

Social Justice & Regeneration Committee

(SJR(2)-05-07(p.5))

Date: Thursday 22 March 2007

Time: 09:30 – 12:30

Venue: Senedd

Title: Refugee Inclusion Strategy - Post Consultation Update

1. Purpose

1.1 To provide Committee Members with an update on the Refugee Inclusion Strategy Consultation and the headline issues/responses received.

2. Summary / Recommendation

2.1 That the Committee notes the contents of the paper.

3. Background

3.1 The Minister for Social Justice & Regeneration last provided a verbal update on these issues for Committee Members on 18 January 2007.

4. Refugee Inclusion Strategy

4.1 In November 2003, the All Wales Refugee Policy Forum was established by the Minister for Social Justice & Regeneration. It is chaired by the Minister and ensures that a more strategic, co-ordinated and effective approach is taken to support the successful integration of Refugees and Asylum Seekers on a national level across Wales. The Forum initiated the work which has led to the publication of the Refugee Inclusion Strategy.

4.2 The Refugee Inclusion Strategy for Wales sets out the Welsh Assembly Government's vision and 3 year strategy for achieving Refugee Inclusion in Wales. It also sets out the core principles which will underpin this work.

4.3 The evidence base for the Strategy was developed through focus group research; a comprehensive literature review; questionnaire feedback; workshops and interviews with key stakeholders. The Strategy is placed within a policy and legislative context, taking into account the profile of Refugee and Asylum Seeking and receiving communities in Wales and work already undertaken to date.

4.4 The Welsh Assembly Government will work with partners to deliver the Strategy and will continue to seek ongoing advice from those with expertise in this area. The document sets out its overall arrangements for doing this.

5. Consultation Phase

5.1 Cabinet agreed the Refugee Inclusion Strategy on 19 June 2006 and agreed to go out to consultation. This consultation began on 3 November and took the following forms:

1. An invitation to all interested parties to provide written feedback on the draft strategy. This has been done via the Assembly Government website, email and hard copy letters and distributed widely through relevant networks across civil society, the statutory and private sectors. In addition, the executive summary and the recommendations were translated into five languages (Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Somali).
2. Two consultation events targeted at all partners, stakeholders and interested parties. One was held at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff (to capture the dispersal areas of Swansea, Newport and Cardiff) with attendance of over 80 and a smaller event at the North East Wales Institute (NEWI) of 40 in Wrexham. Both events were held in January 2007 and were very well attended.
3. Targeted refugee consultation sessions which were organised by Refugee Voice Wales (RVW) and The Welsh Refugee Council (WRC) with asylum seekers, refugees and Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs). These workshop sessions enabled people from within refugee and asylum seeker communities to receive training in facilitation skills and for them to then organise and hold the sessions. This was aimed at actively engaging as many refugees and asylum seekers in the consultation as possible and to reflect as much as possible, the diversity of experiences in Wales. This was also an opportunity to build capacity within both the WRC and RVW.

5.2 This approach has proved successful. The consultation events organized by RVW and WRC, and the resulting interest raised amongst Refugee groups, have been much higher than predicted. The Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to consult directly with asylum seekers and refugees has been welcomed. The WRC and RVW hope that the methodology used has enabled active engagement by individuals and that it has been an empowering process for refugees and asylum seekers. It is hoped that this can act as a model for consulting refugees and asylum seekers on other government strategies or for consulting with other groups whose voices are often not heard in larger consultation processes

5.3 It was originally anticipated that consultation sessions involving approximately 150 participants would be arranged. However, by the end of January, sessions had already been run involving some 240 Refugees and Asylum Seekers. In addition, requests had been received to run sessions throughout February with groups who would reach approximately another 150 individuals. The high level of demand and interest amongst Refugee Communities in the consultation process has reflected the value of this approach.

5.4 In light of this, I made further resources available to enable additional sessions to be held and I

agreed an extension to the closure of the consultation period to the end of February. This has meant that, whilst I can provide headline responses in this paper, a full summary of responses to the consultation will be produced for the attention of the next Assembly Government.

6. Initial Headline Issues

6.1. It is significant that the responses received and noted below have come primarily from the consultation events and refugee & asylum seeker workshops and are common to all these sources. There have been over 30 written responses to the consultation received, which although they have yet to be fully analysed appear to make similar points.

6.2 The final Summary of Responses Report will outline the methodology used for the consultation and an analysis of the different groups and individuals who participated.

6.3 Responses received include:

- The language used in the strategy document was commented upon – that phrases were used which emphasised the separation, talking about ‘links’ not ‘integration’ within communities.
- In discussions around what were identified as the highest priority issues, participants were keen to emphasise that all the recommendations are important and need to be followed through with some urgency.
- Increasing public understanding of issues relating to refugee inclusion was underlined as an important recommendation of the strategy.
- Wider access to interpreters was a commonly repeated statement and with particular reference that children and young people must not be used as interpreters for other family members.
- Greater access for refugee communities to advocacy services was supported as a vital component, specifically in safeguarding vulnerable children and young people.
- The significance of English language skills and lack of access to ESOL provision was cited as a barrier to integration.
- The focus on mental health issues for refugees/asylum seekers was welcomed but it was felt that the strategy did not go on to offer a robust picture of what and how the physical health needs of refugees / asylum Seekers differ from those of the indigenous population.
- The lines between what is devolved and non-devolved and therefore Assembly Government responsibilities are not always clear or in many cases cannot be neatly separated.
- There was also a feeling that even where issues were not the direct responsibilities of the Welsh Assembly Government, it could act as an influential advocate on their behalf.

7. Next Steps

7.1 I have asked Emyr Roberts to chair a group of senior officials and external stakeholders to oversee the consultation process, the costing and continued development of the strategy and action plan. I expect to receive a report before the end of April. This will then be a matter for the next Assembly Government.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 There are no financial implications arising from this paper.

9. Compliance

9.1 There are no issues of compliance arising from this paper.

10. Cross-cutting Themes

10.1 The issues around Refugees and Asylum Seekers cross over many different areas within the Assembly and outside, such as health, education, employment, housing and children and young peoples' issues.

11. Action for Committee

11.1 To note this paper.

12. Links

The Refugee Inclusion Strategy Consultation Document is available at:

<http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity/consultation/refugeeinclusion/?lang=en>

Edwina Hart AM

Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration

Contact Point: Tara Croxton, Voluntary Sector & Inclusion Unit, Ext: 01685 729301