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# Lawyers slam 'chaotic' asylum unit



By Jonathan Rayner

The UK's system for registering asylum claims is chaotic and unworkable and urgently needs a root-and-branch overhaul, lawyers' groups allege.

Problems at the 'Kafkaesque' asylum screening unit in Croydon (pictured), the only such unit remaining after a similar unit in Liverpool closed in 2009, have prompted angry letters to the UK Border Agency from the Law Society and Immigration Lawyers Practitioners Association (ILPA).

The bodies claim that telephone lines are constantly engaged, so that immigration solicitors must start judicial review proceedings simply to secure an appointment for their

clients. And they protest about what they describe as the 'degrading' treatment of asylum claimants, the 'wholly unacceptable' behaviour of staff and the 'appalling nature of the physical environment'.

Alison Stanley, head of immigration at London firm Bindmans, described her 'Kafkaesque' dealings with the ASU. She said: 'You have secretaries sitting all day pressing the redial button, but never get through, and so you turn up without an appointment. You queue for hours and then get sent away. Telephone us, they say, and make an appointment.'

Stanley added that she recently visited the ASU for the first time in years. 'I was appalled, shocked and ashamed

by the attitude of some of the UKBA officers. And the seats must be the most uncomfortable in the country,' she said.

Alice Boyle, immigration partner at London firm Duncan Lewis, said: 'It always takes the whole day to get through [to the ASU] – if you manage at all. Our public law team has considered judicial reviews, but on each occasion an appointment has been secured before any further action was taken.'

London firm Wilson immigration partner Russell Blakely said: 'The ASU has suddenly become more chaotic which, by coincidence, suits the UKBA. If it's harder to claim asylum, then fewer are going to do so – bringing the statistics down.'

Jonathan Cox, director of the

campaigning charity Citizens for Sanctuary, said: 'ASU staff used to describe the areas where asylum seekers waited and queued as the "cattle shed" and the "pig's pen". These have now been upgraded, with changing facilities and drinking water, but the culture of disrespect endures. Is it really beyond the wit of the British government to put in more telephones or even an email address?'

The Law Society and ILPA urge the ASU to upgrade its telephone booking system to include fax and email to streamline the process. They want particularly vulnerable asylum seekers, such as rape and torture victims, to be able to register with ASU by email or fax and

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then attend a local reporting centre closer to where they live for screening.

The building itself should be renovated and staff, who perhaps have become 'jaded' over

time, should stop their 'aggressive and insensitive treatment of applicants', their letters added. The bodies have also called for fast-tracking of the elderly, children, pregnant women, families with young children and other vulnerable groups.

A UKBA spokesperson said:

'We are confident that the care provided to asylum seekers at the asylum screening unit in Croydon is of a good standard. UKBA takes complaints very seriously and has processes in place for those using the unit to raise any concerns they may have.'