

London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP) Board Meeting

Tuesday 16th July 2024
11.00 – 13.00

Room 1, London Councils
59½ Southwark Street
London, SE1 0AL
Hybrid via Microsoft Teams

Chaired by: Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice

Attendees:

Bronagh McCuaig, Home Office
Catherine Houlcroft, NRPF Network
Clive Grimshaw, London Councils
Cllr Grace Williams, London Councils
Daniel Kennedy, London Housing Directors
Francesca Rowson, London Councils
Grace Ashaye, London Asylum Seekers Consortium
Helen Brayley-Morris, Home Office
Jon Gough, Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner
Julie Billet, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities
Juliette Frontier, London Councils
Juliet Halstead, Migrant Help
Kara Thompson, Home Office
Liz Maifredi, DWP
Martin Machray, NHS England
Maxine Holdsworth, Chief Executives of London Committee
Mike Stubbins, Metropolitan Police Service
Parwez Samnakay, Department for Levelling up Housing and Communities
Paul Bilbao, Home Office
Pernille Ware, Home Office
Steven Lakey, Clearsprings Ready Homes
Renaë Mann, Refugee Council (MRAP)
Barbara Drozdowicz, East European Resource Centre (MRAP)
Meltem Dincer, East London Advanced Technology Training (MRAP)
Matty Gladstone, Refugee and Migrant Forum Of Essex And London (HMAP)

Greater London Authority (GLA) and Mayors Office on Policing and Crime (MOPAC)

Tom Copley, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development, GLA
Andrew Davis, MOPAC
Eleonora Paesani, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Emma De Zoete, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Hannah Boylan, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Khadijah Amani, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Kismet Meyon, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Laila Aziz, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Lauren Evans, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Lidia Estevez Picon, Communities and Social Policy, GLA

Mark Winterburn, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Philip Baker, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Ramiye Thavabalasingam, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Rukshan Rajamanthri, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Siobhan Gosrani, Communities and Social Policy, GLA
Tamara Smith, Communities and Social Policy, GLA

Apologies

Tim Rymer, Home Office

1. Welcomes and Minutes

- 1.1 Debbie welcomed new attendees. The minutes from the last meeting were approved.
- 1.2 Mark provided an overview of progress on actions from the last meeting. Most points will be progressed through items on today's agenda. As we emerge from the pre-election period, GLA colleagues will be having further conversations with partners about the Sudan Lessons Learned Review.

2. Forward Look

- 2.1 Paul Bilbao provided an overview of key issues and forward look under the new Government:
 - The Home Office are currently bringing new ministers up to speed around the key concerns within the sector, especially around, asylum, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, and Modern-Day Slavery.
 - The Home Office are to set up a new Border Security Command to support the work in tackling people smuggling gangs.
 - The Government is due to cancel the Rwanda scheme .
 - A new Council of the Nations and Regions has been set up. The new Government see this as important partnership.
- 2.2 Helen Brayley-Morris provided updates on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and the National Transfer Scheme (NTS).
 - A joint action plan between Kent County Council and the Department of Education (DofE) has been created following litigation at the High Court. This is to support Kent in ensuring that, as a council, they do not breach their statutory duties towards children seeking asylum.
 - Funding schemes have been expanded to £1500 per child transferred in a two-day period. This has created a positive impact, substantially increasing the number of children transferred in a 2 day period.
 - An emergency response plan is being curated in an operational live document.
 - The Home Office is funding Kent to procure further accommodation for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children in their care.
- 2.3 Pernille Ware provided updates regarding children transferred under the NTS system. London has taken more children than was agreed; the Home Office are grateful for London as a region.

- 2.4 Cllr Grace Williams thanked Home Office for the constructive tone of their approach. London local authorities want to help, and take their corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously. It was positive to hear the updates on the National Transfer Scheme; however there are underlying issues that need addressing. Currently the system sometimes treats children in care and care leavers differently if they are Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children: we want to see a system that is clear in terms of children's legal status and in terms of funding.
- 2.5 Cllr Grace Williams raised her concern that the Home Office's current relevant protocol stops their providers from referring children disputing their age to local authorities if a Home Office age assessment had been carried out at port. This prevents Merton-compliant age assessments from being carried out when they are needed. In 2022, the majority of those age assessed by the Home Office as an adult at port were later found by a local authority to be children. As a consequence, there have been numerous cases where children have been sharing rooms with unrelated adults within hotels. This impacts a child and their access to rights under the Children's Act 1989.
- 2.6 She also noted that those who are in care or due to leave care and in limbo over their status due to the Illegal Migration Act can incur more costs for a Local Authority. There needs to be more clarity on that, given support is given care-leavers up to the age of 25.
- 2.7 Grace Ashaye noted that LASC is covering NTS coordination for London. Westminster is committed to helping and supporting the NTS in the best way we can.
- 2.8 Barbara Drozdowicz noted that the sector has received positive engagement with the Home Office around the EU Settlement Scheme. Over the last seven years since the EU referendum, seven million EU nationals have successfully settled in the UK. Barbara noted that there was some contrast with engagement in relation to the Ukrainian evacuee cohort. Some of the Ukraine scheme changes were implemented unannounced, including the removal of the Family Scheme. This has left this group with less confidence, although working with the LSMP and other forums have been of use. Lastly, Barbara argued that the Home Office should move towards sustainable funding in the future and replace funding that has been lost such as from the loss of the European Social Fund. This can also support in resolving issues that our NHS partners face.
- 2.9 Julie Billet shared areas of priority for the London Asylum Health Task and Finish Group:
- A collective aim is to enhance support for health and wellbeing within the context of asylum accommodation. This has involved working collaboratively to address these concerns effectively, and work to hear the voice of lived experience. There is work to join up with the GLA's new Migrant Londoners Advisory Panel.
 - Data sharing is a challenge not just with local government but also the NHS – poor data sharing can impact community care. Collaboration with Clearsprings Ready Homes on the portal is ongoing. Further work in this space is required.
 - Good practices and supporting toolkits for needs assessments are being shared. This includes work around responding to health and wellbeing concerns, maximising vaccinations for those in asylum accommodation, and promoting safer surgeries with Doctors of the World.
 - A Community of Practice group has formed, becoming a focal point for partners to share information about developments within the policy space and look at collective problem solving.
- 2.10 Martin Machray echoed Cllr Williams's comments regarding the importance of tone and working in the right way. The issues faced by people seeking are like those encountered by others, with access to primary care being an issue. Additionally, Martin supported Barbara's point on incorporating lived experiences into practice.

- 2.11 Catherine Houlcroft highlighted data on households with social care needs; this group often gets overlooked in larger conversations. A refreshed data overview can be shared at the next meeting. The findings indicate that more support is needed from the Home Office, and there is a need for a funding settlement for Local Authorities, including a grant that would enable them to invest in services.
- 2.12 Cllr Williams emphasised that it was a critical moment for ministers to understand local government.
- Although hotels are to be closed, it is acknowledged that they remain a part of the solution in the meantime. Cllr Williams argued that local authorities do not receive adequate support when hotels are in their area, highlighting the need for a clear funding settlement and operational model.
 - Investment is required for wraparound and move-on support. Successful pilots should be used built upon to ensure the mitigation of destitution, with an emphasis on providing immigration advice.
 - Extending the move-on notice period from 56 days would be valuable.
- 2.13 Renae Mann noted that civil society are keen to be equal partners around the table, noting they are often the first responders and it would be beneficial for them to be involved therefore with plans around asylum accommodation so that they can support. This means better data sharing. On accommodation quality, she argued that rather than evaluating on a case-by-case basis, there should be broader rethinking. Renae also echoed the need for high-quality immigration advice in the context of faster decision making.
- 2.14 Hannah Boylan noted the introduction by the Government of a Council of Nations and Regions, and asked how the work of SMPs could feed into that. She also offered to conduct a review of what happened with the Streamlined Asylum Process, to provide recommendations to the Home Office.
- 2.15 Steven Lakey thanked partners for their work and engagement. He highlighted some of Clearsprings Ready Homes' successes, such as reducing the time individuals and families spend in hotels or contingency accommodation settings, particularly for families, and successfully transitioning them into dispersal accommodation.
- 2.16 Mark Winterburn acknowledged the helpful and wide-ranging nature of the discussion. It will be important to work across all the different areas covered through our governance.
- 2.17 Paul Bilbao additionally thanked everyone, and welcomed feedback including on the points around the need for person-centric funding.

Action: GLA to produce Lessons Learned Review on Streamlined Asylum Process.

Action: Home Office to provide an update on the Department's new approach to funding.

3. New London Asylum Accommodation Plan

- 3.1 Paul Bilbao provided an overview:

- The first set of Full Dispersal Plans have come to an end, and the Home Office has been working on new holistic Asylum Accommodation Plans. The aim is for these to be as transparent, fair and equitable as possible. This approach builds on the modelling developed in London and involves analysing around 20 data sets to understand pressures, including those on homeless services, and to address the rural-urban split. Local authorities will be ranked based on their capacity, according to this analysis.
- Ministers approved this approach under the last Government, and the Home Office is updating current ministers. The indications are that there is no change in direction on this matter.
- Due to the pre-election period, local politicians were previously unable to be briefed on the index tool. However, efforts there is a hope to do so in the near future in collaboration with LSMP.
- Paul indicated that the plans are adaptable and subject to change based on feedback, with regular reviews. Currently, a review period is scheduled for October 2024. The primary challenge for implementation is addressing stock issues and pressures on the Private Rented Sector, with the Home Office in dialogue with Clearsprings Ready Homes on these matters.
- Forecasting will need updating to account for potential changes, including the impact of Government policy changes in relation to Rwanda and the Illegal Migration Act.

3.2 Deputy Mayor Tom Copley emphasised the importance of safe, decent, secure, and affordable housing. He highlighted how such housing is crucial for sustaining employment and mitigating the potential impact of rough sleeping. Tom also stressed the need for support and resources for the Voluntary and Community Sector to offer long-term assistance. A holistic approach was advocated for those seeking asylum to ensure comprehensive support.

3.3 Tom additionally stated that there were 951 new rough sleepers who had previously been in asylum accommodation last year, representing a rise from 4% to 17% compared to the previous year. Recent discussions with France explored what can be learned from other cities and how London might benefit from these insights. However, substantial action from the national government will be necessary.

3.4 Maxine Holdsworth set out a range of points:

- She noted that extending the move-on notice period to 56 days could significantly impact the percentage of those rough sleeping.
- As part of our thinking, we need to also look to minimise the cost burden for local authorities arising from supporting NRPF households.
- There is a need to avoid competition between councils and Clearsprings on rates paid for procurement.
- There is a need for a contingency plan if lots of new asylum accommodation does not come onstream.
- The need for political engagement as soon as possible.

3.5 Cllr Williams noted that the new plans have not been socialised with councils at a senior level because of the pre-election period and suggested that letters be sent to local authority Leaders and Chief Executives to ensure this is brought to their individual attention. Additionally, she proposed that group sessions with Leaders be conducted before the 'go live date.' This approach would provide a valuable opportunity to align on the overall housing strategy and address the evolving housing pressures.

3.6 Paul Bilbao highlighted the need for a political decision around the 28 day move-on period. Home Office Liaison Officers are also a solution to provide support during this period. SAP

learnings will be integrated into the Home Office's approach to move-on. The Home Office will explore new delivery models to achieve targets.

4. Fully Digital Immigration System; Transition to e-Visas

4.1 Debbie introduced the item and invited a member of the GLA's Migration team to provide insights. They shared brief updates as follows:

- Migrants will need to prove their right to work, live in the UK, and access healthcare through the new UKVI eVisa system. Physical Biometric Residence Permits (BRPs) will no longer be issued after 31 December 2024.
- While there are some benefits to the new approach, there is a risk to vulnerable populations, such as rough sleepers, older Londoners, newly recognised refugees, and the digitally excluded, as migrants who do not comply with UKVI requirements may lose their rights.
- The GLA is concerned about the level of communication, with only 2,300 people applying for the scheme since 2023. BRPs (Biometric Residence Permits) remain the sole document many people hold, and some may struggle to afford the necessary paperwork. There is no alternative after December 2024 for migrants.
- Issues such as documents going missing and incorrect information in the EUSS digital scheme have already arisen, and we have not yet had assurances that improvements have been made.

4.2 Deputy Mayor Tom Copley noted he was not in principle against the move to a digital system – but the way that it is done, and the speed, is important; the Home Office is looking to accomplish something in eight months which took Australia 10 years to achieve. Tom added that 'right to rent' checks were never supported by the current Mayor of London, on the basis of concerns about the role it plays in creating a hostile environment. Lastly, Tom added that landlords will need a share code to verify status, which could deter Private Rented Sector landlords from accepting this cohort as tenants. This poses additional barriers, particularly for older migrant Londoners who have not had to prove their status for many years. There are fears of repeating Windrush-style issues or exacerbating homelessness.

4.3 Liz Maifredi provided an update from DWP. Work coaches are being upskilled about the changes. Benefits will not be stopped for someone if they do not have an eVisa by January 2024. She also noted that support remains available in person at job centres for those who need access to a computer.

4.4 Barbara Drozdowicz, who spoke based on frontline experience, noted that people may be less likely to move jobs or housing if they face digital checks. There are concerns about how this transition will affect community integration and access to NHS and secondary treatment, where evidencing has been problematic. She noted that we do not have clarity on the current Government's position on the 'hostile environment'.

4.5 Tamara Smith welcomed the intention of DWP to not stop benefits. However, she noted concerns about the practicalities – whether DWP are going to start enquiring about end of leave beyond what is written on BRPs. There are questions about the strategic engagement planned for this transition and whether the GLA can be involved. While there are benefits to digital status, there are questions about what measures DWP is implementing in response.

4.6 Paul Bilbao noted that concerns were heard, and although there was not much to say in absence of Ministerial steer the Home Office will be active in being in touch on this issue going forward.

Action: DWP to respond in writing to questions and concerns regarding the 31 December 2024 cut off date and access to benefits.

5. Update: National Referral Mechanism (NRM)

5.1 Eleonora Paesani who provided a summary and update on the NRM.

- Non-statutory First Responder organisations currently do not have the capacity to meet the increase in both the number and complexity of referrals. Civil society colleagues have been reporting for over a year that they have reached crisis point. We raised this for the first time in March 2023 and more recently in March 2024, together with frontline organisations and the London Victims' Commissioner Office.
- We are aware that since this point was raised at the last LSMP board meeting in March, two of the largest non-statutory First Responders have paused referrals due to capacity concerns, further exacerbating the situation. This issue is compounded by the fact that many statutory First Responder organisations, including the Metropolitan Police Service and local authorities, lack expertise and awareness of their duties.
- Eleonora also stated that in the view of the voluntary sector, statutory services in London are failing their safeguarding duties, and their statutory duties as First Responders. As a result, victims of modern slavery are not being identified and supported and are thus unable to access pathways to justice. The GLA considers the situation for migrant victims of modern slavery across London to be a crisis in need of urgent action. This is a position shared by colleagues in the Mayor's Office on Policing and Crime and the Victim's Commissioner team.

5.2 Eleonora then stated the key asks which are listed below.

- A London focused point of contact for escalation of concerns and cases.
- Increased capacity for non-statutory First Responders.
- Improved training for statutory First Responders.

5.3 Eleonora followed by stating that some of these things do not require significant extra resource, or legislative change. It is important to recognise that best practice, knowledge-building, and trauma-informed work play a significant role. There are larger issues regarding fundamental capacity; both the Labour manifesto and the Mayor of London's manifesto has echoed these concerns. Eleonora stated that the team are keen to work with the new government to address these issues.

5.4 Debbie thanked Eleonora and stated that minutes have been shared with Home Office and this issue will be discussed at a future meeting. Debbie stated that seeking resolution on this is imperative.

5.5 Renae Mann mentioned that Kalayaan are doing a review of first responders that would be useful to bring into the conversation.

6. LSMP Business Plan

6.1 Mark Winterburn shared slides on the LSMP Strategic Objectives for 2024/25. He noted that things could shift a bit following the election, but did not anticipate much change.

6.2 Mark shared updates on the LSMP's team workstreams on ESOL and resettlement which are areas that have not had much airtime at recent LSMP Board meetings:

- LSMP continues to be involved at a granular and operational level to support refugee resettlement. All 33 London local authorities are delivering refugee resettlement, which is a great accomplishment. LSMP continues its role in matching homeless Afghan households with Refugee Housing Programme and Local Authority Housing Fund properties.
- The ESOL monthly newsletter continues to thrive, and there are now over 800 specialists within the ESOL sector signed up. LSMP continues to help inform the delivery of the Adult Education Budget as we work together to remove barrier to access for sanctuary seekers.

6.3 Debbie thanked Mark and requested the group to look at objectives and relay any thoughts, feedback, or questions back to Mark.

Action: Mark to share LSMP Business Plan with the group.

7. AOB

7.1 Hannah Boylan explained that LSMP Board made a commitment previously to continually review the status of Grenfell survivors and bereaved. We are hearing some issues that continue to be escalated to the GLA. The GLA welcome the Home Office engagement to date, and is keen to pick up a conversation off-line in the first instance and bring update back at a future upcoming Board meeting.