

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Group 2 - notes from engagement session with Farsi speakers

Scottish Parliament Tuesday 13 June 2023

At the meeting:

- Four men from Iran, spoke Farsi, with an interpreter present.
- Maggie Chapman MSP
- Fulton MacGregor MSP
- Two individuals from support orgs
- Two Scottish Parliament staff

The men are based in either Falkirk or Aberdeen

Man A

He's been going to Falkirk college for 4-5 months to learn English. He goes twice a week, but the hours are not enough. He still needs interpreters for everything.

He's not allowed to work so not being able to communicate is a big problem.

He says that some people have been living in the hotel for over two years, and that £8 a week is not enough to survive.

He didn't come here to be in a hotel, he'd rather get a good education: "Would rather be useful for Scotland and do something good".

He joked about the quality of the food in the hotel.

Every day is the same, it is repetitive. "No-one lives to eat and rest all the time. I can't be a useful human being"

Man B

He also talked about need more hours of English classes. Learning the language is a priority for everyone. He would like access to computers and laptops to help with learning, but does not have access.

He said that the cleanliness of the hotel was not bad.

However, the food available is too sweet, rather than what he is used to.

Traveling to college is not that far so has no complaints.

Man C

Said he was grateful for the opportunity to speak today and hopes the Committee takes in everything we say.

He said that the people here today first arrived in England and are now in Scotland and that Scotland is a more comfortable place to be.

The number of people in hotels puts limitations on what can be provided within the hotel.

Regarding the food, people come from different countries with different diets, some have preference for spicy food, others sweet. When this is mentioned to staff, they are told it will take a long time to change.

They are given breakfast in a plastic bag, but he doesn't eat all the contents and a lot goes to waste. He imagines this is the same for many, because the contents in the bag do not match the diet they are used to.

Generally, he does not eat much because of the food issues. Some men have developed allergies and skin rashes because of the food.

The hotel is in the city centre and is clean.

There are difficulties with accessing English language lessons, some people have had to wait six months to go on a course. He is currently doing three different courses: English, computing and, electronics, and is hoping to do a university course in the future. He is very happy with college services.

Also, very grateful for help from charities in the city.

They used to have access to a gym, which was close to the beach and the therefore good for mental health. However, things have changed and now they have access to a gym that is far away. Has been told that it is good exercise to take the long walk to the gym.

It is difficult to get access to a GP. He arrived in Scotland in the middle of winter and was told it would take two weeks to get an appointment. He tried the chemist but was told he needed a prescription for his medicine. He needs a specialist appointment for his skin rashes and has been told this could take about a year.

He said (not verbatim), "Just put yourself in our shoes, living on £8 a week. I haven't had a bad life, but had no option to leave my country, to leave my wife and child. No other option. Sometimes I want to smoke, but I can't even afford to do that"

So many hotel residents take medication to deal with the stress.

Man D

He said he hopes we haven't upset you.

In 11 days he will have been here for two years (in Scotland). Was initially in Leeds for 5 months.

He is grateful to have had help from a lawyer and has achieved his residence status (refugee status).

He is now trying to go through family reunion, and so far, there has been no outcome for 5 months.

He is registered at the job centre and living on Universal Credit. This is £335 per month, and he has to spend £150 per month on electricity.

He has been offered a three bedroomed house by the council, but it is unfurnished. He hasn't seen his family for three years, and if successful with the family reunion process, he doesn't know how he will afford to bring them over or how he will furnish his home.

He is living with so much stress. He wakes up early and goes for a walk at 5am in Aberdeen.

He had a comfortable life at home but had to leave. "If I go home, I will be handcuffed or shot".

[The group did not have a lot of time to discuss transport provision during the session, but in follow-up communications considered free bus travel to be a necessity for asylum seekers, especially for those out with bigger cities. In other places, like for example Falkirk, trains would be a better and often cheaper option, given unreliability of services and inconvenient operating hours.]

Summary of all sessions – feedback from Members

Group 1 (Craig Hoy)

- quality of housing and length of stay in hotels
- Need access to cooking and other facilities, eg recreation
- Access to ESOL (English language lessons)

Group 2 (Maggie)

- Need to see change around food, hotel must appreciate diversity in respect of food
- Psychological stress of being separated from family for years. So need to give people something to do, so that it's not all they think about.

Group 3 (Karen)

- Heard how people first arrived and lack of information they received on arrival, especially in terms of access to healthcare.
- Trauma of being in hotel rooms

- Might be allergic to some of the foods
- Lack of English classes
- Some charities provide English classes and football sessions
- There are power dynamics in some of the hotels, with some people experiencing discrimination