

SP 39

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb,
Llywodraeth Leol a Chymunedau
Priorities for the Equality,
Local Government and Communities Committee
Ymateb gan: Welsh Refugee Coalition Response
Response from: Welsh Refugee Coalition Response

Consultation – Priorities for the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

Welsh Refugee Coalition Response

About us:

We are a coalition of organisations working in Wales with asylum seekers and refugees at all stages of their journey, and with the communities in which they live.

We work together in the interests of asylum seekers and refugees to ensure that our limited resources can be used to best effect and to speak with one voice on policies and practices affecting people seeking safety in Wales.

Response:

The Welsh Refugee Coalition welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's proposed priority areas.

In responding to Europe's ongoing refugee crisis, the biggest since the Second World War, Wales has an important role to play in protecting the safety and dignity of people fleeing persecution and harm. We celebrate the commitment to refugee resettlement and the emerging progressive integration policies of the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Authorities who have received Syrian refugees through the Syrian Vulnerable Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) to date.

But these families represent just a small fraction of the total number of asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. In December 2015, there were 2856 people seeking asylum in Wales (Home Office Migration Statistics), including people from Eritrea, Sudan, Iraq, Iran and Syria, who have fled similar violence and persecution to those arriving under the SVPRS.

These individuals are waiting months or years for a decision on their applications, whilst living on a maximum of £36.95 per week which is half that of someone receiving Job Seekers Allowance. With no right to work and limited access to education many fall in and out of utter destitution, unable to meet their very basic needs. For those who do obtain 'leave to remain', 'move-on' support is inadequate or non-existent, in contrast to the support available to those settled under the SVPRS.

Although decision making on asylum claims is not devolved to Wales, vital public services which are devolved such as health, education, social services and housing are at risk of additional pressures caused by delays to the system, Home Office policy, lack of legal advice and cuts to support services. Access to public services has a significant impact on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales and their opportunities to settle and establish their lives in their new home.

Priorities identified by the Coalition

We would ask the Committee to examine a number of priorities in relation to asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales under an overarching aspiration for Wales to become the UK's first Nation of Sanctuary (endorsed by all Welsh parties except UKIP). These priorities include:

- **Poverty and welfare reform** – In Wales, as elsewhere in the UK, there are large numbers of failed asylum seekers who remain totally destitute and homeless while regularly reporting to the authorities and in many cases going on to make a successful fresh asylum claims. It is the experience of the coalition members that the number of asylum seekers and refugees presenting as destitute in Wales is increasing and will continue to rise following changes to UK legislation and policy. We ask that the committee look at how the Welsh Government can respond to mitigate destitution amongst asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales. For example, by examining the possibility of the Welsh Government establishing a destitution fund similar to the Northern Ireland OFMDFM Crisis Fund. We also ask that the Committee scrutinise the equitability of access to support services for those coming through the asylum system compared to those settled under SVPRS to ensure parity and avoid a two-tier system whilst building on good practice from both processes.
- **Influence and engagement in UK Government migration legislation** – Whilst migration is not devolved to Wales, the impact of such legislation directly affects asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales and devolved public services. We ask the Committee to look at the effectiveness and availability of current mechanisms for positively influencing and engaging the UK Government's migration legislation.
- **Current service provision** - The process of seeking asylum and establishing a new life in Wales for refugees is often confusing, challenging and complicated, particularly as dispersal areas are changing and support services have been cut. We ask the Committee to assess the current need and provision of specialist advice, advocacy and support services available to asylum seekers and refugees.
- **The experience of people seeking sanctuary in Wales** – We ask the Committee to look at the experience of asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales and how we can improve on it by considering devolved and non-devolved matters such as accommodation (including housing standards), dispersal, integration, access to services, the treatment of children especially unaccompanied minors, participation in society and in decision making.

For further information please contact Cathrin Manning email cmanning@redcross.org.uk or phone 07739823254