
Healthwatch Report - Asylum Seeker Experiences of Living in West Berkshire

Report being considered by: Health and Wellbeing Board

On: 23 February 2023

Report Author: Healthwatch West Berkshire

Report Sponsor: Healthwatch West Berkshire

Item for: Decision



1. Purpose of the Report

To present the experiences of asylum seekers living in West Berkshire and set out a series of recommendations for Health and Wellbeing Board partners and external agencies.

2. Recommendation(s)

For the Health and Wellbeing Board to:

- (a) note the report;
- (b) endorse the report's recommendations; and
- (c) ask key partners to act upon the report's recommendations and provide an update on actions that have been implemented to a future meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board.

3. Executive Summary

This report presents the results of Healthwatch West Berkshire's work to obtain feedback from asylum seekers currently housed in West Berkshire. A series of recommendations are made which are designed to address the issues raised.

4. Supporting Information

- 4.1 As part of the Covid Testing and Vaccination programme from September 2021 to March 2022, Healthwatch West Berkshire became aware of two local places housing asylum seekers through the Home Office.
- 4.2 During this period, we received information from partner organisations who helped us with the report, about the day-to-day life of asylum seekers in our area. We heard that asylum seekers were not getting enough to eat, offered the appropriate cultural food or food that was sufficiently hot. We also heard from Migrant Help (a voluntary sector telephone helpline contracted by The Home Office), The Home Office itself and some local health services that there were difficulties in engaging with relevant services.
- 4.3 The objective of the project was, in conjunction with voluntary sector organisations working with the residents, to gain a better understanding of asylum seekers' experiences of living in West Berkshire.

4.4 A survey was developed with voluntary sector partners to collect information on the wellbeing and welfare of asylum seekers housed in West Berkshire. Following initial trials, surveys were carried out between May and September 2022.

4.5 Issues highlighted by the survey included:

- Asylum seekers had not anticipated how long they would be staying in Home Office Contracted Contingency Initial Accommodation (HOCCIA), did not know how long they might be there, yet could be moved at short notice.
- A general feeling of being 'in limbo', which led to doubts around feeling safe and secure with the anxiety that generates.
- Lack of meaningful mental and physical activity leading to boredom, isolation and anxiety.
- Lack of information available to asylum seekers on arrival about how health services operate in the UK and what they have access to.

5. Options Considered

5.1 The recommendations listed in this report are considered to be the most appropriate ways of responding to the concerns raised by asylum seekers in West Berkshire and the organisations who work with them.

5.2 It is recognised that many of the issues highlighted arise as a result of imposed national policy. We have, therefore, tried to offer solutions and recommendations that can be actioned in West Berkshire.

5.3 Healthwatch West Berkshire, in conjunction with Healthwatch Wokingham Borough and Healthwatch Reading are talking to Ready Homes, who provide the HOCCIA, and the Home Office.

6. Proposal(s)

The report makes a series of recommendations, which are summarised below:

- **Provide more useful information** about how UK health and other services work.
- **Manage migration systematically** by considering the development of a Multi-Disciplinary Group bringing together all key stakeholders.
- **Improve food and nutrition** through discussions with Ready Homes and the Home Office.
- **Provide community outreach similar to the Homeless Outreach Team**, with a multi-skilled team who can offer support for physical and mental health issues.
- **Monitor women's health and safety**, including access to services, and take appropriate action.

- **Provision of activities (including volunteering), transport and education** are improved to address issues around boredom, isolation and access to medical appointments.
- **Assistance for families** to ensure their children can continue in the same school for at least six months.
- **Regular residents' independent wellbeing survey** to understand what actions have been taken to address the issues and the wellbeing of residents.
- **The effects of national issues and policies** are noted and any negative reactions are reported, with risk regularly assessed.

7. Conclusion(s)

- 7.1 It is hoped that this report will build on the remarkable work in West Berkshire by local services, voluntary sector, and the community, but also offer some help to residents to improve their present lives, impact on services and of course their health and wellbeing.
- 7.2 If actions are taken to reduce feelings of uncertainty and improve service access for asylum seekers, including gender-appropriate support, the more likely they are able to maintain their resilience to cope with what lies ahead.
- 7.3 We will follow up with key stakeholders in three months' time to hear what improvements and changes have been made.

8. Consultation and Engagement

- 8.1 The report was prepared with information and support from Refugee Support Group, Community United, Care 4 Calais and West Berks Action for Refugees.
- 8.2 We surveyed 47 asylum seekers living in West Berkshire.
- 8.3 Prior to publication, responses were obtained and included from: West Berkshire Council; BOB Integrated Care Board; Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust; and Thames Valley Police. The report was shared with Ready Homes (provider of the HOCCIA) but we did not receive a response.

9. Appendices

Asylum seeker experiences of living in West Berkshire, Healthwatch, February 2023

Background Papers:

Links to supporting information are included in the document.

Health and Wellbeing Priorities Supported:

The proposals will help achieve the following Health and Wellbeing Strategy aim(s):

- Reduce the differences in health between different groups of people
- Support individuals at high risk of bad health outcomes to live healthy lives
- Help families and young children in early years
- Promote good mental health and wellbeing for all children and young people
- Promote good mental health and wellbeing for all adults

The proposals contained in this report will help to achieve the above Health and Wellbeing Strategy priorities by focussing attention on the health and wellbeing needs of asylum seekers resident in West Berkshire.
