

Welsh Action for Refugees: briefing for Assembly Members

The Welsh Refugee Coalition

We are a coalition of organisations working in Wales with asylum seekers and refugees at all stages of their journey, and with the communities in which they live. We work together in the interests of asylum seekers and refugees, to ensure that our limited resources can be used to best effect and to speak with one voice on policies and practices affecting people seeking safety in Wales.

Wales: Nation of Sanctuary

'City of Sanctuary' is a movement of people across the UK and Ireland who seek to create a culture of hospitality and welcome for people seeking sanctuary. As well as two established 'Cities of Sanctuary' in Swansea and Cardiff, people across Wales have been responding to the refugee crisis in towns and villages across the country, setting up schemes which offer support and welcome.

The generosity and compassion of people in Wales should be recognized and celebrated. The Welsh Refugee Coalition supports the establishment of Wales as the world's first 'Nation of Sanctuary'. The Welsh Government can play its part in making this a reality by publicly supporting the movement, and by enacting policies and practices which promote safety and inclusion for all asylum seekers and refugees in Wales.

The Refugee Crisis

The biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War is getting worse every day. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports the largest ever annual increase in numbers of refugee and displaced people, to 59.5 million people worldwide. One in every 122 human beings is a refugee, asylum seeker or displaced person. Over half of these are children. Conflict and persecution have forced over four million Syrian refugees into camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The International Organization for Migration has recorded the deaths of over 2,600 people crossing the Mediterranean in their desperation to find safety.

Syrian Vulnerable People's Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS)

The UK-wide SVPRS will see 20,000 Syrian refugees resettled from refugee camps by 2020. We are proud of the Welsh response, which has seen Welsh people, local authorities and the Welsh Government showing leadership and compassion in providing safety and welcome.

Although it will save many lives, 20,000 over 5 years is deeply inadequate to the scale of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. UNHCR report that over 42,000 people are being displaced in or forced out of Syria every day. We must continue our efforts, and do more.

Asylum seekers in Wales

Although the Syrian crisis has awakened many of us to the appalling experiences of refugees, asylum seekers have been with us in Wales for many years. Most of them have been sent to live here by the Home Office's 'dispersal' system.

In May 2015 there were 2,355 people seeking asylum in Wales (source: Home Office) - under 0.1% of our population. This includes people from Eritrea, Sudan, Iraq, Iran and Syria, who have fled similar violence and persecution to those arriving under the SVPRS.

They are waiting months or years for decisions on their applications, whilst living on a *maximum* of £36.95 pw each, with no right to work, and limited access to education. Many fall in and out of utter destitution, due to a combination of Home Office policy, lack of legal advice, and cuts to voluntary agencies providing support.

A 'two-tier' system is being entrenched, in which the small number of people arriving under the SVPRS are treated well, whilst the majority of asylum seekers in Wales are facing escalating poverty and exclusion.

The current Immigration Bill, which completed its Third Reading in the UK parliament on 1st December, is set to worsen this situation by withdrawing asylum support from children as well as adults, forcing children into destitution.

All asylum seekers in Wales need fair and humane treatment. The 'wake-up' to the plight of Syrian refugees is welcome; now we must wake up to the plight of asylum seekers already living amongst us.

Although immigration matters are not devolved to Wales, the Welsh Government has both the power and the duty to ensure that in Wales:

- ALL people seeking safety from persecution are treated with equal care, humanity and respect
- no one is left destitute;
- asylum seeking children are treated as children first, and are safeguarded and protected;
- organisations, services, local authorities and communities are encouraged and supported to welcome and value asylum seekers and refugees.

The Welsh Government should also show political leadership and accountability by

- ensuring that the outcomes of resettlement services schemes are consistently monitored, so that effective systems can be established.
- Using devolved powers over equalities, housing and social care to ensure that all people living in Wales, including asylum seekers and refugees, are treated with equal respect and care across the country.

What the Welsh Government can do:

1. Continue responding to the refugee crisis, and make safe and legal routes in Europe.

Tell the UK Government that we need to resettle 20,000 refugees from Syria as soon as possible, and show how quickly it can be done in Wales

Demonstrate long-term commitment to refugee resettlement through the UK Gateway scheme, the SVPRS and wider resettlement schemes, and support calls for the UK to welcome a fair proportion of asylum seekers already in Europe.

Speak up for a Europe-wide co-ordinated response to ensure the safety of people travelling in Europe.

2. Support a humane asylum system

Put pressure on the UK Government to deliver a fair and humane asylum system, including

- an increase in asylum support rates from £36.95 per week per person
- an end to destitution
- improved decision making on asylum applications
- an end to the detention of innocent people seeking sanctuary. Although there are no detention centres in Wales, people are being detained in Wales and taken to detention centres elsewhere. This should not happen in Wales.

3. End destitution in Wales

Destitute asylum seekers have nowhere to live, and no right to public housing; no money, no access to public funds or benefits, and no right to work. The enforced destitution of vulnerable displaced people is an outrage, and has no place in Wales.

The Welsh Government can:

- Demand that the UK Government stop using destitution to create fear in the asylum system, and to create destitution in Wales.
- Set up a destitution fund so that no person is left destitute in Wales, regardless of their nationality or migration status. This is already in place in Northern Ireland, through the OFMDFM Crisis Fund.

4. Act on forthcoming UK legislation

Ask Welsh representatives in the House of Lords to respond strongly to the current UK Immigration Bill, which proposes to make children in the asylum system destitute.

Plan for how the impact of the Bill, should it be passed, can be mitigated in Wales to ensure that no families or children are left homeless and destitute.

The WLGA has already recognised the likely increase in destitution, and has asked the Welsh Government to discuss with the Home Office the impact of these measures in Wales. The Welsh Government should examine and require a response from the UK Government regarding

- how the different Welsh legislative context will apply to the proposals, and affect LA duties and responses;
- certainty that LAs will continue to be able to act where there are concerns about destitute children or vulnerable people;
- how Social Services' increased duties will be funded.

5. Call for devolution of the asylum support system

Call for devolution of the asylum support system, including asylum accommodation and dispersal in Wales. The Smith Commission Report on devolution in Scotland has made similar recommendations. This will enable the Welsh Government to not only deliver a humane asylum support system, but improve dispersal policy, with benefits for asylum seekers, local communities and community cohesion; and allow seamless transition from asylum support to mainstream benefits or work for people granted refugee status.

6. Fund advice, advocacy and support services

Despite the complexities of the system, there are extremely limited advice and support services for asylum seekers in Wales. Local drop-in services cannot meet the need, and legal aid has been cut to the extent that people with a right to safety cannot make effective claims. This leads to an increase in wrongful refusals of asylum, wrongful refusals of support, and destitution. There is still no advocacy service for asylum seeking children, as there is in England, despite a previous commitment by the Welsh Government to put in place sustainable advocacy provision.

Funding, similar to that already set up by the Scottish Executive, is needed for the co-ordination, co-production and delivery of advice, advocacy and support services for asylum seekers and refugees in Wales.

7. Develop a migration strategy

Wales needs a comprehensive National Migration Strategy, incorporating the updated Refugee Inclusion Action Plan, and addressing poverty, the labour force and economic renewal of Wales, and our commitments to equality and human rights. The existing Task Force and Operations Board for the SVPRS is a model for coordinating and monitoring activity for all migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees.

8. Ensure the participation and inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees

Asylum seekers and refugees must be able to participate in national and local policy development, political forums, and the co-production of services for refugees in Wales.

The renewed Refugee Inclusion Action Plan must respond to the needs of **all** asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales, regardless of their journey here, and ensure equal treatment. It must have a robust accountability mechanism, with strategic political oversight to monitor outcomes.

9. Support 'Wales: Nation of Sanctuary'

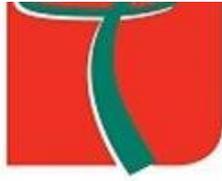
Encourage pledges of support for a Nation of Sanctuary from local authorities, Assembly Members and MPs, and public, voluntary and private sector organisations.

Identify and carry out actions which the Welsh Government and AMs can take towards making Nation of Sanctuary a reality.

Pledge to continue using positive language when speaking of asylum seekers and refugees, and to speak out against and correct discriminatory or prejudiced language, or false information, about people seeking safety in Wales.

For more information please contact Hannah Wharf, Policy & Communications Manager at the Welsh Refugee Council and Chair of the Welsh Refugee Coalition:
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Taff Housing Association



Unity without Uniformity - Diversity without Division



Wales Nation of Sanctuary



Cymru Cenedl Noddfa