

**At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 12<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2022 at 4.30 p.m.**

**Present: -**

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Ali, Dixon, Fagan, Laws, Mordey, Reed, Scanlan and Warne.

Also in attendance: -

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council

Ms Gillian Robinson, Area Co-ordinator, Sunderland City Council

Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services

Mr Billy Broad, Housing Officer (Vulnerable People), Sunderland City Council

Ms Kimberley Short, Housing Officer (Vulnerable People), Sunderland City Council

Members of the Press and Public

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Edgeworth, Foster and H. Trueman.

**Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022**

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2022 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

**Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)**

Item 4 - Refugee and Asylum Seeker Programmes – Update

Councillor Ali made an open declaration in the item as a Member of ICOS

Item 5 - Visit to the Port of Sunderland

Councillor Scanlan made an open declaration as a Member of the Port Board

## **Refugee and Asylum Seeker Programmes - Update**

The Assistant Director of Housing Services submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with an update on the refugee and asylum seeker programmes.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing, Billy Broad and Kimberley Short Housing Officers (Vulnerable People) presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and were on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Laws thanked the officers for their presentation and for all the work they were doing. Councillor Laws commented that there appeared to be a big difference between the two schemes for Ukrainians and Afghans, with more support being made available for Ukrainians to be rehoused into their own homes whilst Afghans could potentially be made homeless and in essence there was a two tier system dependent on where the refugee came from.

Mr Scanlon advised that the government introduced these schemes and the local authority had to follow their guidance. The Ukrainian scheme was a sponsorship scheme similar to that employed by Canada which had been a success and it possibly worked better financially also. Mr Scanlon added that it was frustrating to them when there was no consistency in approaches, and he had sympathy for some of the requests made but as a Local Authority they had to follow the guidance given to them.

Councillor Laws wished to stress he was not criticising the Local Authority and appreciated that they had to administer the guidelines given to them by the Government. Councillor Laws queried if the practice of putting refugees into hotels was not economically the correct thing to do, then was it the sensible thing to do either.

Mr Scanlon commented that whilst he could not give a political answer, the direction of travel was to get people out of hotels and into a settled home, which not only made economic sense but for health purposes also. The Local Authority was administering the programme as robustly as possible and working with their partners to do the right thing.

Councillor Ali commented that the Officers were doing a brilliant job and referred to the £350 discretionary payments, adding that he felt this amount was very low and they were facing an uphill struggle to get landlords to come forward.

Mr Scanlon advised that the focus had been on those people who had a spare room to utilise rather than private sector landlords and the payment had been understood to be a thank you payment rather than revenue. Mr Scanlon agreed that the £350 was below what the landlords would get on the private market but the programme was not about making money and more about helping someone fleeing war.

With regards to the safeguarding cases mentioned within the PowerPoint presentation, Councillor Ali enquired if criminal proceedings had been initiated against the perpetrators as these examples were very concerning to him. Mr

Scanlon confirmed that both the Police and the Home Office were involved in those scenarios.

Councillor Ali referred to the 91 people who had come into the area recently and that the 7 who had been rehomed due to breakdowns in relations with the host seemed to be a low number as he had heard through ICOS of many more cases.

Mr Scanlon advised that if any cases came through, that they would investigate these thoroughly and if a placement wasn't working, Mr Broad and Ms Short would step up and be reactive to the situation. They had heard of requests for the refugees to provide cleaning etc so they did carry out welfare checks and investigations.

Ms Short commented that they had a very good working relationship with ICOS so if they have any concern they can raise them with the team. Mr Scanlon added that should anyone have any concerns then to please get in touch with the team.

Mr Broad added that more issues would be expected to arise as peoples' personalities and different cultures came into play, this could result in a breakdown in relationships and they did go out to try and mediate for this.

Councillor Ali commented that the £350 payment would not really help much when taking into account the cost of living crisis families faced now. Mr Scanlon advised that he completely agreed and that the world was changing fast so some families may not be able to support others now compared to when they initially made the offer.

Councillor Ali enquired if this meant we needed to be prepared for more emergency housing. Mr Scanlon advised that they had secured emergency temporary accommodation with Wearside Women in Need as an essential stepping stone/stop gap whilst they could find suitable accommodation but this was a challenge.

Councillor Dixon informed the Committee that he had met quite a number of the refugees that were in the City's hotels, and there were a number of African nationalities coming into Sunderland and enquired how these were looked after.

Mr Scanlon advised that there was a natural process of involvement of most places which the Local Authority was supportive of and tried to build connections with all communities. The programmes are what they are and the Local Authority has to manage them.

Councillor Dixon suggested that these be taken further via the Area Committees and the VCS over the next few months and also suggested that our leisure Centres/Community Centres and possibly the Football club be considered to welcome the refugees and help integrate them into the community further. This could possibly be broadened out to Nissan and the University etc.

Mr Scanlon advised that there was a lot going on in this regard already but felt the Area Committee's consideration was a very good idea. At present there was a lot of classes and courses being put on to engage communities with a whole raft of programmes from cricket to cookery. Mr Broad advised that they were trying to put this across the whole of the City and not just in certain areas but they were putting

support services in Washington where the majority of the people were placed at present.

In response to Councillor Dixon's enquiry on accommodation and if there was any way to get the accredited landlords to be more forthcoming, Mr Scanlon advised that it was a perfect storm at the moment as the landlords were accredited for a reason, they were very good landlords so when they had properties available, they usually were in great demand to be let.

With regards to properties available under the empty property scheme, Mr Scanlon advised that they were continuing the programme and had been successful in spending all of the allocation but it was a timing issue and how they could identify new properties, purchase and furnish them so it wasn't the perfect situation.

Councillor Reed enquired if those refugees who'd had a breakdown in relationships with their hosts were given the option of staying in single accommodation. Ms Short advised that these were emergency situations and depended on the accommodation that they were given whether this was permanent accommodation or rematched with another host.

Mr Scanlon advised that the rematching process was most complex due to lists of different requirements. Mr Broad advised that they speak with the people involved and what they needed depended on their circumstances, giving the example of two 18 year olds that weren't suited for tenancy's on their own and needed a family to sponsor them so they work with each individual and build up relationships.

Mr Scanlon advised that the biggest challenge they faced was with interpreter services with only one interpreter available for all Authorities to utilise, this had been an additional factor for the Team.

Councillor Reed referred to the Safeguarding issues and enquired if the refugees were given contact details for the Police and local Councillors. Mr Broad advised that no information was given in relation to local Councillors but during their welcome meetings they did provide information on benefits, the teams details and they shared the details with the Police.

Mr Broad further advised that they were looking to expand the info with details of what was on offer, in terms of events etc, and they could share details of Members Ward surgeries for instance. Mr Scanlon commented that there was also an expectation that the host would help with providing information also.

Councillor Reed enquired if the team meet with Police and how often they checked up on the families. Mr Broad advised that there was an initial visit where phone numbers were given out and then follow up visits, but these were not regular. Mr Scanlon advised that the Government guidance suggested only one welfare visit but they did do a lot of activity up front in terms of DBS checks which were carried out beforehand.

Councillor Reed enquired as to the process involved when referrals were made to the Homelessness Team. Mr Scanlon advised that the first port of call would be to the 8 units, then they would look to house them from there, if those 8 units weren't

available then it would proceed through the normal homelessness process and put the person in hotels if there was no accommodation available.

Mr Scanlon also advised that all material issued to the refugee was supplied in Ukrainian so if there was a breakdown in relationship with their host and they did not speak very good English they had the contact details in their native language.

Councillor D. E. Snowden thanked officers for their presentation and their work, especially the most recent help in getting a potential host approved, who had been rejected because they did not have a working boiler and the team had helped with grants to rectify this. This refugee that had been placed with the host had now gained employment at a local café and Councillor Snowden believed it was also about the Community coming together to help now.

Mr Scanlon advised that there were a number of employers looking to take on the refugees and there was a coming together as a community.

Councillor Warne commented that the presentation had been fascinating and highlighted the amount of hoops that officers had to jump through so wished to express his gratitude to the team for all they were doing.

Councillor Fagan referred to the amount of work done to keep the refugee families connected via a network and enquired if there was anything similar for the host families to link up and share their experiences.

Ms Short advised that there had been a meeting at the Minster where the refugee families would split off into one group and the host families into another so there was support for both. Mr Broad advised that WhatsApp and Facebook groups had been set up also. Social media had been really helpful to the team in finding out information and support mechanisms that were out there.

The Chairman commented that a lot of these people in reality were going to make Sunderland there home in the future and that consideration of this would be needed in the future in terms of demand it will place on schools and doctors surgeries for example.

Councillor Ali agreed and commented that care and transparency would be needed with regards to messaging and the intimation that refugees were taking our homes and jobs, we did not want to see a repeat of previous situations and the racial tensions that arose in 2016 for example.

Mr Scanlon advised that it was a balancing act and they needed to ensure it was finely managed so integration was as smooth as possible.

Having discussed the report, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

## **Visit to the Port of Sunderland**

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), for Members to consider the arrangements for the Committee visit to the Port of Sunderland.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report and enquired if Members were happy for the arrangements to be made as proposed.

3. RESOLVED that Members agreed to visit the Port of Sunderland under the suggested arrangements within the report

## **Annual Work Programme 2021-22**

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide options, provide support and advise Members on the development of the scrutiny work programmes for 2022/2023

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Members information

In response to Councillor Law's suggestion that Gentoo be included in invites regarding Housing issues, the Chairman advised that the plan was to invite Gentoo, but to include other providers also.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that the last meeting considering such topics had been very lengthy and personally felt it may be best to split these up.

Councillor Mordey referred to the committee workshop and the possibility of inviting Cabinet Members to the Committee and suggested invites be sent to discuss their plans for the year ahead and suggested extending these invites to the Chief Executive and Executive Directors.

In response to Councillor Fagan's suggestion that Nexus be invited to the October meeting when considering the Public Transport Update, Mr Diamond advised that Mark Wilson was leading on this and he would be contacting Nexus.

4. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2022-2023 be noted.

## **Notice of Key Decisions**

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report providing Members with an opportunity to consider the items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2022 (copies circulated).

(For copy report and notice – see original minutes).

Mr Diamond, reminded Members to get in touch if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

5. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

The Chairman thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting

(Signed) D. SNOWDON,  
Chairman.