

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Notes from informal engagement session

Maryhill Integration Network Tuesday 6 June 2023

Theme – mothers and babies

Summary of main themes

Asylum process

- There is a common sense that asylum seekers must live their daily lives with the uncertainty of how long the process will take, and living with this uncertainty is stressful.
- It is very difficult to navigate the asylum process, especially when things go wrong. There can be issues with the advice received from, e.g., Migrant Help or lawyers. There are also language barriers.

Experience of accommodation

- A common theme was the type of food provided in hotels, especially for children. The children of asylum seekers are used to their own cultural food and have difficulty with the food available, as well as adjusting to their new circumstances. This can mean they don't eat enough, and it impacts on their mental health and behaviour. When moved to community accommodation, money is spent on transport to shops that sell suitable food.
- The impact of living in hotels on young children is very bad. A family of four living in one room for 6 months, affects child behaviour, relationships between siblings and parents, and opportunities for children to take part in things, such as education, play and sport.
- There is limited space for children to play in hotels.
- A common view is that single mothers experience social isolation in small hotel rooms, especially after making a difficult journey. It is also hard to be an active community member when you are in this situation.
- Staying in a Falkirk hotel was difficult because there are fewer organisations to support asylum seekers, compared with Glasgow. People tended to just stay in their rooms.
- Some described issues with their flats. This included the size being too small for families, or inadequate/cheap repairs being made leaving a family with the feeling they are not deserving of proper repairs to their home.

Support structures

- Some felt that Mears and Migrant Help were not supportive or helpful.
- Some suggested that more support could be provided at hospital for pregnant women. Language barriers can mean that women consent to procedures that they do not fully understand.
- There are not enough ESOL classes, and it can take a year to get into a class. This is seen as a big barrier to integration.

Other issues from the event

- A sense from some participants that there was not enough time to say everything they would have liked to have said, or that they did not feel comfortable enough to say what they really would have liked to say.

Group one (Convener)

Two women

The first woman, from Sierra Leone. Not clear if she is still going through the asylum process or has achieved refugee status.

She came to the UK with four adopted children, that she rescued. They are now aged 13,15, 17 and 18. The oldest is at university studying law. However, all the children requested to move away from their adoptive mother. Social work undertook an investigation and found no issues, so the children are no longer living with their adoptive mother. She is currently only in contact with one child. Social work has tried to help with reconciliation, however, there is currently no facility for family re-connection.

She spoke about a series of difficulties with the asylum process:

- ASPEN card had been stopped twice, and possibly this is related to the change in circumstances regarding her children. However, she was left without money and was given emergency cash (not clear if from local authority or charity). She received a letter from the Home Office stating she had been overpaid and was getting a reduction.
- She tried to speak to Migrant Help about this but was told they could not help. Her lawyer told her to ask Migrant Help again.
- She has to use her weekly money for transport so that she can get to the shop which sells African food.

Second woman, has a two-month old baby. Originally from Eritrea, came over from France in March (presumably heavily pregnant) and stayed in a hotel in Erskine with her husband for a month.

They are now staying in a one-bedroom flat. Have generally felt supported, including from Mears, her midwife, and from [Amma](#) family centre. Also received the [£300 one-off maternity payment](#) from UK Gov.

Group two (Paul O’Kane)

One woman and two men

The woman has two children, aged 8 and 10, boy and a girl. She was living in a private hotel for 6 months (she said this was not a Home Office hotel, but I’m not sure how else accommodation could have been provided and paid for). It was very tough on the children; they could not go to school.

They were only given breakfast, had to get lunch and dinner for themselves. This was difficult due to delay on getting the ASPEN card. Scottish Refugee Council came to their rescue and then various other organisations helped out.

She said that her son had wanted to play, but was always told by staff to go back to his room. He would find this upsetting.

After 6 months, the family were moved to a Home Office hotel which was better, because it provided three meals and the children were able to go to school.

First man, stayed in a hotel for 4 and a half months with wife and kids, aged 3 and 6. Have had a very hard time. Staying in one room with no privacy.

The food is not bad, but not their culture.

The children’s behaviour has changed since living in the hotel. They fight with each other and have become aggressive. The children have also lost weight because they are not eating the food.

It was very difficult not knowing when they might leave the hotel. It is the unknown, the uncertainty that is difficult to live with. If he had a time scale of how long things would take, he could deal with that.

Second man, spoke from experience of one mother he knows. Her situation is hard, she has a son he enjoys football and is talented but is not allowed to travel to another country and play with the team.

Group three (Maggie Chapman)

Four men

First man, has been working voluntarily. In his experience of speaking to asylum seekers who are mothers, there is no-one to help with childcare and it is also very expensive. There is a lot of social isolation for single mothers.

He has recently achieved refugee status and is currently waiting in a hotel for housing. He was previously in a Falkirk hotel for a year. He said that in Falkirk, everyone stayed in their rooms. They never got on a bus, as they did not have the courage or the means to do so. They also only received £8 a week. A small charity in Falkirk did their best to help people, but it is not enough, this is different to Glasgow where there are more organisations available to help. He said that if you were depressed in Falkirk you have to talk to Mears, “and then you want to kill yourself”.

Second man, mothers come from a different culture and is very hard for them to be active member of the community. Mothers are often stuck in their small hotel rooms, following a dangerous journey.

Third man, he has been volunteering as an ESOL teacher for a year. He was a teacher in Syria. Mothers are unable to come to ESOL classes because they don't have access to childcare. So single mothers stay at home and are socially isolated.

He is still an asylum seeker, and it seems to be taking ages for the Home Office to process his claim. There is specific questionnaire that is given to people from 5 countries (referenced in this article [Asylum seeker plans legal challenge to Home Office questionnaire](#), Guardian, 27 Feb 2023), he has been told he will get the questionnaire, but is still waiting for it.

He said that people can attend a community ESOL class once a week, but once a week is not enough. It can also take a year to get into a class. Access to ESOL is a big barrier for people and they are therefore unable to integrate.

Fourth man, wished asylum seekers had the right to work, and that it was not limited to those on the shortage occupation list. (Note, there is a [process to get permission to work](#), but it is limited to jobs on the [shortage occupation list](#), which are very specific, and you get 80% of the going rate).

Group four (Fulton and Karen)

Selina and four women

First woman, came to the UK without her daughter and was placed in a Mother and Baby unit. She found this traumatic. Home Office/Mears did not consider the impact this would have.

The rooms are tiny, not enough space for one adult, let alone a mum and baby with a crib.

Second woman has a two-and-a-half-year-old, and a boy and girl aged 14 and 16. The older children are having to share a room which is very difficult. They are teasing each other about their bodies. It is not good for them at this difficult age. Mears ignores the fact they are teenagers, in terms of finding more suitable accommodation. Her two-year-old does not have enough space to run around.

Also described a situation with GP, where she felt accused of harming her son.

Third woman, spoke about how women are treated in maternity hospital; hospital staff do not take account of trauma. When a woman is pregnant, they are not given the same birth choices, or they end up saying 'yes' to things because it is difficult for women to understand what is being said.

Group five (Pam)

Four women

First woman has a 9 year old boy. Started out in a hotel. The food was not good, the son is used to African food. It was very difficult living in a hotel for a month. You can't cook in a hotel. Was later moved to other housing, but then needed transport to get access to African food, so money goes on that. Her son loves swimming but she can't afford to take him.

The current flat is ok, but their door is different to other doors in the block. It sounds like damage was done to the door and it has been replaced with a plywood door. This marks them out as different, and makes them feel uncomfortable and possibly less secure.

Second woman, does not have children but has observed a huge problem in hotels regarding the food. Children, generally, need extra snacks and juice, and this is not available, so they are crying a lot. Sometimes the food that is available is simply not enough.

Third woman, said that there are language barriers for women in maternity. As a result, they are unable to access the support needed. Nurses are supportive, they take into account the vulnerability of the women. Need to make sure there is interpretation available in maternity wards.

Fourth woman, there is a lack of spaces for children to play in hotels. Something the SG could do to help asylum seeker children be active, is to provide free swimming access.