



News Release



Tuesday 18 March 2003

94/2003

Churches' Praise for Council Asylum Policy

Senior church leaders have given their backing to Wigan Council's policy on asylum seekers.

The Bishops of Warrington and Liverpool have met council chiefs and agreed to give a high profile to promoting good community relations through their parishioners and local church organisations.

The move is just one of a series of measures outlined in a council cabinet report that reveals a unique approach to asylum issues in Wigan. It shows how the council, police, private landlords, churches and voluntary groups are all working together to manage asylum in a way that's seen as reasonable by most people.

Now the policy is being held up as a model of its kind by government agencies, including NASS, the national asylum seeker service.

Council chiefs say their aim is to ensure that no one part of the borough is asked to take more than its fair share of asylum seekers. And by working together, agencies believe they are better able to co-ordinate information about race-hate crime and the provision of local services.

Ashley Crumbley, Deputy Director of Environmental Health, said: "We accept that not everyone in the community is happy with the asylum situation. But the council has to manage the situation that has arisen.

"The majority of asylum seekers are being housed by private landlords, so if we did nothing at all, asylum seekers would still come to Wigan but there would be little control over where they go. A notable achievement has been the fact that all accommodation providers are now abiding by recommendations on fair dispersal.

"The churches wish to play an active role in promoting good community relations, and the Bishops were very supportive of the approach we are taking."

In his report Mr Crumbley outlined other recent initiatives:

- The council is working with Leicester Council to improve its local approach in areas such as young people, education and asylum seekers.
- A new Black and Ethnic Minority Forum has been set up, with fifty people attending a recent meeting.
- Council plans for a 'community cohesion' policy aimed at strengthening community relations will be in place later this year.
- An A-Z of key services to help all the agencies has been produced, as well as a well-regarded myth-busting leaflet that aims to scotch some of the wilder rumours about asylum seekers.

Mr Crumbley added: "The council and its partners have made good progress in implementing the policy framework for asylum seekers that was adopted last year.

"We have also been quietly working behind the scenes with various government agencies dealing with asylum seekers who breach their contracts by working illegally, or if criminal acts are committed.

"However we are not complacent and know we need to do more to improve our approach to race-hate crime and developing policies for community cohesion."

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Note to editors

1. The government via NASS has asked Wigan to take 1,533 asylum seekers. The council has provided 168 properties, but the vast majority of accommodation is provided by private landlords.

2. The Council's 'Policy Framework for Asylum Seekers' was adopted in November 2002 following recommendations by a scrutiny committee that looked at asylum issues.

3. Further information: Ashley Crumbley, tel. 01942 827072.