

# Wales Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum Minutes

*13th May 2020 - 12:00-2:00pm*

*Venue: Online Zoom Meeting*

*Minutes taken by: Sarah Allen*

**Forum Topic:** The Impacts of Coronavirus

**Guest Attendees:** Welsh Government, Asylum Matters, WRC, EYST, BRC, REACH+

**Members:** 20 attendees

*Names and specifics have been removed in some areas to preserve the anonymity of members and guests. Where these remain, permission has been granted.*

*Feel free to contact me at [sarah@dpia.org.uk](mailto:sarah@dpia.org.uk) or on 07496 840 479 if you would like to make any comments or amendments to the minutes.*

*If you are a Refugee or Asylum Seeker and you'd like to become a member of the forum, please fill in this form: <https://forms.gle/tvhdkmSjJY93msj9>*

## **Minutes:**

1. Sarah **introduces the forum** and its topic as the impacts that coronavirus has had on Refugees and Asylum Seekers. This includes things such as looking at social distancing in accommodation, looking at whether asylum support is enough to pay for essentials and any other issues there are.

2. The whole group in turn introduces themselves. The attending professionals include:

Senior Inclusion Manager- Welsh Government  
Campaigns Project Manager- Asylum Matters  
BME Community Coordinator- Newport City Council  
Holistic Coach- REACHE (Cardiff and Vale College)  
Caseworker-EYST  
Caseworker- Welsh Refugee Council (Newport)  
Support Officer- British Red Cross

Alongside explaining their roles, many of the professionals mentioned how they are looking forward to listen to the experiences of the forum members. Sarah checks that all members are happy with these professionals attending and listening to the forum. There are no objections.

3. One forum member says that recently **most people have been experiencing loneliness**. People are alone in their rooms which is hard. He says managers could at least try to check up on us, even just speaking through the window to see how we are doing. His only contact with the housing manager is by text. He has a leak, but doesn't think anyone will come to fix it. He says it is **hard as managers don't follow up or ask how we are doing**.

4. Another member living in NASS accommodation said **her manager has been good** at texting to generally check-up on how her family is managing. He also offered an emergency member for over the bank holiday weekend.

5. One individual notes how English Class and **online groups are helping to combat loneliness**, but that this is hard to access when there is **no Wi-Fi and cannot afford the data**.

- Sarah informs the group of **DPIA's digital and data fund** that can help with getting phone credit and devices for those who need them in Wales. Anyone who needs this should contact [sarah@dpia.org.uk](mailto:sarah@dpia.org.uk)

6. One individual mentions how some asylum seekers she knows travelled to London to see their solicitor before lockdown. Now they are **stuck in London and staying with friends to comply with lockdown**, but the concern is that if Home Office knew they weren't in their NASS accommodation, they **might lose their support**.

She mentions how another individual **moved to his friend's house as a housemate wasn't complying with lockdown** and inviting over others to their NASS accommodation. He is worried that this **may threaten his support**.

7. One member says how a few women she knows are in NASS accommodation and have **housemates that aren't complying with lockdown**. They are **worried for their health** and their children's health. Some are vulnerable so particularly in danger.

Single mothers are not classed as a family unit, so are put in shared accommodation. This puts their **children under risk through housemates not following the rules** of lockdown. They **should have separate accommodation**.

8. Sarah asks if people think this is because those housemates don't know the rules (Hasn't been translated for instance) or if they know the advice but aren't following it.

- One individual says that **most are aware of the advice** and the dangers, but it is hard to stay isolated in one room all day. One guy he knew in an Initial Accommodation hotel said he had been told they couldn't go out for exercise. This **wrong information leads to issues** such as mental health declining.

- One member says that the **language barrier** is an issue. Some **don't really understand the advice**. The managers should be making a **clearer message**.

9. One member said that accessing hand sanitiser has been an issue. Asylum Support is not enough. Prices in the nearby shops (mainly corner shops) has skyrocketed. 'You have to either decide to buy food, or to buy sanitiser... food is life, sanitiser is life, which one do you go for?' The Government should give a little **more money so we can access hand sanitiser** at this time.

10. Another member notes that those on Section 4 support have to shop for themselves, even if they have to isolate due to health conditions and vulnerability. This is because those on **S4 cannot withdraw cash**, and you can't share the card & pin, so **cannot pay back others** (volunteers/friends) **to go to the shops** on their behalf.

If someone on S4 is vulnerable, and **is in isolation so doesn't use their weekly allowance**, that may **risk support being stopped** as the Home Office sees the card is not being used.

13. One individual says people she knows are **stuck in their house as they are worried about getting ill** and anxious about their children touching things and getting ill.

14. One member says they find it hard as they are scared to go outside, even to get money from the machine. **Shopping is hard as they have to take public transport or walk**. Paracetamol and Calpol is hard to afford and to find.

- Another agrees that **local shops have become more expensive**.

- One individual notes how you **can only buy limited amounts** of paracetamol and canned goods. This is especially hard for asylum seekers, with their little money, to bulk buy and make use of offers when they do go to the shop.

- It is noted that asylum seekers **can't do online shopping** so have to go to the shops or rely on volunteers.

15. One volunteer says she does the shopping. She doesn't want her children to leave the house, as they don't pay attention to the advice.

Her elder daughter is on S4. As she can't withdraw money, if she **doesn't spend** the full amount before the week is up, **the amount is not carried over** to the next week. This makes it **hard if she cannot leave** the house one week.

It is **hard to go to the shops** as there is **no bus service**. She **cannot carry heavy things** home because of a health problem, and she **cannot take a taxi** as there isn't the money and they don't accept card.

16. One member has had an ongoing medical issue, and went to the doctor in February. After his x-ray his **doctor said to stay home**. He's been in quarantine for three weeks now. **Shopping is a problem** and he hasn't had the medication from his doctor. He has been waiting a few months for one of the appointments he needs, but hasn't received this.

- One professional said a lady she was supporting recently had a **problem getting through to her surgery**, so she helped her make the call. Phone lines are tied up because of corona virus, but by **trying a few times she did receive the help** she needed.

- Sarah reminds the member of her contact details and says to email her after to see how he can be supported

17. Robert lets the group know that as BME Community Connector for Newport City Council, he can **assist & support with food parcels**, family activity packs and picking up medication in Newport. They are working with 8 foodbanks in Newport and work to provide culturally appropriate food (Halal, vegan etc.). **To access, or refer** someone struggling, contact: 07871277103 [robert.muza@newport.gov.uk](mailto:robert.muza@newport.gov.uk)

18. Welsh Refugee Council caseworker notes that since the office for national insurance numbers is closed, if you are a refugee you should make the claim for benefits through the job centre.

19. Robert notes how **asylum seeking healthcare workers are not allowed to work** currently. Also, there is a lack of workforce due to corona virus, and **asylum seekers could be contributing** by working.

- Mabli, from Asylum Matters notes that the **Lift the Ban campaign is ongoing**. They are making the point that if we are to deal with pandemic, it doesn't make sense that qualified healthcare workers aren't allowed to work, and other individuals whose skills are needed can't access employment.

20. One member who is over 50 with underlying health conditions, says in Swansea he has had volunteers and friends drop off medicine and food for him.

21. One member says a **main challenge is having no devices or WiFi** for her and her three kids to do their work (she is in college). They managed to get a laptop and borrow an Ipad from the community centre.

Being indoors in a small confined space has been hard, especially since her teenage daughter has mental health issues. It is hard even though they go out. **No Wi-Fi has had a negative effect on mental health** as nothing to occupy themselves with. Daughter's councillor recommended that they should be moved because of the **negative impacts of being in their small flat**.

22. One member says the most difficult thing for most asylum seekers is the asylum support. The current amount is not enough. **There is not enough money for data and for food**. With lockdown, data is needed for meetings and socialising.

Also, it is an **issue getting support for those without English language skills**. Support facilities are closed to go into, and it is hard to get translated support on the phone. When you first call, they wouldn't know how to speak to you.

He felt that it might help to reopen essential places like Welsh Refugee Council for limited, urgent appointments for those without English.

- [Sarah followed up on this issue after the meeting. **Welsh Refugee Council do have on phone translation services** which individuals have been using successfully to get help. Volunteers, staff members, and Big Word (On-phone translators) are being used to translate telephone appointments, and to help when you first call in. If you need to call Migrant Help, you can also request a translator from them.]
- Sophie from **EYST** in Swansea says that there they are **using their volunteers to translate**. They are doing their best to work around it in this way.

23. One member is supposed to be collecting free school meals from the school, but he cannot leave the house because of his health. [Sarah to follow up after meeting]

He also notes, the **money from the home office is not enough**. He asks is there anything else we can do to raise this issue?

- Mabli from Asylum Matters signposts the **campaign** that they are running with other organisations **to raise Asylum Support**.
- She asks people to **email their MP** through this link: <https://act.refugee-action.org.uk/page/59805/action/1?>
- And to **share this on social media** and with people you know!  
<https://twitter.com/RefugeeAction/status/1255394211849015296?s=20>

24. One member says about a lot of the BME community are **worried about children going back to school**. She says how if a house was on fire and 75% of the fire is put out, you wouldn't feel safe going back in. She says she personally worries about her own children going into school, more so because her husband has **underlying health conditions so they have been self-isolating completely**. When things go to normal, without a proper solution this could be a problem. It is known that the BME community has been hit especially badly.

25. One individual notes how some families have been struggling in terms of making sure that when their teenage children go out, they are following the rules.

He also notes that there is an issue with some individuals having **big families**. When they go out, people **assume they are not following the rules**. This can lead to issues with the community and **hate crime**.

- Sarah encourages the group to **report any hate crime** they experience. She says you can report hate crime by **calling 101**. Encourage others you know to do the same if you think they have suffered a hate crime. Hate crime could include someone using a slur related to race or maybe another protected characteristic, physical threats, etc.
- If you are **worried or uncertain** about contacting the police, please **get in contact** with me and we can talk through what options you could take.
- Welsh Government added into the group chat that the Welsh Refugee Council have a **guide on hate crime** on their website and it's in other languages:  
<https://wrc.wales/learn-how-you-can-help-stop-hate-crime/>

26. One member says how her daughter and friends are **worried about their GCSE and A level grades** coming from the predicted grades. This is as many African students will tend to put in a real push of effort before the exam and come out with higher than the predicted. Her daughter was concerned that the **predicted grades wouldn't be fair**.

- Robert Muza notes about a forum with EYST. They **wrote to the Minister of Education in Wales** about this matter. He says he will email her the letter and the reply, and that it is very positive. You can ask Robert for this letter by emailing  
[robert.muza@newport.gov.uk](mailto:robert.muza@newport.gov.uk)

27. One member notes about how she watched the Home Affairs Select Committee's enquiry on COVID-19 and asylum accommodation. They **asked providers if they provided cleaning**

**materials** to asylum seekers to keep them safe during this period and **they said yes**. She was surprised as this is **not something that she has received**.

- Sarah asked the rest of the group whether anyone had received cleaning materials and **none of the group** had. She agreed to follow this up.

- One member said this is really important as they have **not been able to afford or find sanitiser** in the shops. This is needed for asylum seekers to stay safe when going outside, going on public transport and to shops.

-Sarah notes that she will follow up on this issue. She stresses that if you have no access to hand sanitiser, when you get home **wash your hands for at least 20 seconds** with any type of soap (doesn't need to be anti-bacterial).

28. Another member notes how it is **frustrating** that asylum seekers **can't contribute through work**, even though they could be supporting themselves and contributing to the country.

- Sarah notes again to go to this link to find out more and **sign the petition** to make this change: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/>

29. Sarah concludes the meeting. She encourages individuals to **get in touch if you are struggling** with anything. DPIA can then try to help, or signpost to another organisation that can help. Her contact details are [sarah@dpia.org.uk](mailto:sarah@dpia.org.uk) and **07496 840 479**.