

LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

Meeting:	Cabinet
Date:	9th September 2004
Subject:	Development of a Multi-Agency Strategy for Services to Refugees and Asylum-Seekers
Key Decision:	No
Responsible Chief Officer:	Executive Director (People First)
Relevant Portfolio Holders:	Social Services and Education and Lifelong Learning
Status:	Part 1
Wards:	All
Enclosures:	Annex 1: “Draft Multi-Agency Strategy for Services to Refugees and Asylum-Seekers” (circulated in Supporting Documents Pack)

1. **Summary / Reason for urgency (if applicable)**

A cross-departmental project group has been working for some time to develop a draft multi-agency strategy for the development of local services for refugees and asylum-seekers in the Borough. This Draft Strategy is now presented for formal endorsement, prior to its circulation to other stakeholders.

2. **Recommendations (for decision by Cabinet)**

2.1 That Cabinet approve the Draft Strategy, and support its circulation to all other key stake-holding organisations for their formal comment and endorsement, and to seek their assistance in drawing up a more substantial Action Plan.

2.2 That, following comment and endorsement by stakeholders, the Cabinet receive the final strategy for approval and onward transmission to the Harrow Strategic Partnership.

Reason: Formal approval of the strategy is required before it can be circulated to other stakeholders for their consideration and endorsement.

3. **Consultation with Ward Councillors**

None specifically.

4. **Policy Context (including Relevant Previous Decisions)**

4.1 The following are key aspects of the current national and local policy context of which the draft strategy seeks to take account:

- The uncertain impact of what is still a very fluid policy approach being developed by Central Government; the impact of recent case-law about status decisions and about responsibility for support needs; and the changing role of the National Asylum Seekers Service (NASS). Each of these have significant impact on the role of the current Asylum Seekers Team in People First, and on the reducing numbers and changing profile of new asylum-seeker arrivals within the Borough.
- The increased importance of the West London dimension in relation to access to Central Government (Renewal) funding, and to developing 'community cohesion' initiatives.
- The significance of the current development of area-based approaches to service delivery within the Council, and the related drive towards working to deliver key policy objectives related to combating social exclusion and addressing health inequalities.
- The importance of working to 'mainstream' the provision of adequate and appropriate support for this group of people with specific needs in an inclusive way, rather than to develop further specialised provision.

5. **Relevance to Corporate Priorities**

5.1 The draft strategy supports the following corporate priorities:

- **We will strengthen Harrow's local communities** by promoting social inclusion amongst all our residents both young and old, by seeking to eradicate poverty and by reducing the fear of crime.
- **We will promote Harrow as a centre of lifelong learning** by offering the highest quality education service, by raising aspirations and outcomes of achievement, and by providing activities for cultural, artistic and leisure pursuits which reflect the profile and the interests of all local communities.
- **We will improve the quality of health and social care in Harrow** by improving the life chances of young people, by promoting and maximizing the independence of disabled, frail and chronically ill people, by ensuring appropriate levels of safe care and support for those not able to live independently, and by enabling choice and access to good quality housing.

5.2 The strategy also takes account of key policy objectives in relation to the need to address social exclusion and current health inequalities.

6. **Background Information and options considered**

- 6.1 A cross-directorate officer group has been working with Harrow Refugee Forum representatives for some time to develop a draft multi-agency strategy covering the development of local services to these groups. Links with other key stakeholder organisations have also been established.
- 6.2 The Project Group has collated a range of background information about current needs, services and expenditure; and have used this together with the outcomes from two significant consultation events and other cross-agency discussions, to identify the key strategic themes which now appear to require attention. These are outlined in the draft strategy (attached as Annex 1).
- 6.3 Within this context, the draft strategy identifies and seeks to address five broad strategic issues (section 5 of the draft document), as follows:
- 6.3.1 Existing services are seriously fragmented, are experienced as such by refugees and asylum-seekers themselves, and by all those working to support them, whether in voluntary or statutory agencies. There is a very clear need to establish a strong and continuing overall strategic focus and direction for the further development of local services on a cross-agency basis: the umbrella role of the Harrow Strategic Partnership would appear to provide the appropriate broad framework within which to position this further work. The strategy proposes the identification of a very senior (Director-level) Council officer (probably one of the People First Directors) to provide this overall strategic lead into the future, together with the establishment of a Partnership Board-style continuing planning group. The role of this group would be to undertake the detailed work to oversee implementation of the strategy once it is finally agreed, to plan further service developments as resources allow, and to be able to respond appropriately to changing policy and patterns of need as these arise in the future.
- 6.3.2 The Harrow Refugee Forum and the current Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) will need further capacity-building work and investment (most of which is potentially available from existing external sources which are largely untapped at present); and they could be encouraged and supported to begin to take responsibility for certain areas of direct service provision – the draft strategy identifies possible specific areas where this would be possible.
- 6.3.3 There are potential sources of external funding which are not currently being tapped, which could support both the development of services and the further development of existing RCOs to becoming service providers and not just lobbying / representative groups. To harness this range of resources would however require the appointment of a dedicated Funding Officer (probably

best placed within the Regeneration Team within the Urban Living Directorate).

This officer could undertake the necessary work with the Forum and with the RCOs to enable them to successfully bid for these resources - which will increasingly require proposals to be developed which work across the range of West London authorities. This proposal needs to be considered alongside the current corporate review of the Council's grant support to voluntary agencies generally.

6.3.4 The current remit of the existing Asylum Seekers Team within People First is changing quite rapidly as the current amnesty arrangements, the national dispersal policy, and changing NASS functions impact on the profile and numbers of people for whom we are obliged to provide direct support. It is anticipated that the residual numbers of families and single adults requiring support from the team will have fallen very significantly by around the end of the year. However, the Council will retain responsibility for those who arrive as Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children, for whom – under the recent 'Hillingdon Judgement' – significant additional resourcing is likely to be required.

6.3.5 There are a number of specific gaps within current service provision, some of which it is now possible to begin to address without significant new resource requirements other than those that could be funded through successful bids for Renewal funding. These are detailed within the Draft Strategy and it is anticipated that many of these are issues which could be picked up by supporting the further development of the Harrow Refugee Forum and key RCOs to take on more of a service-providing role in the way outlined above. Others could readily be addressed through the kind of strategic service coordination function which the establishment of a continuing multi-agency Partnership Board-style planning group would provide.

6.4 Discussions within People First are now well-advanced to address the impact of these changes in terms of the appropriate management arrangements for the existing Asylum Seekers Team. Whilst staff numbers will now be falling to reflect the reducing workload, this change also provides an ideal opportunity to begin to shift the balance of functions within this team – away from an almost exclusively individual case-work focus (to provide the direct subsistence and accommodation needs of those who are not dealt with by NASS); and towards a role which has more of a community-development focus. The expertise of this team could now be used to provide specialist support to other Council services, and (working within the broad context of area-based service delivery) to encourage, develop and support initiatives aimed at promoting more effective integration of refugee communities within the life of the community as a whole; helping to address social exclusion, health-related and other inequalities; and to enabling these groups to take their full place as active citizens within their own local communities.

- 6.5 This approach would also be consistent with what is a key thrust of the draft strategy, which is to aim at securing the provision of a continuing safety-net of direct provision where this is needed, but otherwise to move towards ensuring that mainstream provision is better geared to provide for the needs of this group of people, rather than further developing specialised services.
- 6.6 It is suggested that the steps now required are:
- 6.6.1 Circulation of the draft strategy to statutory partners and other relevant agencies and interest groups for their comment and formal endorsement, and then to seek formal endorsement and adoption from the Harrow Strategic Partnership;
 - 6.6.2 Circulation to all Council Directorates for comment and for assistance in finalising the current Action Plan, which still requires further work.
 - 6.6.3 Resolution of the options available for providing funding support for the proposed establishment of a new Funding Officer post in the Regeneration Team within the Urban Living Directorate, and which may need to feature as a specific growth bid within the current round of High-Level Service Planning / MTBS refresh work.

7. **Consultation**

- 7.1 The work undertaken has included two significant strands of consultation work - one event held directly with local refugees and asylum-seekers, and the Refugee Community Organisations; and one with a broader group of stakeholders / interest groups.

8. **Finance Observations**

- 8.1 The proposal to develop a further post of Funding Officer (whether full-time or part-time) will have revenue funding implications, which cannot be provided for from within the currently planned revenue budget for Urban Living, unless this is subject to and approved as a specific growth bid as part of the current round of High-Level Service Planning and Medium-Term Budget Strategy re-fresh work.
- 8.2 Officers are currently investigating whether or not this proposed post might be provided for by some re-allocation of resources from the current Asylum Seekers Team within People First, where the anticipated decrease in the Team's workload is likely to lead to some reduction in staff establishment. However, that possible avenue will only prove feasible if there is not also a concomitant reduction in the grant repayment received back from Central Government.

- 8.3 This matter is still being explored and it is hoped to be able to provide an update to this report, with a fuller evaluation of this possibility, by the time of the Cabinet discussion.
- 8.4 The anticipated level of extra resourcing required to implement the requirements of the 'Hillingdon Judgement' in relation to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is being included in the current round of work to re-refresh the High-Level Service Planning and Medium-Term Budget Strategy proposals: this is currently estimated at up to £500,000 in a full year. On the basis of current projections, and on what is known about the formula being adopted for the allocation of additional grant funding; this Authority is not likely to qualify for additional support from Central Government towards the added cost of these extended responsibilities.
- 8.5 There are no other financial implications arising from the implementation of the draft strategy other than the issue referred to in section 8.1 above.

9. **Legal Observations**

None

10. **Conclusion**

The Draft Strategy seeks to address the key strategic issues identified following work to collate key information, local consultation events, and consideration of relevant national and local policy issues. It also seeks to outline a more appropriate framework for managing the future development of services on a multi-agency basis for local people within these groups who otherwise remain potentially very vulnerable to serious social exclusion.

11. **Background Papers**

Annex 1: "Draft Multi-Agency Strategy for Services to Refugees and Asylum-Seekers"

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers should telephone 020 8424 1726

12. **Author**

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