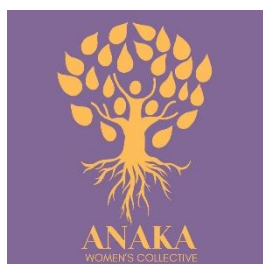


Briefing on the provision of childcare during substantive asylum interview in Belfast



Introduction to Anaka

Anaka Women's Collective (formerly SAWA) is a women's group based in Belfast, led and run by a group of women refugees and asylum seekers and in response to the needs of this community, provides support, skills, activities and a safe space for women refugees and asylum seekers. It is working to establish a childcare social enterprise.

The difficulties facing women attending for substantive asylum interviews with their children emerged from the group and the work to understand the extent of the problem and the best solutions has been carried out by participants with the support of VSB Foundation.

Background

Childcare was first provided as a pilot project at the UK Border Agency interview centre in Cardiff in September 2007. It was offered to single asylum applicants with young children during their substantive interview and delivered at the centre by qualified and experienced play therapy staff from a nearby community project. In 2009, an evaluationⁱ showed substantial benefits for applicants as well as the Agency in dealing with applications in a timely manner.

At this time the UKBA stated that they hoped to roll the Wales pilot out nationwideⁱⁱ. It was not until 2018 that childcare provision was provided at all 8 interview centres on the UK mainland. Belfast remains the only interview centre without any childcare provision. We are pleased that the Home Office is committed to addressing this and finding a solution for those single parents invited to interview at Drumkeen House in South Belfast.

The benefits of providing childcare for single parents of young children attending asylum interviews are well known and include:

- Shorter interviews and fewer interviews re-scheduled
- Better quality interviews as applicants can more freely disclose all relevant information
- Better decisions and fewer appeals
- Reduced anxiety and distress for applicants
- Less likely that information will be disclosed later, with associated costs and delays
- Children are not exposed to traumatic details of parents' case
- Single parents, the majority are women, are not disadvantaged by the asylum process

A lack of childcare provision raises issues with regard to:

- child protection obligations, including the UK Border Agency's own Code of Practice on keeping children safe from harm 2009
- equal opportunities duties
- the Gender Equality Duty 2007
- and under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which places additional statutory duties on public bodies here to address inequalities, including between genders, racial backgrounds and people with and without dependents.

Experience of women in Northern Ireland

In autumn of 2019, Anaka surveyed female refugees and asylum seekers connected with its services, to understand the impact which lack of childcare provision is having. While the number of asylum claims processed in Belfast is small, the impact on individual parents and children can be substantial. Our findings are summarised below.

1. The women said they found having to bring their children added to an already stressful experience. Many said it was distracting and made it hard to concentrate on what is an incredibly important interview.
2. Some women reported interview lengths of 4 and 5 hours – naturally children became bored, hungry, unsettled and upset.
3. Several women reported disruption or delays as they attended to their children, making the interviews even longer. One interview was almost abandoned after a baby started crying and wouldn't settle – this would have resulted in time and expense of rescheduling plus stress and uncertainty for the applicant, who would still be faced with bringing her child the next time.
4. Some women were offered colouring pencils or books for their children – suggesting staff recognise it is a tough ask for a child to sit quietly during the long interview. Worrying, two women said their children had been questioned by the interviewer.
5. Very distressingly, a number of women talked about the difficulty of recounting traumatic experiences in their home country in front of their children – or being faced with the choice of withholding details of what they suffered to protect their children, potentially undermining their asylum application. No woman should be faced with this dilemma.
6. Of those we spoke to, none felt they had the money to pay for a babysitter or other childcare while they attended the interview. A handful were able to make informal arrangements with friends, but this was not open to all – given that women had arrived in a new city with few family or social networks.
7. There was overwhelming support for the provision of childcare so women would not have to bring children to interviews. One woman said it would make a meaningful difference: "Protect kids from hearing unnecessary information. It will mean I can focus on the interview and not on my unsettled children."

"[It was] very difficult. I was nervous and the stress of the kids having to sit for long hours caused lots of difficulty for me... with the children being there the mind is not settled and makes it difficult to concentrate on the interview."

Single mother of a 7 and 12-year-old, interview during school holidays

"[It was] very difficult, my daughter was hungry and was crying a lot. When she cried it confused me and distracted me. Also my older children could understand and I was forced to share information in front of them which they did not know. This affected my children as I had previously hid details about what happened."

Mother who's pre-school and older children attended 5-hour interview

"At first when we started my son was crying and that made the interview a little bit difficult because we couldn't continue so I was asked to take a break or the interview be changed for another day but I managed to put him to sleep. [Childcare] will make the interview faster and without any disturbance."

Single mum of a 23-month-old

"[Provision of childcare would make...] So big difference because we stay long time, the kids so bored. Also when you remember what happened you feeling sad and cry – I prefer the kids don't see that."

A mum of three school-aged children who had to bring them to the interview

Recommendations

- There was universal support for making childcare available for single parents during substantive interviews and those asked would like to see it provided as soon as possible. This would bring provision in Belfast in line with other UK Border Agency centres.
- In terms of the best arrangements locally, the women would welcome further discussion and input into the options, including the availability of a room on site, experienced childcare providers close to the centre, and Anaka's proposed childcare project (though this has been delayed by the pandemic).
- The proposed provision is for single parents of pre-school aged children – yet we have spoken to a number of mothers of older children who had interview times during the school holidays so had no choice but to take their children. Given their age and understanding, the impact of hearing their mother's stories can be particularly distressing. If no provision is being made for children over five, how will the Home Office ensure that interviews take place within school term time?
- Likewise, some women reported interview lengths of 4 or 5 hours. For a single parent of primary aged children in particular, it would be impossible to have such a lengthy interview and return to school in time to collect to children. If provision is to be restricted to pre-school children, how can you ensure interviews take place within the school day and allowing for travel time?
- Some women also reported their children had been questioned by the UK Border Agency official during their mother's substantive interview. This is totally inappropriate – what further steps will be taken to ensure this doesn't happen?

Briefing compiled by Christine McCartney on behalf of VSB Foundation's Voice of Migrant Women Project.

ⁱ "Review of Child Care Pilot UK Border Agency Regional Office Wales & South West" by Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership

ⁱⁱ Timeline is set out in "Childcare in Asylum Interviews: The story of a successful campaign" available at <https://consonant.org.uk/childcare-in-asylum-interviews-the-story-of-a-successful-campaign/>