Dear Ms McKelvie

CALL FOR VIEWS ON DESTITUTION AND ASYLUM IN SCOTLAND

I refer to your letter on behalf of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee of 31 January 2017 requesting the views on destitution and asylum in Scotland. In response I would offer the following information in respect of the support available for asylum seekers in a diverse, rural and island authority such as Argyll and Bute:

Question 1

What support are we able to provide to asylum seekers and what are the main barriers to providing support?

There is social housing available in some areas of Argyll and Bute notably, Rothesay, Campbeltown and to a lesser extent Dunoon. On the island of Bute, in Rothesay we have resettled 21 Syrian refugee families through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, who have integrated very successfully into the community. The support model we have put in place for these families is held in high regard by the Home Office and other agencies.

However it has to be acknowledged that Argyll and Bute is not an ethnically diverse area. The diversity of our communities has begun to change incrementally through immigration influenced by opportunities for employment, housing and education locally and which also reflect wider changes in Scotland’s society as a whole. This poses challenges in Argyll and Bute where asylum seekers’ wellbeing would best be supported by a community who share or have an awareness of language, religious and cultural needs. All of these concerns were addressed in Rothesay before the Syrian families arrived so are not insurmountable however they are facilitated by establishing a network of supports within a single community and not by dispersal throughout the area.
Widespread dispersal of a broad range of needs and ethnicities would present very great difficulties for the local partners to support.

In additional to cultural supports, there are some further issues that would present issues given our geography. By no means exhaustive but these would include access to translation services for day to day living as well as formal transactional meetings; access to specialist physical and mental health services; ESOL and specialist educational supports; access to special dietary foods; access to religious supports; to ensure appropriate integration there is a need for induction and orientation in Scottish life, communities and culture; access to specialist legal advice locally; and access to transport and journey times to access many services.

**Question 2**

*How is a person's need for support assessed and what would make this assessment process easier?*

For any asylum seeker presenting in Argyll and Bute support would be provided by the local partnership based on an assessment of needs and in involving key services such as health and social care, housing, education etc. In relation to the Syrian VPR programme this has been successful because of the quality of information available prior to dispersal on the needs of individuals and families so that an assessment of whether they can be met within the authority area can be made. It is prudent and preventative that similar screening and matching is carried out before arrival and we would strongly recommend that the same arrangements are applied to asylum seeker dispersal.

We have no known asylum seekers living in Argyll and Bute at present.

**Question 3**

*What policies, guidance or procedures are in place or are being developed to address support for asylum seekers?***

We have a robust and comprehensive programme of support already in place for our Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. The support for our refugees is coordinated through our Refugee Resettlement Group which is embedded in the Community Planning Partnership with members from both statutory agencies and the third sector. Support for asylum seekers would draw on the knowledge and experience of this group whose remit could be expanded if required.

As noted above, the approach to advance screening and matching of needs with supports is critical to the success of the asylum dispersal programme. We would expect to see the development of procedures for that programme would reflect the success of the VPR programme and allow the local partnership to use its existing partnership structures and local procedures where required to best effect.
A key issue for Argyll and Bute would be to ensure that at such times where public sector budgets are under challenge that the costs of any programme is fully funded by government and again would highlight the robust arrangements in place for the VPR programme during the assessment period and beyond if leave to remain is granted.

Yours sincerely

Cleland Sneddon
Chief Executive

Christina West
Chief Officer
Health and Social Care Partnership