

Report to: Cabinet



Date of Meeting 12 July 2023

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Home Office Asylum Hotel – Hampton by Hilton, Exeter Airport

Report summary:

This report provides a position statement on the background and current issues being experienced by asylum seekers placed in hotel accommodation in the district by the Home Office. The Multi-Agency Coordination Group have been very effective in securing services for asylum seekers under partners control, however, a number of issues outside of our control have persisted from mobilisation of the hotel. Despite our best efforts these concerns around the adequacy of food and robust safeguarding arrangements remain issues. The report advocates continuing to work with local partners to ensure that the Home Office respond positively to the issues being raised with them.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That Cabinet endorse the measures being taken to ensure that the Home Office are accountable for providing adequate feeding and safeguarding arrangements in the asylum accommodation they commissioned at the Hampton by Hilton hotel in East Devon.

Reason for recommendation:

To maintain pressure on the Home Office to ensure that asylum seekers in the district are properly fed and safeguarded whilst in their care.

Officer: John Golding Director Housing, Health & Environment.

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Democracy, Transparency and Communications
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Tourism, Sports, Leisure and Culture

Equalities impact Medium Impact

The Home Office equalities impact assessment covers their responsibilities for asylum seekers.

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Medium Risk; The risk register reflects partner agencies risks. As Safeguarding Lead for the council I am very aware that safeguarding arrangements at the hotel need to be robust as the scheme is accommodating a cohort of vulnerable adults and children. I am seeking assurance from the Home Office that their service providers are proactively managing safeguarding, are properly trained and competent to do so.

Links to background information

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
 - A greener East Devon
 - A resilient economy
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1. Asylum arrangements at the Hampton by Hilton hotel

- 1.1 In February 2023 the Home Office advised that they had commissioned an Asylum Hotel in East Devon, The hotel being the Hampton by Hilton on the Exeter Airport facility.
- 1.2 The accommodation would provide a home for up to 400 asylum seekers whilst their claims for asylum were being assessed. This is part of the Home Office programme of accommodating asylum seekers in hotels rather than camps, and a number of hotels were commissioned and mobilised in Devon and across the country. The last report we had indicated that numbers at the hotel remained similar to those reported initially with mainly families and 103 children on site. There are 34 children under 4 years, 40 between 5 and 11, and 29 between the age of 12 and 17. The situation is dynamic as new placements arrive.
- 1.3 Our initial briefing in a Home Office mobilisation meeting advised the following:
 - Commissioned by the Home Office as a contingency asylum seeker hotel
 - We have been formally notified following Ministerial 'sign off'
 - Arrivals imminent, but cohort unknown
 - Hotel has 160 rooms with a maximum capacity of 392 (rooms will be shared)
 - Managed by Clearsprings Ready Homes Home Office contractor for providing asylum accommodation
 - On-site 24/7 with staff who are trained to provide support
 - Security on site 24/7
 - Service Users (Home Office term) given briefing on arrival and induction packs
 - Food, laundry, cleaning services provided
 - Migrant Help phone line available
 - Links with primary Health established
 - Mention of a shuttle bus being provided
 - Recognised need for social, recreational, and wellbeing activities, religious and cultural needs, language issues (no plans)
 - Mobilisation meeting held Monday where we and other agencies were briefed
 - Home Office/Clearsprings recognise the value and contribution that local engagement can make in achieving a successful placement and the value of strong multi-agency partnerships

- There is no additional funding for local authorities available to support asylum seekers
- Home Office briefing suggests that basic needs will be met by them. Question for me is does their rhetoric match what happens in practice?

- 1.4 I briefed Cabinet in February that there were expectations on us (not a requirement) that we coordinate and oversee local statutory and non-statutory organisations to ensure continued safe management of the site. DCC had produced some draft local guidance on what a good local response looks like which is based on experience elsewhere in the county. It was for us to work out what that an effective local response looks like on our patch and react in an agile way.
- 1.5 We were ready for a multi-agency coordination meeting the week after being notified and the initial considerations included:
- Ideally need a single point of contact at EDDC
 - Develop a relationship with Clearsprings, Hotel management, partners, agencies etc.
 - Need sight of the welfare checks and the needs identified as a result – these could be health; medical conditions; clothing; food; education; language; transport; safeguarding; etc.
 - We can mobilise a community development/Financial Resilience Team response to certain requests for support
 - Link with community and voluntary sector including local refugee support groups
 - Assume health colleagues will pick up and address health needs
 - Public Health should address health protection and wellbeing needs
 - Think about access to leisure, transport, education, language services, role of Parish Council and Ward Member etc.
 - Guidance suggests appointing theme leads to deliver local responses for things like welfare; communications; health; community safety; safeguarding; language; education etc.
 - We have the option of being proactive and interventionist or holding back and waiting to receive requests for support
- 1.6 We quickly established a Multi-Agency Coordination Group and have had eight meetings to date with good attendance and support from senior colleagues from DCC; Health; Public Health; GPs; Police; Refugee Support Devon; South West Councils; schools etc. We as the host district were asked to Chair the multi-agency group and agreed our purpose for the group at the initial meeting, which was to welcome and ensure that refugees were safe and comfortable whilst in East Devon.
- 1.7 At the invitation of DCC we agreed to extend their support arrangement with Refugee Support Devon that had been commissioned to provide a support service for the Exeter asylum hotel the aims of which were as set out below:

Outline

This note outlines the proposed scope of a support service for the wellbeing and welfare of residents for an initial period post arrival, alongside the co-ordination of work with local organisations and people wanting to play a positive role in support for asylum seekers placed in East Devon.

The paper seeks to outline an initial six months of support and co-ordination designed to understand, assess, and deliver to meet the initial support needs of residents outside that of Clearsprings or wider statutory services. This service will be reviewed monthly.

Purpose

To ensure humanitarian and basic welfare needs are met whilst asylum claims are assessed.

The delivery of this support service and co-ordination of voluntary & community group support will:

- Help partners understand and respond to the immediate and day to day wellbeing and welfare needs of asylum seekers;
- Undertake a welfare needs assessments to understand the needs of individuals;
- Help partners understand emerging risks and issues for residents and escalate where required;
- Meet the basic and immediate needs of residents beyond those provided by the Home Office and their contractors;
- Provide opportunities for residents to be active, socialise, learn and connect with other people;
- Support language, translation and interpretation services to enable asylum seekers to communicate;
- Support people to connect with local statutory and voluntary agencies;
- Support the development of a positive environment within the hotel and with its residents;
- Develop positive local connections and relationships with the local community;
- Co-ordinate local voluntary and community activity into a single hub/strand of activity.

Key Outcomes

- Connect with each resident and provide an initial assessment of immediate wellbeing needs – Clothing, essential items, language, religious requirements etc.;
- Assess collective requirements of the group – e.g. Activities for children; space for private appointments; prayer room; an additional community venue for activities etc.;
- Develop connections with Clearsprings/Fine Fair and Hotel staff to ensure productive and positive outcomes;
- Support the GP registration of all residents as required;
- Co-ordinate activity to meet identified basic wellbeing needs and provide materials as required;
- With partners, contribute towards a timetable of activities and social/leisure programmes;
- Co-ordinate support and engagement with wider community and voluntary sector partners;
- Support work to create opportunities for learning (ESOL) and leisure activities;
- Attend multi-agency partnership meetings to update work and flag key risks and issues.

1.7 Partners were quick to mobilise a GP surgery on site, provide vaccinations, organise school places, school transport, activities, welfare support etc. We devised a risk register, organised environmental health visits, donations, and managed contributions and interventions that were within partners control and influence. The local response has been impressive with partners working collectively to welcome and settle asylum seekers, providing a safe, secure and healthy setting for all placed in the district.

1.8 One recurring theme that was raised at multi-agency meetings was the availability and adequacy of food supplied within the hotel setting. This was repeatedly raised with the Home Office and their service providers and we never received a satisfactory response. We had

also raised concerns around access to transport for welfare purposes because of the isolated location of the hotel, and the reliability of transport to get to medical appointments.

1.9 In June the Chief Executive wrote to the Secretary of State at the Home Office escalating concerns on behalf of partners. I have reproduced the contents of the letter below:

I write in my capacity as chair of the East Devon Multi-Agency Coordination Group and Chief Executive of East Devon District Council, host for the above hotel.

I have resorted to writing to you about our welfare and safeguarding concerns in respect of resident asylum seekers, as your officials and your appointed service providers appear incapable or unwilling to respond adequately to reasonable concerns about the adequacy of food and safeguarding of children in your commissioned hotel in East Devon.

We have established a well-attended, senior level, multi-agency group to support your team, who from just after mobilisation of the hotel have been raising concerns about the adequacy and nutritional value of food served in the hotel, access and transport to medical appointments, and more recently safeguarding of children at the hotel.

You will have seen correspondence from local school leaders and the recent Guardian article published highlighting these same concerns.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/17/children-in-englands-asylum-hotels-suffering-from-malnutrition>

Prior to the May meeting of the Multi-Agency Coordination Group my colleague circulated the questions below anticipating a series of concerns and questions around the adequacy of food at the meeting.

Anticipating that the quantity and adequacy of food for residents is likely to be the main topic for our meeting this week (based on recent emails I have seen), could I ask that colleagues (particularly the Home Office, Clear Springs and FineFair) come prepared to discuss the following:

- Reassurance that residents are receiving sufficient food of adequate nutritional value to sustain a healthy lifestyle
- That the service specification outlined below is being achieved consistently
- That residents are having the NHS advised number of daily calories for an average man 2,500 and an average woman of 2,000
- How widespread are concerns about children losing weight and diet related health conditions
- Has the menu been validated by a qualified nutritionist as required in 5 below
- That menus are addressing cultural needs and preferences
- Can we obtain direct feedback from residents on the issues through an organised survey rather than anecdotal information
- Can residents guide menu choices and assist with food preparation (food hygiene considerations must be paramount)
- Can residents be given access to cooking facilities or part of the kitchen (again food hygiene considerations must prevail)
- To what extent are residents supplementing their diets and using offers of food support outside of the hotel
- What has the Somerset research and investigations into food provision taught us

I have gone back to the Home Office service specification and have reproduced a relevant section below and highlighted a couple of points:

1. The Provider shall provide a full board service to entitled Service Users who are:
 - a. supported under Section 4 or Section 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; and
 - b. accommodated in full board style accommodation without access to facilities for food storage and preparation.
2. The Service shall be provided in a location easily accessible to the Service User and/or within the relevant accommodation within which the Service Users are accommodated.
3. The food provision under the full board service shall include:
 - a. breakfast;
 - b. lunch and evening meals, with a choice of at least one hot and one cold selection. At least one vegetarian option shall be provided at each meal;
 - c. a beverage service with each main meal;
 - d. a food service for babies and small children with the appropriate foodstuffs. This service shall enable babies and small children to be fed whenever necessary;
 - e. options which cater for special dietary, cultural or religious requirements (including, without limitation, gluten free and diabetic options where necessary); and
 - f. additional foodstuffs or meals as required to meet the nutritional needs of Service Users for whom three daily meals may be insufficient.
4. The food service shall meet appropriate nutritional standards for each varied menu and satisfy cultural, religious, health or other specific requirements. The Provider shall also clearly advertise the availability of religious or culturally sensitive meals to relevant Service Users, where appropriate.
5. The Provider shall ensure that each varied menu is validated by a suitably qualified nutritionist or health professional as being appropriate to the dietary needs of Service Users.
6. The full board service shall include additional support items required by Service Users, including:
 - a. baby care equipment and disposable nappies;
 - and b. personal toiletries and feminine hygiene products.

No one attending could answer the issues raised and Home Office officials took the questions away for a response. We are still awaiting a reply.

At our June meeting we pressed for a response to the outstanding issues, which resulted in a site visit and audit. We are awaiting a copy of the audit report and an assurance that your service providers are operating the facility in accordance with your service specification.

I am sure that you would agree that adequate nutrition, safeguarding and medical treatment are urgent matters, yet your officials appear to accept no accountability for the conditions at the hotel.

When asked to intervene on these matters our MP Simon Jupp has been given inadequate platitudes by the Home Office in a dismissive fashion.

Our Multi- Agency Coordination Group have been very effective in arranging school places, school transport, GP surgeries, vaccinations, activities, welfare support etc.

for hotel residents, but on the issues of food and safeguarding we feel ineffective and ignored.

I am therefore seeking your intervention to ensure that asylum seekers, that are your responsibility, are properly safeguarded and that your team are proactively deploying good safeguarding practices in the hotel, and that the food provided meets minimum recommended nutritional guidelines.

I would urge you to ensure that regular inspections of the site are undertaken and that the service providers listen to and act on the feedback from the on-site Welfare Officers. I am sure that you appreciate these facilities require strong and effective on site management, with a compassionate and professional approach.

I look forward to receiving your considered reply and assurance that our East Devon asylum seeker residents are safe and properly looked after in the Hampton by Hilton Hotel.

- 1.10 We are in receipt of Home Office Full Dispersal Grant 3' scheme and the precise sum is £217.5k based on 290 residents at the hotel as at April 1 this year. We are considering how best to utilize this funding to meet some of the additional costs associated with asylum seeker placements in our area. There are a number of calls on this funding including additional Welfare Officer support provided by Refugee Support Devon, school transport, school meals etc. Our current thinking is to increase the hours of Refugee Support Devon so we effectively have a full time Welfare Support Officer albeit this will likely be delivered by part time workers. The cost of this service has been estimated at circa. £31k. We also feel that funding personal transport would benefit the wellbeing/leisure needs of residents providing freedom to travel offsite. This might be achieved by meeting the cost of Stagecoach bus tickets/passes.
 - 1.11 I have been made aware that the Children's Commissioner is showing interest in the hotel and asking questions of the Home Office about physical isolation, food, hygiene, and appear to be planning a visit. This interest appears to have been a response to school leaders' letter highlighting concerns for their pupils.
 - 1.12 To be clear the Home Office are responsible for the commissioning of arrangements for asylum seekers and we know from media reports that this is one of the Governments top priorities (stop the boats). We also know that the system is not working effectively with the high cost and long waits for asylum claims to be processed. The Home Office are also responsible for the safety and security of asylum seekers.
 - 1.13 I intend to keep the pressure on the Home Office and their service providers until we are satisfied that feeding and safeguarding issues are being managed to the satisfaction of our multi-agency partnership. I await a detailed response on the issues raised and will report back to the Multi-Agency Coordination Group in order that all agencies and interested parties can agree what if any further actions are necessary.
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Financial implications:

EDDC has received funding direct in the case of the Asylum Seekers (rather than through Devon County Council) and the Council has a number of funding requirements to consider as outlined in 1.10 of the report. The amount received is a one off payment of £750 for each asylum seeker who is in Home Office accommodation on the 1st April 2023 which was recorded as 290 giving a sum of £217,500.

This funding is different to that of other schemes where more directed specific support is given to local authorities for instance the Afghans scheme which help families to integrate:

- £20,520 per person [over three years] to cover resettlement and integration costs.
- Up to £4,500 per child in the first year to cover education.
- £850 for adults requiring additional English language support in the first year.
- £2,600 for health partners to cover healthcare in the first year.

Legal implications:

Local authorities have safeguarding responsibilities under the Children's Acts of 1989 and 2004 and the Care Act 2014. This report details the questions that the Council has raised with the Home Office to ensure that safeguarding issues are being managed to the satisfaction of the multi-agency partnership.