



## **Welsh Refugee Coalition - Submission to the Finance Committee to inform the scrutiny of the Welsh Government draft budget proposals for 2018-19**

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### **Introduction**

The Welsh Refugee Coalition was established in 2015. We are a coalition of organisations working in Wales with asylum seekers and refugees at all stages of their journey, and with the communities in which they live. We work together in the interests of asylum seekers and refugees and the communities that welcome them, to ensure that our resources are used to best effect and to speak with a coherent and strong voice on policies and practices affecting people seeking sanctuary in Wales.

Through collaborative work, the Coalition contributes to a more equal, globally responsible Wales with cohesive communities to make a Wales welcoming place of safety where rights are enjoyed and asylum seekers and refugees can thrive.

### **Q1. What, in your opinion, has been the impact of the Welsh Government's 2017-18 budget?**

Our main contribution is in response to question 2, but is clear that current budget to support refugees and asylum seekers falls short in areas such as language and integration support, advice and advocacy and prevention of destitution. This is having a significant impact on asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. Apart from the impact on the individuals concerned, lower levels of integration, employment or health are having a negative impact on Welsh communities and the economy.

### **Q2. What expectations do you have of the 2018-19 draft budget proposals?**

The Welsh Refugee Coalition was delighted with the Equality, Local Government & Communities Committee inquiry report 'I used to be someone'. The report focused on so many of the important issues affecting asylum seekers and refugees and recommended concrete steps to make Wales a 'Nation of Sanctuary'. It is also encouraging that Welsh Government has accepted or accepted in principle 18 out of the 19 recommendations put forward in the report. We are committed to actively working with Welsh Government and other partners to push these recommendations forward.

Whilst recognising that asylum policy *per se* is reserved to the UK Government, the Committee found that 'the degree to which asylum seekers and refugees are able to settle and play a full part in our communities depends largely upon the accessibility and quality of the devolved services for which the Welsh Government is responsible.'

Finance is obviously critical in any re-invigorated approach and we urge the Finance Committee to ensure that the 2018-2019 draft budget proposals take this into account across all relevant portfolios. Refugees and asylum seekers frequently have many skills to offer in Wales and effective pathways into employment are critical. The relatively modest sums involved in supporting their effective integration will reap strong rewards in terms of their subsequent contributions to our communities and economy.

Some of the key costs arising from the ELGC Committee's recommendations include:

- support to expand ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision so that classes are accessible and available promptly (Education & Skills);
- enabling university access by treating refugees as home students (Education);
- expand the role of community cohesion co-ordinators to encompass all refugees and asylum seekers (Communities & Children);
- National Support Service for Refugees to provide stronger mental health support as well as legal advice and health screening (Health, Wellbeing & Sport);
- Avoiding destitution and addressing needs of those left destitute through better accommodation provision and small grants within the Discretionary Assistance Fund (Social Services & Public Health);
- Provide for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) through a Guardianship service, better mental health support and age assessment (Communities & Children);
- ensuring (the re-named) Asylum Rights Programme has sufficient provision of legal advice and mental health support (Health/ Communities & Children).

We would expect to see financial provisions within the draft 2018-19 budget to ensure that Welsh Government is able to effectively deliver in these areas.

### **Q3. Preventative spending and how Welsh Government policies to reduce poverty and mitigate welfare reform.**

Whilst some asylum claims are settled rapidly, many extend over some months and even years. The costs of individuals not integrating into society or employment and of poor mental health can be significant and long-lasting. By contrast, effective integration will reap substantial benefits in terms of contributions to the Welsh economy, public services and communities.

Investing relatively modest sums for an effective approach to asylum seekers and refugees in Wales is therefore vital preventative spending that also helps alleviate long-term poverty. Effective support in Wales will be even more important as the impact is seen of UK-wide changes such as in Universal Credit and the 2016 Immigration Act.

Other areas where preventative spending would be beneficial include subsidised fares for asylum seekers and refugees on public transport which would reduce social exclusion and isolation, improve access to services and help reduce poverty. In addition, currently young asylum seekers leaving school and wishing to further their education face significant financial barriers as they are unable to access Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). This effectively stifles the progress and quashes the hopes of young people who, as asylum seekers are unable to work and due to current guidelines on access to EMA are unable to afford the costs of continuing their education. This will have a significant impact on the well-being of young asylum seekers but could also have longer term implications for community cohesion.

### **Signatories to this submission**

Asylum Matters  
 City of Sanctuary  
 Colwyn Bay Group of Amnesty International UK  
 Diverse Cymru  
 Evangelical Alliance Wales  
 EYST  
 Focal Point Merthyr  
 Displaced People in Action  
 Diverse Cymru  
 Hay Brecon & Talgarth Sanctuary for Refugees

Henna Foundation  
Hope Not Hate  
Mind Cymru  
Muslim Council for Wales  
Oasis  
Oxfam Cymru  
Race Council Cymru  
Race Equality First  
Red Cross  
Snap Cymru  
Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group  
Tai Pawb  
Together Creating Communities/ Trefnu Cymunedol Cymru  
Trinity Centre  
Tros Gynnal Plant  
Unity in Diversity  
Welsh Refugee Council  
Women Connect First