



**Leeds**  
CITY COUNCIL

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**Report of the Director or Neighbourhoods and Housing**

**Neighbourhoods and Housing Scrutiny Board**

**Date:** 7<sup>th</sup> February 2007

**Subject:** Asylum Seeker and Refugee Service update

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**Electoral Wards Affected:**

All

**Specific Implications For:**

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

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**Executive Summary**

To provide Scrutiny with an update on:

- The delivery of housing and support services to asylum seekers in Leeds.
- The key issues relating to this customer group.

## **1.0 Purpose Of This Report**

- 1.1 To provide members with an update on the new Asylum Support and Accommodation Contract and related information.

## **2.0 Background Information**

- 2.1 Leeds City Council (LCC) is part of a partnership of ten local authorities in the Yorkshire and Humberside region that form the Yorkshire and Humberside Public Sector Group (YHPSG), as a function of the Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Leeds provides services to discharge duties under 2 separate Home Office contracts through this partnership structure; Section 95 Support and Accommodation Services and Induction Centre Services.

### **2.2 Support and Accommodation Services**

- 2.3 The YHPSG entered into a 5 year contract with NASS in 2000 to provide support and accommodation services to asylum seekers dispersed to Leeds, this contract expired in October 2005 and a short term extension until the end of April was agreed to allow negotiations around a further contract to conclude.

- 2.4 On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2006 YHPSG entered into a new 5 year "Target Contract" to provide 50% of the regions bedspaces for asylum seeker accommodation. The additional 50% is contracted to the private sector and divided between 3 organisations: Angel Group 20%; United Property Management 20%; and Priority Property Management 10%. This provides a total of 8842 bedspaces for the region.

### **2.5 Induction Centre Services**

- 2.6 The Regional Induction centre is based across two sites – Barnsley and Leeds and is made up accommodation and wrap around services, delivered by both the voluntary sector and the two partaking local authorities.

- 2.7 Hillside Reception Centre was established as Leeds Induction Centre in June 2003 and provides short term self contained, fully catered accommodation for up to 75 newly arrived asylum seekers awaiting dispersal. Service users are accommodated at the centre for 7-10 days and during that time undergo health screening and complete the necessary formalities to obtain support while their claim for asylum is considered. They are also provided with information and briefed on their rights and responsibilities while in this country and the formalities of the asylum support process.

- 2.8 Current contracts are in the process of being negotiated and extended for 12months terminating on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2008.

### **2.9 Sunrise**

- 2.10 Sunrise (Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services) is the centre-piece of the national refugee integration strategy, Integration Matters, which was published by the Home Office on 9 March 2005. The integration strategy seeks to empower refugees in three main ways: to achieve their full potential; to contribute to their communities; and, to access the services to which they are entitled.

- 2.11 The Sunrise integration model is a personal caseworker approach to managing the transition from asylum seeker to refugee. With the use of a Personal Integration Plan the caseworker spends a total of 17 hours providing support helping the new

refugee to meet initial critical needs such as housing, health and education and ensure that the refugee accesses mainstream benefits and employment advice. Longer term support is reviewed regularly and continues for up to a year through quarterly reviews.

- 2.12 On the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2005 Leeds City Council in partnership with Sheffield City Council (SCC), Refugee Council (RC) and Refugee Housing Association (RHA) entered to an agreement to pilot Sunrise services across Leeds and Sheffield. The service is open to those who have been granted refugee status in accordance with the UN Convention on Refugees; or humanitarian protection or discretionary leave in the UK as a result of their asylum application. All referrals for the service are made via a notification process from the Home Office.
- 2.13 This grant agreement has been further extended for an additional 12 months and will now terminate in October 2008. The Government is in the process of publishing guidance on the national roll out of integration services.

### **3.0 Main Issues**

#### **3.1 Distribution**

- 3.2 Over the last 5 years the procurement of private sector asylum accommodation has occurred without, local authority consultation and thus resulted in increased concentrations of accommodation in small pockets of the most deprived wards around the city. Historical concentrations have been in LS 7, 8, 9 & 11, due to the affordability of private sector stock.
- 3.3 The terms of the new contracts now place a requirement on all providers to support local authorities by consulting in regard to the appropriateness of the procurement of asylum accommodation. The local authority recognises the pressures distribution places on local communities and local services and is keen to seek ways to redress the balance, disperse current densities and manage future dispersal more effectively. To inform consultation consideration is given to: Licensing regulations; the impact on Housing market renewal initiatives and Housing Strategies; densities and tensions.
- 3.4 Unfortunately there was no requirement to apply the consultation framework to any accommodation which had been procured under the terms of the old contract, and this could be transferred to new contracts without consultation. A large proportion of existing accommodation in Leeds transferred between new and exiting providers, thus not requiring local authority consultation.

#### **3.5 Volumes**

- 3.6 The new Yorkshire and Humberside Public Sector Group contract is based on regional and not local volumes. The contracted upper volume for the local authority providers across the region is 4,421 with the Leeds local authority contribution being a maximum of 767 bedspaces.
- 3.7 Within the contract there is no contractual stipulation on how the overall regional total, (8842 bedspaces) should be distributed across the region, or guidance in regard to upper volumes for each city/town and for the private sector side this will be heavily influenced by availability and price of accommodation. Previous thresholds were set at 0.5% of a cities population and for Leeds this equated to a maximum of 3637 individuals. At its peak Leeds never exceeded 2700 individuals. At the end of December 2006 there were 2461 Asylum seekers in Leeds.

- 3.8 Leeds local authority uses ALMO accommodation to deliver their responsibilities to the Regional Home Office Support and Accommodation Contract. The new contract is a reduced volume to the previous contract (2000-2006) and therefore the number of units of accommodation required has reduced around the city. Over all the service has reduced their portfolio by 46 properties since the start of the new contract. The reductions have been focused on wards with higher densities of both public and private sector asylum seeker accommodation, these being Beeston& Holbeck, Gipton Harehills and Richmond Hill..
- 3.9 Overall the volumes of properties utilised within the public sector contract has fallen considerably over time. At its peak in 2004/5 the authority was utilising 380 properties, in comparison with the 330 in 2006/7.
- 3.10 A more sophisticated approach to managing volumes and distribution is now being sought through a Regional Strategic Coordination Group (RSCG). Part of the RSCGs responsibility is to monitor the implementation of asylum seeker dispersal into the region, in particular its impact on community cohesion, housing and health services, and to take strategic decisions relating to cluster areas, overall numbers and languages of dispersed asylum seekers.
- 3.11 7 sub themed sub groups, locally engage in and support the work of the RSCG: Housing and Community Cohesion; Health Interest; Employment; Community Legal Services; Community Development; Education & Young People and Refugee Integration. Where issues cannot be resolved at a local level the RSCG have a remit to consider and make recommendations to the appropriate authority.
- 3.12 Section 4
- 3.13 Section 4 accommodation is available to asylum seekers who have exhausted all appeal rights and are no longer entitled to stay in their NASS accommodation. Acceptance for support is subject to a number of requirements including the cooperation with your return home. Historically this accommodation has been outside all other asylum seeker accommodation provision. The Home Office entered into separate contracts with private providers and no requirement to engage with stakeholders or provide information to local authorities existed. This resulted in local authorities having little or no knowledge of the numbers, location and make up of this group of individuals and sometimes inappropriate placement.
- 3.14 Within the new contracting arrangements (established in 2006 with the Yorkshire And Humberside Public Sector Group) the Home Office included a clause allowing for inclusion of S4 cases. The Home Office has now indicated a wish to bring the section 4 cases into line and will commence terminating all existing contracts with Section 4 providers and transferring their support over to Target Contract holders. This transition process was to have started on 1<sup>st</sup> December and would have been expected to be completed by March 07. Due to delays within the Home office this is still under discussion.
- 3.15 The Yorkshire Humberside Public Sector Group wish to centrally coordinate the dispersal of some of these service users and re-proportion where they are accommodated and address the issues of density in some areas. The success of this is dependent on the ongoing discussions with the Home Office.
- 3.16 New Asylum Model (NAM)
- 3.17 As part of the implementation of the Government's Five Year Strategy for Asylum and Immigration to speed up the asylum process and improve decision making, The

Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) has begun piloting NAM processes in Leeds Induction Centre and establishing asylum case management teams in Leeds. Caseworkers will have end to end case ownership of new asylum seekers dispersed to Yorkshire and Humberside and be responsible for seeing the case through to conclusion. They will also act as a single point of contact about the progress of the case for the claimant and others until the case is concluded through integration or removal. NAM aims to process all asylum claims and serve substantive decisions on asylum claims on day 21. If a negative decision is served most applicants will have the opportunity to appeal and be entitled to support whilst this is being considered. This will usually take up to 3 months.

3.18 Refugees

3.19 Upon receiving leave to remain refugees have the same access to public services and support as all other established members of the community. If they are in NASS funded accommodation they will be given a maximum of 28 days notification and will have to secure alternative accommodation and access mainstream services within this very limited timescale. Refugees have an established local connection with the area they are dispersed as an asylum seeker, and can only be eligible for social housing assistance on receipt of leave to remain in the same city/town.

3.20 SUNRISE was established to provide support to newly granted refugees integrate by bridging the gap between NASS support and mainstream services and employment, through channeling resources and support into the initial 28 day transition period.

3.21 The SUNRISE pilots have been hailed a success and a model will be rolled out nationally in late 2007. The Leeds model is a partnership of four leading refugee agencies in Leeds and Sheffield. The service has networked, developed links and partnerships with a range of agencies since its inception in 2005 and established referral procedures and joint working agreements with stakeholders. However, funding restrictions of the pilot limit the access of this service to those who are resident in the Leeds 7, 12 and 13 postcodes areas of the city on receipt of leave to remain.

3.22 The Leeds model has a take up rate of 79% for the service. Of 239 notifications of cases eligible for SUNRISE support 190 chose to access the service. Those opting out did so for a variety of reasons for example, moving out of the area, already settled and able to access services independently, had alternative support arrangements in place.

3.23 Destitution

3.24 Once a negative decision has been served and all appeal rights exhausted NASS will terminate support on those with no dependant minors and the provider of accommodation will be required to ensure that the individual vacates the accommodation. A failed asylum seeker has no recourse to public funds and if they are not eligible for section 4 there is little alternative. The Home Office does not track, detain or deport all these individuals and therefore this group are left vulnerable to destitution and exploitation. For such individuals the options are limited to seeking assistance from voluntary sector groups, staying with members of the community or friends or becoming involved in illegal or criminal activity to provide funds. It is likely that most support themselves through illegal working.

3.25 At present there are no conclusive statistics to evidence how many people are destitute in the City due to withdrawal of NASS support. This is a growing concern

amongst many public facing organisations with anecdotal evidence to suggest there are a significant number of individuals affected.

- 3.26 The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has commissioned an inquiry to find out the extent of the problem in Leeds and its impact. The aim is to highlight the plight of destitute asylum seekers and to make practical proposals for new approaches which may improve the situation for both settled communities and for new arrivals. As possible solutions emerge they will be explored and discussed with policy-makers, politicians and others.
- 3.27 To aid the work of the commissioners, research has been gathered data from different sources. Interviews included Leeds policy-makers and service providers, and representatives of refugee agencies and groups.
- 3.28 The commissioners will consider these findings and hold a day of hearings and discussions in early 2007. They will use this experience and the research findings to produce constructive recommendations.

#### **4.0 Recommendations**

- 4.1 Members are requested to note the contents of the report

