

Cross-Party Group on Migration

Date and Time: 07/06/22, 6pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

- Bob Doris MSP
- Paul Sweeney MSP

Invited guests:

- Anne McLaughlin MP
- Dylan Fatoohi- Refugee for Justice
- Graham O'Neill- Scottish Refugee Council

Non-MSP Group Members:

- Alison Phillips- UNESCO RILA
- Traci Kirkland- Govan Community Project
- Pinar Aksu- MIN
- Sekou- MIN
- Mo- MIN
- Alvina- MIN
- Mohammed Ashraf- Min
- Ahlam Souidi- Freedom from torture
- Mursal Noori- Freedom from torture
- Gladys Ngawsang- Freedom from torture
- Una Less- NHS
- Ellen McGeough- NHS
- Ahmed Alhindi- MIN
- Richie T Bayo- MIN
- Bea Pinahrandi- MIN
- Shaina Gabi- Citizens Advice Edinburgh
- Benjamin Napier- Citizens Advice Edinburgh

- Mohammed Alkhatib- MIN
- Cham- MIN
- Anwar- MIN
- Ranjbar- MIN
- Rawezh- MIN
- Tandy Nicole- MIN
- Deeksha Pagar- Refugee for Justice
- Mohammed Altayyeb- MIN
- Doaa Abuamer- British Red Cross
- Mary Osei- Oppong
- RuthAnn McCalla
- Cameron David
- Gillian Wilson
- Harriette Campbell
- Stella Kyalikunda
- Thierry Fotso
- Annika Joy
- Daniel Sweeney
- Elizabeth CIS
- Heather Alari
- Jennifer Baldyga
- Jillian McBride
- Sheila Arthur
- Sarah Stewart - FOSS
- Juliet Enoch- MIN

Apologies

- Kate Alexander- Scottish detainee Visitors
- Faccenda KA (Katrina)
- Fiona McHardy- The Poverty Alliance
- Murdoch Stephens

Welcome and Introduction

- Bob Doris MSP

Approval of Minutes of Previous Meeting

- Bob Doris MSP

- Seconded by Paul Sweeney MSP

Agenda item 3

Bob Doris MSP: Thanked everyone for coming along and introduced the theme of the meeting.

Introduced the first speaker, Anne McLaughlin MP and opened the room for her to speak.

Anne McLaughlin MP: Thanked everyone for inviting her to speak. She was the last CPG on Migration meeting and thinks we should really keep this up as the CPG is a great way to keep the two parliaments together.

Talked about the inquiry that they conducted into the UK's government use of large scale institutional sites like Napier Barracks, Dungavel and penally camps across the UK to house people seeking asylum since April 2020. The families living in the Napier Barracks (with shared facilities in isolated areas) suffer from various medical conditions and their mental health is hugely impacted. The dorms are badly designed: no soundproofing, the light switches turn on all the dorm's lights, which wakes everyone up and causes some disagreements. It's not strictly speaking immigration detention but given that those large scale institutional settings replicate the potential sound in detention settings things like security is very visible, shared living quarters, reduced levels of privacy and a deliberate attempt to isolate people from local communities.

The APPG took the view that it was like partly detention and therefore we could do our investigation and as part of the investigation we have 3 oral evidence sections with key witnesses who were current at the time residents of those different places: doctors, lawyers, who are working with people in there, NGO's, local groups working directly with residents in February 2022. The Home Office tries to mask the horrible reality of such barracks, but the traumas of the people living there question the integrity of the HO's alleged claim.

The Mother and Baby unit in Glasgow was terrible in treating pregnant women and their babies. The mothers spend too much time in the unit and the process of getting out is lengthy.

The report first came to me in January 2021, and I started to meet with Mears on weekly basis (chairman of Mears) but I stopped those meetings because they were getting annoying because I was being told that things will happen that didn't happen, and that it

wouldn't happen but it happened, and I'm quite shocked at times I felt quite helpless and I'm shocked how long it's taking to get those mothers and those children out of there.

The Report that we brought out as the APPG along with reports from others states that these large scale settings of shared accommodation are fundamentally unsuitable to be used as asylum accommodation.

Paul Sweeney MSP: Thanked Anne McLaughlin MP and opened the room for questions.

Ruth: I am so angry that many asylum seekers are attempting suicide because of the horrible treatment the Home Office is forcing them to deal with. The agonies they feel in the UK are no less traumatizing than the experiences they had in the countries they fled from. I am troubled because some are threatened of being deported back to their countries by their housing officers if they were to protest the horrible conditions they live in. Some asylum seekers have had surprising visits from the police to 'check they are home'. This is not right.

Heather Alari: I will call them concentration camps, sending people to Rwanda. They are going to be in concentration camps, there is no coming back from there and it's inhumane.

Anne McLaughlin MP: (to Ruth) The SP's job is to protest such an unfair system that intimidates people seeking asylum and to endeavor to protect their constituents as much as they possibly can. If there are any asylum seekers in the room that need help, please do get in touch with us and we'll provide you with help.

(To Heather): I understand what you are saying about concentration camps, people are concentrated in one area and have no consideration of their trauma or mental health. I have spoken with people to provide that mental health support but they can't do it because there are so many people assigned to one nurse and have less access to GP Surgery and that is just in one place (Napier Barracks). The figures from the Home Office by the end of March that 5,541 asylum seekers currently in Glasgow and over 200 people who have been granted leave to remain who are still stuck in Home Office accommodation with high risk of being evicted, there are other 300 who are destitute as there is no accommodation for the general population, so where are going to put these people if we close down the barracks.

Tandy: How can we access the research data you mentioned in your speech?

Alison: I agree that we need a kind of joined -up thinking between the two Jurisdictions. My response is about further research but also the power of an international view or lens on this. We've worked with in the past with Professor Nicholas Procter who is a suicideologist at the University of South Australia and he was the inspector for the Australian detention centers and it strikes me he'll be the appropriate person to commission potentially from the devolved competencies about precisely the concerns we have around suicide. He has seen it in other cases, he knows what produces it, he's an internationally renowned expert and has visited dungavel removal center and had VIP clearance for that and I think this is a point where we can do quite a lot from our position parties from within the UK but actually being able to bring in international experts and UN experts.

Mary: If it didn't work in Ireland, why introduce it in Scotland?

Anne: (to Mary) it is not Scotland that introduced it, it's the UK government. The Scottish government has zero say on whether or not that happens in the country, although they'll have a say they just don't get to make those decisions, the answer is down here we need to stop it from happening,

(To Tandy): Just google APPG statistics and you'll have an expansive set of facts and stats about asylum seekers in the UK.

In terms of what Alison said I have to agree. One of the things I will be doing is meeting with the European counterparts, I don't think they'll let me meet with the Australian counterparts, just different people involved and different ways of doing things and we'll certainly commission research on what a good asylum policy would be. There might be people in this meeting tonight who might be part of the research because it focuses on people who have gone through it. But in terms of International experts, when I was working against the NABB we collaborated quite closely with Madeline Gleeson in Australia because they were talking about the offshoring which Rwanda typically is, but just in a different way to the way Australia did it and we worked extremely closely with her and it was to everyone's benefit that we did that.

Paul: thanked Anne for a really helpful contribution.

I want to say that the interface between the APPG and the CPG is really a composite one given the nature of where policy imperialise and is really important.

Invites the next speaker Dylan Fatoohi (Refugee for Justice)

Dylan Fatoohi: thanked Everyone and made a brief introduction of Refugee for Justice as a group of asylum seekers and refugees who are affected by asylum accommodations.

My focus will be what can be done in Scotland. We have a very good idea on what a good Asylum system will look like in Scotland and there has been Research on that and there is a blueprint on what a Scottish asylum system will look like if Scotland had the power to have their own asylum system. Some aspects of a Scottish immigration system can be done now with the current devolved powers.

The opportunity for asylum dispersal used to be a voluntary scheme in the past and Glasgow used to be the only asylum dispersal city in Scotland. From 13th of April 2022, asylum dispersal is no longer a voluntary scheme, It's a mandatory Scheme. So all UK local authorities are dispersal areas, so technically the Home office can send asylum seekers to any local authorities that they want.

The Home office at the moment has an open consultation with local authorities and devolved administrations. The content of the consultation is that the home office said, we are going to send you asylum seekers whether you like it or not, let's sit down and you tell us how you want to run asylum support and accommodation, which is a rare opportunity for Scotland to ask for the powers and resources that is required to deliver the Scottish model for asylum support and accommodation in line with our resource, principles and with our new Scotts strategy integration from day one. This consultation is open and we have developed a headline proposal asking the Scottish Parliament to tell the HO that there is an alternative system for asylum accommodation. The SP could and should represent the RfJ's call as they cannot take part in the consultation with the HO.

For instance the Ukrainian Super Host scheme can be replicated to accommodate asylum seekers. The SP should ask the UKP for the resources to do so in the current consultation instead of contracting with a private company that fails to deliver good accommodation to asylum seekers. I have done a rough calculation of the money that is given to the Mears group as a private company in comparison to the service that is delivered, they do not deliver accommodations that comply with Scottish legislation regarding safeguarding, care and housing.

Two years ago the asylum support and accommodation in Scotland, since privatized, has been dysfunctional. There is a huge amount of evidence which shows why it is dysfunctional and why its not working but with covid things changed, this is not news to anyone we all know that in April 2020 there was a massive eviction of 300 people from

safe accommodations housing them in hotels, as a direct consequence of that practice our friend Adnan sadly killed himself in one of those hotels in June. On the parking tragedy, we formed Refugee for Justice, to ask for justice and accountability and change in the provision of asylum support and accommodation. The permanent mental and physical damage that was inflicted on evicted asylum seekers is invisible.

In August 2020, after the parking incident, the Home Office came and conducted their own internal evaluation, they kept the findings of that evaluation secret, so they conducted their evaluation but did not publish the report of that evaluation. And the MPs who asked for the findings to go public were not answered.

In April 2022, the report was leaked a few months ago by the BBC and then the HO published it. The report is a painful read.

A RfJ member is taking legal action against the HO to conduct another investigation that complies with Article 3.

We are going to be in the court for justice in London on the 29th & 30th of June, wish us good luck. If we win that case, the UK Govt will have to conduct an Article 3 compliance investigation into the conditions of the hotels. The prospects of success are positive according to the council and the lawyers.

The SP could not allow a public enquiry to take place but was supportive for the call. It recommended contacting the UKP. The UKP refused the request for a public enquiry.

In the absence of a government instigated public inquiry we've worked hard with our amazing leaders in RFJ, we've fund-raised and we have commissioned an independent inquiry to be conducted on the provision of asylum support and accommodation during Covid. Baroness Helena Kennedy has responded to our call, which we are really grateful for. She is going to chair the inquiry. At the moment her team is conducting a level of research on publicly existing evidence and that inquiry is going to be launched on the 26th of June at the anniversary of the parking incident.

On the 16th of June Baroness Kennedy is running a short consultation round table about her initial findings and about the terms of reference of the inquiry with civil society organizations for refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland. This is the link for the inquiry for people to give evidence: <https://www.asyluminquiryscotland.com>

Graham: thanked everyone for the opportunity given to him to speak.

Focused on the need for asylum seekers to reside in good accommodation to have a sense of stability. Almost 30,000 asylum seekers live in 'ex-hotels,' hotels that lack

experience, and that are isolated. Asylum seekers are left with little or no money at all to survive. Such ex-hotels are inflicting tremendous damage to asylum seekers' mental health.

The SP must take advantage of the dispersal consultation; otherwise, the HO would continue to employ cheap, poor ex-hotels to accommodate asylum seekers. Just recently the law states this type of contingency ex-hotels accommodation does damage to people's mental health and some people lose their lives. The Home office keeps on letting these companies put people into these accommodations that they know are very dangerous in mental health terms. The SP must have such a proposal in this consultation since pointing out the issue later would put the HO in a stronger legal position since it has already offered the SP a chance to contribute to the consultation but the SP has not taken advantage of it.

People refused asylum should be treated as people. The SP must not let the HO get away with its current failures, and if the SP does so, it is assisting the crimes the HO is committing. The dispersal consultation is the SP's golden opportunity to change the circumstances asylum seekers are suffering from for the better

Paul: opened the room for general contributions and comments

Shaina Gabi: I'm just picking up on the dispersal proposal. The dispersal consultation is a chance to provide asylum seekers with a home rather than just accommodation. One of my concerns with the new dispersal proposal is that we will have individuals placed too tightly across local authorities, and while that may reduce the pressures on accommodations, what that does is it creates new support networks and specialized services that will not have enough opportunity to build up around individuals. Glasgow has fabulous support networks of organizations that work together but other local authorities don't have these in place, so keeping that in mind with that proposal on how they are going to direct the dispersal and the numbers to different local authorities. The Ukrainian scheme is a blueprint of what an ideal accommodation system for asylum seekers in Scotland can look like.

Mohammed Altayyeb: During COP26, asylum seekers living in the area's hotels were 'shipped' to Northern Ireland during the conference and then brought back after the conference had ended. I think their human rights were breached at that point.

Daniel Sweeney: My question is predicated on the plan to send to Rwanda those who came through illegal means which I will say is a significant proportion, I will assume that that is probably going to fail or stopped at some point with the sort of numbers which

they seem to be proposing with the ability to send them to another country with the possibility of being detained and refusing to have their claim looked at even before being sent to Rwanda, Is the proposal going to stop the Rwandan plan? I think the SP has a chance to change that.

Dylan: starting from daniel's point, we need to see this consultation in a wider context, the Home Office direction of travel is very clear in terms of the future of asylum including asylum support and accommodation, there is a pre-emptive announcement on reception centers and asylum camps, I've experienced them and I know what they look like. As a refugee and an ex-asylum seeker myself, I can safely say asylum seekers are deprived of the basic services that a Scottish resident has. Asylum seekers residing in Scotland should have a public service funded by the Scottish Gov to provide them with access to basic public services. RfJ is more than happy to turn the above ideas into realistic, applicable proposals that the SP can implement.

Bob Doris: We in Scotland can greatly improve the quality of the asylum seekers' accommodation by implementing a new scheme similar to the Ukrainian scheme. If we leave the decision to the HO and its private contractors, the horrendous circumstances asylum seekers are forced into living in would continue, and would be almost impossible to change. Scotland might not be able to help in facilitating the immigration or asylum processes, but it can hugely contribute to housing, health and education.

Mo: I was one of the victims of the parking incident, after listening to most speakers talking about mental health, it reminds me of Badreddin Abdalla the guy that stabbed people in parking, he was going through a lot and at the end of the day he reacted by stabbing people as I speak to you we have hundreds of Badreddin out there and no one is bothered. I was stabbed 5 times, On the 20th, the doctor asked me to carry out an endoscopy test and realized I have a problem with my liver after the stabbing. This happened in 2020, till date nothing has been done about it. I have knocked on every door, but nobody has come to my aid.

Paul: (to Mo) thank you for your contribution, it was powerful, please let us know with your contact details so we can follow up these issues

Ranjbar: We are living in a house infested with insects, it's really dirty and dump. The house is not safe for my children. I've got 4 children and all of them got allergies and it's traumatizing them and they cannot sleep. The community welcomes us but we've been moved to a bad house. The first problem is, there is natural gas inside the house and I don't know what is the reason my children got allergies and were moved to the hospital and we got a report from the hospital that the house is not safe for the children. There

are many holes in the house that the insects are coming out from. Everybody here talked about mental health but unfortunately my children are not in a good state psychologically. As a father I am really ashamed that I cannot do anything to help them.

Paul: Thanks very much for that powerful contribution, if you want to follow up in more detail in writing, we'll happily capture this information.

Alham: Dylan's new proposal for asylum dispersal is really interesting, I appreciate that you mentioned that it's not about dispersing people to accommodation across Scotland but also considering that they will be provided with services that they can access to. The Syrians who were dispersed across Scotland through the resettlement program face a lot of isolation especially those rehoused in the north of Scotland.

Jillian McBride: I believe that this is a position supported by the children's commissioner who has said that a Scottish asylum support system should be given detailed consideration.

Traci Kirkland: There is also a concern that some of the flat accommodation being procured by means which they argue is in the community is now buildings with multiple apartments which is still keeping individuals and families seeking asylum segregated to a certain degree and no thoughts toward the community safety, impacts of trauma on the location of these flats.

Alison: New Scots is also based in a human right framework which also includes the right to housing.

Any Other Business and Close

Paul thanked the speakers and everyone who attended the meeting and announced that the next CPG on migration meeting will be October and themed 'Free Bus Pass'. He then brought the meeting to a close.