**The Bigger Picture About Refugees:**

It has been 2 years since the tragic death of Alan Kurdi and the outpouring of empathy that resulted from his picture being plastered across the media.  In the wake of the second anniversary of Alan Kurdi’s death, many have asked – what has changed?  The answer - not enough:

[The Independent](http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syrian-refugees-libya-two-years-alan-kurdis-death-a7925616.html) reported recently that things have only got worse for Syrian refugees.

[The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/01/alan-kurdi-khaled-hosseini-mediterranean-refugees-sea-prayer) reported that 8500 have died making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

[UNHCR](http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2017/8/59a82b2a4/statement-un-refugee-agency-two-year-anniversary-death-alan-kurdi.html) took the opportunity of the two year anniversary to push for robust action to prevent more tragedies:  
"Nearly two years after the lifeless body of three-year-old Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi was found on a Turkish beach, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, urges the international community to take robust action to prevent more tragedies.  
Although the number of arrivals in Europe has drastically decreased since Alan’s death, people continue to attempt the journey and many have lost their lives in the process. Since 2 September 2015, at least 8,500 refugees and migrants have died or gone missing trying to cross the Mediterranean alone. Many others have died in the desert.  
Many of the children trying to reach Europe travel on their own, making the journey even more terrifying and perilous. This was the case for 92 per cent of the 13,700 children who arrived to Italy by sea in the first seven months of 2017.  
The urgent need for solutions for these children and others on the move remains – if people see no hope and live in fear, then they will continue to gamble their lives making desperate journeys.  
UNHCR is encouraged by the commitments made at the Paris meeting on migration and asylum on Monday that address some of these issues, but much more needs to be done to protect and save lives.  
Political leaders need to work together to develop safer alternatives, to better inform those considering making the journey of the dangers they face, and most importantly to tackle the root causes of these movements, by resolving conflicts and creating real opportunities in countries of origin."

**2017 Asylum Statistics**  
The immigration statistics for April to June 2017  show that there have been significant decreases in numbers of applications compared to last year.  
Applications:  
·         In Q2, there were 6,172 asylum applications, compared with 6,516 in Q1.  
·         In the last year (Q3 2016 – Q2 2017) there were 27,316 asylum applications, compared with 36,546 in the previous year (Q3 2015 – Q2 2016). This represents a decrease of 25%.  
The 25% reduction statistic appears to apply across the board to migrants, not just asylum seekers, as quarterly immigration statistics also show an almost 25% reduction in net migration in the year ending March 2017 compared to the year ending March 2016.  The overall figure represents the lowest net migration figure since the year ending March 2014.  A deeper look at the statistics reveals that while most of the decrease is due to lower levels of immigration, much of it is fuelled by emigration, mostly by EU nationals. The overall emigration figure has increased by 31,000 overall. This change is almost entirely fuelled by EU citizens leaving the country: emigration from the UK by EU citizens has increased by 33,000 overall, while emigration by non-EU citizens has actually decreased, by 9,000, the remainder of the increase in overall emigration accounted for by British nationals. Immigration figures for non-EU nationals are also down – showing how great a job this country has done in turning into a place fewer want to be part of.

• People seeking asylum are waiting longer for their applications to be processed, with 10,033 people waiting more than six months for an initial decision on their claim, up 51% on the same period last year.

• Between April and June, 1,228 refugees affected by the Syrian conflict were welcomed to more than 100 local authority areas, bringing the total number of refugees resettled through the Government’s Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme to 8,535

Stephen Hale, chief executive of Refugee Action, said:  
“Despite a significant drop in asylum applications, these figures show an alarming increase of more than 50% in the number of people waiting longer than six months for their claim to be processed. During this time people are unable to work and struggle to survive on just £5.28 a day.  
“As our research shows, people seeking asylum in Britain already face long delays to receiving support and once they gain refugee status find it difficult to access English language lessons.  
“It is positive news that the Government’s programme to resettle refugees affected by the Syrian conflict is on track to meet its target of welcoming 20,000 refugees to the UK by 2020.  
“But all refugees in Britain should have the same opportunity to rebuild their lives – starting with access to a fair and effective asylum system.”

**Updates on the law:**  
In August, the Government proposed to amend the ‘NHS Charging Regulations’, which govern how people access healthcare in England and when they have to pay for it. While there are already processes in place for hospitals to identify and bill ‘chargeable’ patients for their care, these regulations introduce two significant changes.

Firstly, charges will be introduced for services provided by all community health organisations in England, except GP surgeries. Public health services commissioned through Local Authorities, which include public mental health and drug and alcohol services, will also be affected.

Secondly, the regulations introduce upfront charging which means that every hospital department in England will be legally required to check every patient’s paperwork before treating them, to see whether they are an overseas visitor or undocumented migrant and should be charged for their care. If a patient cannot prove that they are entitled to free care, they will receive an estimated bill for their treatment and will have to pay it in full before they receive any treatment other than that which is ‘urgent’ or ‘immediately necessary’, as defined by doctors on a case-by-case basis.

What does this mean for refugees and people seeking asylum?

Refugees and people seeking asylum are exempt from paying for treatment. However, refused asylum seekers have different entitlements. Those in receipt of some form of statutory support (Home Office Section 4/ Section 95 support or Local Authority support) are entitled to free care. However, in England, refused asylum seekers who are not in receipt of support are currently chargeable for secondary (hospital) care, unless they started their course of treatment prior to being refused or qualify for a treatment based exemption (for example, they are HIV positive).

Under the new regulations, refused asylum seekers would become chargeable for a range of community health services in England, and would also be subject to up-front charging for non-urgent care. Even under the current system, it is difficult for health services to accurately identify who is chargeable under the regulations and who is exempt, particularly when the immigration status of individuals regularly changes over time. Those who are most adversely affected are often the most vulnerable, who have little understanding of their rights or ability to advocate for themselves and navigate the NHS, particularly without a translator.

The result has been that all too often, even those who are exempt from charging - such as refugees and asylum seekers – are wrongly denied or charged for treatment, or deterred from accessing treatment altogether for fear of being charged.

These amendments, due to come into force on 5 November 2017, have been laid without evaluation of their impact on health outcomes and health inequalities. Asylum Matters are working to push for the Regulations to be withdrawn while further impact assessments and public consultation are completed.