

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee - Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Aberdeen City Council written submission

Introduction

The resettlement, migration and asylum landscape has changed beyond all recognition in the last 2 years.

As a Local Authority, Aberdeen City Council has strived to meet the challenges presented by the rapid influx of displaced people seeking support and refuge because of international conflict and has offered sanctuary to over 2000 people. Our resettled population has increased ten-fold over the last 2 years.

Our commitment to fully supporting the UK's humanitarian programmes is illustrated by our active participation in the following.

- Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) – circa 130 Syrian and Kurdish individuals have been successfully settled in the city.
- United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) – a commitment to provide resettled homes for 6 families.
- Afghan Bridging Accommodation - currently 2 hotels are being utilized with capacity for 170 individuals.
- Afghan Assistance and Relocation Policy (ARAP) - ACC has made a commitment to provide settled accommodation for 6 families.
- Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)
- Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme 2 (ACRS2)
- Welcome Hub Accommodation for Ukrainian Guests - currently providing temporary accommodation for circa 550 individuals in situ.
- Homes for Ukraine Sponsor Scheme - 31 sponsors are currently offering temporary accommodation to 63 individuals. Guests are pre-matched with Hosts prior to arrival.
- The Warm Scottish Welcome Super Sponsor Scheme (SSSS) 68 private household sponsors currently offering temporary accommodation for 129 Ukrainian guests.
- Aberdeen City Council has committed to providing 500 tenancies funded through the SG Longer-Term Resettlement Fund. This is in addition to the 80 tenancies provided for the first cohort of families to arrive. Registered Social Landlords have provided over 40 secure tenancies in the city.
- National Transfer Scheme (NTS) – predicted between 30-35 UASC to be supported in 23/24

The inward migration of international students arriving in the city with their families is also a significant feature in the changing demographic picture in Aberdeen.

Both Universities have confirmed that the total number of international students is likely to continue to grow over the coming years and that this policy is necessary to ensure the financial sustainability of the Higher Education Institutions.

However, the volume of demand for school placements resulting from the Higher Education Institutions actively attracting international students travelling with families is considerable. Officers conservatively estimate that in excess of 1400 school places are currently being offered to families who travel to the city to study at one of the Universities.

In addition to the above, Aberdeen has welcomed Asylum Seekers to the city. Currently we have 2 Contingency Hotels, the first has a capacity for 110 service users, a 2nd Contingency Hotel opened on 17th May with capacity for 168 service-users. A 3rd hotel is due to open on 31st May, with capacity for 35 service users. There is also a commitment to provide 96 dispersal properties in the city.

LA Support for Asylum Seekers

All of the above schemes together are putting a significant strain on our Education, Housing and Health services.

Aberdeen City Council is committed to the Scottish Government/COSLA New Scots Strategy and to the principle of 'ensuring a welcoming Scotland where refugees and asylum seekers can rebuild their lives from the day they arrive'. Asylum is a reserved matter and the support and financial structures upon which asylum is based is separate to the New Scots Strategy:

The principal challenges to providing support include:

Limited funding to Local Authorities. Whilst the announcement of Recognition Grant 3 is an uplift from previous years, both it and the funding attached to Incentive Grant 4 will require to be directed towards statutory services, including the provision of Health services.

Although asylum-seekers have No Recourse to Public Funds until Leave to Remain is granted, they can access other publicly funded services, such as libraries and sports facilities. However, local service-users report that the low level of Section 95 and Section 98 monies provided in accordance with the Asylum Accommodation Support Contract (AASC) prohibits any such access and restricts any self-accessed activity to the locality of the Contingency Accommodation.

Relationship with Mears, notice from Mears/Home Office

The Home Office has provided sufficient notice of the procurement of accommodation for asylum use in Aberdeen. Written Notice is provided to the Chief Executive with follow up engagement between Home Office, Mears and Aberdeen City Council staff and partners, including Police Scotland. Locally Aberdeen City Council has enjoyed a positive working relationship with Mears Group.

Access to Health Services

Having a Health Assessment Team on the ground in the hotel as well as Mears Welfare Officers provides an entry level point for discussions to progress any appropriate referrals via GP services who would then assess and onward refer as necessary. Third sector support services e.g. counselling can also be accessed whilst awaiting assessment. Whilst there are no specific resources dedicated to asylum seekers locally, there is a willingness from our existing networks to support where possible. Notwithstanding this, resources are stretched, and additional capacity would be readily utilised.

Without this local knowledge, it would be difficult for people to know how and where to access appropriate support. We recognise that mental health may be viewed negatively in their home countries, it is important therefore to break down barriers and reduce stigma about asking for help.

There is at the same time wider increased training and awareness for all practitioners about the issues faced by asylum-seekers and the trauma they may have experienced that will enhance the service-users experience.

Human Trafficking

The National Referral Framework is used to identify and refer victims on for support. Victims can also approach Third Party Reporting services to raise concerns.

In 2022, information from the National Referral Mechanism system shows 34 potential victims of Human Trafficking were encountered in Aberdeen, with the most common types of exploitation being Labour, Sexual Exploitation and Forced Criminality.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

To date Aberdeen City Council has received circa 19 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). While the majority are being supported on a community housing model there is significant challenge placing pre-16-year-olds who are dispersed. As such 20% of those we have received are in a local children's home. These resources are currently running at 110% occupancy. This clearly limits our capacity to respond to local young people who may benefit from such a resource and compromises our ability to Keep the Promise.

The demand for UASC to be dispersed via the National Transfer Scheme into Aberdeen in 23/24 is anticipated to be circa 30-35.

ESOL

The rapid arrival of displaced persons over the last two years, has placed significant pressures on ESOL provision. This appears to be a Scotland wide problem. The absorption of the ESOL Strategy into the Adult Learning Strategy has removed the framework to support this provision.

ACC has recently recruited an additional 2 ESOL Tutors to support work with Ukrainian Displaced Persons but recruitment is challenging. Sufficient time to prepare materials for learning and to allow for the needs of the cohort, requires to be built into service provision.

Provision needs to reflect the diverse needs of learners and offered in sufficient supply to make a difference.

Interpreter services are available for the main languages spoken by asylum-seekers; however, provision tends to be by telephone rather than in person. Third Sector provision tends to be ad hoc and reliant on pockets of funding. Capacity can be limited, and classes are often over-subscribed.

Wider Support

The successful dispersal of asylum seekers will rely on the ready availability of Contingency and Dispersal Accommodation and the presence of support structures, including a well-established and resourced Third Sector.

The pace of service user arrivals into Aberdeen has not been matched by an increase in third sector expertise or support. Unlike Glasgow, whose third sector have built up significant asylum support and expertise over the course of 20 years, Aberdeen is at the early stages of this journey and development is required.

Well-resourced and informed Third Sector services are critical to supporting integration outcomes and have played a significant role in the successful settlement of asylum-seekers in Glasgow. Currently, Third Sector provision for asylum seekers is concentrated in the central belt of Scotland because of Glasgow's role as the original dispersal city. Out with this area, provision is sparse and there is an urgent need to further develop Third Sector services to support successful Scotland wide dispersal.

There is long established good practice in the Third Sector relating to Resettlement Humanitarian Schemes in Aberdeen and given sufficient resources, this expertise could be further developed, and capacity created within the sector to meet the needs of asylum-seekers.

Of particular concern in the North East is the scarcity of legal advice and access to those who are Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) qualified. Whilst asylum-seekers can access legal advice, it is almost always never in person and there is concern that our role as duty bearers of the Public Sector Equality Duty to ensure due regard to advance equality of opportunity is being compromised for this particularly vulnerable group.

Newly arrived asylum-seekers into Contingency Accommodation will have only recently entered the UK. The support provided under the AASC is designed to meet immediate health and care needs and is not focused on longer term integration outcomes. More comprehensive, wraparound support is required in order to meet both the longer-term needs of the service-users and to reduce future demand on statutory services.

As an initial step, those service users who are assessed under the Streamlined Assessment Process and are therefore very likely to receive a positive decision, should receive intensive support in accordance with the New Scots Strategy outcomes.

As per the New Scots Strategy, key components of integration include but are not restricted to access to suitable settled housing, employability and welfare rights, ESOL, health and

wellbeing services, education, and social connections. These need to be incorporated into any package of support in order to achieve positive integration outcomes.

Currently however, the focus of the AASC is to address needs on an interim basis whilst a decision is made on an asylum-seekers application. Longer term planning and support is required to better support integration. Failure to address broader integration requirements will lead to less successful integration and poorer outcomes for the people.

For example, earlier attention to supporting asylum seekers into employment would provide significant benefits not only to the asylum seeker but also the local economy. Currently, people do not have the right to work, unless their asylum decision has been outstanding for over 12 months and they have applied and been granted permission to work by the Home Office. However, they are only permitted to take work stated on the Home Office Shortage Occupation List. It is suggested that this approach is reconsidered.

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