



Subject:	Access to Council leisure facilities for asylum seekers
Date:	17 th June 2022
Reporting Officer:	David Sales, Director of Neighbourhood Services Rose Crozier, Interim Director of Neighbourhood Services
Contact Officer:	Noel Munnis, Partnership Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	To present proposals for asylum seekers in Belfast to access Council leisure facilities.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The committee is requested to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The proposal below to grant registered asylum seekers access to Council leisure facilities free of charge or at a substantially reduced rate.• The rationale presented in support of the unique restrictions and hardships associated with living under asylum seeker status.

3.0	Main report
3.1	<p data-bbox="272 226 432 255"><u>Background</u></p> <p data-bbox="272 275 1469 456">In recent years, resulting from conflicts around the world, we have experienced an increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving in Belfast. The relatively small but steady stream has accelerated during high profile conflicts/migrations in for example, Syria, Afghanistan and more recently Ukraine.</p> <p data-bbox="272 526 1469 607">Asylum seekers experience a unique set of hardships while waiting for government determinations on their asylum seeker status.</p> <p data-bbox="272 676 1469 757">City and Neighbourhood Services has received a number of requests seeking free of charge or substantially reduced rates for asylum seekers to access our leisure facilities.</p>
3.2	<p data-bbox="272 831 1469 958">Offering concessions solely to asylum seekers does present equity dilemmas, however it should be acknowledged that the situation for asylum seekers is slightly different for the following reasons.</p> <p data-bbox="272 1028 1031 1057">Asylum seekers experience a greater level of hardship as:</p> <ul data-bbox="320 1126 1469 1563" style="list-style-type: none"> a) they cannot access the labour market. b) they cannot open a bank account. c) many do not have a residential address (as most are accommodated in hotels). d) their allowance of £39 per week is about half of what others on benefits would receive. e) they are extremely isolated and many are suffering from the trauma of the refugee journey. f) mental ill-health is particularly high. g) they are not able to work and don't have established family networks here, leading to extreme isolation which hampers their sense of integration and inclusion in Belfast. <p data-bbox="272 1632 1469 1760">The Home Office does not produce exact figures for asylum seekers. However, the total for Northern Ireland is believed to be circa 2,500. The proposal below would only apply to asylum seekers housed in Belfast accommodation.</p>
3.3	<p data-bbox="272 1834 1469 1962">Most asylum seekers are assessed within a few months but unfortunately in some cases there are long delays and in extreme cases they can remain as asylum seekers for in excess of twelve months.</p>

	<p>Following assessment asylum seekers are either deported, where their application is rejected, or granted 'refugee' status, if their application is upheld. When an asylum seeker is reclassified as a refugee, they immediately have access to housing, the labour market, banking services, health care and income support. Essentially the same rights as any other citizen.</p>
3.4	<p>Leisure provision can be key to asylum seekers' long-term integration but moreover, in the short term, an essential means of alleviating isolation, mental health issues and the trauma associated with the refugee experience.</p> <p>£39 per week is already a struggle for people paying for food, mobile data to communicate with family, buying clothes to suit local weather conditions, toiletries, bus passes, etc. plus children's essentials from nappies to schooling items.</p> <p>Our current concession rate for Health & Fitness Membership is £18.30 per month (£36.55 full price). The concession rate would put membership of our leisure centres beyond the reach of asylum seekers living on £39 per week. A Health and Fitness Membership package includes access to all centres for gyms, pools and classes plus some facility bookings.</p> <p>Attached at Appendix 1 is a Briefing paper produced by the Law Centre which supports this initiative.</p>
3.5	<p><u>Proposal</u></p> <p>That members consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Free of charge Health and Fitness Membership for asylum seekers for a period of 3 months, andb) A reduced rate of £5 per month, for subsequent 3 month blocks, for Health and Fitness Membership for the duration of their asylum seekers' status (to be renewed every 3 months).
3.6	<p>GLL have confirmed that they are in agreement with the above proposal and the resulting processing implications.</p>

3.7	<p><u>Summary</u></p> <p>Members are asked to consider the background information provided and the special circumstances associated with being an asylum seeker. In particular the specific restrictions set out above at 3.2.</p> <p>Members are further requested to consider the free of charge and reduced rate proposal set out above at 3.5.</p> <p><u>Communications & Public Relations</u></p> <p>None</p> <p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There would be no additional expenditure associated with the above proposal for BCC or GLL.</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>This report has been prepared in consultation with officers from the Council's Equality and Good Relations unit and in full acknowledgement of the equity considerations involved.</p>
4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	Appendix 1 - Promoting improved mental and physical health through gym membership for persons seeking sanctuary in NI