

Cross-Party Group on Challenging Racial and Religious Prejudice

Tuesday 16th May 2023 at 6pm on zoom

Present

Foyso! Choudhury	MSP
Pam Gosal	MSP
Anas Sarwar	MSP (Chair)

Non-MSP Group Members

Omar Afzal	Scottish Association of Mosques
Ephraim Borowski	SCoJeC
Alessandra Cecolin	University of Aberdeen
Peter Hopkins	Newcastle University (Secretary)
Asifa M Hussain	Heriot-watt University
Rabia Ihsan	NASUWT
Demet Kayaoglu	Turkish Consulate General in Edinburgh
Ghzala Khan	West of Scotland Regional Equality Council
Dhruva Kumar	Indian Hindu Community Scotland
Nicola Livingston	SCoJeC
Jacqueline Merchant	Scottish Parliament
Esther Muchena	Scottish Refugee Council
Kirsty Robson	SCoJeC
Susan Siegel	Glasgow Jewish Representative Council
Lindsay Taylor	MEND
Mateo Urquijo	
Kimberley Wong	CRER

Apologies

Naseem Anwar	
Pinar Aksu	Maryhill Integration Network
Sabah Aslam	Interfaith Glasgow

Welcome

Anas Sarwar welcomed everyone to the meeting, the focus of which is upon racial and religious prejudice against Scotland's asylum-seeking and refugee communities. It was noted that a progress on the Islamophobia inquiry will be provided at the next meeting.

Previous minutes

The previous minutes were approved; this was proposed by Susan Siegel and seconded by Ephraim Borowski.

Racial and religious prejudice against refugee and asylum-seeking communities

The first speaker was Esther Muchena who is a Service Manager with Scottish Refugee Council. Esther explained that there is a small policy and influencing team who do most of the work that is being discussed today. In addition to this, there is a Scotland wide community development team which was already present prior to dispersal to Glasgow (which was the only dispersal city in Scotland). A key issue at present is the recent introduction of asylum hotels with there being 11 hotels at present.

Esther discussed how SRC are working to challenge racial and religious prejudice:

- Asylum hotels have led to local tensions, so it is important to promote understanding and compassion about why people flee persecution, what happens when they are fleeing and when they arrive
- Significant delays in the asylum process – this can enhance the trauma already experienced
- How do you engage with new people rather than those who are already trained and understand the issues well?
- English language and communication challenges
- Very complex asylum process – constantly need to seek to understand this and the processes involved.
- Guidance for professionals who work with those who have fled persecution would be useful but if such guidance is not used then it serves little purpose
- Working in a constantly changing landscape
- Can be very difficult to get funding in this area
- Need for advocacy for those seeking asylum especially in areas like legal issues and health
- Need for coordinated approach between the different organisations
- Person-centred and multidisciplinary approach
- Third party reporting issue and the tendency towards under-reporting – things are happening but are not being reported
- Need for culturally competent interpreters
- Diversity training – very difficult to hit the mark
- Media based interventions
- The importance of lived experience but the need to take care with those who are sharing their lived experience – but can be a powerful way to challenge prejudices.
- Need for therapeutic services that serve well those who have experienced refugee trauma.

The second speaker was Pinar Aksu who is a Human Rights and Advocacy Coordinator with Maryhill Integration Network. Pinar was unable to join the zoom meeting in person so sent through a short video that was shared with those attending the meeting. In this video, Pinar discussed the work of Maryhill Integration Network and the challenges experienced by those they work with. Maryhill Integration Network have been in operation since 2001 and primarily work with those seeking asylum and with refugee communities through direct provision. They offer weekly activities such as English classes, gardening club, art group, men's and women's groups, advocacy and campaigning groups, work with local schools, and training activities.

It was noted that prejudice and discrimination are big issues faced by those that Maryhill Integration Network engage with. Some of the main issues highlighted include:

- The asylum process often takes a long time and people are moved around a lot during the process from different types of accommodation
- Glasgow was a dispersal city but after the Park Inn incident, Glasgow stopped receiving asylum seekers through this scheme and now asylum seekers are housing in asylum hotels
- If placed in hotels in Glasgow, a lot of provision is already in place so this makes it easier to connect with people, but if placed in isolated locations, this presents a lot of challenges about access to information and community spaces.
- Some hotels are in places where local tensions are being created with resistance from locals (such as in Erskine) where racist and far-right groups have been protesting outside the hotel every Sunday.
- We would suggest that Local Authorities need to engage with local communities more to inform them about the asylum hotels and about how people can be welcomed and how problematic narratives can be challenged.
- Those who engage with Maryhill Integration Network mention challenges on public transport, with GPs, or in accessing local services, where discriminatory language is often used towards them
- It was suggested that this may be due to the language used by the current UK government and the Home Secretary and how this is then filtering down into communities
- It was noted that there is a lack of understanding about the rights of asylum seekers e.g. they are not allowed to work and have no right to access higher education

Pinar concluded by noting that she looks forward to joining in a live discussion in future meetings and is very happy to discuss any of these issue in more detail.

Questions and discussion

Both speakers were thanked for their contribution and the meeting was opened for questions and discussion. Key points of discussion were:

- Is there more work that can be done between the more established ethnic, religious, and racial minority communities and those that have arrived more recently
- Cost of living crisis, and the further challenges experienced by asylum seekers in this context.
- Are Ukrainian refugees experiencing similar exclusions or is there a racialised element here?
- How can we challenge the media around these issues?
- Why aren't local political mobilisations that are often organised by asylum seekers not covered in the press?
- Concern about the UK Conservative government language around these issues and the unacceptability of the language that is being used.
Only £45 a week given to asylum seekers and people in hotels are only receiving £9.10 per week.
- Illegal Migration Bill is in process and presents numerous challenges as does related policies

- Ukrainian situation shows how people can be treated very differently
- Issue of access to free school meals for asylum seeking children
- A view that there should not be a hierarchy of asylum seekers or refugees
- What can be learnt across communities?
- Can the group share resources and information around these and other issues?
- Lack of planning around the asylum hotels, and the local facilities and organisations that can offer support. Lack of local legal advice.
- £9.10 a week for those in hotels.
- Challenges around those who are at high risk of food and fuel poverty
- Asylum hotels included in locations such as Falkirk, Aberdeen, East Kilbride, Perth, Greenock, Erskine, Paisley and Elgin as well as Glasgow and Edinburgh

AOCB

There was a request for a focus on Hindu-phobia in a future session. It was also noted that there will be a review and update on the Islamophobia inquiry.

The next meeting will be the AGM after the summer recess and the date will be confirmed in due course.