Response to Parliamentary Questions

Equalities and Human Rights Committee

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Convener

Q1a As public service providers, what support are you able to provide to asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status.

Since 2000, asylum seekers and their families have had special support arrangements provided through the creation of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) which contracts with individual councils. West Dunbartonshire does not have a contract with NASS.

Q1b Also what are the main barriers to providing support in these circumstances?

Firstly, Local Authorities do not receive any additional financial support from the Home Office and are expected to bear the whole additional costs associated with the provision of the basic support services to asylum seekers or those with insecure immigration status. Underwriting the additional costs associated with asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status would place too great an additional strain on Council finances and threaten existing services potentially causing hardship and difficulties to many existing residents who rely on support from Council services. However, should the Home Office reconsider their position and agree a realistic funding package to support asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status the Council would reconsider its position.

Secondly, the range of rules and prohibitions regarding asylum seekers with regard to housing and benefit rights makes giving support to asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status extremely difficult. Local Authority areas like Glasgow City Council or Edinburgh Council are currently able to mitigate against these prohibitions to an extent, by tapping into the additional support provided by third sector agencies many of whom have been set up specifically for asylum seekers and refugees, including voluntary, charitable and legal organisations.

Thirdly, the law governing this area of work complex and the interpretation of the Law changes regularly as a result of developments in case law and legal judgements. As a result it can frequently take many months for an asylum claim to be processed and/or appealed. During this time asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status can become destitute due to the prohibitions on housing and benefit rights. At the point of destitution many in this group go on to be supported and cared for by third sector agencies that can provide hostel accommodation, food, clothes and personal care. Those appealing their asylum claim also need to have access to specialist legal advice and support from other specialist agencies working for asylum seekers and refugees. At present, this range of services only exists within Scotland’s major cities.

Furthermore, Scottish Government action is curtailed because immigration and benefits are reserved to the UK government.
Q2. We’d also like to hear about how a person’s need for support is assessed and what would make this assessment process easier, please make reference to any policies and procedures within your organisation.

West Dunbartonshire do not currently supply asylum support services as outlined above and so are unable to provide any specific examples.

Q3. If your area does not have experience of asylum seekers or people with insecure immigration status, it would be helpful to know what policies, guidance or procedures are in place or being developed to address support for asylum seekers?

As a Council area which scores high on the index of deprivation with consequent high levels of poverty within the population, we are unable to provide services to asylum seekers without being supported financially to do so by the Home Office.

West Dunbartonshire Council have at the present time, resettled almost 90 refugees from Syria under the SVPR scheme. This scheme is primarily supported by funding from the Home Office and this has allowed the Council to provide interpretation and translation support for this group and case work services for each family. As the refugees are entitled to claim benefits and access mainstream housing and to work or study they are at no risk of destitution; the resettlement of these refugees has so far proven to be very successful. Building from our experience we have ambitions in future to take part in the Home Office Gateway Programme and become a receiving authority for refugees from all parts of the world.