



# NORWICH City Council

**Committee name:** Scrutiny

**Committee date:** 16/03/2023

**Report title:** Scrutiny review of welcoming Refugees and Asylum Seekers to Norwich and overcoming obstacles to their smooth integration

**Portfolio:** Councillor Alan Waters, Leader of the Council

**Report from:** Head of legal and procurement

**Wards:** All Wards

## OPEN PUBLIC ITEM

### Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update the Scrutiny Committee on the work undertaken to review the welcome of refugees and asylum seekers to Norwich, and how obstacles to their smooth integration can be overcome

### Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Scrutiny Committee review the work undertaken at this stage and:

- 1) Determine whether there are any recommendations they wish to raise at this point
- 2) Whether they wish to commission for further work to be undertaken to discuss the initial findings

### Policy framework

The council has five corporate priorities, which are:

- People live independently and well in a diverse and safe city.
- Norwich is a sustainable and healthy city.
- Norwich has the infrastructure and housing it needs to be a successful city.
- The city has an inclusive economy in which residents have equal opportunity to flourish.
- Norwich City Council is in good shape to serve the city.

This report meets the corporate priority to ensure that people can live independently and well in a diverse and safe City

## **Background**

1. At their meeting in January, the Scrutiny Committee agreed the terms of reference for a review of the welcome asylum seekers and refugees receive into Norwich, and how their smooth integration can be supported. It was clarified that the scope of the review also included those who had come to Norwich through the Ukrainian Settlement Scheme.
2. The Committee were supportive of surveying those organisations who support asylum seekers, as well as organising an event to meet asylum seekers and refugees to learn of their experiences. In addition, the Committee requested exploring further opportunities to meet asylum seekers and refugees, including an event at City Hall, as well as surveying them for their thoughts, subject to consulting with the City of Sanctuary.

## **How the work has progressed**

3. The Democratic Services team have worked closely with the Communities team to progress the review, and are also grateful to Councillor Lucy Galvin for her connection with the Zainab Café to organise an event for refugees and asylum seekers.
4. Early in the process it became evident there may be some challenges in taking forward the review as envisaged. In particular, there was concern about meeting and surveying refugees and asylum seekers about their experiences, in particular potential language barriers; potential fear on the part of participants about engaging with a government institution about their experience, and the care required when working with refugees and asylum seekers to avoid triggering traumatic experiences.
5. This made it challenging to get up and running in the timeframes envisaged. At this stage, we have therefore:
  - a. Directly engaged with organisations including Bridge+, New Routes, City of Sanctuary and the Zainab Café for their thoughts on the undertaking of the review and support they can provide
  - b. Undertaken the survey across the organisations previously identified in the terms of reference
  - c. Held an event at the Zainab Café which provided members the opportunity to talk to refugees and asylum seekers about their experiences

## **Outcomes from the Survey**

6. The survey was sent to 14 organisations, of which only 3 full responses were received.
7. Two organisations, GYROS and Access, responded to indicate that they do not directly support refugees and asylum seekers in Norwich, in part due to the work undertaken by New Routes and Bridge+ in Norwich.

8. Dr Yasir Hameed from Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust kindly responded to highlight the work being done by the Rest Hub at Churchman House, Norwich. This provides sensitive referral-led clinics to Asylum Seekers and Refugees. More information can be found [here](#)
9. A summary of the responses to the survey can be found at **Appendix 1**.

### **Outcomes from the Zainab Café event**

10. The Zainab Café is an organisation that provides work opportunities to former refugees and asylum seekers to help them gain necessary experience to then enter the workplace.
11. On Thursday, 16 February, the Zainab Café hosted an event for members of the scrutiny committee to attend with a range of refugees and asylum seekers present. Unfortunately, only 4 members were able to be present. The refugees and asylum seekers were divided into language groups, with each group supported by a translator and note-taker. Councillors could ask questions and the notes taken have been collated at **Appendix 2**.
12. We are very grateful to both the Zainab Café for hosting the event, and to those attending for being so candid in sharing their views.
13. There were some immediate needs that were raised and addressed in the meeting and afterwards; for example, one of the attendees was pregnant and was made aware of potential support after the birth of their baby. Concerns were raised relating to conditions in asylum hotels; a Council Officer attends regular partner meetings with Serco, who administer asylum seeker hotels in the East of England, and relayed the feedback we had received to Serco in order to raise with the hotels.

### **Other research**

14. As part of their work, the Good Economy Commission explored how refugees and asylum seekers participate in the local economy. Their report can be found [here](#)
15. We have also engaged with the East of England Strategic Migration Partnership, who are formed to co-ordinate and support delivery of national asylum seeker and refugee schemes in the area. More information about the partnership including their current projects is available [here](#)
16. There is also a range of national and local guidance available about provision of support. This includes [information on the Norfolk County Council website](#) about local sources of support and the Local Government Association, who provide information about Councils' role in supporting refugees and asylum seekers [here](#). National third sector organisations who provide support to refugees and asylum seekers include the Red Cross (more information [here](#)) and [Citizens Advice](#)

### **Next Steps**

17. The Committee will be aware that at this stage, limited work has been undertaken. A decision needs to be made as to whether further work should progress, and if so, the focus of that further work.

18. It is evident that support for refugees and asylum seekers is a broad area; support with their health, housing, work and social integration into the area. The work of the Good Economy Commission highlights the level of depth that review of specific areas of activity can delve into.
19. As a local authority, our specific responsibilities are limited; we have a duty to provide housing to those entitled to receive housing support, and will assist with benefits or specific items such as disabled facilities grants. However, the support refugees and asylum seekers require often goes much further including education (including English language courses), physical and mental health and wellbeing, access to employment, legal support and specific forms of social services support.
20. To fully understand some of the challenges, effective engagement with partners would be required to understand the difficulties presented and gain a more rounded view regarding potential recommendations. This would likely need to include the People from Abroad team from Norfolk County Council or specialist providers linked to particular themes – such as Serco, who administer asylum seeker hotels in the region on behalf of the Home Office.
21. As a result, the scrutiny committee is being asked today whether it wishes to make initial recommendations at this stage, or to commission further work. If further work is requested, officers would be grateful to understand the level of commitment and involvement members wish to have within the process.

### **Consultation**

22. As set out above, this report has been informed by a survey of organisations and a liaison event with refugees and asylum seekers

### **Implications**

#### **Financial and resources**

23. Any decision to reduce or increase resources or alternatively increase income must be made within the context of the council's stated priorities, as set out in its Corporate Plan 2022-26 and budget.
24. At this stage, a contribution has been made to the running costs of the event at the Zainab Café. Officer time has also been incurred in undertaking the review work so far.
25. Clearly, any additional work will incur officer time, which will depend on the level of work commissioned.

#### **Legal Implications**

26. As above, the Council has limited duties with regards refugees and asylum seekers, with other bodies holding further statutory duties.

## Statutory considerations

Consideration	Details of any implications and proposed measures to address:
Equality and diversity	Whilst this report does not present specific equality implications in its own right, further work commissioned may cause have implications (potentially positive impacts)
Health, social and economic impact	Recommendations or further work by the scrutiny committee may have a positive impact on the health, social and economic outcomes for refugees and asylum seekers
Crime and disorder	This report is not considered to have specific impacts on crime and disorder
Children and adults safeguarding	Recommendations or further work by the scrutiny committee may have a positive impact on the child and adult safeguarding risks in relation to refugees and asylum seekers
Environmental impact	This report is not considered to have specific environmental impacts

## Risk management

Risk	Consequence	Controls required
Ineffective arrangements exist to support refugees and asylum seekers to integrate into the local community	Refugees and asylum seekers do not fulfil their potential as members of local society, and potentially suffer adverse health and wellbeing effects	There are a range of support mechanisms for refugees and asylum seekers locally. This review was commissioned in order to assess potential recommendations to strengthen the support received.

## Other options considered

27. There are two options presented for the Scrutiny Committee to consider:

- a. Ending the review at this point, potentially making recommendations based on the work thus far
- b. Commissioning further work to be undertaken, whether as part of a broad review of asylum seeker and refugee support or to undertake a specific review of elements of the support provision

## **Reasons for the decision/recommendation**

28. The scrutiny committee has requested a review of support for asylum seekers and refugees. This report provides an interim update on the work to date and seeks the Committee's views on how it should progress.

## **Appendices:**

**Appendix 1: Feedback from the survey of organisations who support refugees and asylum seekers**

**Appendix 2: Feedback from the asylum seeker and refugee event**

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## Appendix 1: Feedback from the Survey

Organisation	Q1 – are there examples of good practice to support refugees / asylum seekers?	Q2 – have you identified particular gaps in support?	Q3 – what are the greatest challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in Norwich?	Q4 – how might the challenges be resolved?	Q5 – how effectively do partners work well together, how can challenges be overcome?	Q6 – anything else?
New Routes	We offer a good range of informative and social activities.	ESOL provision - there needs to be a strategy around this most crucial work.	Navigating 'new', systems, cultures, traditions, etc.	Greater funding to allow for more capacity to support the emergent needs of our new arrivals. Particular focus on mental health and wellbeing.	New Routes works closely with our partner organisations such as the Bridge Plus+ and English+ and we have good relationships with the statutory sector.	No
Withheld	There is already a comprehensive network of support for asylum seekers and refugees, offering a gold-standard of service under the resettlement programme (as identified by Home Office)	There is insufficient and un-co-ordinated ESOL arrangements in place. There are too many organisations trying to get involved in supporting asylum seekers and refugees.	1. Making the transition from asylum seeker to refugee and moving from Home Office support to mainstream provision. 2. Navigating public services who are not used to working with people who do not speak English	Requires a joined-up approach between upper and lower tier authorities across the whole county, and not a Norwich-centric approach. There are 6 other district councils in Norfolk who are also facing their own challenges of supporting migration, Norwich does not need to operate in isolation or make decisions that are not in line with the rest of the county. Requires appropriate data sharing agreements to be in	I feel that partners do work together well, facilitated by the Norfolk Asylum Seeker and Refugee Forum (NASREF). Further improvements are required to break down the barriers between city and other district councils	I do not feel that Norwich City Council needs to commission its own services; this requires a joined-up approach county-wide involving councils in both tiers of local government. A co-ordinated approach to spending the

				place across the relevant agencies so that we can work together to support migrants, not working in our own silos.		government money that has been allocated for asylum dispersal is required, not for Norwich City Council to decide independently.
Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board	As above- PFAT Health care team supporting dispersed asylum seekers and hotels Wellness on wheels bus supporting health access/Covid vaccinations. Inclusion Health Practices Vulnerable Adult Service Specialist MH provision.	Health Protection support for Primary care Primary care capacity MH pathway	Accommodation environment Lack of activities opportunities to join community groups/volunteer etc Wider community cohesion - impact	Community group integration capacity on VCSE sector	Good- operational group and good relationships/network between partners	



## **Appendix 2: Experiences of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Norwich**

### **People and community groups**

Some refugees and asylum seekers spoke about having positive experiences of, and interactions with the people of Norwich, as they were found to be welcoming and friendly. Other refugees and asylum seekers spoke about the negative perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees, especially in regard to the view that asylum seekers commit crimes.

Refugees and asylum seekers spoke about how they felt it is sometimes difficult to be accepted as a member of British society but when visiting home, they were considered too Western.

Some people spoke about facing racism when trying to find accommodation and work, with some mentioning they felt that some refusals when job hunting were due to racism. Others spoke about negative reactions to wearing a headscarf.

While it was acknowledged that Norwich is becoming more diverse, it was perceived that there is a lack of example of people who are from a similar background to those refugees and asylum seekers we spoke to. They also mentioned that they believe this impacts their ability to access halal food.

Due to the restriction on asylum seekers accessing the labour market, many of them spend a lot of time volunteering because they want to spend time developing their skills, as many of them feel that they are suffering from skill decay. This volunteering also makes them feel like they are giving back to the community that has helped them. These volunteering opportunities are being offered through a range of organisations, such as their local churches or other community action groups.

It was common across each of the groups that much of the information they had received to date, had been provided on an informal basis. This was often through churches, schools or interpreters. In fact, it seemed clear that interpreters were acting as a main source of information and were in fact key to informing refugees and asylum seekers of different community groups and services. However, it was felt that there was no central place for everyone to go. Many refugees and asylum seekers spend time at The Forum Library as this offered free access to books, newspapers and the internet.

### **Housing**

There was a range of experiences regarding housing. Overall, the experience of being housed, whether in hotels or council housing was largely negative. With regard to hotels, the refugees and asylum seekers expressed that the living conditions are unsatisfactory. They mentioned that the food that is being provided is not in keeping with their religious and cultural practices (halal food mostly) or was too spicy to eat or enjoy. Additionally, the hotel made no provision for the fasting period during Ramadan. The conditions of the rooms within the hotel were described as being poor, some reported issues such as overly humid and damp rooms and even the presence of insects and bed bugs.

Other refugees had been housed in council housing and spoke about their experiences. One individual mentioned that if they had known the area of Norwich that they would be housed in, they would not have agreed to the home. The area where they were living had issues related to drug and gang crime and antisocial behaviour.

Some volunteers expressed that it felt like that once someone was housed, there was no further consideration of the living standards of the home.

## **Healthcare**

All groups expressed some issues with their experiences of the healthcare system. Some explained that they had difficulties getting appointments with their GPs and after care, post appointment. Volunteers highlighted that in many cases it seemed like refugees and asylum seekers were registered with GP surgeries that were a significant distance from their home, due to a lack of Arabic speaking doctors in reasonably close proximity to their homes. The distance to GP surgeries and pharmacies had caused health issues, as they were unable to get to the surgery easily to attend appointments or get medication from their pharmacy. All those that spoke of it mentioned that they were unable to get dental appointments.

The general feeling was that they did not understand the way the system works. There seems to be a particular lack of understanding with regards to the length of appointments, how to order repeat prescriptions and how to change the nominated pharmacy.

## **Language**

A key topic that all groups discussed was the importance of having information in a language that they understood. All of the refugees and asylum seekers expressed great desire to learn and improve their English language skills. Many of the refugees and asylum seekers voiced that they felt there was not enough hours of English courses offered to them, this was partially due to their entitlement but was also due to a lack of knowledge of other free or low-cost English language courses. The main organisations that were spoken about were EnglishPlus and the City College. Most spoke about wanting to improve their English language so that they could better integrate into Norwich and to gain employment.

The information that asylum seekers and refugees need, often seems to only be available in English and as such means that many offers of services are not taken up, as they are unaware of these. Examples of this included things such as websites that allow refugees and asylum seekers to book courses, flyers or posters that might be placed in community hubs such as The Feed café. Greater promotion and signposting of other language and budgeting courses that are currently being offered by local organisations, also represent something the refugees and asylum seekers would like to see.

## **Education and employment**

Many of the refugees and asylum seekers spoke about their frustration with education in Norwich. For those with children they expressed that they felt let down

by the schools. They suggested that the broader societal attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers were reflected in the attitudes of other pupils towards the young refugees and asylum seekers. One volunteer disclosed that at their children's school, there was only one child that was a refugee and that other pupils did not interact with them. The refugees and asylum seekers also spoke about the racism that their children faced within local schools, with parents perceiving that their children were being blamed for others misbehaviour.

Younger refugees and asylum seekers expressed further frustration with the education system as due to their age they were unable to access free GCSEs. These GCSEs are required to access further education, such as A Levels and even university courses. This caused young adults to disengage from further education and lose their passion for this.

All of the groups spoke about employment, as all wanted to work if they were able to. Each group highlighted the experience and skills that they had gained from their home country. Many wanted to start working as soon as they were allowed to work, as generally, they were unhappy with receiving money for not working. However due to a range of issues, such as lack of English language skills, recognised qualifications or other barriers, they were unable to work. It was suggested that the council could work with businesses who would be willing to employ refugees with the appropriate work permits and whose English was not quite at the required level. This would aid community cohesion and allow these individuals to improve their English "on the job".

Sometimes there was a hesitance by refugees and asylum seekers to engage with services due to a fear of institutions. There was a perception that social services would remove children due different cultural understanding of discipline.

### **Interacting with council services**

Frustrations were shared by refugees and asylum seekers and volunteers with councillors and officers in regard to contacting and interacting with the council. One volunteer highlighted that they had called the council over 15 times and each time been informed that there were no translation services, despite this being advertised on the website.

Some expressed the view that it felt like once someone was in longer term housing that they were forgotten about. A number of individuals were in unsuitable homes due to a range of issues and there was uncertainty about how to ask for changes or adaptations.

It was felt that the Norwich City Council website needed to improve as it was difficult to navigate, especially if their English language skills were not particularly strong. Those that had good English skills also found the website difficult to navigate as there was insufficient details to explain services.

**Suggested solutions (please note that some of these solutions may require further discussion with other partners as to solutions that may already exist)**

- Having direct outreach to asylum seekers in the hotels that they are housed in. This should include the following information (if possible via an interpreter):
  - Cultural norms, values and laws of Britain (this would prevent asylum seekers from committing crimes as things may not be seen as illegal in their home country)
  - How to access healthcare and information on how to change nominated pharmacy
  - With regard to healthcare there should also be information on how the system works such as GP appointments (i.e. the 10 minute appointments and hours of access) and services such as 111
  - Having a resource pack that signposts different organisations and charities that can offer support, as there seems to be no clear one source of information for people to access. This should be in as many different languages as possible so people are able to understand the information given to them. A list of organisations they can approach for voluntary work. Additional language lessons that are free or low cost
- To help with funding these initiatives, some suggested the provision of public lockers and public showers that are paid for. This represents a common expectation held by many of the refugees and immigrants new to the UK.
- The Norwich City Council website should be improved as it does not provide enough details to easily navigate the site if members of the public are not familiar with the various council departments.
- The council should facilitate connections to companies that are willing to hire refugees who may not have the required English skills but have other skills.
- Having a community hub that anyone can go to, in order to meet up with other people and get advice for certain things. This would also help with social isolation being experienced by people which we know contributes to poor mental health.
- Raise the issue of GP surgery allocations with NHOSC
- The council to host an event or provide opportunities to encourage integration, such as an international or cultural day
- Some refugees were interested in becoming a local councillor so suggested a talk be given to help them understand what members do
- More spaces for young people such as youth centres, so that children could interact in a safe space
- Encouraging schools to celebrate different religious holidays such as Diwali or Eid

- The council to produce a myth-busting document about asylum seekers and refugees to challenge the negative stereotypes.
- Ensure that when someone phones the council and asks for translation services that they are provided as stated via the Intran service.
- Provision of a mentor service with someone who knows areas, processes and can provide advice – sometimes interacting council services requires an advocate
- Clarity needs to be provided on the responsibilities of the various local councils and the boundaries between district councils – this should include managing expectations of what the council can achieve
- Discussion about other free resources for those that do not have the financial means to access entertainment and activities.
- Creation of opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to share their skills and support others in their situation. For example, sharing cooking skills and recipes and using the opportunity to practice their language skills.
- The schedule of activities at The Forum heavily favours the summer, but it would be helpful to have events scheduled throughout the year.