By Email: equalities.humanrights@parliament.scot

Our Ref: AL/JMcN
Your Ref: 
Direct Line: 01620 827413

7 March 2017

Ms Christina McKelvie, MSP
Convener, Equalities & Human Rights Committee
T3.40
The Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

Dear Ms McKelvie,

DESTUTITION AND ASYLUM IN SCOTLAND

I refer to your letter of 31 January 2017 regarding this complex and difficult situation.

It is clear that Scottish Councils have responded very positively to the issue of dealing with the humanitarian crisis in an number of areas, principally the work undertaken by Councils to meet the needs of Syrian families fleeing the conflict in their country and the action which is underway, with the assistance of COSLA, to deal with young unaccompanied asylum seekers.

In relation to the Syrian refugees, East Lothian Council has given a long-term commitment to re-settle seven families per year for five years from 2016 onwards. I am pleased to confirm we have met this target during the first year and work is already underway already to re-settle further families during this year.

In addition, the Council’s social work teams are engaged with other authorities to find a means of positively responding to the challenges of re-settling young unaccompanied asylum seekers. Whilst there are concerns about the proposed funding regime in relation to young unaccompanied asylum seekers, one of the main drivers in allowing Councils to deliver services to these groups has been the funding available to do so. This has been supplemented with practical support across Scottish Councils in relation to the provision of services and sharing of experience and best practice. However, the issue of destitute asylum seekers is somewhat more
complex, in that there does not appear to be any consistent view across Councils as to how they deal with these issues and the funding and support arrangements are extremely limited.

A specific issue for East Lothian is that, from the information provided by the Home Office, the great majority of asylum seekers will be single men. The Council already faces significant challenges in dealing with single homelessness, with a waiting time for single people in some areas in excess of two years. Clearly, this places a huge strain on Council resources, by way of the costs of temporary accommodation and staff resources to support such clients. Therefore, any expansion of the asylum services represents a clear risk of exasperating an already unacceptable position. The basis for this problem lies in the structure of housing stock in all sectors in East Lothian where the proportion of houses suitable for single persons housing is very limited.

Discussions have recently taken place with the Home Office around the possibility of becoming involved in the expansion of the existing dispersal system and East Lothian Council will be taking a formal view on this matter in the near future. Whilst I cannot advise what the Council's final view will be, I can confirm that the recommendation from officials will be not to participate in the expansion of this process because of the inherent housing supply issues the Council faces and the lack of resources available to ensure any expansion could be delivered in a positive and effective manner. I thought it useful to place this in context before responding to the specific questions raised. With regard to these issues, I would comment as follows:-

1. **Support for Asylum Seekers**

   We had a number of cases where we provided interim support until the situation was resolved, generally because the families concerned included children, i.e. 'children in need.'

   In general terms, given the pressures on this Council, we are only able to provide statutory support requirements. Other than for specific groups, such as the Syrian families, we are not in a position, either in terms of financial or staff resources, to provide more support.

2. **Basis of Support Needs**

   This is undertaken through existing support assessment processes, based on any statutory duties we may have towards the person or family concerned.

3. **Development of Guidance, Etc.**

   The Council will be asked to take a view on its role across a range of asylum and refugee issues in the near future and any new or additional guidance will be developed in line with that decision.
I trust this information is helpful. However, should you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact my colleague, Ian Patterson, on Tel: 01620 827544 / Email: ipatterson@eastlothian.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Angela Leitch
Chief Executive

cc: Ian Patterson, Homelessness Manager