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London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP) Board Meeting

14 March 2024

15.00 – 17.00

Microsoft Teams meeting

Chair:

Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice

Attendees:

Tim Rymer, Adult and Family Asylum Accommodation, Home Office
Renae Mann, Refugee Council, Migrant and Refugee Advisory Panel (MRAP)
Bethan Lant, Praxis (HMAP)
Sarah Hernandez, Department for Work and Pensions, London, and Essex
Steven Lakey, Clearsprings Ready Homes
Samantha Tidy, Migrant Help
Juliet Halstead, Migrant Help
Liz Maifredi, Department for Work and Pensions, London, and Essex Group Partnership
Caroline Oates, Home Office
Dan Kennedy, LB Hillingdon, Chair of London Regional Asylum Plan, Local Government Working Group
Fawad Shah, Home Office
Hannah Bennett-Gough, Department for Levelling up Housing and Communities
Maxine Holdsworth, Royal Borough of Kensington, and Chelsea
Ian Marson, Home Office
Jo Beck, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)
Juliette Frontier, London Councils
Julie Billet, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities
Kerry Page, Home Office,
Michelle White, Home Office
Nicola Davies, Migrant Help UK
Olutoyin Adeyemi, Home Office
Philip Adekunle, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)
Rachel Buttrick, London Councils
Russell Bramley, Home Office
Sarah Aspinall, Home Office
Scott Holland, Home Office
Stephen Thompson, Home Office
Steven Lakey, Clearsprings Ready Homes
Sue Westcott, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)

Greater London Authority (GLA) & MOPAC Staff

Mark Winterburn, Communities and Social Policy
Hannah Boylan, Communities and Social Policy
Tamara Smith, Communities and Social Policy
Philip Baker, Communities and Social Policy
Kismet Meyon, Communities and Social Policy
Marc Simo, Communities and Social Policy
Laila Aziz, Communities and Social Policy
Ramiye Thavabalasingam, Communities and Social Policy
Healah Riaz, Communities and Social Policy/ Housing and Land
Caroline Drummond, Communities and Social Policy
Eleonora Paesani, Communities and Social Policy
Susan Cueva, Citizenship, and Integration Advisor (Migrant Exploitation)

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Andrew Davis, MOPAC
Safa Aziz, MOPAC

Apologies

Tom Copley, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development, GLA
Cllr Grace Williams, London Councils

Guests

Avril Sharp, Kalayaan
Marissa Begonia, The Voice of Domestic Workers
Safa Aziz, Victims' Commissioner's Office
Meltem Dincer, ELLAT

1. Welcomes & Minutes from the Last Meeting

1.1 Debbie Weekes-Bernard welcomed attendees, and the minutes from the last meeting were approved.

1.2 Mark Winterburn provided updates on actions from the last meeting. Key updates included:

- Mark is arranging a meeting between Migrant Help, Clearsprings and the Home Office and key stakeholders to follow-up on issues arising from the last meeting regarding the needs of Deaf Migrant Londoners.
- Mark shared that the GLA is commissioning research to gather further insights around support for Deaf Migrant Londoners. An update for the Board will be provided once the project has concluded.
- Following the discussion at the last meeting on detention, Mark outlined that this would be brought to a future meeting.

2. Transition to a Digital Immigration System

2.1 Debbie stated that this item was escalated from the Homeless Migrant Advisory Panel (HMAP). She noted that the LSMP Board had discussed digital status at length in relation to the European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS), and that the Mayor had at that time called for people to have physical proof of their immigration status.

2.2. Debbie invited Bethan Lant from Praxis to share concerns about the digital-only system set to commence in January 2025. There were numerous issues identified, including:

- Switch to eVisa system will conclude all Biometric Residence Permits (BRPs) / Biometric Residence Cards (BRCs) issued to expire on 31/12/2024; however, it is not clearly stated that this is not an indication of an individual's leave to remain expiry date.
- Confusion around renewal dates leading to unnecessary renewal applications, leading to applicants paying the Immigration Health Surcharge and then awaiting a prolonged period for a refund.
- Issues evidencing status in transition periods, especially regarding employment and housing, with a 48hr wait for the Home Office to confirm with employers and landlords.
- Concerns around whether documentation for proof of identity is adhering to Home Office's own guidance on unreasonable expectations of those seeking sanctuary. Especially as the Home Office is yet to return passports to many supported by Praxis, who are destitute.

- Digital exclusion and access to emails and phone numbers, especially for vulnerable groups, as seen in the EU digital system. The Government Digital Service (GDS) of the Home Office's online "Prove your right to work" system in 2018 stated that the Home Office had "very strong evidence" that any move from physical status documents to digital only documents would cause problems.
- Safeguarding concerns around exploitation regarding EEA nationals; in some cases, people are being charged by some organisations claiming to offer support in helping them receive their codes. Concerns around those affected by Modern Day Slavery as choices are limited for digital assistance and support.
- Learnings and consequences regarding the EUSS system and Windrush scandal must be considered.
- EUSS and the new UK Visas and Immigration system are separate systems, leading to confusion for an individual in understanding where they have been granted status online.
- Contradictions in the Employer Guidance. The Home Office have been inconsistent in their wording, some letters stating "*Your BRP is an important document...*"
- Next to no engagement and guidance on the new UK Visas and Immigration system from Home Office with stakeholders.

2.3 It was noted that various stakeholders, including the 3million, have raised concerns about the digital system with the independent monitoring authority. Bethan highlighted that under the terms and conditions of the new system, the Home Office would accept no liability for any errors in the digital system and retain the right to suspend digital accounts and change terms without notice. Bethan reflected on the experience of the Windrush Generation and the need to learn lessons – not just prevent liability.

2.4 Healah Riazi from the GLA highlighted how the digital system poses a particular risk to people vulnerable to homelessness and rough sleeping, including additional barriers for landlords and employers to engage with non-UK nationals. Building on EUSS learning, Healah outlined the need for an equality impact assessment and implementation of appropriate mitigations: live action logs that will allow the Home Office to create accountability measures, a helpline for service users, and improved engagement with the sector.

2.5 Ian Marson from the Home Office stated his remit was not on policy and he was best placed to field technical questions. Ian mentioned that the remain-to-leave letter does state that the date of expiry does is not equivalent to the date of leave expiry. Ian noted that further communications around this may go out to prevent further confusion. Additionally, he agreed concerns will arise for those digital excluded or with additional vulnerabilities, especially for newly recognised refugees.

2.6 The Board discussed further concerns, including:

- The lack of awareness amongst community partners, and whether help would be provided during the transition, including through a public campaign or guidance for people affected.
- Whether letters going out to people affected could be user-tested; the information is not easy to digest, and lots of letters are being sent out with incorrect information including expiry dates and information about BRPs.
- Systemic issues around the Digital EUSS status are still persistent; what would be the accountability and reporting mechanisms to flag, solve and escalate issues for resolution?
- The huge investment in advice capacity around the EUSS was crucial to managing the transition and supporting robust accountability through legal representation, and whether similar funding was under consideration.
- Whether the system would be expanded to people in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

Action: Ian Marson agreed to write to LSMP Board with an update on some of the more technical questions, including escalation points and whether the system would be expanded to people in the NRM.

Action: Tim Rymer agreed to engage with senior leaders in the Home Office on this to connect with engagement and communication concerns.

Action: It was agreed that an item on this matter would be brought back to a future LSMP Board meeting.

3. Sudan Evacuation Lessons Learned Review

3.1 Debbie introduced the item as arising from a discussion at the June 2023 LSMP Board meeting, following concerns raised by Sudanese community members and local authorities regarding the Sudan evacuation.

3.2 A member of the GLA migration team summarised the outcomes of the lessons learned review, which was built on engagement with Sudanese community members and a range of stakeholders involved in the evacuation. He outlined several recommendations arising from the review:

- More consistent application of evacuation eligibility criteria, conscious of the conditions of conflict, with due follow-up with community members granted a UK visa.
- Better information sharing throughout evacuation exercises to ensure adequate response by welcoming stakeholders.
- Development of timely guidance for evacuees and statutory services on immigration status, entitlements, and options to regularise status in the long term.
- Timely and accurate information sharing with local authorities.
- Needs assessments and pressures duly communicated in advance of arrival to ensure appropriate response by partners on the ground.
- Financial support for local authorities faced with supporting new arrivals.
- Follow-up and wrap-around support for evacuees after arrival in the UK, delivered by local authorities and VCS organisations.
- Foster engagement with community organisations and ensure monitoring of emerging community needs.
- More proactive use of GLA resilience structures on events related to new arrivals in or around London.

3.4 Debbie expressed gratitude to the member of the GLA migration team and welcomed reflections. Renae emphasised the need for a needs-led approach to address recurring issues in evacuations and advocated for a structured response framework offering both short-term emergency support and long-term integration services. Hannah Boylan echoed Renae's point, emphasising the importance of learning from previous responses to similar crises and suggesting systemic resolutions to recurring challenges.

3.5 Hannah Bennett-Gough reflected on the commendable efforts of all involved in supporting evacuees and stressed the need for DHLUC to ensure proactive planning based on data sharing and collaboration among partners. She outlined that a coordinated cross-government piece of work is underway regarding lessons from evacuations. Julie Billet emphasised the importance of learning from past mistakes and integrating systematic structures for planning and response, advocating for the utilisation of existing resilience partnerships to avoid duplication of efforts.

3.6 Phillip Baker supported the need to avoid duplication of work and suggested greater engagement with regional SMPs during evacuations, acknowledging challenges faced by Sudanese evacuees and proposing solutions for their long-term integration. Additionally, better engagement is needed with voluntary charity sector partnerships.

Action: GLA to progress further engagement on recommendations and their implementation with all partners.

4. Ukraine Visa Updates

4.1 Debbie acknowledged the two-year anniversary of the Ukraine invasion and invited Philip Baker to summarise some of the key announcements related to Ukrainians in the UK. Philip outlined several updates, including:

- Closure of the Ukraine Family Scheme
- Limitations placed on applications under the Ukraine Extension Scheme
- The launch of a new Ukraine Extension Scheme at the end of 2024, which will grant an 18-month extension for Ukrainians already in the UK. New requirements are being introduced for sponsors, requiring sponsors to have British or Irish Citizenship, or indefinite leave to remain.

4.2 Barbara Drozdowicz highlighted concerns arising from the reduced duration of stay to 18 months, which poses challenges in maintaining stable housing, employment, and educational/training. Barbara raised several other concerns, including:

- Challenges concerning Ukrainian children and individuals with high care needs, as there is now a requirement to find a host with indefinite leave to remain, leading to distress within affected communities.
- General homelessness, and individuals facing difficulties in securing housing, resorting to temporary accommodations like Airbnb.
- Confusion when approaching local authorities for support, with some being told that they are not covered by any homelessness duty, and services seeing a higher proportion of people left vulnerable.

4.4 Sue Westcott acknowledged the housing challenges and ongoing efforts to facilitate individuals' transition into the Private Rented Sector (PRS). Jo Beck confirmed that there is no change in the duties that local authorities owe, and the Government has provided top-ups to the homelessness prevention grant and continue to collect the data to monitor issues around homelessness. Jo reflected that this was part of a huge challenge around homelessness, particularly for single people not in priority need.

Action: DLUHC to support engagement between GLA and the correct Home Office point of contact.

5. Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism Capacity Extension

5.1 Debbie introduced the item by noting that she recently met with the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, where she raised concerns about migrant victims of modern slavery. Tamara Smith reflected that this item followed on from a discussion at the Board last year, and raised concerns that little progress had been made since the issue was last escalated to the Board last year given the urgency of the issues being faced in London.

5.2 Tamara outlined that the Home Office had confirmed they did not have capacity to attend a London working group on modern slavery and have instead invited the GLA to join the Modern Slavery Engagement Forums (MSEFs). Tamara noted while this is welcome, there remain

concerns that this centrally held model of quarterly meetings could not deliver the level of accountability required to meet the urgent need in London.

5.3 Tamara noted the GLA considers the situation for migrant victims of modern slavery across London to be a grave crisis in need of urgent action, which is a position shared by colleagues in MOPAC and the Victim's Commissioner team.

5.4 Tamara emphasised that the GLA urgently needs an escalation point and process at strategic level to escalate concerns around modern slavery issues in London to the Home Office and to be able to report resolved issues back to the LSMP. The impact of this issue is being felt across working groups on asylum move-on and rough sleeping, and a joined-up approach to escalation and resolution of crosscutting issues is needed. Tamara reiterated a request for further clarity on what this escalation process would look like to, to be able to build trust with the sector that issues we raise will be actioned.

5.5 Avril Sharp from Kalayaan raised concerns about the lack of action from the Government in relation to the anti-slavery sector over the past 12 months. Avril specifically highlighted issues faced by migrant domestic workers, emphasising the need for urgent intervention. Avril presented case studies illustrating the challenges faced by domestic workers, including a mother and a child left without job opportunities or support to resolve their immigration status. Marissa Begonia shared accounts of rescuing 57 domestic workers facing physical and sexual abuse, underscoring the dire need for protection and security.

5.6 Safa Aziz, representing the London Victim's Commissioner, echoed the concerns, highlighting increasing challenges around human trafficking and modern slavery in a context of dismantling of support frameworks and the increased precarity of individuals due to changes in immigration and border policies. Safa also highlighted the lack of mandatory training for first responders and victims' reluctance to approach the police due to insecure immigration status and fears of Home Office enforcement.

5.7 Debbie thanked Avril Sharp and Marissa Begonia for their work and for their poignant accounts of the people they have helped and worked with and stressed the need for action before the next LSMP meeting.

5.8 Russell Bramely acknowledged the issues raised around the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Russell agreed the NRM should be opened to more NGOs as First Responders, and that the Home Office should assist more First Responders in online training and enabling quality control of services.

5.9 Debbie underscored the necessity for concrete actions and proposed offline discussions to translate discussions into actionable steps. GLA staff agreed to follow up with Russell and Home Office colleagues to address these pressing concerns effectively.

Action: GLA to follow up with the Home Office regarding escalation points.

Action: Update required at the next LSMP Board from the Home Office on what progress is being made and how these risks are being monitored.

6. Asylum Contingency Hotel Closures

6.1 Debbie Weekes-Bernard initiated the discussion by reflecting on the last two LSMP meetings, underscoring the persistent concern of the Mayor regarding asylum cessations and the significant homelessness being experienced by people seeking asylum and refugees, and the acute issues faced during the activation of the Sever Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP).

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6.2 Juliette Frontier explained key borough concerns around hotel closures: lack of notification, lack of data sharing, and in particular the impact on children and schooling. Juliette highlighted one case of a young person moved three times in the middle of exams, who is due to be moved again. Acute issues arose in Waltham Forest, where lack of information sharing, issues related to safeguarding, and the traumatic nature of upheaval came to the fore.

6.3 Dan Kennedy (Hillingdon) added that being moved into others borough unexpectedly is a significant disruption to people's lives and reiterated the need for good data sharing. Rachel Butterick (London Councils) outlined the need for clear written policies and processes on hotel closures, clear underlying principles, and clear reescalation routes that local authorities can use when things go wrong, noting that boroughs report that there were not sufficient staff on the ground during some recent hotel closures, and those that were did not have the right level of decision-making power.

6.4 Renee Mann highlighted the need to centre people who are being moved in deciding future policy and procedures and reiterated that there is an urgency to ending the use of hotels but that this cannot be done at the cost of people's health. Steve Lakey confirmed that engagement teams are out and doing that work now. If civil society groups have independent feedback directly from users, then Clearsprings would be keen to receive this.

6.5 Tim Rymer outlined that it is not unusual to move people around the estate, and that there is an increased amount of movement with more hotel closures. Tim noted that there is an extremely high expectation of Clearsprings from the Home Office on how they manage the process on the ground, with mechanisms in place to have concerns escalated. If any of that is not working, then the Home Office are happy to discuss how to get that in place. Tim acknowledged the issues faced in Waltham Forest, where things did not go as well as they should have done and outlined that there was a commitment to learn lessons, consider a person's needs, minimise moves, and to share data to the extent that this is allowed within the limits of GDPR.

7. Asylum cessations and homelessness

7.1 Dan Kennedy highlighted the Test for Change pilot in Brent and Hillingdon, whereby Home Office Liaison Officers are embedded in hotels to support the move on of newly recognised refugees. He discussed how Brent and Hillingdon councils are working closely with the Home Office, DWP and housing providers, which has improved Hillingdon's online homelessness processes and the Home Office's data sharing practices to improve the experience of people leaving the hotels with a positive decision. Lessons were learned on both sides and Dan highlighted the importance of this work given the high numbers of people receiving an asylum decision in hotels. Despite notable improvements, challenges persist, especially concerning non-priority and single individuals, who prove more difficult to house. Dan provided examples of individuals unable to accept job offers due to their unstable housing situation.

7.2 Tim added that it is vital we continue to take opportunities to make this as smooth as possible, and to feed back issues and successes to Ministers.

8. Close

8.1 Debbie thanked the Board for the contributions to the discussion and closed the meeting.