

Promoting improved mental and physical health through gym membership for persons seeking sanctuary in NI

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Summary

In May 2022, Better leisure centres across the UK launched a new initiative that offers Ukrainian refugees a free Better health centre membership for a fixed three-month period. Although developed as a support measure for Ukrainian refugees as well as refugees, the scheme is also available for all persons who have claimed asylum.¹

The Law Centre understands that this initiative is **not** currently available in Northern Ireland. We consider that there would be many benefits associated with providing access to free gym membership to persons seeking sanctuary. This includes:

- Improved mental health
- Improved physical health
- Increased opportunities for integration.

The unfolding Ukraine humanitarian crisis provides an opportunity for Belfast City Council to make a similar commitment in Northern Ireland that would benefit Ukrainians as well as other asylum seekers and refugees. This would be consistent with the Council's decision to become a City of Sanctuary. Accordingly, the Law Centre invites the Belfast City Council to fund the Better leisure centres to provide:

- An initial 3 months' free gym membership to the following persons:
 - Newly arrived Ukrainian refugees;
 - Asylum seekers;
 - Refugees.
- Beyond the 3 month period, the development of a new concessionary rate for asylum seekers of £5 per month.

¹ [Better: The Feel Good Place. Join us now.](#)

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Asylum seekers in Northern Ireland

1. Home Office statistics indicate that there are 1404 asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland as of March 2022². People arrive here seeking sanctuary from conflicts and human rights abuses around the world including Eritrea, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, Nigeria, Palestine, Sudan and Iran.³ A small number of people from Ukraine (LCNI estimates < 20) have claimed asylum.⁴
2. The large majority of asylum seekers are housed in the Belfast council area. Recently, a small number of asylum seekers have been relocated to the Derry & Strabane council area.
3. Prior to summer 2021, asylum seekers in Northern Ireland were primarily accommodated in 'Dispersal Accommodation' in apartments and houses. Asylum seekers were part of local communities, their children attended local schools, etc. However, in June 2021, the Home Office introduced a model of 'contingency accommodation'.⁵ This model is now the norm for newly arrived asylum seekers who live in 14 hotels, 10 of which are located in Belfast and four outside of the city.⁶ Full board accommodation is provided. As of March 2022, we understand that there were almost 1,200 asylum seekers living in contingency accommodation. The Law Centre NI and other charities are extremely concerned about the use of hotel accommodation as a long-term model and would welcome an opportunity to share our concerns on another occasion.

Belfast is a City of Sanctuary

4. In April 2022, Belfast City Council voted to officially become a City of Sanctuary. The motion, which was proposed by Councillor John Kyle and supported by all the political parties, commits Belfast City Council to making the city a more welcoming place for refugees and asylum seekers. Described as a 'huge achievement' by the group's coordinator Israel Eguogie, this vote built on years of work by refugees and asylum seekers, voluntary and community sector organisations, good relations officers, councillors, etc.

Asylum seekers and poverty

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets#asylum-support>

³ Home Office Asylum Statistics for Northern Ireland, March 2022: Eritrea - 258 individuals, Syria - 206 individuals, Somalia - 148 individuals, Iraq - 122 individuals, Nigeria - 73 individuals, Palestine 48 individuals, Sudan - 47 individuals, Iran - 46 individuals.

⁴ Most Ukrainians have arrived in Northern Ireland under the Homes for Ukraine scheme

⁵ Information obtained [by PPR through a Freedom of Information request](#) shows that just 14 asylum seekers were accommodated in hotels in June 2021.

⁶ Information correct as of April 2022.

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- Asylum seekers are barred from accessing the social security system. If they can evidence a risk of destitution, they can apply to receive a weekly asylum support payment as well as somewhere to live.

Asylum support – different situations	Payment
Resident in an asylum hotel	£8.24 per week
Asylum seeker in ‘Dispersal Accommodation’ i.e. living in local communities	£40.85 per week
Single adult asylum seeker whose appeal rights are exhausted	£0 per week
For comparison purposes, Jobseekers Allowance (which is designed to be the minimal amount necessary to keep a person above the poverty line)	£77.00
Pregnant woman	Additional £3 per week
Baby under 1 year old	Additional £5 per week
Child aged 1 – 3 years	Additional £3 per week.

- Asylum support is paid on a pre-paid ASPEN card. This card cannot be used for online purposes. Whereas most asylum seekers can withdraw cash using their ASPEN card, some asylum seekers cannot.⁷
- In general, asylum seekers are not permitted to work while their asylum claim is being processed. This means that they cannot supplement their weekly income through employment.
- Poverty is prevalent across the asylum process. This affects physical health and mental health and places an unbearable stress on relationships between family and friends as ‘good will’ support cannot always be sustained. Poverty makes asylum seekers particularly vulnerable to exploitation⁸ and can negatively impact on community cohesion and social exclusion.⁹ Poverty has a particularly grave impact on children. Families in NI struggle to buy healthy food, nappies, medication, sanitary items, clothing, books, etc.¹⁰ It is particularly difficult for families to meet the costs associated with caring for children with disabilities or health conditions. Poverty impacts significantly on children’s education, their ability to integrate and dampens their aspirations in life.

⁷ This applies in situations where the asylum application was refused and where, for example, the person is appealing the decision, preparing a fresh claim, etc.

⁸ Hannah Lewis et al, ‘Precarious Lives: Forced Labour, Exploitation and Asylum’ (Bristol University Press: 2014).

⁹ Suzanne Fitzpatrick et al. ‘Destitution in the UK’ (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018).

¹⁰ See: Law Centre NI response to ‘Home Office consultation on asylum support rates’ (2018) and NICRAS, ‘The effect of destitution on refugees on NI’ (NICRAS, 2016). The NICRAS study is five years old; regrettably there has been very little progress and the issues highlighted by the report still stand.

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9. The fact that asylum seekers cannot work and cannot access many social and cultural activities (due to cost), results in dependence on charities and contributes to a sense of “enforced idleness.”¹¹ This contributes to poor mental health.

Prevalence of poor mental health within asylum seeker population

10. There is significant body of research that documents the prevalence of poor mental health within this community.
- Asylum seekers and refugees are more likely to experience poor mental health than the local population, including higher rates of depression, PTSD and other anxiety disorders.¹²
 - The increased vulnerability to mental health problems that refugees and asylum seekers face is linked to pre-migration experiences (such as war trauma) and post-migration conditions (such as separation from family, difficulties with asylum procedures and poor housing).¹³
 - Asylum seekers are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population and more than 61% will experience serious mental distress. However, data shows that they are less likely to receive support than the general population.¹⁴
11. Research commissioned by the Executive Office conducted by QUB academics in 2015 ‘Asylum seekers and refugees’ experiences of life in Northern Ireland’ found that “the area of mental health is a critical concern”.¹⁵ The report advised that **mental health needs should be better linked to broader services through a partnership and multi sectoral approach**. The report’s findings chimes with a survey conducted by refugees and asylum seekers themselves in 2018: 79% of those surveyed stated that they experienced anxiety, depression or isolation or felt they could not cope with daily activities.¹⁶

Asylum seekers and exercise

12. The Public Health Agency continues to iterate the numerous benefits associated with increased physical activity:

¹¹See Lisa Doyle (2009) “I hate being idle”: Wasted skills and enforced dependence among Zimbabwean asylum seekers in the UK’, Refugee Council, available at: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/blogs/3693_i_hate_being_idle

¹² Blackmore R, Boyle JA, Fazel M, Ranasinha S, Gray KM, Fitzgerald G, et al. (2020) The prevalence of mental illness in refugees and asylum seekers: A systematic review and meta-analysis.

¹³ Mental Health Foundation, ‘Mental Health statistics: asylum seekers and refugees’, accessible [here](#)

¹⁴ Mental Health Foundation, ‘Mental Health statistics: asylum seekers and refugees’, accessible [here](#)

¹⁵ Dr Fiona Murphy, Prof Ulrike Vieten, ‘[Asylum seekers’ and refugee’s experiences of Life in Northern Ireland: Report of the first study on the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in NI](#) (QUB, 2016)

¹⁶ Practice and the Participation of Rights, ‘[A Prison without Walls: Asylum Migration and Human Rights](#)’ (2019)

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“Being physically active is not only good for your body, but also for your mind. Taking part in exercise releases chemicals in the brain that can improve your mood and make you feel good. Being more active and getting out and about is not only enjoyable, but can be a way of meeting people which in turn is good for mental health and can also build confidence.

“Benefits of physical activity also include a reduction in stress, anxiety, frustration and anger. Those who exercise more will get a natural energy boost and as a result of the exercise are more likely to have an increased appetite and to get a better night’s sleep.”¹⁷

13. However, in practice, there are many barriers to asylum seekers wishing to exercise. For example, asylum seekers living in city centre hotels do not have ready access to public parks. Fear of racist hate crime (race hate makes up the largest proportion of all hate crimes in NI),¹⁸ discourages asylum seekers from walking and jogging in areas of the city that they are not familiar with. The costs associated with many sports is, of course, a major barrier.
14. Nonetheless, there is a real interest in sport among asylum seeker communities and many people regularly take part in exercise and sporting initiatives. By large, such initiatives are offered by voluntary and community organisations. For example, organisations like HAPANI and LORAG provide sport programmes for asylum seeker children whereas adults can take part in IFA Street Soccer, basketball, etc. Many initiatives are progressed through the organisation EMSONI (Ethnic Minority Sports Organisation NI), which seeks to use the medium of sports to integrate migrants with the local community in NI and to diversifying the face of sports in NI. EMSONI is inspired by Nelson Mandela, “sport can create hope where once there was only despair”.
15. The Law Centre and other support organisations regularly receive requests from asylum seekers for assistance in applying for gym membership. Some asylum seekers are able to avail of a free 3-month gym membership if recommended by GPs. However, the reality for many is that the referral is at discretion of their GP and is time-limited. Additionally, seeking mental health support from medical professionals may be viewed in some cultures as taboo, even shameful, and thus many asylum seekers would not explore this topic with their GP.¹⁹

¹⁷ [Exercise – good for your mental and emotional wellbeing | HSC Public Health Agency \(hscni.net\)](https://www.hscni.net/health-topics/exercise-good-for-your-mental-and-emotional-wellbeing)

¹⁸ PSNI recorded 1,231 racist incidents and 864 racist crimes in the year up to Nov 2021 – an increase of 40% on the preceding 12 months. <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics/2021-22/q2/hate-motivations-bulletin-sep-21.pdf>

¹⁹ https://crownschool.uchicago.edu/ssa_magazine/looking-cultural-aspects-mental-health

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Rationale for Law Centre proposal

16. The Law Centre considers that the warm welcome provided to persons fleeing from the Ukrainian conflict should also be extended to all persons seeking sanctuary.
17. Providing an initial 3 months' gym membership / access to courses is a generous gesture of welcome.
18. Beyond the three months' period, the Law Centre notes that Ukrainians and refugees may avail of existing concessionary gym memberships schemes that are available to persons who are on low income and in receipt of social security benefits. Asylum seekers cannot avail of these schemes - they cannot meet the eligibility criteria due to being barred from receiving social security benefits, and by not having refugee status²⁰. In any event, the lowest monthly concession price of £20.70 is prohibitive for a person receiving between £32.96 - £163.40 monthly asylum support²¹. This is our rationale for asking the City Council to make a long-term commitment to the mental and physical wellbeing of asylum seekers by offering a new concessionary rate of £5 per month for people in this category.
19. If helpful, the Law Centre would be willing to organise a small delegation of people to speak to the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee about this issue, which would include representatives from Law Centre NI, Ethnic Minority Sports Organisation NI (EMSONI) and others.
20. Finally, the Law Centre is happy to advise on any aspects of this proposed scheme, including in relation to providing eligibility, etc.

Law Centre NI, June 2022

²⁰ <https://www.better.org.uk/monthly-membership/better-hf-conc>

²¹ See asylum support rates on page 3: hotel resident - £32.96 per month, dispersal accommodation (community) resident - £163.40 per month