



Cynulliad
Cenedlaethol
Cymru

National
Assembly for
Wales

Cofnod y Trafodion The Record of Proceedings

[Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb, Llywodraeth Leol a
Chymunedau](#)

[The Equality, Local Government and
Communities Committee](#)

07/12/2016

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Motion under Standing Order 17.42 to Resolve to Exclude the Public
for the Remainder of the Meeting

Cofnodir y trafodion yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynnddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir trawsgrifiad o'r cyfieithu ar y pryd. Lle y mae cyfranwyr wedi darparu cywiriadau i'w dystiolaeth, nodir y rheini yn y trawsgrifiad.

The proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, a transcription of the simultaneous interpretation is included. Where contributors have supplied corrections to their evidence, these are noted in the transcript.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Gareth Bennett	UKIP Cymru
Bywgraffiad Biography	UKIP Wales
Janet Finch–Saunders	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig
Bywgraffiad Biography	Welsh Conservatives
John Griffiths	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor)
Bywgraffiad Biography	Labour (Committee Chair)
Sian Gwenllian	Plaid Cymru
Bywgraffiad Biography	The Party of Wales
Rhianon Passmore	Llafur
Bywgraffiad Biography	Labour
Jenny Rathbone	Llafur
Bywgraffiad Biography	Labour
Joyce Watson	Llafur
Bywgraffiad Biography	Labour

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Elinor Harris	Rheolwr Gwasanaethau ar gyfer Orlhain Teulu a Chymorth i Ffoaduriaid, Y Groes Goch Brydeinig Services Manager for International Family Tracing and Refugee Support, British Red Cross
Neil McKittrick	Rheolwr Cymorth Gweithrediadau Ffoaduriaid, Y Groes Goch Brydeinig Refugee Operations Support Manager, British Red Cross
Salah Rasool	Gweithiwr Achos Cyngori, Cyngor Ffoaduriaid Cymru Advice Caseworker, Welsh Refugee Council
Hayley Richards	Swyddog Polisi ac Eiriolaeth, Oxfam Policy and Advocacy Officer, Oxfam
Tracey Sherlock	Rheolwr Polisi a Chyfathrebu, Cyngor Ffoaduriaid Cymru Policy and Communications Manager, Welsh Refugee Council
Siân Summers–Rees	Prif Swyddog, Dinas Noddfa y DU ac Iwerddon, a Chadeirydd Asylum Justice Chief Officer, City of Sanctuary UK and Ireland, and

Chair of Asylum Justice

**Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance**

Chloe Davies	Dirprwy Clerc Deputy Clerk
Stephen Davies	Cynghorydd Cyfreithiol Legal Adviser
Hannah Johnson	Y Gwasanaeth Ymchwil Research Service
Christopher Warner	Clerc Clerk

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 09:16.
The meeting began at 09:16.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau, Dirprwyon a Datgan Buddiannau
Introductions, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

[1] **John Griffiths:** Okay, let me welcome members to this meeting of the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee. Item 1 is the introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest. We've had one apology, from Bethan Jenkins. Are there any declarations of interest? No.

**Ymchwiliad i Ffoaduriaid a Cheiswyr Lloches yng Nghymru:
Sesiwn Dystiolaeth 1
Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales:
Evidence Session 1**

[2] **John Griffiths:** Okay, we'll move immediately on then to item 2, which is the committee's inquiry into refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. If I could just remind members of the public and the committee that we have decided to undertake this inquiry, which will focus on the pace and effectiveness of the Welsh Government's approach to resettling refugees, the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's refugee and asylum seeker delivery plan, the support and advocacy available to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and the role and effectiveness of the Welsh Government's

community cohesion delivery plan in ensuring integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Members of the committee have undertaken informal visits to projects in Swansea and Cardiff to meet with refugees and asylum seekers, and with those that provide support to them to discuss their experiences. Members have also visited Scotland to meet with academics and a range of organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers, as well as an official from Scottish Government and the convenor of the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee. Those visits have provided useful insight into the issues facing refugees and asylum seekers in the devolved nations and will help inform our subsequent evidence gathering. Today is the first of our meetings where we will take formal oral evidence to inform our inquiry.

[3] So, I'd now like to welcome Siân Summers-Rees, chief officer of the City of Sanctuary UK and Ireland, and chair of Asylum Justice. Good morning, Siân. If we could move straight into questions, and perhaps I could begin with some questions on Welsh Government policy. Firstly, I wonder if you could explain to the committee what you see as the main issues facing refugees and asylum seekers living here in Wales.

[4] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Okay, I'll try and take that in two parts, focusing first on asylum seekers, and around my role—in my voluntary role, really—as chair of Asylum Justice. One of the key problems is the lack of good quality legal advice in Wales. Unfortunately, we only have one firm that is able to do judicial reviews on immigration matters, which is of grave concern with the forthcoming Immigration Act 2016 and the implications of that on asylum seekers. There is a concern about the quality of decision making. Obviously, that's not anything that the Welsh Government can do, but I think it's important that they're aware that, for example, for some countries of origin, there's a completely high turnaround of appeals; Eritrea is one such example. So, on the quality of legal advice, 80 per cent of appeals by Eritreans are successful, and so there's obviously something going wrong with initial decision making there.

[5] I'll try and focus more on devolved matters. Transport is a key issue for asylum seekers. Given that they only have just over £5 a day to live on, transport causes a key barrier to integration. It's very important that they are able to access services, access English for speakers of other languages—everything really that is essential for integration purposes. I know the committee has been made aware of some of the housing problems, and, significantly, asylum accommodation that is run by Clearsprings in Wales is

of a very poor standard. From a City of Sanctuary perspective, lots of our volunteers who are central to our work have witnessed first-hand some of the appalling conditions of housing.

[6] With ESOL, we're very pleased that the Welsh Government support that ESOL should be from day 1 for asylum seekers settling in Wales. Unfortunately, there isn't enough provision for that actually to be a reality for most asylum seekers, especially if they are arriving sort of midway through the academic year, as they're not able then to access until the following academic year. So, access to English language is a key issue for both asylum seekers and refugees. Also, with regard to health, again, we are really pleased as City of Sanctuary that the Welsh Government has committed to providing secondary healthcare to asylum seekers—and I was part of the coalition pre 2007 that called for that—but there are still lots of problems in terms of accessing healthcare, such as access to LanguageLine and reports of GPs using children to interpret, which is utterly inappropriate. Also, in relation to health, there is a lack of specialist mental health support for both asylum seekers and refugees. There aren't enough experienced people in terms of being able to deal with asylum seekers and refugees who may have suffered torture and significant trauma, of course.

[7] There're huge concerns around separated children not getting independent advocacy, and that's something that, I think, as a refugee sector in Wales, has been called for for a very long time. So, it's disappointing that there've been no improvements in that area. In terms of refugees, we have a really good, positive refugee inclusion strategy. Unfortunately, I think there are lots of difficulties that refugees face during the move-on period from when they get their status, and so having a strategy is not going to help in terms of the administration problems that, within the 28-day period, refugees face. That period is not long enough to get benefits up and running, to get a national insurance number, to get their biometric card, and, within that time, often people become destitute and homeless.

[8] From that experience, it's significant to look at how they are going to really contribute to society in terms of being able to access English language and then employment, on top of all the difficulties that they are facing, such as being able to apply for benefits. One of the key problems when someone is also on jobseeker's allowance, is that they are not able to study a full-time course. So, if you take the Displaced People in Action, which runs the Wales asylum seeking and refugee doctors scheme, for example, they're not allowed to access this fantastic project that Welsh Government has provided

funding for because they're required to do a lower level English course that's not benefiting them in terms of their career progression and getting a professional international English language testing system exam, doing their professional and linguistic assessment board test 1 and test 2, and really being able to pursue their career and contribute to Wales. So, you know, coupled with jobcentre sanctions now as well for refugees, who find it difficult, online, to show that they're looking for work, there are considerable barriers to integration for refugees in Wales that I think the Welsh Government could practically do more to support.

[9] **John Griffiths:** Siân, thank you very much for that. Obviously there are quite a number of issues and we'll be coming on to a number of those through this session. As far as housing is concerned, given that asylum accommodation is non-devolved, would you have anything specifically that you might want to tell the committee in terms of what Welsh Government might do in terms of those housing issues?

[10] **Ms Summers-Rees:** So, I think it's essential to have some independent scrutiny. We have lots of testimonies. Today, we have the Sanctuary in the Senedd event that we hope some of you will be able to come along to, but lots of asylum seekers are afraid to report complaints. There is no independent scrutiny. To be fair, I've been out of the sector for two years, but when I was in the sector, when the complaints got as high as UK Visas and Immigration, they were dealt with. But asylum seekers are just afraid to take that step to report concerns, so there does need to be that independent scrutiny and that ability for asylum seekers to take complaints forward.

[11] With the new contract that's coming up, I think that's a fantastic opportunity for the Welsh Government to influence what's in that contract in terms of standards and whether, as part of that, they could look at current housing standards that the Welsh Government has for housing in Wales and whether that can be a part of that contract, perhaps.

[12] The other thing to note, I suppose, is that when we had local authorities providing asylum accommodation, they also had support workers. So, it was a very different relationship and asylum seekers were able to take forward any concerns that they had. We just don't have that now.

[13] **John Griffiths:** So, there needs to be some mechanism where complaints can be effectively processed and dealt with without the fear that there will be adverse consequences of making a complaint.

[14] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Absolutely.

[15] **John Griffiths:** So, it's whether Welsh Government can find a means of overcoming that issue within the devolved settlement, really. Okay, Jenny.

[16] **Jenny Rathbone:** I just want to pick up on your remarks in your paper on Lynx House and the associated properties on Newport Road. I wondered if you could be a bit more specific—I've visited Lynx House several times and the issues I've raised have always been dealt with. I just wondered if you could be a bit more specific—you know, do you visit, or do other people from Asylum Justice visit? How do you know, or what is the basis of you saying that it's extremely poor-quality standard?

[17] **Ms Summers-Rees:** From the actual asylum seekers who have told us what they've experienced. So, there's a gentleman speaking in the event afterwards who actually had mite bites from the hotel. I think that's a concrete example.

[18] **Jenny Rathbone:** That is a concrete example, but anything else?

[19] **Ms Summers-Rees:** I'm hoping this has been resolved, but there was concern over pregnant women being at Lynx hotel and not getting the sufficient snacks et cetera. So, I'm hoping that's been dealt with, but that was—

[20] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, but they're obviously not housed in Lynx House.

[21] **Ms Summers-Rees:** No, but they were previously. So, hopefully, that's been dealt with.

[22] **Jenny Rathbone:** That doesn't happen any longer.

[23] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Good.

[24] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, what is the concern today?

[25] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Namely—that's one example that we've had. I can—

[26] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, but we do need to be really specific about this and bear in mind that we need to compare it with the standard of homeless accommodation and the general population.

[27] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Sure, of course.

[28] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, you know, this is—. I think it's really important. Obviously, mites is most definitely a public health issue. But I think I would expect Asylum Justice to be really specific, if they have concerns—you know, who we're taking it up with and how it's being managed.

[29] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Absolutely. I can make sure. I can go back and get some more examples.

[30] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, because I don't think it's possible to say that there's no oversight—there is, both from Asylum Justice and from other people like me. So, we need to be really clear as to what it is we expect. I mean, have you seen the specification of the contract?

[31] **Ms Summers-Rees:** No.

[32] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, thank you.

[33] **John Griffiths:** I think, recently, concerns have come to the fore in terms of the quality of housing for asylum seekers in other parts of Wales as well, Siân. Have you had any involvement with any of that?

[34] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Yes. The sanctuary-seekers team and the mentoring scheme for City of Sanctuary UK, which is my paid role, they support asylum seekers within dispersed accommodation. So, there are a number of complaints with regard to broken boilers, carpets, damp problems, and, again, this afternoon, we'll be hearing direct testimony from the asylum seekers involved.

09:30

[35] **Jenny Rathbone:** But the issue is what does Asylum Justice do about it? If asylum seekers report these things, what then happens?

[36] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Asylum Justice does the legal advice, so we don't do asylum support. So, we've got very little capacity to take those complaints

forward. We have one legal director for 500 cases. So, it's very difficult for us to do any asylum support work.

[37] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay.

[38] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Rhianon.

[39] **Rhianon Passmore:** You mentioned a plethora of issues there, and I'm trying to sort of focus more on the housing side of things, because of this part of the question. You mentioned support workers from local authorities—can you explain to me why that is no longer accessible? Can you give me a little bit more information about the standards? We've also talked about new contracts, and obviously there's this backlog, isn't there, in terms of the complaints that you've mentioned? So, outside of those issues, particularly with regard to housing, what are the main concerns? I'll come on to legal aid at a different point.

[40] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Okay. So, when the previous contracts were set up, they were different; they were different for different providers as well. So, there was a different level of—

[41] **Rhianon Passmore:** So, we're not talking about a contract?

[42] **Ms Summers-Rees:** So, we're not talking about now.

[43] **Rhianon Passmore:** To interrupt you, so that I'm clear, we're not talking about a standards contract, we're talking about a simple procurement contract in terms of housing—between whom and whom?

[44] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Yes, so, previously, it would be between the local authority and UK Border Agency, as it was. And those standards—that contract was negotiated between them, so it wasn't a set standard across all the providers. And as part of that, I think it was because local authorities wanted that additional capacity to be able to better support asylum seekers.

[45] **Rhianon Passmore:** So, where's the sudden loss of support workers? How is that—?

[46] **Ms Summers-Rees:** So, it's now all private contractors and no local authorities won the last round of the contracts.

[47] **Rhianon Passmore:** So, what needs to be done in that regard, bearing in mind that you've just mentioned that you're not able to take up cases, and there is a huge issue around legal advice? What needs to be done to block that massive deficit in those huge challenges that asylum seekers are facing?

[48] **Ms Summers-Rees:** There needs to be advocacy for asylum seekers. There is no service. Previously, there was a one-stop-shop service by the Welsh Refugee Council, who would take forward these complaints, and there is no one-stop-shop now. Asylum Justice just deals with the legal asylum process, and not asylum support, due to capacity.

[49] **Rhianon Passmore:** If you had a magic wand, what would you like to see?

[50] **Ms Summers-Rees:** A service much like the one-stop-shop that dealt with all of these asylum support issues and advocated on behalf of asylum seekers.

[51] **Rhianon Passmore:** Okay, thank you.

[52] **John Griffiths:** Okay. And Janet.

[53] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** Thank you, Chair. Just on some of the points that Rhianon has raised, in terms of any accommodation that's obviously being procured for these people, under housing enforcement, all local authorities do have housing enforcement teams, and so, if there are conditions within those properties that are not ideal, somebody should be picking up on those. Are you aware who's picking up on them? Are they being reported in by anybody?

[54] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Nobody, as far as I'm aware. The local authorities don't have—

[55] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** So, they're placed in accommodation and left to it.

[56] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Yes.

[57] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** That's worrying in itself, really.

[58] **Ms Summers-Rees:** And that's why City of Sanctuary, as a grass-roots

movement, has begun to try to mobilise volunteers to do things like befriending and mentoring, and will often try to ring Clearsprings to report some of those conditions.

[59] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** So, on that, there's not conduit of support. Local authorities literally—. People are coming in and people say, 'Put them in accommodation', and then they're left on their own.

[60] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Yes.

[61] **John Griffiths:** But, as you were saying, Siân, one of the big issues does seem to be the reluctance to complain when there are problems. I think you were saying that when problems are reported they're dealt with, but the difficulty is in getting them reported.

[62] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Getting over that—and that's why an independent advocacy support service might get over some of those concerns.

[63] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** If I could come back—I think the First Minister has alluded to the fact that, let's be honest, we do expect local authorities to be very involved in this. I'm baffled why there isn't some follow on. If they are procuring accommodation, and that accommodation—

[64] **Ms Summers–Rees:** They don't procure it, UKVI procure it.

[65] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** Right.

[66] **Ms Summers–Rees:** So, local authorities have no involvement in that at all.

[67] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** Right, I've got you. Okay.

[68] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Sian.

[69] **Sian Gwenllian:** Os ydym ni wedi gorffen efo'r agwedd tai—ydym ni? Oes nad oes rhywun arall eisiau mynd ar ôl yr agwedd tai, mae'r agwedd gyflogaeth yn rhywbeth y dylem ni fod yn rhoi ffocws arno fo, achos y neges rydym ni'n ei chael dro

Sian Gwenllian: If we are finished with the aspect of housing—are we? Unless somebody wants to pursue housing, then the employment aspect is something that we should be focusing on, because the message that we're having time and time

ar ôl tro ydy nad ydym ni fel cymdeithas yn defnyddio'r sgiliau proffesiynol sydd gan lawer o ffoaduriaid, ac rydych chi wedi sôn am hynny. Beth ydych chi'n meddwl sy'n gallu cael ei wneud er mwyn gwella hynny, er mwyn ein bod ni'n medru 'match-o' y sgiliau yn well efo beth sydd ei angen arnom ni fel cymdeithas?

again is that we as a society don't use those professional skills that a lot of refugees have, and you've mentioned that. What do you think could be done in order to improve that, so that we can better match the skills with what's needed by us as a society?

[70] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Originally, the Welsh Government did a lot, I have to say, in terms of providing some pilot work around recognised prior learning. The funding was provided to Displaced People in Action. There was some great pilot work, but unfortunately, then, when they were no longer funded, we lost a lot of that energy and work that was ongoing. And there was a specialist employment service, an education and employment service, which did some really good work. What was a shame—and we recognise the cuts to funding et cetera, but what was a shame was that a lot of that work could have then had a longer-term impact. So, there were things like employment advisers' manuals, which could have been pushed out to Careers Wales, Jobcentre Plus, schools et cetera—you know, lots of resources around entitlements, on education, that, without anybody taking these issues up now, have been lost. It's a real shame. Whilst I believe that a specialist service is obviously a really good approach, even without that specialist service, things still could have been taken forward, and we've lost a lot of that work.

[71] Some of the work that was done by that specialist service was very much an action plan, person-centred approach, which would look at—. There's no such thing as a typical refugee, refugees come with all different experiences—not just professionals, we've got vocational trades—and it's looking at a person-centred approach, and building it around them: readiness for work, whether it's to get a first aid qualification, whether it's health and safety, because, in some countries, that's not a concept they're familiar with. So, it's really doing very bespoke, specific work for refugees to get them back into employment, and then, additionally, working outside of the refugee sector to support mainstream advisers to get and learn that experience.

[72] One really good pilot that we did was with an Eritrean builder. So, he

had tonnes of experience, but didn't have his certificate. He could really contribute to society, and through the Welsh Government pilot, which was great, we took him to an assessment centre, where he was able to show his skills. There were things that he would need retraining on—so, for example, insulation isn't something you need in Eritrea, so there were areas that he wasn't familiar with, but we didn't then have any funding to take that further. But what did happen was that the gentleman who did the assessment was happy to do a reference to say that he definitely had these skills, and was supported then to get a card to be a labourer, and started work within a week. So, these are really good case studies that we've lost, unfortunately, so I think it's really important to try and pick up some of this work that was done previously.

[73] **Sian Gwenllian:** So, you don't think it's too late? It is possible to go back to some of this pilot work and pick it up.

[74] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Absolutely. Absolutely, yes. And of course, then, the professionals—the Welsh Government has supported the fantastic Wales asylum and refugee doctors scheme, which has been doing amazing work.

[75] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Joyce.

[76] **Joyce Watson:** [*Inaudible.*]

[77] **John Griffiths:** Sorry, we've moved on. Rhianon.

[78] **Rhianon Passmore:** You've talked about the fantastic Welsh Government doctors' scheme, you also mentioned prior to that—was it PLAB 1 and PLAB 2? Can you give more information with regard to the real barriers that are faced every day in terms of those with skills at a higher level? Obviously, I take it in the round that there is a huge mixture, but those who have got desperately needed skills, where are they falling through the gaps in terms of the—? You mentioned the 28 days around welfare benefit claims. Can you give me a bit more of an understanding of those barriers that are being faced?

[79] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Yes. What the Wales asylum refugee doctors scheme does is bespoke international English language testing system classes, which is the professional language test that you have to have to go on to university or to retrain. So, there isn't enough IELTS provision for people and it certainly isn't bespoke IELTS provision like there is for doctors.

Again, it depends on your level of English. It may be that you need to start from a very early entry English for speakers of other languages level or you're ready to do an IELTS test. So, English is probably the first barrier. Then it really does depend on the profession. The National Academic Recognition Information Centre is the testing centre, so you can get your free qualifications sent off and a certificate comes back, saying what that level is at. So, there's a problem there in that there isn't a specialist service anymore doing the NARIC for asylum seekers or refugees.

[80] **Rhianon Passmore:** So, what's filled its place?

[81] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Nothing in Wales.

[82] **Rhianon Passmore:** So, what's the logic and rationale for it not being there?

[83] **Ms Summers-Rees:** I'm not sure. The Welsh Government no longer—

[84] **Rhianon Passmore:** So it's something that, as a committee, we can ask. Okay.

[85] **Ms Summers-Rees:** It was part of the previous inclusion grants and Displaced People in Action didn't get funded.

[86] **Rhianon Passmore:** Okay, and also then in terms of the welfare benefit gap and in terms of being able to—. You talked about national insurance, et cetera, and all of those things that are necessary to function in Wales. Can you give me a little bit more information as to what's happening there?

[87] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Usually, it's just administrative delays that cause the main problems. You might be interested to know that there's a pilot in the north of England and the Department for Work and Pensions are looking to ensure that refugees get a dedicated adviser and I think that's quite—

[88] **Rhianon Passmore:** It keeps coming back to that theme, doesn't it—that support?

[89] **Ms Summers-Rees:** It does.

[90] **John Griffiths:** Siân, could I ask you about English for speakers of other languages, which you mentioned earlier, because obviously that's a crucial

area of concern for asylum seekers and refugees? To access services, to get employment and to play a full part in society, they need those English language skills. Your concerns relate to the general provision and, as you say, there is an issue with term dates. Is the overall provision adequate? Are there enough places?

[91] **Ms Summers-Rees:** No, certainly not. Reports from Swansea City of Sanctuary are that not enough people are able to access the courses in Swansea. I believe it's a problem as well with the higher levels of the ESOL classes. Looking at good value for money, City of Sanctuary could have a really important role to play, I think, with some of the lower level English, such as conversation classes. A lot of the members of our movement are retired, often professionals and teachers, and we really think we can build a movement that can support asylum seekers and refugees in the early stages of learning English, because it's often useful to do it in an environment that's informal, especially if they're people who might never have experienced any learning environment or haven't been in a teaching environment for a very long time. So, we find that some of the conversation classes and friends and neighbours groups that are springing up are really benefiting asylum seekers and refugees to learn English in a more practical sense.

[92] **John Griffiths:** Okay. So, would you suggest anything in particular that might be done to support that more informal provision of English language skills?

[93] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Sure. Obviously the promotion of City of Sanctuary as a movement so that we can encourage more groups to grow and encourage more volunteers to come forward and get involved. It is a very fast-growing movement, so, for us, it's about trying to keep up with the amount of groups that are springing up and need support. Having the Welsh Government's commitment to building Wales as a nation of sanctuary and promoting the movement will only benefit everybody in the longer term.

[94] **John Griffiths:** Would you point to any particular barriers, Siân, to that sort of flourishing of informal provision of English language tuition?

09:45

[95] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Encouragement of local authorities and churches and people outside of the refugee sector to give venues for free so that we can keep costs as minimal as possible. For some people, we'll need to be

able to get volunteer expenses for them to get to the venue and then, depending on where the asylum seekers are, transport is obviously always a barrier, depending on where they are living.

[96] **John Griffiths:** Might there be a role for refugees in perhaps volunteering to provide some of the tuition?

[97] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Absolutely. You know, central to the City of Sanctuary principle is that asylum seekers and refugees are part of the movement not 'the other'. So, we have refugees volunteering in Swansea, supporting the conversation classes, supporting, befriending and mentoring and very much part of the movement across Wales.

[98] **John Griffiths:** Would they also, Siân, be providing any of the interpretation services that would help with, you know, accessing public services and so on? Is that happening then?

[99] **Ms Summers-Rees:** I'll put my volunteer hat on. At Asylum Justice we rely entirely on volunteer asylum seekers and refugees to do the interpreting. We don't have any funding to provide that interpretation. Cardiff University—thank you to them—have provided a course for asylum seekers and refugees, for free, to go on to get those interpretation and translation skills.

[100] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Siân, I wonder if I can ask you—I'm not sure whether you'd be in a position to offer a view on this, but we've been to Scotland and we found that Syrian refugees have been resettled in Scotland proportionately more than they have in either Wales or England. Might you have a view as to why that's the case?

[101] **Ms Summers-Rees:** I suppose I can only anecdotally tell you what City of Sanctuary groups tell us across England and Wales. Those groups that have been advocating for their areas to take Syrians recognise some of the local government concerns around housing—not enough housing stock—and also concerns, I suppose, if it is a dispersal area already, that the number of the quotas might be at its limit or in some areas—I believe Derby is one of them—they're over that quota. So, they are concerned that they're not able to provide good-quality support and we recognise those concerns. However, we would again plea to local government to say, 'Well, actually, City of Sanctuary can support you in some of those areas.' We have a grass-roots movement that's building every day to look at where the gaps are in areas and whether there's anything that those groups can support local

government with.

[102] In Wales, we have—. As part of preparation for the inquiry, we asked groups about engagement with local government on the Syrian scheme and it was a mixed response. Some said, you know, that the local authorities have been really proactive in coming to them and looking at what activities and initiatives they can do. Others said that there's been a very guarded approach. Whether it's a communication issue that these people are very vulnerable—and I can understand the local authority's concerns—but I think the dialogue perhaps isn't there to appreciate why a local authority might not be engaging in the areas that the groups have come forward and said there's been very little engagement.

[103] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Who might be taking part in that dialogue then?

[104] **Ms Summers-Rees:** So, from what I gather from one particular area, the group has tried to contact local authority officials to ask, 'Is there something we can do to support the families?', and there's just been no response at all. So, we're talking grass-roots volunteers who have set up City of Sanctuary groups across Wales. But then again, Neath Port Talbot is a really positive example, where the local authority went to them as a group first to say, 'What kind of things can you help us to do for these families?' So, I think it's about promoting those examples of good practice.

[105] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thanks for that, Siân. Janet, if we move on to UK Government policy, I believe you have some questions.

[106] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** Some claim that there's a two-tier asylum system. How do you think this actually affects devolved issues?

[107] **Ms Summers-Rees:** I suppose to point out that with a lot of asylum seekers, there is, between communities, a lot of distrust, within having a different system. People are kind of feeling, 'Why has somebody in my community got all this support and we haven't?' So, potentially, there could be community cohesion issues that are arising, which is a concern. I suppose if I relate back to what I've talked about with the refugees and that move-on process and the devolved policy issues around homelessness. Obviously, when a Syrian arrives through the scheme, they get that bespoke support. They're taken directly to their housing, their housing is sorted. They get an initial amount of cash. Refugees may become completely destitute because their benefits aren't up and running, and then become homeless, with an

effect on health and the impact on their mental health as well. So, all sorts of areas where it can have an impact on devolved policy.

[108] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** And how are those concerns being raised, where things can be put into place, to stop this two-tier system? Who's addressing that?

[109] **Ms Summers–Rees:** I don't know, because City of Sanctuary are not on the Syrian taskforce. What I would encourage is that that taskforce that Welsh Government have set up is for all asylum seekers. That seems the most sensible approach so that these issues can be addressed at that strategic level.

[110] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** And in terms of resettlement, how do you think the Welsh Government is working with the UK Government? And is it effective? And how does it compare with how the UK Government works, say, with Scotland on the same issue?

[111] **Ms Summers–Rees:** I'm not aware because I don't work at that strategic level and I'm not on the taskforce, so it's probably not a question I can answer, I'm afraid.

[112] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** How many asylum seekers would you say that you interact with daily?

[113] **Ms Summers–Rees:** The movement—thousands. Across Wales, we have eight City of Sanctuary groups, and each of those groups will support quite a high number. And, actually, the groups are asylum seekers and refugees as well, so they're not just people in the community. So, they're a mixed group of people.

[114] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** And when you say 'group', just to help me, what kind of numbers are we talking?

[115] **Ms Summers–Rees:** So, membership, I think, of Brecon, Hay and Talgarth is something like 300 people who have signed up to that group. And then there's a steering group, I would say, of between five and 10 people who are driving some of the activities forward. So, sanctuary breaks is an example. They've done numerous activities to raise money to support other areas, which I think is fantastic.

[116] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** Okay. I think there's another one here: whether the Syrian vulnerable person relocation scheme is operating consistently across local authorities in Wales.

[117] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Again, in terms of the response that our groups are telling us they're having from local authorities, it's mixed. But, we wouldn't have the details of what the provision is like in each of those areas that have the scheme, unfortunately.

[118] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** Okay.

[119] **John Griffiths:** Okay. I think, Joyce, you wanted to come in here.

[120] **Joyce Watson:** I just want to come back to something that you mentioned earlier on. You said that 80 per cent of Eritrean failed asylum seeking applications were then turned over. But, in that period, they have no recourse to public funds. I don't know whether you can answer this, or point us to someone who can, but what consequence does that really have, not only on the people who are in that position—and I don't know the numbers, of course—but the communities in which they live as well? These people are completely dependent on other people's generosity.

[121] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Absolutely. I believe that the Red Cross is going to be providing evidence, and they provide money and food parcels, et cetera, so they'll be able to give details on numbers. What City of Sanctuary is doing in response is that a number of our member organisations are doing things like hosting schemes. So, Swansea Share Tawe is a good example, where they are very much of the Swansea City of Sanctuary movement, and are providing two-week stays for people who are, essentially, either street homeless or are bed hopping and going from one house to another. I suppose the impact for communities is a rise in homelessness. We do see, unfortunately, that some people may have to turn to illegal working, or are forced into illegal working, and then all that comes with that in terms of being paid very little money and being exploited, and the dangerous situations that people find themselves in, to be able to survive on a day-to-day basis in very exploitative situations.

[122] **Joyce Watson:** On that exploitative issue, because that's what I expected you to say, have you got any evidence where exploitation has led to any form of trafficking?

[123] **Ms Summers–Rees:** We deal with trafficking cases as part of Asylum

Justice. I wouldn't want to go into any details, but certainly, yes.

[124] **Joyce Watson:** But it is.

[125] **Ms Summers-Rees:** It is, yes. It might be a good time to raise the example of family reunions. We have some refugees who have been borrowing money to be able to pay for a family reunion from loan sharks. That's one example.

[126] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Rhianon.

[127] **Rhianon Passmore:** Picking up on that in terms of the hard data, you've clearly outlined how the system is encouraging, or could be argued to be encouraging, illegal behaviour, because this desperation is apparent. If you're not being supported by the public purse, then that's systemic. What is the actual Home Office advice to those in that appellant situation and scenario? What is actually communicated?

[128] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Well, they expect people to voluntarily return, but if they haven't had a fair hearing and there's—

[129] **Rhianon Passmore:** But if they're going through an appeal process—and especially, you mentioned Eritrea—but I've also noted that there's 36 per cent initial granting, compared to 49 per cent after appeal. That's still a huge rise after an appeal. So, there must be an official line as to where you go to—

[130] **Ms Summers-Rees:** They'll be supported up until after their appeal, so they don't become destitute in that period. But we do have examples of people who become 'appeal rights exhausted', then become destitute, but actually, their case has not been properly—. They either haven't had the proper advice or there are outstanding issues. Asylum Justice, really, is the only place they can go to to try and restart their claim and present the evidence. There is a range of issues that might have gone wrong—medical reports not filed. There are various reasons why an asylum claim hasn't been dealt with properly. I think, with Share Tawe, for example, out of the people that they've been hosting, eight submitted a fresh claim and then got refugee status. So, I think that shows that people are wrongly being made destitute.

[131] **Rhianon Passmore:** Okay. And lastly, in terms of hard evidence, you mentioned that Cardiff University was doing some work around language

skills. So, what research is being done in terms of homelessness and the whole process of asylum seeking and refugee status?

[132] **Ms Summers–Rees:** In terms of destitution?

[133] **Rhianon Passmore:** Yes.

[134] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Nothing from Asylum Justice. That's not our role, but I would ask Red Cross what numbers they keep in terms of people coming forward.

[135] **Rhianon Passmore:** And is there a need for that type of analysis?

[136] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Absolutely, absolutely.

[137] **Rhianon Passmore:** Okay. Thank you.

[138] **John Griffiths:** Okay. We'll go on, then, to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. I believe, Joyce, you have some questions.

[139] **Joyce Watson:** Yes, on unaccompanied minors. What support is being given? Do you know that? I note that the Welsh Government have established a taskforce and an operations board to drive that delivery forward. Do you know whether that is, first of all, in operation, and is it working?

[140] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Okay. This isn't my area of expertise, so I went away and asked my legal advisers at Asylum Justice whether they would like to comment further. What they have highlighted is that they feel that there is insufficient training currently for social workers. I'm not sure whether that taskforce is now going to be looking at that, but they've particularly highlighted that social workers don't seem to know the statutory guidance on age assessments, and don't know where to seek help. They have also highlighted that there is a real need to have a designated person within local authorities who is able to conduct age assessments. Then perhaps this could eliminate this postcode lottery of different qualities of standards on age assessments. Also, from the legal advisers' perspective, they're saying that the cost to local authorities for the judicial reviews when they then have to challenge those decisions—obviously it doesn't make sense if you can get those age assessments down correctly in the first instance.

10:00

[141] **Joyce Watson:** I notice that, in Scotland, they have advocates for children. It was something that I asked the UK to think about when I gave evidence in another field. Do you think, or has anybody said to you if it's not your field, that that would be hugely advantageous to both the minor and the person who's trying to help that minor?

[142] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Yes. The legal advisers that I've consulted said that, certainly, there does need to be some independent advocacy. They highlighted one particular case study where they were working for a separated child who wasn't accessing any education. They had to then follow that up—fortunately it was a good solicitor who wanted to find out what was happening to this child—and what they found was, actually, the education provider called for him to have a special educational needs assessment and that hadn't been done. So, if there'd been an advocate, they could have picked up on that issue and taken that forward. I think every legal adviser said that there needs to be that independent support and advocacy for children who are in such an unfamiliar environment and need support through the asylum process, because it's extremely complex. In attending meetings, for example, to have that person that they trust and are able to feel confident that they're being heard and listened to is very important.

[143] **Joyce Watson:** And finally, ECPAT has just done a report on children missing from care and, to all intents and purposes, unaccompanied minors fall under the UN convention on the rights of the child, so they have their rights anyway. Have you, or has anybody told you or given you any hard evidence, that unaccompanied minors are going missing or unaccounted for in Wales once they come here to seek refuge?

[144] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Not that I'm aware. Obviously, when we see children seeking asylum, or age-disputed children, fortunately they've been signposted to us. So we wouldn't be aware of any of that information.

[145] **Joyce Watson:** Okay.

[146] **John Griffiths:** When we went to Scotland, Siân, we heard about the guardianship scheme there, which would address, I think, a number of the concerns we've been discussing here. Do you have a view on that?

[147] **Ms Summers-Rees:** I think from both Asylum Justice and City of Sanctuary, we would really support the guardianship scheme being rolled

out. I think it would really ensure the best interests of the child and that children are better protected. I don't know a lot about the model but it might be worth saying that, from a City of Sanctuary perspective, we have retired social workers as part of our movement that might want to get involved in some sort of system.

[148] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thank you, Siân. I think, Jenny, you have some questions on community cohesion.

[149] **Jenny Rathbone:** Yes. You told us earlier that there was a bit of a problem around this concept of a two-tier asylum system, with Syrians getting a Rolls-Royce service and everybody else getting a much poorer service. I note that you think that the Welsh Government's taskforce should be extended to all asylum seekers. Obviously, asylum seekers—it's not a new problem. You know, we've been welcoming asylum seekers for some years now. I just wondered what level of historic memory and experience there is that we're able to build on, thinking about how we integrate people who are both from different communities themselves, and also may bring with them the conflict that drove them here in the first place.

[150] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Obviously, I'm going to advocate the City of Sanctuary, and the fact that we're a grass-roots movement that ensures that asylum seekers are part of that group and essential to that group. Things like Sanctuary Speakers teams going out and talking to people about the asylum process, myth busting—really, City of Sanctuary is about bringing people together. From our perspective, I think it's great to promote positive messages, but it's only when people sit down and realise that some of these are actually the same as you, and have the same hopes and dreams and aspirations, that we break down some of those barriers, which I think is the key way to contribute to community cohesion. It's around looking at initiatives that will allow people to get to know one another, on an informal basis. And I think that's what City of Sanctuary does well; it doesn't provide services just for refugees and asylum seekers. It will provide, maybe, a children's event that everybody is invited to, and those friendships flow from that initiative, rather than it being forced: 'Come and learn about asylum seekers and refugees.'

[151] **Jenny Rathbone:** I'm trying to establish just how extensive this is in Wales. When we went to Scotland, there were, obviously, a number of integration centres, in Glasgow—some of which worked more effectively than others—and quite an extensive voluntary sector in Edinburgh as well. So, I

just wondered if you can give us a sense of how well developed that is in Wales.

[152] **Ms Summers-Rees:** I would say it's quite new, and the movement has really developed more in the last year, in response to the Syrian crisis. And so, I think there's a lot to be done to really push those groups forward, to do more. Historically—I left the sector for two years, and I'm now back as part of City of Sanctuary—when I left Displaced People in Action, there were a number of cuts to the voluntary sector. The one-stop shop, which was funded by UK Visas and Immigration, was no longer funded, so we've seen a real cut in support for asylum seekers and refugees, and I think that has really had a detrimental effect on the lives of asylum seekers living in Wales.

[153] **Jenny Rathbone:** But I think, in terms of community cohesion, the work that needs to be done is as much with the indigenous community as it is with the different groups that are arriving from other countries. So, particularly in those local authorities that haven't responded positively to the inquiries that you made before coming here, what do you think that voluntary organisations, like City of Sanctuary, can do to extend people's understanding of people coming from elsewhere?

[154] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Certainly, getting the Sanctuary Speakers teams out and talking to people within local authorities. Hiraeth Hope, who will be at the event later, have been looking at community sponsorship, and in some of the pre-work that we've funded as a UK organisation, through funding we've got through *The Guardian*, they are looking to see what work they can do in the community, to prepare for Syrians arriving. So, they are working with Swansea asylum seekers and refugees, who are coming in to talk at various events, and meet people, and do that prep work, to break down any barriers, any worries or any concerns that people have around new people arriving in their area. So, these are areas in west Wales where they have never had asylum seekers and refugees before.

[155] **Jenny Rathbone:** What work is being done in schools, if any?

[156] **Ms Summers-Rees:** We have the Schools of Sanctuary programme, based around three principles: learn, embed and share. So, there are a few schools that have started with Schools of Sanctuary. This afternoon, we'll hear from Wrexham. And it's a process where teachers will come up with a plan to decide how they can ensure that they support the staff to maybe do some activities within different areas of the curriculum around refugee

issues—whether it's history, or whatever area—and then to try and embed that within the community. So, they'll invite people along to hear from refugees who've come to speak in the school about their experiences, and do assemblies. We're really trying to allow schools to decide what they would like to do, and how it fits within maybe something they're already doing as well, so that it's not an add-on.

[157] There's a Schools of Sanctuary resource pack that we're hoping to have for City of Sanctuary. It's England focused, so it does need adapting, and we do need it translated. So, we're going to do some work now with the Wales Cities of Sanctuary project to get that really pushed out across Wales.

[158] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, because, clearly, it is likely that there's going to have to be new dispersal areas developed simply because the housing crisis in places like Cardiff is so extreme that, I imagine that Clearsprings must be saying, 'We can't find anywhere else to place people.'

[159] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Yes, and I think there's a real role for City of Sanctuary in those non-traditional dispersal areas to do some of the work, learn from Hiraeth Hope and what they're doing in west Wales to prepare communities.

[160] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, at the moment, though, this is very much being done and thought about internally. There's no dialogue with Government at any level, whether at local authority level—

[161] **Ms SummerS-Rees:** It depends on the area. Some groups work well with local authorities, and are doing it in conjunction with local authorities.

[162] **Jenny Rathbone:** But there's no sort of strategic overview.

[163] **Ms Summers-Rees:** No, there's no strategic overview.

[164] **Jenny Rathbone:** Thank you.

[165] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Rhianon.

[166] **Rhianon Passmore:** That brings me very nicely on to what would be a road map blueprint for Welsh Government in terms of laying out objectives around this, because, as you know, community cohesion is an issue that affects and impacts on everybody. You've mentioned some of the challenges

that are faced out there. In terms of Welsh Government's role, what would you like to see it doing in terms of co-ordinating, whether it's your organisation, or whether it's Show Racism the Red Card and other organisations? Is there a need for more strategic direction around this? Whose role is it?

[167] **John Griffiths:** I guess in answering that, Siân, it brings us to the Welsh Government's community cohesion delivery plan, really, doesn't it, would you say, and whether that's everything it might be?

[168] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Okay—

[169] **John Griffiths:** Or is it wider than that?

[170] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Okay. So, I think City of Sanctuary would advocate that, if we're going to become a nation of sanctuary, which is a concept that has been raised, then, actually, what that means in reality needs further explanation and discussion with Welsh Government on how they can play a leadership role on pushing that forward. The way City of Sanctuary works is that we encourage pledges of support. So, how it works is that, outside of the refugee sector, we get businesses, local shops, churches, schools, to sign up to pledge that idea of welcome and hospitality. And, I think, if that could be taken forward by Welsh Government, and we could look at having pledges of support from AMs, from MPs, all sorts of local government, local authorities, to start building that positive message of welcome, that would be a really good starting point. And for us, there needs to be more recognition that there are really concrete examples of positive messages of welcome in Wales, and how we can promote those stories, I think, would be a key focus, to try and look at how we can start to build a movement that is beyond, essentially, eight cities of sanctuaries, or towns of sanctuaries.

[171] **Rhianon Passmore:** But in terms of the systemic issues around, for instance, independent advocacy, issues in terms of welfare and benefit, and the challenges in terms of all of the issues that you've mentioned previously, those are strategic challenges, which need to be answered at the same time—

[172] **Ms Summers-Rees:** Absolutely.

[173] **Rhianon Passmore:** —if we're to truly deliver cohesive communities moving forward.

[174] **John Griffiths:** Siân, could I ask you about—? I note what you say about promoting the right sort of message, and the media obviously have a key role there. Do you have much involvement with the media in trying to get positive stories across?

[175] **Ms Summers–Rees:** So, in some local areas, we have good relationships. We had the Sanctuary in Parliament event last Tuesday in Swansea. There was some really good coverage about Swansea City of Sanctuary, going to Parliament and talking about Swansea being a city of sanctuary. But it really is hit and miss, depending on the journalist, and our capacity is limited—we're a voluntary movement. To try and push that—I think it's going to be an important time for the Wales Cities of Sanctuary project over the next coming—. They've got a year and a half left of their funded projects with the Big Lottery.

[176] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Well, if there are no further questions, may I thank you very much for coming along to give evidence to the committee today, Siân? You will be sent a transcript in due course to check for factual accuracy.

[177] **Ms Summers–Rees:** Okay. Thank you very much.

[178] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thanks very much. The committee will now break until 10.30 a.m. Thank you.

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 10:15 a 10:30.
The meeting adjourned between 10:15 and 10:30.*

**Ymchwiliad i Ffoaduriaid a Cheiswyr Lloches yng Nghymru: Sesiwn
Dystiolaeth 2
Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales: Evidence Session 2**

[179] **John Griffiths:** This is the second of today's evidence sessions to inform our committee inquiry into refugees and asylum seekers. So, I would like to welcome Hayley Richards, policy and advocacy officer for Oxfam Cymru; Neil McKittrick, refugee operations support manager, British Red Cross; Elinor Harris, services manager for international family tracing and refugee support with the British Red Cross; Salah Rasool, advice caseworker with the Welsh Refugee Council; and Tracey Sherlock, policy and communications manager with the Welsh Refugee Council. Thank you all very

much for coming along today to give evidence. Let me say at the start, with five of you here on the panel, please don't feel that all of you have to answer every single question. Obviously, it's a matter of if you think there's something particularly important to contribute, then that's very welcome.

[180] Let me begin by asking about Welsh Government policy. Could you tell the committee what your greatest areas of concern are regarding the Welsh Government's approach to refugees and asylum seekers? Would anybody in particular like to begin? Hayley.

[181] **Ms Richards:** Yes, I'll get the ball rolling. In terms of Welsh Government's approach, Oxfam has serious concerns about how they're dealing with non-devolved issues, such as the Immigration Act 2016 and potential changes to immigration rules. For example, the Immigration Act impacts on a variety of devolved policy areas, such as housing and looked-after children, and there seems to be total disparity to how the Welsh Government approached the Welfare Reform Act 2012, for example, where there was a significant amount of research commissioned by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. There were action plans developed on what actions the Welsh Government could take to mitigate negative impacts of welfare reform on people living in Wales, but, to our knowledge, there's been no such action taken with regard to the Immigration Act or potential changes to the immigration rules, and what those impacts would be on people in Wales and how we could mitigate those impacts. So, that's one area that we are seriously concerned about.

[182] **John Griffiths:** I see. Some of that is fairly new in terms of some of that immigration legislation, I guess, Hayley, is it? But you think, at this stage, Welsh Government might have done that sort of work.

[183] **Ms Richards:** I think so. Obviously, legislation takes a long time to be implemented, so although the legislation only came into force in May or June of this year, there's a long-running period where there's an opportunity to influence that legislation, and that's what was done in terms of the Welfare Reform Bill, but it doesn't seem to have been done in the same way with the Immigration Act. Obviously, there are differences in the number of people that it will impact in Wales, but it's still going to have seriously negative impacts on a very vulnerable portion of people living in Wales.

[184] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Hayley, just following up on how—. Sorry, did you want to come in on this point, Elinor?

[185] **Ms Harris:** Yes, just to pick up on what Hayley said, I think, looking at the impact of the Immigration Act is really important now, because one of the things that it is very likely to do is increase the number of destitute people in Wales. And waiting until somebody presents with vulnerability and destitution of social services is really leaving it too late. We need to have a partnership approach to looking at how that impact can be mitigated before it happens.

[186] **John Griffiths:** Would you point us in any particular direction in terms of ensuring that happens, Elinor, or is it a matter of doing the sort of work that Hayley mentioned?

[187] **Ms Harris:** I think it is exactly looking, as you did with the Welfare Reform Act, at what the response of social services will be, looking at the expertise that the voluntary sector have around destitution, and making sure that all of the impact is thought about before and that there is a bit of a plan about how to deal with that, rather than waiting until somebody presents.

[188] **John Griffiths:** Okay.

[189] **Mr Rasool:** What I would like to see in terms of refugees is that we just concentrate on refugees who settle in Wales, in terms of the housing situation and in terms of priority and local connection and their employment and integration in the long term. That's where I would like to see more of the Welsh Assembly's effect on those areas.

[190] **John Griffiths:** Okay.

[191] **Mr Rasool:** I can give you a longer discussion about it if you want to, but I think—

[192] **John Griffiths:** Well, we haven't got a great deal of time, but it might be useful if you expand a little on that then as to exactly where you think the shortcomings are at the moment.

[193] **Mr Rasool:** As I said, on refugees, we are talking about 20 per cent or maybe 15 per cent maximum. Twenty-five per cent will get some kind of status and will remain in Wales. So, we need to look after these small numbers, and we can in the long term. There is the example of 28 days and then they move on for a year in terms of housing priorities and then in terms

of employment, working closely with jobcentres, empowering individuals and recognising their skills and making every individual contribute to Welsh society, which, in the long term, helps integration.

[194] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thanks very much for that. We will come on to a number of these issues as we take questioning forward this morning. I just wanted to pick up on some of the housing issues, really, because obviously we have to understand what's within the Welsh Government's responsibility in terms of devolution and what isn't. The committee is interested in housing because we know there have been a number of issues in terms of the quality and standard of housing. What do you feel Welsh Government could most usefully do to try and ensure that the standard of housing is everything that it should be? Would anybody like to offer—?

[195] **Ms Richards:** Asylum accommodation or—

[196] **John Griffiths:** Asylum accommodation?

[197] **Ms Richards:** Yes. I think that committee members have already done some outreach visits and I understand that at the African Community Centre Wales, housing was one of the issues that people raised there, and certainly in Oxfam's programme experience, asylum housing is something that comes up—the quality of asylum housing and how that housing is managed—repeatedly. A lot of people who we talk to think that, if issues with asylum housing could be sorted out, then that would have a positive impact on lots of other areas of people's lives, because a house is meant to be a place of sanctuary and we're talking about people who have suffered possibly serious mental health issues prior to their arrival in Wales, looking for a place of sanctuary.

[198] Once they get here, there may be problems with the quality of their housing and asylum accommodation and also problems with inappropriate house sharing, where there's significant conflict, due to cultural differences, for example, and people sharing houses with individuals who have got serious mental health problems and the safeguarding issues around that. So, I think there's a feeling that asylum housing in particular is causing additional stress and anxiety to people who are already seriously vulnerable and if that could be sorted out, then it would free people up to concentrate on their asylum case rather than the negativity around their housing conditions.

[199] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Would you point us to anything specific the Welsh Government could do to ensure better standards of housing for asylum seekers?

[200] **Ms Richards:** Well, even though housing for asylum seekers is a non-devolved area, we think there are things that can and should be done just to try and bring the quality of housing up more in line with what would be expected from Welsh publicly funded housing. So, in terms of what could be done, at the moment, UK Visas and Immigration, Home Office, are undergoing a stakeholder consultation on asylum housing and support services. So, we understand the Welsh Government are engaging with that process—they're talking to them about integration, certainly, because of overlaps in integration services, but we think they could be talking to them in a lot more detail about the quality of housing expected from those contracts and the management of those contracts.

[201] They could also potentially ask for some method of independent scrutiny of housing standards, because, at the moment, if you're in asylum housing, then, from an individual's point of view, your case for asylum is being examined by the Home Office. The Home Office are also providing your accommodation. So, there's automatically a conflict of interest, in that people are very reluctant to come forward with complaints because of the repercussions of complaining on their asylum case. So, that's a conflict. So, we feel that there should be some independent scrutiny of standards and independent advocacy provision for people so that they can complain if there is inadequate provision or problems with the management, for example.

[202] The third thing that Welsh Government could do is to try and support maybe a third sector bid from housing associations in Wales—when the contract comes up for renewal, to try and bring that contract into Wales, which would have multiple benefits for the people within Wales, because it would bring the whole of the asylum support and accommodation in line with other Welsh Government asylum integration support and refugee support. I don't know if Neil knows anything about it, but I think, in Northern Ireland, there's also been a call for not-for-profit management of asylum accommodation.

[203] **Mr McKittrick:** I think there are a couple of general points at the outset. The first one would be that when I started working in the refugee sector 10 years ago, all three of the devolved administrations weren't that involved in refugee and asylum issues. It was seen very much as something

that was within the purview of the Home Office. In those 10 years, there has been quite a dramatic shift in the devolved Assemblies having a real focus on these issues. Today is evidence of that. The work you're doing around primary and secondary healthcare for refused asylum seekers is an example. Because it's the responsibility of the Home Office through the contracts, I think there is now a realisation amongst politicians in local authorities in the devolved administrations that they can really get involved, because these people live in their area, their housing is in their area and their children go to school in their area. So, I think there's been much more engagement, which I think is really important and we need to welcome.

[204] But with that, I think, comes a challenge to have a bit more oversight of what the Home Office do with people, and to feed back on that. Most Members will be aware that if somebody presents with a case to their constituency surgery, the Home Office won't really engage with them because usually it has to be a Member of Parliament. So, that's the sort of level of engagement we would hope to change. Housing is an example of that—big, large corporations delivering housing through a Home Office contract to individuals across our areas. Those are people who live and work in our towns and villages across the UK. So, what I would say would be vital is that somebody in a house provided by the Home Office should have the expectation that standards should be exactly the same if that house was being provided by the Welsh Government, the Northern Ireland Government or Scotland. We can chase that when complaints are raised, and, with the issue around the Home Office also being the person who is to sign your case, it makes that very hard. But the point to really get that right is when the contracts are being crafted at the start, and feeding in then to say, 'Our experience of A, B and C means that when this contract is put together, that must be addressed in the contract', rather than waiting for problems to arise and then trying to tackle them on a case-by-case or on a more general basis.

[205] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thanks very much for that; that's very useful. As far as the Red Cross is concerned—. Oh, sorry—yes, Tracey.

[206] **Ms Sherlock:** Can I just add something about housing? We've spoken about the standard of asylum housing and accommodation, but, I think, on housing for refugees, this is another reason it's really important to look at the impact of the Immigration Act 2016, especially the provision around right-to-rent checks. The impact of that could be that landlords, particularly landlords who have a small portfolio, might shy away from renting properties to anybody that they suspect might be of questionable migration status.

Research already shows that it's likely that landlords are making that judgment about people from BME backgrounds in particular. So, another reason to keep a careful eye on the Immigration Act and how that's rolled out in Wales.

[207] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thanks very much for that, Tracey. I wonder if we can move on, and if I could ask the Red Cross to elaborate a little on the call for the discretionary assistance fund to be made available to those without recourse to public funds.

[208] **Mr McKittrick:** Okay. For the Red Cross, destitution is one of the most challenging situations that asylum seekers and refugees face. At any given stage, somebody could potentially be destitute through the asylum system, even somebody who is within the section 95 support being provided by the Home Office. There are constant examples of their cards not working or the information being lost or sent to the wrong post office. So, people can be temporarily destitute even when support should be in place for them.

[209] There are other key points of destitution along the journey. One would be the move-on period, so, when people are granted refugee status, there are 28 days for them to move on from Home Office support to jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance and those kinds of things. That often, and in most cases, takes longer than the 28 days, and people then find themselves destitute in that period. At a time when they should be celebrating getting through the rigours of the asylum system, they often find themselves in a worse position than they were in the asylum system, if they thought that was possible.

10:45

[210] Another period of destitution then is for people who are refused asylum and people who are, kind of, in a legal limbo—so, people who are here in Wales, there's no intention for them to go home, they have a legitimate fear of returning home, and are then found to have to make their own way. So, people, in our experience, sleeping in parks, sleeping on other people's mattresses on floors, sofa-surfing, a real under-culture of people who are almost seen as less than human, who are hidden in the shadows. Again, the fund is tackling the symptom rather than the cause. We would all welcome NDN support being provided by the Home Office, so that nobody finds themselves in that situation. And we'll continue to advocate for that, but, until that takes place, I believe it's the responsibility of the devolved

administrations to support these people who are living in our towns and cities.

[211] In Northern Ireland, we have the Northern Ireland crisis fund, which you may have heard some things about. So, what we do is we take a relatively small amount of money and the Red Cross administers it to 13 other organisations across Northern Ireland, and they have money on hand so that when somebody presents to them as destitute, they can give them a small amount of money to triage their immediate need. And there's four main aims with that. The first is for vulnerable people to mitigate or potentially avoid destitution altogether. So, somebody may present and say, 'Listen, I know I'm going to get my support coming through on Wednesday, but can you help me out over the weekend?' Twenty or thirty pounds gets somebody across a weekend, and they avoid being destitute for that period of time. It keeps people who are longer term destitute linked in with our organisations. So, as to the way we would administer it, we would administer maybe £10, £20 £50 per week. People come back regularly, so we keep in touch with them and they don't drift off our radar. We can track deterioration often in mental and physical health. So, having that place that you know certain people who we're particularly worried about will come back to every Monday or every once a week is really good at keeping those people linked in. It stops them ending up in really difficult circumstances.

[212] In giving the money out, we uncover trends and patterns, so we keep very distinct, very accurate records on why somebody is destitute, how long they have been in the country and what the cause of their destitution is. And, from that, we can build a picture of what destitution really is and what's causing it. In Northern Ireland, we have those data and, as a result, we're making some policy changes. I don't know anybody else who has that information. When you come in and ask us, we can give examples from our experience of cases we all know, but nobody's able to chart down and say, 'Of the 50 people who presented as destitute, 25 of them were in the move-on period, 10 of them were refused and five of them were waiting on their normal benefits' and that allows us to go with evidence to the Home Office and say, 'Listen, we need to make policy changes.'

[213] And the fourth thing in terms of the crisis fund is that what it does is that there's a certain spend-to-save argument in it. So, we have people who will present often as quite ill. The money maybe puts them in hostel accommodation for the weekend, which stops them going to the hospital. It keeps people off the streets, being picked up by police and spending the

night in police cells. And, again, more importantly than that, it gives people a wee bit of dignity while they're waiting on their main case to be resolved. So, it's not an ATM machine for asylum seekers who are destitute. What it is, is a bridging, a bit of money that bridges the gap while the experts who work with these people can get at what their main reason of destitution is. That might be a fresh claim for asylum for example. And we're littered with examples in Northern Ireland of people who were deemed hopeless, whose cases were appeal-rights exhausted and who would never get back in the system, but who, with some support over a period of weeks, managed to sit down with their legal representatives and get a case and go on to get full refugee status. That situation would never have been changed but for that fact that this small amount of money was there to help people along the way.

[214] Now, the way you might want to do that might be completely different. In Northern Ireland, we started with a pilot. The Red Cross and another organisation started with about £20,000 and we gave out £10, £20 per time to people, and that triaged the vast majority of needs. And then all the evidence came, and, over time, as we've gathered the evidence, the Northern Ireland Government has thankfully increased that amount of money. But I wouldn't call for millions of pounds to look at this. If we start small with a pilot, Red Cross and our partners will take this forward, and we wouldn't expect an administration cost, in the first instance, to do it. This casework is already happening on a daily basis throughout Wales. All this does is give people a wee bit of money to support people while they're undertaking the root cause of their destitution.

[215] I could talk all day around this, but I suppose the main focus for me is—whatever method you think is best, be that through a separate fund, be it through your discretionary fund—it's the agility of the fund that is its main strength. Sometimes, people will be putting in a statutory request for support, which may take three days, two weeks, three months or whatever. This money keeps people going in the meantime. So, whatever you come up with, or if you decide to proceed with it, it's that short ability to provide people almost instantly with some support, a small amount of money—and more than 50 per cent of the people who use the Red Cross claim under £50 from it. So, it's minute sums of money, but it makes a real, tangible difference.

[216] **John Griffiths:** Are they also quite small numbers of people as well in Wales, Neil?

[217] **Mr McKittrick:** Again, it's a difficult question to answer because we have never really had this. So, there are people who will use Red Cross services but, until the fund is there, you don't get people really coming out to use it. So, in terms of just a pure research-gathering method, it's worth its weight purely by that. The fact that you're also helping people out in the meantime while you're gathering your evidence, for me, is an additional benefit to it.

[218] **John Griffiths:** Okay, well, thank very much for that, Neil. That's very interesting for us. Tracey.

[219] **Ms Sherlock:** I think it also depends on what other provision exists. So, something that we greatly value is the fact that Welsh Government fund a move-on service for refugees to support them in that initial 28-day period. The number of people that we support through that—almost 700 in the last quarter—is testimony to the need. Salah can speak in a lot more detail about some of those needs that arise in that move-on period. If they're not addressed and people are not supported through that initial period, then, as Neil highlighted, that can really lead to destitution and all sorts of consequences that are unnecessary if people do get that support. So, we do greatly value that Welsh Government invest in that. We would seek more investment and we're not saying that's an alternative to a destitution fund, but certainly it helps keep people away from destitution.

[220] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Hayley.

[221] **Ms Richards:** Just one thing to add in terms of preventing some destitution during the move-on period. As Neil said, there are 28 days to leave asylum accommodation and that's not enough time, sometimes, to get your paperwork sorted out, especially in terms of national insurance number and benefits. One thing in terms of the Syrian resettlement scheme, there is a fast-track process through DWP for the national insurance number and NINo paperwork to be sorted out. It's our understanding—maybe someone else can clarify—that that process happens within 48 hours. So, there's kind of a two-tier system developing. Once you get refugee status, that fast-track system should be available for all newly recognised refugees and not just Syrian refugees.

[222] **John Griffiths:** That's very useful, Hayley, thanks for that. Okay, could I ask a final question, before we move on to other committee members and their questions, and it's of the Welsh Refugee Council? In terms of co-

ordinating and integrating activities in Wales, what role does the Welsh Refugee Council play in having that sort of overarching job?

[223] **Ms Sherlock:** We provide a range of services. We have services direct to people seeking asylum and people with refugee status, so lots of casework provision. In terms of co-ordinating integration activities, again, we offer activities direct to communities of interest, for example working with the Trinity Centre and Oasis, around well-being activities. But, in terms of co-ordinating across Wales, we don't necessarily have a co-ordinating role. We are part of the Welsh refugee coalition, so some activities are co-ordinated and some responses to consultations, say, are co-ordinated through that forum. We're an active member of that. Then, where funding is available, we do play a co-ordinating role, in things like Refugee Week, where we can get money for that. Then, we will work with communities and with arts institutions in Wales to think about a kind of co-ordinated response in terms of public messaging around asylum and refugee issues. So, where there's funding available, we take a co-ordinating role. Other than that, we work with other partners, some of whom are present here today as part of the Welsh refugee coalition.

[224] **John Griffiths:** Are you familiar with the Scottish Refugee Council that the committee recently visited in Glasgow and Edinburgh? The Scottish Refugee Council were doing quite a lot co-ordinating work, and leading, I think, on different areas of provision and service delivery—if not doing it directly themselves, co-ordinating the work of other. Are you quite familiar with their work, and, if so, how would you contrast it with the situation that the Welsh Refugee Council has in Wales?

[225] **Ms Sherlock:** I think the Scottish Refugee Council do play a co-ordinating role. As you say, sometimes that's not activity that they're undertaking themselves. I think that they're differently placed within Scotland, so my understanding is that they're a strategic partner alongside Scottish Government and the equivalent of the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership. So, there's a trio of organisations working together to, for example, produce the refugee integration plan—New Scots. So, I think that they have a different relationship strategically, which enables some of that co-ordinating activity, and funding follows suit as well.

[226] **John Griffiths:** And it would be Scottish Government that gives them that strategic role, presumably.

[227] **Ms Sherlock:** That's my understanding, yes.

[228] **John Griffiths:** Jenny.

[229] **Jenny Rathbone:** The amount of funding that the Scottish Refugee Council has is about twice what the Welsh Refugee Council has, and also they get considerably more from other sources other than the devolved Government. I just wondered if you could talk a bit about what efforts you make to fundraise.

[230] **Ms Sherlock:** We are heavily resourced by Welsh Government and also we get some money from the Home Office. We are always undertaking efforts to diversify our funding base, and recently we were successful in securing almost £1 million over the next five years from the Big Lottery Fund. So, it comes back to capacity issues. So, whilst we also have responsibility for delivering those front-line services that I mentioned, we sometimes struggle, because of capacity, to invest the time that's needed in diversifying our funding base. But, slowly and surely, we're getting there. So, this money that we recently secured, for example, enables us to employ a business development officer, so they'll have much more time to identify opportunities, to do that horizon scanning that's needed, to bring in that additional money and increase the diversity of our funding base.

[231] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, is your expectation that you will be able to increase the level of funding to something equivalent to the Scottish Refugee Council?

[232] **Ms Sherlock:** That's our ambition. I think it will take a while to get there, but we are on the path to achieving that.

[233] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, thank you.

[234] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thank you for that. If we move on to UK Government policy, I think Janet has some questions.

[235] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** The two-tier asylum system—can you give any specific examples of this, and how do you think we all would overcome it?

[236] **Ms Sherlock:** Well, I think our starting point—Hayley touched upon the different experiences that people will have. So, we know, when people come through the Syrian resettlement scheme, that the service that they get is very

bespoke, it's very personalised, people will get collected from their point of arrival and taken to their accommodation—all of the administrative things that people, when they gain refugee status through the asylum route, find very problematic; they're not issues for people coming through that Syrian resettlement scheme. So, very quickly, people get bespoke support around employment, educational opportunities, whereas people coming through the spontaneous route are still struggling when they get refugee status to access, perhaps, a national insurance number, the paperwork necessary to then move into employment, and all of those other important things for integration.

[237] We know that resourcing heavily favours Syrian resettlement. So, just by way of contrast, our move-on provision, funded by Welsh Government—we have four caseworkers working on that, supporting 700 people over the last quarter. By contrast, the Syrian resettlement scheme is not pan-Wales like the move-on services. We have contracts with three local authorities—it has supported 46 people, so 10 families, over the last year with two caseworkers. So, there's a massive disparity—

11:00

[238] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** There is.

[239] **Ms Sherlock:**—in terms of the investment. So, our move-on provision is heavily oversubscribed. There is a real need for it but it doesn't attract the same interest or investment as the Syrian scheme. We do our best. We hope that we offer those people, with that move-on provision, a really good-quality service, but it's not the same service that people coming through the Syrian resettlement scheme get.

[240] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** So, who isn't actually banging the drum and raising this with the UK Government to say, 'It's not working, we need a cohesive approach'? You know, 'It doesn't matter who you are, where you're coming from, how you're coming—at the end of the day, we have a really cohesive approach to that'—who is raising this with the UK Government?

[241] **Mr McKittrick:** I think it's certainly not limited to Wales, this two-tier system. It's happening throughout the UK.

[242] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** How does it compare to Scotland, in terms of how Welsh Government works with UK Government?

[243] **Mr McKittrick:** The same issues have been identified. I think really it comes from the very nature of the approach that the Government has taken. So, on one hand, when the first Syrians started arriving, they were met by dignitaries, they were met by—certainly, I know in Northern Ireland, our Deputy First Minister met them and the lord mayors from different towns. There were welcome parties, there were all sorts of things, and people who come through the normal asylum route always come in with a sense of—their first contact with officials tends to be based around a sense of distrust, ‘Why are you here? What is it you’re doing?’ So, from the very first contact that people have, that’s kind of the tone. There’s also a certain—you know, people coming in through the Syrian resettlement have a certain influence on their destination—where they’re going to be going to. That’s less, obviously, for people who are dispersed into an area where they have much less choice. All the things that were said there around, you know, direct route through housing and the support—we can’t get away from the fact that they are two different systems. We can’t get away from the fact that somebody has had a claim assessed and approved and somebody has not. I think it’s important to point out that refugees and asylum seekers themselves, who’ve come through the normal system, are not in any way critical of this being delivered to the Syrians. They just want a similar vehicle for them. I think the most obvious points are around the move-on period, so the amount of support that’s given to the Syrian resettlement is sadly lacking across all our devolved administrations, purely because of a lack of funding around the ability to casework people through their situation when they get refugee status.

[244] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** And how is this being conveyed, then, to the UK Government? Who’s taking this forward?

[245] **Ms Richards:** The Home Office are fully aware that a two-tier system exists. They know that this system is much different to people who come through the asylum route, so they’re fully aware of that. In terms of Welsh Government’s response, when the Syrian resettlement scheme was launched, the Welsh Government set up a Syrian operations board and a ministerial taskforce, so that is the platform for issues like this to be raised.

[246] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** And are they being raised?

[247] **Ms Richards:** They are being raised. However, the operations board hasn’t met since June of this year—

[248] **Jante Finch–Saunders:** June?

[249] **Ms Richards:** Since June, and also there are—although in the first instance when the scheme was launched the operations board was a useful platform in terms of ironing out issues around how health costs were to be paid in Wales, how education costs would be paid in Wales—. Essentially, because the Home Office scheme is dependent on local authorities, then you could say that the operations board is just adding another level of bureaucracy. If the Home Office wants, and often it does—certainly for the first tranche of people who came in December 2015, the Home Office worked directly with individual local authorities in Wales—

[250] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** Did they?

[251] **Ms Richards:** —and now they're working more closely with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, via the Welsh Local Government Association. So, if there's any need for the Syrian operations board—I don't know. Even having an operations board—if it showed some leadership, it would be worth having, maybe. But, having said that, even having an operations board that focuses solely on Syrians and not the broader people in the asylum system and other refugees in Wales, that in itself is pointing towards a two-tier system even within Wales—you know, that we have this massive operations board and a ministerial taskforce just focusing on Syrian refugees. That's not to belittle the crisis that Syrians are facing—it's horrendous—but it does send out a message to other asylum seekers and refugees in Wales, and this is also perpetuated by the media and the UK Government. There is a real sense that Syrian refugees are good, and all other refugees and asylum seekers are not as worthy as Syrian refugees. I know people have said that refugees of other nationalities, or asylum seekers, don't begrudge the Syrian refugees the support they're getting, but I feel that there are certain community cohesion issues, even within the Syrian community themselves. Syrians who have arrived spontaneously don't get the same welcome as Syrians who have come through the scheme, and within the wider refugee and asylum-seeking community, people do compare what support they get. It's a natural thing to do, and so it's very obvious that the two-tier system exists.

[252] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** So, what do you believe—and any one of you can answer—the Welsh Government should be doing in terms of working more strongly with the UK Government? I'm stunned to hear that an operations board hasn't met since June, and we're quite close to the end of this year.

[253] **Mr McKittrick:** Again, if you wait on the Home Office to get everything right, you'll be waiting for a period of time. So, the experience we have had in Northern Ireland is that we've taken the gold standard of the Syrian resettlement, and tried, with issues and policies that are within the gift of the Northern Ireland Government, to bring the other refugees and asylum seekers up to that standard. And the things that we have done previously in Northern Ireland—English for speakers of other languages wasn't available for refugees, it was only available to asylum seekers, but those coming in from the Syrian resettlement had that right, so we extended that right to all refugees, which was appreciated. Family reunion—we have a better relationship around housing, so when families are arriving through family reunion, we have a relationship with the housing providers that is much better than it ever was before, because we have that relationship through the Syrian resettlement.

[254] So, there are some drip-down benefits through the relationships, but I think a simple comparative analysis of 'This is what one person gets, and this is what one person gets through a normal route' are all things that we need to press the Home Office on, but here are issues that locally we can amend, like the move-on, like support for that. That's where certainly the Welsh Government can look at putting some additional resource and support in that regard.

[255] **Janet Finch-Saunders:** I was just going to say that I notice that the WLGA recently said that the intention was for all 22 local authorities to have some refugees. It's 17 at the moment, but all 22 would have by the end of the year. We're almost there, aren't we, and I understand that there are still—? There was an article, certainly from north Wales—Sian, you might have seen it—where we've got local authorities that haven't participated at the moment.

[256] **Mr McKittrick:** I suppose on that point, and we've had it in Northern Ireland as well, it is great that, from a presentation point of view, all local authorities are seen to participate. Our focus is much more on the level of service that people get when they come in, and, obviously, it's natural that areas that haven't had an asylum-seeking or refugee population, or maybe don't have an expansive black and minority ethnic community at all, will have some difficulties in actually setting the resettlement out. So, while that aspiration is to be commended, I think what's much more important is the level of support that is provided to people, and that people aren't sent to certain areas just so that you can meet the target of getting all local

authorities in place.

[257] **Janet Finch–Saunders:** Absolutely right.

[258] **John Griffiths:** Okay. I'm just going to bring Rhianon in at this point. Rhianon.

[259] **Rhianon Passmore:** Very interesting. In terms of the focused operations board, I'm also concerned it's not met since June. But, solutions moving forward, we've discussed the two-tier system, we've skirted around the issues around cohesion around that, but in regard to what is in Welsh Government's gift, would you be supportive of an operations board that would be catering for all refugees, that would co-ordinate services across the main, so it's not only retrospective, but looking forward to future issues? And how would you see that working? Is there a model for that in Northern Ireland or Scotland, and would that be the place, then, that we could effectively lobby through to the UK Government around these very, very serious issues around the 28 days, and also the national insurance fast-tracking? It doesn't make any sense at all that we have an inbuilt imbalance. We all recognise the reasons, but it is not healthy that we have such a disparity of treatment. The perceptions are out there in terms of that, and I think that's very concerning.

[260] In terms of it being Home Office funded, that is as it is. Would you say that that's a way forward for Welsh Government to be able to effectively move?

[261] **Ms Richards:** We sit on the Syrian operations board on behalf of the Welsh refugee coalition and, certainly, since probably the second or third meeting, it's something that third sector members on that coalition have called for from the very beginning—that this operations board should be wider than just Syrians. In defence of the Welsh Government, they have kind of spread it slightly sideways now, because they are looking at the schemes for children. It is already wider than Syrians, but it's still a Syrian operations board. So, Oxfam would be very supportive of widening that board, and making it a more permanent basis for ensuring that there's proper monitoring and evaluation of schemes, proper sharing of best practice. So, yes, definitely.

[262] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Sian.

[263] **Sian Gwenllian:** I'm just going back to the 700 in casework—that huge load that happened. Are you able to drill down into that 700—where they are now, how many are destitute? Can we use that last quarter to inform us of what's happening with these people, because, within the two-tier system, we seem to know quite a lot about the Syrian resettlement programme, but not about the move-on service, and exactly what effect we are having, and whether we are having enough of an effect and impact on this other kind of hidden—it seems to be a hidden group of people.

[264] **Ms Sherlock:** Yes, we can drill down and we have got further information. It's not long-term information. So, people are with us—perhaps Sal wants to say a bit more—people access that service whilst they're in need, but we don't necessarily know what happens to people perhaps six months, a year or two years down the line, or even five or 10 years down the line. We have anecdotal evidence that integration is an issue, but the starting point for that integration is that move-on period, or, arguably, day one upon someone's arrival. Did you want to add to that?

[265] **Mr Rasool:** I think, in terms of that 700 people, 196 new refugees in the last few months I have seen myself. If you think about somebody who is granted refugee status by the Home Office in Cardiff, automatically they get a national insurance number. Compare that with someone whose case is dealt with in London or Leeds or Liverpool; they don't get a national insurance number. And compare this with somebody who the Home Office refuses, when they go to court with their cases, those people as well don't get a national insurance number. That is a knock-on effect on the 28 days, and then it's delaying the whole benefits system. In terms of child benefits and child tax credits, again, it takes two or three months. We have an agreement with a local job centre, fast-tracking child tax credits, but it still takes up to three months. So those are the kind of people, in the first two or three months—I would say there are almost 90 per cent facing that destitution, for which they are accessing Red Cross funds here.

[266] **Ms Sherlock:** It is perplexing to us how you can have a system of safety, an asylum system, where people are recognised as being in need of international protection, and then they get that protection, they get that recognition, and then almost immediately face destitution in Wales and the UK. That just can't be right.

[267] **Rhianon Passmore:** Chair, can I ask one question?

[268] **John Griffiths:** Well, we really do need to move on, but if it's very short.

[269] **Rhianon Passmore:** It's very brief; I promise you, it's very brief. In terms of a legal challenge from organisations—I'm looking to Oxfam Cymru and the Red Cross—is there any sounding around that? Because it's an in-built inequality in that system that we know from evidence—not just anecdotal evidence—that is causing destitution. So, is there any legal challenge out there around this?

[270] **Ms Richards:** I guess, if there was a legal challenge, it would come via Oxfam GB. So, I haven't heard of a legal challenge, but I can certainly look into it, and find out what my colleagues in Oxfam GB think about that idea.

[271] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Joyce—unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

[272] **Joyce Watson:** Yes. I'm particularly interested in the plight of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, or unaccompanied minors, and the challenges that they face that you're hearing about. You've already mentioned the board, but how are they being looked after and catered for, and what can we do to improve that situation?

11:15

[273] **Ms Sherlock:** It's difficult to know exactly how many people are in that situation. We know that, as of February earlier this year, apparently there were 37 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children across Wales—so, formally recognised as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—being supported by local authorities. We have a degree of scepticism about that figure and whether that actually represents everybody who is out there. So, it wouldn't include anybody who was age disputed and trying to get recognition as being an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. Part of the problem is that there's no dedicated provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Wales. There used to be. Because of that provision, there's an evidence base to show that there is still a need. Welsh Government do recognise that there's a need, so they have issued a specification for money that's available for service provision from next April, for a period of three years, and as part of that they're asking if children's needs can be recognised. I speak on behalf of the Welsh Refugee Council, and I think—on behalf of the sector as well—that we feel that the money that's available for what Welsh Government wants is woefully inadequate. To invest in a service—any service, but particularly for

children—the money won't do justice to the issues.

[274] **Joyce Watson:** And following on from that, it is about the unknown. There was a report by ECPAT about children missing from care and I'm just wondering whether you have any evidence whatsoever that children, unaccompanied minors in Wales, are going missing from care, because they did cite Wales in their overall figure, and consequently, how they fare. Do we manage to find them again? Do we know what their fate is? Is there any evidence that, first of all, they are the most at-risk category, and if they are going missing from care, do we know what is happening?

[275] **Ms Sherlock:** The Welsh Refugee Council don't have that evidence, but I absolutely agree that I think it's an issue and I think it's an issue that needs a light shining on it and needs some investment. The fact that we don't have the evidence doesn't mean it's not a huge issue.

[276] **Ms Richards:** I was just going to add that I think it's quite important for the committee to try and meet with maybe some of the children's charities that have more expertise in this area, particularly Children in Wales and Tros Gynnal Plant, for example, which did run a specialist advocacy service and still provides general advocacy for children leaving care, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. But they also had a specialist service specifically for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children that was funded by Welsh Government until March of this year.

[277] As Oxfam, we have concerns that advice and support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children seems to have been lumped in with the Welsh Government inclusion grant, which seems to us to be a bit of a backtrack really from the promises that were made earlier. Before this evidence session, I looked at the Children in Wales response, for example, in their written submission to the committee. They've got a catalogue of evidence that shows that Welsh Government has made various promises. Save the Children have written reports since 2008—this has been an ongoing issue.

[278] There's an issue around advocacy provision, especially for age-disputed young people, and also around the need for a guardianship service for these young people. So, in helping the coalition to put their response together for this inquiry, I spoke to a previous worker from Tros Gynnal Plant. She said to me that, if a guardian isn't appointed when people first arrive, or as near to that point as possible, then a few months down the line

or a year down the line, it's too late and the hope has gone from that young individual's life.

[279] These are children and young people and we need to see them as children and young people first, along with all the kind of safeguarding and protection that goes with that. So, they've already suffered a journey that's too horrible to imagine. They've already had their childhood stolen from them. So, whatever we can do in Wales to make their onward journey safer, so that they get the advice and support that they need, then we really need to be doing that. If we're only talking about 37 children, then it's hardly going to break the bank, really.

[280] **Joyce Watson:** If we can talk a little bit more about the value of the guardianship and the advocacy—just for the record, really—and what that might mean. If we were talking about a cost-benefit analysis, let's say, because governments tend to like figures, if you haven't got it, who can we get it from? Those figures in terms of saving money, like you—

[281] **Ms Richards:** Certainly, there is a statutory guardianship model in Scotland, and there have been reports in terms of what costs to the public purse are saved as a result of that guardianship model. I can find those reports and certainly send them on to the committee.

[282] **Mr McKittrick:** That was going to be my response. We have the guardianship model in Northern Ireland as well. I'm not across the detail, but on the issue that you mentioned around people going missing from care, the guardianship is held up as the best method so far to prevent that from taking place. So, there is evidence out there, particularly from Scotland, but also in Northern Ireland, of how the guardianship was brought in. So, I think we can follow up with you on that, and get those specifics so that you can look to make a step forward, maybe, in Wales.

[283] **John Griffiths:** That would be very useful, thanks. Could I ask, in terms of age disputes, how often age disputes occur in Wales?

[284] **Ms Sherlock:** Again, we don't know. There's no—. If we had a guardianship model, we'd know. We'd be able to—

[285] **John Griffiths:** So, that information just isn't available

[286] **Ms Sherlock:** It's not available, no.

[287] **John Griffiths:** Jenny.

[288] **Jenny Rathbone:** Can I ask about the children in families who are refused asylum and therefore are destitute? What happens to those children?

[289] **Ms Harris:** If you are in Home Office accommodation and your asylum claim is refused and you have children, then currently that accommodation continues. One of the things that the Immigration Act does, which will come in sometime next year, is that it takes away that provision. That's something that really needs to be thought about in advance, because there is a decision then for social services departments about how they support those children and families. So, that support currently continues, but in terms of advice, advocacy and provision about what you then do, because that's the sort of limbo that you're in indefinitely, that's something that still needs that advocacy around it.

[290] **Jenny Rathbone:** What about their right to an education? Does that continue?

[291] **Ms Harris:** You have a right to an education, yes. But there's a real question there about age disputes as well. Just going back to the unaccompanied children issue, we don't know how many there are because not everybody who should have an age assessment has one, and a lot of those age assessments aren't really done very well. The knock-on impact is that if the Home Office then says, 'Your date of birth is X', that's fixed forever. You might then get asylum. That's great, but if you've been given asylum as an adult and, actually, you're a child, then you have to sign on, look for work, do all of those things when, actually, you should still be in school. So, it's really important that those age assessments are done and that anybody who has any sort of issue about the date of birth that the Home Office has allocated being wrong has that access to a guardian or advocate.

[292] **John Griffiths:** And who is responsible for assessing age?

[293] **Ms Harris:** Social services, if it's raised as an issue.

[294] **John Griffiths:** Right, okay.

[295] **Jenny Rathbone:** Just going back to the general point. At the moment, families remain in the asylum-seeker accommodation.

[296] **Ms Harris:** Usually, yes.

[297] **Jenny Rathbone:** Usually, or—?

[298] **Ms Harris:** The provisions around asylum accommodation—. It depends whether you had the children at the time of your asylum refusal and whether the children were with you in the accommodation at the time of the asylum refusal. So, there are various little bits of legislation.

[299] **Jenny Rathbone:** It's the children I'm focusing on here. Are we saying that we could not just have young adults sleeping in the park or sofa surfing, but whole families sleeping in the park?

[300] **Ms Harris:** Under the Immigration Act, that could happen, yes.

[301] **John Griffiths:** But it doesn't happen now.

[302] **Ms Harris:** Not often.

[303] **Joyce Watson:** Can I ask just one more question on that? Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in terms of who has to pick up the cost of children, would it not be the case that there's a transference of cost from what the Home Office is picking up now, because they have a legal duty to do that, and the change to that legislation would mean that that transfer of costs goes to a local authority, because that child has rights in and of themselves—because they are a child—which have to be picked up and costed by the local authority? Am I right?

[304] **Mr McKittrick:** That's certainly the understanding of that demand, and I would add the Red Cross would probably pick up a good whack of that cost as well, while all that is being worked out. And you're adding extra layers of that application, too, and I'm talking about that bridge again. There will be a period of time when one will stop and the other will probably take a while to assess, to restart, and we'll most likely support that in the meantime. And that's going to be a big challenge for us as an organisation that already spends a lot of money on destitution, really looking at that, and we'll have to maybe start prioritising certain circumstances.

[305] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thanks for that. Jenny, community cohesion.

[306] **Jenny Rathbone:** In your evidence, Oxfam quotes the fact that the Welsh Local Government Association says that, so far, 17 authorities out of the 22 have resettled refugee families, and they anticipate families will have been resettled in all 22 local authority areas. I just wondered what your view is on the extent of the awareness raising that has been done, either by local authorities or Welsh Government, to ensure they are welcome.

[307] **Ms Richards:** I'd say not enough, really. Again, in the early days of the Syrian operations board, there was a communications group, which spoke about media around the Syrian resettlement scheme in Wales. I think there is a perception, certainly at a local authority level, which has probably come from Welsh Government, that there is a media lockdown on Syrian resettlement. Trying to get positive—

[308] **Jenny Rathbone:** Sorry, what do you mean by that?

[309] **Mr Richards:** We know, as Oxfam, of Syrian families who would like to speak about their stories in the media, but they will not speak about their stories in the media, because the local authority where they are housed have said 'no media'. So, it's very hard to get a positive media story. Ceredigion County Council have been very proactive, so much so that the families there have been inundated with media requests, and now there's a step back to try and give those families some privacy. But it is very, very difficult to get positive media stories. For example, on Sunday, there is a Syrian football team playing in Merthyr Town FC, and there will be no media coverage of that event, I would imagine, despite the fact it is a massively positive story about integration and sharing, and the joy that these people bring to communities and what we can learn from these people. So, the Welsh Government certainly needs to do a lot more to put out positive media stories—any media stories—about the welcome that refugees and asylum seekers are receiving in Wales, because, at the moment, 'no comment' is not really good enough to change public attitudes.

[310] **Jenny Rathbone:** Absolutely not. So, where is this omertà coming from? Is it from the local authority, or from—? What role do voluntary organisations play in saying nothing?

[311] **Ms Richards:** Oxfam tries very hard to put out positive media stories, but, in terms of Syrian resettlement, it's very difficult, you can't access stories, or—

[312] **Jenny Rathbone:** Why? Why not?

[313] **Ms Richards:** Because families will not speak to the media, because they feel that it's not permitted within the area where they live.

[314] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, so they have been given the impression that local authorities don't want them to speak about their experiences.

[315] **Ms Richards:** Yes.

[316] **Ms Sherlock:** With our cases, we have contracts where we explicitly are not allowed to approach families to speak to the media. There is great media interest. We get phone calls on a daily basis from different media places asking, 'We want to cover Syrian resettlement'. We know that we can't approach the families that we support—

[317] **Jenny Rathbone:** Who says?

[318] **Ms Sherlock:** The local authority; that's part of the contract.

[319] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay.

[320] **Ms Sherlock:** And when we go back to the media and explain that and say, 'But we have great integration stories, not to do with Syrian resettlement, but the broader refugee issues', the media isn't interested. So, it goes back to that two-tier system: all of the emphasis, all of the interest, is around Syrian resettlement. So, we try to promote something more broadly, and we get met with, 'Oh, we'll go elsewhere. We'll see if we can find some Syrians.'

[321] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, the ban on media is in relation to the Syrian resettlement programme, but not in relation to other refugees.

[322] **Ms Sherlock:** Absolutely, yes, and I think it's local authorities—

[323] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, you're saying the media is not interested in other refugees.

11:30

[324] **Ms Sherlock:** If we push it, we can generally—we can try and make an

argument that there are still interest stories around integration, positive stories. So, sometimes we can convince the media. But their principal interest is Syria and Syrian resettlement.

[325] **Ms Harris:** This is a part of the huge misunderstanding, and certainly we see stories that say, 'Well, they're not real refugees because they're not Syrian', and that's the massive misunderstanding. So, the media think, 'Well, we'll cover Syrian refugees because there is a programme, it's in the news, and they're proper refugees', and one of the things that Government and the voluntary sector and everybody needs to do is to get the message out there that refugees are not necessarily Syrian, and that people who come through the spontaneous route are equally deserving and in need of protection, and come from very, very similar situations. That's something that the Government could really do.

[326] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Rhianon.

[327] **Mr McKittrick:** Sorry—we have an approach that's very different in Northern Ireland. We have been very proactive, and that has been led by the Department for Communities—here, the local government. In Northern Ireland, Syrian resettlement is done from central Northern Ireland Government. We don't have local authorities to the same extent, so there's one press person in the Government department. All enquiries come through her, and she knows—she will give them a breakdown, and do all that—but the guys are very, very keen to express their gratitude more than anything else to people who've taken them in. We have done that, and actually it's coming up to our first anniversary. We have some more Syrians arriving next week, which will be the first anniversary. We always bring forward people who have been here for a period of time. We don't have the interviews with the new arrivals. But we normally have guys and, as Hayley says, local football teams, guys doing all sorts of things—starting to set up businesses and really contributing to the community.

[328] That message really needs to go out, and we've almost been so successful that it has consequently had a two-tier effect, because Syrians are seen again as making all of this positive contribution. So, we always caveat all our stories with, 'Here's somebody from Eritrea or Somalia' or whatever. So, it's not difficult to do, because, for once in our life, the media are really interested in what it is we do for a living. And that, at the start, is kind of, 'How do we handle this?' But I think, working with the departments, hand in hand with the Northern Ireland Government, we've managed to keep them

very much on a positive keel.

[329] **Rhianon Passmore:** So, it sounds very much—. Sorry, Jenny.

[330] **Jenny Rathbone:** Going back to Wales, though, I'm somewhat puzzled by your evidence, given that there's been an outcry of public support for Bashir Naderi, who's a Cardiff citizen from Afghanistan for whom there has been 10,000 people signing his petition, et cetera, et cetera. The media have covered this story quite extensively, so I find it difficult to marry that with, 'The media aren't interested in other asylum seekers and refugees'. I understand the ban that local authorities are putting on Syrians, but is the voluntary sector not able to do more to promote a positive image of refugees and asylum seekers?

[331] **Ms Sherlock:** We do try, and we will always, when we are approached around Syrians, say, 'That's not possible right now, but can we go with a different angle?' Sometimes that works, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes those media providers go and say, 'We'll look elsewhere. We'll find another route'.

[332] **Jenny Rathbone:** The Scottish Refugee Council has an annual award for the media to promote the best, most positive story around refugees and asylum seekers. Why is that not done by the Welsh Refugee Council?

[333] **Ms Sherlock:** Well, I would say capacity again. I don't like relying on this capacity issue, but we are massively under-resourced, so we do what we can, and we work in partnership with the rest of the sector. I didn't know that that was something that existed, but it sounds like a very positive—

[334] **John Griffiths:** Okay. I'm going to have to bring Rhianon in at this point, very briefly, and then I'm afraid we have to move on. Rhianon.

[335] **Rhianon Passmore:** In regard to the comments in the UN report that there's a prevalence in the UK of 'divisive, anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric', I think some of this is very interesting conversation and a commentary, really, and the main underlying reason why there is this caution around Syrian refugees is that we know that there are elements of our media and also political commentary that this could be dangerous for those families—that there could be all sorts of issues, that, by default, cause problems within that community around community cohesion. So, I think we have to recognise that there is caution around that.

[336] In terms of the role of yourselves in promoting that positive refugee image, outside of just a Syrian image, what do you think Welsh Government would be able to do better in terms of promoting that image? Quite frankly, unless we do that, that old-fashioned image of a refugee person who's not contributing, completely falsely, will continue to remain. So, it is a collaboration; it comes back to the co-ordination issue in terms of having a very strong body within Welsh Government to move it forward, but is there any comment in terms of how better we can co-ordinate, perhaps, on a Northern Ireland model, to be able to promote that image? I know that there is an event today at the Senedd that, I think, the Chair is attending.

[337] **Mr McKittrick:** I think that's worth saying; there's an event ongoing now, I think, upstairs. So, it's not that nothing is happening. And Refugee Week tends to be the main period in the year in which all the NGOs and charity groups get together and promote refugee issues. So, whatever you could do to support that, by turning up, would be excellent. In Northern Ireland last year, we had a Refugee Week debate that was held in the Assembly, and all the political parties got up and spoke positively about the contribution that refugees make. Things like that don't go—. They gather information; they gather evidence. And be careful around the language that is used—myth bust the numbers that are about. The tone is set, often, from the top, and we've seen with some other of the most recent political issues that have taken place, people feel now that some sort of intolerance is acceptable, because there are more people who they believe think like that. I think it's very important to be careful with our language. But the vehicles already exist. Again, not to harp on about it, but it's very difficult to run an event and invite people and speakers along, if all your focus is currently on destitution, or your focus is on something else. So, anything that this magnificent building can do to showcase Refugee Week, for example, would be great.

[338] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Can I bring Hayley in briefly here? And then we'll have to call this particular session to an end, I'm afraid. Hayley.

[339] **Ms Richards:** I think, really, Welsh Government needs a proactive communication strategy in this area. As the Welsh refugee coalition, we've got a long-term call to get Wales established as a nation of sanctuary. So, that is a wonderful banner that the Welsh Government could use. And, on the journey to developing Wales as a nation of sanctuary, then positive communication is a key part of that message so that we're all on the same

side here; we all want the same thing. Welsh Government could come under that banner and produce a positive communication strategy. I'm sure members of the panel and other third sector organisations would be happy to get behind them in delivering that.

[340] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thank you all very much and thank you for coming along to give evidence today. You will be sent a transcript to check for factual accuracy. Thank you very much indeed.

11:37

Papurau i'w Nodi
Papers to Note

[341] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Our next item is papers to note. Are Members happy to note those papers? Okay, thank you for that.

Cynnig o dan Reol Sefydlog 17.42 i Benderfynu Gwahardd y Cyhoedd o
Weddill y Cyfarfod
Motion under Standing Order 17.42 to Resolve to Exclude the Public
for the Remainder of the Meeting

Cynnig:

Motion:

bod y pwyllgor yn penderfynu that the committee resolves to gwahardd y cyhoedd o weddill y exclude the public from the cyfarfod yn unol â Rheol Sefydlog remainder of the meeting in 17.42(vi).

accordance with Standing Order 17.42(vi).

Cynigiwyd y cynnig.

Motion moved.

[342] **John Griffiths:** Item 5 is a motion under Standing Order 17.42 to resolve to exclude the public for the remainder of the meeting. Are there any objections? No. Okay, thank you very much.

Derbyniwyd y cynnig.

Motion agreed.

Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 11:38
The public part of the meeting ended at 11:38.