

Title of Report:	Home Office/TEO/Council Asylum Seekers Project Update
Committee Report Submitted To:	The Leisure & Development Committee
Date of Meeting:	21 February 2023
For Decision or For Information	For Information

Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)	
Strategic Theme	Resilient, Healthy & Engaged Communities
Outcome	The Borough comprises cohesive and stable communities which work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to address issues and deliver on opportunities
Lead Officer	Head of Community & Culture Good Relations Manager

Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	Nil to council
Included in Current Year Estimates	<u>YES/NO</u>
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	
Staffing Costs	n/a

Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	<u>Yes/No</u>	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	<u>Yes/No</u>	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

1.0 Purpose of Report

To provide an update to Members on the NI Executive Office and Home Office sponsored programme with all 11 councils across Northern Ireland, including establishment of networks and initiatives which provide assistance and integration with local communities

2.0 Background /Context

Members will be aware from the report provided by officers in December 2022, that the NI Executive Office and the Home Office are engaging with a broad range of government departments, other statutory bodies, as well as national and regional charities in relation to asylum seekers placed across Northern Ireland.

The Home Office is the lead UK government department for nationality, immigration and asylum, *and these matters were not transferred as part of devolution and remain Excepted Matters.*

The Northern Ireland Executive do not have statutory powers in respect of immigration and asylum, however Executive Departments do have a role to play in supporting refugees and asylum seekers here, for example in terms of access to health and education services.

Asylum accommodation and financial support is funded and provided by the Home Office *only for those asylum seekers who are deemed destitute whilst their claim is assessed.* It is provided under the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract (AASC) and does not form part of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) remit for the provision of social housing.

The Home Office seek to select Asylum accommodation where there are sufficient support services in place. They may on occasion have to place asylum seekers in temporary accommodation such as hotels **to meet their statutory accommodation duty** but would then seek to transfer asylum seekers to dispersed accommodation as soon as practicable.

Since June 2019 the company contracted by the Home Office to provide asylum seekers accommodation and to maintain such accommodation in Northern Ireland is MEARS.

3.0 NI Executive Office /Council Engagement & Funding

The Executive Office have confirmed an indicative funding allocation to councils, and officers await the Memorandum of Understanding which is due mid-February, outlining specific contractual arrangements between TEO and Councils.

Council will be provided with a report with details of the Memorandum of Understanding and specific funding specifications on receipt of same. TEO have, in the meantime, confirmed that councils are able to commence activities, due to the time sensitivities associated.

Council had submitted, in this instance, for resources, (funded at 100%), to support activities and services to aid integration and support/signpost users to access key information and relevant services applicable to their asylum seeker status. The proposal also included support to establish and/or build upon the necessary networks and infrastructure for integrating asylum seekers following full dispersal.

TEO continue communicate with councils through the Council Engagement Group on a monthly basis. Council officers representing all 11 councils participate, alongside a range of statutory and regional community sector stakeholders in this forum.

4.0 Proposed/draft indicative actions for TEO Funding Bid

Actions have been prioritised according to urgency and in themselves, seek to embed and promote collaborative efforts at a local level while providing a range of activities which ensure appropriate support is available to asylum seekers located within the Borough. Activities as set out below are funded through the Executive Office scheme.

- a. **Establishing the as is position and development of a localised Asylum Support Plan** - there remains limited information/data available on existing infrastructure/networks both regionally and locally, coupled with the lack of understanding of needs specific to asylum seekers themselves, resources available from key service providers and identifiable gaps.

Officers are utilising a proportion of the funds available from TEO to carry out a scoping and needs analysis, engaging both providers and service users in a co-design process to develop a framework, delivery plan and associated governance structures compatible with need and demand. This work will commence in the forthcoming weeks and will involve relevant service providers, effectively taking a community planning approach. Council's role, in the main, will be to facilitate a joined up/wrap around service through the co-ordination of an interagency steering group and lead on the development of the local plan, as opposed to a lead role on delivery of services.

- b. **Providing interim activities to support wellbeing and build community connections** – these activities provide opportunities for initial engagement with asylum seekers, while building connections with local community support available. These activities operate concurrently to the scoping/planning project with a view to encourage confidence to participate in a co design process by creating connections, building relationships and enhancing skills/capacity to participate in community life.

Some examples of activities undertaken to date include the compilation and publication of key information for service users, the delivery of an information and networking event, cultural competency training for service providers, cultural awareness raising workshops for service users, connecting local groups offering support to the service users themselves.