



Border & Immigration Agency

Mr Dennis Bartholomew
Senior Policy Manager (Equalities)
Corporate Policy and Partnerships Team
London Borough of Sutton
Chief Executive's Grouping Civic Offices
St Nicholas Way
Sutton
SM1 1EA

Asylum Briefing and
Correspondence Team
14th Floor
Lunar House
40 Wellesley Road
Croydon
CR9 2BY

Tel +44 (0)20 8196 0891

Fax +44 (0)20 8196 0951

Email

Janet.Crossman@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

Web www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk

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Dear Mr Bartholomew

Thank you for your letter of 11 September to the Director of Asylum Policy. You have asked, on behalf of the London Borough of Sutton's Equality and Diversity Forum, about our procedures for dispersing asylum applicants across the UK and whether local authorities and public service providers are consulted in advance. I have been asked to reply and thought it would be helpful to include some general and background information.

General information

As you know, the United Kingdom is a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees and has a duty to give necessary protection to those who are fleeing persecution. Our obligations under that Convention and under the European Reception Conditions Directive also require the UK to support those seeking asylum who would otherwise be destitute or are likely to become destitute whilst their claim remains under consideration by the Home Office and during any in-country appeal against a decision to refuse refugee status. This is given in the form of either providing accommodation and financial support or, for those who are destitute but are able to stay with family or friends, by providing financial support only. Not all non-detained asylum seekers require accommodation or financial support.

Background

You may find it helpful to understand why asylum seekers are dispersed across the UK. Historically, most asylum applicants were located in London and the South East of England (especially Kent), putting disproportionate pressure on local authorities in these areas to provide accommodation. The dispersal system was introduced specifically to house destitute asylum seekers away from London and the South East in places where accommodation is more freely available and in a manner which represents better value for money for the taxpayer. It was also introduced to share responsibility more equitably, relieve pressure on

particularly hard-pressed areas and to help maintain social cohesion by ensuring the impact on local communities/public services is taken into account and managed. We have now regionalised our asylum teams so that they are closer to applicants and each new case is appointed a case owner who keeps in close contact with the applicant and their representative until the case is concluded.

Accommodation

Within each Border and Immigration Agency region, asylum seekers are accommodated in cluster areas. Clusters were established in 2000 in response to the need to disperse asylum seekers where they could best be supported. Cluster areas are defined by the Local Authority boundaries in which they occur and the asylum seeker population was set at an advisory cluster limit of 1:200 of the indigenous population. These clusters were chosen because they had or could develop the voluntary and community infrastructures to support asylum seekers.

The accommodation is provided under target contracts which specify standards and services that need to be provided. Those standards are designed to meet the minimum standards as directed by local authorities. The Border and Immigration Agency has entered into contracts until 2011 with a number of private and public sector providers to provide accommodation to asylum seekers. These contracts were awarded on a regional basis with each region allocated a percentage share of the accommodated intake and each provider contracted to accommodate a specific percentage of that share. Providers are paid a fixed rate for each asylum seeker they support.

Where an asylum seeker supported by the Border and Immigration Agency requires accommodation, whilst taking into account an individual's circumstances, that accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis in areas where there is ready supply of accommodation.

How do we decide where to allocate

In explanation of the actual procedures we follow when dispersing asylum applicants across the UK, the volume of asylum seekers dispersed to each Border and Immigration Agency region is based upon a complex algorithm incorporating information on the availability of accommodation if required, the numbers of asylum seekers already housed in that region, the need to ensure each accommodation provider receives an equitable share of the Border and Immigration Agency's business, asylum case owner capacity and any other special circumstances which may need to be taken into account. The number of teams that have been located in each region reflects the current asylum population in that region

The Border and Immigration Agency first establishes whether there are special circumstances that would require an applicant to be housed in London or in a specific location outside London (for example if a medical condition was treatable only in a limited number of hospitals in the UK). The Border and Immigration Agency's central Routing Team will then assign cases to one of the Regional Asylum Teams and arrange for those asylum seekers who require accommodation to be moved to Initial Accommodation (IA) in the particular region to which the case has been allocated. Not all asylum applicants require accommodation.

IA is located reasonably near the Asylum Team's office. The accommodation typically comprises full board hotels, houses in multiple occupation, hostels or self contained self-catering property. The provider arranges transport for the applicant to the accommodation, provides an induction briefing and helps connect the applicant to a GP and other local services.

Asylum seekers generally remain in IA for approximately 2-3 weeks during which time they will meet their case owner. The regional dispersal team will arrange for the asylum seeker to be moved on to dispersal accommodation in that region once they have been assessed as eligible for asylum support. This section 95 accommodation is where the applicant will be accommodated for the remaining period of their asylum claim, and any appeal.

Consultation

You have asked whether local authorities and public service providers are consulted in advance about the asylum seekers who are being dispersed to their area whilst their application is being determined.

Each Border and Immigration Agency region has a Regional Strategic Co-ordination (RSC) Group which ensures that all relevant local stakeholders have an input to important decisions about the dispersal of asylum seekers and the impact this has on the local community. The RSC Group is made up of senior officers from a cross-section of local stakeholders, including members of the regional assembly, local authority, police, health, the voluntary sector, accommodation providers, Government Office and the Border and Immigration Agency. Whilst local authorities and public services providers are not consulted about each individual asylum seeker who is dispersed to their area, via the RSC Group they will have had an opportunity to:

- determine the dispersal clusters used within a region.
- make recommendations relating to the overall regional numbers of dispersed asylum seekers
- monitor the dispersal of asylum seekers into the region,
- monitor the impact on community cohesion, housing, education and health services

Accommodation providers have contractual obligations to maintain effective on-going consultation and liaison with relevant regional stakeholders and Local Authorities with regard to the location of accommodation to ensure that social cohesion issues are taken into account. In addition, there are well-established procedures for temporarily suspending or restricting dispersal to a particular cluster or area when community cohesion issues arise.

Yours sincerely

Janet Crossman
Asylum Briefing and Correspondence Team

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