

**Birmingham City of Sanctuary Position Statement**

**Background**

Birmingham has long been a place of refuge for individuals arriving to claim asylum in the UK. Birmingham is proud of its diversity and has committed to being a City of Sanctuary, providing a culture of hospitality and welcome, especially for refugees seeking sanctuary from war and persecution.

Refugees have, by definition, experienced forced migration, conflict and upheaval as well as language and cultural transitions. They may have experienced significant traumas such as torture, prolonged periods of uncertainty, loss of and separation from family members, physical and/or sexual violence, as well as poor living conditions.

Over a number of years, Birmingham City Council and partner organisations in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors have responded proactively to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees, successfully supporting the migration of individuals into the city.

**Current Issues**

Over recent years, the level of migration and profile of those seeking asylum in the UK has become increasingly diverse. To respond to these issues the Home Office is looking to Birmingham, alongside other Local Authority areas, to increase the number of asylum seekers and refugees housed and supported. To facilitate movement and dispersal the Home Office have developed and implemented a number of programmes such as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) scheme.

Furthermore, changes in legislation will mean there is a potential for the number of the people left destitute within Birmingham to increase as a consequence of the implementation of these new measures which removes support from those whose appeal rights have been exhausted. Although statutory guidance has not yet been issued it is possible that local authorities could experience an increase in demand for support under the Children Act. All partner agencies will be required to work together to mitigate the impact on individuals, local services and homelessness rates within the city.

With the issues connected with both migration and asylum becoming increasingly complex it is critical that we develop a single coherent position that:

- ✓ Honours our commitment to being a City of Sanctuary
- ✓ Balances the needs of asylum seekers and refugees with the needs of the many other vulnerable citizens living in Birmingham
- ✓ Acknowledges and values the contribution of all support providers working in Birmingham, to include voluntary and community sector organisations

- ✓ Seeks to promote sustainable resettlement

## **Birmingham's Commitment to Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

Birmingham City Council has given its support for asylum seekers and refugees to be relocated to the city via the following routes:

### **1) Via the Compass Contract**

In 2015/16 over 41,000 people made an application for asylum in the UK. Applicants are housed in one of 7 Initial Accommodation Centres across the UK whilst their claim is being made. Those considered to have a claim warranting full assessment are subsequently housed in dispersed accommodation until their claim has been fully determined. The accommodation, transport and support services that asylum seekers can access during this time are provided under contract by the Home Office.

One of the Initial Accommodation Centres is located within Birmingham and accommodation in the city is also used for dispersed accommodation. G4S hold the contract for the management of these services and Migrant Help provide the support services, they are both accountable to the Home Office for its delivery.

Whilst Birmingham City Council and partner agencies, have no direct responsibility for the delivery of services to asylum seekers during the period that their claim is being determined, we are concerned to ensure that those who are resident within Birmingham are appropriately supported.

Birmingham City Council has a safeguarding responsibility to all those resident within the city regardless of immigration status. Where Birmingham City Council becomes aware of safeguarding concerns for asylum seekers the council will work with G4S to respond and resolve any issues as appropriate.

Birmingham City Council also retains responsibility for ensuring that accommodation used meets the required physical standards and holds the necessary planning permission, or licenses, to approve its use by asylum seekers. In considering applications for changes to license agreements or planning permission the council will consider the needs of both asylum seekers and the wider community.

The Council does not support the use of hotel accommodation in Birmingham to house asylum seekers when demand for Initial Accommodation has exceeded supply. The Home Office can continue to utilise hotel provision within the city without the consent of the local authority.

The Council is committed to working in partnership with the Home Office and G4S to facilitate appropriate access to services and enable issues to be proactively addressed.

Furthermore the creation of partnerships with local voluntary and community sector organisations is welcomed to add value to the provision provided via the contract from the Home Office.

## **2) Under the National Transfer Scheme**

The National Transfer Scheme was launched by the Government on the 1st July 2016. The scheme is a voluntary scheme which was established to facilitate the dispersal of unaccompanied asylum seeking children across the UK. Each local authority was requested to take unaccompanied asylum seeking children to a level which equates to 0.07% of their total child population.

There are three strands to the scheme:

- a) Children at Risk – mainly from the MENA (Middle East and North African region)
- b) Lord Dubs Amendment which allows unaccompanied children to be offered safe refuge in the UK.
- c) Spontaneous arrivals

Birmingham has confirmed participation in the scheme and has been welcoming unaccompanied asylum seeking children to the city since the scheme was established. The Council has been working to accept children in line with the set ratio to ensure that the additional demand for service can be managed alongside the provision of services to other vulnerable children.

Local authorities receive grant funding from the Home Office for each validated, approved case. The grant covers the placement costs of the child.

## **3) Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS)**

The SVPRS was developed by the Government in January 2014 and enhanced in September 2015 to support the delivery of the UK's commitment to providing humanitarian support to 20,000 Syrian people in need of protection as a consequence of the war in Syria for the duration of this Parliament. Under the terms of the scheme local authorities are provided with funding to cover the costs associated with resettling Syrian refugees for the first 12 months of their stay.

Birmingham City Council, working with partner agencies, was at the forefront of the national response to the Syrian crises, to confirm early acceptance of 50 Syrian refugees into the city. This early commitment was built upon by a cross-party commitment to welcome a further 500 Syrian refugees to the city over the next 4 years.

Resettlement support services for Syrian refugees are being commissioned utilising the Government grant which covers the costs of the refugees during

their initial 12 months of resettlement and the Council has confirmed its support for the piloting of a community sponsorship approach working alongside the Methodist Church which will see a Syrian family supported within this faith based community.

#### **4) Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme**

The Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme was announced on 21 April 2016 with a commitment for the UK to resettle up to 3,000 children and their families from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region over the life of the current Parliament under the Children at Risk UNHCR vulnerability category.

Children have been forced to flee their homes, and many lose their schools, friends, aspirations, sense of security and, often, their childhoods. Over half of the refugees in the MENA region are children.

Separation from family members, difficulty accessing basic services and increased poverty make it more likely that children will marry early, work before the legal age or in dangerous and exploitative conditions, drop out of school or face violence in their homes, communities or schools. They also face risks of detention, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation during their displacement. This is why the UK Government decided to set up a dedicated resettlement scheme for vulnerable children.

The scheme will be open to all children deemed to be "at risk" within the MENA region so will not be limited to Syrians. Other nationalities may include but not be limited to: Iraqis, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis, Afghans and Palestinians.

It will also include mixed families, containing more than one nationality, and those who are stateless. A stateless person is someone who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.

Birmingham City Council will work in partnership with the Home Office to look at the potential for developing a commitment from Birmingham under this scheme. The funding for this scheme utilises the funding instructions to replicate the payments under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children scheme (UASC).

## **Birmingham's Position**

Our commitment to welcome asylum seekers and refugees has been framed with reference to local services, where appropriate, to support those arriving in the city to achieve sustainable resettlement. This covers the following key elements:

### **Education and Employment**

Birmingham is committed to ensuring that all children entitled to an education can access it while they are in the city, regardless of whether they are a UK citizen, refugee or asylum seeker.

When considering the implications of migration and the transient population moving throughout the city it is vital that the education needs of those children are heard and responded to; the City recognises that access to education is of fundamental importance to the safety and well-being of children arriving and/or settling in Birmingham.

A pilot education partnership post will be developed utilising the funding from the Home Office grant to work with Syrian refugees arriving through the SVPRS to support the families completing the application/appeals process for school places, brokering discussions with schools about the additional requirements of the children and working with schools to develop relationships to provide a positive school placement for the children's education. An evaluation will be undertaken to review the learning from the pilot and the potential to improve access to education for those arriving into the city.

The volume of school places required year on year continues to increase as the city grows and there are ongoing plans to ensure there are sufficient school places to meet local need. Development of an internal pathway between commissioning and education will ensure alignment of school place planning and wider proposals to support asylum seeker and refugee children, so that we are able to meet our commitment to provide education to those arriving through the various migration schemes.

Most adults arriving in Birmingham as refugees require ESOL lessons (English as a Second or Other Language) and other training towards employment. The City Council works in partnership with DWP, providers and the Skills Funding Agency to support this programme with no cost implications for the council.

### **Health**

Refugees and asylum seekers have often experienced significant trauma as a consequence of war, conflict or persecution, which will have impacted upon their mental health and wellbeing. Many will have lived in insanitary conditions, or had limited access to healthcare; as a consequence many may also have developed

physical health conditions. We recognise therefore that asylum seekers and refugees often have unique and complex physical and mental health needs that require identification, diagnosis and comprehensive healthcare attention.

Birmingham is committed to ensure that people have access to the right healthcare service at the right time, but there are considerations that must be noted about the funding and availability of services based on an individual's status within the UK. Working in partnership with the local Clinical Commissioning Groups to ensure that individuals are aware of the services available to them and how to access the provision based on their needs and circumstances.

It is important to note that circumstances experienced by asylum seekers and refugees upon arrival in Birmingham should as far as possible not exacerbate existing health issues, or contribute to the development of new ones.

The identification of existing health issues and the delivery of services to address them are essential elements of a supportive healthcare service for new arrivals and are provided through the local Clinical Commissioning Groups with no cost to the council.

Collaborative partnership working with all providers and organisations across the city can help to improve the access to healthcare provision but also to encourage take up of health assessments for those coming through the asylum process. Measures to maximise health assessment uptake and adequate resourcing for their delivery are essential to address the health needs of new arrivals, and mitigate any impact on the local health economy. Healthcare services and their resourcing need to be flexible to respond to changes in demand and need. This will be achieved by providing feedback and supporting the local Clinical Commissioning Groups to understand the needs of those arriving, especially where information is known prior to the individual's arrival.

## **Housing**

With a city the size of Birmingham, homelessness, destitution and temporary/initial accommodation are just some of the issues that impact both on local communities and the migrant communities entering into the city. As a local authority we are keen to ensure that pathways are available to those newly arrived into the city so that they are able to navigate the system in the most effective way, but this does depend on the scheme and their current status. With the various schemes detailed above delivered within the city, this can lead to what might be seen as unfair access to housing as individuals arriving through different pathways may have access to housing provision. This would be dependent on each individual's circumstances.

Birmingham is committed to working with Home Office and G4S, the local contracted partner for asylum provision, to provide adequate accommodation and licensing of properties in order to support the asylum process. In sourcing accommodation for other schemes such as Syrian resettlement, the local authority remains focused on sourcing property from the private sector so as not to put any additional pressure on

the council and social housing markets in the city. There is also asylum seeker dispersal within the city provided through the government contract with G4S.

There is also work to be undertaken with local communities to support the integration of newly arrived communities, with a shared understanding and common ground on which to build a community foundation.

There is a need for join-up between decisions regarding temporary and permanent accommodation for asylum seeker and refugee families and the provision of school places.

## **Safeguarding**

Statutory organisations in Birmingham work cooperatively to identify and address any safeguarding risks for new arrivals (particularly children). New risks may present themselves as the types of asylum seekers and refugees change over time, and local responses (e.g. accommodation provision) change. It is important that local processes to identify concerns are responsive to these changes.

## **Community Cohesion**

We will work with communities within the city to allow them to support and embrace individuals who arrive into the city through the various pathways. They are the experts on their local area and the support that is available more locally. This includes community integration support, community sponsorship and the development of a mapping of provision across the city. Birmingham will look to develop a single point of information for asylum seekers and refugees who arrive in the city, mapping the service provision available and providing a useful resource.

The community response to asylum seekers and refugees has been one of welcome and support. To coordinate the offers presented Birmingham will look to sign up to the Government online portal to support refugees. This will allow communities, individuals and organisations to offer support of time/goods/services and for the facilitation of those offers to be managed effectively.

Birmingham, as a City of Sanctuary, has committed to welcoming an additional 500 Syrian refugees to our city in the next few years – on top of the 50 we have already accommodated. Birmingham also has the highest number of asylum seekers in the region. As a city, we have long seen our super diversity as an asset and celebrated the benefits of our multi-racial, multi-faith composition. This diversity will help us continue to welcome new migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as we grow, but we recognise that promoting these values alone will not be sufficient. In September 2016 a cross-party statement was agreed which lays out our vision, as a council, for cohesion in Birmingham. Building on this we are developing a strategy that will outline the work the council can do to improve cohesion in the city. However, we recognise that this will be a shared endeavour, and we are working with partners across the city to devise a Birmingham strategy for cohesion. Transparency and openness will be key to this agenda as we seek to ensure that no community feels that they have been overlooked.

## **Partnership Working**

Birmingham City Council alone cannot fully meet the needs of individuals. Birmingham recognises the importance of the work undertaken within the voluntary and community sector organisations and how this work increases the contribution that we are able to make as a city to those vulnerable individuals.

Through strengthening the relationships and partnership working across the city we aim to create a coherent pathway of service provision for asylum seekers with a positive status to remain within the UK. This allows us as a collective to support wider community integration.

Additionally we will work strategically with the voluntary and community sectors to ensure that precarious individuals and families who are the subject of immigration control can access advice, information and legal support with a view to avoiding destitution.

## **Conclusion**

Birmingham is committed to ensure that individuals arriving through the asylum and migration schemes are provided with the appropriate level of care. This will be done in partnership with relevant organisations and through the support of local community groups. Birmingham is committed to welcoming and providing a culture of hospitality and welcome, especially for refugees seeking sanctuary from war and persecution. This will be done in partnership with relevant organisations and with support from local communities.

Birmingham City Council acknowledges that this work needs to be undertaken alongside the fulfilment of its other priorities.