**West Midlands Migration Network Rights Thematic Meeting**

**9th November (10:00-11:00)**

Minutes

**Chair: Danai Papachristopoulou**

**Actions from previous meeting:**

* None

1. **Presentation on Better Pathways Project**

Brushstrokes in Smethwick are leading on this new funded Project seeking to improve support pathways and outcomes for those with No Recourse to Public Funds. They aim to identify good practice and develop a charter to implement this. There will be a Steering Group made of those with lived experience and representatives from the third sector.

Four policy briefs will be released over the next twelve months with the first circulated after this meeting highlighting issues around the EUSS scheme.

DP highlighted a related issue with a recent High Court judgement around access to Universal Credit for those with pre-settled status. The result is that if individuals in some cases who can demonstrate a real risk that they and their children cannot live in the UK in dignified conditions can access UC.

1. **Presentation on Cost of Living Issues from Birmingham Settlement**

A presentation was given around current benefits and debt issues currently experienced by Birmingham Settlement who provide support across West and Central Birmingham but also outreach at several locations around the city. Current trends see self-referrals at drop-in services as the largest source of contact. Enquiries are predominately around debt arrears (Council Tax, energy bills) but also around benefit entitlements. A recent significant trend is around how little surplus money individuals have access to post-COVID, this is particularly higher amongst individuals from ethnic minority communities. Social and private renters are being the most impacted, but there has also been an increase seen in those with mortgages.

It was highlighted there has also been an increase in the number of government grants available to both individuals and charities which many in the community are not aware of. Debt advisers at Settlement can assist in securing these in relevant cases.

1. **Presentation from Dr. Amanda Beattie (Aston University)**

Aston received funding from Midlands Innovation for a Project looking to identify best practice around refugee integration in the region. There were three main issues to be looked at:

* The relationship between Local Authorities and the UK government Refugee Resettlement Policy
* What accounts of best practice and hurdles emerge from everyday practice and implementation
* How do accounts of resettlement challenge or compliment the experiences of minority communities that support and experience resettlement in the region.

The local setting in Birmingham is challenging both due to the financial situation of the Council but also a significant portion of the housing stock not meeting standards.

Two focus groups were held with members of the refugee community as well as a set of semi-structured informal interviews and engagement with third sector and LA representatives.

Initial findings were that in the most part participants were happy with accommodation and felt supported by local communities. It was felt that the goal of a permanent, settled home would provide them with opportunities in the future. Male participants talked of work prospects and language training whilst women linked a house with the potential to build relationships and be part of a community.

In discussions with frontline practitioners it was found that many individuals themselves were from a refugee background which facilitated empathy and desire to go the extra mile and but also that there was a potential negative effect on their mental health. Roles was long hours that were sometimes needed to plug gaps in provision and also in signposting to appropriate support mechanisms and organisations. There was also a sense of frustration that that came about at the length of time that it took for the local authority to provide housing.

There was a need for an updated housing policy with Birmingham. Findings need to focus on gendered experiences within hotels and the experience of gender-based violence. It is also apparent that the current housing strategy clearly distinguishes between citizen and non-citizen’s accessing to housing.

Looking to the future, the Project is looking to expand on the findings from this first stage and develop solutions with a larger team at Aston. They are keen to involve practitioners so that solutions are effective and relevant to support communities. All attendees agreed that the need to build networks and solidarity around this issue is vital to identifying issues. LR highlighted work being undertaken in other areas of the sector that could provide learning opportunities.

1. **Any Other Business**

As Danai is stepping down as Chair in the New Year, expressions of interest are welcome from members who would like to take on the role.

1. **Date of next meetings and agendas**

Next meeting is to be held on the 14th December at 10am with a presentation from BSWAID on their current work and challenges.

Meeting Closed