Dear Ms McKelvie

Call for views on destitution and asylum in Scotland:

Thank you for your emailed letter dated 31 January 2017 asking about views on destitution and asylum in Scotland.

In terms of the specific questions the Committee is asking of the Local Authority, Highland Council has very limited experience of asylum seekers in the area, and this would be restricted to responding to a very small number of unaccompanied young asylum seekers who have been known to authorities.

Home Office quarterly reports show only one incidence of subsistence only asylum seekers in the Highland area since 2007, and there is no data on people who have been granted refugee status and may have moved to the area. Council services such as Housing and the Benefits and Welfare team are not aware of any instances of asylum seekers presenting as destitute locally.

While there are no specific local policies, guidance or procedures in place or being developed to address support for asylum seekers, the Council has developed strategic and operational approaches to respond to the needs of families who are being accommodated and supported in Highland under the Syrian Resettlement Programme.

Our recent experience of accommodating and supporting families under the Syrian Resettlement Programme is in response to a Council commitment to house 25-30 families in the area. This has resulted in the Council working closely with partner agencies in order to assess and respond to the needs of these families to meet Home Office requirements and with support and guidance through COSLA.

With regards to unaccompanied young asylum seekers, legal guidance has recommended that any young person under 18 would be treated as a child in need, on the basis that they would satisfy the criteria for accommodation pursuant to Section 25 of the Children’s Act. That would mean that the young person would be formally ‘looked after’, and the consequent provisions of being looked after together with the subsequent continuing care provisions are also likely to apply. However,
existing pressure on placements for Looked After Children mean that it is very difficult to prioritise unaccompanied asylum seekers.

A key barrier to providing support to asylum seekers in the Highland Council area is a lack of specialist support and expertise locally. Where issues have arisen, our staff have relied on advice from other authorities with legal and other specialist knowledge in this field.

This is compounded by a situation of limited housing availability whereby available accommodation tends to be in locations outside the inner Moray Firth area. Our experience of working with Syrian families shows that it would be significantly more challenging to provide the specialist services that those seeking asylum are likely to need in more rural areas. Some of the specific barriers, especially in more rural areas, would include:

- Limited housing support provision
- Difficulty in providing face-to-face interpretation in appropriate languages
- Lack of specialist healthcare and capacity of GP practices
- Lack of specialist assessment services

I hope you will find this information of use for the Committee’s examination of issues of destitution and asylum in Scotland, but if you do have any queries please contact me at the address below.

Yours sincerely

Alison Clark
Acting Head of Policy
Chief Executive’s Office