

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

**CABINET
November 2nd, 2021**

**REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Myfanwy Alexander (Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Welsh Language)
and
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REPORT TITLE: Accommodation in Powys for Asylum Seekers

REPORT FOR: Decision

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to request Cabinet approval for the Council to support and cooperate with the Home Office (HO), and its contracted agent, Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH)¹, in the provision of accommodation across Powys for households and people seeking asylum² in the United Kingdom.
- 1.2 The initial requirement is for six privately owned family-sized homes to be secured in Powys for asylum seekers. These properties would be sourced and managed, on behalf of the HO, by CRH.

2. Background

2.1 National Situation

- 2.1.1 The HO is asking local authorities across the country to support it in procuring suitable accommodation for people entering the UK as asylum seekers. The accommodation is needed whilst applications for asylum are processed. The HO is asking for voluntary participation, but if insufficient offers are forthcoming, local authorities may be mandated to enable or provide accommodation.

¹ Clearsprings Ready Homes is a privately owned provider of short-term accommodation and support services, which has been working with the Home Office since 2000. It currently provides accommodation and transport services in the 'London & South' and 'Wales' regions of the United Kingdom.

² 'Asylum' is the protection offered by a country or state to a refugee who has left their home country because of persecution they have suffered or may suffer on the grounds of race, religion or some other factor.

- 2.1.2 Statistics from the HO show that 35,099 asylum applications were received during 2020, an increase of 11% on the previous year. This meant that by the end of June 2020 there were 45,769 asylum seekers in the UK receiving support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.
- 2.1.3 Under Section 95 asylum seekers can apply for support while waiting for their claim or appeal to be considered. Support can be for accommodation and/or subsistence, according to their circumstances and on condition that the asylum seekers satisfy a destitution test. If provided, dispersal accommodation³ is offered in a 'Dispersal Area', located away from London and the South-east of England. Accommodation and support is provided by the HO, via a network of specialist contractors such as CRH.
- 2.1.4 Once a claim has been determined the family or individual receives 28-days-notice to vacate their HO-supported accommodation. Thereafter, asylum seekers become responsible for securing their own accommodation or in cases where asylum is denied, to return to their country of origin. The local authority in the area where the asylum seekers were accommodated during the time their asylum claim was being processed may be required to assume responsibility, under homelessness legislation, for vulnerable asylum seekers. In cases where the decision is to deny asylum, it is possible that such households could be left without any source of income and unable to work.
- 2.1.5 It is difficult to provide a socio-economic profile of those families or individuals seeking asylum. However, it is possible that asylum seekers will have skills or qualifications that would support them to be able to make a positive contribution to local communities, pending the outcome of their asylum claims.

2.2 Community Engagement

- 2.2.1 The Welsh experience of the HO using Penally Barracks in Pembrokeshire as accommodation for asylum seekers has been mixed, with reports that community cohesion was placed under stress in part due to a lack of communication with the wider community.
- 2.2.2 The proposals for Powys, set out in this report, would be on a smaller scale but it is recognised, both locally and nationally, that good communications are essential to make sure that positive and constructive community cohesion is maintained. The HO is the lead agency for public relations associated with the management of asylum seekers. Local communication strategies can be developed to help

³ Dispersal accommodation is located in particular areas in the community where the local authority has agreed to take asylum seekers up to a defined cluster limit (defined as an assumption that there will be no more than one asylum seeker per 200 residents, based on the 2001 census figures for population).

inform local people of the impacts of asylum seekers being accommodated in their communities. The Welsh Government has established a working group for local authority communications teams – including Powys County Council - to agree a common approach.

2.3 Asylum Accommodation in Powys

- 2.3.1 Wales has provided accommodation for asylum seekers in four 'Dispersal Areas': Newport, Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham. The increase in demand has led to the request to local authorities – including Powys County Council - from the HO for more accommodation to be provided.
- 2.3.2 For areas new to asylum dispersal, the HO's approach is to enter into dialogue with each local authority to agree a way forward that works for the area and enables participation. It is expected that the number of asylum seekers that would be accommodated across Powys would be small and proportionate to local communities. No specific location would be targeted.
- 2.3.4 To reduce the risk of negative impacts on community cohesion, the HO preference is for a low key, widely spread dispersal across each local authority area. The Council can express a preference for household types - for example families or single people. However, the final decision will rest with the HO, which uses demand intelligence to inform allocations.
- 2.3.5 CRH has advised that during the first 12 months of participation it would aim to source a maximum of five family-sized properties in Powys. These properties would be privately owned, with CRH entering into a management agreement with the property owners. CRH works with Migrant Help⁴ and the Refugee Council⁵ to provide a comprehensive service embracing property procurement, engagement, housing management and move-on support following the determination of asylum claims. The Council would be consulted on the location of any proposed properties and kept advised of progress.
- 2.3.6 The impact upon housing demand and homelessness, by reducing the number of homes available for households looking for a home, is expected to be minimal due to the small numbers of asylum seekers which are proposed to be accommodated. CRH has advised that anecdotal evidence suggests that once their asylum claims are determined many asylum seekers migrate to urban areas, reducing longer term demand for accommodation in the dispersal area.

⁴ Migrant Help is a national organisation that provide 1-2-1 help for asylum seekers to make applications for asylum. It provides asylum services in Wales from its base in Cardiff.

⁵ The Refugee Council provides support for newly recognised refugees, including for example helping people into employment. It has an office in Cardiff to supports its work in Wales.

- 2.3.7 The Council has through its work with the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, which has been replaced by the UK Resettlement Scheme, gained experience and expertise in helping resettle people from troubled regions. There are well established multi-agency networks in place to help, support and advise as necessary. This includes provision for English classes (ESOL) and established voluntary refugee support groups.
- 2.3.8 The Council's Social Services and Education teams and the Powys Teaching Health Board have not indicated concerns with Powys being able to accommodate in their services the limited number of asylum seekers proposed in this report to be accommodated in Powys.
- 2.3.9 CRH would review the success of the project after 12 months, taking account of impacts upon community cohesion and the experiences of the asylum seekers. Any expansion of the project would be informed by demand, the willingness of the Council to support further provision and the views of the HO.

3. Advice

- 3.1 Option One: To support the HO to accommodate asylum seekers across Powys.
- 3.2 Option Two: Not to support the HO to accommodate asylum seekers.
- 3.3 Option One would demonstrate a clear commitment by the Council to support the safety and wellbeing of people whose lives have been or are in danger or who are at risk of harm in their country of origin. It would also constitute a meaningful contribution to the aims of the Welsh Government's 'Nation of Sanctuary' Plan. The costs of providing this support will not fall on the Council as HO funding, via the contracted service provider CRH, will cover integration and accommodation costs until such time as asylum applications are determined. There would be no increased demand upon social housing as CRH will be sourcing properties from the private sector. Whilst this will mean less private sector rental properties for local communities, numbers would be minimal in any one area. There may be some risks to community cohesion, if there are objections to people moving to Powys from outside of the UK. The risks of this are believed to be low due to the small number of households likely to be accommodated in Powys and the dispersed approach to sourcing accommodation.
- 3.4 Option Two would mean that additional private sector housing would be available to the wider community and there would be no risk to community cohesion. However, the HO has indicated that Local Authorities could be mandated to accommodate asylum seekers in the event that insufficient accommodation is secured. This would mean less involvement and control for the Council and risk reputational

damage if the Council is perceived as reluctant to support this nationwide appeal for assistance.

3.5 Option One is the recommended course of action for the Council.

4. Resource Implications

4.1 Housing

4.1.1 Overall demand for housing of all types and tenures across Powys is high. There are currently 3,700 households registered with 'Homes in Powys' the majority of whom are looking for or are eligible for one or two-bedroom properties. It is most likely that it will be family sized homes, three or four bedrooms, that will be required for asylum dispersal. CRH will only be seeking to utilise properties from the private sector so there will be no immediate demand upon social housing.

4.1.2 It is possible that some individuals or families may be picked up under homelessness legislation following determination of their asylum claims should they decide to stay within the County. This may apply to asylum seekers whose application for asylum is denied, and who could then be left without any source of income and unable to work.

4.2 Finance and Staff

4.2.1 CRH, will manage the entire service for asylum seekers, including procurement of housing, community engagement and cohesion, allocation and management of housing (including furnishing and maintenance) and the move-on process once asylum applications are determined. There will be minimal financial impact for the Council with involvement limited to initial consultation regarding suitability of properties, and then an ongoing liaison role with CRH to ensure the smoothing running of the project. This can be accommodated within current staffing resources and service budgets, with the Resettlement Project officer being assigned the lead role of liaising with the HO, CRH and the Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership to ensure the smoothing running of the project.

4.3 The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the content of the report and that there is no additional financial impact on the Council as a result of the recommendation.

5. Legal implications

5.1 There are no direct legal implications for Powys County Council as CRH would be sourcing all properties, contracting with landlords, providing housing management services including occupation licences providing necessary financial support and managing the move-on process.

5.2 The Head of Legal and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) has commented as follows: “ I note the legal comment and have nothing to add to the report”.

6. Data Protection

6.1 The ‘data controller’ would be the Government’s contracted agent, CRH. Powys County Council would only hold basic details such as name and address of families/individuals. The Council would not, therefore, be processing any personal data.

7. Comment from local member(s)

7.1 The locations of asylum seeker accommodation is as yet not known so it has not been possible to consult with individual members.

8. Impact Assessment

8.1 An Impact Assessment is attached to this report as Appendix One.

9. Recommendation

9.1 It is recommended that Cabinet agree to:

9.1.1 The Council supports and cooperates with the Home Office , and its service provider (Clearsprings Ready Homes) in the provision of accommodation in Powys for asylum seekers.

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