

Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities and Human Rights Committee Inquiry into Destitution, Asylum and Insecure Immigration Status in Scotland

Written evidence from Positive Action in Housing - March 2017

About us

Positive Action in Housing is an independent homelessness and human rights charity supporting individuals and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds to have an equal chance to live, work and grow, free from poverty, homelessness, racism and xenophobia.

We assist those seeking refuge to overcome crisis situations, for example, the removal of basic human rights such as liberty, refuge, shelter and the right to work. We help new migrants to know their rights and access work. We assist established ethnic minority communities to overcome bad housing and challenge homelessness. By empowering people with information, we help individuals to make the right decisions about their future. Through casework, we challenge unfair decisions. We offer welfare advice and money skills. We offer proactive advice, crisis grants and shelter to those at risk of destitution who are trying to stabilise their lives. We provide volunteering and training. We lead human rights campaigns, most recently concerning the refugee crisis. We persistently challenge anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment.

Since 1995, we have supported over 12,000 vulnerable families and individuals with proactive advice, support and humanitarian assistance in the form of shelter, crisis grants and food.

Positive Action in Housing pioneered the concept of refugee hosting in Scotland in 2002. Iraqi refugees began to turn up in our office with no-where to stay after the Home Office had evicted them. They were forbidden access to emergency hostels or homelessness accommodation. Charities were told they could provide soup kitchens but no more. We challenged this thinking. Some of our staff and volunteers took people into their own homes and we developed the concept from there. Scotland should be proud as a country that the concept was pioneered here, providing a beacon of hope and resistance in the face of increasing resentment towards refugees, immigrants and Muslims.

In September 2015, the hosting programme went viral as a result of the media attention on the Syrian crisis. (www.wehaveroom.org.uk or www.roomforrefugees.com). We renamed the programme Room for Refugees. It has transformed thousands of lives since, of both hosts and their guests.

The charity is based in the City Centre of Glasgow and employs 12 members of staff. We have around 20 office based volunteers throughout the year. We have a global network of 5,799 volunteers – mainly Scotland, the UK and the US. These are families and individuals who are offering to be available to host and proactively assist people from refugee backgrounds in crisis situations.

Key Statistics

In 2015-16, Positive Action in Housing supported 1,114 families and individuals from 81 different countries of origin from our office in Glasgow.

Of this figure, we supported¹ 408 people who were destitute and 73 dependents.

¹ We provided shelter, crisis grants and proactive casework to refugees fleeing war arriving in Scotland. We have also begun distributing grants to Syrian refugees to assist their dependents to leave war zones and secure travel documents to join family members already here under the VPRS scheme.

We distributed over £41,000 in crisis grants through our Emergency Hardship Fund and intend to offer crisis grants to assist war refugees left destitute by the UK asylum process. In 2017, this figure is expected to increase to £50,000 as the numbers needing assistance increases.

In 2016-17 so far, Positive Action in Housing has so far provided shelter and crisis grants to the following numbers of people who were left destitute:

- 344 single people
- 31 destitute families
- 29 single parent families
- 15 couples
- 6 pregnant women
- 65 child dependents

The number of Syrians approaching us have tripled, the number of Eritreans has doubled.

The Room for Refugees hosting programme currently has 5,799 registered hosts in every part of Scotland - and the rest of the UK. This includes over 1,600 US citizens where the programme is still in development².

The programme has 214 referral partners. These are refugee aid organisations across Scotland and the UK who refer their destitute clients to the hosting programme in order to secure shelter. We have regularly receive referrals from the British Red Cross, Scottish Refugee Council, Refugee Survival Trust, Glasgow Night Shelter and Freedom from Torture, to name a few.

Since September 2015, Room for refugees has provided over 29,000 nights of shelter to destitute people. The programme is estimated to have saved the UK government and charities who refer to us over £870,000 in shelter costs alone.

The programme has been used to help us assist Glasgow City Council in accommodating unaccompanied child refugees dispersed in 2017 from Kent local authority. We also assisted two other local authorities recently who had a request about using the Room for Refugees programme to identify families for young people in their care. This hosting programme is remarkable in its ability to offer options in seeming hopeless situations.



The level of pastoral support afforded is immeasurable. The hosting programme has kept babies and children with their mothers when the local authority refused to accommodate the parents but offered to take away their children – who were otherwise well nourished and cared for. It has transformed lives and provided a temporary reprieve to vulnerable families and individuals, while their caseworkers and lawyers assist them to get legal resolution and then start new lives and find work. The room for refugees programme is proactive and effectively creating the taxpayers of tomorrow by giving a helping hand in a crisis. Refugees are

² The success of the programme is its online technology which enables us to “match” hosts and guests globally, working with caseworkers on the ground.

assisted in their time of need until they can gather strength and resources to rebuild new lives. Our hosts say that their lives are enriched by being able to give help. Strong bonds of friendship and love often form.

We believe this is better than the UK government’s approach which is to let people languish for years in the asylum process, in destitution or costly detention centres, with no clear answer.

A copy of the latest annual report can be found at www.positiveactionh.org

Response to Call for Evidence

Positive Action in Housing welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Committee’s Inquiry into Destitution, Asylum and Insecure Immigration Status in Scotland.



As previously stated we provide proactive advice, practical assistance and humanitarian support to people seeking refuge across Scotland. Our contributions to this inquiry is based on our experiences of supporting this group, particularly those who are destitute.

Asylum seekers are forbidden to start their lives, to seek work, to have a bank account or save money in order to stand on their own two feet. But why is someone who is seeking refuge in

this country not allowed to work? Why they are not allowed to hold a bank account? Why are they denied the opportunity to be independent human beings while they wait for years for a broken asylum process to properly consider their case for refuge? In Scotland, many go from being “reserved to Westminster” to “invisible and underground”. We have observed destitute people reach a point of hopelessness that they simply accustom themselves to living lives of enforced dependency on food bank handouts or on the charity of strangers and accept it as if it is their way of life now in this country.

We have observed a year on year increase in the number of destitute refugees and people seeking asylum who are accessing our services for emergency support such as food, shelter and crisis grants. See graph below.

We expect the numbers to continue to increase because of the ongoing refugee crisis, a residual long term destitution issue affecting refused asylum seekers, the implementation of the Immigration Act, and the prospect of widening asylum dispersal beyond Glasgow to the rest of Scotland. Of growing concern is the increasing number of children being referred to us for hosting with their parents because social workers are effectively threatening to separate children and babies from otherwise responsible and loving parents. We expect the number of destitute families approaching the service to increase greatly.

Scotland wide asylum dispersal will create further risks for increasing levels of destitution and isolation, leaving people, including children in vulnerable and potentially dangerous situations. We are therefore developing our emergency services to respond to the anticipated demand. Online referrals to the refugee hosting programme and emergency crisis grants will therefore be especially important.

Our refugee hosting programme is well placed to respond to requests for shelter outside Glasgow as

we have hosts and caseworkers in every part of Scotland and the system is ready to respond but needs more resources.

In addition, we are rolling out an **online** crisis grants system, to distribute a minimum of £45-£50K per year through casework organisations to the most vulnerable and needy people – this will consist of food cards, travel and crisis grants. The programme has been running successfully for 4 months and we are inviting a wide range of organisations to make referrals to the system. We welcome support from local authorities and the Scottish government as we develop this established emergency programme further.

We note that destitution is almost a guaranteed feature of the asylum process regardless of the merits of each person’s case. It can happen at any time during the asylum process. Some individuals may be entitled to support from the Home Office or Department of Work and Pensions, but delays mean individuals and their families become destitute.

What assistance do you think is required to help address the issue of destitution?

Positive Action in Housing believes there is a need for a Scotland wide approach to tackling destitution and we would appreciate the support of the committee and the Scottish Government of our work to further develop our online crisis grants system and the refugee hosting programme, Room for Refugees.

We think the public should be educated about the difference between destitution and homelessness and why a specific programme needs to be developed in order to fend off any criticism that this is just “more special treatment” for refugees and minorities.

We think measures should be put in place to allow people to hold bank accounts or debit cards into which money can be transferred. This would make it easier to give out crisis grants.

An approach should be made to the UK government to insist that people should be allowed to work, if this approach was adopted by the Home Office in 2002, then the UK government could have generated billions in taxes.

We have accepted several referrals from the British Red Cross and our own caseworkers concerning families with children and babies who are threatened by the Social Work Department with having their children taken away from them because they have been made absolutely destitute. These good parents are told that the children can be accommodated but not the parents. This frightens the parents that their children could be taken away and they become too scared to challenge the social worker or return for assistance. There is then the danger that families go underground and become more isolated, and that children’s rights become affected. But this goes against putting the best interests of the child at the heart of all decisions. How can it be better for a child to be placed in care than be kept with its own loving, responsible parents? The separation can have long term psychological impact on the children.

Positive Action in Housing believes that access to crisis grants, temporary shelter and independent proactive casework has a role in helping to prevent people becoming destitute or finding a way out of destitution. Our Lifeline service offers proactive casework to individuals, as well as online crisis grants and shelter through our hosts. The aim of the service is to help people to resolve their destitution and find a legal resolution in the medium to long term. However, we welcome measures by the Scottish Government to provide a safety net and welcome collaboration over our own established service.

Additional information about the Crisis Grants provided by Positive Action in Housing's Lifeline Project to Vulnerable Destitute Asylum Seekers Refugees and Immigrants without recourse to Funds – to be added to our original submission.

During the financial year 2016-17, Positive Action in Housing gave out £43,174.70 in hardship funds, £1000 of which was bus passes, and £1000 of which was Tesco food cards (£5 each).

£4,000 of funds are still in the process of distribution as 2017 is not over.

As of 1st March 2017, we gave out **2,578** plus 400 winter payments (one payment equivalent to one weeks support at around £20) – making a total of 2,978 payments in total. Payments ranged from £10 to £250 and a number of long term payments were made to the more vulnerable clients like women on their own, mothers with children, the sick, disabled and elderly).

As of 6 March 2017, we supported **over 400 unique** cases concerning destitute families and individuals, including 65 children and 6 unborn babies. Final figures will not be ready until the year end has finished. This long term support is essential to helping people turn round their lives, re-engage with solicitors and resolve their legal status. We do not simply provide humanitarian support alone, we are always looking for a long term plan and proactive casework and progress to be made for every client. The vision for this project is to provide hope and to produce the taxpayers of tomorrow. We do not see the UK Government ending destitution of those seeking refuge, if anything the problem will get worse as the refugee crisis progresses.

We would appreciate the Scottish Government supporting Positive Action in Housing in our endeavours to help those without resources of any kind and facing extreme poverty. We have developed a **Scotland and UK wide online crisis grants system** and a **Scotland and UK wide refugee hosting programme**. We deploy these programmes with proactive casework which we strongly encourage in our 216 partners across Scotland and the rest of the UK who utilise the refugee hosting programme and the crisis grants for their service users. These programmes were pioneered in Scotland and deserve strong support from the Scottish Parliament and Government as beacons of hope for those without hope. We would appreciate an acknowledgement and financial support to distribute the grants at grassroots level and turn people's lives around in the process.

CASE STUDIES ILLUSTRATING THE WORK OF THE LIFELINE PROJECT

Sahra

Sahra is 68 years old and originally from Iraq and speaks Kurdish Sorani. She fled Iraq in 2011 and became separated from her family, she claimed asylum in the UK in 2012. She approached several agencies including the British Red Cross without success. Sahra first approached Positive Action in Housing on 17/07/12. She was very vulnerable, distressed and looked confused. She had just received notice from the Home Office informing that her Home Office support would be stopped, as they felt it was safe for her to return to Iraq. We managed to calm Sahra and explained to her through one of our caseworkers who could speak Kurdish, that she had 28 days to appeal the Home Office decision. With no electricity or food in the house we provided regular crisis grants from our destitute funds, which helped Sahra sustain living in the flat while her solicitor applied for section 4 support. Three years later the police arrived at Positive Action on 15/09/15 with Sahra as she was found to be rough sleeping at a bus station. The police informed us that she had recently been evicted from her Home Office accommodation when her support was stopped. We managed to find accommodation for her

through our Room for Refugees scheme. This is a hosting scheme for destitute asylum seekers and refugees, and we matched her with a host called Rachel. While staying with Rachel, Positive Action in Housing contacted Rachel to get an update on how Sahra was. Rachel had become quite concerned about Sahra's wellbeing as often she would forget things, and in one instance she forgot to turn off the gas while cooking. Worried about Sahra's mental health, we arranged for Social Work to come and visit Sahra only to be told they could not support Sahra as she had no recourse to public funds. After a year of procrastination by a variety of organisations over the Section 4 submission, Positive Action in Housing wrote a strong letter to the NHS and all the agencies who were meant to support her. The Psychiatric consultant agreed to expedite the case and assess her condition and diagnosed her as having an early stage of dementia. As there was not much progress in Sahra's case we arranged an appointment with a new solicitor, who agreed to take on Sahra's case and identified that there is sufficient grounds to apply for section 4. Currently Sahra is still being hosted through Positive Action in Housing Room for Refugees and is continuing to receive crisis payments each month to help her continue to live with a host, while her solicitor is preparing to submit new evidence to apply for section 4 support. We also provide an interpreter at short notice so she can progress her application. We will continue to support and assist Sahra during this difficult time in her life, she is very isolated as she has a language barrier and no friends nor family in the local area.

Olive

Olive was pregnant in November 2015 whilst she was living care of a friend. However her friend had asked her to leave and find alternative accommodation as soon as possible. Without any family connections or further friends she could rely on Positive Action in Housing arranged for her to stay with a host in Glasgow. Her solicitor in the meantime was pursuing a possible judicial review in relation to her case. She had previously applied for section 4 support due to being in advance stage of pregnancy but as a result of administration error she was not provided with this support, and Olive gave birth to her baby son in June 2016. Whilst pursuing her asylum case Positive Action in Housing continued to support her through our register of host's as well financial support from our destitution fund which provided her the means to purchase basic essentials for her and her baby son. Whilst Olive was staying with a host she received temporary accommodation with the local authority's social services under its statutory duty (s17 of the Children Act 1989) towards Olive's baby son. Currently Olive continues to pursue her case under human rights legislation.

Rani

Rani, came to the UK from India in 2010 to study social care at college. While studying Rani worked part time in a care home to help pay for her studies and her rent. In 2011 her husband and her 5 year old son came to join her in the UK. Both Rani and her husband had part-time jobs so they were able to afford the rent for their flat. Their son started Primary one at the local school. The struggle for them began in 2014 when the Home Office refused to extend Rani visa and asked for her and family to return back to India. Rani and her family have nothing to go back to in India as they had sold most of their property and had accumulated huge debts to help for Rani's college fees. Another factor is their son Benedict knows no other country as he has been brought up in Scotland and has attended school here for the last 6 years. He does not speak Malayalam language. He also suffers from stammer in which he is receiving speech therapy on a weekly. He would not receive this type of care in India. After being referred by British Red Cross, on the 04/07/14 Rani and her family were still living in private rented accommodation which was being paid by their friends. POSITIVE ACTION IN HOUSING provided small grants to help purchase a bus pass for two months for them to travel to

solicitor's appointments and Home Office sign-on dates. By 25/07/16 Rani and her family became totally destitute as their friends could no longer help pay rent for their flat. POSITIVE ACTION IN HOUSING managed to secure accommodation through our Room for Refugees Scheme, this allowed them to stay with a host family. Valsamam and her family stayed with two hosts from Room for Refugees scheme and recently have moved in with a new host family. Rani and her family are hard workers who have always worked in Scotland. Even now when they are not permitted to work they spend most of their time volunteering in food banks or church projects. They are currently waiting for a decision for their Article 8 to be approved and are being provided support by POSITIVE ACTION IN HOUSING for accommodation and crisis payments to help them while their case is being decided by the Home Office. This is a worrying situation for them to be in. They want to live together in Scotland as they feel settled here.

Mohamed & Family

Mohamed and his young family were referred to Room for Refugees when their friends could no longer support them. Mohamed claimed asylum in the UK in 2010 due to death threats from the Sri Lankan government for creating a website that was critical of the Sri Lankan government. Initially Mohamed, his wife and their baby approached social services when his friends could no longer support them, but they were informed they can support their child only and not Mohamed nor his 7-month pregnant wife. At which point they sought help from British Red Cross who then referred the family to the host a refugee scheme. Positive Action in Housing were able to source temporary accommodation through the scheme, and Mohamed and his family stayed with hosts during which time they applied for section 4 support from the Home Office and Positive Action in Housing provided written support for the family to be given section 4 support given they have no right to work, destitute and no other means of supporting themselves. During the stay with a host the family were given section 4 support. Mentioning one of the hosts the family stayed with Mohamed said: "Gwen and Tony were very kind to my family. Tony and I went fishing some weekends and I forget for a few hours the stress of our situation. We caught a lot of fish! My wife felt safe to be by herself in their home. I hope one day we can properly repay their kindness."

Sannah

Sannah is young women from Pakistan. She came to the UK to study and met her future husband here. Sannah's husband was physically abusive towards her because he wanted her to have an abortion hence she fled the accommodation they were staying at. She sought help where she could and stayed with friends in Glasgow However the friend was only able to provide support on a temporary basis. Sannah approached social services for help. After Sannah was suffered from poor mental health caused by the stress and anxiety of her circumstance, and as a result she was hospitalised for a mental break down and her baby was taken into care by social services. Later Sannah was referred to Positive Action in Housing by social services upon her release from hospital. A meeting was held between Sannah, social services and Positive Action in Housing. We arranged due to the sensitivity of the case. Positive Action in Housing had to find a host who would be suitable to accommodate Sannah and her 5 months old baby After searching through the Room For Refugee database we found a family who were willing to take Sannah and her baby to stay with them Whilst she pursued her case to regain custody of her child. After attending a Children's Panel hearing it was deemed she was fit and well enough to regain custody for her child, aided by having some where safe and stable to stay via a Positive Action in Housing host. In the mean time she applied for asylum support from the Home Office for her and her baby, and Positive Action in Housing provided written support for this purpose.

Two months after approaching Positive Action in Housing Sannah and her baby were given asylum accommodation and support from the Home Office.

Hamid

After fleeing Iran due to the political regime, Hamid claimed asylum in the UK in 2007. He was initially provided with support by the home office until 2008. After his support was stopped. Hamid spent the next few years staying with various friends across Glasgow. As Hamid friends found it difficult to accommodate him, as they themselves were asylum seekers, they referred him to Positive Action in Housing on 02/10/15. With being destitute and in difficult situation Hamid was really upset and distressed. And didn't know what to do.

Positive Action in Housing found a volunteer host who agreed to take in Hamid. Since then Hamid has integrated well with the family and has become an integral part of the family. With things looking much positive for Hamid, he started concentrating on his future and started volunteering at Stobhill hospital three times a week working closely with nurses and providing friendship and stimulation for patients in the wards. With this new confidence, Hamid decided to apply to college for HNC care administrative practice in the hope of becoming a nurse one day. Recently Hamid went down to Liverpool to submit new evidence in regards to his case and is currently waiting for his section 4 decision. Hamid just wants to be given a chance to contribute to this country as he has spent a majority of his life in the UK.

About us

Positive Action in Housing is a Scottish Registered Charity SC027577.

We pioneered refugee hosting in 2002.

We hold a register of over 5,000 hosts ready to provide shelter and pastoral support to refugees fleeing war, persecution or torture.

In the past 18 months we have safely arranged over 25,000 nights of shelter. Refugees are assisted in their time of need until they can gather strength and resources to rebuild new lives. Our hosts say that their lives are enriched by being able to give help. Strong bonds of friendship and love often form.

To support this small charity doing a big thing, go to <https://mydonate.bt.com/donation/start.html?charity=81788> and make a regular donation.

Other ways of giving: www.positiveactionh.org/donate or donate via PayPal to donate@positiveactionh.org

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