

# Wales Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum Minutes

*16th June 2020 - 1:00-3:00pm*

*Venue: Online Zoom Meeting*

*Minutes taken by: Sarah Allen*

**Forum Topic:** Coronavirus – Healthcare and School Reopenings

**Guest Speakers:** Public Health Wales, Swansea Council, Cardiff Council

**Members:** 15 attendees (refugee/asylum seekers)

*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**. The whole group in turn introduces themselves.

Guest speakers:

**Rebecca Fogharty- Public Health Wales:** Is the lead for community engagement. She talks to people across Wales about the work they do and how to improve that to make it more accessible.

**Sara Peacock- Public Health Wales:** Works on a European Health Equity Project and one of her focuses is on health literacy for asylum seekers and refugees

**Pam Cole – Swansea Council:** Lead for Minority Ethnic Learners in Swansea Council.

**Olwen Evans- Cardiff Council** Works as part of the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service in Cardiff.

Guest professionals: Asylum Matters, BME Sport Cymru, Welsh Refugee Council, Newport City Council (BME community Coordinator).

Sarah checks that all members are happy with these professionals attending and listening to the forum. There are no objections.

2. Sarah says that both DPIA and she personally are **in support of Black Lives Matter**. She says it's important to be challenging the racism inherent in many areas of our society.

She says she is aware that there may be a rise in **hate crime** recently. If you have suffered a hate crime **call 999 if it is an emergency** and **101 to report one**. You can find more information on the WRC website (& translated versions) at: <https://wrc.wales/learn-how-you-can-help-stop-hate-crime/>

3. Rebecca (PHW) says that one of her roles during coronavirus has been as an advisor, so she may be able to help with questions about the advice and how to prevent the spread. Her other role is around the information about the coronavirus illness itself and also the impacts this has had on wellbeing.

4. Sara (PHW) says she has been working on health literacy so that those who are newly arrived in the UK have resources to find out how to access healthcare. She has been getting out information about corona to those who may have reduced access to this (sometimes because of no Wi-Fi/data). She would like to hear the issues that individuals have had and what they might be able to do to help.

5. An individual asked **how many refugees and asylum seekers received shielding letters?** Also, did you manage to identify the new arrivals and send them shielding letters?

- Sara says that she doesn't know precise numbers but can try find out from Clearsprings. She thinks that **numbers are small**, and from what Clearsprings were saying people haven't been moving accommodation unless this was shared. There were **two sets of shielding letters** because of changing criteria. If someone had a shielding letter they **should have been moved out of shared accommodation**.

-Rebecca added that the **health conditions that lead to a shielding letter are quite specific**. For example, certain types of cancer, certain respiratory problems. Unless medically necessary, those clinically/medically vulnerable wouldn't necessarily be on the shielding list. People have been worried that Asylum Seekers have been left out, but I want to reassure you that **your immigration status has nothing to do with whether you were on the list** to receive a shielding letter and I've had that confirmed from Welsh Government.

6. One member asks **what information they are basing shielding off**; information you are supposed to give yourself, or information from the housing manager? He has [medical condition], and asks whether he should have been shielded.

- Rebecca answers that this was based on **information like your prescription history**. It is a computer based system. At first some people were missed out. **If you are worried** that you should have had a shielding letter than you should **contact the GP**. They can give you a shielding letter direct if this is needed.

7. One individual asks if there is any concern that the involvement with the NHS concerning **shielding and track and trace** will be like the past duty of the NHS to inform the Home Office of individual's immigration status. **Can individuals be sure that this information won't be shared?**

- Rebecca says that PHW and Welsh Government have a duty to be clear on how they are using data and personal info. She has asked colleagues in the contact tracing team to put together information on how data is used to share with groups. She hasn't received this yet but has been reassured that **data is used exclusively for the process of contact tracing and reducing spread of the disease**. Also, the **duty of the NHS to share data with the Home Office has never applied to Wales** (it has to England). I will get that written detail from the team.

8. An individual asks whether discussions between Clearsprings and PHW raised **the issue of shared rooms for those not shielding**. Clearsprings accommodation does not allow for 2m distance between beds and shared bathrooms. This **doesn't allow people to follow guidance** set by PHW.

- Sara says that there has been mixed messaging so it has taken a while to get through to Clearsprings that **nobody should be sharing rooms**. They are **reassuring PHW that they are now working on this**, but it has taken a while to get to that point. They focused first on getting vulnerable people into single accommodation and making sure no one was moved into shared accommodation. At the moment they are trying to find more accommodation as we and the government have told them that people should not be sharing rooms.

She **agrees to ask them again** what their plans are and timeline and report back on that information.

9. One member says he **hasn't seen his housing manager** for the past few months. **How do they know how we are living** and whether people are **taking precautions?**

- Sara says people have been **asked to take individual responsibility** but they can't enforce that. They have been **making sure people know the advice** by putting out the message. Housing managers wouldn't be able to enter the house for their and your safety.

10. The member mentions that some have a **language barrier to understanding advice** given. It shouldn't be the responsibility of flatmates to translate.

- Rebecca asks how much he feels information is out there and accessible for asylum seekers (in the appropriate language etc.)

- He responds that he **feels there is not enough information**. People don't understand the language, so they don't understand most of the information being given. He feels the Government has produced the information but the **housing managers haven't done enough to help people access this information**.

He made a complaint so his housing manager said he would call every week, but he still hasn't got in contact.

-Sara asks whether anyone has had any information through the door. One person nods, one person shakes head.

11. An individual **received information** through the door but **says it wasn't very helpful**. It had general information but people need more specific. There **wasn't the information of specific areas**, or the **translation of these services** so people can access.

The **information about IT equipment from schools wasn't translated** so people didn't know that they needed to ask. There is a general lack of information for people that don't speak English.

- Sara says there's **so much information that is needed** now, and **so many languages** to consider, and **many can't access online**, so it is being a **real challenge** and worry to get this done.
- The member says that **Clearsprings should send local information**. In Swansea there is a local service provider's forum that knows what is going on but finds it hard to get this information to the whole community. **Not all have social media, internet access or phones**. Her housing manager has been good at asking if they have any concerns, but it shouldn't depend on who you get. **As a company Clearsprings have a responsibility to give this information**.
- Another member says for many the first contact is the housing manager. To access things like school vouchers you have to be good at using the internet and accessing things for yourself. It should be Clearsprings' responsibility to assist with this but the **housing managers aren't helping enough**. He says his housing manager has not been very good.
- Sara says will feedback this information to CS as this is not the message they have been getting from them.

12. One member says "**I have a child but I have only one room**, is it possible for me and my child to have two rooms? I know other single women with 1 child who have two rooms"

- Since this and a few of the preceding questions were directed towards Clearsprings issues, it is decided that **Clearsprings will be invited to the next forum** to discuss questions such as this.

13. An individual says it is **concerning that people are being housed together** by Clearsprings as this is **against Welsh Government rules** and they have a big contract with the Home Office. She says it is important that **PHW has the capacity to talk to Clearsprings and hold them into account** on this.

- Sara says is an important point as PHW and the Government have set these guidelines. **Sara is to bring up these issues at meeting with Clearsprings and Home Office**.

14. One member asks when the hospitals will start **treatments for those who are waiting** for other non-corona surgeries and treatment etc.

- Rebecca says that the last we've heard of this was from Andrew Goodall the Chief Executive of the NHS late last week. He talked about routine services coming back online. Things such as screening programs **timeframes are being discussed** recently. She apologises that they don't have more information on this for now.

15. One member brings up the link between **Vitamin-D deficiency and BME communities** resulting in more deaths. She asks if there is any more information on that now they are thinking whether to send their children to school and are considering the risks.

- Rebecca says that the current info by WG that vitamin D reduces the risk of Corona, but **there is no strong evidence yet**. Some groups are recommending taking Vitamin D supplements. Unless you're prescribed this, that would cost money. Since it's not strong evidence yet, it hasn't been set as a priority. Other measures are more likely to protect you (hand washing, social distancing). She will however take this to that WG team and find out more.
- The member says on the matter that the **26p increase of money doesn't allow for the purchase of vitamins** like this that could be beneficial.

16. Rebecca shared this **link to PHW's wellbeing resources**: <https://phw.nhs.wales/howareyoudoing>  
They would appreciate any feedback on this.

17. Pam Cole introduces the topic of schools and the general Welsh and Swansea context.

- Pam says that the **issue of communicating information** has been one of the real issues with education. **Translation, internet access and devices** have been big barriers. There are over 140 languages across schools in Swansea. The information is changing so quickly there's not always time to translate. Once translated, they're reliant on schools for passing information on. They're trying multiple ways of communication. In Swansea we are phoning some families with on a monthly basis, and trying to signpost on to issues like food.
- She says it's up to local authorities how they distribute free school meals. Her understanding is that the Welsh Government have agreed to continue free school meals across the summer holidays.
- The Welsh Government committed to give provision to families without devices and Wi-Fi. This has been a time consuming process, in Swansea we're still only just coming to the end of distributing this equipment.
- There has been a continuity of learning plan and English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners have their own strand of that plan. We are looking at what the challenges are and how these will be mitigated going forwards.
- It has been announced that **schools will reopen their doors** to all pupils on the **29<sup>th</sup> of June**. Many schools have been open already for children of vulnerable year groups. It **will be all year groups** unlike England. Each child should be able to **go to school 3 times** between the 29<sup>th</sup> of June and the end of term (Around 24<sup>th</sup> July). It will be more to touch base with the school and get children used to the idea of going back to school.
- Each school will be making their own plan on what day children go in. You should receive information this week from schools, Welsh Government guidance is informing what schools have to do.
- Going forwards there will be blended learning with a mix of going back to school and going in. There is **no obligation to send your children back to school**. It's about personal choice and circumstance.
- In September this will probably be continued in a similar way.
- In Swansea we have been calling Syrian refugee families regularly. We have been calling families using the Big Word on-phone translation to be able to contact families in other languages, and also to make sure they are on the digital exclusion list.

19. A question is asked about **how exams and predicted grades will work** for those who were supposed to be taking their GCSEs or A levels this year.

- Children from Year 11 will be getting their **marks off predicted grades**. Schools will **work these out from a variety of information** including coursework, mock exams and what they know of the learner. With Asylum Seekers and Refugees, there might not be enough of this information. From what I understand, in that situation they would be able to reset exam in autumn next year, but that isn't clear yet.

They are also working out how to manage with next year's year 11s and 13s to make sure that this disruption doesn't impact their exam grades.

20. One member mentions that those on section 4 who have children in primary school have been getting food bags.

- They are being given food bags, this is discretionary from the local authorities. Since March we have had a local multiagency forum with herself, and local agencies that work with asylum seekers and refugees. That has been valuable way to exchange information and is ongoing.

-Member says that that has been useful and they have had good cooperation with Swansea council with the queries they had. She wishes Clearsprings would work in a better way to get out information and make sure people are informed. She feels that many without families will have missed out on this useful information and signposting.

21. Olwen from Cardiff Education introduces herself.

22. One member asks **whether food bags have ethnically appropriate options**. I know some who refused food bags because they were not halal.

- Pam says she has pursued that but it looks like there may be good news on that front. There **should be halal available**, but they would have to **order that through the school**.

- The member says that is the issue with a lack of communication and **people not knowing where to ask**.

23. One member has a bachelors and a masters and was interested in studying a PHD. Sarah agrees to get in contact after the forum with some information on this.

24. One members says he heard the prime minister talking about education and hate crime recently. He asks **what they have been doing doing about education and hate crime**.

- Olwen says that **Welsh Government gave £100,000** about 6 months ago to roll out a **programme on hate crime across schools** in Wales. Organisations like Race Equality First, Show Racism the Red Card were commissioned to go around schools and deliver training to children. Also as part of this P4C (Philosophy for Children) helped train the teachers. There has been an extension until March 2021 because of schools shut for coronavirus.

- There has also been **new anti-bullying guidance** sent out regarding bullying and discrimination which links to hate crime. Schools will be expected to review their

current processes in line with that. Local authorities will be checking up on schools with this.

- Olwen explains that she works for the **Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service**. They **review what schools are doing and how diverse the curriculum is** and work with them through an action plan. This also helps asylum seeking and refugee children in particular. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement we should be making more changes. A lot of work is going on, Schools of Sanctuary for example, but there is more work that needs to be done.

25. One member asks if a family is **worried to send their kids to school**, can they refuse to send them this year.

- Pam says you **don't have to send them back** if you don't want to. There will be no fines, it is your own personal choice.

26. One member has been studying a part time teaching assistant course which was £400. This was **hard to pay as an asylum seeker** and asked for help but didn't get any. The college criteria was you **must pay by card**, they said that you must pay **£10 extra to pay by cash**. Normally the payments are in 3 instalments with 50% first. As an asylum seeker this is really hard. Is there anything I can do? It is **hard to access this kind of course**. [Sarah agrees to call after session].

He says he **needs a device and top up** to be able to **continue with study** but this is **hard to afford**. He went to EYST, but they didn't help. It is explained that this is as EYST are prioritising individuals who haven't been sent devices and internet connection by their child's school. He had **been given device by the school** but got **no internet**. He has tried asking but not got anything. Pam says her email address is in the chat and to get in touch after the session and she can help.

27. One member made a comment on the **26p a day increase in asylum support**. She made the comment that **"it is quite degrading**; would it not be better to leave it the way it is then insult us with raising this by 26 pence." She notes that **items have gone up in price since lockdown** and assumes this will go up. **Learning turning more digital has added costs**, and also cost of **printing, arts and crafts and stationary for children** studying from home has been enormous. She personally feels she's had to spend a lot on items like this 'because you **want the best for your children** during lockdown'. These costs are on top of eating. **Free school meals can't provide all the food needed**.

28. One member says that he has an underlying health condition. There were a number of issues he discussed including a long waiting time for appointments. We encouraged him to get back in contact with his GP [After the meeting he was put in touch with the asylum seeker lead nurse to help resolve the issue].

29. One member mentions that **many people in accommodation still don't understand or follow the rules** about the virus. He asks how he can help others in his accommodation to understand these rules. Languages has caused an issue with this. He asks whether more leaflets that can be given, because **one leaflet has not been enough**.

-Sara responds that there has been some good translated advice online from **Doctors of the World** (<https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/coronavirus-information/>). She also suggests that he get in **contact with the housing manager** to ask for more information in the languages of the household. Come back to us or to the asylum nurse if you continue to have issues.

- Olwen says they are advocating **immersive reader** in office 365. It is an app that automatically translates Word documents into another language. This can help keep up to date with new information.

- Public Health Wales has a thing called Recite me that translates into over 130 languages and can read out loud for you. You would need internet to access this.

31. Sarah brings the meeting to a close.