

Place Select Committee

A meeting of Place Select Committee was held on Monday, 10th April, 2017.

Present: Cllr Derrick Brown (Chairman), Cllr Sonia Bailey (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Chris Barlow, Cllr Ken Dixon, Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Norma Stephenson, Cllr Bill Woodhead MBE

Officers: Steven Hume (CS), Peter Mennear, Gary Woods, Jenna McDonald, Annette Sotheby (ADE)

Also in attendance: Janine Hartley (North East Migration Partnership - MBC)

Apologies: Cllr Evaline Cunningham, Cllr Maurice Perry, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

1 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Sonia Bailey declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in agenda item 5 – Scrutiny Review of Asylum Seekers, as she was a member of the United Voices Women’s Choir who worked with asylum seekers.

AGREED that the declarations of interest be noted

2 Minutes for Signature - 23rd November 2016 and 12th December 2016.

The minutes of the meetings held on 23rd November 2016 and 12th December 2016 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

AGREED that the minutes were signed by the Chairman as a correct record

3 Draft Minutes - 18th January 2017 and 13th February 2017.

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of the meetings held on 18th January 2017 and 13th February 2017.

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

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4 Scrutiny Review of Asylum Seeker Services

Members were presented with an overview of North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) to support the Review of Asylum Seekers. Key points from the presentation were as follows:-

NEMP was formed in January 2015 as a result of emerging regional and local issues. It has a small team of staff with sub groups coordinating asylum and refugee issues in the region and the transition between asylum seeker and refugee.

Voluntary sector forum meets regularly.

Established Members forum on which Cllr Nelson is Stockton’s representative – links in to regional Chief Executive and Leaders and Elected Mayor’s meetings.

Original work programme generated key issues to the region.

Process now of completing last year's priorities whilst also consulting on this year's.

The Home Office provides full funding with NEMP acting as a single point of contact for the Home Office, allowing more streamlined discussion. Good practices shared around the region and country to encourage other local authorities to look at their position i.e. training, service delivery, transport, organisation etc. This has included providing progress in other local authority areas on policies on room sharing for example. G4S are the primary contract provider and manage properties across most of the North of England, with Jomast the sub-contracted provider for the north east.

Multi agency meetings took place chaired by Jomast for Stockton; these included police, health and local authorities to meet with the provider to discuss operational issues etc. The Committee was advised that Jomast and G4S do not attend the meetings together which could affect communications. In addition, meetings were taking place infrequently. Members discussed whether to attend some of these meetings to gain an insight into how things work. In response it was noted that an invite from Jomast would allow members to attend. The meetings were being reviewed by the NE Migration Partnership.

The north east and north west had the highest numbers of asylum seekers per head of population, although the Home Office indicated there were also high numbers of unsupported people in the south.

NEMP were aiming to achieve a more even distribution of asylum seekers across the region, though this is determined to some extent by where private sector housing is able to be sourced within the constraints of the contract.

Use of hotels had not happened in our region, as it had in other regions, although due to increased numbers some unrelated people shared rooms - consideration was expected to be given to cultural sensitivity in such instances, within the contract.

All north east authorities now dispersing except Durham, although they had agreed in principle to this. Middlesbrough and Stockton had previously had high numbers of dispersals which had led to a ceasing of dispersal and a replacement basis only, for these areas respectively.

Middlesbrough and Stockton were now under cluster.

Communication protocol developed so that each authority had a list of all services involved for each Authority, i.e. education and school admissions, community safety, housing, safeguarding issues, along with media contacts. G4S 24-hour customer service details were also provided for any housing management or asylum related issues.

Migration profiles were developed with Migration Yorkshire, but although funding had since been cut by the Home Office, NEMP were currently working with Public Health England looking at alternative ways to provide this information.

Aim to improve asylum seeker data to make this more user-friendly for local authorities.

Pilot regarding pre-arrival information on asylum seekers was taking place in Middlesbrough which could be rolled-out to other areas if useful.

Asylum accommodation use protocol had been introduced - local authorities and police were consulted before new properties were brought on-line. G4S and Jomast complete a form which is passed to a lead officer to consult with health, education and police to advise a new property location. This allowed dialogue with G4S, for example if there were any concerns about the location of the properties.

Improvement ongoing with complaints process to encourage voluntary sector and service users to contact G4S rather than sub-contractor, as the main contractor was responsible. Complaints were logged directly with G4S with a time-scale for completion to ensure contract compliance. The handbook given to asylum seekers explained the complaints process. Work ongoing with the police and voluntary sector to convey this message.

Work ongoing around transition from asylum to refugee status, looking at lessons learned from Syrian resettlement which could translate to the asylum community – local authorities currently involved with this.

Local authority and statutory agency views being sought before the new asylum contract is renewed in 2019.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children were the biggest challenge in terms of delivery, funding, etc. The closure of Calais camp had seen an increase in those children. Six local authorities have assisted with unaccompanied children – the majority had been through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), rather than direct from Calais camps. The region had received very few children through the Lord Dubs arrangement when compared to other regions. This was challenging for local authorities but very rewarding for those involved, with positive feedback that children flourish and do well. Training ongoing with social services and children's services to assist local authorities who have taken on the challenge. Stockton and Middlesbrough were not expected to contribute initially due to high numbers of asylum seekers but discussions were ongoing to revise that advice due to changes in asylum populations.

Work ongoing with police and local authorities for contingency planning for all ports in case of spontaneous arrivals at port entries. Some areas were still receiving spontaneous arrivals.

Our region has the second highest Looked After Children rate, with local authorities struggling with current foster placement and children's placements. Potential for regional fostering campaigns or local initiatives.

National feedback to government from local authorities, Local Government Association (LGA) and Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS's) to apply pressure around the unaccompanied children funding regime to reflect cost to local authorities and to help encourage an increase in placements.

The Chairman thanked NEMP for their professional presentation and opened up questions to members who raised the following points:-

Definition of asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and illegal immigrants and in particular the meaning of the term economic migrant (this was defined as a person who had left their country seeking a better life elsewhere by choice, not necessarily due to war, attrition or persecution).

What would happen when government and housing support ceased once an asylum seeker had an unsuccessful claim and had lost all their appeals? It was noted that an assessment would be made in this case, and if they were an adult with a significant care need they could be eligible for council support or, if they had children, they could be entitled to other support from the Home Office if they had medical issues which prevented travel for example, or were indicating they wished to return to their country of origin or they may be able to access funding from the local authority if they had no recourse to public funds.

Were numbers monitored in terms of movement between local areas? It was noted that asylum seekers were allocated to particular properties, but people with refugee status/leave to remain, were able to move between towns as with any other citizen.

Were properties inspected and of a good standard? It was noted that inspections were carried out by the contractor regularly in the first instance and then the Home Office also carried out a proportion of inspections. The Home Office is encouraging a more intelligence-led approach so if local authorities or agencies had concerns about properties they were able to feed these through the Partnership. Homes were of a decent standard, as would be expected from a private tenant.

How were language difficulties dealt with? Members were pleased to note that a 24-hour helpline offering translated services and interpreters was available to assist those with little or no English.

Were advocates available? Members were informed that although this was not funded or part of the contractual process, it was often available informally through the voluntary sector (North East Refugee Service, Open Door etc).

Members asked for clarification of the post office card system - it was confirmed that a new bank card system was being rolled out for the majority of asylum seekers which enabled cash withdrawal.

Were unaccompanied children sent to children's homes? It was noted in the north east that foster placements were generally offered for children under 16 years of age, for 16-17 year olds independent living accommodation, supported lodgings, or semi-independent living in a house sharing situation with social work input was often considered if it met needs, and this was also more cost effective. Schemes such as those provided by Community Campus, Thirteen Group etc. offering support.

In relation to the Syrian Vulnerable Resettlement Scheme, in response to a

Canadian idea, Community Sponsorship schemes were being launched and encouraged. There was potential for this to take place in the Tees Valley area, if there was an appetite from local faith organisations or charities to assist in funding refugee families. Members discussed faith organisations in central Stockton who had made a contribution in assisting families and this could develop and evolve further.

Could voluntary accommodation be used? Some members had received offers from people who had spare rooms in their homes. It was noted that the Government felt this was too difficult on a shared-home basis although this could be done on a fostering basis or supported lodging as there was a shortage of these placements available. It was felt that encouragement was needed for people to come forward.

Concern was expressed that media handling of asylum seekers was often unsatisfactory with reports of mobile phones, cars, money etc. and members asked what support payment asylum seekers actually received. Members were informed that payments were no more than our lowest income support levels. It was noted that consideration was given to keeping families in touch with other family members who may still be in a war-torn country, usually by phone or Facebook, and so access to a phone was important and a priority for families. The Scottish government were very open and positive to migration, and similarly the Scottish media were generally sympathetic. It was felt important to hear good news stories, although adverse comments could not be controlled.

Members asked if Brexit would affect those already here and those looking to seek asylum here. It was advised that as most people are coming outside of European nations, a major impact was not necessarily anticipated.

Members questioned if G4S always sub-contract across the north east and were informed that they directly procure the use of properties in some areas and also use a management company called Live Management. They directly provide the full contracted service now in Redcar for example and other parts of the region. New areas and most recent procurement were predominantly directly delivered through G4S.

Members were interested to hear what sort of complaints were received and if they differed between regions. No analysis had been carried out as not many complaints had been received. The Home Office was looking at the accessibility of the process for complaints.

A Member had been contacted from Cleveland Constabulary asking if any concerns about hatred towards asylum seekers had been received and, if so, could the police be advised. No concerns were reported at that time.

Members discussed when our region would review its participation for unaccompanied children and how this would fit in with the work of the committee. This was a major challenge for the region as the north east already had higher than average numbers of Looked After Children. Mapping work had been done on the current provision in Stockton - in conclusion, in addition to having a high level of dispersal, Stockton did not have the relevant resources to support these children at this moment A request may be forthcoming from the Home Office requesting a review of our position, but early indications are that

we could not help at this stage, with the position unlikely to change in the immediate future.

Was there a register of services offered by voluntary organisations and churches for asylum seekers and could this information be passed on to asylum seekers particularly via the handbook? This was happening in some areas and it is hoped that the local multi-agency groups would take a lead role in working with the accommodation provider to keep the welcome packs up to date - so that when people arrived they would already have information about the services available in the area.

AGREED that the information be noted

5 Work Programme 2017-18

AGREED that the work programme be noted