

Report by a Delegation that visited a Refugee Home in Velbert on August 28th 2011

The outer appearance of the houses hasn't changed since the first delegation came to visit the home on May 7th of last year [1, 2]. Numerous boards are missing from the outside walls; the insulation material lies bare or is not even there anymore. All in all, the houses look decrepit. As early as 16 months ago, following a visit by journalists and the integration council, representatives of the town of Velbert claimed that administrative work was 'going full steam' to improve the living conditions in the home [3].

The town's social committee is obviously being lied to, since practically nothing has happened. The showers in the cellar were repainted once – but the walls are still damp and have mould and moss growing on them. In one out of the four buildings the rooms on the ground floor have been repainted. The showers still do not have doors, so people can come in any time. A hole on the side facing the street is provisionally covered with a plastic bin.

The town council's claim that the houses at the back are currently being renovated is obviously untrue. Children show us the houses: they are boarded up but don't appear to have had any construction workers in them during the last weeks or months. The residents have not seen any workers, either.

It is true that an electric line to the building has been repaired and a hole has been filled, the children tell us. However, there is no renovation work 'going full steam' to be noticed.

We meet approximately 20 adults and about seven children. People are unanimous about the bad state of the home. The showers in the cellar are especially annoying.

A few weeks ago a loose window pane dropped on a baby's head, fortunately without causing any serious injury. The window hasn't been fixed; the glass is still missing.

The children tell us in great detail about the problems they see in the home. While their relations to each other are very good, they suffer from their living conditions. They are embarrassed when their friends and relatives comment on the state of the building saying, 'I could never live here' or 'It's so run-down'. When strangers walk or drive past, the children feel stared at.



There's not enough space for them either: several families live in units where empty rooms are locked. In one case seven people (parents and five children) share three rooms, while several adjoining rooms are locked. In another case six women share a kitchen with three children.

Another dangerous factor is the fact that some people in the home have infectious diseases such as hepatitis C. They are ashamed, or they worry that they might pass their disease on to their flatmates, with whom they are forced to live in an extremely confined space.

Problems like the use of the kitchen, the washing machines (there are not enough of them and there isn't one on every floor), but also noise and lack of space regularly cause conflicts between the residents, who often have difficulty communicating because of the language barrier.

The children say they are scared because the doors are not locked and strangers come in and break things (including during the night). Things get broken regularly. It is also common for homeless people to look for a place to sleep in the home at night.

In addition, the children are irritated by smoke in the rooms and cigarette butts. They use the time of our visit to make a sign: 'Please do not throw cigarette butts down in the hall. We hope you'll follow the rule!'

To some refugees – especially those who haven't been here for a long time – the situation in the home is less important than their fear of being deported or their wish to learn the language. Others have given up and don't expect anything to change – there have been too many meaningless promises. And there are some who would like the home to be closed down, but who do not dare speak to us.

On our way back to Wuppertal we felt the way we did after our first visit in April 2010, before the first public delegation came to the home: nobody should live in a place like that. Homes like the one in Velbert, homes that only serve the purpose of isolating and stigmatising refugees, should not be allowed to exist. During our follow-up visit, a woman from the home said, 'It's a struggle to live here day by day. I can't stand it much longer!' In addition to being forced to live in the home, people are bullied and intimidated by public authorities. They cut down the refugees' social benefits and threaten them with deportation, demoralising them and putting them under high mental pressure.

On our way home it was perfectly clear: together with refugees from Velbert and all of our other friends we will monitor the situation in the home closely and inform the public about what is going on there. We want to work with the refugees' community in Velbert to make sure the home is closed down. The first place to defend human rights is our own neighbourhood.

CARAVAN for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants - Wuppertal

Sources:

[1] <http://thecaravan.org/node/2417>

[2] <http://thecaravan.org/node/2425>

[3] <http://www.derwesten.de/staedte/velbert/Katastrophalear-Zustand-id2951967.html>