

Welsh Refugee Coalition Briefing for Welsh Affairs Select Committee
29th February 2016
Meeting with Clearsprings in relation to management of Lynx House, Cardiff

The Welsh Refugee Coalition

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.

Background

In May 2015 there were 2,355 people seeking asylum in Wales (source: Home Office) - under 0.1% of our population. This includes people from Eritrea, Sudan, Iraq, Iran and Syria, who have fled similar violence and persecution to those arriving under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS). They are waiting months or years for decisions on their applications, whilst living on a *maximum* of £36.95 per week each, with no right to work, and limited access to education.

Welsh asylum seekers are housed in accommodation, such as Lynx House which is managed by Clearsprings Ready Homes, a private company responsible for the provision of asylum accommodation under their COMPASS contract with the Home Office.

Issues relating to asylum housing in Wales

Welsh Refugee Coalition members have raised issues relating to asylum housing with in Wales at various levels for many years. Housing is a major problem for many asylum seekers with reports that the housing provided was often inadequate, degrading, shameful and unhygienic. People supported by Coalition members feel some of the housing conditions experienced may also contravene health and safety legislation.

Examples were given of a hotel in Cardiff where up to 3 women, including one with a 4-month-old child, shared a room. Another example was given where an invalid father, mother and 22-year-old son all had to share a basement room.

Evidence collated by Coalition members demonstrates failings with asylum housing in Wales including issues with:

- Standards of accommodation
- Size of accommodation and overcrowding
- Fixtures and fittings within the accommodation – among Coalition partners there is evidence of housing with broken floors/ boilers not working/ inadequate furniture/ cookers not working
- Harassment and anti-social behaviour experienced in the accommodation from other tenants and members of staff
- A lack of maintenance and damp housing which can cause health issues
- A lack of adequate public/ shared space to sit
- A space for smokers that is not on the main street which draws attention to the premises and exposes residents to abuse and hate crime

It is not simply the physical condition of the properties provided by Clearsprings that are of concern for both service users and service providers. The standards of service provision are also a serious concern with a general feeling that the service provider has little appreciation of the difficulties faced by asylum seekers and their reasons for seeking asylum in the UK. There is a common perception that there is a greater focus on internal targets and profit generation than on providing a service that protects and supports vulnerable people. Asylum accommodation is a source of worry and anxiety for people living there, aggravating pre-existing experiences of trauma, rather than providing a place of sanctuary.

Specific issues for children and young people at initial accommodation

Children and young people supported by Coalition partners report problems with:

- Staff attitude
- Poor room conditions
- A lack of security and privacy due to no locks on doors allowing other people to walk in
- A lack of choice, quality and variety of food provided
- Issues around personal safety
- A lack of information on activities, organizations and the locality etc

Specific problems with Lynx House include staff giving opinions on the age of children and young people in Lynx House or staff acting as an appropriate adult. There are clear issues around the appropriateness of Lynx House as accommodation for children and young people when the age assessment process is ongoing. There are also a lack of facilities and activities at Lynx House for children and young people.

House sharing

There needs to be more flexibility and sensitivity when allocating spaces in shared housing to avoid conflict. Conflict can occur for many reasons including cultural differences which need to be considered when allocating shared housing to avoid future problems. Evidence from Coalition members shows, that there have been instances of conflict where police involvement has been needed or people will try to spend as much time away from the property as possible as they do not feel comfortable or are intimidated by housemates. People are reluctant to complain as they do not want to be seen as 'trouble makers'. It would be helpful for housing providers to know if a client has a history of violence so that they can house them appropriately.

Information provided

Very little in the way of useful local information or support is provided for asylum seekers in Home Office properties. People need very basic information about where they are living such as street maps, location of local post office, where is the nearest bus stop, location of supermarket/ food store and details of the Migrant Help line and local support services. This information should be available in several languages. Some people speak no English at all on arrival and are already frightened and disorientated.

Health care for asylum seekers living in initial accommodation

There needs to be greater clarity on who is responsible for ensuring that the health care needs of asylum seekers living in initial accommodation are met. In the experience of Coalition members, dealing with access problems to resolve health issues often falls to third sector providers. There should be clear responsibility and accountability on who will deal with such issues. Better information needs to be communicated to asylum seekers on their health care entitlements and how to access these with the least red tape. This includes information on where to obtain support when problems are experienced in accessing healthcare.

When refugee status has been granted

When people are granted status they need more time to get their papers/ onward housing sorted out before having to move out of Home Office accommodation.

28 days is not long enough to move out of Home Office housing unless DWP speed up the process of allocating NI/ benefits etc and Local Authorities provide housing faster. There should be no date limit and people should only have to move out when all paperwork and onward housing is in place. It is our understanding that a 'fast track' system is available for Syrian's resettled through the SVPRS to allocate an NI number and ensure benefits are paid as swiftly as possible. We would like this system to be standard for all refugees as soon as their status is confirmed.

Scrutiny

Coalition members have serious concerns about the adequacy of scrutiny applicable to the COMPASS contracts and it is our strong recommendation that these are reviewed on a UK-wide basis to ensure that they are fit for purpose, meet the specific needs of those we have a public duty to protect and are good use of public money. The recent wristbands scandal is symptomatic of the Home Office's poor oversight of private contractors housing extremely vulnerable people.

It is unacceptable that asylum housing in Wales, particularly Initial Accommodation, is not subject to any independent scrutiny on standards and that provision is not subject to any independent means of complaint. Asylum-seekers are unlikely to complain because of a fear of retribution (from the Home Office or housing providers themselves). The result is that people are forced to endure housing which would not be of an acceptable standard for any other publically funded accommodation. An independent advocacy service must be established which enables refugees and asylum-seekers to raise issues of concern without fear of the consequences.

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