

SUPPORT FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

BACKGROUND

1. The Government has made a long term commitment to support individuals seeking asylum in the UK who are fleeing violence, persecution and political instability. In order to support this work the Home Office is responsible for the management of this process both in terms of asylum dispersal as well as enforcement in relation to the removal of individuals not granted leave to remain.
2. Previously Local Authorities were part of the asylum dispersal process and delivered a service on behalf of the Home Office. Arrangements with Local Authorities came to an end in 2011/12. At that time, the annual cost to the Home Office of providing accommodation for asylum seekers was £150 million. In line with wider financial challenges, the Home Office identified a need to reduce the level of spend and In March 2012, signed six new contracts called COMPASS (Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support) with three providers – G4S, Serco and Clearel, to deliver asylum dispersal across the UK. The contracts were initially agreed until August 2017 with the option of an additional 2 year extension. Under the new contracts the Home Office aimed to save around £140 million over seven years.
3. In the North East, G4S were awarded the contract and they sub-contracted with JOMAST to act as their private sector housing provider. Under the terms of the COMPASS contract the provider had to ensure that arrangements were in place to process asylum seekers in a number of central locations as well as arrange transport to suitable accommodation. In terms of wider support the contract allowed for asylum seekers to be supported to sign up for health care services as well as signposting to additional support services and facilities in the local area. No provision was made available for wider social support and integration. The main involvement of the provider is on a housing management basis.

WHAT SUPPORT DO ASYLUM SEEKERS RECEIVE?

4. When an asylum seeker enters the UK they can receive the following:
 - A place to stay – this is offered on a no choice basis and it is highly unlikely that an individual or family will be housed in London or the South East
 - Cash support of £36.95 per week per person in the family household. This money can be withdrawn on a weekly basis from the Post Office
 - Free NHS health support which includes prescriptions, dental care, eyesight and help to buy glasses
 - All children aged 3-17 must attend education and may be eligible for free school meals
5. Additional payments can be made for the following:

- Pregnant mother, extra £3 per week
 - Baby under 1, extra £5 per week
 - Child aged 1-3, extra £3 per week
 - A one off maternity payment of £300 if a baby is due in 8 weeks or less or is under 6 weeks old.
7. Where an individual or family has been refused entry they will be provided with housing and £35.39 per week per person on a payment card which can be used for food, toiletries and clothing. No cash will be provided and the payment card will be refused should the individual refuse the offer of housing. A one off maternity payment of £250 can also be applied for if a baby is due in 8 weeks or less or is under 6 weeks old.
 8. Individuals not granted leave to remain are required to leave the UK at their earliest opportunity.

NORTH EAST MIGRATION PARTNERSHIP (NEMP)

9. In order to support the management of Asylum and Migration issues at a regional level, the Home Office provided funding for the development of Regional Migration Partnerships. The North East Migration Partnership is made up of all North East Local Authorities, representation from VCS organisations supporting Asylum Seekers, health representation, all three Police forces, DWP and Probation/CRC. The meetings are also attended by the Home Office and the contract provider G4S. The overall management of the partnership is hosted by Middlesbrough Borough Council who appointed a Partnership Manager and support team with the funding. The aim of the partnership is to provide a single voice for the region both in terms of lobbying the Home Office for improvements as well as co-ordinating regional responses to emerging issues and calls for additional support.

CURRENT POSITION IN STOCKTON

10. Stockton continues to act as a major dispersal area for asylum seekers. Nationally the Home Office has had to deal with unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers arriving in the United Kingdom. There has been a year on year increase of 19% for arrivals which has significantly exceeded initial projections. It is anticipated that this figure will continue to rise year on year.
11. While there have been no significant community tensions in Stockton we are starting to see an increase in isolated incidents in the Town Centre and surrounding areas, we also continue to receive individual comments and complaints about issues such as parking outside of mosques and concerns about asylum numbers and perceived 'threats' to other members of the community, all of which have no foundation. It is important that we continue to monitor community tensions and there may be a need to revisit wider engagement and cultural awareness within certain communities.
12. In terms of nationality the majority of individuals seeking asylum have arrived from Eritrea, Sudan, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.
13. Through consultation with the Home Office and the North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) efforts have been made to expand the dispersal areas across the region. This is part of a national approach to reduce the burden on existing local authority areas. As part of this

process, Northumberland, Darlington and Redcar and Cleveland have recently agreed to act as dispersal areas.

14. As a result of the high numbers in Middlesbrough the Home Office has agreed to halt any further dispersal in the borough until numbers subside below the threshold. The Home Office has also made a commitment to reducing the number of new arrivals in Stockton in the long term to reduce the risk of the threshold being exceeded. The current agreement for Stockton is a 'one in one out' approach so that the figure remains static.
15. In order to assist with the procurement of additional properties in other parts of the region, G4S are working with a Yorkshire based company 'Live Management Group' to assist in the identification of suitable properties. There are provisions for G4S to do this under the existing contract, particularly in cases where there are high numbers of existing asylum seekers in local authority areas, although JOMAST continue to act as the main delivery agent.

Additional support for Asylum Seekers

16. In terms of additional support for asylum seekers there are a number of services locally that provide assistance in relation to signposting for support, community engagement and advocacy. The Home Office has contracted Migrant Help to provide first point of contact support for individuals and families. There is also a requirement for individuals and families to register with the Arrival Practice on Yarm Road as their main gateway to health services. Additional support and signposting to services is also provided here. Other agencies such as Justice First and the North East Refugee Service (NERS) provide a range of advocacy and support services where possible. In addition to this, the British Red Cross has recently been successful with a £500,000 funding bid which will provide additional support over the next 5 years through the Ariadne project. The project is looking to start in May 2017 and Public Health is looking to provide additional support via this project.

Department for Communities and Local Government Migrant Fund

17. In response to the wider impact of migration in the UK the Government has allocated a total of £140 million to respond to the problems caused by high migration into local authorities. The aim of the fund is to address this impact and deliver benefits to the established resident population. This funding has been split into two parts:
18. The DCLG has been allocated a local service impacts fund of £100 million to help English local authorities and their communities experiencing high and unexpected volumes of immigration to ease pressures on local services. This will be split equally over the next four years.
19. The Home Office has been allocated £40m to direct enforcement action against people in the UK illegally in order to reduce the pressure on local areas.
20. The Government welcomes proposals from local authorities and also retains the option to determine and drive action centrally where it is deemed necessary. Funding is to be directed at local benefits for established resident communities and it is envisaged that the fund will support a broad range of measures. There is no set deadline for funding applications and as this is a new element of support it is likely to evolve as projects develop.

21. In light of this opportunity a funding bid for Stockton has been submitted. The main elements of the bid cover Housing support, language support, community engagement and youth diversionary activities.

SYRIAN RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMME

22. Through the NEMP and in consultation with the Home Office a North East 'offer' was developed. Currently 8 local authorities have agreed to take 300 families consisting of 1,500 refugees over the duration of the scheme as part of the Governments 5 year commitment to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees. This figure represents 7.5% of the total National commitment under the revised scheme and as such it is felt that this is a fair regional offer and shows strong commitment from regional local authorities. Due to the high numbers of Asylum Seekers in Stockton and Middlesbrough both authorities opted out of the Syrian Resettlement Programme. This decision was supported by the Home Office.
23. As with all current refugees, once individuals and families are settled in the region they will have the freedom to re-locate to another area. With this in mind there is a strong possibility that some families will opt to relocate to areas which may be better suited to meet their needs and as such Stockton may see an increase in refugee numbers.

REVIEW OF COMPASS CONTRACT ARRANGEMENTS

24. As discussed earlier in the report, the current contact arrangements are due to end in September 2019. In November 2017, the Home Office hosted a meeting with Local Authority officers to start the initial consultation on what a revised dispersal contract will look like after this date. Over the next 12 months the Home Office are looking to carry out engagement work with a range of sectors both in terms of stakeholder engagement and market engagement with a view to developing a number of possible options for consideration.
25. What was clear from the initial presentations was that there is an expectation that changes will need to be made to existing arrangements to better service future dispersal contracts and that there will be an increased role for Local Authorities moving forward. The plan is to have a 'preferred design' option approved by the end of 2017 followed by a 9 month procurement phase. At this stage, the plan is to award the new contract contract in September 2018 and allow for a 12 month mobilisation/transition period, with new contracts fully operational by September 2019.