

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
(REGENERATION AND SKILLS)**



Home Office

**HOUSING SUPPORT SERVICES TO VULNERABLE PEOPLE
WORKING GROUP
FINAL REPORT
SEPTEMBER 2021**



Overview & Scrutiny

**'Valuing
Improvement'**

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LEAD MEMBER'S INTRODUCTION

I am very pleased to introduce this Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regeneration and Skills) Housing Support Services to Vulnerable People Working Group report.

The Working Group adhered to its established terms of reference and objectives (see paragraph 2 below) in the drafting of its recommendations.

I wish to thank all those people who gave up their valuable time to be involved with the Working Group. The input and expertise of officers greatly helped the Working Group in the formulation of its recommendations. Finally, I am extremely grateful to my fellow Working Group Members for their commitment, ideas and contribution.



Councillor Dave Robinson
Lead Member, Housing Support
Services to Vulnerable People
Working Group

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regeneration and Skills) established the Housing Support Services to Vulnerable People Working Group.
- 1.2 Councillors Janis Blackburne, Mhairi Doyle, Paula Murphy, Dave Robinson and Anne Thompson were appointed to serve on the Working Group. Councillor Doyle, at the meeting of Council on 20 May 2021 was appointed as the Cabinet Member - Children's Social Care. In accordance with the protocol that Cabinet Members should not serve on Overview and Scrutiny Committees Councillor Doyle therefore ceased to be a member of the Working Group on 20 May 2021.
- 1.3 At the first meeting of the Working Group Councillor Dave Robinson was appointed Lead Member. Details of Working Group meetings are set out below:

Date	Activity
04.12.20	Scoping Document approved Consideration given to initial documentation to be provided by officers
22.01.21	Briefing notes on Information on the scale and location in Sefton of supported accommodation for vulnerable people and associated support service specifications; and details of the Serco contract specification with the Home Office; and profiles of service users in relation to age, gender, children
26.02.21	Interview of witnesses from Venus Charity, the Bosco Society, Liverpool City Region and former Asylum Seeker and Syrian Refugee; Briefing note on Serco postcode checks
23.04.21	Interview of witnesses from Serco, the Home Office and Migrant Help
24.06.21	Interview of witness from Migrant Help; consideration of information on asylum seeker/refugee children of school age accessing education; and asylum seeker children who lived with their families and information on performance data provided by Migrant Help that detailed their responsibilities under the AIRE Contract
27.07.21	Consideration of update on the 6 Monthly Asylum Procurement Report for the period 1 January to 30 June 2021; and approval of recommendations for submission to Cabinet and Council

2.0 TERMS OF REFERENCE AND OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 The Terms of Reference and Objectives of the Working Group were approved as part of the scoping exercise at the first meeting and are set out below.
- 2.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regeneration and Skills) has established the Working Group to review the topic of housing support services provided to vulnerable people by non-governmental organisations and charities and their links to statutory agencies covered by the Communities and Housing portfolio. This is a wide-ranging topic and will include looking at



accommodation and support services provided to Asylum Seekers, Syrian Refugees, those fleeing domestic violence and vulnerable homeless households. The terms of reference and objectives of the Working Group are:

- The collation of information on the scale and location in Sefton of supported accommodation for vulnerable people that fall under the remit of the Communities and Housing portfolio
- How do we ensure that such services provided to vulnerable people are regulated and are being delivered in accordance with contract specification

3.0 METHODS OF ENQUIRY

3.1 Dependent upon the refined scope of the review, to include:

- Analysis of current Sefton practice
- Desktop research into practise elsewhere
- Witness interviews with officers, stakeholders, experts and other organisations
- Possible site visits / conference calls with experts and other organisations

4.0 WORKING GROUP MEETING – 4 DECEMBER 2020

4.1 The Working Group considered and approved its [Scoping Document](#). The Scoping Document's terms of reference, objectives and methods of enquiry are referred to in paragraphs 2 and 3 above.

4.2 In approving the [Scoping Document](#) Working Group Members highlighted the following points:

- Difficulties experienced by members engaging with Serco Group PLC (Serco) to obtain information about their activities and future plans in Members' wards
- A need to focus on private sector organisations operating in Sefton providing services covered by the Working Group's scope
- To obtain information from other local authorities, particularly Liverpool City Region authorities, on the scale of problems experienced in their areas. This would help to gather evidence, build a bigger picture and strengthen the submissions to, for example, Government or the Local Government Association, seeking remedies to identified problems. It was acknowledged that it was vital to obtain such evidence in order to reach informed conclusions and recommendations
- Concentration of accommodation provision in certain areas. There was a view that Serco, for example, procured properties in areas where property prices/rents were at the lowest. These areas often



suffered from the worst socio-economic factors and the concentration in such areas compounded existing problems. On occasion this had resulted in unfavourable social media posts about vulnerable residents; and in some instances, activity by far-right groups trying to capitalise on the situation

- The importance to be advised of the location of selected new accommodation before it was occupied
- Did Serco consult with the Council prior to acquiring accommodation for use in Sefton?
- A view was expressed that asylum seekers were not getting the support services they deserved due to poor service provision by Serco
- Complaints had been received from residents that properties in use by asylum seekers appeared to be occupied solely by males. Residents suggested that a mix of family accommodation would be beneficial
- Details of the Serco contract with the Home Office would be helpful to understand fully their responsibilities
- The possibility to obtain profiles of service users in relation to age, gender, children
- Information and views from Migrant Help and similar charities would be helpful for the Working Group to undertake its task

4.3 In response to the above points officers made the following comments:

- Prior to acquiring property for use, Serco would provide the Council with the postcodes of such property. This enabled officers to provide details of crime statistics (including hate crimes) in such areas, together with the availability of services, for example medical and educational provision. Serco would not commence with the procurement of a property if negative feedback was given by the Council. It was found that Serco would submit numerous postcode checks to the Council and they would be provided with positive/negative feedback on each property location. However, Serco were under no obligation to then advise the Council which properties they would secure for use. This was why the Council found out about the use of such property “after the event”. This was in contrast to the Syrian refugee programme which the Council had responsibility for. As the Council commissioned such services it was fully aware of the use of individual properties
- The profile of asylum seekers showed that 85% were male. This was the reason for the preponderance of males in accommodation provided by Serco

4.4 The Working Group also gave consideration as to what information/documentation would be beneficial at future meetings to help it complete its task. The Working Group requested that the following information



be presented at the next meeting:

- Information on the scale and location in Sefton of supported accommodation for the cohorts of vulnerable people within the scope of this review
- Information on the comments raised by Members in their deliberation on the Scoping Document (Paragraph 4.2 above) for example, details of the Serco contract specification with the home Office; and profiles of service users in relation to age, gender, children
- Information on the support services commissioned by the Council and the accommodation related to those services; and the associated support service specifications

5.0 WORKING GROUP MEETING – 22 JANUARY 2021

5.1 The Working Group considered information requested at its previous meeting as set out below.

5.2 Information on The Scale and Location in Sefton of Supported Accommodation for Vulnerable People and Associated Support Service Specifications

5.3 The [briefing note](#) of the Service Manager - Housing and Investment Services provided information on:

- the location in Sefton of supported accommodation for vulnerable people, commissioned by the Council
- Information on the support services commissioned by the Council and the accommodation related to those services; and
- the associated support service specifications relating to services within the Communities and Housing Cabinet Member portfolio.

The briefing note indicated that the provision of the above information was in accordance with one of the Terms of Reference for the Working Group; that the Council commissioned a number of accommodation and support services for Syrian Refugees, those fleeing domestic violence and vulnerable homeless households; and that the number of property locations, and the number of units of accommodation provided, by Ward, was as follows:

5.4

Ward	Number of properties/locations	Sum of Units
Cambridge	2	32
Dukes	4	17
Norwood	2	19
Derby	19	36
Ford	1	11



Linacre	21	77
Litherland	5	6
St Oswald	2	2
Grand Total	56	200

5.5

Sum of Units									
Service	Cambridge	Derby	Dukes	Ford	Linacre	Litherland	Norwood	St Oswald	Grand Total
Accommodation-generic homeless people	32	20			40	2	9		103
Accommodation-offenders					8				8
Accommodation-single women with complex needs		4							4
Accommodation-substance misuse			10						10
Domestic Abuse Refuge					11				11
Homeless Families Hostel				1 1					11
Private Sector Leased properties funded through FHSG		2	6		11		10		29
Syrian Refugee		10	1		7	4		2	24
Grand Total	32	36	17	1 1	77	6	19	2	200

5.6

The briefing note concluded by detailing the service specifications relating to the following services; advised that there currently wasn't a service specification for Domestic Violence Refuge scheme, which was originally commissioned with SWACA under the historic Supporting People programme; and that the new statutory accommodation duty would provide commissioning responsibility on the Local Partnership Board and this would require some form of specification/performance management framework in the longer term to demonstrate success.

- Homeless Accommodation (including Move-On) tenancy support and Sit-Up service
- Substance Misuse Accommodation (including Move-On)
- Single Women with Complex Needs
- Offenders Accommodation



- Generic Floating Support (North)
- Targeted Intensive Floating Support Service
- Floating Support Service- Offenders
- Rough Sleeper Outreach Service
- Rough Sleeper Community Services
- Syrian Family Accommodation and Housing support Services

5.7 Members of the Working Group asked questions/commented on the following issues:

- What happened to service users who were excluded or evicted from services identified in the service specifications attached to the briefing note. Response – The aim was to keep such incidences to a minimum; exclusions and evictions normally resulted for non-compliance or misbehaviour from service users or for specific safeguarding reasons; and on occasions service users were moved to different accommodation. Any service users who were better suited to another service and moved would be managed into that other service in a planned manner
- What were the legal implications to the Council and the service provider for excluding or evicting service users. Response - although regrettable this was a legal course of action to take. If the service user was non-compliant with rules, misbehaved or presented safeguarding issues then it could be deemed they had made themselves intentionally homeless. The function of supported accommodation however was for the provider to support service users and avoid such situations
- Does service provision supply meet demand. Response – No. During the Covid pandemic there was a surge in the numbers of clients; for example, lots of “sofa surfers” were asked to leave properties they were staying in due to isolation reasons and therefore demand increased; and to meet this increased demand work was currently being undertaken to commission 25 additional rooms across four properties
- Was a further surge in demand for homelessness services anticipated during the current Covid-19 lockdown. Response – Yes, most professional commentators expected this and there had been an increase in single homelessness. It was also anticipated that once the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Residential Tenancies: Protection from Eviction) Regulations were relaxed then there would be a further surge in homelessness. To obtain a clearer picture liaison would be undertaken with Courts to assess the number of eviction proceedings in the system. However, Court system information would not highlight evictions from unscrupulous landlords who did not comply with regulations
- Were we coming the end of the supported housing service to Sefton’s homeless residents provided by the Bosco society. Response – Yes.



We were currently in year two of the 5 year plus 2-year extension contract. Regarding service provision to homeless persons emergency accommodation was being provided in the Prince of Wales Hotel, Southport and this service experienced very high demand

- Was there homeless service provision for couples. Response – No specific provision was made and service users would be placed in single person accommodation. Similarly, service users with pets experienced problems as accommodation providers generally did not allow pets
- Reference was made to residents fleeing domestic abuse and violence and seeking accommodation in refuges; and information was sought on how children’s needs were catered for in such situations. Response – there were clear referral lines and wrap around support was provided by SWACA. Most of the children in Sefton based refuges were from out of borough due to families and victims leaving the areas from where they were subjected to abuse and violence. Similarly, lots of Sefton residents left the borough for the same safety reasons. Systems and processes were in place to support clients via Children’s Social Care, Early Help, and Housing Options. Liaison was also undertaken with the Courts Service in respect of prosecutions
- The tables on page 8 of the briefing note identified clusters of units in areas. Was this done deliberately. Response – No. It was the responsibility of service providers to source accommodation and support services; but the Council did try to discourage over-concentration of accommodation in areas. The next time services were commissioned there was a potential to build into the contract specification a prohibition of clustering of units

With regard to the last bullet point Members expressed a willingness to pursue this option as the clustering of supported units of accommodation was one of the reasons for the establishment of the Working Group; and that it was desirable for the Council to have an influence in determining locations of such units.

5.8 **Details of the Serco Contract Specification with the Home Office; and Profiles of Service Users in Relation to Age, Gender, Children**

5.9 The [briefing note](#) of the Head of Communities detailed information the Council held about the accommodation and services provided to asylum seekers by the agency appointed by the Home Office (Serco) as set out below:

(1) Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants

- Who was a refugee?
- Who was a vulnerable migrant?
- Section 95 support to asylum seekers whilst their asylum application was being processed



- Section 98 support was a form of temporary support that was provided to asylum seekers who appeared to be destitute and who were awaiting a decision on their application for s95 asylum support
 - Section 4 was the provision of support to refused asylum seekers
- (2) The Home Office contract with Serco, who are the provider for the North West and Midlands, regarding the Housing of Asylum Seekers. This is known as the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract (AASC).
- Migrant Help had been contracted to deliver the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE). An appendix to the briefing note set out information on this matter.
 - The AIRE contract covered the provision of advice and guidance, issue reporting, and eligibility assistance to people seeking asylum. It was predominantly a phone-based service
 - The AASC Contract covered accommodation services, transport services and support services. An appendix to the briefing note set out information on this matter.
- (3) Accommodation
- Initial accommodation for Section 98 asylum seekers was provided at 3 main sites in Liverpool
 - During the Covid-19 pandemic a number of hotels across the country were utilised to provide additional bed spaces to act as initial accommodation. Serco had procured 5 hotels in the Liverpool City Region – 2 in Liverpool City Centre and one each in Wirral, Halton and Sefton
 - Serco procured accommodation in local authority areas and this was usually in the form of a commercial agreement with a private landlord
 - Each local authority operated an asylum seeker cluster limit (set by the Home Office) based on 1 asylum seeker for every 200 head of population. The cluster limit could only be used boroughwide and not at ward level
 - Serco's property procurement arm would approach a Local Authority (LA) with the property address and postcode of the property they wished to procure, known as a postcode check (PCC)
 - All LAs had seen a significant increase in the number of PCCs received from Serco since March 2020. This was Serco's attempt to satisfy the demands of the Home Office to quickly cease the use of hotels
 - An appendix to the briefing note showed the PCC activity from

March until the end of December 2020 across the Liverpool City Region

(4) Sefton Context

- An appendix to the briefing note showed the numbers of asylum seekers in Sefton and gave the LCR picture for context
- Details were also provided on the hotel accommodation (as at 18 December 2020) and the approximate 50% split between Section 98 and Section 4 asylum seekers using such accommodation

(5) Challenges for Asylum Seekers

- Legal Advice
- Employment
- Welfare advice
- Housing
- No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)
- Education
- Language
- Health and wellbeing

(6) Governance

- Sefton Multi Agency Forum. All agencies involved with the provision and support of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants met on a quarterly basis to raise issues and jointly problem solve
- Migration lead for each Liverpool City Region local authority met on a 6-weekly basis
- Each area had a Regional Strategic Migration Partnership
- Politically each local authority had an elected member with responsibility around Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants. In Sefton this responsibility rested with Councillor Hardy, Cabinet Member – Communities and Housing

5.10 The [briefing note](#) concluded that the asylum world was a complex one and that Sefton played its part as a dispersal area and supported asylum seekers and refugees to ensure that the diverse nature of Sefton's population was enriched; it was noted that there were issues that local areas faced in managing asylum seekers and these were not exclusive to Sefton or any other local authority area, indeed they were common issues across many LAs in the North West; and that the governance mechanisms in place provided a route to escalate issues with Serco or the Home Office and this was done on a regular basis.



5.11 The following appendices were attached to the [briefing note](#):

[Appendix 1](#) - overview of the asylum process in the UK

[Appendix 2](#) - detail in terms of the accommodation standards that is expected to be delivered

Appendix 3 - the different services Migrant Help deliver under the AIRE contract

[Appendix 4](#) - the PCC activity from March until the end of December 2020 across the Liverpool City Region.

Appendix 5 - the numbers of Asylum Seekers in Sefton and gives the LCR picture for context

5.12 Members of the Working Group asked questions/commented on the following issues:

- How much influence did the Council have with Serco and the Home Office. Response – Issues are escalated and raised at a regional level at the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership. Anecdotally this was a one-way relationship
- The added responsibilities dealing with migrants cost money. Did Councils receive additional Government funding to achieve this. Response – No. As a dispersal the Council was expected to deal with the issues presented to it
- Regarding the Scarisbrick Hotel accommodation how many Serco staff were employed to help with the clients. Response – 2 during the day and 2 during the night. 78 clients, mainly male, were currently residing at the hotel and it was anticipated that all would have left by the end of February 2021
- Concern was expressed that women may feel vulnerable in such a male dominated environment. Response – This was acknowledged and efforts were made to place women together at one particular north-west site. Regarding safeguarding issues, Serco had clear Home Office guidelines that they had to adhere to. Two serious incidents at the Scarisbrick Hotel had occurred
- Had asylum seekers experienced anti-social behaviour or hate crime. Response – Any form of anti-social behaviour or hate crime was not acceptable but generally, levels did not cause concern. On-going care and emotional support were offered at the Scarisbrick Hotel and there were also very good support services in place provided by the faith and community sector, for example, drop-in sessions at Christ Church
- Reference was made to the graphs and tables on pages 73 and 74 of the agenda relating to the PCC activity from March until the end of December 2020 across the Liverpool City Region. Explanation was given to a number of points such the data showing that Serco's property procurement arm was looking to procure services across the LCR region rather than solely in Liverpool; and that the term "unsupported" in the table referred to those asylum seekers that had

sufficient assets that they didn't require support

- If a local authority indicated that a property was not suitable as part of PCC could the procurement of that property still proceed. Response – No. If a local authority provided valid reasons then it could not. However, on occasion Serco would escalate the refusal to the Home Office who would in turn request further evidence and reasons for the local authority decision
- Therefore, all procured properties in Sefton had received approval from the Council. Response – Yes.
- Did the Council have to give specific reasons for a PCC refusal. Response – Yes. Valid reasons related to crime, hate crime and anti-social behaviour levels; capacity with local GPs and health services; capacity with local schools for additional pupils; and a concentration of asylum properties
- Regarding dispersal issues across the north-west, was there a connection between the availability of cheaper property in this area of the country than others; and in a similar fashion locally, the procurement of properties predominantly in the south of the borough. Response – Yes. The Home Office rather than Serco determine dispersal ratios
- Could elected Members have access to responses to PCC enquiries. Response – Before information was released consideration would have to be given as to its commercially sensitive nature. Checks would be made to see if such information could be released
- Why couldn't elected Members be involved in the PCC consultation process. Elected Members had good local knowledge of, for example, anti-social behaviour issues in their wards and could provide a valuable input into the process. Response – The Council did refuse PCC's on the grounds mentioned above and as could be seen from the graph on page 73 of the agenda 38 such PCC's had been refused in Sefton. Regarding elected Member involvement in the consultation process, there was a very short 3-day turnaround for the provision of information and this could be problematic to receive responses in the short timeframe. Furthermore, qualitative information from elected Members was different to quantitative information provided by statutory bodies such as the Police who could detailed statistical evidence for use in the PCC
- It was appreciated that there was a short response turnaround for PCC checks but a number of Members suggested that they should nonetheless be consulted as part of the PCC application process. Response – Investigations would be undertaken to find out if such consultation could be introduced
- Was the dispersal of asylum seekers considered at the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership. Response – Yes and also at a national level. A case was being made to the Home Office that there was a disproportionate number of asylum seekers being placed in the LCR and north-west region



- What voice did asylum seekers have to raise complaints or grievances. Response – Complaints about Serco would be raised with Migrant Help. Other avenues were also available via Venus or Bosco and community groups
- Were there any complaints about Migrant Help. Response – Significant waiting times of up to 45 minutes were frequently experienced by asylum seekers using the Migrant Help telephone line. However, service improvements had been implemented and waiting times were now down to 3 or 4 minutes. It was generally accepted that Migrant Help performed a good service
- It was good to receive assurances about the quality of services provided by Migrant Help. Could information/feedback be provided to the Working Group on services offered by Venus and Bosco. Response – This should be possible. It may also be helpful to invite representatives of Venus and Bosco, along with service users, to a meeting of the Working Group so that they can provide information and share their experiences with members
- How could elected Members feed into the Sefton Multi Agency Forum. Response – The terms of reference would be checked to ascertain elected Member representation on the Forum and how input could be facilitated. Politically each LA had an elected member with responsibility around asylum seekers, refugees and migrants and Councillor Hardy was Sefton’s lead. These lead members across LCR met twice a year and Councillors could contact Councillor Hardy with a request that she raise issues of concern
- Reference was made to the delivery the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE) and what was the Council’s involvement with this. Response – The Council would only become involved if there was a complaint about housing standards issues. Generally, Migrant Help would escalate issues and complaints to the Home Office and there was a potential that Serco would incur financial penalties. It was agreed that information/data be sought on the complaints made in respect of AIRE
- A suggestion was made that an invite be extended to a representative(s) of the Liverpool City Region to attend a meeting of the Working Group to obtain the views of LCR in respect of the management of issues associated with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants

5.13 To further progress and help the Working Group with its review it was agreed that:

- (1) the Head of Communities be requested to investigate and report to the next meeting of the Working Group on:
 - (a) providing elected Members with access to responses to Post Code Check (PCC) enquiries;



- (b) enabling elected Members to be included as consultees as part of the PCC's within their wards; and
 - (c) how elected Members could feed into the Sefton Multi Agency Forum.
- (2) arrangements be made to invite representatives of Venus and Bosco, along with service users, to a meeting of the Working Group so that they can provide information and share their experiences with Members; and
- (3) arrangements be made to invite a representative(s) of the Liverpool City Region to attend a meeting of the Working Group to obtain the views of LCR in respect of the management of issues associated with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants

6.0 WORKING GROUP MEETING – 26 FEBRUARY 2021

6.1 Witness Interviews - Venus Charity, former Asylum Seeker, Syrian Refugee, the Bosco Society and Liverpool City Region

6.2 The Working Group interviewed the following witnesses:

Carlie Machell and Lorraine Webb from Venus Charity
 Atheer Abbas – former Asylum Seeker
 Tahsen Abbar – Syrian Refugee
 Sheila Howard from the Bosco Society and service users;
 Julie Kashirahamwe from the Liverpool City Region.

6.3 Councillor Robinson, Lead Member, advised the interviewees that the Working Group was established following concerns about the perceived lack of management by Serco of their properties and the poor service provision to their service users; and that the purpose of the witness interviews was to obtain information from the Venus Charity and the Bosco Society and learn about the experiences of their service users; and to obtain the views of LCR in respect of the management of issues associated with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

6.4 To set the context, it was explained that the Venus Charity and the Bosco Society were part of the Sefton Supported Housing Network (SSHG) a consortium of four organisations that had joined forces to tackle homelessness in the borough.

Regarding work with Refugees SSHG were commissioned by Sefton to implement the Syrian refugee resettlement programme. This was an intense piece of support work provided to families that were resettled into the UK via UNHCRs refugee resettlement programme. Service user families fell into groups of vulnerability such as "women and girls at risk", "victims of violence

and torture", and "unaccompanied minors", and would have different needs as individual families. Work commenced before a family arrived to secure appropriate accommodation, and property was procured from "available now" lists or private landlord properties, so from a transparency point of view the families were not being "given" a property that could have gone to a local family. Pre-arrival work included furnishing the properties to a basic standard (again, ensuring local people could access these furnishings as well should they need it, by using the same supplier as local the Emergency Limited Assistance Scheme (ELAS) provision), and a basic food shop was provided to ensure families had everything they needed on immediate arrival (baby milk, bread etc). One of the unique pieces of pre-arrival work was liaising with Sefton to ensure a school place was secured and ready and schools would usually provide service users with uniforms meaning children could usually begin school within week one. On arrival service user families were met at the airport and settled into their home. Over the next week intensive support was provided on a daily basis, with local induction, and also in respect of applying for benefits, attending GP, dentist, and any other immediate issues service users faced. Within 2 weeks parents started English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) at a local centre and again the administration for this was completed pre-arrival, and once the children were in school parents were free to attend ESOL to help to begin language work.

Venus work with Asylum seekers was different and was in response to what the Charity was met with in their international cafe. This session was developed in response to recognising how important it was for new speakers of English to be able to practice in a more informal setting, and to foster peer support. Word of mouth increased the amount of people attending this session and quickly it became apparent that many local asylum seekers also needed assistance. Some of the issues faced were asylum seekers not being aware of local services, so they may be housed in the area, but were unaware of where the GP was, or how they could access money, food, clothing. This local orientation was very important to people in needing to feel settled into an area, and local information, such as "bin day" may not feel very important to people, but these were issues that if left unchecked could become important quickly to the local community. Venus had worked with many individuals who had no idea how to access cash points or had needed safeguarding referrals completing. Venus had informal links to many people who spoke different languages who could help to convey information and support to people as often quite simple things could make a big difference. These sessions were attended by local community police officers and other professionals such as local libraries, Red Cross, women's refugee connect, so that service users could be signposted to other support where needed.

6.5 Members of the Working Group and witnesses asked questions/commented on the following issues:

- Migrant Help – the consensus of witnesses was that rather than using Migrant Help, support was sought from the community and voluntary



sector services such as Venus or Bosco. The only way to contact Migrant Help was via telephone and experience had shown that it was difficult to get through on the phone line; and that they could not offer the wide-ranging support on matters such as mental health issues, finances, energy providers and the provision of local area knowledge. An opinion was expressed that the Home Office relied on charities and local authorities to pick up the pieces of the inadequate Migrant Help service provision and that this situation was replicated across the Country and not only in LCR

- Language barriers – further to a number of different languages spoken, dialects within the same language could also hinder effective communication with asylum seekers and refugees. Methods to resolve such problems included not only the use of translators but the use of Google translate and matching service users with same language/dialect speakers
- Home Office Contracts – these are in place for 10 years and local authorities, voluntary and charity sector had little influence over how changes could be implemented. However, a structure was in place to challenge the contracts, the [North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership](#), and local authorities had a voice at this Partnership. At a political level Councillor Liz Parsons from Liverpool City Council represented the LCR Lead Members on the Partnership. Quarterly meetings were held and data was provided on the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract (AASC) but no performance data was given on the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance services (AIRE) contract despite regular requests for such information. It was therefore difficult to know whether outcomes were being achieved and contract specifications/performance targets were being met. It would be helpful to this information/performance data
- Serco – service user experience was that a poor service was provided by Serco; after the initial contact relating to the allocation of the property little contact was made by Serco; service users relied on help and support from other agencies; when contact was again made by Serco it was to inspect the property rather than to offer help and advice. It was noted that SERCO are only contracted to ensure that the housing provided is of a sufficient standard and are not required through the contract with the Home Office to do anything additional in terms of support.
- Mental Health - it was acknowledged that service users had left their home countries either as political refugees and were seeking asylum in the UK or had been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster; and that some service users had experienced horrendous and traumatic experiences in the process. This had a negative impact on mental health. Specialist mental health services were available but could not meet the demand; and some services were now only being provided via telephone or online which was inadequate. Universal mental health services in the UK are often

not equipped to deal with these types of trauma related issues and often don't have the necessary language skills.

- Education – a comment was made that the allocation of school places for refugees ran much more smoothly than for asylum seekers. Social workers assigned to refugees and asylum seekers were involved in seeking education provision for their service users and it was considered that this was a resource that could be better managed. Outreach provision could be linked to the Talbot Street Southport Family Wellbeing Centre for those Asylum seekers living the Scarisbrick Hotel

It was noted that Serco should provide service users with information on how to access school places. A scheme was referred to, run between LCR and Liverpool City Council, whereby a process was being established to identify refugee/asylum seeker families moving into areas so that appropriate educational services could be accessed

- Geographic location of asylum seekers in UK – It was noted that 24% of the UK's asylum seekers were in the north-west region when on a nationwide proportionate basis the north-west should accommodate 12%. The reason suggested for this was that Serco, who had been commissioned by the Home Office to provide such services, took decisions based on market forces and purchased properties where they were less expensive, for example in the north-west. At a national level north-west local authority Chief Executives were striving to achieve a reduction in asylum seeker numbers to 12%. To achieve a more even distribution nationwide the Home Office would have to provide additional resources to secure the procurement of properties in the south-east.
- Geographic location of asylum seekers in Sefton - on a Sefton basis, it was acknowledged that a 1:200 ratio of asylum seekers across the local authority area was acceptable. However, it was stated that asylum seekers were often concentrated in a small number of wards and the reasons for this were recognised as a result of Serco procuring properties in areas where they were less expensive. It was also recognised that as part of the postcode check (PPC) local authorities could only refuse approval for the procurement of a property on evidence-based grounds relating to crime, hate crime and anti-social behaviour levels, capacity with local GPs and health services for additional population, capacity with local schools for additional pupils and a concentration of asylum properties. It was noted that elected Members were a valuable source of local knowledge but were not consulted as part of PCC and that consideration should be given to their involvement in this process. It may also be helpful to engage with Serco to influence them to target procurement of properties in particular areas.

6.6 The Working Group agreed that it would be beneficial if the following information could be sought:



- (1) the processes in place to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees received appropriate educational provision;
- (2) in respect of Migrant Help, the number of calls from service users received by the organisation; the average time taken for calls to be answered; the average time taken to resolve issues raised by service users; the number and nature of complaints received about the organisation; the number of staff employed to deal with service users calls; the languages in which staff could respond to service users calls; and the mechanisms in place to monitor the performance of the organisation against the contract service specification; and
- (3) Partnership managers from Migrant Health and Serco, together with a representative from the Home Office to attend a meeting of the Working Group to answer Members' questions.

6.7 Serco Postcode Checks Details

- 6.8 The Working Group considered the [report](#) of the Locality Services Manager that provided information on access by elected Members to responses to postcode checks (PCC) enquiries; how elected Members could be included as consultees as part of the PCC's within their wards; and how elected Members could feed into the Sefton Multi Agency Forum.

In respect of PCC's the report indicated that Serco's property procurement arm would approach the Local Authority with the property address and postcode of the property they wished to procure (known as the postcode check); that LA had 3 days to reply as to whether to grant approval for the procurement or not; and that the checks that the LA would make to determine whether a request could go ahead were:

- Crime, Hate Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour levels – the Police consulted
- Capacity with local GPs and Health Services for additional population – the CCG consulted
- Capacity with local schools for additional pupils – Schools Regulatory Services consulted
- Concentration of Asylum Properties – Housing Strategy consulted

Given the high number of PCCs that the LA received and the time required to turn around the responses to these requests; and given the number that in reality followed through and became asylum accommodation, the report suggested that it would not be feasible to provide elected members with access to each response and that there was also the sensitivity of sharing

potential commercial arrangements between Serco and private landlords. However, a potential solution could be to ask Serco to provide a quarterly report giving the total number of PCCs they had requested in that quarter, the number that the Council had refused and the reasons why, and the number of properties that actually culminated in becoming asylum accommodation.

Furthermore, elected Members' opinions could be sought, on a quarterly basis, on suitable areas for procurement, where Members felt there were significant numbers of properties already and any other issues they felt should be taken into account of in local communities.

In respect of the Sefton Multi Agency Forum (MAF) the report indicated that this hadn't met in over 12 months due to the Covid-19 pandemic but that arrangements were being taken to restart the MAF in Spring 2021. In respect of elected Member involvement in MAF it was suggested that the views of Councillor Hardy, Cabinet Member – Community and Housing be sought; and that an alternative solution for elected member involvement to input their experiences into the system could be to do so via Councillor Hardy's attendance at the 6 monthly meeting with other LCR Lead Members chaired by Councillor Liz Parsons from Liverpool City Council. To facilitate this input the Head of Communities could, 4 weeks prior to the meeting, seek the views of elected Members on any issues they were experiencing and thereafter Councillor Hardy could be provided with a briefing note enabling her to raise these issues at LCR level.

6.9 Members of the Working Group asked questions/commented on the following issues:

- The involvement of elected Members in the Sefton Multi Agency Forum
- Ward Councillors being included as consultees as part of the consultation postcode check associated with Serco's property procurement

6.10 The Working Group agreed that the Head of Communities:

- (1) submit quarterly reports to Members, following the receipt of information from Serco, on the total number of postcode checks they had requested in that quarter, the number that the Council had refused and the reasons why, and the number of properties that actually culminated in becoming asylum accommodation;
- (2) seek the views of elected Members, on a quarterly basis, on suitable areas for procurement, where Members felt there were significant numbers of properties already and any other issues they felt should be taken into account of in local communities;
- (3) seek the approval of the Cabinet Member – Communities and



Housing;

- (a) for the inclusion of Ward Councillors as consultees as part of the consultation postcode check associated with Serco's property procurement; and
 - (b) for elected Member involvement in the Sefton Multi Agency Forum; and
- (4) provide 6 monthly updates to Councillor Hardy, containing the views of elected Members, in advance of her meeting with LCR Lead Members chaired by Councillor Liz Parsons.

7.0 WORKING GROUP MEETING – 23 APRIL 2021

7.1 The Working Group had been arranged to interview witnesses from Serco and the Home Office. Accordingly, Ben Rodgers and Ged Swanson (Serco) and Jonathan Blackburn (Home Office) attended the meeting. Members of the Working Group then asked the organisations listed below questions or commented on the following:

7.2 SERCO

1. Please can you describe your obligations under the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract (AASC) to provide housing and support to Asylum Seekers in Sefton?

Answer - Under the contract, Serco are required to have proactive maintenance plans, to make sure that they regularly inspect properties and report back to the Home Office on the findings of these inspections. When issues are identified they are expected to be resolved within set timescales. Induction support is also provided to service users to ensure that they are aware of key services in the local area, for example signposting to GP and other support services; and how requests for, or complaints about, Serco's housing services can be made.

To facilitate the above Serco has Housing, Repair and Maintenance and Business Support teams.

Welfare visits are also undertaken but such visits have been affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A Member referred to a problem occurring in a small cul-de-sac whereby service users regularly put their bins out for collection on the wrong day. This resulted in local residents complaining. It was stated that service users were advised about local Council services as part of the induction process. However, if problems continued in particular locations then if information is forwarded on



to Serco measures would be taken to resolve the matter.

A Member asked was there a high turnover of service users in properties; as such a high turnover resulted in continuous problems as they did not have time to become accustomed to local services etc.

As mentioned earlier it was restated that all new service users had an induction; that inspection of the premises would be undertaken prior to a service user moving in; and then monthly inspections thereafter. This provide an opportunity to resolve issue on an ongoing basis.

A Member asked how long a service user would stay in a Serco property.

This would depend on the legal processes associated with the service user's asylum application.

2. How many staff do you employ and what is the staff to property/service user ratio?

Answer – Across the north-west regional contract about 400. Safeguarding work is undertaken on a north-west regional basis. Staff to property/service user ratio can differ due to types of property and how large the geographical area is. In Sefton, there are 2/3 frontline housing officer staff assisted by 2/3 maintenance staff. The target operating model for housing and maintenance services is one officer covering 50 properties. On average there are 2/3 service users per property so each housing officer could have responsibility for 100/150 service users. A Field Operation manager oversees work and for this purpose Sefton is included with areas of north Liverpool.

A Member asked how much time was spent with a service user. This was based on inspection times built into the Inspection Model in respect of housing matters or accessing services. The Safeguarding Partnership Team would deal with more problematic service user problems. Migrant Help also worked very closely with Serco and if a service user had an identified additional need then extra support would be provided by outreach teams and the voluntary sector.

3. How is your performance against your contractual obligations monitored?

Answer - Performance and Compliance Teams within Serco would do this internally; and information was also reported to the Home Office. Serco was also accountable to local authorities in respect of environmental health/licensing regimes. The Home Office kept a close check on Serco's performance in relation to contractual



obligations. It was explained that each contract region had a dedicated Home Office Service Delivery Manager who checked adherence to key performance indicators. Commercial Managers were also assigned to contract regions to ensure client service delivery. Dialogue between Serco and the Home Office in respect of this matter was undertaken daily.

At a local level there was a well-established Multi-Agency Forum and monthly Liverpool City Region meetings where issues could be raised. Any specific concerns regarding the contract could be made direct to Ged Swanson at Serco.

A Member referred to an issue raised at a previous meeting of the Working Group whereby a representative of Venus detailed problems experienced by service users using Language Line. Serco considered that their system did work well but acknowledged that it was not perfect. It was difficult to have every officer fluent in every language. On occasions there was a need to engage a representative of the service users' community to help with translation issues. It was acknowledged that part of the Serco contract was to enable service users to raise issues in their own language. It was also noted that Migrant Help had access to Clear Voice interpreting services covering 20 languages.

A Member asked what contractual obligations there were in respect of service users' children accessing education services.

It was stated that Serco's main role was as a housing provider. However, this would form part of the service users' induction process. Service users received two inductions and the second one related to access to health and education services and referrals were made where necessary. The general view was that service users genuinely engaged with educational provision. Ged Swanson agreed that he would be happy to make links and explore with Sefton education service a point of contact to resolve issues such as access to educational services.

4. How are issues raised by service users living in accommodation you manage?

Answer – Initially issues are raised via Migrant Help, cases are logged and the Key Performance Indicator process begins. Contact with Migrant Help can be made via a live webchat, email or a freephone number. Complaints can also be raised directly with housing officers or escalated via advocates or colleagues in the voluntary or community sectors.

Most service users have access to mobile devices but in instances where they do not help can be obtained from the Red Cross or other voluntary organisations.

Collaborative work is also undertaken by our Safeguarding

Partnership Team with organisations to address issues relating to early intervention and health; and to ensure the wellbeing of service users, with the Red Cross, Refugee Action and the Multi-Agency Forum.

Information sharing with other organisations is also used to address problems. However, such information sharing with voluntary sector organisations can be problematic due to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) issues.

To overcome language barriers when service users wish to make complaints the Language Line as part of the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE) can be utilised. Mediation measures would always be used to resolve language barriers.

5. How do service users make a complaint about your service and how many complaints have you received in the past 12 months? Are there any particular themes in complaints that you see repeatedly?

Answer - Service users making complaints had been referred to in previous questions; and the Serco representatives did not have the numbers of complaints made to hand at the meeting. Service users could make complaints covering many aspects such as property maintenance issues, other service users or a desire to move to another property/location. No particular trends had been observed. It was stated that all complaints via the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract were dealt with by Migrant Help; and that this was part of the escalation process and provided transparency. Monthly management board meetings were held and there was always an item on the agenda regarding complaints. Jon Blackburn (Home Office) indicated that customer service surveys were undertaken and that the results of feedback could be shared with the Working Group; together with details of complaints received.

A Member asked how neighbours of service users could report complaints. Complaints could be directed through the local authority or direct to Ged Swanson at Serco.

6. In your view are there any gaps in the service you provide that could be easily rectified?

Answer - There was always a potential for gaps to appear in service provision over the course of time. However, it was considered that Serco adhered to the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract.

A Member referred to her membership of the Council's Mental



Health Issues Working Group and the worrying trend that mental health issues being experienced were on the increase; and asked how service users could get referrals for mental health problems. The Member would welcome Serco, Migrant Help and Home Office involvement in the Working Group.

It was stated that Serco had a low-level intervention regarding service user mental health issues and that this could be perceived as a gap in the service; although there was no mandatory requirement for medical issues of service users to be resolved by Serco. Service user mental health issues could be referred to the local Adult Social Care teams.

A Member asked about suicide incidents of service users. Unfortunately, some service user suicides had been experienced. In such cases the Home Office undertook in-depth case reviews. As mentioned above, there was no distinct mental health service user service provision; but a NHS Task and Finish Working Group was referred to which was currently looking at the medical service provision for service users. This brought into focus the need for services users to register with a local GP.

A Member asked about service user links with the local community and how the Council could be involved to help with this process. Ged Swanson, Serco was currently undertaking a piece of work on this matter and any contact or assistance with the Council would be greatly appreciated.

From a Home Office perspective there was a desire to encourage service users to integrate into their local communities. Post code checks helped with cohesion; and it was considered that generally, there had been successful resettlement and integration of service users into communities.

A Member indicated that although the Council were made aware of Serco property searches via post code checks, the Council was unaware what properties had been purchased and service users accommodated in.

This was acknowledged and it was now the case that local authorities were advised when Serco would not be pursuing the procurement of properties following post code check enquiries.

Steven Martlew, Interim Head of Communities suggested that this should be built into the post code check process so that a strategic overview could be obtained and to provide due diligence for elected Members.

7.3 HOME OFFICE

1. Can you describe the Home Office roles in the procurement and



monitoring of both the ASSC and AIRE contracts?

Answer – The procurement process was initiated in 2017 to replace the former COMPASS contracts for the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers; the contracts were designed following engagement with local authorities, potential providers and non-governmental organisations; following an open and transparent procurement process the contracts were awarded in March 2019 and took effect from August 2019; and the contracts were for a period of 10 years with the potential for a review after 7 years.

A Member asked why Sefton did not take part in the procurement process.

It was noted that local authorities could have bid for the contracts. However, a consortium of local authorities would have had to submit a joint bid as the contract was awarded on a regional basis rather than by local authority geographical area.

2. What opportunities are there for amending the contracts to include things that are clearly a common issue for Service Users?

Answer – There is the ability to amend or change the contracts by use of formal contract change notes.

A Member asked could a contract change be implemented if a local authority raised a particular issue.

It was stated that in theory this could be done but that it would be very unusual for changes to be made at a local level rather than at a regional level. Issues of concern should be raised with the Strategic Migration Partnership Lead.

A Member asked about the potential changes to the property procurement processes contained in the contract.

It was stated that changes could be made to the operating processes and that these were regularly reviewed.

A Members asked who attended Multi-Agency Forum meetings.

It was reported that representatives of the Home Office, Serco, local authorities, Police, Health Services and the voluntary sector attended the Forum. However, the membership was “fluid” and invites could be extended to any person or service if deemed appropriate.

A Member asked how the Home Office heard of service users’ concerns.

It was stated that the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract was established for this purpose; and that Migrant Help was the first point of contact for complaint escalation. Also, the

Home undertook customer satisfaction surveys, on a sample basis, and these were used to inform changes to service provision.

A Member asked what level of feedback was generated by the customer satisfaction survey.

It was reported that often, service users viewed the surveys with cynicism as they considered there may be an ulterior motive for the survey; also, the outcome of the service users asylum claim could have a bearing on the perception of the service they received. It was stressed however that service users were not mandated to undertake the survey.

It was also noted that Serco were working on a Customer Insight survey. All service user responses to the survey would be anonymous and hopefully a true picture of service user views could be obtained.

A Member asked what happened when a service user had failed the five appeal stages and lost their right to asylum but could not be returned to their country of origin due to personal safety issues; but were left with no access to public funds.

It was stated that the Home Office had a Voluntary Returns Programme and could undertake enforced removals. Since the UK left the EU problems were being experienced with the Dublin Agreement. Failed applicants could apply to stay in the UK using Section 4.

3. What form does your contract monitoring of both Serco and Migrant Help take and where do you report this?

Answer – This was undertaken by a full Governance Board. Reporting of information could be to Chief Inspectors, the Home Affairs Select Committee and ultimately the Home Secretary. If any system failures were identified then an action plan would be put into place. If the service failure was deemed to be severe then then the service provider could be removed from the contract.

4. What performance information does the Home Office publish around contract monitoring assurance meetings?

Answer - Information in this regard is deemed confidential and commercially sensitive. However, the terms of the contract itself was in the public domain.

A Member queried why performance data was deemed commercially sensitive and suggested that scrutiny of performance data of a Government contract would ensure transparency. It was stated that information would be sought on the reasons for

confidentiality in this regard.

5. Who holds the Home Office to account in terms of their granting and monitoring of the AIRE and AASC contract? How do we know the Home Office is holding Serco and Migrant Help to account appropriately?

Answer – the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Home Secretary. Independent Chief Inspectors also ensured that the contracts were managed correctly. It was also stated that there could be significant financial penalties if contractors did not perform adequately; and that a sanction could lead to the removal of a contractor from the contract. Key performance indicators were publicly available on the Government website and a link to such information would be provided to the Working Group. Home Office inspectors also undertook inspections of Serco properties to ensure service providers were providing the service they should. In conclusion, it was stated that the Home Office would be happy to be involved in collaborative property inspection work with both Serco and Sefton.

6. In your view are there any gaps in the services that both Serco and Migrant Help deliver that you feel should be included in an immediate contract change or included in future contract procurement processes?

Answer – No pressing issues at present.

Appropriate data sharing across statutory bodies was required to ensure adequate services are provided. The sharing of health data would be beneficial but it was acknowledged that health service providers were not mandated to provide such information.

A change in planning of service user placements could be helpful to ensure an equitable distribution of asylum seekers not only across the north-west but across the UK regions.

The discontinuance of the use of hotel accommodation.

A Member asked how realistic was it that the distribution of asylum seekers would be equitable across the UK bearing in mind the widely varying house prices from region to region.

This difficulty was acknowledged and that Serco were working in an environment of high demand. Rurality was a barrier due to poor service provision for service users. A balance also needed to be taken regarding the potential negative views of the public to placing service users in affluent, expensive property areas. To balance distribution more equitably there needed to be % shift towards the Midlands and the south-east and south-west. At the end of the day the situation was dictated to by the availability of suitable properties that could provide a minimum set of standards for service users.

A Member asked whether local authorities who had signed up to be part of the programme could back out.

No this could not be done. Furthermore, the Home Office had a statutory duty to provide accommodation and support services to asylum seekers so a situation could arise whereby service users could be located in a local authority area without any consultation.

A Member stated that the poorest wards in Sefton accommodated a disproportionate number of asylum seekers and that this could lead to local community resentment or at worse, right wing extremism. It was stated that a “hot mapping” exercise could be undertaken but that Serco had to use properties available to them and which met the requirements of the post code check. If specific problems were being experienced in Sefton then Serco should be contacted in an effort to resolve them. Across the UK there were 8000 asylum seekers in hotel accommodation who needed to be decanted to residential property. Numbers of migrants may also increase with the relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions. There was therefore a need for more accommodation to be sourced across the UK. Sefton could engage with Serco to specify areas in which they deemed it most suitable for the housing of service users. The post code checks were really important because service users needed to be placed in areas where there was no risk to their safety. This would help to ensure service users were successfully integrated into communities. A Serco representative indicated that they were actively procuring property in Sefton and that a small cluster of properties would soon be utilised in the Southport area.

A Member indicated that a number of Syrian refugee families had been housed in Derby ward and on the whole, there were very few complaints. One issue of concern however related to refuse sacks being put out on the wrong days which local residents construed as fly-tipping.

A Member asked when asylum seekers would be moved out of the Scarisbrick Hotel in Southport; and reference was made to a recent incident whereby a far-right group demonstrated at the hotel. The plan was to decant the asylum seekers shortly and work was being undertaken with the local MP on this. Hotel accommodation was only used as temporary facility. Local authorities often highlighted areas where they did not want to see asylum seeker accommodation but rarely specified areas in which they would be happy to accommodate it.

Steven Martlew, Interim Head of Communities assured Members that work on the “hot mapping” exercise referred to earlier in the meeting had already started in liaison with Serco.



8.0 WORKING GROUP MEETING – 24 JUNE 2021

8.1 The Working Group had been arranged to interview the witness Florence Le Gal from Migrant Help. Accordingly, Florence Le Gal attended the meeting and Members of the Working Group asked the Ms. Le Gal questions or commented on the following:

- 8.2 1. Can you describe your obligations under the AIRE contract to provide support to Asylum Seekers living in initial and dispersed accommodation?

Answer – When Migrant Help are notified that a new arrival has made themselves know to the Home Office and claim asylum, the key performance indicator (KPI) provides that within 24 hours Migrant Help should contact the client and complete an induction leaflet. Migrant Help also have to comply with a KPI to complete the application for support and send it to the Home Office for decision. During the application process, advisers can identify extra support needed and will signpost to appropriate services. Migrant Help give out a handbook in service users own language regarding the asylum process, support and rights. A solicitors list is also provided, a national and local list of services and Migrant Help's contact number and other ways to contact the organisation. Pre pandemic, the Home Office would take 21 days to respond to the clients regarding the support. If accepted, clients will receive a Grant letter of support which they can use to access medical, educational and legal services and they will be dispersed to a more permanent accommodation. If refused, Migrant Help signpost clients to various partners to lodge an appeal.

Clients can contact Migrant Help if they are having issues with: payments, repairs, change of circumstances, re-location, signposting, safeguarding issues, complaints and feedback. During this time clients will receive their asylum claim decision, either positive or negative and Migrant Help will make contact with the clients to speak about their options and referral to partners for extra support. Migrant Help also have an outreach team that partners can refer clients to and this is for vulnerable clients. The team has no KPI and will offer support as long as the client is in need.

Migrant Help are working very closely with the Home Office, housing providers, Local Authorities and the Voluntary Sector and a monthly report is sent to all referred to. Regular meetings are attended, information shared, feedback taken and issues solved when they arise.

A Member asked who funded legal representation for migrants. The Working Group was advised that funding was provided by Legal

Aid.

A Member asked how initial contact was made with migrants. The Working Group was advised that before the pandemic, all clients would have been seen face to face and seen by the medical team in place. Now the induction and application process had to be completed by telephone. If the service user does have phone access, provision is made and are appointments for applications are also made with the support of Serco staff.

For hotel use the local CCG medical team have a presence in the hotels.

2. How many calls from service users to do you receive?

Answer – The Working Group was advised that this number fluctuated; and that Migrant Help monthly reports would show the different trend each month.

The Working Group was advised that the exact data would have to be sought from the Home Office as they are the data owner.

A Member asked for details about the Aspen Card.

The Working Group was advised that an 'Aspen Card' was a debit payment card, issued by the UK Home Office to asylum seekers. Asylum seekers with ongoing applications (called 'Section 95') could withdraw cash on their card, whilst people with failed applications (known as 'Section 4') could only use it as a debit card. The Home Office could see exactly what had been purchased, and where and when it was purchased.

A Member asked about recent problems with the Aspen Cards. The Working Group was advised that in May 2021 the current Aspen Cards were de-activated and new cards sent to service users. However, problems occurred and in circumstances cards stopped working. Migrant Help had to deal with numerous calls from service users to resolve problems they were experiencing.

A Member asked if any statistics were available, relating solely to Sefton, about the problems experienced with Aspen Cards.

The Working Group was advised that such information would have to be sought from the Home Office.

A Member asked who was responsible for emergency payments to migrants.

The Working Group was advised that Migrant Help and Serco, the Home Office's approved housing provider could make the payments.

A Member asked whether statistics could be provided to the Working Group detailing the numbers of calls from service users and the



average waiting times for such calls to be answered. Migrant Help collected such data but did not “own” it. The data was sent to the Home Office as the commissioner of the service. The information would therefore need to be requested from the Home Office.

3. What is the average time taken for calls to be answered?

Answer – This changed depending on the time of the year. As referred to above, Migrant Help collected such data but did not “own” it. The data was sent to the Home Office as the commissioner of the service. The information would therefore need to be requested from the Home Office.

(Note: As an example, information provided by Migrant Health on 25/06/21 showed that on that day, the helpline waiting time was under 20 minutes for the first responder and under 10 minutes for the EAGL team (the more experienced advisers).

4. How many staff do you employ to deal with service user calls?

Answer – the number of nationwide helpline staff fluctuated between 100/200 depending on periods of demand. Higher numbers of staff worked between 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and reduced numbers outside of normal hours and at weekends.

A Member asked what training was provided for Migrant help staff. The Working Group was advised that training was provided by the Home Office suitable to the levels of responsibility. For example, there were 2 helpline teams. The first team dealt with standard queries whilst the second team dealt with more complicated issues.

A Member asked what was the ratio of staff to service users. The Working Group was provided with details of client advisor and outreach teams roles; and it was stressed that the north-west region received more asylum seekers than any other region. Migrant Help fulfilled the terms of the Home Office contract and adhered to the key performance indicators within it. It was stated that the Home Office would not allow the publication of Migrant Health client numbers. However, some north-west statistical information was collated by Colin Parker, Asylum Lead at Manchester City Council.

A Member asked could the Working Group have sight of the key performance indicators. The Working Group was advised that this matter would be looked into to find out whether the helpline key performance indicators could be provided.

5. What is the average time taken to resolve issues raised by service



users?

Answer – Migrant Help had various KPI's for different issues set by the Home Office. If targets have failed the Home Office will penalise Migrant Help.

For maintenance issues, the housing providers have their own KPI's but Migrant Help have 30 minutes to send the notification.

6. What are the common themes raised by service users in their calls?

Answer – The trend will be detailed in Migrant Help's monthly report but common themes mainly related to repairs, payments issues, a change of situation (adding a child/family members), re-location requests, welfare calls needed for extra health support or clothes.

7. How is your performance against your contractual obligations monitored?

Answer – Migrant Help had internal processes in place, key performance indicators to adhere to as part of the Home Office contract and the submission of monthly reports to the Home Office.

A Member asked could the Working Group have sight of this information.

The Working Group was advised that the information would need to be requested from the Home Office.

8. In your view are there any gaps in the service that you provide that could be easily rectified?

Answer - it would have made sense if Migrant Help could still complete Asylum Support Appeals for clients when the support had been declined. Migrant Help were currently signposting clients to external partners as Asylum Support Appeals were not covered under the AIRE Contract.

Migrant Help would like to support clients and the external agencies by providing additional support. Migrant Help have now recruited more staff to launch a new strategy to support local projects and are also looking at involving more service users to hear their feedback and ideas.

Migrant Help are always looking at improving communication with all involved in the region and would welcome any questions.

Migrant Help encouraged Working Group Members to visit their website, which had many translated materials; and the use of an App which can translate and speak different languages and provide information on Covid updates, asylum support changes, videos about Home Office interviews and many more topics.



A Member referred to the change to the 2019 Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance services (AIRE) contract that prevented Migrant Help from helping service users to complete documentation; and asked how would service users now get help with, for example, appeals issues.

The Working Group was advised that each region had different methods and as referred to above signposted service users to organisations who could offer help and support.

A Member stated that one of the reasons the Working Group was established was to understand the issues affecting migrants in Sefton; but to do so, it was apparent that information had to be provided to the Working Group by the Home Office. Concern was expressed that information may be difficult to obtain because the Home Office would cite commercially confidential reasons for refusing to release such information.

A Member asked whether Migrant Help considered that they could adequately support migrants under the terms of the new AIRE contract.

The Working Group was advised that Migrant Help's outreach workers aimed to ensure that migrants had financial support, accommodation, medical care and access to legal advice. Furthermore, in addition to the AIRE contract Migrant Help had an involvement with the Home Office Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract.

Migrant Help also had very good working relationships with local authorities and voluntary sector organisations who helped service users out with, for example, the provision of meals and clothing.

A Member asked whether Migrant Help would be advised of the potential homelessness of service users.

The Working Group was advised that service users in this position should contact Migrant Help for assistance.

A Member asked what happened when a service user had no further recourse to public funds.

The Working Group was advised that this related to people with failed applications (known as 'Section 4') (known as 'Section 4'). Often in these circumstances people with failed applications "disappeared" into society.

Florence Le Gal concluded by indicating that she would welcome being invited to any multi-agency forums to have the chance to highlight issues affecting migrants; and that the Migrant Help website was a useful source of information which provided monthly reports.

8.3 The Working Group also considered information on performance data



provided by Migrant Help that detailed their responsibilities under the AIRE Contract. The following information was provided and links to the information can be obtained from the “Documentation considered by the Working Group section” of the Final Report:

- Migrant Help Monthly Update – March 2021
- Migrant Help North West Regional Update - March 2021
- AIRE Outreach Overview
- Outreach Referral Form
- UKVI Asylum Operations – Update on Remote Interviewing - 15/02/2021
- Migrant Help Asylum Services Consent Form – Third Party
- Migrant Help Services
- Clear Voice Information

8.4 The Working Group also considered a [briefing note](#) of the Head of Communities that provided information on asylum seeker/refugee children of school age accessing education; and asylum seeker children who lived with their families.

The briefing note indicated that once Sefton had been notified about children of Asylum Seekers moving into the borough, the children missing education processes were followed and an admissions form was sent to the family to complete; that there was a dedicated Children Missing Education Co-ordinator who would also arrange to engage a translator if required to complete the forms and that a home visit was undertaken if required; and that if the family were placed with an accommodation provider, for example SERCO, Sefton liaised directly with them, and often this involved a home visit to complete the application form for a place at the school/education setting.

In the case of unaccompanied asylum seekers who were in the care of the local authority, the briefing note indicated that when the application form for a school was received it was passed to the Principal Admissions Officer to process; that the Principal Admissions Officer had specific responsibility to oversee the admission of looked after children into school; and that this function was added to the role to align to care planning and education processes.

In respect of support for Refugee families under the UK’s Resettlement Scheme, children who came into Sefton through the scheme were allocated school places prior to their arrival; and that this was a partnership between Community Safety, School Admissions, VENUS (voluntary and community sector) and schools.

9.0 WORKING GROUP MEETING – 27 JULY 2021

9.1 The Working Group considered the [briefing note](#) of the Interim Head of



Communities that updated on the 6 Monthly Asylum Procurement Report for the period 1 January to 30 June 2021.

- 9.2 The briefing note indicated that Working Group had requested that elected Members had more input into the strategic planning, location and distribution of Housing and Support Services for vulnerable households; that one such vulnerable group were Asylum Seekers; that Asylum Seekers were housed in dispersed accommodation whilst they awaited a decision as to their asylum application; that each local authority operated an asylum seeker cluster limit that was based on 1 asylum seeker for every 200 head of population; that the cluster limit could only be used boroughwide and not at ward level; that the cluster limit in terms of actual numbers of Asylum Seekers in Sefton would be 1382; and that Sefton currently had 241 dispersed Asylum Seekers.

The briefing note also detailed Serco's property procurement process and the postcode check (PCC) they undertook with local authorities which required a response within three days; and provided information on the 6 Month PCC activity in respect of:

- PCCs received by Ward from 1 January to 30 June 2021
- the total number of PCCs received since Sefton became a dispersal area in 2016
- the decisions made on the 85 PCCs submitted by Serco from 1 January to 30 June 2021 by ward
- detail with regards to reasons for refusal of PCCs

The evidence showed that the conversion rates of PCCs into actual dispersed accommodation was very low; that out of the 460 total PCCs received since 1/1/2016 only 57 had progressed into actual dispersed accommodation – a 12% conversion rate; and that in the period 1 January to 30 June 2021 only 2 additional properties became dispersed accommodation as the number of dispersed accommodation.

Looking forward to the next 6-month period the briefing note provided information on Operation Oak, a strategic approach by the Home Office towards procurement of asylum accommodation which encouraged providers to focus their procurement activity in the right areas. In support of this operation Sefton had begun conversations with Serco as to the areas of the borough they should be focussing their procurement activity in. Discussions had not yet been finalised but it was hoped that the operation would enable a more sensible, strategic view of the procurement of asylum accommodation.

The briefing note concluded by recognising the intelligence and local knowledge Elected Members possessed about their communities; that there should be an opportunity for Elected Members to feed this intelligence and local knowledge as to which areas within their wards that maybe suffering issues that should be taken into account when considering future procurement; but stressed that any recommendations for refusal would need

to be evidence based. It was vital therefore that Elected Members reported instances of crime, including hate crime, anti-social behaviour and any community tensions into the right channels so that the evidence used to make informed decisions was accurate and reflective of the situation.

9.3 Members of the Working Group acknowledged that any comments on PCCs should be evidence based and that comments had to be submitted within a very tight timescale. Notwithstanding this, Members considered that appropriate Ward Councillors should be consulted as part of the PCC process as they could provide a valuable source of local knowledge; and that this should form part of the recommendations in the Working Group's Final Report.

9.4 Accordingly, the Working Group resolved that in order:

- (1) that elected Members can provide a local insight into the Postcode Check process, appropriate Ward Councillors views be sought as part of the consultation process;
- (2) to provide as much evidence base as possible as part of the Postcode Check process the Chief Legal and Democratic Officer be requested to write to all elected Members urging them to contact the Head of Communities as to which areas within their wards maybe suffering issues that should be taken into account, such as instances of crime, including hate crime, anti-social behaviour and any community tensions, when considering future asylum accommodation procurement; and
- (3) that elected Members are aware of the strategic planning, location and distribution of Housing and Support Services for vulnerable households the Interim Head of Communities be requested to provide 6-monthly updates to all Councillors.

9.5 The Working Group also considered the briefing note of the Interim Head of Communities that provided potential recommendations for inclusion in the Working Group's Final Report.

9.6 The briefing note indicated that following the assessment of evidence gathered in the form of Witness interviews with officers, statutory agencies, a selection of accommodation and support service agencies, stakeholders, experts and other relevant organisations there was a significant range of housing and support services for vulnerable households located throughout the borough; that when the Council directly commissioned a housing and support service for vulnerable household there was consideration of the location of the housing, taking into account other services for similar groups in the area, the capacity of statutory and non-statutory services as well as local community and ward specific issues; and that there was a mature relationship



between Council Officers and service providers and that issues were resolved quickly.

However it was also found that where a service was commissioned by an organisation external to Sefton more local issues were not taken into account and as such can cause issues. Because services were not based locally and were regionally centred services it could be difficult to resolve issues quickly and this frustrated local residents and communities.

Members commented on the [letter](#) submitted by a number of Liverpool City Region MP's to the Home Secretary regarding the impending eviction of up to 275 people from asylum accommodation in the region.

Steve Martlew, Interim Head of Communities provide background information and stated that the Home Office would be resuming the cessation of support for those cases who had received negative decision to their asylum claims, starting on Monday 19th July, in line with the removal of most Covid-19 restrictions; that local authorities had already been advised of the number of negative cases to be processed, and the split between s95 and s4; and that as the review of s4 cases would result in the continuation of support, these numbers represented a maximum; that the Home Office intended to deal with the s95 cases first, as they were more straightforward.

The review would be undertaken as a desk-top exercise, as it was a matter of fact that these cases had had negative decisions. Service users would be issued the notices of discontinuation of support, and Serco would issue 28-day notices to quit. The service users may, during the 28-day grace period, appeal against the decision, apply for s4 support, and provide evidence in support, or make a fresh claim (further submissions) if their circumstances permitted. If they did not do any of the above, or their circumstances did not allow, they were likely to be evicted. Serco's normal procedure was to serve a 7-day "lock change" notice on day 21 of the grace period.

When the s95 cases had been processed, the Home Office would start to review the s4 cases; and they would write to service users inviting them to submit evidence that they had a continuing right to receive support under s4. Emphasis needed to be put on the need to submit evidence. After 14 days (allowing for postage), if the Home Office were not satisfied of a continuing right to s4, they would serve discontinuation notices, and Serco would issue 21-day notices to quit. "Lock change" notices would be served on day 14 of the 21-day grace period, on the expiry of which service users were likely to be evicted.

The Regional Strategic Migration Partnership had asked for the cessations to be phased, so that local authorities and third sector organisations would not be inundated with requests for support. The Home Office response was to say that they did not have the capacity to deal with all cases at the same time, and it would take a few weeks to deal with them all, but there would be no phasing related to local authorities/third sector's capacity. The Home Office were to restart the negative decision and cessation process.

The numbers for Sefton were low – with less than 10 s95 cases and less than 20 s4 cases. The numbers in Liverpool were high hence the letter from Paula Barker’s (MP for Liverpool Wavertree) office.

9.7 The Working Group resolved that:

- (1) when commissioning specific housing and support services for vulnerable groups, the Council should continue to adopt a strategic approach that is cognisant of other such services, the capacity of wider statutory, community and voluntary services and reflects issues at a local community level within each ward as to the location of the housing element;
- (2) the Syrian Refugee scheme is a great example of a support service working right. The Council have commissioned South Sefton Housing Group (Bosco, Venus and Excel Housing) to provide the housing and support for a particularly vulnerable group of people; and the Working Group have heard from Bosco and Venus about how they are local organisations delivering local services and also from service users who were extremely complimentary of the services they received, how they have helped them integrate into their local community as well as how they supported them when they had issues or problems.

Therefore, it is recommended that any support services that are commissioned by the Council to support vulnerable households should be tailored to the target group with specialist provision and the ability to flex up and flex down as and when required. Local, Sefton based services, often run by the Community and Voluntary sector based in our communities should always be the preferred option wherever possible. The longer term aim of self-reliance for the service user and longer term sustainability of the project should always be the aim with a focus on reducing demand on demand-led services.

- (3) Where housing and support services that are not commissioned by the Council are locating in the borough the Council needs to liaise with the relevant responsible government department to ensure that any services bring added value and are not to the detriment of the Communities in Sefton.

An example of this is the Postcode Checks that Serco carry out with regards to procurement of new asylum accommodation in the borough. Elected members felt they would like more involvement from a strategic oversight of the Postcode Check process.

Therefore, it is recommended that a system of 6 monthly updates on Postcode Check activity be shared with elected members to increase



their awareness of activity within their wards; and

- (4) Where housing and support services that are not commissioned by the Council fail then officers should use the governance structures in place to escalate issues.

An example of this is where officers have used the Liverpool City Region Officers network and the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership so that issues can be escalated by elected members to the Lead Member for the Liverpool City Region group.

10.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 That Cabinet and Council be recommended to approve that:

1. in order for elected Members to provide a local insight into the Postcode Check process, appropriate Ward Councillors views be sought as part of the Postcode Check consultation process;
2. to provide as much evidence base as possible as part of the Postcode Check process the Chief Legal and Democratic Officer be requested to write to all elected Members urging them to contact the Head of Communities as to which areas within their wards maybe suffering issues that should be taken into account, such as instances of crime, including hate crime, anti-social behaviour and any community tensions, when considering future asylum accommodation procurement;
3. in order that elected Members are aware of the strategic planning, location and distribution of Housing and Support Services for vulnerable households the Head of Communities be requested to provide 6-monthly updates to all Councillors;
4. when commissioning specific housing and support services for vulnerable groups, the Council should continue to adopt a strategic approach that is cognisant of other such services, the capacity of wider statutory, community and voluntary services and reflects issues at a local community level within each ward as to the location of the housing element;
5. any support services that are commissioned by the Council to support vulnerable households should be tailored to the target group with specialist provision and the ability to flex up and flex down as and when required. Local, Sefton based services, often run by the Community and Voluntary sector based in our communities should always be the preferred option wherever possible. The longer-term aim of self-reliance for the service user and longer-term sustainability



of the project should always be the aim with a focus on reducing demand on demand-led services; and

6. where housing and support services that are not commissioned by the Council fail then officers should use the governance structures in place to escalate issues.

An example of this is where officers have used the Liverpool City Region Officers network and the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership so that issues can be escalated by elected members to the Lead Member for the Liverpool City Region group.

11.0 DOCUMENTATION CONSIDERED BY THE WORKING GROUP

- 11.1 [Scoping Document](#) approved by the Working Group on 4 December 2020
- 11.2 [briefing note](#) of the Service Manager - Housing and Investment Services on the location in Sefton of supported accommodation for vulnerable people, commissioned by the Council; Information on the support services commissioned by the Council and the accommodation related to those services; and the associated support service specifications relating to services within the Communities and Housing Cabinet Member portfolio considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 22 January 2021
- 11.3 [briefing note](#) of the Head of Communities detailing information the Council held about the accommodation and services provided to asylum seekers by the agency appointed by the Home Office (Serco) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 22 January 2021
- 11.4 [Appendix 1](#) - overview of the asylum process in the UK considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 22 January 2021
- 11.5 [Appendix 2](#) - detail in terms of the accommodation standards that is expected to be delivered considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 22 January 2021
- 11.6 [Appendix 4](#) - the PCC activity from March until the end of December 2020 across the Liverpool City Region considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 22 January 2021
- 11.7 [North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 26 February 2021
- 11.8 [report](#) of the Locality Services Manager that provided information on access by elected Members to responses to postcode checks (PCC) enquiries; how elected Members could be included as consultees as part of the PCC's within their wards; and how elected Members could feed into the Sefton Multi Agency Forum considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 26 February 2021
- 11.9 [Migrant Help Monthly Update – March 2021](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.10 [Migrant Help North West Regional Update - March 2021](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.11 [AIRE Outreach Overview](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021



- 11.12 [Outreach Referral Form](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.13 [UKVI Asylum Operations – Update on Remote Interviewing - 15/02/2021](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.14 [Migrant Help Asylum Services Consent Form – Third Party](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.15 [Migrant Help Services](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.16 [Clear Voice Information](#) considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.17 [briefing note](#) of the Head of Communities that provided information on asylum seeker/refugee children of school age accessing education; and asylum seeker children who lived with their families considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 24 June 2021
- 11.18 [briefing note](#) of the Interim Head of Communities that updated on the 6 Monthly Asylum Procurement Report for the period 1 January to 30 June 2021 considered at the meeting of the Working Group held on 27 July 2021
- 11.19 [letter](#) referred to at the meeting of the Working Group held on 27 July 2021 by a number of Liverpool City Region MP's to the Home Secretary regarding the impending eviction of asylum seekers

12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

In producing the Council's Housing Support Services to Vulnerable People Working Group Final Report the acknowledgements and thanks are attributed to the following individuals and organisations for their time and input:

Tanya Wilcock, former Head of Communities, Sefton MBC
 Steve Martlew, Locality Service Manager, Communities Service, Sefton MBC
 Neil Davies, former Service Manager - Housing and Investment Services, Economic Growth and Housing Service, Sefton MBC
 Graham Parry, Strategic Housing Officer, Economic Growth and Housing Service, Sefton MBC
 Carlie Machell and Lorraine Webb, Venus Charity
 Sheila Howard, the Bosco Society
 Julie Kashirahamwe, Liverpool City Region
 Atheer Abbas, former Asylum Seeker
 Tahsen Abbar, Syrian Refugee
 Ben Rodgers, Serco
 Ged Swanson, Serco
 Jonathan Blackburn, Home Office
 Florence Le Gal, Migrant Help

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Councillor Dave Robinson Lead Member,
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Councillor Janis Blackburne



Councillor Mhairi Doyle



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Sefton Council 

**Overview
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