15 January 2018

Dear Christina,

**Re. Hidden Lives – New Beginnings: destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland**

Many thanks for your letter requesting an update on the progress being made by COSLA in response to recommendations in the Committee’s report ‘Hidden Lives – New Beginnings: destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland’.

The impacts of migrant destitution create significant challenges for local authority budgets and services, and cause immeasurable hardship for migrants and their families. UK laws continue to limit access to public funds for many migrants and asylum seekers and destitution is a major consequence of the UK Government’s ‘hostile environment’ immigration policies. As a result, local authorities are providing social work assistance, temporary accommodation and financial support to some of the most vulnerable migrants experiencing destitution, including families with children and those with community care needs. This is without any additional resources and at a time when budgets are already stretched. Unless there is an increase in funding, we are very concerned that councils will struggle to meet the growing levels of need amongst migrants living in Scotland.

COSLA officers have been doing a great deal of work over recent months to further understand the issues that local authorities face and to identify what support is required to better meet the needs of destitute migrants and asylum seekers. Since the publication of your report we have recruited an additional member of staff who is focused on strengthening local authority responses to migrant destitution as a substantive part of their role. We are specifically considering the role COSLA can play in helping to develop strategic partnerships across government and the third sector to better co-ordinate services as well as to support effective practice.

Your letter specifically asks for an update on progress in implementing the Committee’s recommendations at paragraphs 140 and 179 of your report, which relate to public authority guidance. In terms of these issues, we have advised the Scottish Government that there would be value in updating national guidance and that additional resources will be necessary to deliver this (in particular to commission the necessary legal expertise). We have also requested resources to develop this as an accessible online resource and to facilitate a number of regional training opportunities to support its use by frontline staff.
Scottish Government has agreed to support this work and I understand will be writing to you separately to confirm what we will be taking forward in partnership. It will, I understand, include a focus on the use of human rights assessments, which we intend to include as an explicit component of updated national guidance and related training.

A number of local authorities have also produced or refreshed their own guidance and protocols for managing NRPF cases. COSLA has been assessing how national guidance can further strengthen these local approaches and has discussed this with Chief Social Work Officers and Directors of Children’s Services at national level. We are also consulting more widely on staff training needs and what further work COSLA can do to support improvements in policy and practice in this area. At a November meeting of COSLA’s Community Wellbeing Board, members unanimously approved proposals for work to be taken forward to address these concerns.

In terms to the Committee’s recommendation in paragraph 191 of your report, COSLA continues to host the existing national NRPF network for local authority practitioners in Scotland. Last year, the network met three times with representation from COSLA, Home Office and the UK NRPF Network, along with local authority officers. Our most recent meeting was held in November and focused specifically on duties and powers to support children whose families are destitute and have NRPF. We are now considering how the network could be further developed to increase operational support to Local Authorities and to facilitate greater collaboration with the third sector and other agencies.

I finally wish to advise you that Derek Mitchell has recently left COSLA and Andrew Morrison has newly taken on the role of Chief Officer in the Migration, Population and Diversity team (which also hosts the Strategic Migration Partnership). As you will be aware, the work of the team includes issues relating to refugee and asylum policy, migration in all its forms, as well as equalities and human rights policy issues. We would be very happy to discuss these issues and the work of the team in more detail, as well as provide any further information that might be of use to the Committee.

I look forward to working with the Committee on our shared priorities in 2018.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Elena Whitham
COSLA Community Wellbeing Spokesperson

For further information please contact:

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