



## Ending Asylum Destitution Conference

“What a scandal it is to have so many homeless in a wealthy country like ours-how much more so that so many are homeless by government decree.”

These are the words of Father Richard McKay, Chair of Bristol City of Sanctuary and moderator of the Ending Asylum Destitution conference. Over 180 delegates, representing 29 UK cities, attended the conference on March 6<sup>th</sup> 2015 in Bristol, all with the express aim of ending asylum destitution. And what a conference it was! The determination in the air was palpable, and it was fair to say that there was a feeling that real, concrete change to the inhumane policy of enforced destitution will be made.

The conference was opened by Bristol’s first elected mayor, George Ferguson. He recently took part in a sleep out to highlight homelessness within the city. He spoke of how Bristol’s diversity enriches us, and how immigration is a “huge opportunity for development.” He declared that whilst he is proud that Bristol is a City of Sanctuary, he is “not proud of the fact that Bristol is not a fair city”, calling it an “absolute disgrace that in a wealthy city there are so many destitute” people. He expressed his gratitude to the agencies in Bristol who support sanctuary seekers, and assured that Bristol City Council would give as much support as they could afford, asking for feedback as how best to do this.

The keynote address was followed by arguably the most important and valuable part of the conference; the opportunity to hear from those who had experienced destitution. Five local asylum seekers addressed the conference, each with their own account of the distressing effects of destitution. It was impossible not to be moved, as individuals spoke articulately of their feelings of shame, of loss, and of despair.

“Being destitute  
nobody will think  
you are  
somebody”

“We ran from  
violation of human  
rights and have come  
to a place where our  
rights are ignored.”

“It is a long walk  
to freedom and I  
am still walking  
even now.”

“You are not a  
person at all”



# City of Sanctuary

Delegates then heard from Sarah Teather MP, a vocal opponent of the anti-asylum seeker rhetoric that can be found both in the media and in government. She pointed out that homelessness can affect people from all walks of life, adding that “if you bear that in mind you are forced to make a connection with the person standing in front of you.” She went on to stress that destitution was not and should not be the shame of asylum seekers, but that it is everybody’s shame, blaming the direction of government policy towards fear and misinformation. She told of the dysfunctional system of disbelief, which forces those seeking sanctuary to tell their story over and over, whilst accusing them of lying; importantly “the interpersonal encounter with the system is what leaves them most bruised.” Not only that, but the numbers whose asylum claims are accepted after so many attempts is a startling indication of a system riddled with poor decision making. She went on to criticise the punitive Section 4 support as being insufficient; if somebody is unable to return home, she asked, then why are they not allowed to work? She condemned the current culture of deterrence, stating that “it is unacceptable to make people destitute as a means of trying to get them to go home,” adding that we should all hold out hope that politicians will move for change if they really hear what is happening.

We then heard from Jonathan Ellis from the British Red Cross and Vice Chair of City of Sanctuary who facilitated an open discussion on the subject. He stressed the value of working together, before introducing Gillian Douglas, Service Manager, Bristol City Council Housing Options, who thanked the voluntary sector for enabling Bristol City Council to offer support and for working in areas where the Council cannot. She impressed the need for more private landlords to work with the council in providing housing for sanctuary seekers, promising that the Council would support them in this.

“Constantly having to give painful details is mental torture.”

“The worst time of my life I’ve seen in this country.”



“Why on earth we cannot let people who are cannot go home to work is beyond me!”

“Destitution is disgusting, inhumane, disgraceful...a shame for the UK as a . . .”

“Destitution shames everyone. I expect to be able to help myself, but I am just seen as rubbish.”

Following on from Gillian, delegates were invited to the stage to share their experiences of good practice. We heard from EMMAUS, an organisation which provides accommodation to homeless people, including spaces for destitute asylum seekers. We also heard from Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre, who work closely with the City Council, providing different services such as supported refugee housing units. There were many more brilliant examples from organisations from around the United Kingdom, all giving inspiration as to how each of us can work collectively to alleviate the suffering that destitution causes.

After lunch, and a chance for delegates to network with each other, Mike Kaye from Still Human, Still Here, a coalition of organisations campaigning for an end to the destitution of refused asylum seekers, addressed the conference. He articulated the national aims of the alliance; to improve the decision making process, an end-to-end system, the right to work after six months and free access to healthcare. He declared that preventing destitution benefits all, helping to decrease incidences of begging and exploitation and also impacting heavily the number of those who use A&E; being street homeless you are six times more likely to use A&E.

Kerry McCarthy MP then took to the stage to stress the importance of changing public and political attitudes. She spoke of the need to combat the myths surrounding asylum. She also highlighted the right to work, emphasising that those whose claims have been rejected but who cannot be removed should be allowed to work.

Following the speakers, delegates split into six workshops. Please see attached for the write up of each workshop, aimed at coming up with practical and achievable aims for ending asylum destitution.

Stephen Williams MP was the penultimate speaker, who spoke about the judicial system of decision making. He then challenged one of the myths that is unfortunately propagated around asylum, saying that “most of the people I’ve met are hardworking intelligent people - that’s why they’ve come here!”

“Concern about destitution should not just be sentimental but practical.”



# City of Sanctuary

The conference culminated with Mayor George Ferguson signing the Ending Asylum Destitution statement, committing to address asylum destitution, whilst considering several practical measures to be taken both locally and nationally. Please find the statement attached.

Ending the conference, Father Richard McKay said that we have to “find a new courage and a new determination to change this evil in our land.” This conference was the perfect stepping stone, but it is our responsibility to ensure that we work together to end asylum destitution.

“People of all sorts of different political persuasions, of all sorts of backgrounds, and all sorts of faiths are coming together to say we are proud of making our country a welcoming place.”