

FULL ASYLUM DISPERSAL – SOUTH EAST REGIONAL DELIVERY PLAN

Executive Summary

On 13 April 2022, the Home Office announced that all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales would be expected to participate in a new system of full asylum dispersal to allow the Home Office to move from hotels to more settled, less expensive and more fairly dispersed accommodation. The Full Dispersal model, backed by new government funding, would allow accommodation providers, working on behalf of the Home Office, to identify private rental sector properties that can be procured for asylum dispersal accommodation in each local authority area.

The South East region will be expected to provide accommodation for 7.2% of asylum seekers by December 2023 (equating to 7,200 individuals). The South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) has been working with local authorities to devise a fair and equitable approach to meeting the regional allocation for asylum accommodation dispersal. The starting point is broadly based on achieving an equal share of asylum accommodation in each local authority area as a percentage of the local population. SESPM has made representations to the Home Office that existing provision of asylum accommodation, including contingency accommodation, is factored in.

It is recommended that the Council endorses the proposed draft regional delivery model and options developed by SESPM as a pragmatic, fair and equitable distribution approach for the South East.

There are already 29 asylum seekers accommodated in Woking by the Government accommodation provider, Clearsprings, and under the proposals, this would potentially increase to 74 – 81 by December 2023. Whilst the Council is well placed to support asylum seekers using its existing partnerships and support networks, the full dispersal model will add further pressure on local services and communities, which will need to be monitored closely.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) the Government's policy for asylum accommodation dispersal be noted, along with the associated implementation challenges both nationally and locally;
- (ii) the regional delivery model to full dispersal proposed by the South East Migration Partnership be endorsed; and
- (iii) the Strategic Director – Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Living Well, shall be delegated authority to decide whether Woking Borough Council can offer any further accommodation under its refugee resettlement commitments once the local implications of full dispersal are fully understood.

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To inform the Government's plans to disperse accommodation for asylum seekers fairly and equitably across the country.

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The Executive has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 On 13 April 2022, the Home Office announced that all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales will be expected to be asylum dispersal areas and they will receive new government funding to support this. The Government has committed to working with local authorities to move to a fairer distribution of asylum seekers and has been working with 12 regions and nations to agree a regional plan that works for them.
- 1.2 There are currently approximately 25,000 – 35,000 individuals seeking accommodation in the United Kingdom. However, fewer than half of local authorities (47%) participate in the asylum dispersal system, limiting the amount of suitable accommodation available. Local authorities would be expected to participate in a new system of full dispersal to allow the Home Office to move from hotels to more settled, less expensive and more fairly dispersed accommodation.
- 1.3 The Full Dispersal model, backed by new government funding, would allow accommodation providers, working on behalf of the Home Office, to identify private rental sector properties that can be procured for asylum dispersal accommodation in each local authority area. Clearsprings Ready Homes is the Home Office contracted accommodation provider for the South East. The Council would have the responsibility for supporting individuals and would receive £3,500 per individual in Year 1. As yet, it is not clear what level and type of support will be provided by Clearsprings.
- 1.4 On 26 July 2022, all local authorities received a letter from the Home Office outlining the proposed regional and national allocations to align with the UK population share. Regions were asked to develop local level plans, working in partnership with local authorities, the Government and their appointed commercial providers, by 6 September 2022.

2.0 Proposed Regional Delivery Plan

- 2.1 The South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) is one of 12 Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships covering the UK (one in each English region and one in each devolved administration). Hosted by South East Councils, it provides a leadership, co-ordination, and advisory function for migration in the South East in support of all 70 local authorities in the region.
- 2.2 The South East region will be expected to provide accommodation for 7.2% of asylum seekers by December 2023 (equating to 7,200 individuals). The regional allocations proposed by the Government are based on an illustrative planning number of 100,000 asylum seekers across the United Kingdom. The numbers provided are for illustrative planning purposes and whilst percentage shares will remain as detailed in the regional/national allocations, the Government expects the absolute numbers to go up and down based on intake and decision outputs. Local authorities will not be expected to accommodate asylum seekers beyond 0.5% of their total population. This 0.5% population cap equates to one asylum seeker per 200 local residents.
- 2.3 Over the summer, SESPM has been working with local authorities to devise a fair and equitable approach to meeting the regional allocation for asylum accommodation dispersal. The starting point is broadly based on achieving an equal share of asylum accommodation in each local authority area as a percentage of the local population. For Woking, the fair share of the 7,200 regional allocation would equate to 81 asylum seekers by December 2023.
- 2.4 SESPM has formulated alternative options that recognise that some local authorities in the region are already above their fair rate and assumes these levels are frozen whilst the remaining local authorities increase to their fair share. This reduces the balance for other local authorities in the South East to 6,605 with an indicative target for Woking of 74 by December 2023.

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- 2.5 SESPM has also lobbied for existing Contingency Accommodation (i.e. Adult Asylum Hotels, Military Barracks and Immigration Processing Hotels) to be considered. In principle, procurement of dispersal accommodation in areas with existing contingency accommodation should be on a like-for-like basis until the hotels are closed completely and fair share allocations are in line across the region. There is no contingency accommodation in Woking.
- 2.6 SESPM figures show that there are already 29 asylum seekers accommodated in Clearsprings dispersal accommodation in the Borough, which would be netted off the target. This would result in an indicative net target for Woking of 45 – 52 asylum seekers. Clearsprings will continue to submit consultation forms and engage with local authorities on the suitability of individual properties
- 2.7 SESPM has submitted an initial response to Government by the September deadline, but is seeking endorsement from each local authority by the end of October 2022.
- 2.8 It is recommended that the Council endorses the pragmatic options developed by SESPM, which take into account existing asylum accommodation in each area, whilst also raising the challenges this will present locally as set out in Section 3 below.

3.0 Local Impact

- 3.1 The Council has a strong track record of welcoming refugees into the Borough. 50 Syrian refugee households have been successfully resettled in our area under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (far in excess of most local authorities) along with 5 Afghan households under the Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Relocation Scheme. More recently, local residents have welcomed over 160 Ukrainian families into their homes under the Government Homes for Ukraine scheme. None of these schemes have been factored into the full dispersal model.
- 3.2 Whilst the Council is well placed to support asylum seekers using its existing partnerships and support networks developed through the above schemes, the full dispersal model will add further pressure to local services and communities. The main risks resulting from full asylum dispersal within Woking Borough are as follows:
 - Accommodation Scarcity – Asylum dispersal will result in further loss of private rented accommodation in the local market place. In particular, there is a severe lack of private rented properties in Woking that fall within the Local Housing Allowance. The Government's appointed accommodation provider will add further competition for these properties, leading to a disproportionate impact on lower income households. This is likely to adversely affect the Council's ability to secure private rented homes for homeless households and also hinder Ukrainians in finding settled homes when their sponsorship under the Homes for Ukraine scheme comes to an end.
 - Access to Services - The Council has already supported the Syrian, Afghanistan and Ukrainian resettlement schemes, which have not been factored into the full dispersal model. These have added further pressure to health, community and education services, which are already stretched. Ideally, the Home Office would take a whole system approach that considers full dispersal in the round, bringing together the various resettlement schemes that are presently impacting local authorities.
- 3.3 The Council has reservations on whether an additional 45–52 private rented homes for asylum seekers (dependent on the adopted methodology) is a realistic and achievable target for the Government's accommodation provider to procure in Woking by December 2023.
- 3.4 The Council has resettled 50 Syrian families in Woking since 2015 against an original pledge of 60. In light of the extra demands the full dispersal model may place on the private rented sector and local services, it is recommended that the Strategic Director – Communities

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monitors the local impacts before committing any further accommodation for refugee resettlement schemes.

4.0 Corporate Strategy

- 4.1 This decision is consistent with our corporate values and objectives as a council that takes local and global responsibility seriously, and an inclusive council that promotes social and health equality.

5.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 5.1 The Government has committed a £250 one off grant payment per asylum seeker to all local authorities accommodating asylum seekers as at 27 March 2022.
- 5.2 On top of this, all local authorities will receive £3,500 un-ringfenced grant funding for each new dispersal bed occupied from 28 March 2022 and 31 March 2023. This is designed to mitigate the impacts on local services and can be used to provide wraparound support for asylum seekers. Local authorities will receive this funding at the end of each quarter throughout the 2022-23 financial year.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 5.3 The United Kingdom has a legal obligation to provide asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute with accommodation and other support whilst their claim for asylum is being considered. This obligation arises from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act.

Legal

- 5.4 The full dispersal scheme will be governed by regulations and guidance from the Home Office.

6.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 6.1 SESPM has sought to engage with local authorities across the region to devise a fair and equitable approach to meeting the regional allocation for asylum accommodation dispersal. Wider consultation has not been possible given the tight timescales imposed by Government to submit regional delivery plans. The Leader of the Council has been consulted.

REPORT ENDS