

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Group 3 - notes from engagement session with Arabic and Somali speakers

Scottish Parliament Tuesday 13 June 2023

5 individuals

2 individuals from support orgs

2 interpreters

2 Committee Members (Karen Adam; Pam Gosal)

1 Scottish Parliament staff

The first man to speak said how his **accommodation** feels like a prison, like being a caged pet with nowhere to go. He had no access to any activities so essentially had to stay in his room for 18 months (others have had clearance within 6 months). He worries all the time about his wife and children and misses them. This, together with being confined to his room had a significant impact on his **mental health**. He does now at least have a place he can go to pray.

The second man to speak said that when he came to the UK he thought his life would change. He has been here for 18 months. At first there were 52 other people in the hotel but he is now the only one “left behind without papers”. This makes him feel very lonely and has had an impact on his **mental health**. He is pleased to be in the Parliament today and, this morning before he came he received an invitation to attend an interview in the next part of his journey. He is grateful to FOSS, who have been really helpful and have given him opportunities to learn and to do some volunteering.

The next two men have been here for 18 and 20 months respectively. Visits [from support organisations] have been restricted. The quality of food in their accommodation is poor, but they don't have enough money to be able to afford their own food. When they gave feedback on the quality of the food it maybe improves for a day or two but soon returns to 'normal'. When initially placed in their accommodation they were provided with basic toiletries but now have to buy their own – this adds to anxiety over how they can afford things and which do they prioritise. This has had an impact on their mental health, with one man having been diagnosed with depression, which he had not heard of before.

The last man has been in Scotland for 15 months and has also had a bad experience of food and suffered poisoning. The operators of the accommodation have no consideration of cultural or dietary requirements. Lack of money again limits his capacity to buy his own food to suit his needs. He initially experienced many challenges in accessing schooling, transport or apprenticeships. He thinks access to public transport is key. Supported by FOSS he and others have been able to access public transport and also get to play football. This has been very positive as it helps him and his team-mates to integrate and feel less isolated – he says FOSS has been a great help in accessing other things like ESOL, short day trips and classes. Charities need funding to support access to travel/sport/education.

[Karen Adam observed how small, simple steps can change an experience.]

The men spoke about **health and mental health**. One suffers from insomnia due to constant worry about what will happen to him and he has no way to communicate with his wife and family, which just adds to the worry.

It is difficult to get appointments and even if one is available they can often get delayed or postponed. One man was awaiting treatment for three months. There are very long waiting times and sometimes conditions are misdiagnosed.

On **education**, the men said that language is important to enable them to integrate. They had experienced some frustrations in accessing ESOL courses and even then the maximum level to reach is intermediate. Can't access ESOL in college due to not having documents.

Committee members reflections

- A clear problem with quality of accommodation and the length of stay
- Access to ESOL/college
- Hotels/accommodation need to cater according to cultural sensitivity of food
- Psychological stress of not seeing families for years is immense
- Lack of timely information
- No access to appropriate support (eg health)
- Lack of access to English classes
- Need better funding for charities.