

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

Visits to the Oasis Centre and Trinity Centre, Cardiff

17 November 2016

Members:

Gareth Bennett AM

Siân Gwenllian AM

Rhianon Passmore AM

Jenny Rathbone AM

Participants:

Oasis project workers/officers

Migrant Help UK officers

Space4U workers

Social work student

Trinity Centre co-ordinator

Welsh Refugee Council

Oasis

The Oasis Centre is a registered charity and has a mixture of volunteer and paid workers. Its service users are refugees and asylum seekers.

Challenges facing service users

- Project workers emphasised that refugees and asylum seekers face several barriers to successful integration into the community. One of the main perceived barriers is a **lack of advocacy** from when an asylum seeker or refugee first arrives at the dispersal centre.
- Interpretation is often unavailable making it difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to go through **necessary processes and paperwork** such as applying for job seekers' allowance, joining a GP surgery, attending appointments and applying for housing.



- Project workers noted that another barrier to the successful integration of asylum seekers and refugees are the **cultural differences** between their country of origin and Wales, meaning that they misunderstand everyday systems and services such as GP surgeries, job centres, police, refuse and recycling.
- These barriers can result in **sanctions** (e.g. for not providing the correct paperwork or for littering in the street) which can then be **detrimental to the individual's confidence and lessen the likelihood of successful integration into the community**.
- The project workers noted that service users often have **mental health problems** as a result of traumas experienced in their countries of origin. The problems **often go untreated** due to failure to integrate into the community, and their needs tend to increase as time goes on.
- It was noted that an additional main issue for asylum seekers and refugees is **housing and accommodation**. The project workers told Members that the majority of their service users have been **homeless** at one point during their time in the UK, usually after they have been moved from their initial accommodation upon arrival.
- Single male asylum seekers and refugees are often placed in hostels alongside individuals suffering with substance abuse problems. Project workers noted that **hostel staff are not trained or equipped to assist individuals who have suffered the type of trauma that refugees and asylum seekers have experienced**. It was noted that few private renting landlords will accept tenants who receive Job Seekers' Allowance, meaning there are very limited options for accommodation for Oasis' service users.

Services provided by Oasis:

- The majority of service users find Oasis via word of mouth or from signposting by other charities. One example was given of the project being



found on Twitter. It was noted that other charities use the facilities at Oasis as part of their work, such as Migrant Help UK.

- Both charities emphasised that they are **constrained by capacity and funding**. Oasis' capacity means that workers often only have direct access to newly arrived refugee and asylum seekers. Access to individuals who are settled in the community relies on referrals from other services.
- In response to a Member, workers noted that **the project is unable to support all service users** with processes and paperwork **due to the volume of people who drop in to the centre** on a daily basis. One Member queried whether service users who have lived in Cardiff for a longer period could assist with advocating newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, and although project workers noted that properly structured "befriending" schemes can be beneficial, all service users could be vulnerable, regardless of the length of time they have been living in Cardiff, and so they are not a straightforward solution.
- Volunteers at the project work with newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, undertaking volunteer activities such as painting and decorating at not for profit and third sector organisations. The aim of such activities is to assist with English language skills and integration. The project workers emphasised the **importance of giving service users the opportunity to practice the English language in an informal, practical setting, to help build confidence**.
- The project runs voluntary, drop-in English classes every day, which are of a mixed ability-level and age group. Lessons are structured by key themes including cultural topics in order to assist with service users' knowledge of/access to everyday services and information, but otherwise they are predominantly student-lead. It was noted that service users are given the opportunity to ask questions, to ensure lessons appear **accessible, interesting and exciting, whilst providing a safe environment**. The classes



also encourage peer-to-peer learning for the service users to share their knowledge and skills with others.

- The classes aim to assist with refugees and asylum seekers' integration into their communities, as the **main barrier for employment is language**. The project workers noted that there is a shortage of English language class provisions in Cardiff, and that it is only possible to apply for colleges such as Cardiff and the Vale ahead of the new term in September, meaning that refugee and asylum seekers could have stayed in Cardiff for up to a year before being able to apply.

Young service users

- The project's service users include unaccompanied minors who are usually placed with foster families after arrival. The project **encourages a family atmosphere** so that children begin to feel accountable to the staff, who are then more able to encourage them into education or to attend the centre's English classes.
- It was noted that child service users are often wary of social services and reluctant to attend school, and **project workers have been successful in encouraging them** to attend school and further education.

Recent resettlement of Syrian refugees

- Project workers do not have direct experience of the recent funded resettlement scheme, in which Syrians arrived with refugee status and were provided with a "family development package" including a support worker, specific programmes and classes.
- Project workers suggested that the resettlement scheme has **demonstrated good practice** and that the services available to the refugees on the scheme should be accessible to all refugees and asylum seekers in the community. They also suggested that all refugees and asylum seekers, including those recently arrived from Syria, should be integrated together in the community, to provide a common ground.



The Trinity Centre

Services provided at the centre

- Charities such as Space4U have their base at the centre. Space4U provides a **safe environment with recreational activities, English classes, and meeting basic needs for people in the community to access**. They run on a voluntary basis and are open two afternoons a week, with up to 200 drop in's per afternoon. They provide support to asylum seekers and refugees at different stages, for example letter reading, making appointments. They also provide a mum and toddler group.
- Space4U's service users include refugees and asylum seekers who are homeless, and whom have very few other places that they can be referred to.

Housing and homelessness

- Similar to Oasis, workers at the Trinity Centre find that **housing is one of the main barriers to refugee and asylum seekers' successful integration in the community**. It was noted that once refugee status has been granted, individuals have 21 days to find somewhere to stay, which can be delayed by waiting for National Insurance numbers, having to find money for a deposit and agency fees, as well as landlords' refusal to accept tenants claiming JSA.

Applications for refugee status

- If Asylum Seekers' applications for refugee status are unsuccessful, they will then have **no access to public funds and become destitute** whilst waiting to re-apply. It was noted that many individuals are in this situation, at which point the ways in which the charities based at the centre can help is limited. It was noted that the timeframe for addressing asylum seeker claims has reduced, from approximately four years to 12-18 months.
- If an application is successful and refugee status is granted, it was noted that some individuals will face further difficulties as they no longer have the initial accommodation provided following dispersal. The centre's workers estimated that **once refugee status is granted, it takes between three and six months**



for individuals to go through the basic processes such as housing applications and job centres.

Difficulties facing the service providers

- It was noted that the “consortium bid” for services to refugees and asylum seekers which is funded by the Welsh Government **could be making it difficult for smaller organisations** (such as those running out of the Trinity Centre) to tender for such bids.
- The co-ordinator for the Trinity Centre noted that the framework of services that are within the criteria means that **locally generated initiatives can be overlooked**, but it is often these organisations who the service users have become accustomed to.
- It was suggested that it would be useful for the Welsh Government to carry out an **audit of the volunteers** who work with refugees and asylum seekers, to map the pattern of all services that are available and establish which organisations are actually working with refugees and asylum seekers on the ground.

Longer term integration of refugees and asylum seekers

- The centre’s workers expressed concern around the longer term integration of refugees and asylum seekers in communities, and suggested that a **change of perception within the local people is needed**. It was noted that the majority of jobs for asylum seekers and refugees tend to be stereotypical roles such as working in restaurants, car washes and as taxi drivers. It was noted that these roles do not make the most of the skills held by many refugees and asylum seekers, but there are no affordable conversion courses available to help continue professions from their countries of origin.
- It was noted that of the asylum seekers who are dispersed to Wales and then granted refugee status, only a small number stay long term. The majority move to larger cities due to more perceived opportunities for jobs.



- The **cuts to local government services are affecting the most vulnerable including asylum seekers and refugees**, as they affect access to services they need such as libraries and Citizen's Advice Bureau representatives. It was suggested that strengthening local government services and increasing funding to the third sector could improve this.
- It was noted that centre workers have noticed an **increase in incidences of racial abuse** reported by their service users. One centre worker noted that it appears as if racial prejudice has become more acceptable in communities in recent months. It was suggested that one issue is ratios of contact, as only a small number of people in communities have regular contact with a large number of refugees and asylum seekers.

