



REPORT TO:	Regeneration Panel	Cabinet
DATE:	31 March 2004	1 April 2004
SUBJECT:	Progress Report - Implementation of Asylum Seeker Policy Framework	
REPORT OF:	Director of Environmental Health and Consumer Protection	
CONTACT OFFICER:	Ashley Crumbley — (01942) 827072	
PURPOSE/SUMMARY:	The Council and its partners continue to make good progress in implementing the Policy Framework for Asylum Seekers, since its introduction in November 2002. Most crucially for the community, asylum seekers are being dispersed locally in a managed way that ensures no one community is overly burdened.	
ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REASON FOR SELECTING THE ONE RECOMMENDED:	Progress report only.	
RECOMMENDATION/DECISION:	Members note the continued progress being made on implementing the Policy Framework for Asylum Seekers.	
KEY DECISION	This report does not involve a key decision.	
IMPLICATIONS:		
Financial:	No cost to General Fund or the Housing Revenue Account. Potential implications for 2005 onwards from change to housing provider contract.	
Staffing:	No new commitments.	
Policy:	Housing, Neighbourhood Renewal and Community Safety.	
Equal Opportunities - Has a Diversity Impact Assessment been conducted?	Yes, reporting to Regeneration Panel on 31.3.04.	
Wards Affected:	All.	
Special Interest Members – Which have been consulted	Councillors Smethurst, Bourne and Hurst.	

Categorisation of the report:

Discussion leading to a decision		Discussion
Monitoring	x	Decision
Sharing for corporate understanding		Information

Tracking/Process:

	Consultation	Ward Members	Partners
	-	-	G M Police
Panel	Overview & Scrutiny	Cabinet	Council
Regeneration 31/03/04	-	01/04/04	-

There are no Background Papers to this Report within the meaning of Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Proper Officer	R Saunders
Date	17 March 2004

BACKGROUND:

In the November 2002 cycle, the Regeneration Panel and Cabinet adopted a Policy Framework for Asylum Seekers drawing on the findings of the Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee's review of the issue. The Policy Framework endeavours to maintain community cohesion and includes:

- commitments to the community not to accept any more asylum seekers beyond those set down in Government quotas and to endeavour to ensure that no individual community is overly burdened;
- commitments to asylum seekers revolving around dispersal, access to key services and supporting the police in responding to race-hate crime; and
- key mechanisms for delivering the commitments, including using the Asylum Seekers Providers Forum to improve co-ordination between services, communications / awareness raising and a local Intelligence Exchange Forum led by the police to inform dispersal and respond to race-hate crime.

It has to be stressed that the Council simply cannot prevent asylum seekers arriving in private sector accommodation. The Policy Framework represents an attempt at trying to persuade the various parties, in particular private landlords, that a balance needs to be struck around dispersal and community cohesion.

Progress was last reported to members in the October 2003 cycle.

INFORMATION – PROGRESS TO 1 MARCH 2004:

Wigan Council's Asylum Seeker Policy Framework was unique, but other Boroughs are now using it. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has still to formally endorse the approach, though it continues to hold it up to be "best practice". Whilst NASS has still to reach a formal position on our approach, all local housing providers and partners continue to co-operate and work within the Policy Framework.

National Level

At national level, asylum applications have fallen from a peak of 22,760 in the fourth quarter of 2002 to 10,830 in the last quarter 2003 (source: Home Office web site), a reduction of just under 50 per cent. Measures include the closing of Sangatte, hi-tech vehicle scanning at ports and more recently moving UK immigration controls from Dover to France to check people before they enter the Country.

The Government policy on the dispersal of asylum seekers around the Country continues and is managed by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Following criticism, the Home Office Minister, Beverly Hughes, commissioned an independent review. Amongst the improvements emerging from this review were the strengthening of the management team and the introduction of regional offices. These have had a significant impact, notably a much closer working relationship between Wigan Council and NASS at both regional and national level. There is now much greater recognition by NASS of the vital role the local authority plays around key issues such as managing local dispersal and community cohesion.

There are a number of issues emerging from NASS which have implications locally. The main areas are as follows:

- **Accommodation contracts expire in 2005.** Currently about 70 per cent of accommodation is provided by private sector landlords and the remainder is provided by the Council. The contracts for this come to an end in 2005 and discussions are now underway on the future arrangements. If trends continue, less accommodation will be required for asylum seekers in both the public and private rented sectors.
- **Accommodation oversupply.** With the reducing numbers of asylum seekers, NASS are inviting all housing providers (private landlords and Council's) to cut their existing supply. This is enabling us to:
 - Release around 25 units of Council accommodation. This accommodation may be of assistance in accommodating increasing levels of homelessness within the Borough.
 - Further balance the pattern of dispersal of asylum seekers across the Borough.
- **Terminating a private housing provider contract.** The Council has worked closely with NASS on this issue in identifying the failings of Landmark (Liverpool) Ltd. The Government is terminating the contract with this housing provider and we are working closely with NASS in ensuring a smooth transition to an alternative housing provider.
- **Induction for asylum seekers.** Agreement has been reached with NASS to involve local authorities at an earlier stage of the asylum seeker process. This will enable us to better ensure that asylum seekers receive the appropriate induction on our laws and so on, and allow more influence on final dispersal. Various options are being pursued, but it is likely the service will utilise existing private sector asylum seeker accommodation with the Council managing the

induction and move-on.

- **Unaccompanied children.** An initiative is emerging around supporting unaccompanied children seeking asylum. This is currently being trialed elsewhere and officers have made it clear that the Council will only consider participating where, amongst other matters, there are no cost implications for the Council.

Local level

The introduction by Wigan Council of a Policy Framework for Asylum Seekers has proven effective. Notable achievements include:

- the recommendations by the Intelligence Exchange Forum on dispersal have been adhered to by all the housing providers;
- close inter-agency working on community cohesion issues;
- the introduction of networks to provide essential and humanitarian support to asylum seekers;
- the production and dissemination of myth busting literature; and
- effective enforcement ensuring that housing standards were largely met by private housing providers and, where failings occurred, appropriate action taken.

The impact of the policy on dispersal across the Borough has been significant as Appendix 1 shows. No ward exceeded the limit set by the Council to avoid any one locality being overburdened. Wards which have high levels of asylum seekers have seen the levels of asylum seekers reduced. The latest data, February 2004, reveals the numbers of asylum seekers has fallen to 785 people which represents 51% of the 1533 people quota set by NASS. The trend of the numbers of asylum seekers in the Borough is downwards since the peak of 921 people in June 2003.

Behind the scenes, both the Asylum Seekers Providers Forum and its Intelligence Exchange Forum have identified and then ensured action on various critical issues including support networks, integration, race-hate crime and misbehaviour by asylum seekers, such as illegal working and motoring offences.

The only aspect of the Council's action plan which is still outstanding revolves around improving the induction process for asylum seekers. This has become tied into regional level contract negotiations but should be introduced during the summer.

The Intelligence Exchange Forum has recently conducted a review of the issues that have emerged over the last few years, the current position and potential issues for 2004/05. They have produced an action plan, which includes:

- the Council continuing to monitor and influence dispersal, updating myth busting literature and providing a briefing session to update key players in April;
- the Police and NASS continuing action on issues such as illegal working and motoring offences; and
- meeting with Wigan and Leigh College to ensure that any expansion into the training of overseas students involves joint planning on key issues such as the location of student accommodation.

Whilst not an issue within the Borough, the Council is continuing to monitor the impact of the numbers of asylum seekers who receive a negative decision.

Failed single asylum seekers can cause problems for local authorities, particularly if the Immigration Service is unable to forcibly return them to their home country, such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Democratic Republic of Congo.

Single people receiving negative decisions are unable to access any form of support via the benefits system and legally are not entitled to gain employment. Their access to accommodation is also barred. Consequently, these people are put into destitution receiving help from the voluntary sector rather than public agencies. Many of them gravitate to the large cities, a few stay locally with friends or relatives so this has left us with just two cases which we are monitoring closely.

"Hard cases support" is available for these people through NASS. However, the criteria for this being granted are very strict and the availability of the support is not well publicised. NASS are currently reviewing their approach, following recent legal action.

Support will not usually be provided unless:

- the applicant is unable to leave the UK due to physical impediment to travel e.g. through extreme illness / late pregnancy; or

- the circumstances of the case are exceptional (e.g. no safe route home) and the applicant is taking all reasonable steps to leave the UK and is complying with efforts to remove him / her; or
- the applicant has been granted permission for judicial review in respect of his / her asylum application or he / she has made an application for permission to apply for judicial review and the application does not appear to the Secretary of State as wholly unmeritorious.

Conclusions

Dealing with asylum seekers emerged as a major issue for both the Government and local authorities. Since 2002, good progress has been made at national and local level in responding to this. The numbers of asylum seekers has fallen significantly; NASS has improved following reorganisation; and Wigan Council's innovative Policy Framework has proven effective in managing dispersal and community cohesion.

The major issues emerging for 2004/05 have been identified and an action plan is in place to ensure these are managed.

Appendices

1. [Graph showing dispersal of asylum seekers against Nominal Allocation, Review Level and Nominal Limit as at 31 December 2002 and 31 December 2003](#)

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