

## Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 23rd February 2024

Subject: Homelessness from the Asylum System – Update and Response

Report of: Mayor Paul Dennett, Portfolio Lead for Housing, Homelessness and Infrastructure

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### Purpose of Report

To provide an update on the current homelessness and rough sleeping crisis across Greater Manchester as a result of Home Office accelerated asylum decision-making and seek approval for a shared Greater Manchester (GM) approach to tackling it.

### Recommendations:

The GMCA is requested to:

- Note the unprecedented levels of homelessness and rough sleeping among new refugees in Greater Manchester, the linked service pressures and the opportunities for improvements to our service offer to this cohort, now and in the longer-term.
- Support efforts to secure additional funds to boost Voluntary Community Faith Social Enterprise (VCFSE) provision for this cohort, with a focus on prevention and Private Rented Sector (PRS) access, and ensure that Housing Options and homelessness teams support delivery of GMCA-commissioned services.
- Consider continued or additional investment in capacity for specialist frontline support for people in or leaving the asylum system, especially across homelessness, social services, education teams, using current and future (potential) Asylum Dispersal Grant funding.
- In order to ensure that the current crisis, and its impacts on people, services and communities are visible, support continued engagement with national Government and efforts to evidence and communicate these impacts more widely.
- Support shared key policy asks (detailed in paragraph 6.6) in order to:
  - i. give GM's local systems time to recover;
  - ii. fund GM's systems to enable effective response now and in the longer term;
  - iii. improve transitions from the asylum system and;

- iv. address wider policy issues that are preventing access to affordable housing.

## **Contact Officers**

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## Equalities Impact, Carbon and Sustainability Assessment:

Impacts Questionnaire		
Impact Indicator	Result	Justification/Mitigation
Equality and Inclusion	G	The proposals will support prevention and recovery from homelessness for people leaving the asylum system, which disproportionately affects people with protected characteristics The proposals will support prevention and recovery from homelessness for people leaving the asylum system, which disproportionately affects people who are economically disadvantaged The proposals will enhance access to public services for this cohort The proposals will reduce rough sleeping, which impacts on social cohesion and support shared communications that minimise existing threats to cohesion linked to anti-asylum activism and tensions
Health	G	Homelessness and rough sleeping have serious consequences for individual and personal health, both physical and mental. The situation and risks outlined therefore have potentially significant health consequences, and the approach described is expected to have positive effects.
Resilience and Adaptation	G	The proposals will support the prevention of rough sleeping and management of community cohesion risks, which will help reduce risks to public safety and community health.
Housing	G	This proposals will support the prevention of homelessness, including rough sleeping and support move on to affordable homes.
Economy		
Mobility and Connectivity		
Carbon, Nature and Environment		
Consumption and Production		
Contribution to achieving the GM Carbon Neutral 2038 target		n/a
Further Assessment(s):	Equalities Impact Assessment	
<b>G</b> Positive impacts overall, whether long or short term.	<b>A</b> Mix of positive and negative impacts. Trade-offs to consider.	<b>R</b> Mostly negative, with at least one positive aspect. Trade-offs to consider.
		<b>RR</b> Negative impacts overall.

## Risk Management

N/A

## Legal Considerations

Legal and procurement advice has been received in the development of grant agreements to deploy emergency funding.

## Financial Consequences – Revenue

The paper considers future potential revenue funding – the 2024/25 Asylum Dispersal Grant.

## **Financial Consequences – Capital**

N/A

**Number of attachments to the report: 0**

## **Comments/recommendations from Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

N/A

## **Background Papers**

N/A

## **Tracking/ Process**

Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution

No

## **Exemption from call in**

Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency?

No

## **GM Transport Committee**

N/A

## **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

N/A

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1. Clearing the 'legacy' asylum backlog of cases that have been waiting on an initial decision by the end of 2023 was a public commitment of the Prime Minister and core facet of the Government's plan to tackle "illegal migration".
- 1.2. At the end of 2023, the Government announced that they had cleared the 'legacy' backlog, which was mainly achieved through granting positive decisions for people from countries with high asylum grant rates who had returned the Streamlined Asylum Processing (SAP) questionnaires and through withdrawals of asylum claims for those who did not.
- 1.3. Since January 2024, the Home Office announced it had moved on to process the asylum applications of people awaiting initial decisions who come from countries with lower grant rates and who applied for asylum before 28th June 2022.

## Greater Manchester context

- 1.4. Based on Home Office data shared in August 2023, GMCA established that over 2,500 households would receive decisions before December 2023 who were accessing asylum support in Greater Manchester.
- 1.5. Between September-December 2023 the rate at which asylum decisions were granted across GM appeared to be slightly less than predicted. However, it still represented a major acceleration and a significant increase in the number of people leaving Home Office accommodation.
- 1.6. It is not possible to estimate how many households received negative decisions or had withdrawn applications, as the Home Office does not share this data at the local or individual levels.
- 1.7. Home Office have now confirmed that the increased volume of asylum decisions will continue, though to a lesser degree than in 2023. Of the total cases to be decided nationally before April 2024, 5% live in GM.
- 1.8. Compared to the previous cohort and due to the nationalities included, a larger proportion of these are expected to be negative decisions. The impact of negative decisions is likely to be seen over a number of months, but if individuals are unable to access legal advice and appeal (and therefore remain in Home Office accommodation), they will have restricted eligibility for public funds and face acute exploitation risks.

- 1.9. We have welcomed the Government's commitment to more efficiently make decisions which will enable people to leave the asylum system, integrate in their communities and move on with their lives.
- 1.10. Nevertheless, without additional resources, local services are unable to meet the sky-rocketing demand for support which is already being felt across the whole of Greater Manchester.
- 1.11. There is currently almost no face-to-face support offered through Home Office-commissioned services. The Refugee Transitions Outcomes Fund has funded local authority keyworker roles in GM for the past two year, but is set to end in March 2024.
- 1.12. Currently, Local Authorities only other source of funding for asylum response is the Asylum Dispersal Grant, which is insufficient, short-term and unpredictable. Whilst most Local Authorities intend to retain keyworker (or equivalent) roles through the Dispersal Grant, the demand created by the current pressures vastly outstrips the capacity of Local Authorities and VCFSE organisations to respond.

## **2. Homelessness Impact**

- 2.1. In September 2023, when accelerated decision-making began in earnest, the proportion of people finding themselves rough sleeping following an asylum decision had already been increasing since July 2023.
- 2.2. This echoed long-term trends in statutory homelessness, where over the last three years of available data, GM has been home to between 12% and 21% of former asylum claimants owed a statutory homelessness duty nationally.
- 2.3. All ten Greater Manchester Boroughs are now reporting dramatically increased rough sleeping amongst people who had recently left the asylum system, largely with refugee status. Across Greater Manchester, this amounted to a 13-fold increase over the last 7 months of 2023 and a doubling month-on-month between October and December.
- 2.4. A number of Local Authorities are also reporting unprecedented levels of families in Temporary Accommodation from the asylum system, along with pressures on A Bed Every Night (ABEN) accommodation.

- 2.5. The VCFSE has also experienced a huge increase in demand for its services, with some drop-in services reporting that they are now forced to turn people away every day.
- 2.6. Of course, these new pressures are being felt at a time of acute pre-existing pressures on homelessness systems, Temporary and Emergency Accommodation, Housing Options services and affordable move-on accommodation. At the end of June 2023, Greater Manchester (GM) authorities were collectively responsible for 5,014 households resident in Temporary Accommodation, including 6,568 children.
- 2.7. As a result, the asylum homelessness crisis cannot be seen in isolation from the recent dramatic rise in Section 21 evictions, the long-term under-supply of truly affordable housing, and delays to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) uplift until April.
- 2.8. Across boroughs, the nature of the rough sleeping challenge from the asylum system is distinct in a few key ways:
- People rough sleeping and in off-the-street accommodation are typically **single person households** who are unlikely to be deemed in Priority Need for temporary accommodation.
  - New refugees are **being drawn to urban areas** from elsewhere in GM and the rest of the country – overwhelmingly to Manchester – therefore pressures being experienced are not necessarily proportionate to asylum populations in each borough.
  - **Confusion and expectations of housing offer:** In the absence of funded, community based, face-to-face support for people seeking asylum, the level of advice people have access to while awaiting their decisions is inadequate. When confronted with the realities of the limited accommodation options available, frequently after having experienced many years of trauma and uncertainty, individuals find it difficult to accept and understand.
  - **Risks to social cohesion and community safety:** the pace at which people are receiving decisions and being evicted into homelessness feeds into pre-existing risks of anti-asylum activism, being coordinated at the national level and in some cases, targeting GM communities. While this is being managed as a priority issue within the GM Hate Crime Partnership, it remains a serious challenge to communities and services.

### **3. Greater Manchester Response so far**

- 3.1. Extra provision emergency accommodation has been established in every borough, totalling over 200 emergency bedspaces. Bed spaces filled up quickly and remain consistently full.
- 3.2. In order to address the long-term need for targeted homelessness prevention support for this cohort, some GM Local Authorities have recruited additional staff to provide private rented sector (PRS) navigation support specifically to refugees whilst others have created additional specialist roles to support people who are leaving the asylum system with their holistic needs, including with housing, work, skills and early help.

#### **GMCA work to date - summary**

- 3.3. Accommodation: Mayoral funding has been committed to stand up emergency accommodation across Greater Manchester.
- 3.4. Data: Following the initial snapshot on asylum homelessness pressures collated in September, GMCA have begun work via the GM Homelessness Data Leads Group to collect, collate and report indicators of asylum homelessness pressures on a monthly basis.
- 3.5. Mobilising an emergency VCFSE-led response: Since October 2023, the GMCA team has been working to identify funds internally, and through repeated submissions to the Home Office and Department for Levelling Up at the ministerial of official levels, for delivery of a GM Refugee Homelessness Prevention Model. We are exploring all options to boost Private Rented Sector access support and asylum support advocacy where demand is greatest.
- 3.6. Continual lobbying and engagement: working with Government cross-departmentally, at every level. With the emergency funding ask a priority, GMCA has also emphasised wider policy asks including the benefit cap, LHA rates, asylum-seekers' right to work, the timely sharing of Home Office data with LAs. This has led to, for example, a January meeting between GM, Liverpool City Region and London mayors and deputy mayors with Department for Levelling Up and Home Office ministers.
- 3.7. National collaboration: Working across Combined Authorities with Liverpool City Region, West Midlands Combined Authority and Greater London Authority to share intelligence, approaches and ideas.



- 3.8. Operational troubleshooting and escalation: Acting as a point of coordination for VCFSE and LAs to escalate operational issues with support cessations with Serco, Migrant Help, Reed in Partnership, Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions.
- 3.9. Convening: creating spaces for regular updates, discussion and intelligence amongst GM Homelessness and Asylum leads and VCFSE partners.
- 3.10. Long term strategic thinking: Developing and building support for the skeleton of a Greater Manchester Migration and Integration strategy, which sets out our ambitions for a more person-centred transition from the asylum system and a more progressive vision for how GM welcomes new communities.

## **4. Next steps: Developing and aligning a GM Partnership Response**

- 4.1. In October, GMCA presented plans to seek investment in a pan-GM Refugee Homelessness Prevention and Integration Programme. We are moving forward with a minimum viable model, but require additional investment to enable the service to be delivered where it is needed.
- 4.2. The current crisis is disproportionately affecting single males. While most are considered to have low support needs, they have often endured many years of enforced disconnection through frequent accommodation moves and the inability to work. Often, this leads to trauma, alienation and distrust of authorities. Unfortunately, this cohort are more likely to be found to not have Priority Need under the Housing Act 1996 and less likely to be able to access the limited Temporary Accommodation available.
- 4.3. Despite this, with the right support the housing, employment and integration prospects for refugees are relatively strong and there is a significant opportunity for homelessness prevention and employment outcomes.
- 4.4. The system lacks capacity to deliver face-to-face support and advice and build relationships with people before and after people receive their asylum decision, helping them to understand the realities of housing options available, and connecting them through to language classes and employability support that would smooth their transition.

4.5. A homelessness prevention and crisis support service, providing targeted support and led by specialist VCFSE organisations that are embedded and trusted in refugee communities, could help us to meet this need across Greater Manchester and support learning for longer-term investment.

4.6. The GMCA model would deliver face-to-face and remote support and advice to people still in the asylum system and those who have recently left it, with an emphasis on consistent approaches to assertive Private Rented Sector access support and expectations management. It would be a mixed model, including:

- **Upstream Prevention:** pre-decision in-reach to hotels focused on asylum support casework but including provision of resources on expectations of housing and life in the UK.
- **Crisis Prevention:** supplementary to, and in partnership with, council housing support, PRS access support delivered in mainstream homelessness settings across GM such as day centres, ABEN and any other off-the-streets accommodation.
- **Capacity Building:** through training and resource development, increased general and PRS advice capacity in existing trusted drop-in settings; 'life in the UK' information resources.

4.7. Investment will be consciously targeted at specialist organisations that are likely to be trusted by people leaving the asylum system; be able to deliver asylum-literate support; and be able to reach individuals that may not present to local authorities initially.

4.8. However, it is clear that the investment available will be unable to meet the level of demand across all ten GM boroughs. Additional Government investment is still urgently needed to enable planned provision to stretch into more areas.

## **5. Next steps: A shared approach to communications and engagement**

5.1. In order to secure the action and investment needed from Government to tackle the current unprecedented crisis, it is crucial that Greater Manchester boroughs and wider partners consistently and visibly communicate the impact these choices are having on our communities and services.

- 5.2. While the Home Office demonstrated that the levers to pause evictions to prevent homelessness exist – through the Christmas pause and 3-day pauses that can be enacted when Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) is announced – they have been unwilling to consider a longer-term pause. This shows that cutting asylum system costs has been prioritised over Government commitments to end rough sleeping or longer-term costs to local authorities and communities, as well as the lack of cross-Departmental decision-making taking place.
- 5.3. The increased pace of asylum decisions is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, as the impact of the Illegal Migration Bill takes hold, the complexity and risk involved in this work will increase, without adequate funding or support to manage transitions.
- 5.4. The lack of affordable housing means it is more and more difficult to move people on and out of homelessness. If we are ever to end homelessness and rough sleeping, we need a national Housing Strategy which prioritises investment in genuinely affordable, social and council housing and which is resilient to changing communities and demographics. Despite the rhetoric of ‘British homes for British workers’ seen in recent proposed changes to allocations policies, the unaffordability and dysfunction we are seeing in the housing market does not affect everyone equally and non-UK nationals are more likely to be overrepresented in temporary accommodation and in overcrowded and poor quality homes.
- 5.5. It is therefore important to bring visibility to how these issues are being experienced by local system, focus on consistent, shared policy asks, and highlight the solutions developed in GM over recent months.

## **6. Recommendations**

- 6.1. GMCA are requested to note the unprecedented levels of homelessness and rough sleeping among new refugees in GM, the linked service pressures and the opportunities for improvements to our service offer to this cohort, now and in the longer-term.
- 6.2. In order to expand the VCFSE response, GM LAs are requested to support efforts to secure additional funds to boost VCFSE provision and ensure that their Housing Options and homelessness teams support delivery of the GMCA-commissioned services.

6.3. In order to support asylum homelessness prevention in the longer-term, GM LAs are requested to consider continued or additional investment in capacity for specialist frontline support for people in or leaving the asylum system, especially across homelessness, social services, education teams, using current and future (potential) Asylum Dispersal Grant funding.

6.4. In order to ensure that the current crisis, and its impacts on people, services and communities are visible, GM LAs are requested to support continued engagement with national Government and efforts to evidence and communicate these impacts more widely.

6.5. GM LAs are requested to support shared key policy asks, as follows:

**Give our systems time to recover and tackle the worst of the rough sleeping crisis.**

- Immediate pause in evictions into homelessness from asylum accommodation in GM, until capacity in the homelessness system recovers.
- North West-wide pause in procurement/addition of asylum bedspaces until capacity in the homelessness system recovers, in recognition of the lack of progress made to deliver on Home Office commitments to reduce the disproportionate share of asylum dispersal accommodation in the region thus far and the role this has played in the current crisis.

**Fund our systems so GM can respond effectively, now and in the future.**

- Immediate investment in local authority capacity to respond to the rough sleeping emergency.
- Provision of uplifted and multi-year Dispersal Grant to enable longer-term planning of LA response. The uplift should reflect flow of asylum seekers throughout the year, as the true measure of local service impact.

**Improve processes so transitions from the asylum system can be managed in partnership, safely and effectively.**

- Extend notice periods for eviction from asylum accommodation to 56 days, in line with Homelessness Reduction Act duties.
- Notify LAs of negative decisions, in line with information received on positive decisions.

- Emergency enhancement of the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE) contract to ensure increased provision of face-to-face move-on support in GM.

**Address wider policy choices that are preventing access to housing and delaying integration for new refugees.**

- Reform or remove the benefit cap.
- Let people seeking asylum work.
- Deliver a national Housing Strategy which prioritises investment in genuinely affordable, social and council housing and is resilient to changing communities.