

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Group 1 - notes from engagement session with Tigrinya speakers

Scottish Parliament Tuesday 13 June 2023

3 individuals

2 individuals from support orgs

1 interpreter

3 Committee Members (Kaukab Stewart, Paul O’Kane, Craig Hoy (substitute))

2 Scottish Parliament staff

The first man is from Eritrea. He left his country because of the conflict and wanted to live in a safe place which was peaceful. He is staying in a hotel.

The second man is also from Eritrea. He left his country for the same reason and the difficult political situation there. He is also staying in a hotel. He has not been able to contact his family as they do not have internet access.

The third man is from Ethiopia. He left his country because of the conflict and political situation there.

The participants were asked for their views on a range of topics.

Accommodation/Hotels

The first man has been living in a hotel for 18 months. The room he is staying in has a leak in the ceiling. Water has leaked onto the bed and because the mattress has been wet there is a bad smell in the room. The food that they are given in the hotel is not good. There are no cooking facilities and that is difficult. There is a communal space but there are no leisure facilities. The man feels there have not been much support from Mears but he has received support from local organisations/charities.

The second man has been living in a hotel for 6 months. He has had no support from Mears. He said there are no leisure facilities there, so he spends a lot of time inside and sitting on the sofa. He has injured his leg before he came to the UK and hasn’t managed to get any treatment here. He feels that he doesn’t receive any help from Mears. He feels that they are identified as trouble-makers if they complain about their conditions.

Impact on mental health/wellbeing

The first man said the building he is living in (in Falkirk) is very old. He has reported the problem with the leak, but nothing is being done. He understands it is owned by a local businessman but it was closed in the pandemic so the maintenance hasn't been done. Friends of Scottish Settlers has provided him with clothing and English lessons. Charities are providing the support. There are a lot of issues raised by the asylum seekers to Mears but if they raise too many issues, they get a warning letter from the Home Office. The Mears staff also report them to the Home Office if they complain too much. The man feels Mears don't listen. He will provide a letter to the Committee so they can see it.

The man says he has found the experience stressful but hasn't received any support. He did go to a GP but was only given a printed sheet with information.

The third man has had no communication with his parents for six months. He is finding it very difficult to survive on £9 a week and he has struggled to buy clothes. He has had help from charities.

Getting out and about

The second man said it was very helpful and important to get out of the hotel and being able to play football sometimes has had a positive impact.

The third man was able to take part in football and swimming after he had been in the UK for a year, and this was provided by charities. He lives next to the park and having access to leisure activities has been positive for his mental health.

ESOL/Interpreters

The first man has some basic English.

The second man is receiving one hour a week of English lessons.

The third man is receiving around 4 hours a week of English lessons. He feels that he could be in education full-time, and this would be helpful.

The support worker from Friends of Scottish Settlers said that you have to have conversational English to qualify for English lessons at the local college as they are not running English courses for absolute beginners. The charity are trying their best to provide some tuition but, as their funding is unstable, it would be better if ESOL was provided by the council.

The support worker from Grampian reported a similar situation in that you have to pass a basic English test to get onto an English course as they are not offering beginners' classes.

However, the asylum seekers do have access to interpreters.

Access to transport

The second man is living in Falkirk and is able to walk most places as the hotel is in the centre. If he needs to go to the GP the hotel book him a taxi.

The third man is being supported by a local charity who provides £25 per week so that he can travel to attend church. He is able to walk to his local ESOL class.

The support worker from FOSS said Falkirk is quite compact so most things can be accessed by walking. FOSS give asylum seekers £25 a week where they can but the funding is precarious. This funding means the men can go to church in Glasgow.

The support worker says there are problems in the highlands as the transport links are not as good. They also have problems with accessing GPs as many of the surgeries have closed. In relation to the hotels, this charity has found that they are not of a high standard of cleanliness and that there is a lot of inconsistency across the accommodation offered. They took their staff out of the hotels as they were not prepared to allow them to work in those conditions. However, the residents had no choice but to stay there. Mears have contracted additional hotels in Grampian and have been concentrating on training their staff for those rather than dealing with existing ones which already house residents.

Other issues

The third man feels there needs to be more international thinking around the housing of asylum seekers especially when it comes to who are housed together. People's beliefs and religions need to be taken into account.

He said he came to the UK because it has a good record on human rights, and he believed they would have the right to speak out if they needed to but their experience is that the staff don't respect or listen to them.

Once the whole group came together the Convener asked Members from each group to reflect on the session and highlight a couple of points.

Whole group

Group 1 (Craig Hoy)

- There is clearly a problem with the quality of the accommodation, the length of stays and the lack of leisure space that needs to be addressed
- Access to ESOL is also a problem. In Falkirk, for example, ESOL is being provided by charities. Classes are not accessible unless asylum seekers have basic English so many are not able to access the English tuition they need, to enable them to build their lives here.

Group 2 (Maggie Chapman)

- This was an emotional session which highlighted the psychological stress of being separated from loved ones and not being able to see them. There needs to be some more thinking around what can be done to provide people with a structure and something to do to enable that the separation is not all they have to focus on.

Group 3 (Karen Adam)

- There is a lack of information given to asylum seekers in a timely way and there is not enough access to appropriate health support for past trauma which can cause mental health issues. Many people feel like prisoners or caged animals being housed in hotel rooms. There is a problem with the food provided and some people have allergies and intolerances which are not being addressed and this can cause physical health problems. Sometimes the food is not culturally appropriate.
- There is a lack of English classes. Charities have supported access to English and to some leisure activities like football which is really positive. It highlighted the need to provide more leisure activities in order for people to effectively integrate.
- There are power dynamics in the hotel with the staff showing discrimination. The Scottish Government is not able to do anything with the waiting times in hotels, but we can do some things in Scotland to make people's lives easier.