

**London Strategic Migration Partnership Board**

Friday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2025

13:00-15:00

Microsoft Teams

London Councils, 12 Arthur Street, London, EC4R 9AB

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

**Attendance:**

Adam Thompson, Home Office

Áine Ruth, Greater London Authority

Barbara Drozdowicz, Eastern European Refugee Centre

Beth Wheaton, Greater London Authority

Beverley Jones, Home Office

Charlotte Maguire, Greater London Authority

Claudia Harvey, Ministry of Defence

Clive Grimshaw, London Councils

Cllr Anthony Okereke, Executive Member for Communities, London Councils

Diletta Mastria, Greater London Authority

Ellen Laidlaw, Greater London Authority

Edward Russel, Home Office

Emira Ben Amara, Greater London Authority

Emma Marsh, Ministry of Defence

Emma Neill, Clearsprings Ready Homes

Esther McConnell, Greater London Authority aine

Fawad Shah, Home Office

Francesca Rowson, London Councils

Hannah Boylan, Greater London Authority

Helena Carrizosa, MHCLG

Jack Rigby, Home Office

Josie Garrett, Greater London Authority

Julie Billet, Department for Health and Social Care

Juliet Halstead, Migrant Help

Katerina Kokkinou, Ministry of Defence

Kalyani McCarthy, Westminster (London National Transfer Scheme Coordinator)

Lidia Esteves Picon, Greater London Authority

Lisa Kunwar-Deer, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime

Louisa Le Roux, Home Office

Marc Simo, Greater London Authority

Mark Winterburn, Greater London Authority

Maxine Holdsworth, Chief Executives London Committee (CELC) Lead on Refugees and Asylum

Nazee Akbari, Chief Executive Officer, New Citizens' Gateway (Migrants' Advisory Panel)

Paul Bilbao, Home Office

Phoebe Blagg, MHCLG

Rukshan Rajamanthri, Greater London Authority

Siobhan Gosrani, Greater London Authority

Stephen Mayne, Department for Education

Steven Lakey, Clearsprings

Tanya Dewey, Home Office

Tom Copley, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development, Greater London Authority

## **Apologies:**

Hannah Doody – Chief Executives London Committee (CELC) Lead on Refugees and Asylum

Alison Griffin – London Councils

Tim Rymer – Home Office

Sarah Newman – ALDCS and Westminster

Liz Maifredi – DWP

Catherine Houlcroft – NRPF Network

Rena Mann – Refugee Council (MSAP)

Meltem Dincer – ELATT (MSAP)

Det Supt Andrew Furphy – MPS

## **1. Welcomes, Minutes and Actions**

- 1.1 Debbie welcomed the group. A special thanks was extended to Nazee Akbari and Umran Khan, noting it was their first time at the meeting.
- 1.2 The minutes from the previous meeting were approved.
- 1.3 Mark Winterburn, London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP) shared updates on key actions from the last meeting. He provided an update on the action from the previous meeting for the GLA to support the cascading of eVisa updates to frontline staff and organisations, noting that the GLA is currently developing a form to help facilitate this information-sharing with government and the wider sector.

## **2. Introduction to Migrants' Advisory Panel (MAP)**

- 2.1 Nazee Akbari introduced herself, explaining that she is the CEO of the New Citizens Gateway, which provides support for refugees and people seeking asylum, but that she joined MAP as a migrant herself. She explained that MAP was established by the GLA to shape, influence and guide the inclusion of migrant Londoners in the GLA's work.
- 2.2 She explained that the panel was established through a co-production process between the 28 members over 22 hours. Following these discussions, the panel selected four focus areas: healthcare; advice and support for migrant Londoners; good work; and learning. Each area is being developed by dedicated sub-teams, each working on 1–2 priorities per topic.
- 2.3 Nazee shared the panel's progress to date, including their input into the 2025–2029 Police and Crime Plan in collaboration with MOPAC, detailed recommendations on changes to the Good Work Standard, and engagement with the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Strategy Task and Finish Group to address funding gaps. She also noted that MAP is planning to provide feedback on the new Transport for London webpage to help ensure it is accessible to migrants and is liaising with the London Asylum Health Task and Finish Group to explore how they can support its work.

- 2.4 Nazee emphasised the importance of involving individuals with living experience (a term she prefers to lived experience) to ensure policy is more reflective of real-world experiences and ultimately more effective. She highlighted that this helps to identify blind spots, build trust.
- 2.5 Debbie thanked Nazee and invited meeting participants to reflect on how we can ensure MAP members can input into the LSMP's work.

### **3. Skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) strategies**

- 3.1 Helena Carrizosa (MHCLG) shared that the final call for Step Ukraine had over 12,500 participants, with more than 1,000 moving into employment during the course of the programme. Many secured jobs in sectors they had worked in while in Ukraine. An evaluation has been completed and is expected to be published in May or June. She noted that MHCLG plans to procure an English and employment support programme for Ukrainians and Hongkongers in 2025–26, initially for one year. Ukrainians will also continue to access support through local authorities, while Hongkongers do so via VCSE organisations. She added there is growing interest in a more cross-cohort approach to strengthen existing infrastructure.
- 3.2 Adam Thompson (Home Office) explained that the Refugee Employability Programme (REP) is delivered across nine areas in England, including seven London boroughs where the programme is implemented by Reed in Partnership. He noted that ESOL is one of three pillars of the programme alongside employability and integration. The programme will end in June 2025 following a ministerial decision not to extend it. Onboarding ended in December 2024 and they are now shifting the focus to evaluation and lessons learned. Reed in Partnership conducted assessments in London after programme participants went through 92 hours of ESOL (usually on a non-accredited basis) and found that in London there is a very wide variety of sectors people wish to go into (up to 20 sectors). After REP ends, ESOL support will still be available through the Adult Skills Fund, and the Home Office pilot project Step Ahead delivered by the World Jewish Relief. Home Office is looking into how they can move this support more into the digital space.
- 3.3 Rebecca Parker (Home Office) added that Step Ahead was developed in response to barriers faced under REP, particularly around ESOL. It builds on the Step Ukraine model, and an evaluation will be shared when available.
- 3.4 Stephen Mayne (DfE) outlined how ESOL is funded via the Adult Skills Fund. In areas with Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), those with devolved skills budgets have greater freedom to decide how this funding is allocated. He noted that further devolution is expected in August. He also shared recent statistics showing that, while ESOL demand rose significantly following the COVID-19 pandemic, it has now stabilised. He asked what may be driving this and whether this is due to capacity or funding constraints. He observed that more learners are now at pre-entry level, often with limited literacy in their own language, which places additional pressure on resources, and asked whether there is anything that needs to be done to provide more support to local areas. He also flagged that ESOL achievement rates remain high, and asked for feedback on how DfE can better support ESOL delivery in devolved areas.

- 3.5 Cllr Anthony Okereke highlighted ongoing challenges around access to non-accredited ESOL, particularly for resettled refugees with caring responsibilities. He noted that reductions in Adult Skills Fund budget and local authority tariff funding will have an impact and added that there need to be consideration of how provision can be maintained for people with settled status. He also noted that people with caring responsibilities often need more tailored support.
- 3.6 Barbara Drozdowicz (Eastern European Resource Centre) raised concerns about the Adult Skills Fund, particularly whether support will be embedded within DWP services or outsourced. She highlighted risks for migrants impacted by changes to benefits—especially women with caring responsibilities or those far from the labour market due to cultural or economic reasons. She noted that while tax credits previously offered some support, individuals who have never worked in the UK may now be pushed towards benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).
- 3.7 Barbara raised concerns about people losing access to incapacity benefits, and the difficulties faced by those with mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety in accessing ESOL or planning for their future. Insecure housing is a growing issue, with 10% of EERC’s service users currently living in insecure tenancies.
- 3.8 Barbara asked whether DWP or DfE have plans to embed employability or careers advice within services, warning that the impact of current gaps could be severe, potentially leading to homelessness and reduced access to other support. She added that before Brexit, European Social Fund (ESF) funding could be used to help meet these needs, and expressed concern that the VCSE sector may now face an unsustainable burden, diverting resources from migration and social welfare advice.
- 3.9 Mark welcomed the update from Helena and suggested she provide more detail on upcoming employment support for Hongkongers and Ukrainians through LSMP. He also proposed that the GLA could work with Stephen to answer his questions via engagement with the wider sector.

**Action: Helena Carizzosa (MHCLG) to share updates on upcoming employment support programme for Ukrainians and Hong Kongers.**

**Action: The Greater London Authority to speak with Stephen about his questions on changes in trends in ESOL, and how to ensure sector input.**

- 3.10 Stephen confirmed he would take forward Barbara’s questions to colleagues. He asked about the ease of managing multiple government funding streams and whether capacity or skills gaps are behind the lack of support for certain groups.

**Action: Stephen Mayne (DfE) to ascertain how DWP and DfE will integrate employability or careers advice within existing services considering changes to the Adult Skills Fund.**

- 3.11 Adam highlighted that an interim evaluation of REP will be shared internally in the coming months, with a final evaluation due in September. He added that a knowledge-sharing workshop is being planned to share findings with other departments. Initial findings indicate a need to clarify the distinction between formal ESOL and unaccredited English language provision.

- 3.12 Helena Carrizosa acknowledged the challenges facing ESOL provision and funding. While there are no new funding pots currently, she committed to feeding this feedback into departmental strategy and budget discussions.
- 3.13 Paul Bilbao (Home Office) reiterated the Home Office's commitment to ESOL as a key part of refugee integration. He noted cross-government efforts to simplify funding and improve asylum outcomes.
- 3.14 Barbara stressed the importance of clear guidance on how people can access ESOL, especially at transition points between support schemes. She emphasised that a lack of availability and poor coordination between providers can lead to exclusion, particularly for women with childcare responsibilities.
- 3.15 Áine (GLA) presented updates on the development of the London ESOL Strategy.
- She noted that this item builds on discussions at the last LSMP meeting, where the London Growth Plan was shared, and highlighted that a key priority within it is establishing a dedicated strategy for ESOL in the capital.
  - The ESOL sector has long called for both national and regional strategies. The purpose of the London strategy is to acknowledge limited funding and ensure resources are used to maximum effect, while improving access to provision for those who need it.
  - Áine emphasised that a coordinated, strategic approach is more effective, noting that 79% of ESOL learners go on to achieve positive outcomes.
  - A task and finish group has been formed to support the strategy's development, with two meetings held so far and further work planned throughout May. While led by the GLA, the strategy is a collaborative effort, involving 30 members across strategic and political partners, ESOL networks, regional partners, VCSE organisations, MAP, and a range of ESOL providers. The group has also engaged with other Mayoral Combined Authorities and ESOL learners, with a strong focus on ensuring shared ownership.
  - The aim is to produce a single, citywide strategy that addresses the needs of all Londoners requiring ESOL.
- 3.16 Áine highlighted the following challenges:
- Rising demand and long waiting lists, with some colleges turning learners away.
  - Increasing costs and reduction in key funding streams.
  - Gaps in the ESOL curriculum, which often does not support progression into work.
  - Lack of coordination between providers and limited support for pre-entry learners.
  - Barriers such as digital exclusion, childcare, and unclear eligibility rules under ASF.
  - Growing pressures on the VCSE sector without adequate funding.
- 3.17 Áine outlined the strategic priorities for the London ESOL Strategy, including: improving access pathways; establishing a coordination framework; drawing on diverse funding sources; ensuring adequate VCSE resourcing; strengthening employment pathways beyond Tier 3; promoting informal ESOL and volunteering;

using data to support funding discussions with DfE; and engaging partners to develop a more ambitious, joined-up approach.

- 3.18 It was agreed that questions relating to the strategy would be put to LSMP Board at a later date. Áine confirmed LSMP can circulate her questions to attendees. She closed the item by thanking everyone for a valuable discussion.

**Action: The Greater London Authority to share in-depth case studies with central government colleagues in the call to provide an overview of ESOL in London.**

- 3.19 Áine confirmed that the GLA is working with MAP to ensure learners are meaningfully engaged in the strategy's development.

## **4. Migration Governance in London**

- 4.1 Mark shared the new draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for the LSMP Board and thanked everyone who had contributed so far to its development. He noted that the structure of the document has been updated to clearly outline the purpose, functions, and priority goals of the Board. The intention is to, as a next step, agree measurable objectives for both LSMP Board and wider migration governance in London. He emphasised that the draft reflects partner feedback and intelligence and invited further comments on the priority goals both during and after the meeting.
- 4.2 Mark explained that the plan is to also change the London Asylum Oversight Group in a London Migration Place-Based Board, so that it is more intentional about bringing together cross-cutting themes. The group will meet monthly, in the months when the LSMP Board does not, and will help bring forward key priorities for Board consideration. There will need to be a stronger link between the London Migration Place-Based Board and LSMP Board going forward. He asked for any views of this direction of travel.
- 4.3 Paul welcomed the updated direction for the London Asylum Oversight Group, noting that while such groups were initially formed to focus on procurement and asylum dispersal, they have evolved to take a more place-based and issue-focused approach. He welcomed the stronger links between the London Asylum Oversight Group and the LSMP Board.
- 4.4 Maxine agreed, adding that it was important not to duplicate efforts and that the involvement of Clearsprings helps retain an operational focus on arrivals in the London Asylum Oversight Group. She stressed the need to be clear on where decision-making sits within the governance structure.
- 4.5 The group expressed agreement with the draft LSMP Board Terms of Reference, subject to any final feedback from members.

**Action: LSMP Board members to provide any final feedback on the LSMP Board Terms of Reference.**

## **5. Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP): Transitional Hotels**

- 5.1 Debbie shared that she had met with Lord Khan to discuss community cohesion and Afghan resettlement. She noted that a number of boroughs have raised concerns

about what will happen to Afghan families after their nine-month stay in transitional accommodation ends, due to the risk of homelessness.

- 5.2 Ellen Laidlaw (MHCLG) shared that they are working to implement a fairer approach to Afghan arrivals under the Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP), aiming for a more equitable regional spread that supports integration and cohesion. Ministerial letters outlining regional allocations have been sent, based on expected inflow rates using MOD data. Regions are also encouraged to consider longer-term settlement needs.
- 5.3 Emma Marsh (Ministry of Defence, MOD) explained her role in setting up the commercial arrangements for transitional accommodation. She noted a pressing need for accommodation and highlighted that a 4 April was deadline set for return on how allocations would be met to support rapid planning. She outlined MOD's accommodation requirements.
- 5.4 Mark noted London's previous experience in resettling Afghans but highlighted key differences under the new scheme, including the nine-month accommodation limit and reduced access to flexible housing and homelessness funds. He explained that London has been asked to submit plans for accommodating its allocation by 4 April and that a request for an extension of this deadline was put forward by the GLA and London Councils. He outlined three potential options: not submitting a plan (in which case the government might procure spaces directly), boroughs volunteering to provide transitional accommodation, or agreement to a 'fair-shares' model for allocations across London.
- 5.5 Mark acknowledged the need to respond to incoming arrivals and emphasised the importance of making the scheme as successful as possible. He stressed the need for more focus on what happens after the initial nine-month period in transitional accommodation.
- 5.6 Cllr Anthony Okereke welcomed the opportunity for dialogue. He noted that the 4 April deadline was too soon to enable meaningful engagement and called for clarity on support available after the nine-month period. He stressed the need to consider boroughs that have already hosted significant numbers of people and to account for the housing crisis in London within a fair-share approach.
- 5.7 Maxine noted that while the initial nine-month transitional accommodation offer may appear attractive to some boroughs, the lack of affordable move-on options—particularly for larger families—makes it really challenging. This could discourage boroughs from coming forward.
- 5.8 Maxine asked whether there is any flexibility to extend the nine-month period. She also raised concerns about the absence of an equivalent to the Flexible Housing Fund, noting that if per capita support cannot be used for housing costs, this places a challenging burden on local authorities and risks increasing homelessness.
- 5.9 Ellen acknowledged the challenges raised and welcomed continued collaboration. She clarified that boroughs providing transitional accommodation would not necessarily be expected to provide settled accommodation and that submitted plans could still be revised. Funding concerns, including the revised tariff, would be taken away for further discussion.

5.10 Phoebe reiterated that the government is keen to avoid people presenting as homeless and stressed the need to support settled moves within regions. She shared that the LAHF team is seeking interest in acquiring larger properties. She underlined they are interested to continue engaging on this issue and welcome LSMP input and insights.

5.11 Katerina explained that whilst MoD understand the concerns for the nine-month period, it was judged to strike a balance to allow people to get integration support adjust and acclimatise and help people move on at the right point. She noted concerns about capacity and confirmed MoD would provide staff support to hotels where needed and will think about alternative solutions in the longer term. The 4 April deadline is viewed as a starting point, with further discussion expected after submission.

5.12 Cllr Okereke underlined that they are grateful to hear the points on the timeline and interest in engagement with local authorities on this. He also stressed that without appropriate accommodation funding, local authorities already facing housing pressures may not be able to engage fully and called for further movement on this issue.

## **6. Update: Future of Asylum Accommodation and Support**

6.1 Paul (Home Office) provided a confidential update on the Delivery Model Assessment being carried out by the Home Office on the future of asylum accommodation and support.

6.2 Louisa le Roux (Home Office) outlined four pilot projects being developed to inform future delivery models after the contract end date. She elaborated that the main focus is ending the use of hotels and providing different mechanisms and working towards locally led delivery models. The pilots were tested in workshops. Boroughs will shortly be asked to submit Expression of Interest (EOIs) to deliver pilots. She emphasised that expressions of interest (EOIs) are non-binding, and that further opportunities will be available in future financial years.

6.3 Hannah Boylan (GLA) proposed developing a piece of work on options for future asylum accommodation and support delivery to build on what is learned from the pilots. She noted the importance of early thinking on potential future models, given the time required to shape and implement new approaches.

6.4 Paul supported this proposal, noting that while 2029 may seem distant, the complexity of the system requires early and informed planning. He highlighted the need for an evidence base to shape sustainable future models.

**Action: The Greater London Authority to develop a paper on options for future asylum accommodation and support delivery in London.**