

Hong Kong Citizens Migrating to Britain - Welcoming Parishes

The decision of the Government to offer a special visa route for British National Overseas Passport Holders to Hong Kong citizens has followed the events of last summer. Applications opened in January. The Home Affairs Editor for *The Times* (16 April) claims that the number applying in the first 10 weeks is more than a tenth of the 300,000 that the Government expects to request the visa over the next five years, suggesting it has underestimated the number applying for the scheme.

The Home Office has forecast that between 123,000 and 153,000 dependents will apply in the first year. There are 350,000 Hong Kong citizens who held BNO Passports and a further 2.5 million who are eligible for one. With an additional 2.5 million dependants, up to 5.4 million Hong Kong citizens could apply for the visa and a path for full British Citizenship. The Government has put no limits on the number who could be admitted, but expects many to stay in Hong Kong or prefer to move to places in the Pacific region.

This month the Government announced a £43 million "integration" fund setting up 12 regional "Hubs" to help Hong Kong citizens to integrate into local communities, focussing on education, housing and employment. A Government spokesman said "this new visa route reflects the UK's historic and moral commitment to (the) people of Hong Kong...they will be expected to be self-sufficient and contribute to UK society". The West Midlands Combined Authority has advised that the "Integration" fund will be disseminated through Local Authorities.

The Churches have responded setting up the ecumenical Hong Kong Ready Churches Website to help welcome people arriving from Hong Kong. The website is here: www.ukhk.org/church where parishes can sign up to help welcome people arriving from Hong Kong.

Birmingham Churches together Ecumenical Officer, Robert Mountford, has been pointing leaders in the direction of that website and also www.ukhk.org which extends a practical welcome to those who arrive.

The majority of Hong Kong immigrants are expected to settle in London, Manchester and Birmingham. At the level of the Archdiocese we have a Chaplain, Father Joseph Liang, who in normal times celebrates a monthly Mass at St Catherine's in Birmingham. Father Joseph says about 5% of Hong Kong citizens are Catholic. He can be contacted at email josephliang1998@gmail.com. Father Joseph's website is www.londonchinesecatholiccommunity. In the Diocese a Chinese Layman, Alfred Chan, is happy to be contacted through Monsignor Daniel McHugh, the Co-ordinator of Ethnic Chaplaincies, Missions and Eparchies: co-ordinator.ethnic.chaplaincy@rcaob.org.uk or www.ourladyofgoodcounsel.org.uk

The Bishops' Conference, while welcoming the Government's approach to Hong Kong immigrants, has responded to the Home Secretary's announcement of what was described as "the most significant of our asylum system in decades," echoing Pope Francis' call for us to welcome, promote, protect and integrate refugees. Bishop Paul McAleenan, the lead Bishop for Migrants and Refugees said: "the assistance that we provide to our sisters and brothers fleeing war, poverty, or persecution is a fundamental test of our society". "Restore" (www.restore-uk.org) is a project of Birmingham Churches Together, which supports Refugees and those seeking Sanctuary. In addition, there are a number of projects in the Archdiocese where support is given to Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Tabor House, St Chad's Sanctuary, Fatima House and Brushstrokes come to mind, but there are also at local level other initiatives such as that in St Augustine Church Hall, Solihull, where welcome and refreshment is given to those signing on at the local Enforcement Centre.

I thank all those involved in supporting and welcoming asylum seekers and refugees. I am sure the creation of welcoming parishes for Hong Kong immigrants will be responded to generously.