



**South East
Strategic Partnership
For Migration**

SESPM response to NAO Value for Money Study: Asylum Accommodation and Support

Brief

The Home Office is responsible for providing accommodation and support to asylum seekers that are deemed to be destitute. The study will take both a retrospective view on how the Home Office learnt its lessons from the COMPASS contracts when designing and procuring these new contracts, as well as examining how it is managing the new providers and services. The study will look at whether the new asylum accommodation and support contracts are set up to deliver value for money.

Introduction

The South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) provides strategic leadership, advice and coordination for migration policy issues affecting the South East region. The South East region comprises 74 local authorities (7 County Councils, 55 District Councils and 12 Unitary Councils), the highest number of any region in England.

There are three long established asylum dispersal areas in the South East i.e. Portsmouth, Southampton and Hastings. 36 more authorities have agreed in principle to participate in asylum dispersal and over the last year asylum seekers have been accommodated in 18 authorities to varying degrees (including the three established).

The 'new' areas of dispersal include rural and semi/rural locations which have provided some challenges to the delivery models of accommodation and support discharged in more urban city environments.

For the purposes of this NAO review response, efforts were made to gather feedback from local authorities and local asylum support NGOs and voluntary organisations, both in long established and newly created dispersal areas. This partnership distributed the NAO research to all our stakeholders across the region and facilitated a dial in meeting to enable discussion and collate responses. This response is also informed by the workshop hosted at the NAO on 31st January 2020 and a pan regional telephone conference on 24th February 2020 involving the regions/nations where Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH) operate i.e. London, South East, South West, East of England (partial) and Wales.

The scope of the study

1.Has the Home Office designed and procured effective asylum accommodation contracts?

1.1 Some partners expressed a view that the study could benefit from having a wider perspective and taking into account the 'place based approach' to migration and the work being undertaken through the Chief Executives Group to achieve greater equity across the regions in levels of asylum dispersal over ten years to 2029.

1.2 Although Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) were helpfully heavily involved in the transition and mobilisation meetings we were not privy to the content of the AASC and AIRE contracts. It would be helpful to understand the degree to which the AASC and AIRE contracts enable providers to effectively support the rebalancing the dispersal authorities including delivery outside of urban centres where the infrastructure may not be readily able to support dispersal e.g.:

- Shortage of housing
- High housing cost
- Lack of legal aid
- Insufficient English language/ESOL provision
- Little of no culturally appropriate services (e.g. food, faith community), relevant voluntary sector
- The commissioning model for voluntary organisations to apply to seems more suited to denser urban areas with organisations citing that the spot purchase, payment in areas, paid staff only, CT checked staff prevents some smaller but well-placed organisations participating (see also 2.3 below)
- There are no available travel costs for people to address potential isolation and integration issues.

1.3 Feedback from several authorities and NGOs experienced in working on asylum dispersal was that there were certain important practical aspects of support provision that were perennial issues under the COMPASS arrangements and carried through into the AASC e.g.:

- Whilst cleaning aids are provided there is still no provision of vacuum cleaners within dispersal accommodation. It was reported that when these issues are raised with the contract holders, the reply is that "it is outside of the remit of the contracts", leaving those

trying to support people in asylum accommodation with no recourse to follow up the issue further.

- No provision of baby/child seats where a taxi firm is subcontracted transporting mothers and children from National Referral Mechanism accommodation to asylum accommodation. This is cited as a significant safeguarding issue putting children in potential danger. A charity supporting victims of human trafficking (under sub contract from the Salvation Army) routinely has to donate car seats they purchase themselves, as they feel it is a safeguarding issue which cannot be ignored. They felt that the cost is being passed onto the voluntary sector, as they understand there is no inclusion within the asylum contracts that transport to asylum accommodation has to have adequate safeguarding provisions to transport children. Such issues are not captured within the reporting and monitoring channels of the new asylum support providers contracts as they are outside the parameters of the contracts to begin with and are therefore rendered invisible.

2. Is the Home Office managing providers effectively to get the best value from its asylum contracts?

2.1 Prior to COMPASS and Asylum Help services there was a national network of 'one stop services' and Refugee Integration Employment Services (RIES) and some partners felt that to assess the effectiveness of AASC and AIRE the NAO report should take into account that model where face-to-face support was provided as a base line.

2.2 Some partners cited that in comparison to the previous 'one stop services' and RIES the new model probably was likely to be more cost effective, however, it was felt that there had been an effect upon quality of provision. The new system is certainly streamlined but due to things like high call waiting times there were reports of asylum seekers turning away from the services, which due to the vulnerable nature of this cohort, was not seen as an improvement. As one respondent stated

"Asylum seekers are abandoning the AIRE service because of having to wait upwards of 50 minutes for a response, only to find themselves re-queued in order to keep average wait times down, this should not be taken as an indication that the service is adequately resourced or performing well"

2.3 It is possible that the focus on value for money has meant that AIRE contracted support provision is only available in locations with large enough numbers of asylum seekers so as to be able to create an economy of scale for the local support provider. Meanwhile, asylum seekers in areas of smaller asylum numbers are left without comparable support, and again are reliant on the support of the voluntary sector (see also point 1.2 bullet point 7 above)

2.4 In terms of suggestions of improvements which would lead to better value of service, it was suggested that the creation of an additional hotline for NGO and voluntary sector support agencies be created. NGOs and voluntary organisations familiar with the asylum system will likely have gathered the salient factors of their clients cases in advance, and have often triaged the clients in most imminent need of assistance, helping to streamline assistance most effectively

“X’s efficiency and effectiveness, and that of all the voluntary agencies, could be vastly improved if AIRE were to establish a private agency-only telephone number which was answered promptly by staff who had access to the correct information and were empowered to make things happen. It would reduce the number of client calls to the service, but for the good reason that clients are triaged by voluntary sector professionals, and would also increase Migrant Help’s effectiveness”

3.Are new asylum services meeting users’ needs appropriately?

3.1 It is possible that the new system may not have had time to get up to speed yet, nevertheless some problems which have persisted at the time of writing and these include:

- Some new accommodation not ready upon arrival, consequently clients found themselves with no heating or hot water.
- Aspen cards not having been delivered or topped up, as a result the client has no financial support during the period of delay, and is forced to rely on NGOs. One respondent mentioned that when following this up he is routinely told by support providers to direct clients to foodbanks placing an unnecessary burden and expense on local services.
- The system is still slow to respond to the recording of new births, even when all relevant documents are sent via recorded delivery immediately after birth. This has consequences in terms of what support the recent mother can draw down on in the first few weeks/months post birth.
- The situation for asylum seekers being placed in rural areas was deemed hard due to the lack of financial support for transportation for things such as access to a supermarket etc.

3.2 As has been exemplified in the previous questions it was felt that various needs of clients (such as having access to a vacuum cleaner) were not being met due to the ways in which the new system has been designed but also potentially, due to how it is monitored. One possible means to overcome this might be introducing some evaluation metric which includes client satisfaction, which would allow for the capture of such problems and help to inform future contracting requirements.