

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Notes from informal engagement session

Maryhill Integration Network Tuesday 6 June 2023

Theme - Housing/Hotel accommodation

Group one (Paul O'Kane)

Two women in group and a Rep from British Red Cross

The first woman has been living in a hotel since coming from Syria 18 months ago. She is on a waiting list for a flat. She is a student at university and has moved a few times and this has been difficult as no notice is given. The hotel accommodation has been reasonable.

The second woman was initially housing in a hotel with her 9-year-old son, and this was very difficult. The accommodation was okay but there were no cooking facilities, and it was hard to do laundry. The hotel was also quite far from amenities, and it was hard to access activities. When there was a problem with the accommodation the housing officer from Mears did not respond quickly to requests. Her son has found it particularly difficult as they have very little money and are not able to travel to access activities. This impacted their well-being.

When she was moved from the hotel she was housed in temporary accommodation and has been there for almost two years. It has been difficult for her son to make friends and feel settled.

Group two (Maggie Chapman)

Two women

The first woman said that her housing situation was okay, but she felt the support was not good from the Home Office and it was difficult to communicate with them. She lived in a hotel before her baby was born and is now in a one-bedroom flat. She said that she relied on third sector organisations to help her with things for the baby, clothes etc and her experience with what has been provided was quite good. Mears also provided some of the things that she needed. She would welcome help with travel costs as it was hard to afford travel costs.

The second woman said her mental health was poor due to a lack of funds and that meant she was not able to travel. She has some health problems with dry eyes and has to take medication. She was finding it difficult to navigate the system particularly trying to register for a dentist and travel to medical appointments.

Group three (Karen Adam and Fulton McGregor)

One woman and two men

One woman moved a year ago and has been staying in a hotel with her two children. She said this has been traumatising for all of them as the hotel only provides breakfast and a packed lunch and no other meal. Feeding the children has been very difficult with no cooking facilities. The Scottish Refugee Council and the Red Cross “came to her rescue” and have been a big help. Her children were not attending school initially and there was no community space for them to play. They were then moved to another hotel for a month and then moved to temporary accommodation. It was a huge relief having access to cooking facilities as the food provided in the hotels had not been good.

One man spoke about having no privacy as his whole family were housed in one hotel room. There was no variety in the food that was provided to them. The uncertainty was also very difficult and they did not know when they are going to be moved. There is a lack of notice, information and communication with Mears.

Group four (Pam Gosal)

Four men

One man had been in Glasgow for two years and was still waiting for a decision. He was living in an apartment and had no complaints with the area,

The second man said that Mears put people together in flats who came from different backgrounds. He had to share with a man who was a heavy smoker and a heavy drinker. He had friends round to the flat and it was very difficult living with him. He could get aggressive and they had arguments. When he spoke to Mears about the problem, they did nothing but then indicated that they would move both of them. He did not want this and felt he was made out to be a troublemaker for making a complaint when it was the other man's behaviour that was the problem. Eventually, they agreed he could stay in the same flat and the man was moved but it was a really difficult situation to manage. There is no consultation or communication from Mears as to who they will be housed with.

The third man spoke about a situation he knew of in a flat where the flatmate stole food and smoked heavily and said it was irresponsible to house people together from completely different cultural backgrounds and religions. The Mears housing officers did nothing to help. When he was in a hotel, he only had funds of £8 a week and this was not enough to live on. The food that was provided in the hotel was not good.

The fourth man said he was currently studying coding. When he was granted leave to remain, he was moved from a flat to a hotel and the uncertainty was very difficult. He had been told he had to present at the office every seven days in order to have the hotel stay extended. When he told them he could not present every 7 days as he would miss his classes they did not seem to care. There are lots of communication problems with Mears. It was unclear for example why some people had been in the system for 2 years before they had a decision or were moved from a hotel to an apartment but then others who had been in the system for maybe only 5 months were processed first.

Group five (Kaukab Stewart)

One woman said that the Mears housing officer has come into her flat without giving any notice. They say it is for an inspection but let themselves in with a key. This makes her fearful that they are going to walk in at any moment without her knowledge.

One woman said she had experienced staff being rude to asylum seekers. She also spoke about being given at the very most 12 hours notice that they would enter the accommodation. They have very little trust in the staff. They have also had problems when trying to have items fixed in the flat.

The second woman spoke about a time when her washing machine broke down and she had no laundry facility for her and her children. She had to rely on a friend who came and took her washing away and on third sector to make representations for her to Migrant Help as she was on the phone for hours trying to resolve this. There is no alternative provided if something breaks down so that is very difficult and it takes Mears weeks to resolve things.

Selina from Refuweege said that some people have arrived in only the clothes they are wearing and the third sector has to fill in the gaps. She explained that the hotels have a laundry service once a week so if you don't have enough clothes to last a week what are you meant to do. Third sector have to help to provide additional clothes and often it is only when they step in as representatives of the asylum seekers that things get done.

Another woman spoke about the need to allow visitors so that they have support but visitor access can be a problem.

General themes from Round Table Session

MSPs

- Free bus travel would assist and take pressure off third sector to provide for travel costs. This would also help with wellbeing of asylum seekers
- Mental health for trauma is not sufficiently supported
- ESOL needs to be accessible for all

- There is inconsistency in the experiences of mothers and babies who are navigating the system
- Dignity, Fairness and Respect should be the cornerstones when developing strategies to assist with the process. There is a lack of this and the Scottish Government could do better.

Participants

- ESOL classes are there but they need to be able to access them and also have the space to practice their English
- Interpreting services are inconsistent and there are experiences of translation being done incorrectly. Would welcome there being a standard that required to be met – a test or some regulation so that translation of important work relating to applications or health care is done correctly.
- Hotel accommodation – there should be a watchdog for hotels so children can integrate properly i.e. this needs to be looked at before people are placed so they are placed appropriately.
- Integration needs to be addressed and how this can be done better. The issue of staff going into accommodation without notice is also a problem that needs to be looked at. Participants said there needs to be more respect for privacy from Mears
- Accessing mental health services also feeds into the interpreter problem as they are sharing sensitive and confidential information. It is vital this information is translated correctly. Participants were not confident trust would not be breached.
- Third sector orgs often have to advocate for individuals to address problems with Mears/Migrant Help. Participants spoke of being on the phone for hours and issues taking weeks or months to be resolved.
- The group welcomed being listened to and hope that the Committee will be able to help make the changes that are needed.