

W-ASH Good Practice Guide

1. General description of W-ASH's aims and services

In consultation with refugee community organisations, the Asylum Seeker Housing Project (ASH) was established by Community InfoSource in 2015. In response to evidence that women asylum seekers had particular needs, we then also set up the Women Asylum Seeker Housing project (WASH). Together they form the Women and Asylum Seeker Housing Project (W-ASH), which has the following aims;

1. To support asylum seekers with housing issues with the asylum accommodation provider
2. To raise awareness of poor and illegal practices by the asylum accommodation provider and to campaign for service improvements
3. To develop a volunteer programme aimed at asylum seekers living in asylum accommodation to raise awareness of their rights and provide training so that volunteers can assist other asylum-seeking residents to report repairs and resolve housing issues

The focus of the service was originally on housing Issues which included;

- General repair issues including problems with heating and hot water, dampness, replacement or supply of furnishings, rectifying water leaks, repair of supplied white goods including washing machines and fridge freezers
- Relocation requests to alternative accommodation due to changes in family composition or circumstances, current accommodation no longer suitable due to resident's health issues, residents being subjected to harassment, relationship breakdown between flat mates or families
- Supporting residents who had their Home Office asylum support and accommodation terminated due to receiving a negative or positive decision in respect of their asylum application

W-ASH has received on average 350 housing related requests for assistance a year, the majority (65%) from asylum seeker residents either by telephone call or text, with the British Red Cross being our most significant referral agency accounting for 25% of our cases.

Over the last few years, we have been working with more vulnerable service users particularly those who are at risk of destitution and homelessness. We secured additional funding to set up the Preventing Asylum Seeker Eviction Project (PASE) established in 2017.

PASE employed a dedicated worker in order to maintain regular on-going contact with these service users which enabled us to develop trusting relationships with these clients. Consequently, some of these service users divulged to us that they were survivors of torture, had emotional and mental health issues or experienced suicidal thoughts. We therefore developed referral procedures to enable these service users to access appropriate mental health and support services and an accompanying PASE Handbook which detailed the nature and scope of the service provided (attached).

2. Covid-19 impact

In March 2020, partly due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the asylum accommodation provider utilised hotels to accommodate new arrivals to the city who had recently lodged their claim for asylum. W-ASH has supported these residents as effectively as possible within our current capacity however we require greater resources to provide a comprehensive service, particularly as a high proportion have extra support needs including mental health issues. Many of them also have extra support needs, including mental health issues. We have therefore referred those we have worked with to relevant agencies including the NHS funded Asylum Health Bridging team, who are assisting with registering with GP's, accessing prescriptions and counselling.

In early 2021 a new Mother and Baby Unit was set up for asylum seeker mothers. This is an overcrowded and unsuitable facility which we and other agencies in the city feel does not meet the Home Office's [Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract](#) (AASC) standards. Again, we have supported the mothers in this unit with the limited resources we have, but more needs to be done to support them effectively.

W-ASH has also seen a rise during the Covid-19 Lockdown period in the number of residents in asylum accommodation expressing suicidal thoughts, self-harming or divulging that they are experiencing bouts of anxiety and depression, who we then refer for support to relevant agencies. We secured some temporary funding to establish a Wellbeing Project providing support with digital inclusion, shopping vouchers and social support through outdoors activities.

3. W-ASH good practice development

Through the experience of the last five years of the W-ASH project we have developed a number of good practice approaches which have been very effective:

Training volunteers with lived experience of asylum and relevant language skills, as key members of the advice and support team

The majority of our volunteers are current or former asylum seekers. Their lived experience means they are ideally placed to offer advice and support to more recent asylum seekers needing help. It also helps build trust with new clients when they realise that the support volunteer who is helping them has faced the same issues they have and sees the progress the volunteer has made. Many of our clients self-refer as a result of this important network of volunteers within the asylum communities who are also able to spread information about the project services by word of mouth.

We monitor the changes in language needs of the asylum seeker community over time and make sure that we recruit and train volunteer asylum seekers with the relevant language skills, to improve communication with service users. This means that our service is both trusted and accessible, with clients able to fully express their needs.

Training and information for asylum seekers on their housing rights and responsibilities, so they are more aware and confident to report their problems

The project runs outreach sessions in areas where asylum seekers are housed, working in partnership through local agencies and community groups that are in regular touch with asylum seekers (e.g. ESOL classes, foodbanks etc.). In these outreach training sessions we raise awareness among asylum seekers of their housing rights and responsibilities and we have also produced a *Rights and Responsibilities* leaflet (see attached) which has been distributed extensively to asylum seekers in Glasgow. We have produced this in 6 languages so that we can reach as wide a number of people as possible.

In the last three years we have supported asylum seekers to resolve over 1,250 housing issues. In doing so, we have always emphasised that asylum seekers should be aware of their rights, in relation to the casework and advocacy we carry out on their behalf and in supporting them to advocate for themselves and building the confidence to do so.

Training sessions for mainstream professional staff

We have also developed good quality training and PowerPoint presentations for use with professional staff in mainstream agencies, covering the terms of the Home Office contracts, the rights of asylum seekers and how to work effectively with this client group. This training has received very positive feedback from participants.

Trained volunteers are involved in helping us gather evidence of client need

Many of our volunteers are current asylum seekers and we have given them training in reporting housing issues, public speaking and research methodology. In 2019 we undertook a survey into the prevalence of housing staff entering flats with keys and without notice. After training our volunteers they conducted all of the research interviews themselves. The survey recommendations produced real change based on this evidence; when the new housing provider (Mears) took over the contract in Autumn 2019 they agreed that their staff would not enter flats without prior permission from the resident.

This training and experience also means that the volunteers themselves develop greater knowledge of their rights, build their work confidence, English language skills and evidence of UK based work experience that improves their future employability.

Providing a holistic service by making asylum seekers aware of and signposting them to a range of other support they can access

We have produced a signposting handbook (attached) and ensure that all service users we support are referred to relevant agencies where appropriate. We have built close collaboration with a wide range of community, statutory and private services within the city, who we refer to and who refer clients to us. This includes foodbanks, immigration and asylum lawyers, women's agencies, social services, NHS services (physical and mental health and services) education agencies, among many others. This ensures that our clients get their housing needs met and also access many other services they also need.

We are currently developing a Smart Phone Information App for new arrivals into Glasgow and supplying smart phones to those without, to prevent the digital divide. All of these phones have static information installed and the receiver is assisted in understanding how to use them.

Provision of tailored support to women by women staff and volunteers

Many of the women asylum seekers have suffered gender based violence and abuse, and there is a need for specific support with these issues. In response, we developed a Women Only aspect to the project, Women Asylum Seekers Housing (WASH). This is coordinated by a women staff member who recruits, trains and supports a team of women volunteers. These volunteers are trained for a similar role as the W-ASH volunteers and are able to provide support on reporting housing issues and can signpost to a wide range of women's organisations and provide peer support. This team has begun to extend support to the women in the Mother and Baby Unit in 2021, though resources are insufficient to provide the full support required.

Tailored Buddy support for those at risk of eviction to provide practice and emotional support during a very difficult time

Between 2017 and 2020, in response to the particularly difficult situation of asylum seekers facing homelessness and destitution when their asylum claim is refused, we set up PASE (Preventing Asylum Seeker Eviction) Service. In 2020, in partnership with the Scottish Humanitarian Project. PASE assisted 137 asylum seekers with submitting fresh asylum applications and reinstating their Section 4 accommodation and support, thereby ensuring that they were not evicted from their accommodation or left destitute.

During the lifetime of this project, staff and volunteers provided practical and emotional support for this client group including;

- Regular welfare calls and face to face appointments with W-ASH staff/volunteers for particularly vulnerable service users
- Referrals to food banks
- Assisting with applying for charitable grants
- Facilitating access to immigration and asylum lawyers to assist with further submissions in respect of service user's asylum applications
- Arranging appointments with housing lawyers
- Arranging medical appointments including GPs and referrals to specialist mental health support services
- Provision of bus vouchers to ensure that service users can attend appointments
- Assistance with reporting repairs to the accommodation provider
- Producing detailed handouts for people to take and/or distribute to friends advising of asylum seekers' rights and with support contact numbers
- Providing a notice for people to put on their door (inside or outside) advising that they are not leaving their accommodation and advising of

their lawyer's contact details; providing a detailed handout for people to take and/or distribute to friends advising of asylum seekers' rights and with support contact numbers

In April 2020, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Home Office announced a pause on all evictions of asylum seekers from their accommodation and a suspension of terminations of service users Home Office asylum support.

However, we note with concern the recent Home Office announcement that evictions may recommence from June 2021 onwards. If the proposed evictions do take place, W-ASH believes our previous PASE experience, of supporting asylum seekers facing potential eviction and destitution will enable us to meaningfully assist service users forced into this situation and minimise the numbers who may end up street homeless.

Community InfoSource

Albany Centre • 44 Ashley Street • Glasgow • G3 6DS

Telephone: 0141 258 2773 • Website: www.infosource.org.uk

Company No SC291462 • Scottish Charity No SC049135

