

NEWS DIGEST

Move to tag asylum seekers

Asylum seekers could be tagged rather than locked up in secure centres as part of a bill published by David Blunkett. The asylum and immigration bill – published just a year after the last legislation to tackle the problem – could allow electronic tagging within 12 to 18 months. The home secretary announced the change of heart as he defended the bill's most controversial measure – to take into care the children of failed asylum seekers. He insisted only a "handful" of families would be affected by the decision. The proposal does not appear in the legislation reducing the risk of a rebellion by Labour MPs. But the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have vowed to oppose the policy.

The legislation will also target asylum seekers who destroy their passports to evade detection by the authorities on arrival in the UK. Those who do so risk a criminal record and up to two years in jail. In future asylum seekers will be able to claim only five hours' help from solicitors, slashing £30m from the £175m asylum legal aid budget. The bill was published as the Home Office released figures which showed that the government had met Tony Blair's promise to halve asylum applications. There were 4,225 applications in September, compared with 8,770 last October. But applications rose 13 per cent to 11,955 in the three months from July to September.

Cathy Newman



Stephen Timms: broadband use nearly trebled in a year

Broadband use trebles in a year

The use of high-speed broadband internet services in Britain has almost trebled over the past year and is expected to top 3m connections by the end of the year. Stephen Timms, the e-commerce minister, said yesterday that Britain still lagged behind Canada and Japan in the national penetration of its broadband network, but now had greater penetration than the US.

Mr Timms, who was opening a broadband laboratory in Whalley, east Lancashire, was confident that, after a slow start, Britain would meet its target of having the most extensive broadband network of any G7 industrialised country by 2005. The government is spending £1bn over the next three years on broadband connectivity.

William Hall

British Energy gets new £75m loan

British Energy, the troubled nuclear power generator, said yesterday that the government had agreed temporarily to lend it a further £75m, to add to an existing £200m government credit facility. A cash squeeze at the company, caused by delays in repairing its Heysham 1 power station in Lancashire, meant that British Energy needed more capital to keep trading. "The company is facing short-term pressures on liquidity," British Energy said. The temporary loan, which runs until February, will tide British Energy over until its £5bn government-backed financial restructuring is completed. The group was rescued from insolvency last year by an emergency government loan, and has been negotiating a debt-for-equity swap with its creditors for several months.

Rebecca Bream

Crackdown on minicab touts

Illegal minicab drivers caught touting for business are to have their fingerprints and DNA recorded by police in an effort to counter sex attacks, say ministers. From Monday, taxi touting becomes a recordable offence and drivers arrested by police will have their details entered on the national criminal database. Police in London alone have recorded 86 rapes in the past two years by illegal minicab drivers and 167 sexual assaults last year.

Press Association

Third 'ghost ship' arrives at Hartlepool

The submarine repair tender vessel the Canopus, the third of the ageing US navy "ghost ships", arrived yesterday at Able UK's Hartlepool yard on Teesside after a 4,000-mile journey under tow from Virginia. The fourth of the vessels, dry bulk cargo carrier Compass Island, is due to enter Able's Teesside Environmental Reclamation and Recycling Centre this afternoon. No dismantling work can be carried out on the four ships before High Court hearings next month, brought by environmental campaigners who claim the vessels pose serious risks.

Chris Tighe

Threat of industrial action at Jobcentres

The threat of industrial action by 90,000 workers in Jobcentres and benefit offices across the UK in a dispute over pay increased yesterday when union leaders backed strikes. Officials of the Public And Commercial Services Union voted for a strike ballot in protest over a 2.6 per cent pay rise. The decision will have to be ratified by the union's disputes committee. Union leaders warned that a two-day strike could be held at the end of January followed by further action. Several hundred Jobcentre and benefit office workers in Glasgow and Essex staged unofficial strikes last week in protest at the 2.6 per cent being imposed by the Department for Work and Pensions.

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