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Welsh Assembly

Equality Local Government & Communities Committee

Inquiry into Refugees & Asylum Seekers in Wales

Additional Comments from Professor William Yule

Thank you for inviting me to give oral evidence to the Inquiry on 15 December 2016. I hope it was helpful as far as it went. I had intended to say more on the needs of unaccompanied minors and was advised to submit a brief addendum.

As I mentioned, I found the 2011 All Wales Practical Guidance on “Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People” very helpful. The inquiry briefly raised issues around age assessment, and this report provides useful information. It also emphasises throughout that we are dealing with “Child first, migrant second”.

A holistic approach is recommended. With respect to children, this means considering the child, the family, the school and any care arrangements. I am aware that last week, the inquiry team was focusing on aspects related to health. My additional comments are on care and education.

Looked after children: The 2011 Guidance and the House of Lords Report of 2016 point out that the majority of unaccompanied minors are aged 16-18 years and are mostly male. As we discussed, they have often had very traumatic experiences before arriving in Wales. The question has to be confronted as to their suitability for foster placement. My contention is that without additional training and continuing support from social workers, foster placement is unlikely to benefit many.

The alternative has usually been “semi-independent living” where more than one young person is placed in accommodation with minimal support from a social worker. In my view, this should include active training in self-help skills such as cooking, managing money, using local services. As it is, we know that a number of these young people leave the accommodation and are lost track of.

They also need to be put in contact with others from the same background so as to get proper social support. We know from many psychology studies that effective social support is one of the strongest influences to protect against stress reactions. Sadly, this runs counter to the policy of dispersion which lessens the possibility of young people from similar backgrounds meeting to learn from and support each other.

Education: Rightly, emphasis is placed on learning English in order to become independent and contribute to society. In the documents I read, many mentions were made of ESOL teaching. I have no doubt that such formal courses have an important role. However, mention was also made of waiting for new courses to begin. My view is that in addition there should be support for informal language courses involving other asylum seekers as well. Hopefully some local volunteers can participate. This requires minimal expenditure on access to a suitable meeting place and travel expenses. Self-help in a social setting will strongly complement formal teaching.

Given that these young people will be enrolled in education, there is then a further barrier to their development. Many will be preparing for important examinations. Unfortunately, at around the same time, they will be waiting for decisions on whether they will have their Leave to Remain extended or whether they may be deported. This is an extremely anxiety provoking time and this will interfere strongly with their ability to concentrate on their studies and learn. Those supporting the young people need to be aware of these tensions.

Professor William Yule

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