

Written evidence submitted Tees Valley of Sanctuary

Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, Stockton-on-Tees

Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme

I am writing as the Housing Stream convenor for Tees Valley of Sanctuary

Thank you for your report which reflects very well the situation with asylum accommodation.

I have just 3 brief points.

1. The huge delays in calls being answered by Migrant Help in the first few months of operation under the AIRE contract, in 2019.
 - I had repeatedly complained to the Home Office about calls to G4S not being answered when service users were ringing them about repairs and other issue that they were responsible for.
 - These complaints were not taken seriously, I felt, and although the local voluntary sector tried very hard, it was extremely difficult to get the service users to record the exact time and date for every time they tried to contact G4S.
 - Many service users gave up trying to contact G4S and “had a word” with the local subcontractor, Jomast, and very many issues were not dealt with.
 - There was no system in G4S to record how many calls were being not answered.
 - This led to a great underestimate of the need for a telephone service, leading to the unpreparedness for the sheer volume of calls to Migrant Help.

Taking the input of the voluntary sector seriously would have avoided the gross underestimate of demand.

2. The report talks of the 28% increase in cost of the provision of accommodation. This is a lot, but the improvement in provision increased dramatically with the new contract. The decrease in work for the voluntary sector on housing issues dropped by much more than 28%. Standards were very much improved to meet what was required.
3. Whilst it seems sensible to spread accommodation around the country, we have severe doubts on this idea.

- There will of course be extra costs as housing is more expensive in the south, and that cost will fall on the Home Office.
- If there are extra costs for the local authority in the area that asylum seekers are currently housed, those costs must be properly reimbursed.
- There are very rarely problems caused by asylum seekers within communities, in fact they are part of assisting in stabilising communities. They are far less likely to be causing and sort of trouble, and police figures will endorse that. They are keen to be involved in the voluntary sector and local faith communities. They use local shops and facilities, enabling them to remain there, and decrease the chance of any areas becoming abandoned/
- An informed public service infrastructure is needed to properly support asylum seekers whilst they wait for decisions. This includes health care specialists to understand and be aware of health issues. Schools that are experienced in talking in children of asylum families.
- Within the 3rd sector there is provision of interpreters for interactions with the public sector, especially health. These vital services would not be available in the range of language needed in other parts of the country.
- A network of “Drop In Centres” run by the local voluntary sector and faith groups has proved essential in not just filling in the gaps of official provision, with such as distributing donated clothing, providing informal language classes, and being a base for signposting and giving advice. They do provide a safe space and place of welcome, and are crucial in being part of eventual integration into the community. Transport costs would be prohibitive for asylum seekers to attend these, and impossible for those on Section 4 with no cash.
- There are solicitors in existing areas that specialise in immigration issues. Counselling services are there for those who have experienced torture, trauma, and mental health issues.

It takes a long time to have built up the infrastructure and experience to provide essential support. With less numbers in some places, it is not going to happened for less numbers of asylum seekers that are more widely dispersed.

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