



Extraordinary Scrutiny Committee

16:30 to 18:45

25 July 2023

Present: Councillors Fulton-McAlister (chair following election), Carrington, Champion (substitute for Francis), Fox, Galvin, Haynes, Osborn, Prinsley, Stutely, Thomas (Vi) and Wright (substitute for Ackroyd).

Apologies: Councillors Ackroyd, Driver, Francis, Padda, Stutely, Thomas (Va)

Also Present: Councillor Giles

1. Declarations of interest

Councillor Carrington declared an other interest in item 2, Scrutiny review of welcoming Refugees and Asylum Seekers to Norwich and overcoming obstacles to their smooth integration, in that she is employed by Norfolk County Council as a social worker and could work directly with asylum seekers as part of her role.

2. Scrutiny review of welcoming Refugees and Asylum Seekers to Norwich and overcoming obstacles to their smooth integration

The head of legal and procurement provided an update on the report, she advised that the People from Abroad Team (PfAT) had previously indicated they would be able to attend the meeting but now felt unable to do so. Serco and their subcontractor Cromwood who provided dispersal accommodation on behalf of the Home Office had responded to enquiries to attend the meeting by advising that any issues should be raised with the Strategic Migration Partnership. Finally, enquiries with Health bodies indicated that they are accountable to the Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and that the Norwich City Council Scrutiny Committee may wish to refer the topic of Refugee and Asylum Seeker support to the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The chair welcomed Abdul Al Dammad from the Red Cross, Gee Cook from New Routes, Beatrice Humarau from The Bridge Plus, Sarah Wynn and Rasha Ibrahim from the Zainab Project and Claire Wood from the Norwich City of Sanctuary to the meeting and invited them to introduce themselves and their organisation to the committee.

Abdul Al Dammad from the Red Cross advised the service provided refugee support services. He had received from complaints from families housed in the Norwich Hotel that it was not fit for purpose. He noted that equipment was needed for children's activities at the hotel over the summer holidays. He asked how the asylum seeker and refugee experience could be improved and considered that communication from the council could move from being formal to more friendly in nature.

Gee Cook from New Routes noted that the organisation had been working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers for over 20 years. She considered from anecdotal evidence that the dispersal hotels had experienced teething problems. Measures had been put in place to make improvements and food provision had recently improved but there was still a need for more activities at the hotels. She highlighted that the support organisations coordinated with each other to advertise activities.

Ms Cook advised that New Routes had a good working relationship with PfAT, who took onboard their suggestions and recommendations and she confirmed that PfAT had taken measures to improve the situation at hotels. There were not enough activities taking place at the hotel in the context that people could be in their rooms all day.

Beatrice Humarau from the Bridge Plus advised the organisation worked with those who had received their refugee status and provided information, guidance and advocacy. The organisation didn't work with those refugees who came as part of the dispersal resettlement program as these households were supported by PfAT. She noted that in relation to housing there was an issue with lack of communication and the shift to digital by default was difficult for those who would benefit from face to face interaction.

Rasha Ibrahim from the Zainab project advised that the organisation started in November last year to help asylum seekers and refugees to gain work experience, to support their wellbeing and signpost to other services. The project was looking for a base. She noted that language and culture were barriers to integration and highlighted that many of their service users had not been educated in their home countries which presented a challenge.

Sarah Wynn, also from the Zainab project continued that the organisation worked to integrate service users with local services such as the police and health. She noted that refugees and asylum seekers found themselves in an alien environment where they were confronted with the formality of bureaucracy in a different language. A key issue was the food provision at the hotels and the project had households using their space to cook.

Claire Wood from Norwich City of Sanctuary advised the project's purpose was to foster a culture of welcome in Norwich and noted all the organisations present were on its steering group. The project worked with organisations such as cafes, theatres and schools to encourage them to be welcoming to asylum seekers and refugees. The organisation had been working with City Council to become a Council of Sanctuary and she hoped to link in with the new Leader of the council to progress this work.

A member asked the organisations for examples of some of the challenges they had experienced when communicating with the council. Beatrice Humarau from the Bridge Plus noted that it was difficult to come into the council and see someone face to face without an appointment. There was a lack of communication especially in regards to housing and homelessness services and this impacted negatively on service users mental health.

Members discussed the food provision at the dispersal hotels and questioned if the religious and cultural needs of the residents were being met. Ms Wynn from the Zainab project advised that they provided their service users with a voucher for the social supermarket to buy food but there were no cooking facilities available at the hotels. The head of legal and procurement advised that issues with the quality of food had been raised by the council with Serco who had provided information as to how provision was being developed.

Members discussed the needs of children at the hotels especially how their needs would be met over the summer holiday period. Abdul Al Dammad from the Red Cross advised he had been contacted by a housing officer at the hotel requesting activity equipment for children and the services were coordinating with each other to respond. Gee Cook noted that New Routes provided a summer programme of activities and this was made available to families in the hotel with transport being provided.

In relation to the provision of second hand goods, Rasha Ibrahim from the Zainab project advised that in some cultures there was a shame associated with wearing second hand clothing.

Councillor Giles the cabinet member for communities and social inclusion noted that the council offered three months free, then a discounted go for less membership to access leisure services at Riverside or the Norman Centre to asylum seekers but he appreciated that transport could still be an issue. He noted that Sports England funding had been secured to provide weekly 7 aside football close to the hotel accommodating single person households which had garnered 15-30 attendees weekly. Ms Ibrahim asked what the possibility of extending free membership until asylum seekers were awarded their refugee status was and the cabinet member agreed to take this away for consideration but noted that Riverside Leisure was not operated by the council.

Members discussed issues asylum seekers faced in relation to healthcare with Claire Wood noting that many were not registered with a General Practitioner or a Dentist. Beatrice Humarau noted many struggled to get face to face appointments and access to interpreting varied. The Bridge Plus had conducted a survey with their service users which highlighted that access to Wellbeing services was challenging.

A member asked in relation to council services such as anti-social behaviour, repairs and adaptations what improvements to access could be made. Ms Wynn noted that if English was not a person's first language it was difficult to use the website and there were long waits to get through on the phone. Ms Cook noted there was a long wait to hear back about complaints in relation to repairs. A member advised that if individuals were experiencing issues with repairs they could contact their local ward councillor for advice.

Members questioned if asylum seekers and refugees were engaged with when the website was being developed. A member suggested an audit of how the council communicated with service users other than via the website could be conducted.

In relation to a member question the neighbourhood and community enabling manager advised that the council's community centres were now all run by individual organisations. A list of what activities they provided could be collated and the council could suggest they offer reduced price or free access for the cohort to activities but it was ultimately the individual organisations decision.

Members asked the support organisations present if there were any other points they would like to raise. Mr Al Dammad wondered how many asylum seekers in the area were awarded refugee status and if it would be possible for the council to ring each and welcome them to the city. Ms Wynn referred to the effort to welcome those asylum seekers who had arrived from Ukraine. A member noted that if he was aware of those granted refugee status in his ward he would be happy to provide a telephone call to welcome them to the city.

As regards mental health services it was noted that more provision was needed. In terms of individuals that had experienced multiple trauma there was no provision in place. Finally it was noted that numbers receiving refugee status were increasing and there was an opportunity for the support organisations and the council to work more closely together to support their integration.

Following a vote it was:-

RESOLVED to:

- 1) Ask the committee officer to circulate the set of questions to members of the committee and then sent to People from Abroad Team for written answers;
- 2) Ask cabinet to engage with organisations that support asylum seekers and refugees, when making updates to the website to ensure that these changes are accessible;
- 3) Ask cabinet to explore becoming a Council of Sanctuary that will include a service user group of asylum seekers and refugees, to ensure that their voices and experiences are listened to on an ongoing basis;
- 4) Thank the organisations that have attended committee, and other organisations, and their work with asylum seekers and refugees;
- 5) Condemn Home Office policies in relation to refugee and asylum seekers;
- 6) Ask cabinet to include a strand within the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy review that relates to asylum seekers and refugees;
- 7) Ask cabinet to engage with community centres to provide free activities to asylum seekers and refugees;
- 8) Ask cabinet to engage with Places for Leisure to extend the provision of free gym services to asylum seekers;

- 9) Ask the leader of the council to write to the Norwich Business Improvement District to support refugees and asylum seekers to develop an outreach programme to asylum seekers and refugees;
- 10) To explore the potential for councillors to have training on using the INTRAN system;
- 11) To conduct user testing of the Norwich City Council website with service users;
- 12) To conduct an audit of communications that the council produces, this would involve service users;
- 13) To explore the use of City Hall for organisations that support asylum seekers and refugees;
- 14) To ask cabinet to explore the ability for asylum seekers, refugees and other residents that have limited English to book face-to-face appointments;
- 15) To ask the leader of the council and Lord Mayor to invite refugees and asylum seekers to City Hall to be able to engage with them directly;
- 16) To request that cabinet treat these recommendations as a matter of urgency;
- 17) To produce a social media campaign that details activities that are happening within the summer holidays and asking for donations of clothing and toys;
- 18) To explore funding streams to be able to provide a similar provision that is provided Ukrainian refugees to other asylum seekers and refugees.

CHAIR