

TOPIC GROUP SOCIAL DOMAIN ON REFUGEES

9 & 10 NOVEMBER 2017



EUROPEAN FEDERATION
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1. HOSTING ORGANISATION: ASHLEY COMMUNITY HOUSING, BRISTOL



The EFL topic group, Social Domain, and the Eurhonet group, Social Integration, conducted a conjoined, two-day meeting where participants studied and discussed the city of Bristol's welcome and integration of refugees and status-holders. Group members conferred on the relevance and effectiveness of the city's approach and presented best practices from other European countries.

2. EUROPEAN FACTS ON REFUGEES:

- 1.2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2016 in EU member states. Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis continued to be the top nationalities. Together, all three represent half of all registered asylum seekers. In 2017, the top nationalities were Syrians, Nigerians, and Afghans.
- In 2016, Germany recorded 60% of all asylum seekers, more than any other EU state. It was followed by Italy with 10%, Greece with 4%, Austria with 3%, and the UK with 3%.
- The largest decreases for 2016 in recorded asylum seekers came from the Nordic member states. Sweden decreased its registered asylum seekers by 86%, followed by Finland with 84%, and Denmark with 71%. Other large decreases came from Hungary with 84%, Belgium with 63%, and the Netherlands with 55%.
- In 2016, the majority of asylum applicants across the EU, roughly 83%, are below the age of 35.
- 2017 has seen a decrease in the number of asylum seekers. Applications have reduced by 54% from 2016-2017.



Source: Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union

3. UK FACTS ON REFUGEES:

- Around 50.000 refugees enter the country every year. About 10.000 of these individuals are allowed to stay in the UK. The other 40.000 are made to leave.
- Apart from war-ridden countries, such as Syria, many individuals hail from the North Eastern part of Africa, including countries like Somalia and Eritrea. Family reunifications form an important part of the influx of migrants.
- The vast majority of asylum seekers are not allowed to work and are forced to rely on state support, which is set at just 70% of income support. Many do voluntary work while their asylum application is being processed.
- The stereotype of asylum seekers as willing welfare recipients is damaging and false. They want to work and support themselves and do not come to the UK to claim benefits. In fact, many know very little about the UK asylum or benefit systems before they arrive. They are keen to get a paid job or start their own business.
- Asylum seekers cannot jump the queue for council housing, and they cannot choose where they will live. The accommodations allocated to them are not paid for by the local council. They nearly always receive 'hard to let' properties, which other people do not want to live in.
- Asylum seekers do not receive special perks, such as mobile phones or monetary help to buy a car. They are also denied access to many of the benefits others rely upon, such as disability living allowance.



4. CHANGES TO ASYLUM SUPPORT, 10 AUGUST 2015:

- The government announced it was introducing a flat rate of asylum support for all asylum seekers. This amounted to £36.95 per week, regardless of age. Prior to this change, children under 16 in asylum seeking families received £52.96 per week.
- The impact of changes on the main family groups is illustrated below:
 - Single parent + 1 child: pre 10 August payment £96.90; post 10 August payment £73.90
 - Single parent + 2 children: pre 10 August payment £149.86; post 10 August payment £110.85
 - Couple + 1 child: pre 10 August payment £125.48; post 10 August payment £110.85
 - Couple + 2 children: pre 10 August £178.44; post 10 August payment £147.80

5. SEEKING ASYLUM IN THE UK, 2016:

25,771 people applied for asylum in the UK in the year ending June 2015.

- 41% (11,600) were granted asylum
- 14% of applicants were from Eritrea
- 9% from Pakistan
- 8.5% from Syria
- 2,168 applications were from unaccompanied children

During the two-day visit, the Topic Group gained a deeper insight into how Ashley Community Housing (ACH) and the City Council of Bristol interact with the situation of UK refugees. ACH is often referred to as the landlord of last resort. The organisation was established in 2008 as a social enterprise specialising in the economic, social, and

civil integration of refugees. They do not have their own housing stock, but instead rent homes from social and private landlords in order to let them out to refugees. ACH receives funding from several sources. The subsidies are used for two purposes:

- 1) Topping of the rent private landlords ask for their property
- 2) Buying properties from developers. The maximum subsidy is 50.000€ per dwelling.

Distribution of the homes among refugees in Bristol:

- Single males receive a room in private housing, as opposed to a full home.
- Families with children end up in social or council housing.



6. THE ASHLEY COMMUNITY HOUSING APPROACH

Bristol, a city located in the south east of the UK with a total population of about 430.000 inhabitants, has recently seen a wave of migration from Somalia and Poland. This is sometimes called new migration, in contrast to established countries from the Caribbean and South Asia. Many of these new migrants start their own enterprises, gain ways of earning money, and integrate into the society.



In a recent interview in the magazine of the Chartered Institute of Housing, the CEO of Ashley Community Housing, Mr. Fuad Mahamed, stated the following about their award winning campaign,

"We are currently in the most serious refugee crisis of modern times, with the highest numbers of displaced people since World War II. At the same time, several factors, including Brexit, major infrastructural projects, and an ageing population create the challenge of skill shortage in many sectors and threaten to hold back economic growth.

Too often the refugee issue is portrayed as a burden to society and, at best, a humanitarian and charitable issue. A humanitarian response designed for the short-term too often end up administering long-term misery and wasted

opportunity for both refugees and society. Rather than transitioning from emergency relief to long-term integration, refugee populations too often sadly get trapped within the system. Instead, investing in skills, networks, and enterprises of refugees can be to the advantage of everyone. While there is undoubtedly a humanitarian angle to refugee resettlement, ACH looks beyond the short-term response. We see refugees as people with talents, skills, and aspirations, assets which will boost our economy and enrich our communities. We do not focus on the story of how they came to be here. We focus on where they want to be. In August 2015, our #RethinkingRefugee campaign was born as a reaction to the negative portrayal of refugees in the media as swarms or problems to be dealt with. In July 2016, the campaign changed direction from working to change the public perception to a more targeted approach addressing the need we had for more landlords in Bristol. We operate on a leasehold model and rely on landlords with a more ethical outlook. We rely on landlords to lease us properties on long-term leases. In Bristol, the high demand for property leads to high prices, and we cannot always make a market rate. We used the campaign to address this issue, with our Bristol #RethinkingRefugee Conference and media coverage successfully gaining us more properties from private landlords and Bristol City Council.

#RethinkingRefugee campaign

Housing is important, but it is not enough to ensure integration. Engagement in the economy and civic society is also essential. The campaign, therefore, evolved in early 2017 to fit within the skills agenda being pushed by central government, new combined authorities, and to reflect views of the business community. The new aim was to change the perception of refugees amongst employer organisations, such as businesses within the community, as well as local authorities and education providers. We can demonstrate that refugees are people with skills and ambitions but need training, support, or access to net-



works to unlock their potential. Although, by definition, they are seeking refuge from life threatening situations, they are not looking for our pity; they are looking for jobs to enable them to support their families and are assets to employers and local communities.

The #RethinkingRefugee brand enables us to have this discourse. It is the message we use to engage, enabling us to talk about what we do with less confusion. We do not have the marketing budget for a large consumer campaign, so we target our audiences more directly.

Thus, the campaign has evolved. Of course, we still face challenges. We live in a post Brexit country where there is still negative conceptions of refugees. We still need to work on making sure people properly understand what we do. But we have made a difference. We are changing the perception of landlords to enable us to access more accommodation for our tenants, and we are changing the perception of refugees amongst employers, local authorities, and education providers. #RethinkingRefugee drives our marketing activity and helps us continue to transform lives.

Ashley Community Housing was established in 2008 to support refugees and other vulnerable homeless people by offering them affordable housing, along with training and education, to help them integrate into UK society. "



7. ACTIVITIES IN BRISTOL TO FOSTER CHANCES FOR REFUGEES

Within Bristol, there are a number of events and activities, which contribute well to the status of refugees and other vulnerable groups. For example:

- International Women's Day
- PRIDE
- Refugee Week
- Refugee Sundays

Nevertheless, there is still a sizeable group of white, working class inhabitants who reject the arrival of refugees. Particularly in the outskirts of the city, living conditions for people of color can be adversely affected by racist behaviour. If such events occur, victims are moved to the city center with the help of the Ashley Community Housing organisation.

8. PROBLEMS OF HOMELESSNESS

It is estimated that around 100 people sleep on the streets in Bristol. Provision of permanent homes to all homeless individuals is not an obligation for municipalities. However, people who have lived in the city for more than two years have the right to apply for a home. The City Council advises homeless individuals on how they can apply for a home and what institutions might be of support. Many

homeless people sleep in hostels or homelessness centers. The city guarantees, with the help of churches and other charities, that nobody has to sleep on the streets during the winter months.

The city has a yearly budget of 16 million pounds to work on problems of homelessness.



9. FURTHER READING: THE GUARDIAN, 31 JANUARY 2017, ON REFUGEE HOUSING IN THE UK

Alan Travis Home affairs editor

Tuesday, 31 January 2017

Last modified on Tuesday, 28 November 2017

The “rat-infested” conditions in which 38,000 asylum seekers are housed in Britain by the Home Office while they wait for their refugee claims to be decided have been branded “disgraceful” by MPs.

The House of Commons home affairs select committee has called for a major overhaul of the system for housing destitute asylum seekers in Britain after hearing evidence of some families living in homes with infestations of mice, rats and bedbugs.

One woman complained that her kitchen was “full of mice” that “ran across the dining room table” while they were eating. For one torture survivor the presence and noise of rats triggered flashbacks to the rat-infested cell where he had been detained and tortured.

Migrant Voice released a dossier documenting what it called “systematic neglect” of asylum housing and said comments from asylum seekers included: “I can’t stop crying and I cannot eat because of the mouldy smell. I am five months pregnant and I am scared that I have to raise my child in this way with dirt and vermin”, and “I feel that anything could happen and G4S would not put necessary measures in place to ensure my safety”.

The committee chair, Yvette Cooper, said that even where the accommodation and support were of a good standard, asylum housing was still far too concentrated in the most deprived areas.

The MPs’ report, published on Tuesday, shows that while there are 1,042 asylum seekers housed in Bolton and 1,029 in Rochdale, there are only 88 housed in the home secretary, Amber Rudd’s Hastings and Rye constituency and none at all in Theresa May’s Maidenhead constituency.

The Home Office contracts to provide housing for dispersed asylum seekers were awarded in 2012 to three

providers, G4S, Serco and Clearsprings Ready Homes, under the Compass contracts. But the companies told the MPs they were now housing more people than the contracts allowed funding for because of growing delays in Home Office asylum processing and increasing numbers of applications.

The report reveals that the latest figures for “work in progress” on asylum applications has doubled from 37,381 in 2012 to 77,440 in 2016, with more than 20,000 waiting for an initial decision on their claims for refugee status.

Cooper said: “The state of accommodation for some asylum seekers and refugees in this country is a disgrace. We have come across too many examples of vulnerable people in unsafe accommodation, for example children living with infestations of mice, rats or bed bugs, lack of healthcare for pregnant women, or inadequate support for victims of rape and torture. No one should be living in conditions like that.”

She said it was unfair that those local communities that had signed up to take asylum seekers were housing more and more people while many local authorities in more affluent areas were doing nothing.

“The current contract system is badly designed and puts local authorities off from signing up. Ministers should learn from the success of the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement programme which has given local authorities far more control and has also got far more local authorities involved. Similar reforms are needed for asylum seekers,” said Cooper.

The report says that on 8 December the Home Office announced that the Compass contracts were to be extended for two years until August 2019. The terms of the contracts were revised and G4S and Serco estimate that their losses on housing each asylum family will be reduced. Serco expects its losses to be £20m lower while G4S said its would be restricted to the £47m already announced.



The Local Government Association responded to the MPs’ report saying that more than 200 local authorities were becoming dispersal areas. It said: “We hope that the government’s future contracts for asylum accommodation and support addresses the challenges in securing accommodation in other local authority areas, particularly where there is limited availability and high-cost housing.”

A Home Office spokesperson said it was committed to providing safe and secure accommodation while asylum applications were considered.

“We work closely with our contractors to ensure they provide accommodation that is safe, habitable, fit for purpose and adequately equipped and we conduct regular inspections to check that this is the case. We have also made significant improvements to the operation of the contracts including increasing the number of dispersal areas by more than a third,” they said. “We will consider the committee’s recommendations and respond in full shortly.”



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