

# **Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee**

## **Minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2023**

### **Present:**

Councillor Hitchen - In the Chair

Councillors Azra Ali, Appleby, Good, Ogunbambo, Priest, Rawson, Whiston and Wills

### **Also present:**

Councillor Midgley, Deputy Leader

### **CESC/23/19            Minutes**

#### **Decision**

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2023 as a correct record.

### **CESC/23/20            A short update report on migration services in Manchester, including Afghanistan, Ukraine and Asylum**

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Housing Services which provided an update on Council support and services to Afghanistan and Ukraine migrants in Manchester. It also provided an update on asylum dispersal in the city and on the emerging Sudanese situation, Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) and Chagossians.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- The Afghanistan Service;
- Ukraine Service;
- Local Authority Housing Fund;
- Welcome Desk for Ukraine Nationals;
- Asylum Contingency Hotels;
- Asylum Dispersed Accommodation;
- Sudanese Refugees;
- Hong Kong British Nationals (overseas); and
- Chagossians.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- To welcome the work that the Council was doing to support people fleeing from conflict and other difficult circumstances and to thank officers involved in this work, including those who used their volunteering days to help;
- That people hosting Ukrainian families broadly reported positive experiences of the support from the Council in relation to this;
- Concern about Government plans to temporarily exempt asylum accommodation from House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licensing requirements, noting that the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership and Greater Manchester Combined Authority were coordinating a response to the

Government on this and asking about a response from the Council and the Committee;

- To request that care be taken to ensure that no identifying details, such as employers, were included in case studies;
- Support for Afghan families who were re-located outside of Manchester;
- The potential impact of Serco's request for the moratorium on the procurement of dispersed accommodation in the M8, M9 and M40 postcode areas to be lifted and to request an update on this; and
- The impact of ending the use of temporary hotel accommodation including whether some people would become homeless.

The Deputy Leader agreed that the plans to temporarily exempt asylum accommodation from HMO licensing requirements were very concerning and supported a request to respond as a Council, saying that she would discuss this with the Executive Member for Housing and Development. The Chair requested that the Committee's concerns be included and that the Committee endorse the response, to which the Deputy Leader agreed.

The Strategic Lead for Homelessness reported that there was a support package for Afghan people when they moved from contingency hotels into alternative accommodation and that there was funding for up to three years for that support. She reported that the Council would be providing that support for people accommodated within Manchester and was working with other local authorities in relation to support for people placed in their areas, although, unfortunately, not all local authorities were as willing to provide support. She advised that Manchester City Council would provide some transition support if the local authority in the area they were moving to was not providing support. She reported that the Council also worked with people before the move to ensure that they were tenancy-ready and to help with other issues such as needing furniture, regardless of where they were moving to within the country. In response to a Member's question about support with qualification conversions, she confirmed that the Council was helping and encouraging people into employment as much as possible.

The Refugee, Asylum and Evacuee Manager informed Members about qualification conversion support which had been procured for Ukrainian nationals and extended to Afghan nationals. In response to a further question, she outlined how the skills, qualifications and work experience of Ukrainian arrivals were assessed through discussions with the individuals and fed back through regular meetings with Regional Strategic Migration Partnership colleagues.

In response to a Member's question, the Strategic Lead for Homelessness stated that, until the Welcome Desk at Manchester Airport closed in March 2023, Ukrainian Nationals had been provided with the £50 and sim cards from the British Red Cross on arrival. She advised that any new arrivals were still able to claim £50 and that she would ensure that staff were informing anyone who arriving in the UK since the closure of the Welcome Desk. She reported that the Council was also providing sim cards and £200 in an initial payment. In response to a question about opening UK bank accounts, she stated that a lot of Ukrainian nationals were using online services such as Monzo, which did not have the proof of residency requirements of high street banks; however, the Council could provide a letter as evidence to assist Ukrainian

nationals with opening a UK bank account, if they wished to do so, and she asked Members to inform her if they were aware of anyone struggling to open a bank account so that her team could provide assistance.

The Strategic Lead for Homelessness reported that the decision to introduce a moratorium in specific Manchester postcodes had been a political decision and a decision to lift it should be a political decision too. She advised that the Home Office and Serco were writing business cases to the Minister for them to decide whether to take this request forward through a formal conversation with the MP for Blackley and Broughton. In response to a comment from the Chair, she stated that she would request that the MP for Manchester Central be included in this conversation. In response to the question about the closure of bridging hotels, she outlined the support that her staff were providing to Afghan people in these hotels to help them to overcome the barriers to moving on and help them understand their options. She highlighted the section in the report about the Local Authority Housing Fund and the additional properties being made available. She stated that she was confident of being able to work with people to find suitable accommodation and highlighted work to overcome people's concerns about moving to areas they did not know; however, as a back-up, her service was also working with other Greater Manchester authorities to discuss how they would deal with people presenting as homeless. In response to a Member's question, the Accommodation and Support Manager stated that 115 families and 52 single people were in bridging hotels

The Director of Housing Services highlighted that this was a fast-moving area, impacted by Government policy changes, which added to its complexity, and discussions were taking place about the need for a longer-term view from the Government. He advised that raising housing standards was also key. In response to a Member's question, he stated that information on housing supply issues could be included in the report on Homelessness, which was scheduled for the following month's meeting.

A Member requested further information on the Council's engagement with the Chagossian community, noting that this community was mainly concentrated in his ward of Sharston. The Refugee, Asylum and Evacuee Manager stated that the Council had undertaken some preliminary work with the Chagossian community in Manchester and, while they generally did not tend to engage much with national and local government, a link had been made with them and, as some Chagossians applied for and were granted British citizenship, that would be likely to encourage increased engagement. The Chair suggested that the Member speak with the Refugee, Asylum and Evacuee Manager outside of the meeting to discuss further how this work could be taken forward within his ward.

The Chair recognised the hard work taking place, including the role of the voluntary and community sector, and highlighted the importance of Manchester being a welcoming city.

## **Decisions**

1. To request that the Committee's concerns, through a letter from the Committee, be included in the Council and Greater Manchester responses to the Government's plans to temporarily exempt asylum accommodation from HMO licensing requirements.
2. To receive a further report at an appropriate time, to include an update on the proposal to lift the moratorium on the procurement of dispersed accommodation in the M8, M9 and M40 postcode areas.

## **CESC/23/21          Overview Report**

A report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit was submitted. The overview report contained a list of key decisions yet to be taken within the Committee's remit, responses to previous recommendations and the Committee's work programme, which the Committee was asked to approve.

## **Decision**

To note the report and agree the work programme.