

Outreach

Volunteers at the Lewisham Donation Hub

Key information

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Introduction

The following section explores advice and insights for local authorities on engaging in outreach with people seeking asylum: both in contingency and dispersal accommodation.

1. Building an outreach team

Outreach teams engaging with people seeking asylum will need to be equipped to help service users with a broad variety of challenges: from accessing an Aspen finance card through to signposting people toward specialist advice and support. It is essential that strategic leads look to compose teams bringing together a variety of skillsets. Where possible, recruiting staff with lived experience as a person seeking asylum or refugee can also provide important understanding and insight to a team.

Key lessons in this section

1. Recruit an outreach team with experience adapting to fast-changing national policy contexts and with a variety of specialisations in the core needs of people seeking asylum: such as accessing health, housing and welfare entitlements.
2. Use available guidance to understand the conditions and expectations for Clearsprings Ready Homes, set out in the AASC contract, and to know when to challenge inadequate provision.
3. Maintain regular and consistent in-person presence at contingency accommodation and sites close to dispersal accommodation to build trust with people seeking asylum.

Recruitment

Participants in the Design Lab stressed the importance of emphasising in a job description that prospective outreach workers have experience ‘dealing with ambiguous situations, demonstrating resilience, and readily adapting to change in emerging situations’, to source personnel with a background in handling rapidly-changing policy environments. Similarly, their recruitment stresses that job requirements may flex and change over time.

Multilingual staff

Not all outreach staff need to be multilingual, however it is beneficial to recruit team members capable of speaking some of the main languages used by people seeking asylum within the local authority. This helps staff to establish trust with residents at an earlier stage and to respond more swiftly to urgent issues, without requiring an interpreter.

Multidisciplinary teams

- An important lesson shared by local authorities with longer experience engaging in outreach – either with people seeking asylum or other refugee groups – was the added strength of setting up a multidisciplinary outreach team, bringing a range of skills and experience in addressing different areas.
- These teams typically used an early help assessment to identify the needs of asylum seeking families.
- Adults are also signposted towards services with a specialised background in areas such as health, finance, employability, legal advice, trauma-informed mental health support, or housing.

Design Lab case study - Learning from Afghan Bridging Hotels

One of the local authority teams participating in the Design Lab had learned from their response supporting Afghan bridging hotels to establish a multidisciplinary ‘Integrated Outreach, Early Help and Social Care Team’, working in contingency accommodation throughout the borough.

Results and lessons:

- This new team brings together an early help team, working in close collaboration with a group of outreach officers, an adult help worker, all working under the supervision of a social work practice manager.
- The team reported that the new system has enabled cases to be handled in a more responsive and targeted approach – with residents referred directly to one officer based on their area of need.
- Since the needs of people seeking asylum are so diverse, it was felt that recruiting outreach staff with area specialisms was necessary to enable detail expertise to be built, for example offering dedicated early help support to families.

Regular check-in meetings across an outreach team can then ensure that lessons from specialised team members are shared. For example, Newham’s ‘Welcome Newham’ team comprises a series of officers who each act as ‘champions’ in specific areas of expertise:

- Employment
- ESOL
- Benefits
- Housing/homelessness
- Tenancy sustainment

- GP registrations
- Biometric residence permits (BRP)
- Aspen Cards
- Section 95 status
- GP registrations
- School admissions.

The team largely engages in specialised work relating to their designated area, but holds a weekly in-person ‘anchor day’ to update on their caseload, to share learnings and to remain closely aware of the complex challenges and issues facing people seeking asylum in different areas of their lives.

2. Gathering data on asylum-seeking residents

Data can be a helpful tool for local authorities to gain insights on their local population and to cater services based on observed needs. A key consideration that should be made when gathering and sharing data, and should underpin all aspects of this work, is appropriate GDPR compliance.

In contingency accommodation

- London’s contracted asylum accommodation provider Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH) maintains a data portal with basic information on the residents of a contingency hotel. This can be used to establish data on the profile and demographics of asylum-seeking residents, and in certain cases individual data on arrivals. Local authorities should liaise with senior contacts at CRH to ensure they have suitable arrangements in place that enable the maximum sharing of data. Please note, CRH will ask officers to sign a Memorandum of Understanding and will only grant access to the portal to officers with a valid user case.
- However, when using the portal, local authorities should be mindful that there is a high level of population churn among asylum-seeking residents, where people will move between boroughs or in and out of London, particularly when they are provided with dispersal accommodation or acquire refugee status. As such portal data should be seen as approximate, rather than accurate.

Helpful tip - Establishing a case management system

Boroughs participating in the Design Lab with a longer history of working in resettlement advised against local authorities attempting to supplement gaps in this data themselves through extensive research exercises, since this typically requires a resource-intensive and ongoing process to maintain and track a fast-changing population of residents.

Rather, multiple boroughs advised that it is more practical for staff to establish a detailed case management system within a local authority that can capture data through early help check-ins and outreach visits, and which can be updated by outreach team members over time to reflect residents’ changing needs. Further details on establishing a case management system can be found on our [Supporting changing needs](#) page.

- Another simple yet effective method for data collection can be for outreach staff to visit new arrivals through door-knocking exercises, to disseminate basic data sharing forms that enable a local authority to build a file of a person’s name, data of birth, door number, country of origin, and disabilities or health vulnerabilities. These simpler data collection exercises can be integrated into existing outreach, orientation

or early help meetings. Short, accessible forms can include simple GDPR explanations to obtain service user consent for storing personal data.

In dispersal accommodation

Local authorities receive comparatively less data from central government or contracted accommodation providers on residents in dispersed accommodation. This is changing however: Clearsprings Ready Homes began uploading the addresses of dispersed accommodation onto its portal in October 2023.

Boroughs in the Design Lab with larger numbers of residents in dispersed accommodation had found a number of alternative routes to build up data on the whereabouts and needs of people seeking asylum, whilst remaining compliant with GDPR and maintaining the trust of asylum-seeking residents. These included the following methods:

1. **VCS Organisations.** Firstly, many had worked in collaboration or partnership with local VCS organisations delivering immediate aid to people seeking asylum. These tended to have strong relations of trust with asylum seeking residents that, over time, had enabled them to gather data on the whereabouts of dispersed accommodation sites. Some local authorities had shadowed VCS organisations on door-knocking drop-in exercises to introduce themselves and ask about gathering data. Others such as Barnet had directly commissioned and funded VCS organisations with relevant expertise and community trust to deliver local authority outreach work.
2. **Engaging residents through trusted spaces.** Some of the boroughs in the Design Lab had looked to reach and engage residents of dispersed accommodation through holding outreach ‘drop in’ sessions, hosted in community spaces often visited by people seeking asylum: such as foodbanks and warm banks, community hubs and kitchens.
3. **Housing department data.** Some boroughs had been able to obtain partial data on the postcodes of dispersed accommodation through their housing department, on postcodes and the numbers of residents, where House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licenses had been issued for asylum accommodation.
4. **Home Office secondments.** One borough in the Design Lab – Barking and Dagenham – had successfully applied to the Home Office to second a member of staff into the local authority team. This service was funded by the Local Authority at the time. The member of staff assisted with mapping dispersed accommodation and liaising across central and local government to share information. This proved to have been particularly useful as part of a broader strategy for the borough to move its community services closer to areas with dispersed accommodations sites. Other local authorities with a large population of residents in dispersed accommodation may wish to inquire about the potential for similar arrangements. However, local authorities will typically be expected by the Home Office to resource the staff costs for the secondment.

Further resources

In addition to providing data as set out above, the Greater London Authority hosts the London Migration Data Hub. The tool sets out a number of migration and housing pressures/populations in each local authority with the aim of:

- facilitating the implementation of a ‘fair shares’ approach across London to support people seeking sanctuary,
- informing the development and funding of services to maximise opportunities for support and social integration available across populations.

The Data Hub also includes interactive maps on the asylum-seeking population, numbers of Afghan evacuees in settled accommodation, Ukrainian arrivals under Homes for Ukraine and homelessness in the boroughs.

If you have not yet accessed the Data Hub, please first [create an account on the London Datastore](#). Once registered, email MigrationTeam@london.gov.uk to gain access.

3. Key elements of the AASC contract

Outreach teams should look to familiarise themselves with the key requirements of the [Asylum Accommodation and Support \(AASC\) contract](#). This is the contract that Clearsprings Ready Homes holds in London.

Understanding the contract will help teams to identify the services that Clearsprings Ready Homes and its subcontractors should be offering and to spot any potential gaps or poor-quality provision on the ground, when engaging in outreach.

The objective of the Home Office through the AASC contracts is to **"meet the accommodation and essential living needs of eligible asylum seekers"**. [Reference:1](#) Asylum Matters have produced a [concise document](#) of the services that this should comprise and the expected quality of delivery. This also includes information on the [Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract \(AIRE\)](#) for the Home Office's contracted advice provider Migrant Help.

Key features from the AASC contract

- Contracted companies are obligated to liaise and cooperate with local authorities, VCS organisations, the NHS and the Police, including through attending multi-agency meetings and forums. The contract states that providers must "support the effective coordination of local authority delivered services, acting in the best interests of Service Users", through establishing relations with relevant borough teams.
- Companies are also obligated to liaise and consult with local authorities regarding the location of accommodation for service users, and the appropriate information to be shared with local authorities to support their planning and activities.
- Companies must provide a notification service to local authorities regarding the cessation of support for service users, to help prevent homelessness.
- The contracted providers must conduct appropriate inspection and reporting procedures necessary to assure the safeguarding and wellbeing of service users with specific needs, or at-risk service users.
- Most importantly, providers must deliver "accommodation which is safe, habitable and fit-for-purpose, with appropriate adaptations to meet the needs of Service Users, as required."

4. Building trust and effective relations with people seeking asylum

A core role of an outreach team is to build trust with people seeking asylum to engage with and utilise local authority services. People apply for asylum in the UK for a diverse array of reasons, and their journey through the asylum system can be very different, but many can feel a sense of mistrust and caution towards government, either local or central. For new arrivals, awareness of available entitlements and services will often be low, although our [Supporting changing needs](#) page provides advice on how orientation strategies can improve understanding of these. It is crucial that teams proactively approach people seeking asylum, rather than assuming

those in need of support will approach a local authority.

In person presence

- Regular, in-person presence and contact with asylum seeking residents is key to the success of gaining trust. This can take different forms, depending on the context and dispersal of asylum-seeking populations in a borough.
 - In person consultations and drop-ins at contingency accommodation where there is a communal space available.
 - Door-knocking rounds at sites of dispersal accommodation.
 - Where there is no communal space at a contingency hotel, or where there is limited data on sites of dispersal accommodation, drop-ins can be held in nearby community spaces popular with people seeking asylum, e.g. a local library, community kitchen or co-located with VCS organisations delivering aid.
- For drop-ins, consider setting up a welcoming environment – for example with teas and coffees – to invite participants in. Having interpreters on site proficient in the main languages spoken at a site is also crucial for those with emerging levels of English.
- Regularity is important with drop-ins and face-to-face meetings: aim to be available consistently at the same day and time in each venue, and where possible ensure the same staff attend each time to establish recognition among residents.

Navigating barriers and concerns

There is no one form of ‘best practice’ for establishing the trust of people seeking asylum. However, there are a number of tips that can help residents feel more at ease engaging with the council.

- Where boroughs are engaging in outreach for the first time, it can be helpful to shadow or work in collaboration with VCS organisations who have a longer track record and stronger relations with local asylum-seeking residents. This can help gently establish awareness about the role and presence of a local authority – bridged through trusted community practitioners.
- Set clear expectations about what services the local authority can and cannot provide: to outline entitlements available, but also to be transparent about where alternative sources of support are required.
- Where possible, engage in outreach work in pairs with a man and a woman. Oftentimes women seeking asylum may be more comfortable with a female member of staff.
- Liaise with contingency accommodation staff to understand who is not approaching a drop-in. Staff may be able to identify at-risk individuals, who may require a different approach such as door-knocking, or engagement via a VCS partner.
- Communication is key. Maintain regular communication with residents on any actions agreed and delivered, to demonstrate that their concerns have been heard and action taken and reinforce who they can turn to for support.

Hammersmith and Fulham - Open House Sessions

Local authorities can also integrate drop-ins and outreach into less formal environments. Hammersmith and Fulham has successfully piloted a programme of ‘open house sessions’, comprising opportunities for people seeking asylum to leave their accommodation, socialise through organised activities, and also to access a local authority ‘surgery’ where they can share concerns around their needs.

Results and lessons:

- Open House sessions have ranged from food and coffee mornings through to games sessions and guided walks. Outreach staff will attend and noted that the informal atmosphere created a more welcoming, ‘easy access’ environment for asylum seeking residents to get to know (and, when trusting enough, to engage) borough staff.
- The scheme has helped the borough strengthen relations with local VCS organisations, who have helped to facilitate activities. Collaboration and co-location of activities with VCS partners has also helped asylum-seeking residents feel more at ease to approach local authority staff.
- The local football club, constituency MP and council cabinet members have also attended to welcome the participants, helping them feel supported.

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References

- [Reference:1](#)AASC Contract Terms and Conditions, 2.