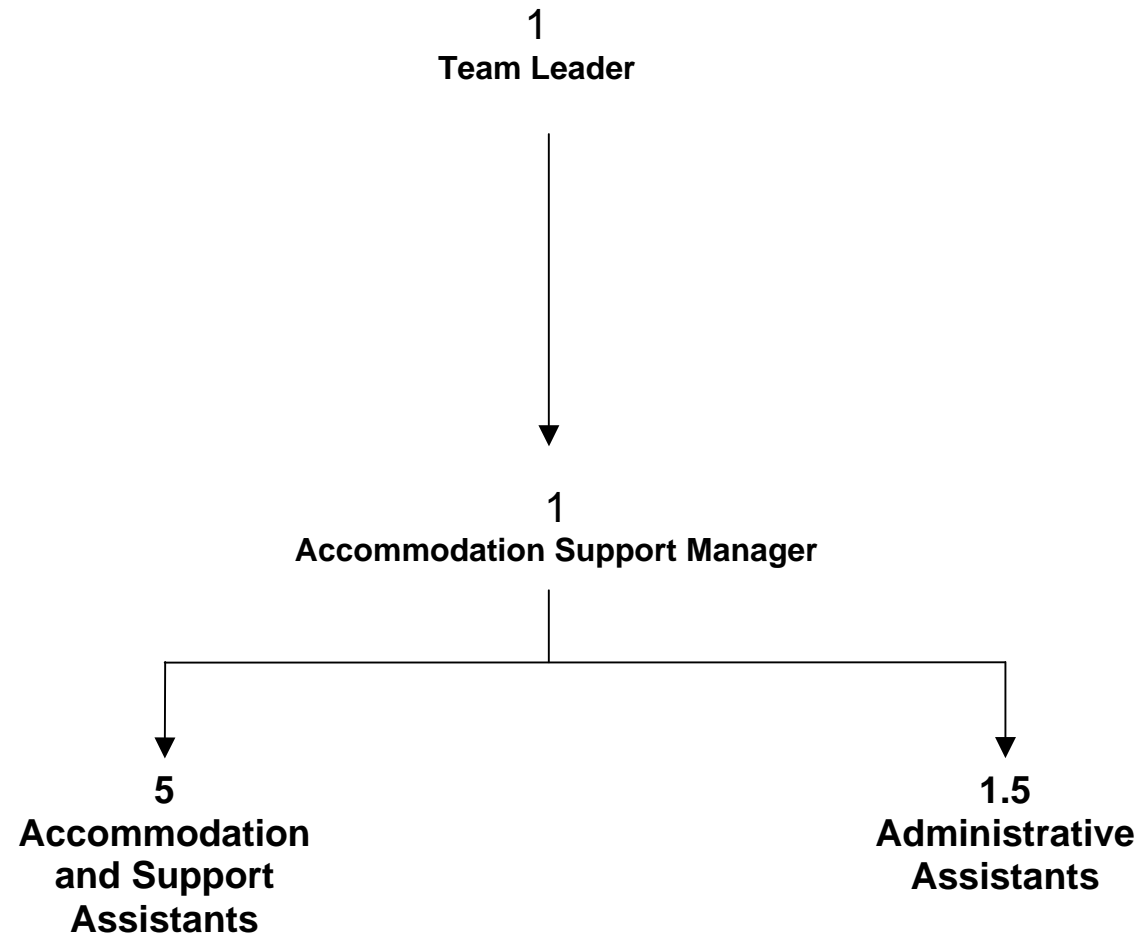


B

Number of Asylum Seekers - April 2008 to June 2008



Appendix 3





Housing Services
Community Based Services
Gateshead Council
Civic Centre
Regent Street
Gateshead NE8 1HH

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