

Place Select Committee

A meeting of Place Select Committee was held on Monday, 12th June, 2017.

Present: Cllr Derrick Brown (Chairman), Cllr Sonia Bailey (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Evaline Cunningham, Cllr Ken Dixon, Cllr Maurice Perry, Cllr Bill Woodhead MBE, Cllr Norma Stephenson (for Cllr Chris Barlow)

Officers: Ruby Poppleton (A&H), Craig Willows (CS), Gary Woods, Annette Sotheby (DCE)

Also in attendance: Brian McCarthy, Beauty Tshuma (Cleveland Police), Graham Strange (VCAS), Pete Widlinski (Justice First), Herbert Dirahu, Georgina Fletcher (Regional Refugee Forum North East)

Apologies: Cllr Chris Barlow, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

PLA Minute Silence

12/17

As a mark of respect for the victims of the recent London attack, a minute's silence was observed.

PLA Evacuation procedure

13/17

The evacuation procedure was noted.

PLA Declarations of Interest

14/17

Cllr Sonia Bailey declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in agenda item 5, as Secretary of the United Voices Women's Choir working with asylum seekers

PLA Monitoring the impact of previously agreed recommendations

15/17

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF KERBSIDE WASTE

Initial progress updates were provided in relation to the agreed recommendations following the review of kerbside waste – key points as follows:

The consultation exercise posted on the Councils consultation portal at the end of last year received a very low number of responses, with nothing to identify any potential changes to kerbside collection services.

Positive feedback had been received in general around the demo trial versions, although the size and weight of the bags had proven difficult for older people. Different sizes may be available when they are replaced.

Recycling was currently performing at around 90%.

Members asked if there was any progress on bottle collection, as the large box was unwieldy. It was noted that there were no plans to change at this stage, however European legislation may affect this in future. Members hoped this would not be affected by Brexit as there could be health and safety implications. It was reported that this should not have any impact.

Work was ongoing with Communications Department, with regular updates in Stockton News and the Council's website to encourage greater recycling

participation – very positive feedback had been received from this.

There were no further plans at this stage to carry out any more recycling campaigns due to cost implications. However, staff members were going into schools to discuss community safety and were also including recycling – members felt this was a positive move.

Green waste arrangements would now commence mid-April (within the growing season). As collections could not be extended beyond 26 weeks due to financial implications, this was considered a more appropriate timeline.

It was noted that reusable sacks were no longer available, therefore disposable bags would be used for the collection of green waste, for which a charge would be made.

Members commended the progress made in relation to the recommendations, which had now all been fully achieved, and expressed thanks to all Officers involved.

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE FUTURE OF COUNTRYSIDE SITES

Progress updates were provided in relation to the agreed recommendations following the review of the future of countryside sites – key points as follows:

Open space assessment of all green spaces was completed and would be used to feed into the strategic plan for countryside management moving forward. Review of local level management plans for the main countryside sites and the work of volunteers and external partners were ongoing.

A draft plan for funding of Wynyard Woodland Park with Heritage Lottery funding had been prepared. Bio diversity work with woodlands and ponds was being explored. The Forestry Commission are conducting a survey of some locations and could provide free expertise. More discussions will be held once the survey is completed.

Stillington Forest Park -£18k funding secured from Banks Group, to be used for improvements to footpaths etc.

Wynyard - discussions had been held with a successful party expressing interest in Wynyard, including opening a railway carriage cinema, a shop to exhibit work of local artists, practical activities, education and awareness for youngsters and engaging with the planetarium.

Cowpen – advanced discussions for a joint bid led by Billingham Environmental Link Project with Friends of Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park to have a community facility for educational events etc.

Billingham Beck – no viable business case yet, however an autism charity has expressed interest.

Increased communication and activity with many volunteers across the sites (1300 registered in 2016). However, as supervision risk assessments need to be in place this limits the number of volunteers.

Improved signage in place for Wynyard Woodland Park, and work ongoing with COMMS to extend to other sites and include in COMMS work programme.

Colleagues in IT were looking at potential interested parties to assist in the use of technology to promote countryside sites.

Extensive visits to some of the sites had been carried out previously through the Environment Committee. The Chairman requested future site visits to see how work was progressing.

AGREED - that a further site visit/s be carried out in autumn 2017.

PLA Scrutiny Review of Asylum Seeker Services

16/17

REGIONAL REFUGEE FORUM NORTH EAST

Members were given an overview of the work of the Regional Refugee Forum (North East), an independent self-managed membership organisation for the North East Region Refugee-led Community Organisations (RCOs).

The Health Working Group aim to help prevent deterioration in mental health after asylum seekers arrive in the region, reduce long-term risks to health, recognise and mobilise the value of collaborative working with RCOs, increase the competencies of front-line service providers to deliver health services and mitigate changes in access to health services implemented under the Immigration Act. Key messages from the Group include that Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) need a dedicated section for RAS (refugees and asylum seekers) health needs and recommendations, commissioning should deliver a 'mainstreaming' agenda, there should be a focus on services that provide early diagnosis/intervention and social prescription to address mental health challenges, and that partnerships with RAS communities are vital.

The Community Safety Working Group (CSWG) aim to influence policy and practice to prevent victimisation of refugee asylum seekers, promoting access to support for victims of hate crime and building long-term relationships between criminal justice agencies and RCOs.

The Stronger Families Working Group (SFWG) aim to promote understanding amongst safeguarding policy makers and service professionals to highlight risk from unconscious bias or discrimination and the need for early intervention to prevent avoidable escalation.

Links with other agencies, including the Local Authority, were discussed and examples were given of the collaborative working with North East Migration Partnership (NEMP).

Key asylum seeker issues, concerns or gaps in provision were identified as follows:

- The opportunity for people to be involved with community allotments – some Stockton refugee residents do have allotment gardens but availability is

on an individual basis only.

- Prevention of sharing of rooms by unrelated adults - the main cause of tension and escalating risks amongst G4S residents.
- Access to English language lessons – this is lacking in terms of capacity and quality.
- Lack of Community Development Work Capacity for individuals or groups who want to develop.
- More support for development of enterprise initiatives amongst refugee residents of Stockton – some have lived here for 15 years but are employed outside the borough.
- Co-ordinated action now needed to map the impact and identify mitigating action for the implementation of provisions of the Immigration Act from autumn 2017 (including the withdrawal of support for refused asylum seeker families).

The Chairman discussed the visit recently to the Arrival Practice where Members witnessed an asylum seeker arriving with a Jomast representative. The people spoken to generally felt happy being in Stockton, although housing seemed to be an issue. Insecurity was felt by many on arrival, and sharing of accommodation was causing tension which could lead to mental health problems. Members expressed concern around the inappropriate sharing of accommodation, including vulnerable women who may have escaped physical and sexual violence, sharing a house with males that they do not know. These issues could be detrimental to the health and wellbeing of asylum seekers.

Members asked who makes the decision to use a social prescription to address mental health challenges instead of/alongside medication. The use of medication is not wrong per se, but should be accompanied with additional support. It was recommended that any intervention should include a general health assessment on arrival, however this was sometimes lacking. Often people felt they did not need to go to their GP, but it was felt important for this assessment to be made.

Members asked if the large number of organisations involved in assisting asylum seekers could cause duplication of services? Could they work together more and offer joint services?

JUSTICE FIRST

An overview was given from Justice First who assist those refused asylum to re-engage with the legal process, treating clients with dignity and respect, monitoring their progress and referring them to other agencies as required.

Many cases were on human rights grounds, with no legal aid available.

The Mary Thompson Fund, a hardship fund for asylum/sanctuary seekers, was noted - £30,000 to £40,000 is raised from donations each year and this is used for destitute payments, food, school uniforms, college costs, help with utility bills, fines and victims of crime.

Tees Valley of Sanctuary, Streams of Sanctuary and Schools of Sanctuary were discussed - 3 schools had been awarded School of Sanctuary status in the area. Assessment Framework now being used across the UK.

Concern with the media reporting untrue stories and inflammatory remarks about asylum seekers and refugees was discussed.

Campaigning issues included NHS sharing of information on patients with the immigration services - Doctors of the World petition, forced sharing of bedrooms with strangers, consultation on new accommodation contracts etc.

The Chairman and members expressed concern that not enough compassion was being shown to asylum seekers.

RED CROSS

A Red Cross representative was unable to attend the Select Committee, however information had been submitted to members prior to the meeting. This included details of the practical and emotional support to individuals and families at all stages of the asylum process, and an overview of the Tees Valley Ariadne Project (funded by the Big Lottery Fund, and delivered end-to-end holistic support for refugees and asylum seekers with a range of partners).

Focus groups with their clients have identified issues they face. These include:

- Stress, anxiety, depression and isolation.
- Poverty, hunger, homelessness and lack of access to justice.
- Waste of skills and lack of anything 'to do'.
- Stigma and abuse from the local community.
- Shared rooms and incidents of bullying, intimidation and violence.
- Transition from asylum seeker to refugee status and delays in getting NI numbers and benefits.

VICTIM CARE AND ADVICE SERVICE (VCAS)

An overview of the VCAS service was given to members – it provides a free, independent, confidential service to help asylum seeker victims cope with the immediate impact of crime, helping them to make a full recovery.

Often asylum seekers do not want to report crime to the police as some believe that doing so could affect their Home Office status in terms of their assessment for Leave to Remain. When providing independent advice, VCAS encourage people to contact the police.

VCAS aim to educate and remove barriers as there is often a lack of trust towards the police, sometimes caused by previous experiences people may have had with police in their country of origin.

It was reported that many occurrences in shared accommodation were not reported to the police as some people were fearful of doing so. A Community Champion briefing session had been delivered jointly by VCAS and Cleveland Police to increase knowledge and confidence to report crime or seek support.

Asylum seekers who are socially isolated can be targeted by criminals involved with fraud. Friends Against Scams Champion training was delivered by the National Trading Standards Team to deliver community crime prevention advice in relation to frauds and scams.

A list of groups and agencies that VCAS engage with was tabled. VCAS have a good relationship with the police.

VCAS are working towards having more volunteers from an asylum seeker background – they currently have volunteers from Syria and Albania but would like to engage with other nationalities to provide further help and advice where required.

The need to explain British cultures to asylum seekers when they arrive in the UK can be very helpful, as they are unfamiliar with bonfire night, Halloween and dogs being kept as pets for example.

CLEVELAND POLICE

The Police and Crime Commission have invested in the Neighbourhood Partnerships area of Cleveland Police involving expansion of the Communities and Partnership Department and Crime Prevention. A new department to tackle hate crime had been set up. A Community Engagement Team were employed to help educate, remove barriers and build safer, stronger communities.

The role of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Co-ordinator was explained. Although having no police experience, her background as a refugee arriving in the UK in 2002 brings personal experience to the role which assists others in a similar situation - helping explain about social workers, loss and grief, counselling, child care, special needs, support with respite etc.

A language appropriate hate crime leaflet has been prepared to inform of services available that can help.

A meeting had been held with Stockton Baptist Tabernacle who would like to become a reporting centre – they are already a busy drop-in and would like to identify suitable people with understanding. It was noted that visits to drop-ins would continue.

A film had recently been made to explain the services available through Cleveland Police - welcoming members of the refugee and asylum seeker community, to involve them in community activities and drop-ins as much as possible, protecting their health and wellbeing and assist them in becoming valuable members of their communities.

Members enquired why Show Racism the Red Card was not included anywhere in the presentation as they had carried out valuable work over the years. It was noted that this had been an oversight.

Members asked about the outcome of the circulated Case Study (1), in particular, what happened to the perpetrator – it was noted that this was a live case, and would be followed up with the appropriate police officer.

Members asked what community projects could be accessed by refugees and asylum seekers and could PCSOs be involved with allotments for example. It was reported that this was being looked at, and any suggestions would be considered. Cleveland Police do not co-ordinate community projects

themselves though.

Regional Refugee Forum discussed the concern expressed by parents of their children becoming radicalised in their own communities and would like more connection between youngsters and the police. Some youngsters involved with the police cadets gained confidence, some participating in the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Show Racism the Red Card had received funding from The Home Office for a new project to work with young people of the North East who may be at risk from radicalisation.

The Chairman thanked everyone for the vital work being undertaken and confirmed that, as part of this scrutiny review, a further visit would take place to the Baptist Tabernacle in June 2017.

AGREED – that the information be noted.

PLA **Work Programme 2017-2018**
17/17

AGREED – that the Place Select Committee Work Programme be noted.