

SUMMARY: Preventing destitution within the asylum process: urgent action required

Asylum destitution in NI

Many refused asylum seekers become destitute as a direct result of government immigration policy.¹ We speak of 'enforced destitution' because asylum seekers are not permitted to work and cannot receive social security benefits such as Housing Benefit. This means that refused asylum seekers cannot even get a bed in a homeless shelter.

Approximately 100 asylum seekers became destitute in Belfast in 2015/2016. The fact that asylum seekers are not street homeless is due to the efforts of charities and faith organisations that are currently providing food, hot meals and sometimes shelter. It is also testament to the solidarity shown by other asylum seekers and refugees who share what little they have.

It is currently only single adult asylum seekers who experience such destitution. However, changes in immigration law will put families with children in this same position from as early as April 2017. Up to 100 families could be affected.

Members of the Refugee & Asylum Forum ask the Executive Office to commit to protecting families from the impending change in UK law and to also commit to alleviating destitution for all asylum seekers.

Immigration is an excepted matter and the legislation is crafted in such a way as to prevent destitute asylum seekers from receiving statutory support in Northern Ireland. The challenge, therefore, is for Northern Ireland to find a way to fully utilise its existing powers to ensure that people seeking sanctuary in this jurisdiction are not made destitute. In recent years, the Northern Ireland Executive has instigated a number of innovative initiatives to support people seeking sanctuary on these shores. Further innovation is necessary.

Proposed action

In 2014, the NI Research & Information service suggested that the devolved institutions might wish to explore how to support refused asylum seekers. We consider the time is right for a multi sectoral partnership approach to take action and commit to ending all asylum destitution. This is a complex issue but we are committed to working with all partners to end the injustice of destitution. We invite the Executive Office to set up a working group to:

¹ While some refused asylum seekers do return home, there are many reasons why some do not including because they are from a country that the Home Office considers it too dangerous to return someone.

- Seek to block the commencement of the new Immigration Act 2016 provisions in Northern Ireland;
- Identify existing powers to accommodate refused asylum seekers;
- Consider whether the Health & Social Care Trusts are resourced to meet needs and whether asylum seekers have access to same;
- Consider the role of the Crisis Fund in alleviating destitution;
- Consider recommendations to date including by NIHRC and Housing4All.

Implications of destitution

Destitution causes great individual hardship and is detrimental to physical and mental health. It also has implications and costs for wider society because it leads to social exclusion and creates the conditions where exploitation can happen. It can also place costly demands on emergency services such as A&E in responding to frostbite and on Health & Social Care Trusts in responding to the needs of homeless children. Thus preventing destitution is necessary to protect human rights but it is also beneficial as a wider social policy.

Public support

Finally, Refugee & Asylum Forum members invite MLAs to note that the public has been very generous in its support of the Syrian resettlement scheme in Northern Ireland. We do not think that the public would accept that some families seeking sanctuary are made homeless by government policy.



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