

Anaka Women's Collective Briefing
to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Executive
Office
in the context of the forthcoming Refugee Integration Strategy
1 May 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today about the situation of people seeking protection and new refugees in Northern Ireland.

The latest Home Office data show that at the end of 2023 there were 2,831 asylum seekers and family members in Northern Ireland, 741 of them living in 'contingency asylum accommodation' in hotels.

Hotel asylum accommodation

This use of hotels grew very rapidly in Northern Ireland – from 14 people in June 2021 to over 1,000 by spring 2022 and 1,244 at end June 2023. Following the Prime Minister's promise to 'end the backlog' of asylum applications by end 2023, in late summer 2023 the number of people in hotels began to drop -- to the 741 people mentioned at end 2023.

Anaka have worked consistently with people in the hotels – which were not mentioned in the draft Refugee Integration Strategy when it was published for consultation in late 2021 – for over two years. To give a brief description -- people placed in asylum hotels report facing controlled conditions; isolation from the local community; overcrowded, cramped and often inappropriate living conditions; a range of health concerns (some exacerbated by inappropriate hotel food and inability to access kitchens to cook for themselves and their children); poverty related to the now £8.86 per person per week stipend; failures by staff of hotels, Mears and/or Migrant Help to respect human dignity and to provide effective remedies for breaches of their rights; and in far too many cases, issues in accessing the education essential for their children's development.

As you will know, the Home Office, Mears and Migrant Help were invited to speak with residents about these issues at public meetings here in Belfast, in October 2022 and February 2023. They did not attend – but some local authorities, including from Belfast City Council, the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for Health and the Education Authority -- did. For the last several years Anaka have been helping families and the Education Authority to find school places – this has been really successful for primary age children but much less so for people from about age 14, as we will discuss later.

Evictions

Last summer, in an effort to 'clear the asylum backlog' by end 2023, the Home Office issued an unprecedented number of positive asylum decisions over a short time. For Northern Ireland, the Home Office told PPR that **932 asylum decisions were made in the seven and a**

half months between 1 August 2023 and 19 March 2024: 876 positive decisions, 49 negative ones, and 7 'unknown'.

While receiving refugee status would normally be a joyful occasion for people, in recent months it has become a time of upheaval, uncertainty and fear. This is because responsibility for housing these 876 (and now more) people has transferred – at next to no notice – to a Housing Executive which is already facing a serious shortfall in social housing and a waiting list of over 46,400 households – over 28,600 of them officially homeless.

How do the evictions happen? Up until August, people were advised of their asylum decision by the Home Office as a first step. The Home Office would then inform Mears separately, causing a delay of a few weeks before Mears was able to give the tenant notice of their asylum accommodation and support ending.

Since August 2023 though, the Home Office writes individuals and Mears at the same time, both informing of its asylum decision and, in positive decisions, giving 28 days' notice of asylum support ending. In practice, some people's letters are delayed in the system or the post, or simply do not arrive. A second, formal 'notice to quit' letter – which in theory gives seven days' notice of eviction -- is also very frequently delayed, so that people receive only two or three days' notice, or none at all. In theory, such people are entitled to request the full 7 days – but this entails a request to Migrant Help, which in practice people find it almost impossible to reach.

What happens after the 7 days? Currently, both the Housing Executive and Mears literally advise people to turn up at NIHE offices on the day of their eviction, with their families and belongings, and wait for NIHE staff there to arrange something for them. People have done this only to wait the entire day. Due to the gap between social housing demand and supply, and the short notice of this new need, in practice what the Housing Executive appear to be doing is making unprecedented use of hotels as emergency temporary accommodation – a stopgap to prevent people under its responsibility becoming street homeless.

So people are frequently moved from one hotel, under Mears, to another, often distant, hotel, under the Housing Executive. They have no other option – because as asylum seekers they have been barred from working, so they have no savings. This means that the private rental sector is closed to them; even if they had been able to find a property and secure employment which would cover their rent, they would be required to make significant deposits and/or have someone act as guarantor. This just isn't possible for people.

New refugees in Housing Executive hotels

These new Housing Executive hotels are, for starters, often far from children's schools, as the Education Authority has had cause to call out, given their work in finding the school placements for children in the first place. They are frequently far from GPs or consultants who are giving people much-needed care – many of these medical professionals have written to the Housing Executive urgently requesting that their patients be moved back to

within reach of their services. Some people living with disabilities have been placed in unsuitable or inaccessible accommodation.

People in Housing Executive hotels – unlike in Mears hotels – do not have meals provided. They frequently have no access to kitchen or laundry facilities at all – and they have no money, due to their asylum support ending before they have reached the end of the five-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment. Even assuming maximum efficiency and no mistakes, delays or obstacles, people face a gap between when asylum support ends and Universal Credit begins. What this means practically is that they – and their children -- go hungry and suffer hardship and distress. This obviously compounds the trauma that the vast majority have already undergone, whether in their country of origin, in transit to the UK or while under the asylum system here.

New refugees now face unprecedented barriers to finding work. Part of this is due to their being placed by the Housing Executive in hotels in far flung areas, away from any community network or contacts they have built up. They are told by the Housing Executive that they will be moved somewhere permanent as soon as possible, but they have no idea when this will be, or even where it might be. As such they are in no position to apply for work, even if an employer was willing to hire them in such uncertain circumstances.

Another barrier is transport. Northern Ireland is a car-dependent place; people do have public transport passes provided by the Department for Infrastructure on a pilot scheme, but the public transport here is very limited in scope and reach. Simply put, many people are being placed in hotels without access to buses or train lines, and without the resources to pay taxis to even get to one-off interviews, much less regular work.

Finally, parents face an additional obstacle in childcare. Families are moved out of area, away from their children's schools. They are told that the new placement is temporary, and at any rate, in this late stage of the school year finding a new school place is unlikely. So children are with parents during the day instead of in school, meaning that parents are not free to look for work.

Education

Education is an issue that matters enormously to people in and emerging from the asylum system – it is seen as the way to a better and a fuller life. Children who have lost their school place, or who never had one, feel acutely the lack of contact with other children and the absence of structure and a daily routine.

Back in the autumn of 2022, while noting some progress in enrolment of smaller children, parents raised concerns about blockages in placing older ones (14 years and up). Despite all children under 18 having the legal right, without discrimination, to an education (Convention on the Rights of the Child article 28), NI law (Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (para. 46)) sets the compulsory school age at 4 years up until the end of the school year in which the child turns 16. (In England, Wales and Scotland children have the right to education up to age 18.)

The reality for asylum seeker children is different. Key stage 4 children (15- and 16-year-olds) are by far the most unlikely to find a place, though even some older (13 and 14-year-old) Key Stage 3 children struggle due to schools' reluctance to take on new English speakers at GCSE level. (This and related issues featured in recent research from QUB and the Nuffield Foundation). The Department for the Economy has responsibility for employment and skills training, including apprenticeships, for 16+ young people; but to date has not adequately responded to the needs of this group.

A 2023 survey carried out by PPR and Anaka amongst 35 Belfast asylum seekers aged 16-25 who were out of education during term time revealed that 40% had attended high school before coming to NI, and another 40% had completed it. They had high aspirations – but only 30% were attending English classes, despite the fact that over half had been here for six months or more). In response, in the summer of 2023 Anaka and #KindEconomy partners have organised a network of volunteer teachers from the local community and from amongst people seeking international protection here, to set up and provide classes in a range of subjects for these excluded young people.

In addition to the Refugee Integration policy, Northern Ireland is the only devolved region of the UK without an ESOL policy. Case studies from Leicester (England), Glasgow (Scotland) and Wales show that holistic English language based programmes tailored to the specific needs of this group of young people are both possible and very effective. In contrast, here young people reported that ESOL classes here were aimed at their parents' generation, and that this made them feel demotivated and unwelcome. During the 2023-24 school year, QUB and Anaka offered a weekly ESOL class tailored specifically for 16- to 24-year-olds currently out of education. These young people have recently been taught researching skills to apply to the 16+ Education Equality Campaign and other community issues, and have developed a survey to better understand what education opportunities young people seeking international protection need and want in Northern Ireland, to inform calls for change going forward. The survey has just opened, and I invite you to keep a close eye out for its results.

Thank you.

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