

MINUTES OF THE SAFER STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 13 March 2024 at 7.00 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Liam Shrivastava (Chair), Hau-Yu Tam (Vice-Chair), Mark Jackson, Oana Olaru and Rachel Onikosi.

ALSO JOINING THE MEETING VIRTUALLY: Councillors Coral Howard and Ayesha Lahai-Taylor.

APOLOGIES: None.

ALSO PRESENT: Pinaki Ghoshal (Executive Director for Children and Young People), James Lee (Director of Communities, Partnerships and Leisure), Sara Rahman (Director of Families, Quality and Commissioning), Benjamin Awkal (Scrutiny Manager) and Katya Griffin (Borough of Sanctuary Manager).

ALSO PRESENT VIRTUALLY: Maleeka Dachi (Safe Space Manager).

NB: Those Councillors listed as joining virtually were not in attendance for the purposes of the meeting being quorate, any decisions taken or to satisfy the requirements of s85 Local Government Act 1972

1. Minutes of previous meeting

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 January 2024 be agreed as an accurate record.

2. Declarations of interest

RESOLVED

That the following declaration be noted:

- Re item 3, Cllr Tam declared she was employed by the Lewisham Refugee & Migrant Network (LRMN), which was a Borough of Sanctuary partner. Her employment was not directly related to any funding received by the LRMN from the Council.

3. Borough of Sanctuary update

Witnesses

James Lee, Director of Communities Partnerships and Leisure
Katya Griffin, Borough of Sanctuary Manager

Key points from discussion

The witnesses introduced the report. Key points raised included:

- 3.1. The Borough of Sanctuary Programme aimed to ensure the Council and its partners provided a high standard of support to sanctuary seekers, not to prioritise them above other groups.

The meeting adjourned from 7.19 pm to 7.24 pm.

- 3.2. The Committee's previous meeting, at which it had been joined by voluntary sector partners, had led to a collaborative, borough-wide partnership approach.
- 3.3. The Council had resettled 127 refugee households (the most of any London borough), supported 650 Ukrainian nationals, heavily invested in immigration advice for people designated as No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), delivered bespoke employability support to Ukrainian and other sanctuary seekers, conducted coproduction work to strengthen the voice of sanctuary seekers, provided wraparound support including complex casework, introduced move-on and mental health support and community building.
- 3.4. All GP surgeries had signed the Safe Surgeries pledge. South East London Integrated Care System staff had worked with GP surgeries to ensure they were fulfilling their Safe Surgery commitment to not require identification from service users and the Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network had conducted secret shopper exercises to test consistency.
- 3.5. The Asylum and Refugee Partnership, including the Council, Integrated Care System, voluntary sector partners, the Home Office, Clearsprings Ready Homes, and asylum hotel management, enabled close partnership working and accountability.
- 3.6. The Borough of Sanctuary Strategy Group enabled approximately 50 staff from across the Council to convene to solve problems, share good practice and monitor progress against the Priorities and Outcomes Framework.

The Committee put questions to the witnesses. Key points raised included:

- 3.7. The decision on the Council's reaccreditation by City of Sanctuary was scheduled for 25 March.
- 3.8. Immigration advice was mainly provided by Southwark Law Centre.
- 3.9. Clearsprings Ready Homes and its contracted partners were quite accepting when there were issues. However, they often did not deliver on the commitments they made in response to issues. The Council was persistent in ensuring Clearsprings and its partners delivered what they said they would while making clear it genuinely wanted to work in partnership and appreciated their operational challenges.
- 3.10. The Council's work was helped by the pan-London asylum working group as many of the issues affecting Lewisham were not unique to the borough. For example, Clearsprings required safeguarding referrals by accommodation staff to be made through Clearsprings' own process, but, after a year of work, a position had been arrived at whereby local referrals would be made concurrently.
- 3.11. Councillors could support the sanctuary movement by being involved and engaged in ward-level work, such as housing applications, and would be welcome at the Lewisham Migration Forum – where the Council met with its Borough of Sanctuary partners.
- 3.12. An online learning module and lunch and learns for all council staff were to be launched in April.

- 3.13. Initially, the Council's Borough of Sanctuary approach was largely a political campaign. Since its focus had turned more to embedding sanctuary principles and delivering specific outcomes in the Council, the high-profile campaigning element was somewhat diminished. Whether that element was missed by partners was to be considered.
- 3.14. A system had been introduced to enable voluntary sector partners to provide feedback on the housing support provided by the Council. The difficulty of providing compassionate support while facing significant challenges and pressures was acknowledged.
- 3.15. Potential barriers to the success of the Programme included local authority funding, limited human resources, the housing crisis, and national policy changes and government actions requiring reactive responses detracting from proactive work to implement the Strategy.
- 3.16. The decant of an asylum hotel in the borough previously had caused significant upheaval and trauma for those involved. There was now only one hotel being used for asylum accommodation in the borough, likely in part due to the limited number of hotels.
- 3.17. Few single asylum seekers, who were low priority for housing, were accommodated in Lewisham, unlike other London boroughs, meaning it avoided the challenges of supporting high numbers of single people leaving asylum accommodation.
- 3.18. The Council did not have any role in determining and could not control who was placed or resettled in the borough.
- 3.19. Of people designated NRPF, 80 per cent were of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities and 50 per cent were Black.
- 3.20. It had been reported that sanctuary seekers were being charged for doctors' letters. Action for Refugees in Lewisham (AFRIL) was advising its service users to request copies of their personal data held by GP surgeries, which was often a sufficient substitute for a formal letter.
- 3.21. All Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) in Lewisham were in the care of the Council; none were accommodated in hotels. There were some historic, but no recent, cases of UASC going missing from hotels and the Council's care.
- 3.22. The Council's Licensing Team had inspected, and the multi-agency forum conducted a safeguarding visit to, Lewisham's asylum hotel. Lewisham's accommodation was of a reasonable standard for hotel accommodation, and offered cooking facilities, the lack of which drove the majority of complaints regarding the other, now closed, hotel accommodation in Lewisham. The Licensing Team was satisfied with the standard of accommodation.
- 3.23. Sometimes refugees chose not to access the Home Office's system of move-on support. Issues arose when people chose not to access that system. The Council had an arrangement with the hotel's management under which vulnerable families were referred to a voluntary sector partner for support. The support and quality of accommodation received by homeless refugee families was the same as for any homeless family.
- 3.24. Due to the limited number of single asylum seekers accommodated in Lewisham, few were sleeping rough after leaving their hotel accommodation. For single refugees and other refugees without priority need for housing, the Council's voluntary sector partners worked with Refugees at Home to provide home stays and the Council had procured a property, introduced an

emergency payment system and was considering providing supported accommodation.

- 3.25. Officers were working with Homes for Ukraine families to prevent homelessness – Lewisham was doing well compared to pan-London data.
- 3.26. The Director was to discuss how political campaigning could support the Borough of Sanctuary programme with the Cabinet Member for Communities, Refugees and Community Safety.

ACTIONS

1. Borough of Sanctuary Manager to raise the issue of GP surgeries charging for doctors' letters with Doctors of the World.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

4. Multi-agency response to child exploitation

Witnesses

Pinaki Ghoshal, Executive Director for Children and Young People
Sara Rahman, Director of Families, Quality and Commissioning
Maleeka Dachi, Safe Space Manager

Key points from discussion

- 4.1. The Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) arrangements replaced the Concern Hub in 2022. Its structure comprised operational, tactical and strategic fora intended to safeguard children from extrafamilial harm, including criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation and radicalisation.
- 4.2. A dedicated team, Safe Space, worked with children at high risk of exploitation, although MACE could support children engaged with other services. Contextual responses went beyond supporting specific children and also included upstream work with communities and partners to prevent exploitation.
- 4.3. MACE enabled the identification and redress of bias in services and prevention of disproportionality in outcomes.
- 4.4. The Youth Justice Board reviewed data to identify disproportionality and how it could be prevented through early intervention.
- 4.5. There were cases where victims of childhood exploitation went on to exploit other vulnerable people. National Referral Mechanism decisions made by the local pilot panel were subject to ratification by the Home Office, which had a high threshold. If there was not sufficient evidence that, at the time of a referral, the person was a victim of modern slavery, they would not receive a positive conclusive grounds decision. In such cases, other paths would be followed, such as the allocation of a social worker or referral to a partner agency. Council services adopted a child-first approach and understood that children's behaviours were contributed to by prior experiences.
- 4.6. Good progress was being made with the implementation of the Child Lilo case review recommendations. The broader picture was that the numbers of children requiring statutory social care interventions, entering care, being excluded from school, in the criminal justice system or involved in serious violence were reducing. However, failures nevertheless did and could occur.
- 4.7. A theme in the Child Lilo case review, and other similar cases elsewhere, was the disconnectedness of the response to his needs. The Integrated

Adolescent Safeguarding Service had since been formed to provide a single response to children with safeguarding concerns and greater connectivity with education services developed.

- 4.8. A greater awareness of neurodiversity as a potential risk factor of exploitation – a feature of the Child Lilo case – was also being developed. Services were also seeking to understand and meet children's needs early, regardless of whether they had received a formal diagnosis.
- 4.9. Missing education was common theme among children about whom there were safeguarding concerns. The Integrated Adolescent Safeguarding Service was to work closely with education settings.
- 4.10. The Child Lilo case had also highlighted how adverse childhood experiences affected children's functioning, particularly for children with additional needs. The mental health of children who had such experiences required support in order to prevent them being exposed to violence or exploitation.
- 4.11. Existing participation groups were used to capture children's voices. At individual level, children's voices were recorded by children's services staff in assessments and plans; however, there was a challenge of collating those insights so their themes could inform strategic planning.
- 4.12. Children received personal plans to support multi-agency working in relation to the risks they faced. For example, the local schools network might be made aware of certain risks; or where risks related to a child's housing, children's services would liaise with housing services and the Police to ensure the child and their family were safely accommodated.
- 4.13. Any child with a positive reasonable or conclusive grounds NRM decision, their parents/carers and social workers could be supported by the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian Service.
- 4.14. The courts could not conclude their proceedings before a defendant's NRM case was determined. Local youth courts had requested a meeting to better understand the NRM process and how it interacted with criminal proceedings.
- 4.15. Young people, parents/carers and professionals could raise complaints regarding the MACE using the Children and Young People's Services complaints process. Complaints data were monitored weekly. Young people could also raise concerns and day-to-day issues with their workers so they could be addressed promptly.
- 4.16. The indicators of vulnerability in the report did not necessarily equate to risk. They helped professionals consider the circumstances around a young person. For the purpose of a pre-MACE referral, 'family breakdown' meant children not residing with their birth parents.
- 4.17. The MACE was not used for individual case management (which was conducted via traditional safeguarding processes such as strategy meetings) and was not intended to target individual children. Its purpose was to help partners consider how to improve their practice or social conditions and what specific interventions would reduce the risks faced by children and improve their outcomes. There was strong anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice and a culture of accountability across the partnership.
- 4.18. Not all young people receiving support from the Integrated Adolescent Safeguarding Service interacted with the MACE.
- 4.19. Exploitation for the purposes of MACE was defined in pan-London guidance.
- 4.20. No system similar to the Think Family application used in Bristol was used in Lewisham.

ACTIONS

1. Director of Families, Quality and Commissioning to provide the number of complaints re the MACE received since its formation, and the number of those upheld.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

5. Select Committee work programme

- 5.1. The Chair noted he intended to schedule an item on the use of Live Facial Recognition technology by the Police in Lewisham for the Committee’s first meeting of the next municipal year. Key areas of interest included racial bias and privacy considerations. He suggested organisations as Stop Watch, Big Brother Watch, Liberty and the Open Rights Group as potential external witnesses.
- 5.2. Suggested items for the next municipal year contained in the Work Programme were noted: Lewisham Disabled People’s Commission implementation and Cultural Strategy implementation.
- 5.3. Committee members suggested further topics for the next municipal year: community centres and the implementation and future development of the Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.
- 5.4. The Chair noted his preference for single-issue meetings.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.29 pm

Chair:

Date:
