

The Bishop of Stafford: The Rt Revd Geoffrey Annas
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The Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Minister of State for Immigration

November 13th 2018

Dear Minister,

Re: The Impact on Asylum Seekers of the Closure of the Reporting Centre in Stoke on Trent

As I am sure you are aware we have a large number of men, women and families who are living in the City of Stoke on Trent and the surrounding area of North Staffordshire as they wait for the Home Office to process their claim for asylum.

I understand that that there is a need for churches and other voluntary groups in this City to try to support those seeking asylum from often horrific previous experiences as best we can. However, the closure of the Northern Area Custody Suite based in Etruria, Stoke on Trent (without any prior warning or discussion with local people) is really unacceptable.

I realise that not all asylum seekers are required to report regularly but since August 2018 those who do so have received a new BAIL 201 form telling them to go to Dallas Court in Manchester – which is in fact outside of Manchester in Salford. Some had just a few days to make arrangements before they needed to go and there was no information given to them as to how they should get there or how they were to pay the travel costs.

The cost of transport to Dallas Court from Stoke is at least £20 per person. This covers train fare and the bus journeys. The coach is cheaper but takes longer and terminates further away from the reporting centre thus making the journey more difficult. Even when using the train the journey takes at least two hours from Stoke to the Dallas Court.

Many find it hard to find the Dallas Court and once there I have heard stories of people having to queue from 2 to 4 hours outside without any cover.

As those in receipt of asylum support receive just £37.75 per person per week to cover all their essential needs and of course are not allowed to work as they would wish to do, these people simply cannot afford to go to Salford. An added difficulty is when they are given appointments early in the day when the fares are more expensive. I am told of one person who had to spend the night in Manchester in order to make his early morning appointment.

Failure to comply with the bail conditions that are imposed can result in fines, detention or asylum support being stopped. This can also be taken into account negatively when further applications or submissions are made to the Home Office.

There has been little or no consideration of people's disabilities or vulnerable circumstances or safeguarding issues. If you wish I would be able to supply you with a number of stories from those working with asylum seekers here on a daily basis to substantiate this.

Clearly this whole situation is adding to the distress of those already carrying the scars of their previous lives and the increased stress and anxiety exacerbates depression and other mental health conditions,

All agencies and churches working with asylum seekers in this City have seen a significant increase in their workload because of this situation – in August the number of people contacting Citizens Advice rose by 28% and a third of those presented this issue.

As Chair of the Stoke On Trent Hardship Commission I know that this problem comes at a time when we are also facing increased demands of those who are homeless and rough sleeping or living in poverty because they are earning a minimum wage. The introduction of Universal Credit has hit this City in a hard way and our Food Banks are struggling to cope with the extra pressure. There is little sign of austerity ending in Stoke on Trent and the move of the Reporting Centre is an unnecessary additional burden on our volunteers.

A meeting was held with the Reporting and Offender Management (ROM) Team on the 5th September 2018 but although the difficulties were accepted by ROM and possible solutions to ease the problems were proposed, it was impossible for them to make any firm commitments or give an indication of timing. Thus far we have not seen any improvement in the situation.

Despite the offer of some concessions from ROM the current reporting arrangements for those in Stoke on Trent remain impractical, unsafe and unsustainable. They put people at risk of harm and of breaking their bail conditions which carry serious consequences for them.

I therefore request that you consider finding a more suitable reporting venue in Stoke on Trent. Until a new venue is opened I ask you to consider that:

1. Travel costs for all supported and unsupported asylum seekers and care-leavers should be provided and this should include the cost of travel to Stoke Station for those living outside of the City centre.
2. Those who are medically unfit to travel to Dallas Court should not be required to report.
3. Single parents should not be required to report on a frequent basis and the travel costs for their whole family should be covered.
4. Clear directions as to how to find Dallas Court should be issued to all who are required to report there.

I would be grateful for your reply as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

+Geoffrey Stafford

Bishop of Stafford

