

RAS 41

Ymchwiliad i ffoaduriaid a cheiswyr lloches yng Nghymru

Inquiry into refugees and asylum seekers in Wales

Ymateb gan: Migrant Help

Response from: Migrant Help

**Migrant Help response to the Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales conducted by**

**Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's, National Assembly for Wales**

**December 2016**

**For further information about this paper please contact:**

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**About Migrant Help**

We are an UK wide charity offering advice and support to vulnerable migrants, helping them feel protected, safe and informed. We are non-campaigning and have more than 50 years of knowledge and experience in supporting asylum seekers, refugees, victims of modern day slavery and other migrants.

Our vision is for a global society that protects vulnerable migrants, treats them with respect and enables them to become successful members of their community.

**Our work in Wales**

Asylum Help has operated in Wales since the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2014 replacing all other government funded asylum advice services. This is free independent advice and guidance to asylum seekers. Our advisers assist asylum seekers to understand their situation and to make informed decisions. Asylum Help has advisers based in Initial Accommodation in Cardiff (as well as other IA's across the UK). It runs a national free telephone helpline to provide advice and assistance with completing support applications in the client's language of choice. We also provide outreach for a defined vulnerable group of asylum seekers and are also first responders to the National Referral Mechanism for victims of slavery. Resources and information are available in 15 language on [www.asylumhelpuk.org](http://www.asylumhelpuk.org) and [www.migranthelpuk.org](http://www.migranthelpuk.org)

Migrant Help is supportive of fuller responses to the inquiry given by the Welsh Refugee Coalition, Tai Pawb and Welsh Women's Aid.

## **1. Asylum Accommodation**

As an exception to devolved housing policy asylum accommodation is not devolved. Asylum Accommodation in Wales is run by Clearsprings which runs both the Initial Accommodation and dispersal properties. Clearsprings is a private company that is contracted by the Home Office to do this. Asylum Seekers are made to share bedrooms, the standard of the accommodation is often poor and when asylum seekers want to report a maintenance issue or complaint the existing processes are not effective. There is no independent scrutiny on standards or independent means of complaint.

**Recommendation 1:** Welsh Government to engage in ways to improve asylum accommodation in Wales. This could be done by putting measures in place for asylum housing quality to be scrutinized by Welsh Government or local authorities. Welsh Government could also engage with UK Visa & immigration Asylum Accommodation and Support (AAST) stakeholder consultation on new contracts for asylum housing and influence bringing the asylum housing contracts back to the Local Authorities in Wales.

## **2. Destitution and Homelessness**

Asylum Seekers who have been through the asylum process and become all rights exhausted are evicted from asylum accommodation and have no right to public housing, no right to legal work and no access to public funds or benefits (NRPF)

Some asylum seekers at the beginning of the asylum process may also be at risk of destitution due to inability to evidence destitution to the Home Office, particularly vulnerable unfamiliar with their environment with no family links.

Enforced destitution on vulnerable asylum seekers should not be happening in Wales and although it is a Home Office policy, Welsh Government could take measures to reduce destitution and thus exploitation of vulnerable displaced people.

Voluntary hosting schemes have been operating in Cardiff and Swansea but capacity is an issue particularly in terms of risk assessing, training hosts and safeguarding framework. Although as a Welsh society we are facing increased racism, the rise of far right movements and general hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees there has on a positive side been a massive upsurge in people wanting to help asylum seekers and refugees. Support for those who have spontaneously claimed asylum and who have been through the asylum process should also be encouraged.

**Recommendation 2:** Welsh Government expands the eligibility criteria for the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) to include those who currently have no recourse to public funds. Welsh Government to look at how it can support hosting schemes either through capacity building or through the DAF.

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Registered Charity (England and Wales): 1088631 Registered Charity (Scotland): SC041022 Company No (England and Wales): 4172880

**Recommendation 3:** WG to commission standard information sharing protocols with UKVI asylum support or its contracted agencies to provide ongoing statistical data on asylum seekers refused support and are destitute in Wales. Data/trends to be closely monitored to inform policies and advocacy areas following full implementation of the new immigration rules in 2017.

### **3. Health and wellbeing**

#### **Initial Screening/Services for newly arrived asylum seekers**

Newly arrived asylum seekers have an initial health screening during their stay in IA (Initial Accommodation), this is done by staff at CHAP (Cardiff Health Access Practice). The health service at the time was designed for a throughput of 140 asylum seekers in IA. The average number of asylum seekers passing through IA are on average 300 and have been for the past 2 years. CHAP service have undergone two tenders and many changes, at times there have been no capacity to see all newly arrived asylum seekers and quite often asylum seekers have significant and complex health needs.

The intended stay in IA is 28 days but we are finding that people may be in IA for longer as TDA (Temporary Dispersal Accommodation) this means that people are waiting longer for permanent dispersal and thus access to secondary health care.

**Recommendation 4.** WG to monitor health service for newly arrived asylum seekers (previously done via WASHRAG meetings)

#### **Mental Health**

Many asylum seekers have experienced significant trauma and are in need for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Counselling – the waiting lists are long and quite often the counselling does not include appropriate translation and interpretation. It is also evident that the asylum process itself can have a significant negative impact on an asylum seekers' mental health – the lack of control over their situation, poor living conditions, low financial support rates, isolation, culture shock, mental health stigma, language barriers and loss of identity. There is a lack of understanding of these issues amongst health professionals, with very few specialists in refugee related trauma. In England asylum seekers have easier access to the services of Freedom from Torture and Helen Bamber charities – but this is more difficult for those asylum seekers living in Wales – partly due to their capacity and also distance/travel.

**Recommendation 5.** WG to look at joined up working with third sector charities in developing sustainable provision of specialist mental health services for asylum seekers. WG to review and develop a framework for specialist training for health professionals.

#### **Language Line/Interpreting Services**

Not all health services are offering or using Language Line. Some GP's are refusing to use language line or make other interpreting arrangements. This can be because GP's may use patients' children to interpret or simply because of direct discrimination.

**Recommendation 6.** WG/Delivery Plan should reflect action to work with health colleagues to ensure all health services in Wales fully integrate Language Line or equivalent into health provision. Monitoring systems should be put into place to ensure access to interpreting services.

#### **4. Asylum Seeking and Refugee Women**

As service providers in the Initial Accommodation we are witness to the fact that refugee women and girls in Wales are highly likely to have experienced violence in their lifetime, in their country of origin, in a refugee camp, on their journey, or in the UK. We fully support the response and recommendations made by Women's Aid to this enquiry.

#### **5. Integration of new arrivals**

Newly arrived asylum seekers dispersed in Wales are accommodated in the Initial Accommodation for a relative period of +/- 28 days. This is an estimated length of stay which could ultimately be as long as 3 months due to various contributing factors. In our experience this is wasted time when many service users start to become frustrated, depressed and disorientated. It is noted one of the principles underpinning the policy approach to supporting refugees in the Welsh Inclusion Strategy acknowledges 'refugee inclusion begins on day one of arrival'. As many of these policy issues affecting asylum seekers and refugees are notably not devolved areas of responsibility, promoting community cohesion from day of arrival should be extended to newly arrived asylum seekers as they are more than likely to be settled long term in Wales as asylum seekers or when granted leave to remain.

**Recommendation 7:** WG to provide support and SMART framework to the third sector agencies providing activities promoting community cohesion. These should be relevant and relative to the requirements of the service users ie. English Conversation groups or ESOL + courses, children's therapeutic play groups, access to sporting facilities/extracurricular activities and proactive engagement by local PCSO's. Orientation/life in UK modules would be useful for newly arrived asylum seekers in learning about welsh society and laws. Skill identification is needed at an early stage and assistance to utilise such skills in a volunteering capacity. Opportunities should be maximized for residents in IA and in dispersal to be involved in local volunteering activities, and for capacity building support for local communities to support befriending/mentoring schemes.

**Recommendation 8:** Structured monitoring of the experiences of newly arrived asylum seekers to be required from supported third sector

agencies to inform policy development and lobby areas in areas of devolved responsibility.

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