

EXECUTIVE 15th September 2022

Report Title	Full Asylum Dispersal Model
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Lead Member	Cllr Helen Harrison, Executive Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing

Key Decision	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there public sector equality duty implications?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information (whether in appendices or not)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Applicable paragraph number/s for exemption from publication under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972	

List of Appendices

None

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To brief the Executive on the Central Government approach to Full Asylum Dispersal, on the recent consultation, the emerging regional model and on the Property Procurement (contingency hotel and private sector lease) arrangements being delivered in our area by SERCO.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. In May 2022 the Government announced a shift from an opt-in model for asylum dispersal, whereby Local Authorities (LA) could choose to be Dispersal areas, to a Full Asylum Dispersal model where asylum seekers will be placed across

all LA areas. This is due to the huge increase in the numbers of asylum seekers crossing the Channel into the country.

- 2.2. Regional Migration Partnerships have been asked to develop delivery models to implement the strategy including modelling the numbers of asylum seekers the region will offer to resettle.
- 2.3. The Council has a limited direct role in asylum dispersal as the work is delivered by the Government contractors. However, the Council is consulted on any properties identified for dispersal by SERCO, whether a contingency hotel or private rented homes. The Council is a key partner in a local multi-agency forum which will receive demographic data on how the dispersal model is operating and will consider any impact on local communities and service delivery. The Council will also facilitate access to local services such as school places, social care and primary care and will need to pass on some of the funding it receives under the scheme to the relevant partners to support this activity.
- 2.4. The government is providing funding of £3,500 per person for 2022-23 to councils for every Asylum Seeker accommodated in a bed space in the Council area, whether in contingency or dispersed accommodation to support asylum seeker to fully integrate into communities.
- 2.5. The Executive is asked to acknowledge the Central Government's adoption of the Full Asylum Dispersal Strategy and the rationale for it, and the East Midlands approach to delivering for the region.
- 2.6. The Executive is asked to note the role of the Government contractor SERCO in delivering Contingency Accommodation and Dispersed Accommodation.
- 2.7. The Executive is asked to acknowledge the Council's and all Ward Members' role within the national strategy to support effective dispersal and integration of asylum seekers into local communities.
- 2.8. The Executive is also asked to note the unintended consequences the various schemes under Refugee Resettlement are having on Council resources and the potential impact on access to services such as education, primary care and other health services and housing.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. It is recommended that the Executive:
 - a. Notes the governments adoption of the Full Asylum Dispersal Strategy and the rationale for it.
 - b. Notes the East Midlands model and approach for delivering the strategy in the region.

- c. Notes the role of North Northamptonshire Council in delivering the strategy in the Council area; and the approach Council Officers are taking to work with SERCO, the contract holder for Asylum Accommodation and Support Services across the North West, Midlands and East of England regions, on contingency accommodation (hotels) and property acquisitions (leases) in the private rented sector.
- d. Delegates authority to the Executive Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing, in consultation with the Executive Director for Adults, Communities and Wellbeing, to take any further decisions and/or actions required, including use of the funding, to support the dispersal and settlement, temporary or otherwise, of asylum seekers in North Northamptonshire.

3.2. Reasons for Recommendation

- To ensure that the Council fulfils its obligations under the national Full Asylum Dispersal Strategy and works with SERCO and other partners to effectively support asylum seekers to integrate into local communities.

3.3 Alternative Options considered:

- There is no alternative as this is a national policy, although the Council has worked closely with the Regional Migration Partnership in developing the model for the region. If the Council did not fully engage with SERCO over the selection of contingency hotels and dispersal properties then there is a risk, as the decisions will stand regardless, of negative impacts on community cohesion, local service provision and successful integration of asylum seekers into local communities.

4. Report Background

- 4.1. In May 2022 the government announced a shift from an opt-in model for asylum dispersal, whereby Local Authorities (LA) could choose to be Dispersal areas, to a Full Asylum Dispersal model where asylum seekers will be placed across all LA areas.
- 4.2. This is in response to the increasing numbers of small boats crossing the channel and the pressure on the Asylum programme. Between April and August 2022 13,000 new asylum seekers have crossed the channel to the UK and it is estimated the total figure for 2022-23 will reach 100,000. There are currently over 30,000 asylum seekers temporarily accommodated in Contingency Hotels and the Government wishes to settle them in private rented accommodation across the country as quickly as possible. This is to avoid disproportionate pressure on certain Local Authority areas and to afford Local Authorities more local influence and control on the system.

- 4.3. In the East Midlands there are 3,395 asylum seekers dispersed across Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire, with only 13% of Local Authorities opting in previously. There are 16 contingency hotels mobilised in this region. Continued procurement of properties in the 3 cities is unsustainable due to increase in oversaturation of dispersal properties and disproportionate pressure on local services.
- 4.4. The majority of asylum seekers are single men but there are a smaller number of families.
- 4.5. A national consultation ran during June 2022, not on the full dispersal model per se, as that is adopted, but more on how to implement it and the potential impact on Local Authorities. At a regional briefing on 24th May 2022, it was agreed a regional response to the consultation would be developed by the Regional Migration Partnership and a regional implementation plan would be drafted to include a regional quota for the number of asylum seekers to be allocated.
- 4.6. Councils in the region have raised a number of issues which were fed into the consultation:
- Population density, urban v rural
 - House and rent prices, access to affordable housing and sustainability of Tenancies
 - Accessibility to local services, public transport networks and wider community support
 - Pressures on already stretched homelessness services
 - Community tensions and impact on community cohesion
 - The impact on Council resources; the rapid expansion of the Refugee Resettlement Programmes has meant most Councils are trying to recruit to/expand Resettlement teams and although funding is forthcoming to support this, the challenge is in recruiting suitable candidates, at pace, if at all.
 - To enable asylum seekers to be housed in safe and secure accommodation within a community setting, it is critical that disproportionate numbers are not housed within wards and the 1:200 ratio is not exceeded within ward areas rather than the wider local authority area.
 - The Home Office need to increase the capacity in processing asylum claims in a more efficient and timely way resulting in a consistent decision making and Move-on. This would greatly reduce the burden of demand of the procurement of asylum dispersal accommodation.
 - The benefits of increasing the length of current eviction notices (Move-on) from asylum accommodation, from 28 to up to 56 days in line with provisions of the Housing Act 1988', should be considered.

- 4.7. A funding package for Local Authorities for 2022-23 was announced with the new model of £250 per person already accommodation in a Council area by March 31st 2022 and £3,500 (un-ringfenced) per every bed space commissioned from 1st April 2022 whether in a Contingency hotel or dispersed accommodation.
- 4.8. The Regional Migration Partnership has examined current asylum dispersal data (excluding Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Hong Kong British Nationals programmes) and has modelled this against 2011 Census population data to estimate number of asylum seekers to be dispersed in each Council area.
- 4.9. 2021 Census data has not been used so as to align with Home Office modelling which has used 2011 data, but the modelling will be revised once the new census data is fully available.
- 4.10. The allocation for East Midlands will see numbers rise from the current accommodated figure of 3395, to 6,700 by December 2023.
- 4.11. Those Local Authority areas which were already dispersal areas with a ratio of asylum seekers currently above 0.5% of the population or 1 in 200, have been excluded from the new allocation estimates.
- 4.12. The East Midland's allocation has been divided amongst the remaining Local Authorities. For North Northamptonshire Council the allocation will be 289 asylum seekers in dispersed accommodation by December 2023. These figures are subject to final review and agreement of the regional plan by Local Authority Chief Executives and the Regional Migration Partnership Board in September 2022.
- 4.13. Regardless of the outcome of the consultation and the development of the regional plan dispersal has been progressed since June in new dispersal areas such as North Northamptonshire.
- 4.14. Officers have also met with SERCO to understand their approach to leasing properties in our area.
- 4.15. The Council is given the opportunity to comment on identified properties in the private rented sector via a Property Postcode Consultation process. This is being undertaken on a case-by-case basis until the allocation numbers are finalised for our area through the Regional Plan.
- 4.16. All prospective properties are emailed to Council officers. SERCO undertake a due diligence calculation which includes information from the Council. Council officers gather intelligence from our Private Sector Housing and Community Safety teams and consult with key partners such as the police, registered housing providers, health and education. The Council has to respond within a week otherwise SERCO will progress the acquisition regardless.
- 4.17. Whilst sourcing properties, SERCO take into account:
 - Community cohesion, anti-social behaviour, racial tensions

- Indications of housing market activity in the area
 - Ensuring Housing Act 2004 Regulations and HMO Regulations are adhered to
 - Integration of Asylum Seekers into the area
 - Asylum dispersal ratio levels
- 4.18. Whilst the Council can influence the decision on the property such influence is limited to the following criteria:
- Police or Council evidence supporting negative impact on crime, community safety and cohesion issues
 - Pressure of local services such as health and school places
 - Rurality
- 4.19. It is important to the effectiveness of asylum dispersal that the Executive and all ward members are supportive of the dispersal programme across all wards and bring a positive influence to bear on how communities welcome asylum seekers into their neighbourhoods.
- 4.20. To date the Council has been notified of 5 properties being progressed by SERCO for asylum dispersal, 3 of which are in the Queensway area, 1 in Crolyand and Swanspool areas of Wellingborough, and 1 in Irchester.
- 4.21. SERCO have well developed and tested processes for acquiring properties. A single point of contact is allocated to each prospective landlord for the whole process which includes lease arrangements, property standards, and landlord FAQs. A physical meeting is held with the landlord at the property to do an inspection and undertake a risk assessment. Properties are avoided that are next to public houses or above takeaways. SERCO have adopted the Home Office Space Standards and will liaise with the Council over any additional requirements specific to North Northamptonshire.
- 4.22. SERCO will work with the Council's our Private Sector Housing team and welcome Officers to attend properties with them if appropriate. If a property requires an HMO licence, then all necessary checks will be done and variations applied for, and if one is not in place already, SERCO will apply for one and would be named as the managing agent on the licence.
- 4.23. A scope of works to make the property fit for purpose is agreed with the landlord and a timeframe for completion. If the scope is not agreed SERCO will not proceed with the lease. Once the works are complete a further inspection is undertaken. All compliance paperwork (gas safety, planning permissions etc.) are checked. Rental amounts are agreed and the lease begins when SERCO take possession of the keys.
- 4.24. SERCO lease properties from a wide network of landlords, investors and agents with SERCO acting as a Tenant, with permission to sub-let to the Service Users. Their lease provision offers an attractive and competitive proposition within the industry and includes benefits such as:

- 7 years lease with no void periods
 - No rental arrears with rent paid in full, on time every month
 - Full repair and maintenance Lease
 - 30-day property inspections and periodic safety inspections
 - No letting or management costs
 - Council Tax and Utilities paid by SERCO
- 4.25. SERCO identify properties through their extensive network of landlords, investors and agents across the North West and Midlands and East of England. They also contact new landlords and agents, primarily with properties that are already in the private rental sector. Once leased SERCO have a team of Housing Officers and Repairs and Maintenance Officers out in the field, along with a team of Compliance Officers who sample 10% of properties via a rolling programme.
- 4.26. SERCO pay rent at Local Housing Allowance levels or below, they offer no financial incentives to landlords other than the favourable lease arrangements detailed above.
- 4.27. There will be regular channels of communication between NNC and other statutory partners with SERCO as regards to how the dispersal model is operating and the impact on local communities and services.
- 4.28. North Northamptonshire Council has a single point of contact in SERCO for day-to-day issues and escalation and a multi-agency forum for the Council area has been established to discuss issues such as:
- Use of properties
 - Compliance with relevant legislation
 - Identification and sharing of best practice and market knowledge
 - Provision of good quality accommodation and services from landlords
 - Reassurance that procurement activity supports and reflects the Council's position on sustainable communities, environmental issues, equal opportunities and diversity
 - Open and clear lines of communication

The ongoing relationship with SERCO will be managed through the Council's Resettlement team and led by the Strategic Lead for Communities and Wellbeing and the Assistant Director Housing and Communities.

- 4.29. SERCO commission a third-party organisation AIRE (part of Migrant Help) to deliver their impartial advice, information, reporting and engagement with their service users. This includes a 24/7 helpline and access to Migrant Help and access to legal advice and support for the asylum application and appeals process. For the most vulnerable service users where multi-agency case management is required an individual risk assessment followed by a support

plan will be delivered in conjunction with the relevant statutory partners. AIRE advocates on behalf of the service user.

- 4.30. Data belongs to the Home Office not SERCO, so they are limited on what they can share with Councils without consent but will provide anonymised quarterly reports for our area.

5. Issues and Choices

- 5.1. The housing market is already under acute pressure and as a Housing Service provider the Council struggle to access accommodation in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) for customers on our housing register and to prevent homelessness. In addition, the Council is already struggling to secure PRS properties for the other refugee programmes for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees (move on from sponsorship).
- 5.2. The SERCO terms are favourable to landlords, for the right reasons, but this additional call on rental properties will add pressure to an already stretched market.
- 5.3. Councils in the East Midlands region have provided feedback to the Home Office that as the pressure of Ukrainian refugees needing move on accommodation at the 6-month mark if their initial sponsorship placement ends, is yet to resolved, it might be more pragmatic for the Government to delay dispersal from contingency hotels to dispersed accommodation for 6 months. There has yet to be a response on this issue from Central Government.
- 5.4. Officers impressed upon SERCO the need for the properties leased for asylum dispersal to be aligned with what the future move on offer might look like for service users who receive a positive outcome to their asylum application, so that affordable and sustainable tenancies can be maintained in the long term. For example, it is not sustainable to place asylum seekers in large high value properties in rural areas as this is not what would be affordable for them in the long term.
- 5.5. Whilst Full Asylum Dispersal is largely managed through the SERCO contract, the North Northamptonshire Council Resettlement and Housing teams will have a role to play in the day-to-day liaison; visits to properties to be leased by SERCO, in the multi-agency forums; potentially in ongoing wrap around support to asylum seekers accommodated in our area and at the point of move on if they have a positive outcome to their application.
- 5.6. As laid out in the Executive report on the Homes for Ukraine Programme dated 14th July 2022 officers are working hard to mobilise and expand the Resettlement team but the Executive should be aware this is proving challenging. Whilst we have secured, to date, an administrator, a business support officer and one resettlement officer via OPUS, OPUS are struggling to find more experienced Resettlement officers. We are out to recruitment in the

wider market but are competing with all other Local Authorities who are simultaneously trying to recruit to Resettlement teams.

- 5.7. The Funding package for Full Asylum Dispersal is only secured for 2022-23 alongside the same timeframe for funding allocated to the Homes for Ukraine programme. Councils have fed back to Government the need for a longer-term funding settlement for all Refugee Resettlement schemes to be agreed at the earliest opportunity.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1. To continue to work with SERCO on the development of the multi-agency forum.
- 6.2. To continue to work with the Regional Migration Partnership on finalisation of the regional model for Full Asylum Dispersal Plan for East Midlands.
- 6.3. To complete the recruitment process for the Resettlement team.

7. Implications (including financial implications)

7.1. Resources, Financial and Transformation

- 7.1.1 Funding at a rate of £3,500 per commissioned bed space, whether in a contingency hotel or dispersed accommodation, will be made available to councils during 2022-23, to enable them to provide officer support to the dispersal process and wraparound support outside of the SERCO contract to asylum seekers placed in the Local Authority area. The government will review funding for future years in due course.
- 7.1.2 If all 289 asylum seekers estimated in the regional modelling were to be placed in North Northamptonshire the funding available to the Council would total £1.011m between now and December 2023. This funding could be used to increase staff to deal with the new demand this creates, for example in the Resettlement and Private Sector Housing teams and to fund any adult social care or educational additional needs packages required for service users.
- 7.1.3 Officers will work together with partners through the multi-agency forum to understand demand and cost over time so that best use of the funding can be made.

7.2. Legal and Governance

7.2.1 Under the Immigration Act 1999, the Home Office has the statutory power to require local authorities to participate in the Asylum Dispersal Scheme, however they would prefer to work with councils on a voluntary basis and do not currently have any plans to enforce this power.

7.3. Relevant Policies and Plans

7.3.1 Supporting the Full Asylum Dispersal model contributes to the following priorities outlined in the Corporate Plan:

- “Safe and thriving places” – Strengthen the cultural identity of towns, villages and rural communities. Help town centres and villages respond to changing trends.
- “Connected communities” – Inform and listen to our communities, giving them a greater say in their future. Empower a thriving voluntary and community sector.

7.4. Risk

7.4.1 The risks associated with the current workload and new demand which may lead to officers being absent or resigning due to stress.

7.4.2 There is the additional reputation risk to the Council, should the support to the national and regional Asylum Dispersal strategy and plans not be met.

7.4.3 If officers do not fully engage with SERCO over the selection of contingency hotels and dispersal properties then there is a risk, as the decisions will stand regardless, of negative impacts on community cohesion, local service provision and successful integration of asylum seekers into local communities

7.4.4 There is a risk associated with the inability to recruit against the posts in the Resettlement team.

7.5. Consultation

7.5. The Council has been involved with other Local Authorities in the East Midlands in submitting a response to a national consultation in the delivery of the Government’s Full Asylum Dispersal model.

7.6. Consideration by Scrutiny

7.6. Not applicable for this report as no decision is being sought, although the work undertaken could be part of the scrutiny work programme.

7.7. **Consideration by Executive Advisory Panel**

7.7. This report will be considered by the EAP Health & Wellbeing and Vulnerable People and the comments received will be incorporated.

7.8. **Climate and Environment Impact**

7.8. There are no additional climate implications resulting directly from this report. SERCO adhere to a set of property standards when they acquire properties for dispersal accommodation which seek to provide a single, comprehensive and unambiguous description of the standard of accommodation that all properties must achieve.

7.9. **Community Impact**

7.8.1 The objectives of this Asylum Dispersal strategy are to ensure that asylum seekers are supported to:

- integrate into the local community;
- have access to local services, including healthcare and education; and
- be able to contribute to the local community.

7.9 **Crime and Disorder Impact**

7.9.1 Community tensions resulting from this programme will be closely monitored and addressed through the multi-agency forum.

8. Background Papers

8.1 Report to Executive dated 14th July 2022, Homes for Ukraine Programme