

Written evidence submitted by Local Government Association (LGA)

1. **About the Local Government Association (LGA)**

1.1. The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We are a politically led, cross-party membership organisation, representing councils from England and Wales.

1.2. Our role is to support, promote and improve local government, and raise national awareness of the work of councils. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils, so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

2. **Key issues: accommodation supply**

2.1. As noted in the report from the National Audit Office, the Prime Minister's priorities for illegal migration include a commitment to reduce emergency accommodation and find more sustainable, permanent accommodation in local communities. Whilst local government supports the principle, this will require access to accommodation at scale and at pace. Alongside challenges to achieving full dispersal as outlined in the report, widely acknowledged housing and homelessness issues will make this challenging.

2.2. Homelessness pressures, combined with depleting social housing stock and an unaffordable private rented sector are creating a housing crisis, which impacts both on existing communities and for new arrivals. There are just over 1.2 million households currently on council housing waiting lists and nearly 100,000 households living in temporary accommodation. Councils are also reporting supply and affordability issues in the private sector, with this is becoming an unfeasible option for those reliant on housing related benefits. Those renting are facing affordability challenges and increased numbers of evictions, which all increase risks of homelessness.

2.3. There also is a lack of coordination across those seeking housing and temporary accommodation locally, with Home Office providers 'competing' with councils and their partners, often offering higher rates and distorting local markets.

¹ [Who we are and what we do | Local Government Association](#)

¹ [The asylum and protection transformation programme - National Audit Office \(NAO\) report](#)

¹ [PM statement on illegal migration: 13 December 2022 – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

¹ [Homelessness numbers will continue to rise without urgent action – LGA on homelessness statistics | Local Government Association](#)

2.4. Based on current trends in arrival numbers of asylum seekers, councils are expecting arrival numbers to continue to increase over the coming summer months. Even with streamlined decision making, numbers waiting for decisions on their asylum claim are likely to remain high with contingency hotel use continuing.

2.5. Councils and their local partners also have to address the impacts of streamlined asylum processing (SAP) over the coming year and recently announced changes to licenses for Homes in Multiple Occupation, both of which will impact on housing supply. Minimising the length of time that asylum seekers remain without a decision is welcome, but the accelerated process will lead to large numbers of asylum claims being granted at pace and scale, with those receiving decisions either needing accommodation in their current areas or seeking to move to areas with existing diaspora communities.

2.6. The asylum system has been under constant pressure for a number of years, leading to a reactive rather than a proactive and planned response from the centre to engagement with local government. Engagement with the Government has improved at a national and regional level, but our member councils tell us that substantial improvements are still needed in how the asylum system in particular is working on the ground. There remain concerns around a lack of engagement over location of accommodation and hotel use, and substantial risks around safeguarding, community cohesion and public health. Engagement at a political level remains infrequent and unplanned.

2.7. Councils are aware of current pressures on the system and share ambitions to end hotel use. There is growing concern however that as we move into the summer that current pressures will become unsustainable, with unmanageable concentrations in some areas, worsening lack of notice and continuing use of temporary accommodation at scale.

3. Recommendations for change: short term operational improvements

3.1. In the short term, there needs to be a jointly agreed plan and approach with local government to include:

- Clear protocols around notice to councils of hotel procurement, alongside better data on the needs those arriving. A day's or retrospective notice is not enough time for councils and their communities to prepare for arrivals or

¹ [Houses in Multiple Occupation \(Asylum-Seeker Accommodation\)\(England\) Regulations 2023, House of Lords, 16 May 2023 | Local Government Association](#)

suggest alternative and more appropriate sites. Councils and their partners need effective two-way engagement, including shared risk assessments and joint agreement on whether particular accommodation should be used, or alternatives sought.

- A commitment to avoiding unsustainable concentrations of asylum seekers. Areas with cheaper accommodation already facing pressures should not be expected to cope with 'more of the same'. Hotel procurement needs to be driven by equity and suitability, rather than just availability and price.
- A focus on agreed regional plans for increasing permanent accommodation supply for asylum seekers. This will help tackle the current crisis by increasing accommodation supply and wrap around support, particularly in areas with lower numbers. This requires adapting a model of support and accommodation developed for use in urban areas to new rural or semi-rural areas, building the capacity of legal, community and voluntary sector.
- Joint oversight of procurement by Home Office providers, so if councils identify new sites for dispersed accommodation, this is followed through with actual procurement.
- Large site and hotel use should be reflected within these agreed regional plans given the impacts on local areas. The selection of both needs to be agreed in advance with councils and their local partners. This should allow for alternative sites to be proposed if they are felt by local partners to be inappropriate. This must both take into account (and fund) impacts across all local services, shared understanding of risks and local context, clear exit plans and advance community engagement, including 'myth busting' resources for local partners to use in response to divisive narratives.
- Better coordination and planning at local level of housing, particularly temporary housing, and a commitment to avoid driving up prices.
- A collective understanding of the interrelated statutory responsibilities for, and impacts on, all partners including safeguarding, cohesion and health and public health concerns.

3.2. We also would like to see a planned, joint process to support the impact on local communities of the SAP programme, with appropriate levels of funding for most affected councils. Councils need to be part of planning at a national, regional and local level given the impact of decisions on their housing and homelessness services, particularly in areas with existing communities, and the potential cohesion issues that could arise from perceived (or actual) competition for local resources.

¹ [Ibid.](#)

¹ [Illegal Migration Bill Committee Stage, House of Lords, 24 May 2023 | Local Government Association](#)

¹ [Debate on accommodation of asylum-seeking children in hotels, House of Commons, 7 June 2023 | Local Government Association](#)

3.3. We would also welcome the promised engagement on the proposed changes to licenses for Homes of Multiple Occupation.

3.4. Councils also need advance engagement on the implantation of the Illegal Migration Bill, particularly in relation to changed roles and responsibilities in relation to detention, support for lone children and safe and legal routes.

3.5. We also need to develop proper shared oversight between central and local government, to rebuild trust and credibility. There is also a need for clear agreed and shared 'red lines', including ending hotel use for children, avoiding mixed use sites and hotel use in areas that are acknowledged to be well over agreed concentrations, in line with councils' statutory responsibilities. Councils previously regarded room sharing as a red line, but this is now being rolled out across England as part of the Home Office's 'hotel maximisation' process by their providers in response to current accommodation pressures, leading to concerns around safeguarding, community tension and increased concentrations.

3.6. All this needs to be underpinned by key principles:

- A more equitable approach to asylum accommodation.
- Overarching governance and oversight at both political and officer level.
- Use learning from what has worked well across all programmes, including funding.
- Be based on joint planning and shared data so we can be a step ahead of the same pressures in future years, based on shared projections in terms of intake.

4. **Recommendations for change: housing**

4.1. There is a clear need for a cross government, political level central / local Task Force on increasing housing supply in both the short and the long term. This should explore how best to fund a sufficient supply of affordable housing, both private and social, in the both the immediate and the long term, and address how to widen housing supply in areas of expensive housing and limited availability. The LGA has made a range of recommendations to local authorities' role in accelerating housing delivery and supply, including setting planning fees internally and full access to right to buy receipts.

4.2. In order to achieve the long-term aim of increasing supply, councils need long term funding rather than the current short term funding pots. Single pots need to be based on a 'no one size fits all' approach that can reflect local housing stock and markets and be at a level that recognises the scale of the

¹ [Housing, planning and homelessness | Local Government Association](#)

challenges around expanding the supply of affordable housing that can meet a range of needs.

4.3. Housing markets and the characteristics of demand vary across the country and a range of interventions are required to address these demand and supply challenges. The solutions will look different in different parts of the county, but they will all require a combination of government capital and revenue funding and local authority borrowing.

4.4. We are also keen to explore how to facilitate access to empty, under or unused public sector housing and space, such as ex-military sites, by enabling a system where local councils can identify empty homes or buildings which could be converted. Parity on move on times from asylum accommodation, which is currently half of the statutory timelines for local people in housing need, could also help minimise pressures on homelessness services locally.

5. **Recommendations for change: funding for councils**

5.1. The LGA view is that the best way to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees is through a cross programme approach that uses, and funds, strategic and operational expertise in councils and their local and regional partners.

5.2. Instead, Councils have to work with the Government and local partners on meeting the needs of a range of different cohorts – all with different funding provided to different tiers of local government, all receiving support via different programmes and all with differing integration and accommodation challenges.

5.3. Councils only started to receive funding for their role in accommodation and support for asylum seekers in 2022, though dispersal was introduced in legislation in 1999, with enhanced funding announced to support widening of dispersal,

5.4. Councils and their partners need a rapid review of the funding available to different groups, often in the same area and sometimes even in the same hotel, and often short term.

6. **Recommendations for change: cohesion and safeguarding**

6.1. Over recent months, there has been a considerable increase in concerns from councils around growing tensions linked to asylum and resettlement and an uptick in activity from anti-minority activists. These pressures on housing are increasing as we move into the Summer arrival period and as cost-of-living pressures continue to increase.

6.2. Home Office procurement of accommodation runs alongside council procurement of temporary and other accommodation for domestic families as well as those resettling in the UK or who have been granted asylum. Lack of engagement with councils around that procurement drives up prices and further exacerbate community tensions.

6.3. We anticipate that these issues will continue to grow, both as increasing numbers of local authorities receive new arrivals, and as narratives build on mainstream concerns about pressures on public services/housing stock, safety, the cost of living and on anti-establishment rhetoric. Periods of economic decline and rising inequality (or perceptions of these) in particular, have traditionally provided fertile territory for tensions to grow. This is coupled with swift and visible change at a local level, which often feels uncomfortable for residents and raises (often legitimate) questions about impact, which can further lead to rising tensions.

6.4. For anti-minority actors looking to exploit these concerns and stoke division, asylum has now become the key rallying point, with narratives that will resonate with many and attract greater support. Much of their focus has built on long-standing themes around the safety of women and children, economic pressures, and British nationals (especially, but not only, white working-class communities) being overlooked or deprioritised.

6.5. There has been limited national communications support to counter divisive messaging around asylum seekers and refugees. Building on initial work by the Home Office, further centrally produced resources / FAQs on asylum would help councils to counter misinformation and more harmful narratives. There is also a need for urgent work at national level on how best to counter narratives and disinformation from organised anti-minority groups which distort, invent and extrapolate incidents of alleged anti-social and criminal behaviour by migrants.

6.6. The LGA would welcome better join-up with and across the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and with the Home Office's Prevent disruptions team on addressing cohesion concerns, community tensions,

on countering extremism and tackling harmful influencers. We would also like clarity on what further central support is available to councils.

6.7. There continues to be limited, or no, opportunities to engage with communities before asylum seekers arrive. Where large numbers are placed or concentrated in one location this can significantly amplify the impact on community cohesion. There needs to be a commitment to greater notice of placements as essential in helping councils and their local partners mitigate these issues.

6.8. In many areas there are concerns that large numbers of asylum seekers are being housed in monocultural communities, in areas with limited infrastructure to support new arrivals, who may have limited experience or expertise in responding to cohesion issues, and sometimes in areas already facing significant cohesion challenges and/or with a history of racial tensions. Joint planning and risk assessment with local partners could help identify which areas might experience fewer cohesion concerns, with alternative sites identified if necessary.

6.9. Whilst councils recognise duties placed on the Home Office to house new arrivals, there needs to be parity with parallel responsibilities for local partners. Keeping people safe should be an urgent priority for all. There are particular concerns around safeguarding in hotels, with local partners needing clearer escalation routes for any concerns and greater responsibility from and oversight by the Home Office of its contractors and sub-contractors.

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