

DECISION ITEM

REPORT OF	MEETING	DATE	ITEM NO
DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DIRECTORATE	ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE	5 JUNE 2018	5

HOME OFFICE WIDENING DISPERSAL ASYLUM SEEKER PROGRAMME 2018

PUBLIC ITEM

This item is for consideration in the public part of the meeting.

SUMMARY

In 2016 local authorities across the North West were approached by the Home Office and the North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership (RSMP) in relation to piloting the widening of procurement of accommodation for the dispersal of asylum seekers, to all local authorities across the United Kingdom. The government's approach previously had been to work with a number of larger metropolitan local authorities to secure suitable accommodation to procure asylum dispersal accommodation.

Asylum dispersal now takes part in 31 local authority areas in the North West, a significant and welcome increase on the numbers historically. Lancashire has participated in full and each Local Authority provided an initial pledge in 2015/16. Fylde Council pledged Serco could procure up to 5 properties. Within Fylde there are currently 2 properties that have been sourced, towards the initial pledge of 5, accommodating 11 service users. We are aware there is a future property in the pipeline, taking the total number of Asylum Seeker units in Fylde to 3.

The majority of local authorities in the North West are reaching their initial pledge figures, and the RSMP is keen to work with Government on this leading priority and support the Home Office and Serco in conversations with local authorities to enable them to build on their initial pilot figures. With further widening dispersal in mind, the Home Office have begun conversations with Lancashire Authorities asking for a commitment for an additional 30 properties each. This figure has been calculated using projected asylum growth figures, in order to meet forecast demands over the next 12-18 months, and is based on each local authority participating to the same level.

This report gives information on the background to widening dispersal of accommodation for asylum seekers across Lancashire and considers the request to increase procurement of properties alongside other competing Government priorities, namely the Homeless Reduction Act 2018 and the Lancashire Syrian Refugee Families and Vulnerable Children and their Families Programme and Fylde Council's pledge to accommodate 5 families in 2019/20.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Note the contents of the report regarding Government's Widening Dispersal Asylum Seeker programme and working with the Home Office and Serco to increase the pledge of numbers of properties Serco can procure within Fylde for asylum seeker accommodation, from 5 to 30.
2. Consider this request alongside other competing Government priorities, namely the Homeless Reduction Act and the Lancashire Syrian Refugee Families and Vulnerable Children and their Families Programme.
3. Recommended Fylde Council agree to a further pledge of 15 properties for Serco to try to procure. This figure be revisited when Serco are close to reaching that number.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS DECISIONS

Environment, Health and Housing Committee – 5th January 2016

Information Item: Outline for member's information on the Home Office programme for the procurement of property to accommodate wider asylum dispersal.

Environment, Health and Housing Committee – 10th January 2017

Decision Item: Lancashire Syrian Refugee Families and Vulnerable Children's and their Families Resettlement Programme.

It was RESOLVED to

1. Note the contents of the report regarding the Asylum Seeker Wider Dispersal Programme;
2. Note the contents of the report regarding the Lancashire Syrian Refugee families and Vulnerable Children and their families resettlement programmes;
3. Pledge that Fylde Council, under the Lancashire Syrian Refugee Families and Vulnerable Children and their Families Resettlement Programmes, accommodate 5 families in 2019/20;
4. Commence negotiations with Lancashire County Council to establish how the available funding would be shared between Lancashire County Council and Fylde Council and how the various services are to be delivered and by which body; and
5. Note that a further report will be presented to update the committee on this matter during 2017/18.

CORPORATE PRIORITIES

Spending your money in the most efficient way to achieve excellent services (Value for Money)	
Delivering the services that customers expect of an excellent council (Clean and Green)	✓
Working with all partners (Vibrant Economy)	✓
To make sure Fylde continues to be one of the most desirable places to live (A Great Place to Live)	✓
Promoting Fylde as a great destination to visit (A Great Place to Visit)	

REPORT

Background

1. The Home Office is responsible for fulfilling the United Kingdom's obligations under the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (The Geneva Convention) and ensuring that those genuinely fleeing persecution are given the protection they need.
2. To achieve this, UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) provides a suite of statutory and elective support services for asylum seekers, failed asylum seekers and refugees. Statutory provision is in accordance with the Immigration Asylum Act 1999, the Asylum Support Regulations 2000 and the EC Reception Conditions Directive 2003/9/EC.
3. The current Home Office provider of accommodation and transport for destitute asylum seekers in the North West is Serco. Serco Housing and Welfare Officers have safeguarding duties and are in regular contact with clients they accommodate. Serco run an initial accommodation facility in Liverpool, at which Migrant Help staff are permanently based.
4. Migrant Help, a non-government organisation, deliver independent advice and support through a national Asylum Help service which includes outreach and community development work in the North West.
5. Asylum Seekers are dealt with and processed through the Home Office contractor in the North West who is Serco. If they receive a positive decision on their asylum application they will then receive refugee status and be eligible for assistance from Government agencies. If they receive a negative decision they can appeal and if they lose it, can lead to deportation.

6. In 2012 the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership (RSMP) developed a protocol for the purpose of supporting the transition from the previous asylum contracts to the current contract. The protocol forms the vehicle for procurement consultation across all local authorities in the North West to whose areas asylum seekers are dispersed. Local authorities have no privity in the contract between the Home Office and Serco, and are under no statutory obligation to co-operate with either the Home Office or Serco. However, they are required to deliver a range of statutory services to asylum seekers, as well as ensuring that community resilience and service delivery is not materially tested.
7. In 2016 local authorities across the North West were approached by the Home Office and the North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership (RSMP) in relation to piloting the widening of procurement of accommodation for the dispersal of asylum seekers, to all local authorities across the United Kingdom. The government's approach previously had been to work with a number of larger metropolitan local authorities to secure suitable accommodation to procure asylum dispersal accommodation. The North West Strategic Migration has been leading a consultation with UK Visas and Immigration across Lancashire / Cheshire on agreements to widen dispersal across the region.
8. Engagement with the procurement process allows local authorities to maintain a degree of influence over asylum dispersal. Local authorities are required to undertake Postcode Checks (PCC) in respect of every property Serco wishes to procure as dispersal accommodation. This influence can be used to limit and mitigate the adverse impacts of asylum dispersal by gathering feedback from the Police, Environmental Health and Private Sector Teams to inform where the property is in a suitable location.
9. Asylum dispersal now takes part in 31 local authority areas in the North West, a significant and welcome increase on the numbers historically. Lancashire has participated in full and each Local Authority provided an initial pledge in 2015/16. Fylde Council pledged Serco could procure up to 5 properties.
10. The widening dispersal work has taken place across the region, not in Lancashire alone, and is also being undertaken nationally.

Definitions

11. An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for asylum and is waiting for a decision as to whether or not they are a refugee. In other words, in the UK an asylum seeker is someone who has asked the Government for refugee status and is waiting to hear the outcome of their application.
12. Persons applying for asylum in the UK are excluded from claiming most benefits and working as they are subject to immigration control in the benefit system. If a positive decision is made on an application for asylum, a person is no longer an asylum seeker and is granted one of the following statuses:
 - a. Refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention
 - b. Humanitarian protection
 - c. Discretionary leave to remain
 - d. Indefinite leave to remain.
13. Following a positive decision a person will be given 28 days to apply to the benefit system and vacate their accommodation. Persons will be entitled to apply to the local authority under homelessness legislation and if households are in priority need the local authority would have a duty to provide temporary accommodation. To date, Fylde Council have not received any homelessness presentations from persons awarded a positive decision to their asylum application to the Home Office.

Widening Asylum Accommodation Dispersal in Fylde

14. Appendix 1 contains Serco Ward Level Data as at 1st May 2018 for number of properties secured across Lancashire. Within Fylde there are currently 2 properties that have been sourced, towards the initial pledge of 5, accommodating 11 service users. We are aware there is a future property in the pipeline, taking the total number of Asylum Seeker units in Fylde to 3.
15. Since 2016 within Fylde, Serco have requested 33 PCCs, 8 have failed following feedback from the local authority and 3 have been withdrawn prior to the PCC being completed. Of those 8 that the local authority felt were unsuitable 6 were due to concerns regarding community cohesion, hate crime and anti-social

behaviour (ASB) and 2 due to the location being unsuitable. In addition 15 of the 22 properties that passed the PCC were subsequently not procured, see Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1 – Postcode Checks for Serco completed by Fylde Council from 2016

PCC Response Fylde Council	Number of properties
Pass	22
Fail	8
Lost/Withdrawn prior to check	3
TOTAL	33

Table 2 – PCC reasons for failure

Reasons for failure	Number of properties
Cohension/Hate Crime/ASB	6
Unsuitable location	2
PASS PCC but procurement did not go ahead	15
Procurement process not successful	7
TOTAL	30

16. Serco have struggled to secure private rented accommodation within Fylde, due to the strength of the private sector market within the Borough. Properties that have passed the PCC check are often let, before Serco are able to negotiate with the Landlord.
17. Of the initial pledge of 5 properties that Serco can procure, they have successfully secured 3.
18. The Local Authority is satisfied Serco responds to concerns the local authority raises during the PCC process regarding community cohesion, ASB and suitable location and in these instances Serco will not go ahead with procurement of that property.
19. If a property passes the Postcode Check, Serco will carry out a full survey, and will negotiate with the landlord/agent the terms of the lease. All properties must meet the standard set out in the Home Office Statement of Requirements. This standard covers the physical condition of the property, as well as minimum requirements for fixtures, fittings, furniture and equipment.
20. Serco are responsible for housing management of the procured properties which covers; accommodation standards, contract management of clients, client safeguarding, links to Home Office case workers, supporting clients to access health and other services. There is also a requirement to have a close relationship with Local Authorities, Voluntary Sector, health and other agencies.

Further widening of Asylum Dispersal Accommodation

21. The majority of local authorities in the North West are reaching their initial pledge figures, and the RSMP is keen to support the Home Office and Serco in conversations with local authorities to enable them to build on their initial pilot figures. RSMP are keen to ensure that Serco and the Home Office undertake additional procurement in a way that is sustainable, and spread out over a managed period of time following agreed and established procurement request processes.
22. A main driver behind the widening dispersal was the need to reduce the numbers of Asylum Seekers in hotel accommodation nationally. The work done has meant that while there are no service users in hotel accommodation, the overall aim of redistributing the share of service users nationally across local authorities

has not been realised and some regional local authorities continue to carry a significant share of dispersed asylum seekers.

23. With further widening dispersal in mind, the Home Office have begun conversations with Lancashire Authorities asking for a commitment for an additional 30 properties each. This figure has been calculated using projected asylum growth figures, in order to meet forecast demands over the next 12-18 months, and is based on each local authority participating to the same level.
24. Widening dispersal has been undertaken cross the whole of the region, not just in Lancashire and each of the widening dispersal areas have been re-approached to build on their pilot numbers. Appendix 2 shows the number of asylum seekers accommodated within each district and the change since 2014.
25. RSMP, working with the Home Office and Serco are requesting Fylde Council pledge to enable Serco to procure a further 30 properties in the Borough. There are Officer concerns that such a figure would be meaningless, due to the difficulties Serco have faced in securing private sector accommodation within Fylde.

Conclusions

26. Fylde Council have pledged under the Lancashire Syrian Refugee Families and Vulnerable Children and their Families Programme, to accommodate 5 families in 2019/20. The Council have begun negotiations with Lancashire County Council regarding taking forward this allocation and will be looking to source private sector accommodation. The request for widening dispersal of asylum seeker accommodation coincides with the local authority undertaking this work, and will be competing with Serco, to procure similar sized accommodation, within a very strong private sector market.
27. The Homelessness Reduction Act was implemented in April 2018 which places additional homelessness prevention and relief duties upon local authorities to work with all households to agree personal housing plans once they are within 56 days of facing homelessness. To source accommodation options Fylde Housing Services would be looking for solutions within both the private rented and social rented sectors. The service as a whole has seen an increase in presentations for housing advice from 355 in 16/17 to 517 in 2017/18.
28. Of the initial pilot pledge of 5, 3 properties have been secured since 2016 or 60%. The widening roll out is to run for a further 12-18 months. It is therefore recommended Fylde Council agree to working with Government on their leading priority for widening asylum seeker accommodation, with the Home Office, Serco and RSMP towards a further pledge of 10 properties for Serco to try to procure, in addition to the initial pledge of 5. Resulting in a maximum figure of 15 properties and this figure be revisited when Serco are close to reaching that number. This equates to 50% of the additional properties Serco are to attempt to procure within Fylde.

IMPLICATIONS	
Finance	There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.
Legal	None
Community Safety	None
Human Rights and Equalities	None
Sustainability and Environmental Impact	None
Health & Safety and Risk Management	None

LEAD AUTHOR	CONTACT DETAILS	DATE
Kirstine Riding	Kirstine.riding@fylde.gov.uk & Tel 01253 658569	16/05/2018

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Name of document	Date	Where available for inspection
Asylum Policy		https://www.gov.uk/topic/immigration-operational-guidance/asylum-policy
Asylum Claims and the Dublin Regulations		https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/asylum-claims-and-the-dublin-regulations
Immigration statistics		https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-statistics-quarterly-release
Asylum Help UK		https://asylumhelpuk.org/

Attached documents

Appendix 1 - Serco Ward Level Data for Lancashire Authorities 01/05/2018

Appendix 2 – Numbers of Asylum Seekers accommodated across the North West