



**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

**QUALITY INITIATIVE  
PROJECT**

**KEY OBSERVATIONS  
AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS**

**FEBRUARY – AUGUST  
2005**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 UNHCR has consistently stressed the importance of having a high quality refugee determination procedure at the initial stage. High quality systems assist Governments to better meet their international obligations, are beneficial to refugees and reduce costs to the tax payer.

1.2 UNHCR recognises the challenges inherent in conducting refugee status determination. These are faced by all states providing international protection in the global context of forced migration.

1.3 In early 2004, UNHCR was invited to assist the Home Office to achieve an improvement in the overall quality of first instance decision making, through auditing existing practice, and providing recommendations. This project is called the Quality Initiative (QI).

1.4 The initial implementation phase of the project took place between March - April 2004. During this period, UNHCR conducted a needs assessment through a review of the Home Office's first instance decision making systems. The review included training programmes, interpretation and application of the Convention, interview practices and the use of interpreters.

1.5 The second stage of the implementation phase ran until the end of January 2005. UNHCR placed a small team of staff within the Home Office's premises in Croydon. During this period, UNHCR reviewed 267 first instance decisions (approximately 2% of decisions made), selected on a random basis from both of the Home Office's sites of operation in Croydon and Liverpool. UNHCR also provided direct feedback to caseworkers and their managers. A summary of UNHCR's key observations and recommendations arising from this phase was published in March 2005.

1.6 During Phase 3 of the Project, between February and August 2005, UNHCR continued to sample approximately 2% of first instance decisions per month, bringing the total number of decisions assessed to 438 since the inception of the Project, and conducted feedback sessions on 199 cases.

1.7 In July 2005, UNHCR started observing interviews of asylum applicants. Fact-finding visits were also made to the facilities at Dover Fast-Track and Induction Centre and Yarl's Wood Detention Centre. During this phase, UNHCR observed interpreters' training and met with Country of Origin Information Service (COIS) officers to discuss the provision of COI to caseworkers.

1.8 The following is a summary of the observations and recommendations flowing directly from these activities.

## **2. KEY OBSERVATIONS ARISING FROM PHASE 3**

2.1 UNHCR continues to report a mixed picture in the quality of first instance decision making. UNHCR is pleased to observe that some caseworkers apply the correct methodology and interview effectively. It remains clear from this stage of the audit however that further improvements in the quality of Home Office decision-making in asylum cases can be made.

2.2 UNHCR continues to report instances of claims for asylum, both well founded and ill founded, which have been subjected to poor decision making. There is some evidence of a lack of understanding of key decision making concepts. UNHCR has also observed instances where the relevant law is misapplied or misunderstood, and where country of origin information is not properly considered.

2.3 UNHCR observes that addressing instances of poor decision making may require both improvements in the level of the competency and skill of some individual caseworkers and in the resources (such as country of origin information and guidance) and support that is made available to them.

2.4 UNHCR welcomes improvements in the quality of country of origin information but further improvement remains possible. UNHCR believes that more support can be offered to caseworkers who are exposed to distressing testimony on a prolonged basis. UNHCR has also observed that the provision of training and the monitoring of decision quality can be further improved.

## **3. PROGRESS ON RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE FIRST REPORT**

- **Accreditation**

3.1 Based on the findings of the QI Project to date, UNHCR believes that an effective accreditation scheme for caseworkers is key to an overall improvement in quality.

3.2 UNHCR welcomes the commitment by the Home Office to actively investigate an accreditation scheme in relation to the New Asylum Model.

3.3 UNHCR continues to believe that every person involved in first instance decision making in asylum cases, including those recruited internally, must be accredited by a scheme that is designed to test the competencies, knowledge, skills and analytical abilities to an appropriate level. UNHCR would welcome the opportunity to assist and provide advice in devising an appropriate accreditation scheme.

- **Country of origin information (COI)**

3.4 In UNHCR's opinion, access to good quality, up-to-date COI and country guidance together with the knowledge of how to apply such information are the cornerstones of good quality asylum decision making.

3.5 UNHCR welcomes the commencement of work to improve the quality of country reports and the wealth of sources on which country reports are based, in particular the use of relevant UNHCR position papers. UNHCR also welcomes the separation of objective country reports and policy guidance. However, based on its own use of the available COI and country guidance when assessing decisions, UNHCR continues to observe that further improvements in the provision of country information and guidance can be made. Country information and guidance should be focused, well presented, unambiguous and consistent, as well as up to date.

3.6 UNHCR still recommends that caseworkers be equipped with the necessary skills to conduct their own research. They should be encouraged to consult a variety of COI sources and assess their reliability, and relevance to the applicant's claim. UNHCR continues to believe that inviting external country experts to provide briefings to caseworkers will be beneficial.

3.7 UNHCR continues to note that internet access within the Asylum Casework Directorate (ACD) remains unreliable, hindering access to original unedited source documents. UNHCR recommends that this be addressed.

- **Stress**

3.8 In UNHCR's experience it is essential that caseworkers deciding refugee claims work in an atmosphere which acknowledges the existence of stress and encourages open discussion of the issues, and that appropriate support structures are in place to enable them to make good quality decisions.

3.9 UNHCR welcomes the acknowledgement by the Home Office that there are pressures associated with refugee status determination work, and the commitment to monitor stress indicators, but notes with concern that there has been little acceptance of the existence of work related stress in ACD.

3.10 UNHCR recommends that stress management training be incorporated into both the initial and ongoing training of caseworkers and that line managers attend stress supervision training.

3.11 UNHCR reiterates its recommendation that caseworkers are regularly rotated off decision making duties for a short period.

#### **4. FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM PHASE 3**

- **Training**

4.1 UNHCR believes that high quality initial and ongoing training is an indispensable tool for providing and developing the skills and knowledge that are required to make sustainable first instance decisions.

4.2 UNHCR recommends that a longer initial training period, including in research techniques, is considered and that it conclude with compulsory competency assessments.

4.3 A regular programme of ongoing training should be introduced and the training needs of ACD staff involved in first instance decision making should be assessed regularly. This will help ensure continued exposure to high quality training on best practice on establishing the facts of a claim, legislation and caselaw, policy and procedure for caseworkers and senior caseworkers.

- **Monitoring and targets**

4.4 UNHCR believes that a fair and efficient asylum system should place equal emphasis on speed and high quality. UNHCR also believes that regular objective assessments and an effective system for the monitoring and review of decisions are essential to maintain quality.

4.5 UNHCR recommends that case production targets be kept at reasonable levels and be sufficiently flexible to allow for anxious scrutiny of each and every case. Meeting and exceeding targets on *quality* should be emphasised.

4.6 UNHCR welcomes the recognition of the importance of effective monitoring of the quality of decisions and the introduction of more objective mechanisms to achieve this, which should be consistently followed. UNHCR recommends that all out-going decisions be reviewed effectively to identify obvious inaccuracies and errors in drafting, and that mechanisms providing effective feedback to caseworkers on their individual decisions be strengthened.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

5.1 UNHCR welcomes the UK Government's commitment to raising the quality of first instance asylum decision making as demonstrated by its continuing partnership with UNHCR through the QI Project.

5.2 UNHCR is grateful for the spirit of cooperation and complete transparency with which ACD has implemented the QI Project. UNHCR has appreciated the goodwill and openness shown by all involved in the Project during this Phase.

5.3 UNHCR looks forward to continuing its work with the Home Office in helping raise the quality of initial decisions.