

# Overview of Swansea Asylum Seeker and Refugee Advocacy Forum Meetings

*Swansea Asylum Seeker and Refugee Advocacy Forum is facilitated by DPIA staff member based in Cardiff, together with volunteer Forum Champions from the community, under the Asylum Rights Programme, funded by Welsh Government. It is run by sanctuary seekers, for sanctuary seekers, with the aim to create a safe space for communicating questions, concerns, comments and suggestions on topics that the members feel are important to them. It is run on a monthly basis (except school holidays). Professionals from relevant sectors are invited to respond to input from members. Previous to the Asylum Rights programme it had been run under the Cities of Sanctuary project by DPIA staff based in Swansea for a year.*

## October 2018

### Theme: Feedback on review of indicators of integration Report by Home Office

Aim: To look at the Home Office Report – indicators of integration – that is due to be reviewed and comment on the elements it holds. The report can be found here:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110218141321/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdf/s04/dpr28.pdf>

The reason for this review was that in October the Home Office held a workshop (managed by Patrick Wood – Home Office Analysis and insight) with professionals in the field, to find out the experiences and needs of practitioners in the field of integration, with the final aim to update the indicators and develop a toolkit for helping to apply the framework to support the design and monitoring and evaluation of integration projects at different levels.

At this meeting 12 members attended. They were introduced to the current report on indicators to integration and its main elements. A conversation was then held to obtain opinions and ideas on whether these elements felt important to integration for members, and if they felt they were being achieved – if so how, and if not, what could be done to achieve them. Below is the review of what was said by members against each element.

At first an open question as to what integration means for members was posed, which provided the following responses: *‘Connection to other people’ / ‘Community – give and get relationship’ / ‘Participating in local life’ / Fusion – coming together’ / Freedom – but this isn’t the case for Asylum Seekers – freedom to make you home a home, freedom to have visitors to stay, freedom to access healthcare, freedom to have privacy, freedom to access support for vulnerable people (not dependent on your situation).’*

#### Means and Markers:

Employment, housing, education and health – *the majority of members said that access to employment would greatly aid their integration and is a vital indicator. As per other comments from previous meetings, housing was also valued as an indicator, but not something they felt they could access with freedom. Education was also valued and health, notably good mental health, was valued as an indicator and necessary means to integration.*

#### Social connections

Social bridges, bonds and links – *Members felt that many people would not talk to them as people, but as asylum seekers. They did not feel there were many bridges available between them and the local community – the closest they got was through religious institutions. They felt that social connections were important to integration, but felt the indicator of social links as detailed as links to government bodies was not as important or had been/could be achieved in their current situation.*

### Facilitators

Language and cultural knowledge – *Members felt this was extremely important indicator for integration. They felt their access to language was supported via ESOL provision, however that this did not extend past a certain level and that childcare was hard to source, there was a limit on their development in this area. They recognised that attending various training was helpful, but didn't feel there was much else in terms of cultural knowledge to support their integration.*

Safety and stability – *again this was valued as important to integration, and members in Swansea felt very safe in Swansea, but inside their home they did not feel safe, and stability was an issue due to being able to be moved at any point.*

### Foundation

Rights and citizenship – *Members again felt this was of course key to integration, but recognised this had not (yet) been extended to them as individuals – they felt that many of their rights were being taken away, and again reiterated the issue of privacy at home – one quoted “We are humans with rights – but we cannot access them due to the system.”*

We ended the session by looking at what experiences they had had that made them feel more integrated. Members mentioned the following: *When they are made to feel welcome, which contributed to better mental health – knowing their neighbours, being shown around and where to get things, people smiling and saying hello. They also said people attitudes helped – when people understand why you are here (fleeing persecution), and as well through having children at schools they had made better connections with other parents. One of the key elements was having access to information, knowing what was going on and what they could get involved with – members communicated that the best way to achieve this was through word of mouth, Facebook and Whatsapp, as well as from professionals in the field. Some of the things they appreciated were access to courses, volunteering opportunities, yoga and women's groups.*

The workshop with the Home Office took place, during which practitioners from the field were asked to feedback on each indicator mentioned in the report, whether it made sense, whether they thought its description was useful for targeting work. Feedback was taken on board; however, some resistance was felt towards any perceived criticism. It was raised that the Home Office should also consult with people affected by integration issues – and not only on refugees (as the report clearly misses asylum seekers from their scope). A meeting was held with people affected by issues of integration, however we were only notified on a Friday, the day before that meeting was to be held, and so not enough time was permitted to engage anyone and support their attendance. The outcome of this review is unknown.

## **November 2018**

### **Theme: Education at Gower College**

**Aim: To find out what is available at Gower College for Asylum Seekers and Refugee, in terms of course, and support to attend, and to provide a space for members to feed in their experiences and desires for access to education.**

A representative from Gower College, Anna Kenney, whose role it is to promote the college and its options to 16-18 year olds attended. The first thing they shared with everyone was full college prospectus and a sheet called Grants for Education for asylum seekers – produced by the National Assembly for Wales. A copy of this is attached – unfortunately searching for the electronic version did not come up at first instance google search. It was made clear that this document was external, and that not all options would be relevant to everyone. It was also made clear that Gower College could not provide any direct support for applying for these finding options, and that asylum seekers would have to go elsewhere if they needed help, however they could receive support to complete applications for courses at the college if they needed. Anna was unsure if the Family Action Grant was supported by them. Anna explained the new initiation of course fee waiver and bus pass for 16-19 year old asylum seekers at the college, but was apologetic that this as stands could not be extended to individuals outside that age bracket.

Members raised some specific questions about their aspirations and interests as well as current engagement in courses at the college. Anna answered best possible and took notes for questions she did not know, to which she promptly found out the answer and forwarded to Leila Usmani at DPIA to communicate back to the members, which was much appreciated that she took her time for this.

One main issue raised was that if payment – that when registering online payment was expected for PT course and that many Asylum Seekers did not have the ability to pay for things online. Additionally, due to the way in which their accounts are handled, they could not save money, as their understanding was that they would risk the money being taken away by the Home Office if it accumulated in their account. It was later confirmed that cash payments could be accepted.

Access to some courses was confirmed – including that ESOL Level 1 was sufficient for Health and Social Care Level 1, GCSEs and A Levels from abroad would be accepted, and that although there were not confidence building courses the pre-access course for people who have been out of education for a while are great confidence boosters.

Overall, members were encouraged to attend open evenings, where they could speak to people from specific courses, however these would not provide 1-1 advice – this would have to be sought more directly at the specific college where the course of interest is held.

## **December 2018**

### **Theme: Lift the Ban – Campaign to allow asylum seekers access to work**

**Aim: To introduce the campaign to members, sign the petition and create letters to send to relevant MPs on the issue. Info can be found here: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/>**

Members were introduced to the campaign Lift the Ban and what had been happening so far, Members commented on various elements of the presentation that was provided by Jo Allen from Asylum Matters (see attached). Members communicated that they felt they were in detention not being able to work, and one communicated that although he had applied for the right to work through the current procedure, filling a gap in the market after 6 months, he received no response and there was no support for this process. Members communicated that in addition to those mentioned, change was needed as lack of work leads to vagrant behaviour, a feeling of dependency

on government, isolation and a feeling of sitting idle and being useless. They felt that having the right to work opened up would improve mental health and confidence, and that this would reduce the money being spent on NHS services for mental health support, as well as the money the government spends on supporting asylum seekers, as they would then be given the chance to provide for themselves. All of these comments were compiled into the letters that have since been sent out to each Swansea MP, asking for their support of the campaign and for them to speak to the immigration minister on this topic. The signed petitions have been sent off and many members took more petitions with them to have signed elsewhere, which they will send copies of to DPIA to send on their behalf.