

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

Visit to the African Community Centre, Swansea

17 November 2016

*Please note the participants were service users from the African Community Centre in Swansea and also Swansea City of Sanctuary

- Joyce Watson AM and Bethan Jenkins AM were present from the Committee
- There were approximately 25 service users present along with their children
- There were also staff representatives from the African Community Centre and Swansea City of Sanctuary

The main problems for refugees and asylum seekers

- **Application forms** not being passed on correctly between areas – one participant within the group said that his case started in Croydon, he is now in Swansea and information has been lost with the move. There is also a **lack of Communication between departments**.
- Many participants noted the need to **encourage** more refugees and asylum seekers to **learn English** to a good standard in order to be able to work in different places, when visiting the doctor, when opening a bank account (to be able to read the terms and conditions for example)
- Home Office **do not accept email applications** – they must be in paper form so need to be posted or faxed over. Asylum seekers find this expensive as they have to pay for the postage. If they used email format there would be no problem.
- If an asylum seeker is starting an application from scratch they have to go to the office in Liverpool. When living in Swansea its far to travel and also expensive – they are reimbursed, but still pointed out that it is expensive and why can they not go to an office closer to Swansea.
- **Transportation** – a lot of asylum seekers are housed on the outskirts of Swansea therefore need to use public transport to enter the city to do things



like shopping and visit the doctor. This becomes expensive especially when a whole family needs to use public transport more than once a week.

- Some reiterated that transport is one of the **biggest problems**.
- Hospitals will reimburse asylum seekers their travel expenses if they are attending a check-up or an appointment which has been arranged beforehand. They will not reimburse if you attend the hospital in an emergency.
- It was pointed out that this was not a known piece of information – lack of communication and information sharing meaning that they were not aware of this, resulting in them not being able to plan financially around this.
- It becomes more expensive when a child reaches 16 years of age as they then have to pay adult prices.
- **Post office** – asylum seekers must go to the post office to receive their money, it has to be the post office in the middle of Swansea, they cannot do this in sub post offices which is causing a problem as they then have to spend money on public transport to get into Swansea.
- Some noted that post office staff are not very friendly and are quite judgemental.
- **Section 4** – if an asylum seeker is placed on section 4 then they can only pay for goods with an Azure payment card, they cannot withdraw cash – cannot pay for the barbers (they only take cash) cannot pay for bus tickets as they also want cash.
- Asylum seekers in section 4 find themselves having to ask friends and neighbours for cash to see them through.
- Can't shop in cheaper stores such as Aldi or Lidl as they won't take their cards, which means they have to shop for food in the more expensive supermarkets.
- Section 4 also means they cannot get medical or dental treatment.
- **Housing** – a lot of asylum seekers are housed by Clear Springs Housing which is controlled by the Home Office.
- They have housing managers that they can call if they have a problem with their housing – these are not very helpful and can be judgemental. Asylum seekers do not know who else they can turn to for help.



- Many of the participants said that they are lucky as they access advice and help in community centres such as the African Community Centre and through Swansea City of Sanctuary, they also have friends and good neighbours, but there were concerns for those who do not know these services exist. Where do they go for help?
- A lot of issues around cleanliness and state of carpets and sofas in these houses.
- Some saying that they were frightened to put their children down on the carpets.
- Others say that their children have had health problems because of the state of sofas and carpets.
- Having to wait a long time for the smallest of problems to be sorted by housing managers/home office.
- Mention of TV licensing being expensive for them – £24 a month.
- Heating – some houses have heating set with automatic timers that they cannot change.
- **Interpreters** – are very costly for organisations who help to arrange these. They find they don't really have the funding to help with this.
- In schools, schools help to provide this for children.
- **Children's extra-curricular activities** – some participants noted that they don't get help from school to pay for things like school trips, Xmas dinner and school uniforms. Others noted that their schools let them pay for things in instalments.
- An issue with activities being in the middle of Swansea, nothing available for families on the outskirts where they live – the transport issue is then risen again.

Access to information and advice

- As already explained the participants said that they were very grateful for the information and advice they receive from the African Community Centre and Swansea City of Sanctuary.
- There was also a representative who volunteers in a drop in centre on Fridays and Saturdays where they primarily welcome asylum seekers and provide them with information and advice.



- The Welsh Refugee Council / The Red Cross used to do this but they had their funding taken away from them – following this the asylum seekers were given a helpline telephone number for Migrant Help in Cardiff but often the telephone number doesn't work or no one answers.
- Provided us with a list of issues that asylum seekers need signposting to.

Integrating into new communities

- General feeling that the people of Swansea are very welcoming and very helpful. Some said they don't experience discrimination as they did in other places in the UK.
- Mention of one discriminatory incident following Brexit vote.
- Some people can be judgemental, for instance in the post office or in the supermarket, but all in all, general individuals are very helpful and welcoming.

Finding work

- Is not easy for those who are able to work to get work.
- Some companies treat those that are able to work, better than others.
- There's not a lot of help available to help them find work, other than the support they get from the African Community Centre and Swansea City of Sanctuary.

Final word from the group was that they are very grateful to the African Community Centre and Swansea City of Sanctuary for their help and support. They also noted that they would like more refugees and asylum seekers to move to Swansea because of the help and support available and because so many people are nice to them.

