

## Delegated Decision

3 May 2024

### Asylum dispersal accommodation - New Arrivals Pathway Programme



**Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change**

**Councillor Alan Shield, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Equality and Inclusion**

#### **Electoral division(s) affected:**

Countywide.

#### **Purpose of the Report**

- 1 To agree the utilisation of funding allocated to support the asylum accommodation programme to develop a community and voluntary sector infrastructure to assist asylum seekers dispersed to accommodation in County Durham, including the provision of a New Arrivals Pathway scheme.

#### **Executive summary**

- 2 The scale of the global humanitarian challenge has resulted in the UK facing significant demands for humanitarian support and Government requests for local authority pledges to assist the UK's effort. Following developments globally and nationally, the county is now engaged in five different programmes delivering refugee and asylum support, some developed at speed in response to global emergencies.
- 3 The Council's support structure has developed to provide capacity to deliver the increasing number of Government schemes. These include two programmes to assist individuals arriving from Afghanistan, the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme, as well as the UK's global resettlement scheme (UKRS), which provides aid to the world's most vulnerable refugees, and a national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).
- 4 The UK's asylum system is under significant pressure, with thousands of asylum seekers in contingency accommodation, including hotels, whilst individuals seeking asylum in the UK continue to arrive. To address this, in 2022 the Government confirmed that all local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales would be expected to participate

in a new system of full dispersal to enable a move from hotels to less expensive, more suitable dispersed accommodation.

- 5 The announcement confirmed the allocation of funding for existing dispersal accommodation bedspaces and new occupied bedspaces (not per person) provided in an area.
- 6 A regional plan was agreed for 2023 to manage the number of arrivals in the North East, with a target agreed for each local authority area by the Home Office.
- 7 The roll-out of asylum dispersal accommodation in County Durham is progressing and the number of arrivals via an asylum route is increasing.
- 8 The level of support provided to individuals arriving under the programme is limited, typically involving signposting to services by the housing contractor, Mears. The programme relies heavily on support from voluntary and community organisations, although it was recognised that the infrastructure to support the cohort was not well developed within the County. As a result, in October 2022, Cabinet agreed that the priority for utilisation of funding allocated to support the asylum accommodation programme should be targeted at developing the limited community and voluntary sector infrastructure to assist asylum seekers dispersed to accommodation in County Durham.
- 9 During the first six months of operation, British Red Cross provided a triage service for new arrivals, signposting individuals and families to other services, whilst the County's key support organisation, Communities Together Durham (CTD) developed its capacity to provide additional support. Since 2023 CTD, a county-based registered charity which builds relationships with churches and communities within the Durham Diocese, has delivered this service in County Durham providing signposting to services, local drop-ins and other support. It also provides help with orientation and other essentials.
- 10 Funding was allocated for the first year using asylum accommodation funding, in line with the agreement of Cabinet, to supplement funding secured for a Refugee and Asylum Seeker Project across the Diocese. As the number of arrivals in County Durham increases and is likely to grow further with an anticipated refresh of the Regional Plan, a longer-term agreement is required, to establish a robust infrastructure to support individuals seeking asylum and refugees across the County.
- 11 A grant funding proposal has been developed for three years, covering the period 2024-2027, at a projected cost of approximately £470,000. This would enable the organisation to employ additional staff and

provide funding for other costs, including drop-ins, integration activities and service user support.

- 12 Funding for the project would allow Communities Together Durham to:
- (a) Continue as the voluntary sector contact partner for the New Arrivals Pathways programme.
  - (b) Continue and further develop existing services through the provision of additional drop-ins, working with local voluntary and community sector partners where provision already exists, and enable a range of integration activities.
  - (c) Offer basic legal advice via trained staff and work with partners to procure more specialist support on a case-by-case basis.
  - (d) Establish a Flexible Integration Fund to support asylum seekers and remove barriers that prevent people accessing support and services.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- (e) agree the use of asylum accommodation funding to enable Communities Together Durham to continue its role in providing a New Arrivals Pathway for individuals allocated to accommodation in County Durham.
- (f) agree to use asylum accommodation funding to further develop the community and voluntary sector infrastructure to assist asylum seekers dispersed to accommodation in County Durham, including a Flexible Integration Fund.

### **Background**

- 13 For several years, the Home Office has encouraged County Durham, and other non-participating local authorities, to engage in UK asylum accommodation arrangements. This scheme is distinct from refugee resettlement programmes and is delivered via a private contract, with a Home Office appointed contractor securing accommodation and providing support services for asylum seekers. Following consultation with partners, the Council agreed County Durham would not engage in the scheme and instead focused on a funded, co-ordinated resettlement programme.
- 14 The asylum system is under significant pressure, with thousands of asylum seekers in contingency accommodation, including hotels, whilst individuals seeking asylum in the UK continue to arrive. In April 2022, the Government confirmed that all local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales would be expected to participate in a new system

of full dispersal to enable a move from hotels to less expensive, more suitable dispersed accommodation.

- 15 The announcement confirmed the allocation of funding of £250 per asylum seeker per occupied bed space to existing dispersal local authorities for 2021/22 and £3,500 for all local authorities per new occupied bedspace (not per person) provided in an area for 2022/23. The funding was increased for 2023/24 and 2024/25 to £750 per occupied bedspace and £3,500 per new occupied bedspace. Resources have not been made available previously to local authorities engaged in the programme and are significantly less than the support provided for UKRS, Afghan and Ukraine schemes, reflecting the nature of the programme, whereby the Government is procuring, via its contractors, the provision of support and signposting to those arriving in asylum dispersal accommodation.
- 16 Mears is the Government's accommodation contractor in the North East. It has secured properties in the county to accommodate asylum seekers and continues to expand its procurement in the area.
- 17 The North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) worked jointly with local authorities and the North East's asylum accommodation contractor to develop a regional plan of anticipated asylum dispersal into local authority areas. The regional allocation includes individuals and families moving out of contingency hotels and initial accommodation into dispersed accommodation, as well as an estimation of likely asylum seeker arrivals across the ensuing period.
- 18 As part of the regional dispersal policy for asylum seekers established in 2000, the advisory cluster limit is one asylum seeker for every 200 of the settled population at a local authority area level only, i.e., across the local authority area rather than each ward. In County Durham, this results in an upper threshold of 2,610 individuals.
- 19 The regional plan developed by NEMP was based on proportionate population size and share as the basis for allocating to local authorities; recognising that County Durham was the only local authority area which had not previously engaged in the asylum accommodation programme.
- 20 Much of the support for asylum arrivals provided in local areas is via the voluntary and community sector. NEMP developed a New Arrivals Pathway, an approach which links new arrivals in a local authority area with a key voluntary/community sector partner to provide a welcome and enhance at a local level the signposting and support provided by Mears.
- 21 The British Red Cross, which has provided a triage and referral service under the New Arrivals Pathway in other areas, agreed to provide this

service for new arrivals in County Durham, initially for a period of six months. It was envisaged that this would allow local voluntary and community sector partners to develop an infrastructure and support provision to take over the service in the future.

- 22 Communities Together Durham (CTD) is a registered charity based in Durham operating across the Durham Diocese. It was primarily established to support churches in delivering community projects. CTD has worked with the council to develop proposals to ensure the County is able to support those arriving into dispersed asylum accommodation and in 2023 the organisation took over delivery of the service in County Durham, with funding from the asylum accommodation programme supplementing the organisation's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Project, which is funded from other sources. The organisation operates several successful projects across the Durham Diocese and within County Durham.
- 23 The number of arrivals in County Durham continues to grow, and it is anticipated that a refresh of the Regional Plan will lead to a further increase in arrivals. A longer-term agreement is therefore required, to establish a robust infrastructure to support individuals seeking asylum and refugees across the County.

### **Main implications**

- 24 The Government's asylum accommodation programme is delivered by Mears, through a private contract with the Home Office. Whilst Mears is contracted to provide support to arrivals, this is primarily via signposting to relevant services. The majority of support provided to arrivals within a local area is via community and voluntary organisations.
- 25 In other areas of the region there are often one or two large voluntary agencies providing centralised support, none of which operate in County Durham. The council has approached two regional organisations about expanding provision to the County. Although proposals for potential future support and activity have been discussed, including opportunities to access advice and guidance in the future, there has been no appetite to take on the New Arrivals Pathway in County Durham. In the meantime, CTD has used its local knowledge and links to develop and deliver a bespoke County Durham service focused on the needs of the communities and service users within the County.
- 26 As a result of the size and geography of the County, one centralised support hub would be difficult for service users to access. CTD has developed a series of drop-ins, based in local areas which can be easily

accessed by those seeking support, providing a flexible service, and working alongside other local and regional support services.

- 27 The organisation works with individuals to help them settle into local communities, improve English Language skills, access social activities, find volunteering placements and signposts service users to other sources of expert help.
- 28 Following confirmation of an asylum decision, CTD works with service users to prepare individuals and families for the next stage of the asylum journey. This includes linking people with expert help as soon as possible to provide support during the critical move-on period, when individuals are required to vacate dispersal accommodation.
- 29 Further development of the service CTD offers would involve working with other voluntary sector groups and schools to raise awareness of the needs of asylum seekers being resettled, and to facilitate social activities and other support.
- 30 As dispersal accommodation continues to expand across County Durham, and the number of arrivals increases, including into new areas with little previous experience of migration, there is a need to establish a robust infrastructure to support individuals seeking asylum and refugees across the County.
- 31 A proposal has been developed, covering the period 2024-2027, to enable continued delivery of support and to develop the voluntary and community sector infrastructure within County Durham.
- 32 Funding for the project would allow CTD to:
  - (a) Continue as the voluntary sector contact partner for the New Arrivals Pathways programme.
  - (b) Continue and further develop existing services through the provision of additional drop-ins, working with local VCS partners where provision already exists, and enable a range of integration activities.
  - (c) Offer basic legal advice via trained staff and work with partners to procure more specialist support on a case-by-case basis.
  - (d) Establish a Flexible Integration Fund to support asylum seekers and remove barriers that prevent people accessing support and services.
- 33 CTD has developed proposals to continue and expand its support based on its experience of delivering 12 months of support under the

New Arrivals Pathway, evidence of the needs of service users to date and the projected number of future arrivals. It is anticipated that funding would be fully met from grant received for the asylum accommodation programme for new arrivals and the annual payment for existing bedspaces. The projected breakdown of the project is outlined below and would enable other funding from the programme to be used to address other requirements, including an enhanced EAL provision to support schools.

| Activity   | Project Cost (£) |                |                | Total cost (£) |
|--|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|  | 2024-25          | 2025-26        | 2026-27        |                |
| <b>Flexible Integration Fund</b><br>To deliver activities including, but not limited to, transport assistance, volunteer training costs, costs associated with facilitating ESOL provision, costs for support sessions including venue hire and catering | 45,000           | 49,000         | 51,450         |                |
| <b>Staffing costs</b><br>2.2 FTE for Durham project plus management costs  | 104,210          | 108,450        | 113,873        |                |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>149,210</b>   | <b>157,450</b> | <b>165,323</b> | <b>471,983</b> |

## Conclusion

- 34 It is now more than two years since the Government mandated local authorities to participate in a system of full dispersal for asylum accommodation to enable a move from contingency accommodation to less expensive, more suitable dispersed accommodation.
- 35 The work undertaken by CTD has allowed the County to deliver a support service to new arrivals in the County, particularly in less diverse communities and areas with no previous experience of migration. Approaches have been made to other regional voluntary organisations, but there has been no interest expressed in delivering a New Arrivals Pathway in County Durham.
- 36 In the interim, CTD has moved at pace to develop and deliver a bespoke service for County Durham and is actively working with individuals to help them settle into local communities, offering a provision which previously did not exist. CTD is using its experience and links with other organisations as part of the wider humanitarian

support programme in the County, in which it has been engaged since the resettlement programme commenced in 2016.

- 37 It is proposed that further development of the service would involve working with other voluntary sector groups and schools to raise awareness of the needs of asylum seekers being resettled, and to facilitate social activities and other support.
- 38 As dispersal accommodation continues to expand across County Durham, including in new areas with little previous exposure to migration, there is a need to establish a robust infrastructure which allows longer-term delivery of a service for asylum seekers and refugees.
- 39 County Durham Migration and Cohesion Multi-Agency Group, which acts as the forum for asylum support in the county, has confirmed its support for the development of the voluntary and sector provision within the County to support the asylum population.
- 40 The utilisation of asylum accommodation funding will enable Communities Together Durham to continue as the voluntary sector partner for the New Arrivals Pathways programme, including the development of a Flexible Integration Fund to support asylum seekers and remove barriers that prevent people accessing support and services. It will also allow the development of existing services, working with local VCS partners where provision already exists, and enable a range of integration activities.
- 41 The programme will operate for a 3-year period, with annual reviews of progress and emerging needs. The scheme will be reviewed at the end of the funding period, to determine future requirements.

### **Background papers**

- Cabinet Report: Humanitarian Support in County Durham, 12 October 2022

### **Other useful documents**

- Communities Together Durham Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2022

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

None.

### **Finance**

The Government provides funding for local authorities which participate in the asylum accommodation programme. For 2024/25, local authorities will be provided with £3,500 per new bed space under the asylum accommodation dispersal contract and an annual payment of £750 per existing occupied bedspace in 2023/24. Work is presently ongoing to assess potential contributions beyond March 2025.

### **Consultation**

Consultation with partners is a key element of the approach adopted in delivering humanitarian support within the County. Two partnership working groups have been established to advise the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, who has been delegated to make operational decisions on the delivery of humanitarian support programmes in County Durham, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder. County Durham Migration and Cohesion Multi Agency Group acts as the forum for asylum support in the county.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

There is a significant requirement for support for asylum arrivals.

The full dispersal programme for asylum accommodation requires the provision of support services and signposting by the Home Office's accommodation provider, Mears.

### **Climate Change**

None.

### **Human Rights**

Human Rights is a key driver for the Government's implementation of a UK asylum accommodation programme, to meet its responsibilities to those claiming asylum.

### **Crime and Disorder**

The police are a key partner in the County's humanitarian support programme and are consulted and involved in planning and preparation for asylum accommodation.

## **Staffing**

A proportion of the resources provided by Government to support humanitarian support schemes, including asylum accommodation funding, is being used to employ a team to deliver support to migration initiatives within the County.

## **Accommodation**

Accommodation for the asylum dispersal scheme is being provided, under a private contract, by the Home Office's contractor, Mears. The contractor is required to consult with the local authority, which also liaises with the police, on the general suitability of properties being secured.

The refugee resettlement support team is accommodated within the Council's estate.

## **Risk**

There is a risk associated with the provision of appropriate services to those seeking asylum, under the full programme of asylum accommodation dispersal. The numbers expected to arrive, over a relatively short-time, and without an established voluntary and community sector infrastructure and support provision, increases the challenges.

There is also a risk of community cohesion issues, with a perceived influx of arrivals, particularly into areas with less diverse and more established communities.

## **Procurement**

None.