

Getting started: structuring your asylum response

Photo showing participants in discussion at a Community Sponsorship event

Key information

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Introduction

Following a rise in the number of people seeking asylum accommodated in London, some boroughs will be designing their asylum response for the first time, while many others are scaling-up and adapting their strategies to meet rising service demand. The following section provides guidance on some of the foundational steps to designing and developing an asylum strategy.

Key lessons in this section

1. Resourcing sufficient capacity is key to enable proactive planning for rising numbers of people seeking asylum and changes in national policy. Recruit a dedicated asylum team with multiple staff.
2. Join up conversations. Consistent communication and co-ordination across relevant agencies and between local authority departments will facilitate a more proactive asylum response and help break down siloed working.
3. Designing an overarching asylum strategy is crucial. The fast-changing nature of national policies may necessitate adaptation over time, but set a clear direction and an organisational vision for building a holistic system of service delivery.

1. Building capacity and expertise

Set up a dedicated asylum team

- A vital step in designing an effective asylum response is to establish an asylum (or asylum and refugee) team. Asylum teams can be established differently, depending on the available funding, their set-up within a wider local authority governance structure (see below), and on the community profile of the borough (for example numbers in dispersal accommodation versus contingency accommodation). Resources below can help you to consider what from a variety of potential models which is best suited to your local authority structure.
- It is vital that an asylum team has a senior lead or programme manager to oversee strategy and adapt responses to shifts in national policy. Typically, boroughs with a longer history of welcoming people seeking asylum also have one or more dedicated operational co-ordinating officers to support this work and enable capacity for expanding service delivery.
- Asylum and refugee teams should also have an outreach team, to visit sites of contingency and dispersal accommodation, and staff to deliver early help and move on support that can help identify priority needs and signpost people seeking asylum toward services. Further information on developing these teams can be found on our [Outreach](#) and [Supporting changing needs](#) pages.
- Proactive and well-resourced asylum teams will also either incorporate, or work in close collaboration with staff across a number of key departments: including health, housing, education, welfare and community engagement. Further information on cross-departmental working can be found below.

Make use of transferrable expertise

- There are a number of helpful transferable learnings on integration and resettlement that can be drawn from people with experience working with those who have come via other humanitarian routes, such as those from Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine and Hong Kong, and from residents with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Several local authorities in the Design Lab benefited from transferring employees with experience engaging these groups into their asylum team.
- Valuable experience with other refugee groups can often be applied to outreach strategies and can help with the design and accessibility of asylum services. Personnel with experience with other migrant and refugee groups also typically hold strong pre-existing relationships with local Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations and agencies such as schools and the NHS.
- Local authorities may also benefit from bringing in employees with previous experience from managing the Covid-19 response. Often, colleagues with this background can bring experience ‘working with ambiguity’ to navigate and innovate local responses around rapidly-changing national policies. Many also brought valuable expertise in trauma-informed practice.

Consider strategies for staff retention and staff welfare

- It is important to have in place retention strategies and career progression pathways for staff in an asylum team. Working with people seeking asylum often requires building broad professional relationships across a wide array of agencies and sectors, from health to the Home Office to VCS organisations; meanwhile, outreach staff in particular need to build trust with people seeking asylum and with staff in contracted accommodation providers. These relationships can easily be lost if a staff member leaves.
- Working on an asylum response can involve emotionally difficult conversations and it is vital that strategies are in place to support teams with their welfare. This can involve arrangements to offer monthly counselling support to team members. Particular trauma-informed support may also be required for staff members with lived experience of migration or the asylum system.

2. Designing the organisational structure of an asylum team

There is no single ‘best practice’ blueprint for how to design the organisational structure of an asylum team and participating boroughs in the Design Lab highlighted a wide variety of models. Some teams had a more centralised and multi-sectoral asylum (or asylum and resettlement) team, while others had a team largely based in one department – such as public health, adult social care, children’s services, communities or housing.

Senior and corporate leads either establishing or redesigning their asylum teams may wish to consider the relative pros and cons from some of the more common typologies below. [Reference:1](#)

Table 1: Asylum team integrated with refugee resettlement versus multi-sector, centralised team

Table 2: Governance structure typologies for an asylum team

Governance structures - typology	Key characteristics
Housing-based asylum team	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Closely linked to refugee resettlement and move-on, which drives a closer focus on the long-term resettlement and integration of asylum-seeking residents.• Able to undertake risk assessments for new accommodation sites to push for adequate quality.• Oftentimes housing is a larger and more high-profile department in councils.
Communities department-based asylum team	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community safety and ‘prevention’ focus enables multi-sectoral and proactive planning.• Strong connections with VCS partners and police.• Specific expertise in safeguarding.
Public health-based asylum team	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often already a multi-sectoral service provision model (aiming for holistic health outcomes).• Strong connections with NHS and some VCS organisations (particularly in mental health and disability).• Benefits from prior capacity built during the COVID-19 response.• Attuned to intersection and acute health needs.• Recognises that wider determinants such as income, housing, education, are the most important drivers of health.

Governance structures- typology	Key characteristics
Children's services- based asylum team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer history of expertise working with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) due to the UASC National Transfer system and experience as a corporate parent. • Often well connected with professional associations of social workers such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services. • Learning and new expertise needed to adapt services to adult needs.
Governance structures - typology	Key characteristics
An asylum team based within a wider resettlement team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits from resettlement funding, such as Homes for Ukraine, where funded activity can involve multiple groups of refugees and people seeking asylum. • Already focused on supporting social integration for new arrivals (transferrable expertise) and often has strong pre-existing ties across local authority departments. • Can identify useful areas of join-up across welcoming strands, for example on ESOL, volunteering and social connection initiatives. • Better equipped to support residents after move-on (except for housing needs).
A multi-sectoral, centralised asylum team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closer to decision makers from multiple key departments (for example health, housing, education). • Ability to navigate various departments in the council to create new services and programmes. • Overview of various funding pots (for example from public health as well as refugee resettlement). • Often necessitates new functions and forums to be established, requiring substantial co-ordination across council departments.

3. Enabling closer co-ordination: within the local authority and across agencies

It is essential that local authorities put in place strategies which facilitate close co-ordination across the departments and agencies working with people seeking asylum. It is common that separate teams will each be working to understand and engage people seeking asylum, as will staff in the VCS sector, schools, the NHS and Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH), London's contracted accommodation provider. A number of steps and guiding principles can help to break down siloes across these teams to encourage a more joined-up, borough-wide approach.

3.1 Mapping existing services

- Many local authorities are now mapping the services being offered to people seeking asylum within their borough: both across departments and externally with VCS organisations, adult education providers and legal advice providers.
- These exercises often take time – to broaden out the relations of an asylum team, for example with organisations in the VCS sector that may have not previously partnered with a local authority, and to bring together senior staff across key borough teams. Yet the value of investing in a mapping exercise can pay dividends for helping reduce the unnecessary duplication of effort and improve information sharing.

Waltham Forest: Co-locating services

Waltham Forest has benefited from co-ordinating its asylum response across departments and has subsequently identified opportunities to co-locate services: using spaces that were trusted and frequented by people seeking asylum, such as ‘warm spaces’ and Welcome Hubs, as a space to offer volunteer and ESOL opportunities.

Results and lessons:

- Sharing a space helped individual services to save costs.
- Co-location helped improve the reach and engagement with service-users than if services had been delivered separately. For example, some residents arrived seeking welfare support and were also signposted toward ESOL assessments that they were otherwise unaware of.
- Mapping VCS organisations in the local area can also help asylum teams to identify new potential partnerships and spot gaps in services for particular groups. Boroughs with a Communities or Cohesion team may already have a database that can be shared and built on. Alternatively, local authorities can put out a call for evidence to update their records and engage a wider array of third sector groups. This can help to reveal organisations that have had less engagement with a council, including faith, sports and social groups, and charities delivering specialist intersectional support for example for people seeking asylum who are disabled or LGBT+. Some services may already have been identified on the Mayor of London’s city-wide [map of services for migrants, refugees and newly arrived communities](#).
- Any mapping exercise – whether shared within a local authority or public with VCS organisations – should concisely and accurately state which services each group offers to prevent organisations experiencing inappropriate referrals or requests for support.
- Crucially, mapping also requires regular review and updating as new organisations emerge or others expand their support offer. Updates can be processed through open-source formatted sites that enable organisations to add themselves or edit their details.

3.2 Joining up internal conversations

Multi-agency forums

- Local authorities with more holistic asylum strategies will often establish networks and forums to facilitate cross-sector, multi-agency conversations. These enable faster sharing of information about the shifting

- needs of asylum-seeking residents, for example to discuss safeguarding concerns, respond to new national policies, or prepare for the opening or closure of contingency hotels.
- Building on the mapping exercises outlined above, multi-sector forums are also valuable spaces for encouraging new collaborative initiatives, service pathways and pooled-funding programmes that support the integration of people seeking asylum.
 - There are a range of approaches that can be taken to establish cross-sector and multi-agency networks. Organisations and internal teams that you may wish to engage could include:
 - Housing
 - Environmental Health
 - Community Cohesion or Community Safety
 - Health
 - Police, NHS and fire brigade representatives
 - Children's Services
 - Adult Social Care
 - Finance
 - Legal
 - Representatives from Clearsprings Ready Homes e.g. hotel managers
 - Local authorities establishing a new forum for the first time should look to agree a Terms of Reference in the inaugural meeting.
 - Aim to hold meetings semi-regularly (approximately every 8 weeks) so as not to be a drain on senior staff time. Having a senior strategic chair, such as an Executive Director, can also help secure buy-in across departments.

Seconding staff across departments

- Local authorities can also benefit from seconding staff from other departments to an asylum team. This can be helpful where significant cooperation and cross-department communication is needed on a high-pressure issue. For example, this might involve seconding a housing officer with expertise in temporary accommodation, to support with an increased number of people with refugee status.
- Secondments tend to be favoured over an alternative set-up of having a 'link officer' (a team member who is co-located and matrix-managed between both the asylum/resettlement team and another department). Boroughs in the Design Lab noted that secondments helped a new officer to feel closer and more involved member of an asylum team and enabled more direct line management.

3.3 VCS Co-ordination

Establishing a VCS network or steering group can similarly provide a simple but effective method of improving information sharing across a borough and promoting closer cooperation across the local third sector.

- Convening a network can make it easier to mobilise support from VCS organisations in response to rapid emerging challenges, such as a new contingency hotel opening. The forum can offer a space to identify which organisations have the expertise and capacity to respond to a specific group's needs, or to operate in a specific geographical area, helping to more efficiently match supply with demand for services.

- Networks can also help promote engagement with a wider array of smaller or more specialist VCS organisations in an area, which may previously have had little funding from or contact with a local authority: for example, those working with a specific nationality group, or working on intersectional issues such as with LGBT+ people seeking asylum.
- VCS networks can take a variety of different forms and boroughs have taken different approaches. Some focus specifically on organisations engaging with asylum seeking residents. Meanwhile others group together organisations engaging in welcoming or resettlement work with different migrant and refugee groups (for example Ukrainians and Afghans), to identify areas for de-siloing support, such as around ESOL services, or for activities that promote social connection. Larger networks sometimes also incorporate elements of both, with an overarching group for all VCS organisations working in resettlement, and subgroups focused on more specific migrant groups.

3.4 Co-ordination with the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes

- Local authorities with asylum-seeking populations should establish regular meetings with a senior point of contact from Clearsprings Ready Homes in their borough, for example a manager at each contingency hotel.
- Consistent communication will help both parties to monitor and track information on the needs of asylum-seeking residents. Having a closer relationship with hotel managers can also help staff access and engage residents in accommodation sites more easily, to conduct outreach work, consultation exercises and raise awareness of local services and social activities.

Challenging the quality of government-contracted accommodation

In certain cases, local authorities may need to challenge the quality of services or accommodation being provided to asylum seeking residents. In this situation, boroughs in the Design Lab emphasised the importance of taking a balanced approach.

The first priority of the local authority is to safeguard its residents and it is crucial to criticise and challenge any shortcoming in the provision of contracted services. At the same time, and in parallel, it is important to maintain constructive collaboration with contracted organisations.

In practice, this can involve taking a two-pronged response:

1. Continue to work operationally with representatives of Clearsprings Ready Homes: being candid about issues, while retaining regular communication and information sharing.
2. Secondly, asylum teams can also escalate concerns to a senior level, for example through statutory bodies for safeguarding, who can file reports to the Home Office or – if necessary – a government minister. Our page on [Outreach](#) provides further detail on the contractual expectations for government-contracted accommodation providers, and our page on [Vulnerability and safeguarding](#) provides further detail and examples of safeguarding responses.

It may also be useful to stay in touch with the London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP) and London Councils about issues, as they use information from across London to build a system-wide evidence base that can be presented to the Home Office and its contractors.

- It can help to establish a set of agreed shared values with representatives of Clearsprings Ready Homes in one of the initial meetings – to promote a constructive relationship going forward. This can help set out the

statutory duties of a local authority, and emphasise the mutual interests of working in partnership and sharing information.

- Local authorities with larger asylum-seeking populations may also benefit from setting up monthly communications with senior management at Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH), such as with the Operations Director and Heads of Engagement and Safeguarding, for example where a company is responsible for multiple hotels in one borough. As the hierarchies of accommodation providers in London are often ‘top heavy’, this can help to escalate concerns more quickly. Since senior managers will also be bound by their contractual expectations from national government, it can also be helpful to involve a Home Office representative in senior-level meetings, for example from the Safeguarding Hub, to liaise across organisations and accelerate sign-off processes.

4. How we respond: spectrum between reactive and proactive

The charts below [Reference:2](#) can be used as a tool to help local authority teams gauge and track the proactivity of their asylum response across different dimensions of a borough. It gives a general idea of the types of activities boroughs engage in within their responses (response dimensions) as well as the different ways they respond (outsourcing, building new capacity internally, etc.). It is easier to think more holistically about the response by considering all these response dimensions together.

Additionally, thinking of how boroughs respond as a spectrum from a more reactive mode to a more proactive mode acknowledges the link between resources invested and adaptability of the response.

The chart answers the questions:

1. Which dimensions of the response do we want to prioritize in our planning, and in what order?
2. How do we want to respond?
3. To what extent can we design the response to be more adaptive to future changes?

All three answers of course depend on financial resources and team capacity, but also the numbers and needs of those seeking asylum in the borough. Most responses start as a more reactive response if hosting asylum-seekers is new to the borough. But councils adapt to new policy areas all the time, and it is possible to respond more proactively to asylum as well.

The chart below can be used in two ways:

1. For boroughs encountering asylum for the first time that do not have an established team, this chart can guide an initial cross-sectoral meeting between council staff to identify which dimensions to prioritize first, and in what sequence to work on the other dimensions.
2. For boroughs with some response in place for asylum, refugee resettlement, and people with no recourse to public funds, this chart can guide a discussion within the team of how reactively or proactively they approach each dimension to determine where to go further. This could be, for example, transitioning from commissioning a provider to manage a help desk to identifying the appropriate council staff to plan outreach events in hotels. This discussion may be prompted by a change in context, for example the establishment of a new hotel after the borough focused most of its attention on hosting people seeking asylum in dispersal accommodation.

Table 3: Spectrum of Reactive to Proactive

Reactive			Proactive
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'one-off'	'outsource'	'outreach'	'adapt'
Meeting statutory obligations and emergency needs if and when they arise. Characterised by unpredictability and lack of clear decision-maker taking ownership of the problem. Difficult to cost this type of response.	Putting service providers in place so that basic needs are met. This could include outsourcing to commissioned voluntary and civil society sector providers to provide a broad range of needs.	Working to tailor service provision to make it more accessible for diverse asylum-seeking residents. This could include outreach initiatives to identify new service users.	Establishing a process for adapting service provision and coordination to future changes.

Table 4: Dimensions of an asylum response

Response dimensions	Reactive			Proactive
Description	'one-off'	'outsource'	'outreach'	'adapt'
Understanding needs				
Establishing a service				
Consulting or co-producing with people seeking asylum				
Building relationships with voluntary and civil society sector organisations				
Building relationships with external partners				
Engaging with other boroughs				
Advocating politically with local, city-level, and/or central-level stakeholders				
Establishing a strategic vision				

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References

- [Reference:1](#) Typologies, analysis and diagrams of governance structures were provided by Melissa Weihmayer, based on participating authorities in the Asylum Welcome Design Lab. See Weihmayer, M. F. (2024). Approaches for Analysing the Local Governance of Displacement (Forthcoming doctoral dissertation). Department of Geography and Environment, LSE, London, United Kingdom.
- [Reference:2](#) See Weihmayer, M. F. (2024). Approaches for Analysing the Local Governance of Displacement (Forthcoming doctoral dissertation). Department of Geography and Environment, LSE, London, United Kingdom.