

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

16 NOVEMBER 2017

**REPORT OF PLACE
SELECT COMMITTEE**

CABINET DECISION

Lead Cabinet Member – Access, Communities and Community Safety – Councillor Steve Nelson

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF ASYLUM SEEKER SERVICES

1. Summary

The attached report presents the outcomes of the Place Select Committee's review of Asylum Seeker Services.

2. Recommendations

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) a clear pathway and information about what asylum seeker services are on offer in Stockton-on-Tees is provided.
- 2) acknowledging the frequent issues raised in relation to unrelated adult asylum seekers being forced to room-share, the Committee strongly object to such practice, but note that any attempts at preventing this would be difficult to enforce. The Committee does however encourage the Government to consider the position on room-sharing of unrelated adults when forming the post-2019 asylum contracts.
- 3) the North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) should ensure it continues to effectively represent the views of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, in the context of effective representation and involvement of all Local Authorities in the region.
- 4) there should be closer working with local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations, including:
 - a) ensuring that asylum seekers have the confidence and awareness to support their ability to raise issues of concern to the VCS and the Council, contributing to the intelligence needed to support action such as targeted inspections (of poor quality private rented accommodation) where necessary.
 - b) enhanced links with refugee-led community organisations (RCOs) via the Regional Refugee Forum North East to increase understanding of asylum seeker issues/concerns.
 - c) continued development of hate crime reporting processes to ensure asylum seekers and refugees have the confidence to report issues.

- 5) information-sharing between agencies is strengthened to ensure joined-up processes, including:
 - a) notifications from local delivery partners of Home Office decisions (for leave to remain, discontinued, fled, deported), communicated via G4S and/or their contracted accommodation partner, be shared with Housing and Education teams as soon as possible to enable effective planning and provision to be made across all relevant partners.
 - b) the establishment of a clear protocol for asylum seeker children school admission, with key information provided to the Admissions Team and schools for the purposes of a robust induction, should form part of the planning for new contracts post-2019.
- 6) there is a need for additional opportunities for asylum seekers to access basic/fundamental English language courses or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.
- 7) the Government is encouraged to ensure that, when forming the post-2019 asylum contracts, an approach is taken which would enable aspects of provision, such as support, to be met by local partners. The Local Authority can then explore the feasibility of bidding for elements of the post-2019 asylum contracts once these have been confirmed.

3. Reasons for the Recommendation(s)/Decision(s)

The report presents the findings of the scrutiny review of asylum seeker services which had been carried forward from the agreed 2016-2017 work programme.

4. Members' Interests

Members (including co-opted Members) should consider whether they have a personal interest in any item, as defined in **paragraphs 9 and 11** of the Council's code of conduct and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with and/or taking account of **paragraphs 12 - 17** of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest, as described in **paragraph 16** of the code, in any business of the Council he/she must then, **in accordance with paragraph 18** of the code, consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest and the business:-

- affects the members financial position or the financial position of a person or body described in **paragraph 17** of the code, or
- relates to the determining of any approval, consent, licence, permission or registration in relation to the member or any person or body described in **paragraph 17** of the code.

A Member with a personal interest, as described in **paragraph 18** of the code, may attend the meeting but must not take part in the consideration and voting upon the relevant item of business. However, a member with such an interest may make representations, answer questions or give evidence relating to that business before the business is considered or voted on, provided the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose whether under a statutory right or otherwise (**paragraph 19** of the code).

Members may participate in any discussion and vote on a matter in which they have an interest, as described in **paragraph 18** of the code, where that interest relates to functions of the Council detailed in **paragraph 20** of the code.

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

It is a criminal offence for a member to participate in any discussion or vote on a matter in which he/she has a disclosable pecuniary interest (and where an appropriate dispensation has not been granted) **paragraph 21** of the code.

Members are required to comply with any procedural rule adopted by the Council which requires a member to leave the meeting room whilst the meeting is discussing a matter in which that member has a disclosable pecuniary interest (**paragraph 22** of the code).

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RECOMMENDATIONS

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- 5) information-sharing between agencies is strengthened to ensure joined-up processes, including:

- a) notifications from local delivery partners of Home Office decisions (for leave to remain, discontinued, fled, deported), communicated via G4S and/or their contracted accommodation partner, be shared with Housing and Education teams as soon as possible to enable effective planning and provision to be made across all relevant partners.
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DETAIL

1. The Government has made a long-term commitment to support individuals seeking asylum in the UK. The Home Office is responsible for the management of this process, both in terms of asylum dispersal and enforcement in relation to the removal of individuals not granted leave to remain, and have had to deal with unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers arriving in the United Kingdom (there had been a year-on-year increase for arrivals which had exceeded initial projections, and it was anticipated that this figure would continue to rise year-on-year).
2. Stockton-on-Tees continues to act as a major dispersal area for asylum seekers. The Home Office has made a commitment to reducing the number of new arrivals in Stockton in the long-term to reduce the risk of the agreed Home Office threshold total being exceeded. The current agreement for Stockton is a 'one in, one out' approach so that the figure remains static.
3. The issue presented the Council with a number of challenges and opportunities, and the Committee's work focused on the following:
 - To ensure that asylum seekers are welcomed and assimilated as effectively as possible in order to ensure social cohesion is maintained
 - To assess the effectiveness of Council and partner support services, including housing, health, education (inc. Early Years), community safety, and role of voluntary and community groups, and any gaps in provision/co-ordination
 - To understand the demand for services in the future, and the impact of this on current providers and what new responses may be needed.
 - To assess the effectiveness of information sharing and quality of strategic planning with the NE Migration Partnership, including its role in representing the views of Stockton Council.
4. In order to inform the review, the Committee considered evidence from a number of key stakeholders involved in local asylum seeker service provision, including G4S (nationally commissioned housing provider), Migrant Help (nationally commissioned advice and information contract), the North East Migration Partnership (NEMP), the Local Authority, Arrival Medical Practice, the Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS) and Cleveland Police.

Regional and local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations provided details of their role in offering support to asylum seekers, as well as representing asylum seeker views and concerns - this included responses to a VCS questionnaire which was circulated to refugee-led community groups (RCOs), local churches and other relevant asylum seeker service providers.

In order to hear the direct views of those working with individuals seeking asylum, as well as from asylum seekers themselves, Committee Members visited the Arrival Medical Practice and Stockton Baptist Tabernacle Church.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

5. This report is not subject to an Impact Assessment.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6. Some of the recommendations may be addressed through the funding obtained following the recently successful Controlling Migration Fund bid.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7. None.

RISK ASSESSMENT

8. This review is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

COUNCIL PLAN POLICY PRINCIPLES AND PRIORITIES

9. The review supports the following Council policy principles:
- Protecting the vulnerable
 - Promoting equality of opportunity
 - Developing strong and healthy communities

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

10. There are no direct implications in the report.

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD/COUNCILLORS

11. The Committee have received evidence as set out in the final report of the Place Select Committee.

Name of Contact Officer: Gary Woods

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Education related?: Yes

Background Papers: None

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors: n/a

Property: Asylum Seeker Housing