

Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb, Llywodraeth Leol a Chymunedau

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

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Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into refugees and asylum-seekers in Wales

Evidence submission from Ethnic Youth Support Team (EYST)

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Introduction

Ethnic Youth Support Team welcomes the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into refugees and asylum-seekers and its call for evidence submissions. We very much hope that the inquiry will:

- Recognise the value of locally-based grassroots and community initiatives in supporting refugees and asylum-seekers and the importance of financially and strategically supporting these.
- Enable a shift towards a more pro-active, prevention and education-based approach to supporting the effective integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in Wales, rather than one which focuses on refugees and asylum-seekers in isolation and treats them as a problem to be solved.
- Develop a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of 'community cohesion', considering economic factors and competition over resources as primary factors behind racialized social divisions, rather than using the term as a euphemism for race relations, and moving towards an understanding of it as a challenge for 'us' not about 'them'.

Background

Ethnic Youth Support Team is an award-winning BME organisation based in Swansea, which aims to support ethnic minority young people, families and individuals across Wales, including refugees and asylum-seekers. Established for nearly 12 years, we have developed a range of successful programmes to support the BME, refugees and asylum-seekers population in Wales, as well as working more widely to promote integration and community cohesion through a better understanding and more positive view of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity amongst the wider public.

EYST provision for refugee and asylum-seekers

With a staff team of nearly 30, and over 100 volunteers, we have a full-time youth and community centre and offices in Swansea, with workers based in Cardiff, Swansea, Llanelli, Ystradgynlais and Newtown. Our core work includes youth work support and family support to BME young people and families, which includes refugees and asylum-seekers. In Swansea we deliver a full-time refugee and asylum-seeker advice service funded by Henry Smith Foundation which supported over 900 individuals last year via over 2000 advice sessions. We also deliver an innovative volunteering programme funded by Lloyds Foundation targeting and encouraging refugees and asylum-seekers to volunteer, which since July 2016 has supported 32 refugees and asylum-seekers in Swansea to volunteer 2298 hours helping other clients who access EYST. We also work extensively with schools and youth groups delivering educational awareness sessions to increase young people's understanding of asylum, refugee and migration issues, including for example our Refugee Awareness Workshops which was delivered to over 400 young people in Cardiff, funded by Pears foundation.

Since January 2016, EYST has been delivering the Orientation Service for Syrian Refugee Families resettled in Swansea under the Home Office Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS). We also have the contract to deliver this same service in Carmarthenshire as well as Ystradgynlais and Newtown in Powys.

We will now respond to each of the key issues identified by the inquiry

The pace and effectiveness of the Welsh Government approach to resettling refugees through the UK Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS);

We are aware of criticism in relation to the initial pace of the SVPRS resettlement process in Wales. However, in our experience the local authorities with whom we have worked (Swansea, Carmarthenshire and Powys) have worked as quickly as realistically possible to take the necessary steps firstly to procure Orientation Service deliverers in a fair and transparent way and also to identify housing, school spaces, and health provision. They have allocated significant resources to making sure the process of resettlement has gone as smoothly as possible, including convening multi-agency working groups as well as coordinating community-based groups to manage the significant voluntary and community response to Syrian refugee arrivals. So far, 10 families have been safely re-homed with our support in Swansea, 4 in Carmarthenshire, 6 in Ystradgynlais and 2 in Newtown.

Therefore, from our experience, at the Local Authority level, the pace and effectiveness has been good. However, it appears that Local Authorities liaise directly with Home Office rather than with Welsh Government to agree family composition and arrival dates. So, we are unclear what influence and role the Welsh Government has played in this process. We are

aware that the Welsh Government set up a Syrian Refugee Taskforce and an Operations Board, in response to the initial announcement of the SVPRS scheme in September 2015. So far, EYST has not been invited to be part of either of these groups, although we are members of the Welsh Refugee Coalition which is currently represented via Oxfam Cymru.

The effectiveness of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan

In our view the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan provided an aspirational but insufficiently defined vision of how Welsh Government would like to see refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. This lack of definition makes it difficult to measure to what extent it has succeeded.

The plan is also very much of its time, having been published in 2014, when refugees and asylum-seekers were a somewhat niche preoccupation in the eyes of the wider Welsh public. This changed dramatically over the summer of 2015 with the media spotlight on tragic toddler Aylan Kurdi leading to an outpouring of public compassion, with the UK government pressured into its pledge to take in 20,000 Syrian refugees – which then became the SVPRS scheme. By early 2016, following terrorist incidents across Europe, public perception of refugees had become significantly more negative and the issue continued to split public opinion, most clearly manifested in the Brexit vote of June 2016.

In hindsight, the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan did not focus sufficiently on preparing the ground for the successful integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Wales as it did not focus sufficiently on delivering an effective media and communications strategy, nor an effective awareness campaign for key frontline workers. The plan also made too much reference to Welsh Government funded delivery for refugee and asylum seekers which was almost exclusively in Cardiff and Newport, and did not give sufficient recognition to wider work being delivered across Wales, although not necessarily Welsh Government funded. Overall, the plan focused exclusively on the refugees and asylum-seekers without taking into account the wider context and growing challenge of how the issue and group is perceived and understood by people in Wales. In terms of the key areas highlighted by the plan, it is our understanding that there still remain key gaps in terms of:

- The understanding of refugee and asylum-seeker issues of public sector workers, including teachers, police, social workers, health-care workers. There should be renewed efforts to improve training on this topic for those public sector professionals.
- There is a huge gap in provision for refugees accessing employment. There are particular issues with the current capacity and disposition of JobCentrePlus staff to effectively support refugees seeking employment. There is also inconsistency in use of interpreters and language line which adversely impacts benefits claims, etc.
- Within health care while it is welcomed that Wales offers more services to asylum seekers than England, there is patchy knowledge amongst health care providers

about the rights of asylum-seeker and refugees to healthcare provision, and inconsistent use of interpreters and Language line.

- ESOL provision remains insufficient to meet demand. This should be increased as language is a key barrier to integration for refugees and asylum seeker.
- Destitution is not adequately addressed by the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan, and remains a huge gap in public policy in Wales.

The support and advocacy available to unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Wales

In EYST's experience, there is no service which is available to support or advocate for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Wales. The responsibility for supporting these children has in practice fallen on already over-stretched social services departments within Local authorities, who lack culturally specific knowledge and expertise. Local authorities in Swansea, Neath port Talbot and Carmarthenshire have often contacted EYST youth workers to provide support alongside their own social workers, and this approach has been welcomed and has proved effective in helping the child feel more culturally supported and comfortable. However, we recognise that our own team lack the immigration-specific knowledge which would enable them to perform the advocacy role more effectively. We are aware that Tros Gynal previously provided a similar service in some parts of Wales, however this is a current gap. We also have experienced public sector workers lacking knowledge of and understanding about the rights of unaccompanied asylum seeker children and in some cases displaying lack of empathy bordering on hostility. This is reflective of the wider social climate and public attitudes towards refugees and immigration which we see today.

The role and effectiveness of the Welsh Government's Community Cohesion Delivery Plan in ensuring the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Welsh communities

Overall, the Community Cohesion Delivery Plan was overly focused on tackling hate crime and insufficiently focused on prevention of hate crime and challenging attitudes of hate – which is akin to closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. The plan also risked pandering to and increasing racial stereotypes by focusing on specific issues such as modern slavery and gypsy traveller communities, rather than the wider and overarching issue of racism. The challenge of Community Cohesion should not confine itself to the realm of reactive policing, rather it should have embraced a more proactive preventative and educational approach aiming to reach out widely to all those living in Wales. EYST has delivered pioneering work in this field in Wales:

Promoting Awareness & Tackling Negative Attitudes through Education: EYST's work in Schools

Given that one of the key issues facing BME Young people is racism, lack of understanding and racial stereotyping, rather than just offering a victim-focused approach, which many BME organisations tend to do, we have pro-actively sought to address this problem in a solution-focused manner. EYST have developed strong relationships with local schools,

including primary and secondary schools and deliver regular educational awareness-raising sessions to pupils, on a range of diversity-based topics, as requested by the schools, usually via assemblies, PSE lessons or RE lessons. In the last year we have delivered 54 such sessions to over 2000 children across Swansea. Schools very much appreciate our input, particularly as they recognise that teachers lack both the expertise and the confidence to tackle such sensitive subjects. Our input can diffuse and reduce racial tensions and bullying within schools particularly following international terrorist events.

For example, following the Paris attacks, we contacted schools and offered to come in and talk to children about what Islam is, what ISIS is, and the difference between them. What makes these sessions effective is that they are delivered by local BME and Muslim Youth Workers who are skilled in engaging with children and young people, and as well as giving pupils much needed facts and information, they also give them an opportunity to get to know and like a Muslim and Welsh/ British person. Never underestimate the power of a cool and funny person to cut through and challenge racial and cultural stereotypes! Feedback from the young participants in the sessions included:

“I’ve learnt that not all Muslims are terrorists” “Helal is a legend!”



However this work is not publicly funded, neither is it strategically embedded in any Schools’ Local Authority or Welsh Government plans – we would like to see both happen. We would also like our example to be used as best practice in order for it to be replicated across the UK.

Preventing Islamist Extremism through Youth Engagement and Support: the Positive Street Project

From 2009 to 2012, EYST was funded by the Welsh Government via their Community Cohesion Fund to deliver the ‘Positive Street Project’ (PSP) – a project engaging with young Muslim males in Swansea to prevent Islamist extremism and radicalisation. The project was highly successful, working with over 250 young males across the project life-time through a

youth-engagement and information model. Under the project Muslim youth workers set out to develop meaningful relationships with young Muslim males, offering support via street-based outreach, community outreach and a regular youth club provision. The project gave the young people information and understanding of 'authentic Islam' using approved and respected Imams and other credible speakers on Islam. Importantly, the project was fundamentally supported by Local Police who respected the freedom and best judgement of EYST to deliver the project, while at the same time offering support and input when needed. The project revealed that one of the key grievances of Muslim young males was the perceived inequality in how they were treated when suspected of Islamist extremism, compared to how racist white males were treated when espousing apparently far right extremist views. The project provided an important communication link between Muslim young people and the Police, and Local Authority leads, where they could voice these grievances and concerns. This project ended in 2012, and has not received any continuation funding. We would also like to see it used as best practice and replicated across the UK.

Challenging Racism and Far-Right Extremism through Education and Contact theory: the 'Think' Project www.thinkproject.org.uk

In response to the growing racism, Islamophobia and Xenophobia being experienced by our young BME clients, EYST devised the 'Think' Project – an educational programme designed to challenge racism and far-right extremism – especially in disadvantaged, vulnerable young white people - through an intensive 3 day educational programme. The project was funded over 3 years from 2012 – 2015 by the Big Lottery Innovation Fund and delivered to over 400 young people across South Wales. Formally externally evaluated, it proved to be an innovative and effective way of increasing young people's understanding of diversity and immigration issues and increasing their resilience to far-right extremism.

To begin with, the majority of participants had strong and largely negative views about immigration, asylum and diversity. These views had changed significantly for the vast majority of participants by the end of programme:

- At the start of the programme 62% agreed with the statement '*It's not fair that a lot of jobs in Swansea and Wales are taken by people from other countries*', By the end of the programme these figures had dropped to only 11% agreeing.
- At the start of the programme 46% agreed with the statement '*Asylum Seekers come to the UK to get Benefits*', By the end of programme only 2% agreed with the statement
- At the start of the programme, young people vastly overestimated the scale of ethnic diversity in Wales. When asked to estimate the percentage of people in Wales from ethnic groups different to their own, over half of the young people thought the figure was 50% or more. By the end of the programme, 89% correctly put the figure at less than 10%.

The Think Project was found to be unique in the UK and even across Europe, in terms of its practical education-based approach to tackling racism and far-right extremism, in terms of its targeted approach with disadvantaged, disaffected white young people (potentially most vulnerable to far-right extremism), and in terms of its unique methodology based on open dialogue, contact theory and experiential learning. Unlike 'zero-tolerance' approaches to racism, this approach encourages open discussion of young people's feelings and views towards immigration, asylum, Muslims and so on. Only then, once out in the open can such views be effectively challenged. Professors Ted Cantle and Paul Thomas wrote a report on the project, which can be read here <http://eyst.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Think-project-report-web.pdf> , and the project was also invited to share its learning at the conferences in Stockholm and Brussels. While highly successful, the project does not receive public or continuation funding, and we are left trying to sell the training at a time of increasingly restricted public funding. Again, we have here an example of best practice, which could easily be rolled out and replicated to meet a growing need in Wales and the UK.

www.eyst.org.uk