

# Wales Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum Minutes

*22nd September 2020 - 1:00-3:00pm*

*Venue: Online Zoom Meeting*

*Minutes taken by: Sarah Allen*

**Forum Topic:** The Home Office  
**Guest Speaker:** The Home Office  
**Members:** 35 Asylum Seekers and Refugees

*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>*

*Follow up from forum outlined in **green**.*

## **Minutes:**

Sarah Allen, the forum organiser was unwell so Faruk Ogut, DPIA's Chief Coordinator, led the forum.

1. Faruk **introduces the forum**. He explains that the topic of the forum is the **Home Office**.

The whole group in turn introduces themselves.

Guest speaker: Home Office

Guest professionals: Welsh Government, Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership, Glitter Cymru, Voices Network, Welsh Refugee Council, Asylum Matters, Race Council Cymru

2. The Home Office representative introduces himself. He manages the contracts with Clearsprings Ready Homes for accommodation and transport for Wales and the South West of England.

He says that he can primarily answer questions on accommodation in Wales. Individuals can also ask about other topics such as the asylum process, and he will pass it onto someone who can better respond to this.

3. A member shares that last week he **moved to a shared house after 6 months in a hostel**. He says they have many problems but **can only talk to migrant help who he feels don't do anything**.

He gives the example that one time he came into his house and three men were smoking weed. The next day police came, found 1kg of marijuana and arrested one of the men. He was freed afterwards. A few days later someone had a fever and was moving through the whole accommodation without a mask. He says there is also a man in the accommodation who works in two places. The Ready Homes **manager knows and doesn't do anything**. He tried to call the Refugee Council but they didn't get back in touch. He called Migrant Help and they said they already knew about him but couldn't do anything.

He **says he has met many Clearsprings workers who have been racist** and said bad things to them. He says it is not his fault he cannot speak English.

- Home Office says that since this is very **specific and serious, if he could send the information** to DPIA after and pass that onto him, that would be best. He says they will need to resolve each of these situations.

- **This was followed up, with further details sent to the Home Office and Clearsprings to investigate.**

4. A member asks **what criteria they use for housing**, and **whether they check the houses** before Clearsprings gives these houses to them. He also asks, **what size houses need to be per person**. He feels his house is too small. He says 2 years ago the Home Office came to do some checks and they said that **the house was too small, but nothing was done** as they said that they had no choice.

- Home Office says in terms of checking the houses before they are occupied, they **do not have enough staff** to do that. They have to have an **understanding with Clearsprings that they are satisfying the requirements**. Where they are not doing this, they hope that it is reported so they can step in and take some action. **If something is wrong**, the channel for that would normally be **Migrant Help**. We also **randomly select properties throughout Wales to check** that Clearsprings are doing what they are supposed to, and **if they're not, financial penalties can be imposed** on them.

- The Home Office says that in terms of the property size, if he contacts DPIA with the details, they can pass this on for them to look into his case.

- **DPIA emailed this individual after the forum to follow up**

- The member says it **isn't just about his own case, it is about this being repeated** with others. He knows how hard it is for them to find houses, but the accommodation isn't

appropriate. He said that **even his housing manager says that the house is too small** for his family.

- Home Office says that the house provided **has to be big enough** for the family size, this is **regardless of whether it is difficult for Clearsprings to source** accommodation. No one should be living in accommodation that isn't appropriate. He says they want everybody to be in accommodation the same standard as that on the private rental market. It **should be safe, it should be liveable** and have all of the equipment needed for your day to day needs and it **should be fit for purpose**. You **shouldn't be living in something that doesn't fit that criteria**.

5. An individual says that she is living in a Clearsprings property, and she was recently **threatened by two men from the community** who came in the night. They knocked at the door and she called the police. **She reported it** to the appropriate places, but her concern is **how did they know that they are asylum seekers**. They did not tell anyone. She reported to police but they never got back to her. She talked about it with her housing manager who reported it to safeguarding. They **requested a chain lock** on the front door to increase security, but they said that **Clearsprings wouldn't allow this**. Clearsprings said that they would keep an eye on the property, but she **asks how they can keep an eye on this during the pandemic**.

- The Home Office responds that **people should not know that they are an asylum seeker**, and they have no need to know. He says that 'I don't tend to refer to anybody as an asylum seeker. You are people, we are all people. That's all that matters.' He says he doesn't know how they knew, but this could be as they use a limited number of properties in a limited area, that people get to know the properties that are in use. He says that **if there is anything on a property that identifies it, they would need to know about it** as we would need to take action. In terms of the **locks on the doors, this would be classed as a fire risk**. They would need to check if there are any solutions to help make the property more secure. The Home Office asks if this can be followed up through DPIA.

- She said the men clearly threatened them, and **people seeking asylum are vulnerable**. Some are recent arrivals and wouldn't know to call police, or what to do in this situation. She **feels that that property was not suitable** for asylum accommodation anymore because of this. She says it is **a rough area, and feels it is not safe for her family**. This is the **second incident in 2 years**.

- Home Office says that before they use any property, **Clearsprings contact the local authority** and ask if there's anything about the area that would make it unsuitable for you. They **also ask the police** whether they believe there are any issues in the area. They ask if there are issues in an area, as they **don't want to put individuals where they may become vulnerable or more vulnerable**. Over the years, areas get better or worse. They said they need to work out whether they should still be using that property.

- DPIA got in contact with this individual to follow up.

6. A member says that they applied for leave [on the grounds of private life in the UK] earlier this year and they went to get her biometrics but couldn't get these. She **kept sending letters to the Home Office but could get no answers**. She said it feels like asylum seekers have been left

behind during the pandemic. **Letters and emails aren't being answered.** She gets £39 a week, and to try to get an answer was **every week sending recorded mail, which costs money.** She said finally, she did get an answer but only because of her persisted contact. She asks why the Home Office lets already **vulnerable and suffering people wait for such a long time?** She has **been here for 8 years.** She notes that the Home Office have a criteria that after 7 years they can apply for this leave, but then they don't answer.

- Home Office says that with the pandemic they have **very few people in the office.** If people are sending post into the office, **post will be being dealt with less.** He says he will have to have a look at this from an asylum perspective, and **will mention to the asylum team the issue** with keeping in touch and ask how they're dealing with enquiries that come through.

- **DPIA has contacted the Home Office to follow up on this point**

7. A member says that he **recently got refugee status. He asks if he will be evicted in 28 days** or whether he will be allowed to stay because of the pandemic.

- The Home Office responds that during the height of the pandemic they didn't ask anyone who got a positive decision to leave their accommodation. **Since the 11<sup>th</sup> September they have started to send letters to people notifying them of 28 days.** He says they will send him a letter saying the date that he will need to leave the property. He advises him to begin looking at moving on.

8. A member notes that two individuals so far this forum have said they have waited for 7 and for 8 years. He asks **why does it take so long to decide on asylum cases, when this puts peoples' lives on hold** waiting for a final decision. He says he's seen people with fake papers get their status in no time, and other people who are disabled and desperate to get their status, waiting for years and getting nothing.

He says he knows Home Office are doing two asylum interviews a day, but there is **a massive queue.** It was on pause for five months because of coronavirus. **He feels two interviews a day is not enough.**

- Home Office says he can only really comment on the last part. He says that there is a **programme in place to try and get more people to come back into the Cardiff office safely.** They can only have a limited number of people in the building at a time without causing a massive risk because of the coronavirus. They **want to return to normal, but when it is safe to.**

9. An individual says that the Home Office is using Covid-19 to keep Asylum Seekers Emergency Accommodation for several months. He asks **when will the Home Office start to disperse asylum seekers from emergency accommodation?**

- Home Office says that they don't want people to be in IA for any length of time, but across the whole of the country, **they have not got the accommodation** to be able to put people. He says they want to **provide a roof and a safe place to be, and this short term accommodation is the only option** available. He says they are working to try and reduce this down. He says they are working with accommodation providers to ask if they can get more accommodation available.

He says that during the height of the pandemic they did not ask anyone to leave the accommodation, which has meant there has been less movement in terms of reallocating those properties. He says that **there is not the supply, but they are actively looking for this, so they we can get people out into dispersed accommodation.**

- The member says that he **feels that it is wrong to keep people in spaces like this for so long**, as it is hard to cope with daily life when they may also have to deal with health problems and also what they have gone through. He was here for 8 years and was kicked out of his accommodation. He says that **he felt he was not treated as a human being** but as garbage, thrown in the street. After pandemic, a charity helped him with accommodation, and it made him feel more human than he feels in Home Office accommodation. He feels being kept for long times in these hotels is completely wrong and insulting. He says he is **entitled to receive the dispersal accommodation, and start living as the rest of people do** every day, and it is wrong that he is not given this.

10. An individual asks **why doesn't the Home Office give organisations like WRC or BRC more powers to help with accommodation?** They know the problems of asylum seekers, but Migrant Help do not. He says that he is **scared to call Migrant Help**, more so than the Home Office. He **finds them intimidating, threatening.** He has even been told that he is not a British citizen, but and asylum seeker so he doesn't get medication for free, he has to pay.

- Home Office says he is sorry to hear this. He says **they attend the Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership** with the Welsh Refugee Council and Migrant Help to have conversation on these issues.

- The individual responds saying that **the WRC do a great job but have no power.** Neither do the Local Council. He was sleeping rough, but no one could do anything to help. These **should have more powers when asylum seekers get refused asylum support unfairly or wrongly.** He says he appreciates that the Home Office says he sees him as a person, but the system has **made him feel like he is just a number** not as a human being. He has faced so many problems, and is still being **held in initial accommodation for over 3 months.** When he asked his options, they told him to go to the street or stay where he is.

- Home Office says that what he's described is awful and not right. **Migrant Help are under contract to deliver a service**, that's what they should be doing. He says that if there are situations where they aren't, the Home Office should be told. Home Office **suggests that he writes down when and what happened** and they can look into it and try to make sure this doesn't happen again. In terms of the accommodation, **the pandemic is not an excuse, they need to have the properties to move people** into before they can be dispersed. Unfortunately, that has meant some people have had to stay where they are for longer than they usually would.

- Agreed for him to email DPIA with details to follow up this. The individual notes that he is worried that something bad will happen if he complains.

- Home Office says that you have the **right to complain if you aren't getting a service. Whether you complain has no impact on your asylum claim.**

10. An individual brings up the **eviction of asylum seekers whose asylum applications have been unsuccessful**. She asks in light of the pandemic, **who is responsible for their homeless status and safety**. Is this left to third sector organisations?

- The Home Office said that they have only been dealing with positive decisions rather than negative decisions until recently because of the pandemic. With those who have been refused asylum, **during the appeals process the Home Office are still required to provide accommodation**. It is only when you have **exhausted your appeals rights that the Home Office are no longer responsible** for their accommodation. If a person reaches this point in the process, there is an expectation that that person will leave the UK.

11. A forum member asks **how long it takes to process an application** since some wait 7-8 years or more.

- The Home Office says that they used to try to deliver the asylum decision within a 6-month period, but it isn't possible. **Some cases are complex, and others will go through a long appeals process**. There is **published data on these timings at Gov.Uk**. You can **ask Migrant Help what is happening** with your case if it is taking a long time.

12. This individual plus others in the forum chat **express dissatisfaction with Migrant Help** in terms of **wait times, fears about approaching Migrant Help**, and a **feeling that no progress** will be made.

- The Home Office says that people **should present these issues to Migrant Help** to ask them to respond. He asks if it is possible to **collate these issues**, writing down time, place etc. to provide as **evidence**.

- Faruk notes that if you have **experienced an issue** with Migrant Help you would like to use as one of these examples, you can **email [sarah@dpia.org.uk](mailto:sarah@dpia.org.uk)**

- **DPIA is following up on these issues through having a meeting directly with the head of Migrant Help's AIRE advice line and forum volunteers.**

13. A member says that he gets anxious when he hears the Home Office as it is a source of many of his issues, but thanks the representative for being patient and answering all the questions.

He says he was in the forum with Migrant Help last month, and he **felt that they were very dismissive of their problems**. He says as it is the only channel between them and the Home Office, and if this channel is not working, this means **their voices are not heard** and problems not heard. He **feels these agencies are not accountable**.

- The Home Office says that it isn't the only channels because of forums such as this, and groups such as the Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP) which organisations such as DPIA and WRC can attend and can feedback experiences at. Migrant Help is able to deal with smaller individual issues, but when the issues become bigger and wider, they can be brought to forums and meetings such as these, and even brought to a national level. As an individual you **should take to Migrant Help first**, then when that doesn't work, it's right to **bring to this forum or to organisations who can take this to the WSMP**.

- The member says that he is in the fresh claims process and that he was once **given 24 hours' notice to leave his home** of a year in Cardiff, and had no choice.

- Home Office says sometimes it is late notice, but this isn't right that this should be such short notice. He **will take this up with Clearsprings**.

14. An individual says that he is a gay man and left an environment of hate, to here to find a similar environment. There are **no safe spaces for LGBT+ asylum seekers in Cardiff**. He says they are put in the **same houses as those with homophobic and transphobic backgrounds**. He feels that no one is listening to them. He worries that it will **only be when an LGBT+ person is attacked and killed that this issue will be looked at** properly. He says that we should be preventative and stop this from happening. He is concerned about those who are vulnerable in this situation and unable to speak up for themselves like he can. **He invites the Home Office to join Glitter Cymru for a discussion** about some of these LGBT+ issues.

- Home Office says they are **currently looking at whether they provide LGBT+ accommodation**. He says there is still an issue around sourcing these properties and safeguarding. He says if you are in accommodation where the others are not accepting, they **need to be told about it, and something to be done** before anybody comes to any harm.

- The member asks **why someone should be put in that position** of risk and anxiety in the first place. **It should be an option** that is provided, so the individual can decide if they feel separate LGBT+ accommodation is needed for themselves.

- The Home Office says that there **should be the option to ask people what they want** and see if they are able to provide this. He says they are **having this conversation** at the moment as to whether they can at least establish what is required. The Home Office **accepts Glitter Cymru's invitation** to join them for a meeting.

- Sarah is in touch with Glitter Cymru and the Home Office to arrange this meeting.

15. This member also asks **how the Home Office produces their country files**. He says that he knows that he is not safe as a gay man in his country, but the file says that it is safe for a gay man in [country], but that is **not accurate**. He also asks **what criteria the Home Office uses to determine whether they believe you're LGBT+**. The stereotypes of the gay men aren't applicable to us, as we come from countries where we have had to be hidden for our safety.

- Home Office said that he would need to **put that to the Asylum Team** instead to give accurate information.

- DPIA has been in contact with the Home Office to hear back on this

16. A member notes that the **world is moving online**. Healthcare and colleges are online as well as many other services. It is **too expensive to be able to afford internet** on asylum support. He says they also **can't afford a TV license**. 'There is **no way to entertain ourselves**.' He hopes the Home Office can provide WiFi as this would provide this sense of connection, and allow them to access services.

- Home Office says that they **have looked at this**, and particularly under Covid. He is aware that Welsh Government is working on a solution.

- **Welsh Government says that they are trying to find some funding** to help with internet access. This wouldn't be for in hotels because that is provided by the hotel, but **for dispersal accommodation.**

17. An individual notes that the only asylum seekers allowed to work are those on the **shortage occupation list**. He asks if the Home Office are actively thinking about **giving people the right to work.**

- Home Office says that there is **a lot of lobbying going on** to the Home Office and the policy makers. He says this is beyond his remit, but he knows **people are looking into it.**

18. A member says that **28 days is not enough time for the move on** period. Universal Credit takes six weeks and housing can take months. Why is it not possible to extend the 28 days by a month or two?

- Home Office says that this is **set in the Immigration Act** that they have to abide by, and until that act is changed this will remain the same. Again, **people have been lobbying** for this to be changed.

19. A member says she came to the UK by **family reunion**. She separated from her ex-husband and **had to claim asylum again** with two kids in June 2020. Since then she has been waiting for accommodation and financial support for herself and her children. Red Cross sometimes helped her with some money. She was a teacher for additional learning needs for seven years. She says she didn't used to stand in a queue for support with food or for agencies. She says she **finds it really hard and depressing to be waiting** for four months for all these issues.

She says that she is still waiting for her ID. She's currently **living in a friend's house** as she didn't want to be put in a hostel. When she came to the UK a year ago, she was waiting for **accommodation in hostel for many months. She got itchy skin from insects** in the bed.

She has been **waiting four months and not received an** answer. She says she feels forgotten by the Home Office. She says she doesn't really need her ID, she needs financial support, at least for her kids. She says she I can't ask the Red Cross all the time if can have money, yet the Home Office won't let her work.

When she claimed asylum, they had an hour interview in Cardiff with the home office. She asks to **receive the interview quicker** as there is lots of **pressure being a mother** with two kids, even without the financial struggles. She says that **before she could study and work to earn her own money, now she is just waiting**, and doesn't even know how long this will be for. With Covid-19 she **worries that it will be years.**

- The Home Office asks **if she's applied to financial support** whilst she's living with her friend. She **says that she did**. Her friend is giving the basics, but she also has to ask Red Cross. She also says she **has an ongoing asylum claim.**

- Home Office suggests sending DPIA the details of the case to send to him so he can have a look into the case. If someone's **destitute**, and they're **living with friends**, generally speaking, there's **no reason why they couldn't get subsistence** instead of accommodation. He says that they shouldn't be in a situation where they're relying on Red Cross or any other group to supply money if they've got an ongoing asylum claim.

- She says she cares less about the money, she **really wants them to look at her case and get her decision. 'I just really want to work.** I just want to feel like I can I can do the normal things again.' She emailed to ask if her MP if they could ask the Home Office to have a look at her case and make a decision. There was no answer from the MP and she doesn't know if he contacted the Home Office or not.

- This is in the process of being followed up with the individual and the Home Office

20. Another individual says that she **arrived in the UK in January.** She was in London before they took her to Cardiff. She has been **in Initial Accommodation for almost 8 months now.** She was in a house, then moved to many hotels. Now she has been in a hostel for over 7 months.

She got her section 95 letter in February and her **Aspen card, but this was stolen** and she couldn't get another one. She hasn't received any letter from the Home Office despite **calling Migrant Help many times.** She can't speak with the Home Office directly. She tried emailing, but they didn't contact her back. She feels she doesn't have the information and doesn't know what to do in her situation. Migrant Help gives her the same answers each time, and **calling them takes 2 hours** out of the day. She wants to know what will happen now.

- Home Office says if you **haven't got an Aspen card it needs to be replaced.** That can be replaced, they can sort this out.

- She says that the aspen card was stolen from her whilst she was volunteering. When she asked for another **they said she couldn't because she was in a hostel.** She has a **health problem related to diet,** and a letter from her doctor about this. They said that they would not give her this card as they **provide her with meals.**

- Home Office says that he **can't see a reason why she shouldn't have an Aspen card.** He says that they will need her to have an aspen card ready for when she moved into dispersal accommodation. She should give DPIA her details to pass to him, and he can look into the case.

- Home Office explains that people weren't getting money in hotels originally as they'd be staying for just a month. However, people have had to stay for longer because of Covid-19, but the policy still is that if you're on a full board, and you get meals and all the other sundry items, then they won't also give cash payments. They're pushing Clearsprings to find more dispersal accommodation to get people out of hotels as quickly as possible.

- This issue is being followed up with the Home Office

21. A member ask if the Home Office can commit to do a **routine check of the asylum seekers accommodation** to see the conditions, and not just rely on the accommodation providers word.

Also she feels that the **key safe in front of the accommodation flags it as for asylum seekers,** leaving them vulnerable to hate crime and racism. She asks if the Home Office can look into this.

- Home Office says that, up until March, they're **routinely checking accommodation.** **They do this randomly** so that Clearsprings can't just show the best. If they find anything that is not complying with the contract, this **has to be sorted within a set timeframe.** He

says if you have any problems with your property, that they need to know about it to take to Clearsprings.

- In terms of safety, the Home Office says that they always make sure people are safe in their accommodation, and that this is their prime aim.

22. Home Office says that as they can't check every single property, **forums like these are good to hear from people** what's really happening on the ground. He says he knows in many cases he has directed to Migrant Help, but if that isn't working **you have the right to complain**.

- A member says that when they arrive to the country there is **no clear indication that they have any kind of power**. He thinks it is the job of the Home Office to make that clear.

He says service providers and his solicitor have **told him that the Home Office don't like to be disturbed** when he's tried to complain that the process is too long, or that he didn't receive his interview or answer from the interview.

He says that **'we don't feel that we have the power to complain to the Home Office'**. The ability to speak with the Home Office is through the advocacy forum or Migrant Help. He **feels that Migrant Help is useless in a lot of cases**. He says that though the Home Office has a contract with Migrant Help, and that they always use the **excuse that they're just a charity**. He feels that as they have been paid to provide that service, they should make sure they do the things they are supposed to do.

- Home Office says that they **pay Migrant Help to deliver a service** to you and us. And if they're not doing it, then they need to know about it, and to do something about it.

- The individual says that he **feels that they are not doing their job**. He adds that it felt 'like a slap on the face' when they heard the contract with Clearsprings was renewed in 2019. He says he's just expressing his frustration.

- DPIA is following up on these issues through having a meeting directly with the head of Migrant Help's AIRE advice line and forum volunteers.

23. Faruk from DPIA notes that they are out of time for more questions. Individuals who haven't managed to ask yet, **can email their question to Sarah Allen**, the forum coordinator, at [sarah@dpia.org.uk](mailto:sarah@dpia.org.uk). They will also arrange another forum with the Home Office in the future. He thanks the forum members for their contributions, and thanks the Home Office representative for attending and responding to these questions and comments.

*End of forum*