

Briefing note: Asylum seekers in Tower Hamlets

Prepared by Tracey St Hill

Date: 3rd May 2021



1. Summary

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide an overview of how the various Council departments are responding to the arrival of over 400 asylum seekers placed in 3 hotels in the borough by the Home Office.

- In early December 2020 the Home Office placed the asylum seekers in the borough without prior notification to previously agreed departments as part of initiative called Operation Oak - a programme designed to disperse asylum seekers around the country between December 2020 and June 2021.
- One of the hotels accommodates 65 asylum seekers. The remaining 2 accommodate 162 and 216 asylum seekers respectively.
- The Home Office have commissioned a small team from a company called Clearsprings Ready Homes to lead on initial placement, liaison with Local Authorities and relocating the asylum seekers.
- The unexpected arrival of this large cohort, many of whom are vulnerable with complex needs, has required prompt and intense support from various Council departments, although the main contributors have been health and education.
- The complexity of need and lack of notice resulted in a disjointed response from the Council that lacked co-ordination. As a result, an officer from the Housing Partnerships Team has recently been tasked with acting as a single point of contact between departments, voluntary agencies, the Home Office, and their agents to help pull together the various strands of support.
- The role also requires attendance at internal and external liaison meetings to ensure an appropriate flow of information takes place and matters escalated through the correct reporting structures.
- As Operation Oak affects a number of Local Authorities, London Councils organises a monthly meeting attended by Home Office and Clearsprings representatives to update attendees on the procurement of properties for dispersal and address any concerns. The Council has a Bronze, and Silver meeting through which Operational and Senior Managers are kept abreast of issues.
- A number of departments and voluntary agencies are providing support to ensure the service users are safe and secure, have access to medical care, education, welfare support, as well as independent advice and information from charitable organisations until they are relocated.
- The Home Office can no longer commit to decommissioning by the end of June due to a lack of properties to procure for dispersal and new arrivals entering the country. We will therefore continue the existing arrangements until the service users are relocated and the sites handed back to the Council.

2. Background

In the lead up to the Xmas 2020, the Home Officer placed 443 asylum seekers from various countries around the world, into 3 hotels within the borough namely:

- Hotel X accommodates 162 single men
- Hotel Y accommodates 65 mixed occupants inc families
- Hotel Z accommodates 216 mixed occupants inc families

The first two hotels are classified as Initial Accommodation by the Home Office which means the occupiers are housed temporarily pending assessment of their application for asylum.

Hotel Z is the only self-contained premises and is designated as a pre dispersal hotel - where the occupant's application for asylum is likely to be approved and they are awaiting relocation to more long-term accommodation around the country.

Contrary to the required protocols with the Home Office, prior notification of the asylum seekers' arrival was not provided to agreed Council departments. Knowledge of their existence came primarily from second hand sources such as voluntary organisations or other local authorities who found themselves in a similar position, albeit slightly earlier than Tower Hamlets.

On the 28th January 2021, the Council received correspondence from the Home Office to inform they were working with providers (Serco, and Clearsprings Ready Homes) to implement a recovery programme called (Operation Oak). This project has been initiated to accelerate the movement of asylum seekers from hotels into dispersed accommodation around the country.

They explained the pandemic created uncertainty and delays in moving on asylum seekers, and the extended use of hotel accommodation had been necessary to meet their statutory obligation to support destitute asylum seekers.

Operation Oak is intended to relieve immediate pressure and facilitate a return to business as usual conditions, underpinned by substantive and sustained planning to bring the Home Office back in line with a previously agreed national change plan.

Clearsprings Ready Homes (CHR) is responsible for asylum seeker dispersal and the implementation of this recovery programme with a target to vacate all hotel occupation as close to the end of the first quarter of 2021 as possible. They have sub contracted two companies to provide wrap around support at the hotels which includes food, welfare checks, complaint handling etc.

Home Office support for asylum seekers

To date many of the service users have been receiving vouchers to the value of £5 as a subsistence payment from the Home Office that allowed purchases from a local supermarket. With effect from the 31st May a new "Aspen Card" issued to service users becomes operational that will work similar to a debit card.

The Home Office have also commissioned a charity called Migrant Help who support asylum seekers affected by displacement and exploitation. They bring services and support together and assist service users with applications for accommodation, financial support, assistance with reporting issues with asylum accommodation, and any other advice needed during their asylum journey. They also provide support during the post-decision period, whether the decision has been positive or negative.

Each hotel has a Hotel Manager on each site to oversee day to day operations and liaise with service users and outside agencies.

3. Current Position

Tower Hamlets LBTH response

In response to the influx of new arrivals, a number of Council departments have galvanised efforts to ensure the premises being used are safe and secure and the occupiers are receiving appropriate support, which has been primarily focused around health, education, and general welfare.

In February 2021, an officer from the Housing Partnerships Team was assigned to assist with co-ordinating the Council's efforts, and to act of the main point of contact for liaising with representatives from the Home Office and CRH. The officer provides information and feedback on any issues directly with the departments concerned and attends the LBTH Homelessness Bronze meeting on a monthly basis to provide an update on progress.

Communication

Many of the initial problems encountered by Council departments stem from a lack of communication from the Home Office about the initial placements, who is occupying the premises, lack of funding as well as insufficient planning. This has resulted in immense pressure being placed on departments and already stretched services to develop the necessary support framework around such a large number of people, many of whom have suffered considerable trauma.

Meetings with CRH highlighted it is not standard practice for the Home Office to ask Local Authorities for their views on the suitability of premises identified for Initial Accommodation; they would merely be notified of its use.

Furthermore, CRH did not have the correct list of named officers in the borough with whom they should communicate passed onto them by the Home Office. As a result, key departments within the Council were not signed up a Memorandum of Understanding to enable personal data on the occupants and their movement to be shared.

A revised list of officer contacts has been issued to London Councils and CRH to ensure that the main departments that need to have advanced knowledge of the commissioning of new premises are made aware. The contacts will now be as follows:

Department/contact	Initial Notification required on intended use of a hotel	Occupancy data required	
		Yes	No
Head of Housing Options	x		x
Temporary Accommodation Manager	x		x
Head of Primary Care	x	x	
Head of Children's Services/ - Early Help Hub Manager	x	x	
Community Safety - Intelligence Partnerships Manager	x		x

Environmental Health		x
Adult Services/Safeguarding		x
Children's Safeguarding		x
Anti-Poverty Team		x
Mayor's Office		x
Communications Team		x

CRH has also been informed that in future, initial notification of the intention to use a hotel should, at minimum include:

- Address of the premises
- Bedspaces available
- Expected date of opening and expected duration of use
- Contact details for Clearsprings Ready Homes (or other Home Office agent)
- Contact details for the hotel Manager/s
- Security arrangements for each premises

The LBTH Co-ordinator, Children's Services, and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) have now signed the Memorandum of Understanding and are receiving weekly information on occupancy as well as access to a portal that provides more detailed information on each asylum seeker.

LBTH Departmental and Voluntary Agency support

The following provides a summary of support currently in place at the 3 hotels:

Primary Care/Public health –

- A Needs Assessment for each service user from a health perspective has been undertaken and the team are ensuring all occupiers are registered with a GP or primary care service. **Drs of the World** (a humanitarian movement that supports excluded people in getting access to healthcare) are supporting the process.
- A Covid vaccination programme is ongoing with approx. 65% of service users vaccinated. Roll out of the Pfizer vaccine for younger people is due to commence shortly.

Environmental Health –

- All the hotels were inspected by an EHO in Feb '21 to ensure adequate Covid secure measures were in place.

Housing –

- The Housing Options team have limited involvement with asylum seekers with no recourse to public funds due to their immigration restriction. Individuals presenting as destitute would be signposted to other services that may be able to assist them. e.g. Adult Social Care.
- The team's main involvement is primarily monitoring the use of the hotel buildings until such time as they are returned to Council use as well as liaising with

departments/agencies around the suitability of any pre dispersal and dispersal accommodation Clearsprings intend to procure.

Childrens Services –

- Members of the Behaviour and Attendance (BASS) team visited the sites, interviewed families, and determined the number of school age children that would require school places.
- The visits raised a number of concerns at the self-contained hotel which initially did not meet appropriate standards of warmth, cleanliness, and appropriate spaces for interview. The families interviewed were very short on suitable clothing for the British winter and the voucher system in place was limited to the local supermarket, which did not have a clothing section.
- Residents were put in touch with local charities to support their food and welfare needs and a clothing bank was set up by the BASS team on 3 occasions with Covid compliant protocols in place to provide winter clothing and other basic toiletry items.
- A systematic approach to recording and allocating school places and other services has been devised and is being led by the Early Help Hub and Pupil Services. School places have been arranged with local schools.
- Network meetings with Clearsprings, Children’s Services departments and voluntary sector organisations have been arranged to address concerns and these continue to happen on a regular basis.
- **Care4Calais (a volunteer run charity that delivers essential aid and assistance to asylum seekers)** is supporting service users with access to clothing and bedding whilst general welfare support is provided by **Migrant Help**.
- The LBTH team are also picking up on the needs of older young people and signposting them to colleges and other appropriate support service.

Adult Services –

- Families and individuals with no recourse to public funds status may be able to access support under the Care Act and Human Rights Act. A representative from the service is involved and available to provide appropriate advice and support as and when required. So far no specific referrals have been received from the hotels.

Anti-Poverty Team –

- They are supporting service users with food at the Council’s food banks on a regular basis as well as delivering weekly food, household cleaning and hygiene items to one of the hotels for the occupants to share.

Community Safety Team –

- Officers in consultation with the Police and local Enforcement Officers provide information on any ASB hotspots or community cohesion issues in the areas where

the hotels are located to help inform decision making on the acquisition of pre dispersal and dispersal properties

Funding Gaps

There are some areas that existing funding from the Home Office does not cover that is making day to day living extremely difficult for service users:

- From an education perspective there is a sustainability issue as the self-contained site has been recommissioned and the number of local school places is limited. As there is no funding available to schools through the DfE for these temporary places, there is a resource issue for schools.
- Many of the children do not speak English and some have other complex needs, so the demand placed on schools and Local Authority education services to provide an adequate level of support is high.
- There is a need to provide uniforms for school age children which has put a strain on the LA uniform fund, which will not be sustainable in the future.
- The subsistence payment of £5 pp per day for many of the service users is not sufficient to cover items such as learning materials, clothing, cleaning, and hygiene items.
- They currently have no access to a dentist.
- They have very limited access to mental health services as this is not covered as part of primary health care and many of them have suffered trauma.
- Only dried food, nuts and fruit can be provided by the Food Banks to service users at 2 of the hotels as they have no provision for preparing hot food (although the Home Office arranges for meals to be delivered)
- There is limited provision for young people that are not of school age leading to a number of young people seen hanging around with nothing to do.

Liaison with the Home Office

As a significant number of London Boroughs have been similarly affected by Operation Oak, London Councils organise a monthly meeting for interested boroughs who are invited to discuss their concerns with representatives from the Home Office and CRH.

These meetings are attended by the Co-ordinator and an officer from Housing Options and the Community Safety Team. Discussions are largely focused on the strategic approach to the acquisition of dispersal properties, the process of which is governed by a Framework Agreement between Local Authorities, Clearsprings and the Home Office.

Monthly data is circulated to Local Authorities by London Councils detailing the number of asylum seekers or service users in each hotel across London boroughs and any dispersal properties acquired.

Over the last few weeks, the Home Office have informed Local Authorities that the June target for decommissioning the hotels will not be met. The lack of available properties to

procure for dispersal and increasing numbers of new arrivals seeking asylum means they are unable to provide a revised target date.

In the interim they intend to procure pre dispersal properties around the country which will be used as temporary housing for up to one year. This will allow the programme of decommissioning the hotels to continue but service users will have to move twice and not necessarily in the same borough.

One of the most serious concerns raised with the Home Office has been the lack of timely and consistent information about the destination address of families once they are dispersed from the borough, often with no warning. Under section 436A of the Education Act 1996, the Council has a statutory duty to establish the identities and whereabouts of children in their area of compulsory school age who are not receiving education. If a family have moved out, we must share this information with the new Local Authority and ensure they are aware of the family and take responsibility for making educational arrangements for the child/ren.

As the Home Office has so far failed to develop a process for the timely provision of this information to Councils, we are at risk of failing in our statutory responsibility for ensuring that we have communicated with the destination LA and fulfilled our safeguarding obligations.

Liaison with Clearsprings Ready Homes

The team assigned to Tower Hamlets consist of a Regional and Welfare Manager, as well as two additional officers responsible for procuring dispersal accommodation.

A process of monthly meetings is in place with the Clearsprings Regional Manager and the LBTH Co-ordinator.

The Welfare Manager is responsible for ensuring service users overall health and wellbeing and liaising with relevant organisations to facilitate appropriate support. She hosts a fortnightly multi-agency meeting where council officers are invited to meet with voluntary sector representatives who help to bridge the gaps not covered by the Home Office examples clothing and school materials.

In addition, CRH Welfare Manager attends a fortnightly meeting with colleagues from Public Health and the CCG to pick up on health-related matters as well as ad-hoc meetings with the Head of local schools when required.

4. Conclusion

The Co-ordinator will continue to oversee this work until the hotels are handed back to the Council. In the meantime, we are confident that despite the challenges each department has and continues to encounter, they have responded swiftly and positively to the needs of the service users. The structures and processes that are now in place enable a more co-ordinated response to issues, a better overview of what's happening on the ground and a more structured framework for raising and escalating problems that may be more difficult to resolve.