Dear Chief Inspector,

Hidden Lives – New Beginnings: destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland

I am pleased to attach a copy of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee’s report on destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland.

Hidden Lives – New Beginnings is the culmination of the Committee’s examination of the causes of destitution, the number of people destitute, the impact on human dignity, health and wellbeing, the current devolved response to destitution and increasing levels of destitution in Scotland.

We spoke to many people who were seeking asylum or had insecure immigration for other reasons and had No Recourse to Public Funds who courageously shared their experience of destitution. A significant number had experienced abuse, torture and exploitation and had fled to find protection in the UK only to become destitute and vulnerable again. Others had escaped exploitative or abusive relationships to find out that they could not be supported by public funds and faced the difficult survival question of whether to remain in the relationship.
Destitute people are one of the most vulnerable groups in Scotland and we believe they should be treated with fairness, dignity and respect, whether this is by the asylum system or by public authorities.

Our work shows there is a gap in the response to this issue. We have asked the Scottish Government for a national coordinated, preventative approach to address destitution. Integral to this approach will be close cooperation between the UK Government and the Scottish Government to negotiate changes to the operation of the asylum system to mitigate features which are causing unnecessary suffering and placing vulnerable people at further risk of exploitation or abuse.

In your letter of 7 April you explained the limits of your powers. I therefore understand that some aspects of the Committee’s inquiry will be outwith your remit. I would however draw your attention to some structural deficits in the asylum system, which means vulnerable people have to travel from Scotland to England in order to register initially or to make a fresh claim. Also, we were told a third of applications initially refused were subsequently successful. Support was cut following refusal leading to destitution. Other actions, such as eviction from accommodation, when all appeal routes had not been exhausted resulted in destitution.

Our report also expresses significant concerns about the decrease in the levels of support provided as legislated for by the Immigration Act 2016. These changes coupled with potential wider dispersal of asylum seekers in Scotland, risks worsening destitution if action isn’t taken now. We believe tackling destitution now will lessen the impact on people, non-government organisations and public services.

The Committee hopes the report and the underpinning evidence received will help inform your programme of inspection. We are also writing to the Home Office advising them of our findings.

Yours sincerely,

Christina McKelvie MSP
Convener
Equalities and Human Rights Committee