

Evidence for Local Government and Communities Committee

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(Chair Displaced People in Action)

Background

DPIA was formed in 2000 and has since then offered crucial services to asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. It played a crucial part in creating and ensuring the success of the Welsh Refugee Doctors Group (WARD) which has helped over 175 medical professionals to retrain with a view to gaining GMC registration. Over the past sixteen years DPIA has helped thousands of displaced people to enjoy sporting and cultural activities, assisted others in acquiring English language skills, retrain and seek employment and sought to advocate on their behalf.

Currently DPIA continues to support the WARD Scheme and supports the Afghan Relocation Scheme, Syrian Resettlement Scheme and the Wales Cities of Sanctuary Project.

What is offered here reflects my own views as Chair. We have not had an opportunity to reflect on the consultation as an organisation.

Pace and Effectiveness

DPIA has delivered the SVPR Scheme for a number of local authorities in the south-east Wales valleys. The work has been challenging but deeply rewarding. Enabling families from the war-torn background of the Middle East has presented unique challenges: complex health needs, managing expectations, assisting with profound cultural differences and helping those involved to settle in a very different environment. DPIA has been able to employ staff from the host Welsh community and the existing Syrian refugee community in Wales to assist the displaced people. This mix has been useful.

DPIA has been granted access to Welsh decision making at the highest strategic level concerning SVPRS through my involvement with the Welsh Government's Taskforce. Through this process we have been able to press the case that the Scheme should not be rushed and consequently be effective in the delivery of key services. DPIA's experience of the numbers needing support through the spontaneous arrivals dispersal system who, unlike the SVPRS arrivals, have to apply for asylum, has compelled us not to call for greater numbers to be brought through the Syrian scheme. The greatest human need in terms of service provision does not rest with the SVPRS arrivals.

Delivery Plan

Co-operating with partners in the sector DPIA has worked with Welsh Government in pressing for high standards of care concerning health needs – especially for children. Ensuring screening and providing advice concerning age assessments have been part of our work.

As one of the main partners in the City of Sanctuary movement DPIA has assisted in delivering key outcomes especially in Swansea and Cardiff through a project sponsored by the Big Lottery. DPIA was the prime initial drafter of the Welcome to Wales pack that has enabled recently arrived dispersed people to have a sense of the distinctiveness of Wales.

DPIA has been supportive of 'Tackling Hate Crimes and Incidents: A Framework for Action' but was acutely aware that hate crime increased during 2016 and that all concerned were operating in a challenging environment.

DPIA has not closely tracked Delivery Plan progress but has been aware of and valued the work of partner organisations in the sector.

Unaccompanied Children

DPIA has no specific projects focused primarily on unaccompanied children. However, our general experience has enabled us to offer advice to the Welsh Government Syrian Taskforce about the need, once key services have been provided, to reflect on placing mentoring provision in place so that children and young people have access to peer support.

Cohesion Delivery Plan

At the start of 2015 the idea of Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary was little more than a pipe-dream, but it has now really taken off. Many of the movement's aspirations fall within the aspirations of the Welsh Government's Community Cohesion Delivery Plan.

The Annual Report of the Cities of Sanctuary movement reveal a record of Welsh activity. *Since the 'summer of 2015, there has been a burgeoning of support for refugees all over Wales and several new groups have formed or are forming, including Wrexham, Neath Port Talbot, Abergavenny, Montgomeryshire and Newport.*

In Swansea, highlights have been the "Welcome to Swansea" mentoring scheme, with 40 volunteers (half refugees, half other locals) having mentored over 100 newly arriving asylum seekers; work with about 20 local pledged supporting organisations to make their pledges practically meaningful; four local charities achieving a Sanctuary Award; a thriving "Sanctuary Speakers" team; continuing working groups on Mental Health and Family & Play; and now the launch of a Maternity Stream in Swansea. The Swansea voluntary hosting project has many new hosts, with over 1700 nights in beds provided in 2015.

Cardiff has a different model, with resources from a successful Lottery project shared between DPIA, the refugee centre Oasis (which has an open drop-in four full days every week and provides up to 200 hot meals per day), and communications work based in the Welsh Refugee Council.

Hay, Brecon and Talgarth Sanctuary for Refugees (HBTS4R) and Hiraeth Hope in West Wales began by collecting and fundraising for Calais and Lesbos, and also link up with places in Wales to support asylum seekers. Both groups now have a regular programme of respite breaks and weekends away for groups of asylum seekers from Swansea and Cardiff. Hiraeth Hope has workshops for training in practical rural skills (woodworking etc.), while HBTS4R was instrumental in achieving visibility and support for sanctuary at the 2016 Hay Literary Festival, including several events with refugee speakers or focusing on refugee issues.

A joint manifesto was developed setting out what would be needed from the Welsh Government to make Wales truly a Nation of Sanctuary. The Coalition also has representation on the Welsh Government's Syrian Refugee Operations Board, and has repeatedly tried to ensure that Syrian resettlement is integrated with support for all asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. The Coalition's manifesto was published as a booklet entitled "Seven Steps to Sanctuary" and it is being used to press the Welsh Government to make the commitment to Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary more tangible.

A small organising group from CoS, DPIA, Oxfam Cymru and Welsh Refugee Council put on the first Sanctuary in the Senedd on 10 December (Human Rights Day), just after Sanctuary in Parliament 2 in Westminster. All Assembly Members (AMs) were invited and sent a briefing based on the Coalition's manifesto. Over 120 people were present to hear an inspiring keynote address from Rocio Cifuentes, Director of the multi-ethnic Swansea youth charity EYST, who reflected on the welcome her family received when she came as a child with her parents, as refugees from Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s. There were moving testimonies from several asylum seekers and refugees and a panel of AMs from the four parties represented in the Senedd at the time.'

DPIA has appreciated the work of the Regional Community Cohesion Co-ordinators and is aware of the seven outcomes on hate crime, modern slavery, Gypsies and Travellers, immigration, tackling poverty, mainstreaming and tension monitoring. We agree that the role of the Co-ordinators has been essential to working with Local Authorities to strengthen the efforts to support the Syrian Resettlement Programme.