

LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON

REPORT:	Scrutiny & Overview Committee	
DATE OF DECISION	Monday 30th January 2023	
REPORT TITLE:	Support provided by the Council to asylum seekers, those seeking refuge under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children	
CORPORATE DIRECTOR / DIRECTOR:	Debbie Jones, Interim Corporate Director Children Young People and Education Directorate	
LEAD OFFICER:	Kerry Crichlow, Director Quality, Commissioning and Performance Improvement, Children Young People and Education Directorate	
LEAD MEMBER:	Cllr Maria Gatland, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People	
KEY DECISION?	No	
CONTAINS EXEMPT INFORMATION?	NO	
WARDS AFFECTED:	All	

1 SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the support provided by the council and its partners to displaced people in the borough including those supported under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, adults and families seeking asylum placed in the borough by the Home Office and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 1.2 Following the launch of the Homes for Ukraine scheme in May 2022 the council has mobilised teams to ensure Ukrainian guests are placed with suitable hosts in the borough, provide practical support and advice to newly arrived people and support their integration into life in the UK. Implementing the scheme required considerable project co-ordination and administrative that was swiftly put in place.
- 1.3 The rapid increase in the number of adults and families seeking asylum placed in hotels the borough by the Home Office as a result of the pressures on the asylum system nationally is putting a financial strain on the council.
- 1.4 The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) has fallen significantly over 2020-2022 and Croydon is no longer an outlier for the number and percentage of under 18-year-olds in its care, although it will take several years for the

proportion of care experienced young people to fall to the same level. However, a number of children placed by the Home Office as adults in hotels have challenged their age-assessments and come into Croydon's care as a result.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

For the reasons set out in the report Scrutiny and Overview Committee is recommended:

- 2.1** To review and comment on the support provided by the council to displaced people in the borough including those supported under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, adults and families seeking asylum placed in the borough by the Home Office and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 2.2** To note the work underway to quantify the additional financial strain placed on the council as a result of the rapid increase in the placements of asylum-seeking adults and children in the borough by the Home Office.

3 BACKGROUND AND DETAILS

Homes for Ukraine Scheme

- 3.1** The Homes for Ukraine scheme was launched in May 2022 to allow individuals, charities, community groups and businesses in the UK to bring Ukrainians to safety including those with no family ties to the UK. The scheme is open to Ukrainian nationals who were residents in Ukraine prior to 1 January 2022 and their immediate family members who may be of other nationalities.
- 3.2** Under the Homes for Ukraine scheme Ukrainian nationals are matched to named UK sponsors who can provide accommodation for a minimum of 6 months. On 5th January 2023 there were 296 host households in Croydon providing accommodation and support to 555 Ukrainian guests.
- 3.3** The council is responsible for completing a number of assurance checks to ensure the safety and wellbeing of each guest in a Croydon household including:
 - A property inspection
 - Disclosure and Barring Scheme checks for everyone in the household over the age of 16
 - Safeguarding checks
 - Interim payments for of £200 for each guest
 - Wellbeing checks for all guests
 - Host and guest assessments

3.4 In addition to the checks above the council is also expected to provide:

- An education placement
- Homelessness assistance
- Social care services for children and adults if required
- Support with finding employment

3.5 Grant funding to councils from the government was initially set at £10,500 per arrival to provide the range of services and compliance checks set out above, the initial £200 payment to Ukrainian guests and monthly 'thank you' payments of £350 per month to hosts. The 'thank you' payments have recently been increased to a £500 per month for guests that have been in the UK over a year on the scheme for up to 2 years starting in the 13th month, to encourage hosts to continue to provide homes for their guests.

3.6 Front office and welfare check teams have been established through a mix of secondments, flexing existing staff and fixed term or agency recruitment. The welfare check team includes a social worker and a social work manager. A dedicated programme manager has been released from public health and is now providing oversight and co-ordination across both the Homes for Ukraine and asylum seekers in hotels schemes.

3.7 Children arriving from Ukraine will have no specific additional priority for school admission, but the council is under a duty to offer advice to parents on applying for a school place. At the end of the autumn term 2022 120 applications had been made, 109 children had been offered places and 99 were attending school with 9 applications pending. 12 children have moved out of Croydon since making the application.

3.8 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) recently announced that the Homes for Ukraine scheme will continue for at least another 12 months. At the same time new funding arrangements have been announced. From January 1 2023, the tariff available to the council for each arrival will reduce from £10,500 per person to £5,900. The rationale for the reduction is the introduction of a new £500 million fund announced in December 2022 to support the acquisition of housing stock and a £50 million top up to councils' Homelessness Prevention Grant. As a result of this change plans to uplift sponsor support and develop a package to support entry into the private rented housing sector are being revised to fit into the financial envelope available.

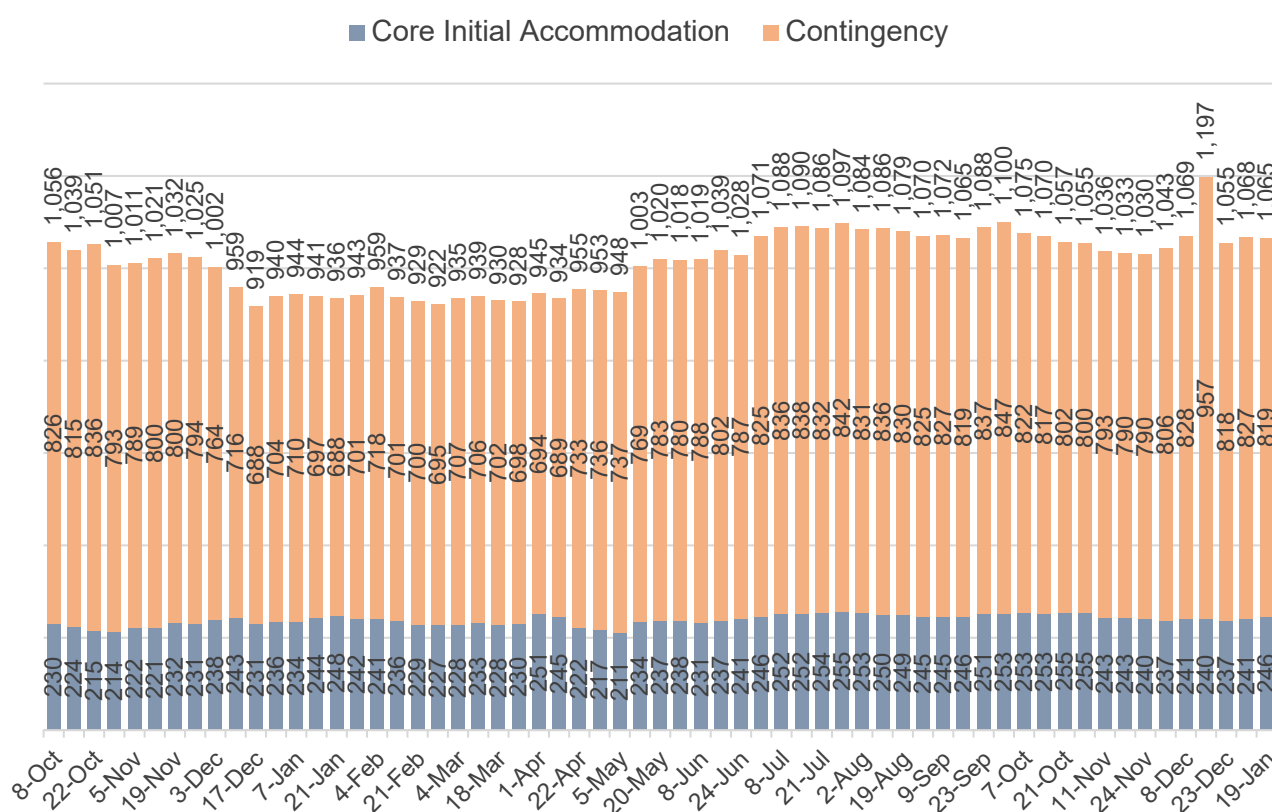
3.9 Longer term housing arrangements are of paramount importance to Ukrainian guests, their hosts and to the council because of the risks of a rise in homelessness presentations if people are not effectively supported into independent living. Guidance has not yet been published on how the new funding can be utilised to help Ukrainians into the private rented housing sector.

- 3.10** If the relationship between the sponsor and guest breaks down, the council is expected to re-match guests with new sponsors. All of the above checks must be completed before a guest can be allocated to a new sponsor.
- 3.11** Sponsor/guest relationships do break down as the day-to-day reality of sharing spaces becomes clear and beds down. Intensive work takes place led by the welfare check team to try and broker solutions that all parties accept, but where this is not possible the teams aim to source new matches. Around 11 rematches have been secured since the scheme opened.
- 3.12** 10 Ukrainian guests have by-passed or lost faith in these negotiations and presented to the council as homeless. Of these, 5 were matched with new sponsors and 5 were accommodated in emergency accommodation (EA). Of these 5, 4 families spent up to 2 weeks in EA before being match with new sponsors. 1 family remains in EA, do not want another sponsor relationship and wish to be supported into private rented accommodation. This is being progressed.
- 3.13** In July 2022 eligibility was extended to unaccompanied children under 18. The process for new applications is different and requires the planned sponsor to first undergo safeguarding checks before a child can begin their visa application. At present Croydon is dealing with one such application and anticipate that if all is in order the child will arrive within around 6 weeks.
- 3.14** Staff have worked proactively to provide practical advice and support to both guests and hosts through what will have undoubtedly been traumatic experiences of fleeing conflict, leaving loved ones behind and adapting to living in a new country. Voluntary and community groups have emerged to support and befriend new arrivals with whom the team have established working relationships. Much has been learnt in a short period of time to tailor the support offer and help hosts and guests set out their expectations. There were a small number of potential breakdowns raised than expected during the recent holiday period and it is hoped that the wellbeing team are more skilled at helping establish these relationships correctly from the outset.

Asylum seeking adults and families placed in Croydon

- 3.15** Adults and children seeking asylum have been placed in hotels in Croydon by the Home Office whilst their asylum claims are considered for many years, with around 200 people placed at any one time in three fairly small hotels (between 50-100 people at each). Called core initial accommodation (IA), the length of time people stayed varied but was typically around 3-4 weeks before moving onto dispersal accommodation if their asylum claim was accepted for consideration.
- 3.16** Over the past two years the number of people placed in IA has ballooned. The reasons for this are varied but a key factor is the lack of flow through the asylum system meaning that people seeking asylum are waiting many months for a decision on their claim. This has caused an unprecedented backlog in the system leading to the rapid development of contingency IA.

- 3.17** The Home Office commissioned two contingency IA hotels in Croydon. ClearSprings Ready Homes is contracted to provide both IA and dispersal accommodation in the south of England including Croydon. They in turn sub-contract for front of house staff, catering, security, maintenance, pest control and cleaning services in the hotels.
- 3.18** The numbers of adults and children accommodated in core and contingency IA in Croydon over the past 15 months can be seen in Table 1 below:



to free early learning for 3 and 4 year olds. More providers would like to offer places but access is limited to within walking distance as adults cannot pay for travel.

- 3.21** Over this time period 81 children have left schools as they have been moved with their families out of the borough. This is hard for the children who may have formed friendships and started to feel more secure. It is also hard for schools as the work to welcome and integrate new children is lost.
- 3.22** It has been more challenging to persuade secondary schools to admit children in key stage 4 as there is little flexibility in schools' curriculum offer. The Director of Education and her team are exploring options for alternative provision for key stage 4 similar to that previously grant funded by the DFE for unaccompanied children which may also relieve similar issues affecting admissions for Ukrainian children in key stage 4.
- 3.23** It is a concern that no health care has been commissioned for the hotel sites by the Home Office. Croydon Health Services have provided health screening and access to GPs through the Rainbow Clinic which works with the homeless in Croydon. This service is mobile and being based at CUH is accessible for residents in some of the hotels. As numbers have increased health colleagues have found it challenging to keep pace with demand. Pregnant women and new mothers have been prioritised along with those with pre-existing conditions. In common with many contingency IA hotels there have been outbreaks of chicken pox and scabies.
- 3.24** Whilst the Council is not the commissioner or provider of the accommodation and services it does have statutory responsibilities for the safeguarding of children and adults living in the borough, for health protection and for environmental health and housing standards.
- 3.25** Two standing meetings are in place to provide a formal opportunity to escalate concerns, request assurance and hold the Home Office and the contracted provider to account:
- A monthly monitoring meeting chaired by the interim Corporate Director CYPE attended by both the Home Office and CSRH. Issues and concerns are escalated at these meetings which are minuted and tracked.
 - A monthly safeguarding meeting, chaired jointly by the adults' and children's safeguarding leads. Attendance by the Home Office has fallen off in recent months; following escalation to the January monitoring meeting a commitment was made that both the Home Office and ClearSprings Ready Homes would ensure senior representation.
- 3.26** In December voluntary and community leaders reported serious allegations of sexual harassment of single women by male security staff on site to the Executive Mayor and council officers. The council alerted the provider who acted swiftly, removing and replacing the contracted security staff that day. A special safeguarding meeting was convened to agree actions the provider would take to ensure this did not happen again. Women-only drop-in sessions will be taking place in the local church led by the council's

domestic abuse lead to provide an on-going safe space for women to share their experiences and gain support.

- 3.27** In early January concerns about vermin and plumbing were escalated to officers. These were responded to quickly and in response council officers, Home Office and ClearSprings Ready Homes leads met to discuss how complaints could be responded to much more quickly. A new approach was agreed, with the council collating and tracking complaints and escalating these direct to the Home Office. This will provide hard data that can be interrogated at the monthly monitoring meetings. Guidance is being developed and will be circulated to residents and their local supporters including VCSF organisations and ward councillors to ensure this intelligence is used to hold the Home Office and CSRH to account.
- 3.28** Alongside this framework to hold the Home Office and its contractor to account officers and health partners have been working alongside hotel staff to focus on what changes can be made within their contract to improve the experiences for adults and children. There has also been recent encouraging engagement with a local ward councillor to explore alternative cooking opportunities.
- 3.29** It is the government's stated intention to speed up claims processing and so move people out of contingency hotels. This is a positive intention however it requires alternative accommodation. Croydon has recently been approached about standing up new dispersal accommodation in the borough which is being challenged. However, if the Home Office press ahead with this policy position outer London areas in particular are likely to come under sustained pressure.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

- 3.30** Over 2020-2022 there has been a significant reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC):

Date	No. UASC
Sept. 2020	249
Sept. 2021	137
Sept. 2022	92
Dec. 2022	100
Reduction	149

Table 2

- 3.31** This downward trend started with the closure of overland travel routes as the pandemic took hold in 2020. The introduction of the mandatory National Transfer Scheme (NTS) in November 2021 also relieved the pressure on the local authority to assume care responsibility for new arrivals at the Home Office reception centre in the borough.
- 3.32** Croydon is no longer an outlier for the proportion and total number of UASC in its care although it will take several years for the number of care leavers formerly UASC to reduce to the same extent. To increase the capacity to relieve the pressure from channel

crossings in Kent the Home Office raised the threshold on the proportion and number of UASC councils are expected to care for to 0.1% of the child population which in Croydon is 98 children. Below this level councils can expect to have children referred in through the NTS.

- 3.33** Across the country children assessed as adults on arrival in Kent and placed in hotels with other adults have challenged this assessment. Since March 2022 27 children have come forward to challenge and 12 have been accommodated by Croydon pending more detailed age assessments. Whilst children can be referred to the NTS for transfer to other councils the age assessment must be completed first and children placed with foster carers whilst this takes place. A social worker is also allocated to support the child during their tie in Croydon. These requirements continue to put a strain on the council's resources.
- 3.34** There have also been reports of unaccompanied children going missing from hotels near or on the south coast. 3 children from this cohort have presented at Lunar House in Croydon and have been transferred to other councils through the NTS.

Quantifying additional costs

- 3.35** In April 2022 the Home Office announced grant funding based on the increase in the number of people placed in initial and dispersed accommodation in council areas. A one-off payment was made in May 2022 followed by quarterly grant payments against a 'baseline' of numbers placed as at March 2022. Croydon has been awarded £369,250 in total to date.
- 3.36** Drawing on this grant the Asylum Seeker Support Fund was launched in November 2022 offering small grants of up to £5,000 to voluntary, community and faith organisations to provide practical help, support, advice and friendship to hotel residents. 11 organisations were awarded small grants to deliver activities up to the end of March 2023 at a total cost of £53,895. Feedback will be sought from those receiving the services to shape future plans for any further grant rounds.
- 3.37** Whilst the one-off grant funding is welcomed there are sustained and substantial additional costs falling to the council as a result of the contingency IA in the borough. Considerable officer time is expended in gaining assurance on the quality standards and safety of provision across the borough, and in challenging unacceptable practices, at a time when Croydon's unique financial challenges and the delivery of agreed savings plans are a priority for staff. This is impacting at all levels, from the Chief Executive chairing meetings with partner councils, the Corporate Director holding senior Home Office and contracted provider representatives to account every month to Directors, Heads of Service and health partners meeting regularly with the provider to provide advice and expertise that improves the experience of adults and families placed in the borough.

- 3.38** Through regional and national meetings of Chief Executives, council leaders and Mayors the additional financial burden to councils resulting from the unannounced placement of large numbers of vulnerable asylum-seeking adults and children has been robustly pursued. Croydon has been selected as one of the 30 LAs nationally to take part in a Home Office data-gathering exercise on the costs to councils of asylum dispersal alongside Hounslow, Enfield, Brent, Barnet and Wandsworth.
- 3.39** This work will contribute to the evidence base for the total additional costs across the council which will in turn inform ongoing discussions being taken forward between the London councils most affected by this placement policy and central government officials and ministers. Croydon is a member of this group of councils.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** Significant work is being carried out to collate, cost, monitor and estimate for the future, the impact on the Council to support asylum seekers and refugees across the authority.
- 4.2** Finance have been working closely with the Director of Public Health, the Director Quality, Commissioning & Performance (Deputy DCS) and the Programme Manager for Asylum & Refugees, initially around the support for the Homes for Ukraine programme, but more recently to understand the financial burden that full asylum dispersal places on Croydon.

Homes for Ukraine

- 4.3** The table below details the grant received to date and the current levels of expenditure. The monthly host payments are fully reimbursed by government following the completion of quarterly returns.

	Grant Income Due	Actuals to 20/1/23
	£'000	£'000
Host Monthly Payments		429
Grant Due	(429)	
Government Grant Received		(2,142)
Expenditure to Date		259
Available Grant		(1,883)

Table 3

Grant of £670,000 has also been received to help mitigate the impact on education services.

Dispersal of Asylum Seekers

- 4.4 The Home Office is keen to better understand the size of the financial burden that full asylum dispersal places on local authorities. Finance are working closely with the programme manager for asylum seekers and refugees to understand the burden to the authority. Asylum dispersal grant received to date is £369,000
- 4.5 A return is due to the Home Office by the end of January that details the cost to the authority for four categories of spend for 2019/20 and 2021/22
- Discrete asylum seeker/refugee–use services
 - Significant asylum seeker/refugee–use services
 - No access to public funds - related (NAPF) support provision
 - Other services
- 4.6 We have communicated the exercise across the council and have gathered relevant information. The next step is to collate the data and cost the impact where evident. Care is being given to the in year and future impact also.
- 4.7 All data is being RAG rated to ensure where information is estimated, the confidence levels around certainty of the information is clear.
- 4.8 Understanding the full impact on the Council for the support of asylum seekers and refugees is a priority and will need to be carefully monitored going forward. Approval has been sought for 2 dedicated staff for a fixed term to add resource to this complex area.
- 4.9 Comments approved by Lesley Shields, Head of Finance for Assistant Chief Executive and Resources, on behalf of the Director of Finance 20/10/23.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO COUNCIL PRIORITIES

- 5.1 The Mayor's priorities are detailed in the Corporate Plan, and highlight which outcomes the report and decision related to: [Mayor's Business Plan 2022 - 2026 \(croydon.gov.uk\)](https://www.croydon.gov.uk/mayors-business-plan-2022-2026)

The issues discussed in this report cut across and address a number of priorities:

- Get a grip on the finances and make the Council financially sustainable
- Work with partners and the VCFS to promote independence, health and wellbeing and keep vulnerable adults safe
- Work closely with health services, Police and the VCFS to keep vulnerable children and young people safe from harm
- Strengthen collaboration and joint working with partner organisations and the voluntary, community and faith sectors

Contact Officer: Kerry Crichlow, Director Quality Commissioning and Performance Improvement, Children Young People and Education Directorate

E-mail: Kerry.crichlow@croydon.gov.uk