



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 3 February 2022

Session 6



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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Councillor Susan Aitken (Glasgow City Council)

Alistair Dinnie (City of Edinburgh Council)

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)

Calum Maciver (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)

Andrew Morrison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Pat Togher (Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 3 February 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Elena Whitham): Good morning and welcome to the sixth meeting of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Apologies have been received from Foyso Choudhury.

Our first item of business is a decision to take items 3 and 4 in private. Are we all agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

09:00

The Convener: Our main item of business this morning is an evidence session on refugees and asylum seekers. The committee has been holding some stand-alone evidence sessions to explore the breadth of its remit. We will use the evidence heard during these meetings to begin to establish priorities for our work programme over the parliamentary session. Given that this topic is also of interest to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, we invited members of that committee to join today's meeting. In addition to Pam Duncan-Glancy, who is a member of both committees, I welcome to our meeting Pam Gosal MSP, who is joining us remotely.

I welcome our panel of witnesses, who are also joining us remotely: Andrew Morrison, chief officer, migration, population and diversity team, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; Pat Togher, assistant chief officer, public health protection complex needs, Glasgow city health and social care partnership; Alistair Dinnie, refugee and migration programme manager, City of Edinburgh Council; Calum Maciver, director of communities, Western Isles Council; and Councillor Susan Aitken, who is leader of Glasgow City Council.

I have a few housekeeping points before we start. Please allow our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to turn on your microphones before you start to speak. If you are joining us remotely and wish to come in on a question, you can indicate that by typing an R in the dialogue box in BlueJeans or simply by a show of the hand if that is not working. I will try to keep my eyes on everyone.

Witnesses, do not feel that you have to answer every question. There are quite a few of you today. It is okay if you do not have anything new to add to what has been said by others. You are also welcome to follow up in writing after the meeting on any points that you think need to be clarified or that have not been covered, or to supply further information on any points that have been raised. I invite members to direct their questions to particular witnesses because we have a lot to get through this morning.

Natalie Don, who is joining us remotely, will start with questions on theme 1.

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): What efforts have been made to improve the data on asylum seekers, refugees and people with no recourse to public funds? I direct that question first to Susan Aitken and then to Pat Togher.

Councillor Susan Aitken (Glasgow City Council): Pat Togher will be able to answer in more detail than I can. He is the expert on operational issues. However, I can tell you that the Home Office owns the data. Glasgow City Council, in partnership with the Home Office, has been involved in a data pilot to try to improve the flow of data, not just into the council but to partners such as the Scottish Refugee Council and the Home Office contractors, Mears. It has had mixed success. There was an improvement in the flow of data, which allowed us to respond and to share information with partners but we cannot compel the Home Office to provide it. It is not something we can insist on. The arrangement has been entirely voluntary and it is fair to say that it has been a little bit patchy.

We first tried that approach when the previous contractor, Serco, announced that it was going to undertake the cessation of support for around 300 accommodated asylum seekers in the city. The local authority did not have access to a lot of the data on those individual households and it emerged that a lot of them had not exhausted their appeals processes and that some of them already had leave to remain, but that information had not been shared with the local authority. There were all sorts of problems and issues with the sharing of the data. We have worked in partnership to try to improve that. It has improved, but there is still quite a bit of progress to be made in shaping our understanding of the status of asylum seekers and people who are transitioning to refugee status in Glasgow.

I will pass over to Pat Togher, because he has been directly involved in the pilot work and I have not. That work has been entirely officer led.

Pat Togher (Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership): Susan Aitken mentioned the asylum data sharing pilot. It has brought about some improvements but some issues remain. We require a lot more data in order to be able to inform the type of service that we want to deliver. That has been a particular challenge. There have been a couple of on-going initiatives. For example, the Home Office has done work on a national safeguarding board, which is about getting greater context in adult protection and child protection scenarios and getting underneath them. That remains a work in progress, but it is not yielding any positive outcomes for us right now. Work is also being done through the ending destitution strategy, which will lean towards third sector partners and sharing information. We also have better arrangements for sharing information about the experience across local authorities.

However, as Susan Aitken said, it very much remains a work in progress. We have better arrangements in Glasgow with Mears—there is no

doubt that that has improved. There is much more dialogue, which allows us to get underneath not just the detail, but the individual scenarios. Communication has improved. However, although we have some better reporting on data, it remains an on-going piece of work.

Natalie Don: I will group a couple of questions together to save time. There is obviously still progress to be made on recording statistics. What benefit would there be from more accurate data on asylum seekers, refugees and people with no recourse to public funds? Are there any figures available on the number of European Economic Area nationals who have no recourse to public funds? Do we have any statistics on how many people who have claimed asylum do not have access to housing support? I will put that question to Pat Togher.

Pat Togher: I can answer about the value of the data, but I will defer to COSLA on the specific data, because it has a greater national context.

Advancing data information sharing would enhance things considerably. It would allow us to better anticipate the different types of service delivery and to better manage cases. It would help us to anticipate trends and better inform our budgets and decision-making about where we want to shift resources. We have long-established relationships with asylum seekers and refugee programmes in Glasgow and we are reliant on the figures and the trends that we have experienced over the years. It would be great to get to a point where we have something quite accurate to allow us to anticipate where we are going. For example, a breakdown of demographics, including age groups and the complexity of needs and anything relating to past trauma, would be very helpful. That is not an exhaustive list. We could make substantial improvements if the information sharing was much better and more concise, up to date and contemporary. That would allow us to move forward with a more informed service delivery.

Andrew Morrison is probably better able to tell you about the national figures, which COSLA has been working on.

Andrew Morrison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I emphasise what Pat Togher said about the benefits of having more accurate data. Fundamentally, that would enable councils to better understand who is in their communities and their needs, and to be able to respond accordingly.

Was your second question about EEA nationals with no recourse to public funds?

Natalie Don: There were two further questions. Are there any figures available on the number of European Economic Area nationals who have no recourse to public funds? Do we have any

statistics on how many people who have claimed asylum do not have access to housing support?

Andrew Morrison: We do not have definitive figures on EEA nationals in Scotland, but we can extrapolate from the United Kingdom data. EEA nationals have no recourse to public funds if they are refused status and remain in the UK or if they have not yet applied. Some have pre-settled status but there is ambiguity about their rights and entitlements. According to UK-wide data, as of December 2021, 205,000 people have been refused status. That is 3 per cent of the total applications. In Scotland, as of 30 September 2021, the total number of applications received was 299,720. If we assume that there would be the same number of refusals in Scotland, that would be 3 per cent of about 300,000. However, that is only an extrapolation from UK data, rather than definitive information about Scotland.

The Home Office has a duty to accommodate everybody who is seeking asylum and who is destitute or is assessed as being destitute. We do not have statistics to suggest that there are large numbers of people who are not being accommodated. I do not have any figures on that.

Natalie Don: Okay. I was not trying to tease out large numbers but rather asking if that data was available. I have no further questions on that theme.

The Convener: I can see that Pat Togher would like to come back in briefly.

Pat Togher: I do not know whether this helps or not, but in Glasgow we have about 90 people with no recourse to public funds in accommodation and we have 132 non-EU nationals. We also have more people—about 130—with no recourse to public funds who are currently supported by our children and families service. That figure has been about the same for the last couple of years and you can imagine the associated on-costs.

Natalie Don: Thank you, that is helpful.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Looking at the numbers that we have, I see that Glasgow is taking the overwhelming majority of individuals and central Scotland is taking the rest. One of the issues that we looked at in the previous parliamentary session was whether there should be a greater distribution of individuals across the whole of Scotland, which would have advantages and disadvantages. Based on the figures, and starting with the Western Isles, do you think it would be more helpful if people who came here were distributed across the whole of Scotland, rather than in one or two local authority areas?

09:15

Calum Maciver (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar): In general, it would be beneficial for refugees, asylum seekers and other economic migrants to be spread across Scotland. The criticality in that is matching the people to the locality. For example, coming to a remote island community might be very challenging for someone who has lived in an urban situation in their home country. Finding the people and matching the people who best fit that type of locality would be good. We have had good matches in the Syrian and Afghan programmes: the families that have come to the Outer Hebrides have settled in well and it has worked well.

On the wider question, having a good spread across Scotland would be preferable to centralising in the urban areas.

Jeremy Balfour: If a greater number of people were to come to an authority such as yours, what extra resourcing would you require to be able to make sure that the appropriate services and facilities were available?

Calum Maciver: One of the big criticalities for us is housing. We are struggling for housing for the general local population. Our registered social landlord, Hebridean Housing Partnership, has worked well with us to find accommodation, but ideas around accommodation are critical.

We have had a good experience with ensuring that all families coming into our area have received universal credit and the appropriate funding. It is questionable whether we would be able to achieve that if we had greater numbers. Having the appropriate housing and support infrastructure—interpreters and so on—around the families is essential. In a remote island community, accessing interpreters, family and people from the culture, is not quite as easy. I go back to my previous point that matching the families to the destination area is also critical.

Jeremy Balfour: Andrew Morrison, from a COSLA perspective, is having a greater geographical spread something that we should be looking to bring about by way of a policy decision? Legal advice was another issue that came up last time. People who provide legal help mostly work in Edinburgh and Glasgow and it was clear that it would be very difficult for an asylum seeker to get legal advice in more remote parts of Scotland. I do not know whether the possibility of remote consultations might have changed that and it would be interesting to get your reflections on that. However, should we be striving for greater spread, or do you think that how we are working at the moment is the right policy?

Andrew Morrison: The broad answer is that there is support across local government for the UK's humanitarian programmes and that support

is unanimous across all 32 councils. Our challenge at the moment is around the different schemes. All 32 councils are supporting the refugee resettlement schemes and the new schemes around Afghanistan. All have received families under the resettlement scheme, but some have not yet received families through the Afghan scheme—we might get on to that later.

The UK Government has a differential approach to asylum dispersal, which is a challenge for us. As Calum Maciver was saying, an infrastructure needs to be built up around resettlement programmes and that includes legal advice, as you said. Local authorities are funded by the UK Government to provide those services over several years, whereas there is no central Government funding to support local government's statutory services in relation to asylum dispersal. That makes it a much more challenging ask and more difficult for councils to volunteer to support that scheme. Councils do not believe that they have the necessary resources to help them to support the people who come in through that scheme. That is why there is a quite different picture around asylum.

Broadly speaking, however, there is unanimous support from councils for the UK's humanitarian programmes and we have been looking for meaningful dialogue with the UK Government about how we can reform how asylum works so that it is more akin to how councils work on resettlement.

Providing access to legal advice is a major challenge for councils and you are right that it is largely centred in Glasgow—rather than in the central belt of Scotland, even. It is one strand of the work that we are doing on ending destitution: the Scottish Government has funded COSLA to provide some casework support to help councils with some of the challenges they are facing. However, a much bigger challenge still exists, just as it did when the committee addressed the issue previously.

The Convener: Sticking with that last point, could you talk about the specific issues that councils across Scotland may face in relation to asylum-seeking children? How does the support offered in Scotland differ from that offered in the rest of the UK and why does that give councils particular problems?

Andrew Morrison: There have been some significant changes around unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the last six months or so. A year ago, the UK Government ran a consultation on how unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should be supported. There are significant pressures, particularly in the south coast of England where so many children are coming in and there is a significant number of

asylum-seeking children who are still being accommodated in hotels, which is as far opposed to the optimum as you could imagine.

The UK Government came up with a voluntary rota system, which Scottish local authorities agreed to participate in following further discussion with council leaders. Scottish local authorities were participating in that scheme. Towards the end of last year, the UK Government made the scheme mandatory, arguing that it needs more councils across the UK to step up to support those children. The argument from a local government perspective in Scotland was that we had already stepped up and we were looking to support those children by playing a part in the voluntary rota.

At the moment we are in a state of flux, moving between what was the voluntary scheme and the full implementation of the mandatory scheme. Some councils have made representations against participation, but it is likely that every council will receive unaccompanied children. Councils receive funding for the children, which they do not get for adults. There are particular challenges with asylum seekers who are over 18, because councils have on-going responsibilities to support care leavers and there is a significant shortfall in the funding envelopes. I am happy to share the figures on that if it would be helpful. I do not have them in front of me now but we have done work on the costs to councils of care leavers and also more generally.

The Convener: It would be helpful if you shared those figures with us, considering that in Scotland we have an obligation to people who are care-experienced, up to their 26th birthday.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning to the panel members, and thank you for joining us.

I have a few questions about the mechanisms that a number of organisations, including local authorities, have used during the pandemic to support people with no recourse to public funds. For example, that was done through self-isolation support. I am particularly keen to hear more about the public health legislation measures that were used and about how else we could use such mechanisms to support people who have no recourse to public funds.

I have another couple of questions, but I ask COSLA in the first instance, and then possibly Pat Togher, to talk about the examples and mechanisms. After that, I have a couple of follow-up questions.

Andrew Morrison: We set out a wee bit of information on that in our written submission. We worked with local authorities to develop a framework to help them to use their public health powers to assist people during the pandemic. That

was about providing accommodation to everybody who was at risk of rough sleeping and who would not typically qualify for support. It was also about considering other needs, for things such as financial assistance and access to food.

Pat Togher and other colleagues will be able to talk in more detail about what they have done. We are aware that, during Covid, some councils enhanced that financial support package. They looked at things such as the provision of food parcels and free school meals, and ensuring that there was phone contact for individuals and families. We also introduced a mechanism to enable self-isolation support grant funding to be provided to those with no recourse to public funds. That was all on the basis of work that we did to ascertain through Public Health Scotland that rough sleeping was, and is, a public health risk during the pandemic. That was the basis for us to develop that framework.

I will leave it there and perhaps allow colleagues to give specific information, although I am happy to take any other questions.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can you tell us a bit more about the mechanism that you used for the self-isolation support grant? Also, because you mentioned it, I will pick up on the point about housing and homelessness. Obviously, this week, we have heard about the 27 per cent increase in homelessness in Glasgow. The Government has said that that is partly due to the increased number of applications from refugees who have been granted leave to remain. Will you elaborate on why that would have had that sort of effect on the number of homeless applications?

I realise that those are two separate questions but, since you touched on the issue, I am keen to ask about it. I also have one further question in the area.

Andrew Morrison: Perhaps we can provide more detailed information about the self-isolation support grant after this session, but my understanding is that, initially, paying it was not allowed in the context of no recourse to public funds conditions. We therefore worked with the Scottish Government to develop a mechanism that allowed us to pay an equivalent amount of money to people who had no recourse to public funds.

I am sorry, but could you repeat the other question?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Yes, no problem. Thank you for that clarification.

You mentioned that some of the provision that local authorities put in place was on housing, particularly during the pandemic. The Government has said recently that the increase in homelessness applications in Glasgow was

possibly because of an increase in applications from refugees who have been granted leave to remain. While you are on the subject of housing, will you elaborate on why that would have such an effect on the number of homelessness applications?

Andrew Morrison: I am not aware of what the Scottish Government said recently and, off the top of my head, I cannot think why that would be. Colleagues from Glasgow might know more about that assertion by the Scottish Government. I am happy to take the question away and do a wee bit of digging into why it might have been the case, but I do not know off-hand.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can any of the panel members from Glasgow help with that?

09:30

Pat Togher: I have a couple of points. I cannot comment specifically on the correlation between an increase in the number of housing applications and the number of people granted leave to remain, but I can get that information to you.

I can respond to your question about the mechanism that we put in place to support the arrangements for those with no recourse to public funds. As Andrew Morrison mentioned, Glasgow City Council worked closely with the Scottish Government on the production of the guidance. That provided us with a considerable way forward in addressing what was an emerging and significant point of pressure at the start of the pandemic. To give a bit of context, the issue relates to our wider homelessness service provision, our rapid rehousing transition planning arrangements, our rough sleeping agenda and our target to eradicate rough sleeping. The mechanism allowed us to immediately access emergency accommodation through our repurposed hotels during the pandemic. At its peak in Glasgow, we had more than 600 people in hotels although, thankfully, the figure has started to come down.

The no recourse to public funds population takes up about 90 of those places on any given day, but far more have come through since then. The mechanism allowed us to negotiate with legal services and the third sector and to provide food parcels, phones and everything else that Andrew Morrison described. For the first time in a very long time, that put us on the front foot in supporting the population in transitioning.

It is important to highlight that staff in the health and social care partnership and the third sector and all the other partners inherently want to do the right thing, and the mechanism gave them a way to do that. Providing that population with emergency accommodation has, to all intents and

purposes, completely eradicated rough sleeping among it. Glasgow currently reports five rough sleepers in the city centre, which is considerable progress for a city of such size, scale and demographics. Before Covid, there were about 30 rough sleepers, so there has been a significant shift. The guidance provided the mechanism to get underneath it and promote much better and more cohesive and joined-up partnership arrangements, and much better outcomes for the service user.

The Convener: I see that Councillor Aitken is indicating that she wants to speak. Do you want to add anything, Councillor Aitken?

Councillor Aitken: I am sorry, but I cannot get the chat function to work for some reason.

I want to reinforce what Pat Togher said, although there is a danger of conflating a number of issues here. The public health emergency has allowed us to deal with the no recourse to public funds issue in a different way to achieve the positive outcomes that Pat Togher talked about, compared with the position that we were in previously. As a local authority, we are restricted by law in how we can support people with no recourse to public funds, although there are always groups who we can support—I think that, currently, that applies to about 130 families with children, but Pat Togher can confirm the exact number. However, large numbers of people with no recourse to public funds are single men, for example, and the public health emergency has allowed us to put in place a new support structure and has allowed many of them to transition.

Right now, no negative cessations are taking place in Glasgow. A negative cessation is when people are evicted from asylum accommodation because the Home Office considers them as “appeals exhausted”. That is not the case in the rest of the UK, where it is back to business as usual. The reason for that is that, in Glasgow, we have been and continue to be insistent with the Home Office that negative cessation should not start again while we are in a public health emergency. However, the Home Office is keen to restart negative cessations, so I am not sure how long we will be able to continue with the systems that we have put in place during the pandemic.

When the Home Office decides to restart negative cessations, it will be challenging for us as a local authority to continue to provide additional support for people with no recourse to public funds and who we would not ordinarily be able to support through social work legislation. There is a potential challenge coming up in relation to that cohort who are deemed “appeals exhausted” by the Home Office, many of whom are single men.

Separately from that issue, we have the day-to-day pressures on our homelessness system. In a

big city such as Glasgow, those pressures are always extremely significant, but they have grown considerably during the pandemic. There are a number of reasons for that. We could spend a long time talking about the pressures and stresses that have been put on households. For example, the recent removal of the universal credit uplift will undoubtedly have an impact on the number of applications.

It has always been the case that, once people have been through the asylum process, have received a positive outcome and been given leave to remain in the UK, they move on from being accommodated by the Home Office contractor, which is now Mears Group, to become the responsibility of the local authority. We then work with our registered social landlord partners and others to accommodate them. At that point, they are citizens of Glasgow and become our responsibility, which is one that we take very seriously.

Since Glasgow became an asylum authority, a proportion of homelessness applications has always been made up of people who have been given leave to remain in the United Kingdom. I am not aware whether there has been a significant increase in that recently. That might be the case, but Glasgow always has that cohort in our homelessness applications that does not exist anywhere else in Scotland, because we are the only asylum dispersal authority in Scotland.

I wanted to clarify that. It will definitely be an element in our current homelessness applications, but the reasons why the number of applications has increased are complex and varied and are to do with a range of stresses on all types of households that are pushing them to the point of crisis. As a local authority, we are responding to that. Pat Togher will be able to confirm the numbers but, during the pandemic over the past couple of years, there were not thousands but tens of thousands of offers of emergency accommodation made to people who made applications, and that continues.

I wanted to clarify that there are two different issues. They overlap, but they are not exactly the same.

Pat Togher: Just to confirm that figure, since the pandemic commenced, well in excess of 20,000 offers of emergency accommodation have been made in Glasgow.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I want to ask a couple of questions about the pressures that councils face, a number of which are highlighted in the helpful briefing from COSLA. Glasgow City Council and the City of Edinburgh Council face particular pressures. How do you manage to balance your resources? Specifically, what work

are you doing with the third sector, which can play an important role, especially in assisting people who have no recourse to public funds?

Calum Maciver: Resources are a huge challenge for councils at the moment. We are having to make very difficult decisions and choices about how we utilise available funds. The third sector is a critical partner, with which we work closely across a range of services. We are lucky in the area of refugees and asylum seekers in that our numbers are very small, so we can put bespoke services in place and get very close to the families we have. We have worked in close collaboration with the health services, our registered social landlord and the third sector to ensure that appropriate supports are in place, but if the numbers got any bigger, it would be a real challenge to finance and resource that provision and to work with families in a bespoke way, as we can at the moment.

Miles Briggs: Would anyone else like to come in on that?

Councillor Aitken: Yes, I am happy to comment. Andrew Morrison has already said that, from the point of view of being an asylum authority—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; my dog has decided to burst in. We are not funded for that at all—Glasgow City Council receives no funding from the UK Government or the Home Office for being an asylum authority, because what is required is deemed to be provided through the private contractor that provides the accommodation.

However, in practice, as Pat Togher has already indicated, there are some very significant costs. It is a significant cost to support families with children who have no recourse to public funds, because we are often dealing with very complex needs. The asylum seeker and refugee population is a traumatised population with complex needs. We must emphasise that every one of them, to a greater or lesser degree, requires support of some kind because they have come from a very traumatic situation, and the process of removal and going through asylum is traumatic in itself. There are very significant costs associated with that cohort, which we carry entirely as a local authority. As Pat Togher has already indicated, it is because we believe that it is the right thing to do that we want to have those services in place for people.

We are funded for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, but not fully, because it is always the case that Glasgow City Council has more unaccompanied asylum-seeking children than we are directly funded for by the Home Office. As we support those children, whether through our children's services, through foster care or

whatever, that is an additional cost, which represents a significant challenge.

I want to quickly make a point to make sure that it does not get lost in this discussion. Despite all the challenges that we will talk about—the nature of this discussion is such that we will probably end up focusing on the challenges and the difficulties that being an asylum authority has caused and still causes for Glasgow—I want to emphasise that we in Glasgow City Council believe, and I think that the population of Glasgow believes this, too, that our being an asylum dispersal authority has been of enormous benefit to Glasgow and, indeed, to Scotland. It has been a social good that has benefited us through the diversity that it has brought to our city, to our communities and to Scotland as a whole. I need to make it clear that we absolutely welcome that. We are committed to remaining an asylum dispersal authority, but the challenges that are put in our way through the way in which the system operates are significant and, at the moment, we carry those challenges pretty much in their entirety.

The refugee resettlement programmes are different in that they are funded. There are questions as to whether they are funded to the extent that is required to make them as effective as possible. This goes back to an earlier question about the difference between the refugee resettlement schemes, in which every local authority in Scotland takes part, and Glasgow City Council's status as the only asylum dispersal authority.

09:45

Our repeated message has been that if the asylum system were treated in the same way as the Syrian and Afghan resettlement programmes have been treated and funded from the outset, with local authorities being provided with that resource, the response of local authorities across Scotland could be much more effective and the successful integration outcomes that we seek for the asylum seekers and refugees and the receiving communities would be delivered much more effectively. The lack of up-front funding for local authorities in the asylum system is the barrier to other local authorities joining Glasgow City Council in being dispersal authorities and continues to put very significant challenges in Glasgow City Council's way as we try to direct the best possible outcomes in the best interests of people who seek asylum in the city and of the receiving communities.

Miles Briggs: Andrew Morrison, Alistair Dinnie and Pat Togher all want to come in. I will bring in Andrew Morrison, specifically on my question about the third sector.

Andrew Morrison: I want to emphasise a couple of points that Councillor Aitken made, after which I will talk about the third sector.

We, together with our partner local government associations across the UK and local government across the UK and in the devolved Administrations, have been trying to work with the UK Government to demonstrate the costs of supporting asylum dispersal. We are continuing to do that work. I emphasise Councillor Aitken's point about the need for resources to support the asylum work.

On the issue of no recourse to public funds cases, it is worth flagging a couple of actions in the ending destitution together strategy. First, we have been doing some work on councils having the resources to support people with no recourse to public funds—specifically, destitute families with children and vulnerable adults. We have been working with local authorities to get a clearer picture of their costs. On the back of that, we want to work with the Scottish Government to agree a future funding model that would support such people appropriately.

Another action in the strategy that might be of particular interest to you is that an action plan is being developed with what is called the Everyone Home collective. That involves working directly with third sector partners and academics to create a route map to ending destitution. That is about scaling up the provision of community-based accommodation in cases in which local authorities will not be able to accommodate people because of the immigration rules. That piece of work is under way. A number of charities are involved in that. They are looking to scale up models and work with major funders in an effort to bring in resources on top of the support that is provided by local authorities and Government to fill the void that currently exists in supporting people who are not entitled to statutory support.

Alistair Dinnie (City of Edinburgh Council): While we can and do liaise with the wider third sector and other partners to support people with no recourse to public funds, the single biggest financial impact on the City of Edinburgh Council is the cost of housing. The cost of housing is entirely borne by the council, whether we are supporting people under public health legislation—the impact of Covid in Edinburgh has been to increase sevenfold the numbers and costs of supporting people with no recourse to public funds—or under social work legislation, and the third sector's ability to help us with that is limited.

Pat Togher: If the pandemic has taught us anything over the past couple of years in Glasgow, it is that the partnership arrangements with the third sector are more important than they have ever been. To reiterate what other people have

said, there is a way of mitigating risk and mobilising our third sector partners in a cohesive way to produce the outcomes that we want. What I mean by that is that, where there is a non-statutory requirement—for example, where there is no requirement for statutory social work services to be involved—the third sector plays a critical role.

During the early days of the pandemic, we stood up a city centre risk meeting in Glasgow, given the complexity of needs in the city centre, with the influx of more than 600 people in hotels. We were only able to properly mitigate that risk through our relationship with third sector partners. It is important to highlight the role that the third sector plays. If we are to have a genuinely trauma-informed approach in the way that we work, we must accept that there is a role for everybody to play where there is no statutory requirement.

Miles Briggs: I want to move on to the budget pressures that will be faced as a result of the coming budget. We know about the concern that has been expressed about cuts to council funding. Martin Booth, who colleagues from Glasgow will know is the executive director of finance at Glasgow City Council, recently represented the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers at the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. He expressed concern about support for English as a second language, which will undoubtedly come under challenge as a result of the budget. We know that around 100 different languages are spoken in the school population in Glasgow.

How is the specific issue of the need for language assistance to access services prioritised by councils? I will bring in Susan Aitken first. If anyone else wants to answer that question, I ask them to put an R in the chat.

Councillor Aitken: English as an additional language is an education service in Glasgow. It is obviously an important service, for the reasons that you mentioned. Our school populations are diverse. I do not think that there is a single school in Glasgow without pupils who have English as an additional language, and there are some schools where dozens of languages are spoken. English as an additional language is an important service, but because it is not necessarily seen as a core service in terms of teacher numbers, it comes under challenge when budgets are tight.

However, the service is a priority for us in Glasgow City Council. We are going through our budget process now. It will be three weeks or so before the outcomes are known, but we will do everything that we can to protect that service, because we think that it is essential. The loss or reduction of that service would have a detrimental knock-on effect in a number of areas. It is crucial.

There are also EAL services for people who are older than school age, many of which are provided through the further education sector—for example, through our colleges—but the specific service that we provide in our schools is particularly important for Glasgow and one that we certainly want to retain undiminished, even in the face of budget pressures.

Miles Briggs: I am not sure whether anyone else wants to come in on that.

The Convener: I am not seeing anything in the chat.

Miles Briggs: In that case, can I go back on my word and briefly ask another question, convener?

The Convener: If you are very brief.

Miles Briggs: It follows on from the language question and concerns access to healthcare services. The language barriers around healthcare are often critically important. This question is directed at Pat Togher. What work is under way on that? We know that barriers to access to healthcare already exist for homeless people but are greater for people who do not have English as their first language.

Pat Togher: I apologise, but I cannot comment on the education aspect in schools. However, we have comprehensive interpreting services in Glasgow, which we have continued to customise according to the different language requirements that have existed and because of the increasing prevalence of the challenge. We are particularly proud of what we have achieved in Glasgow in that area. It will remain a challenge, but the service remains very accessible.

The Convener: I will hand back to Pam Duncan-Glancy, who has a question.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, convener, for indulging me with a further question. I am keen to understand a bit about the support for women in the refugee and asylum-seeking community who are experiencing domestic violence. I note that there are concerns about the lack of clarity and the funding gaps. Could Pat Togher and Councillor Aitken set out their understanding of those issues and say what they can do to support women in those circumstances?

I put on record my thanks to Glasgow Women's Aid and women's aid organisations across the country for the work that they have done to support women this year and in many previous years.

Pat Togher: There is an enormous amount of work on domestic abuse going on in Glasgow. Glasgow health and social care partnership will be producing its first whole-system strategy later this year—the target date for that is April. We are

consulting with and drawing on the experience of everybody involved, including women's aid groups and other key partnerships, but principally with our lived-experience population in Glasgow, which extends to the asylum-seeking and refugee population.

For the past couple of years, we have been engaging with Professor Brid Featherstone from the University of Huddersfield on producing a contemporary strategy. It will be a whole-system strategy—covering children, families, adults, older people, alcohol and drug recovery services, mental health services and everything in between—and it is a substantial piece of work. It was stood up at the beginning of the pandemic, when there was a very reasonable assumption that, in lockdown conditions, domestic abuse would be more hidden than it already was and would become more complex, and that in the aftermath we would be picking up the pieces.

We have mobilised that work around all those services—principally through justice services, child protection services and children and families services—and that brings in the entire population. We have been very keen to cut across the interdependencies and complexities, not least around the trauma associated with domestic abuse in the asylum-seeking and refugee populations, but also among people with disabilities, those experiencing mental health difficulties and those involved with the drug and alcohol recovery services. The work is taking place across the piece. We are very excited about the whole-system approach, because until now our approach has mostly been to deliver services through the various care groups that I mentioned.

The strategy will go out for public consultation for three months, most likely in March or April.

The Convener: I do not know whether you want to come in on that, Councillor Aitken. I thought that Andrew Morrison wanted to come in, but that was for the previous point.

Councillor Aitken: No, I do not have anything to add. Pat Togher has outlined very well the work that is going on in Glasgow. It will be a significant step change in the way that we approach domestic and gender abuse and violence services in the city. Violence against women—gender-based violence—is one of the priorities identified by our multi-agency social recovery group, which the council convened quite early on in the first lockdown.

I think that Pat Togher is right: the work that he described is exciting. We can see a step change and a new era for partnership working across those services, and their accessibility and reach will improve considerably as a result.

10:00

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Most of my questions on this theme have been covered. You highlighted the problems with accessing data, but do you have any indication of the level of unmet need? I will pose that to Pat Togher and Andrew Morrison and anybody else who wants to come in.

Pat Togher: Could you repeat the last part of the question?

Marie McNair: Do you have any indication of the level of unmet need? I know that you have already highlighted the problems with accessing data.

Pat Togher: We acknowledge that, to do the issue justice, we want to drive forward more service delivery with people with lived experience. I touched on that earlier with regard to domestic abuse, and it is particularly important for the population that we are talking about.

We are not always aware of past trauma. For us to be a truly trauma-informed organisation, we need to understand that better. We need to consider the way in which we engage, extrapolate and obtain information from service users and agree on who is the correct person to do that—it is not necessarily always social work; perhaps it should be advocacy support in the third sector, for example—in order to drive that forward effectively. What service users are telling us and what we know from the research will continue to shift and develop the service as we move forward.

A large part of that was generated in the aftermath of the Park Inn shooting in Glasgow. We engaged and consulted with everybody who was affected by that in the week after it. It was a very intense piece of work, and we were assisted greatly by the Mears Group, the Scottish Refugee Council and the health and social care partnership. Sitting down with people gave us a sense of a lot of their unmet needs, of which probably almost all were intrinsically related to poverty.

Some of the issues are fairly straightforward. Earlier, we touched on access to mobile phones and the internet—all of that. We have made changes to make sure that people can contact their own family, but identifying unmet need is a continuing piece of work for us. I hope that goes some way towards answering your question.

Marie McNair: That is absolutely fine. You have highlighted that some funding has been available in Scotland to assist. Within the devolved powers that we have, what other ways are there to provide financial support to people with no recourse to public funds?

Pat Togher: We have spoken a lot today about the role of the third sector for the population that we are talking about. Where local authorities and social workers are somewhat constrained in their ability to provide statutory services, there are great opportunities for the third sector to provide support. It would be very helpful if there was a further consultation on a realistic financial budget for the third sector to pick that up, especially when we know that a substantial proportion of the population do not require that on-going statutory type of engagement.

We have touched on the children and families aspect of the issue, but how we can intervene on adults is not as clear, notwithstanding the adult support and protection legislation and the mental health legislation. There is a requirement to mitigate the impact of past trauma in a different way. I think that there are great opportunities for our third sector to find a role in that and for it to have recurring funding for that. That is one example of something that would be of greater assistance.

Clearly, we should consider any other alternative arrangements that would mitigate poverty. As we have discussed, the subsistence support provided does not necessarily have any parity with the welfare benefits, which are already at a minimum, so there is a gap there. We need to consider any way that we can mitigate the impact of that and make sure that we remain as poverty aware as we possibly can be.

The Convener: I will bring in my colleague Natalie Don, who will ask questions on the Afghan citizen resettlement scheme.

Natalie Don: My first question is directed to Alistair Dinnie and Councillor Aitken, but, if anybody else wants to come in, please let me know. Can you advise how local authorities are supporting Afghan families who have already arrived and how they are preparing to support Afghan families in the future?

Alistair Dinnie: We have, so far, supported only families in bridging accommodation. We have been working with some 30 or so households since September, in bridging hotels. The support that we are providing to them is largely based on the model that we developed on the back of our Syrian resettlement support for school placements and language learning. As it is temporary support and we do not know how long these families will be with us, there is a limit to the wider support that we can offer—for example, support towards onward and permanent accommodation and employability. We have those links, but we have not been able to bring them into place for that population yet. However, we are on the point of discussing some households directly with the Home Office, with a view to getting them

permanently accommodated in Edinburgh. Our support for Afghan families at the moment is necessarily limited by the temporary nature of their stay in Edinburgh.

Councillor Aitken: We are supporting 37 Afghan families through the current scheme, but Glasgow has been supporting Afghans to resettle since about 2014. The city has a substantial Afghan population, which is a very active, proactive and mobilised community. I know that they are providing a lot of informal support and are activating their networks to support people. Like Edinburgh, we have the experience from the Syrian resettlement scheme, although this is a different system that takes a different approach from our asylum dispersal experience of supporting people through the process into accommodation. The challenge at the moment is basically that the process has been very slow.

We are working very closely with our registered social landlords in the city. They have been superb, as they always are, in making offers of accommodation, but the Home Office's matching process has been very slow. People are being left in hotels for far too long, which means that there is very limited information on the complexity of the need or their associated trauma to allow us to prepare to support them when they are finally matched and arrive in the city. Currently, we have 13 offers of properties not matched, so we could have a higher number of people in the city than we have already. We have real concerns about that, because, ultimately, there is pressure on the accommodation. We have already talked about the pressures on the homelessness system and on housing more broadly.

Glasgow City Council is not the landlord, and it is very difficult for our housing association partners to leave those offers open indefinitely while we wait for the Home Office to do the matching. That puts a real challenge on the system. In Glasgow, we know from bitter experience that leaving people in hotels for any longer than is absolutely necessary is very detrimental to their wellbeing and to having good outcomes in transitioning them into support and—what we ultimately want to do—into recovery from trauma and to being able to approach having normal lives, wherever in the UK they have been resettled.

There are a number of issues now, but, for the people we have in the city, our experience and the long-standing systems that we have in place kick in, supported by colleagues in the RSLs and the third sector, particularly the Scottish Refugee Council and the thriving and active Afghan community in Glasgow.

Natalie Don: You have answered my second question, which was going to be about issues

between the bridging hotels and the permanent accommodation. I will pass back to the convener.

The Convener: I think that Pat Togher wants to come in on that point.

Pat Togher: I will give a bit more operational context to what Councillor Aitken has said. We have been doing this since 2014. It is well established and we are very experienced in this.

Our asylum bridging health team is supporting and promoting stability for Afghan families coming to Glasgow. In the past couple of years, it has seen quite a considerable enhancement, commensurate with the increase of families coming in. It makes sure that there is community connectedness, connection to the health provision that is required and connection to on-going legal advice. Critically, with third sector partners, it provides the support that we have already spoken a lot about today, to make sure that the experience is as seamless as it possibly can be.

The process is quite established in Glasgow, and the infrastructure of support that is wrapped around that is very strong. However, as Councillor Aitken pointed out, with the existing pressures on RSLs, particularly in Covid times, it has been challenging and difficult. Where voids have been created as a consequence, that has culminated in substantially more costs for the local authority.

The Convener: Natalie Don has one further question that she would like to ask on the back of that.

Natalie Don: Apologies. I thought that one of my colleagues was coming in next.

I have a further question, which I will direct to Andrew Morrison. The Scottish Refugee Council has criticised the limitations of the Afghan citizen resettlement scheme and the fact that the UK Government is counting refugees who are already here within the 20,000-person limit. What are your views on eligibility for the scheme? Is there not a real risk that people who should access it will not be able to do so because they cannot apply independently, as a result of the referral requirements? In the light of that, are the numbers that the UK Government is aiming for high enough, or could we take more people than the 20,000 limit?

10:15

Andrew Morrison: I will build on what Councillor Aitken said about the matching challenges. I emphasise that what she described in Glasgow is replicated across the country.

There is real concern in local government—not just in Scotland, but across the UK—about the large number of properties that are sitting empty,

awaiting Afghan refugees. The longer that people are in hotels, the more problems manifest themselves for the families, as Councillor Aitken set out, but there are also challenges for local authorities. They cannot hold on to properties indefinitely when there is a requirement to house other people, too. We are seeking urgent dialogue with the UK Government on that, as are our colleagues across the UK.

I am not 100 per cent sure of the specifics of the Scottish Refugee Council's criticism. I wonder whether it is talking about the limited number of people who will come into the UK through the scheme because people who are already in the UK are counted. Was that the specific criticism?

Natalie Don: Yes. I will read the quote out to you:

"we are concerned about the strict limitations around who is eligible to apply for help under this scheme, and that it will leave many thousands of people still at risk of harm in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.

We are also shocked that the UK government plans to count people who are already in the UK—those who were evacuated from Kabul along with British forces in August—within the 20,000 'new' places offered by the scheme."

It is about the limitations.

Andrew Morrison: I am not sure that COSLA has a particular perspective on that. I suppose that our concern is a broader one about knowing who is in the country, because I think that there are still questions around the rights and entitlements of those the UK Government has brought into the country and which scheme they fall under.

There are lots of complexities across the different schemes, which brings us on to another issue that we have around the rights and entitlements of people, depending on which scheme they come into the UK on. The most perverse example is that somebody who has fled Afghanistan and has come into the UK by clandestine means, perhaps in a small boat across the channel, is treated quite differently from somebody who has come in through an evacuation because they were fortunate enough to get on one of the evacuation flights. There are real concerns about the different statuses and differential treatment of people, depending on how they come in.

We know that 20,000 is the UK Government's figure. I think that the Scottish Refugee Council is saying that that is diluting the commitment, but we have never taken a position as to how many people the UK as a whole should support. COSLA's position has been that Scottish local government will step up and support as many people as it can. We have not been focused on targets or saying, "X number of people is the right number."

I do not know whether that helps. Was there a follow-up question? Did I miss a part of your question?

Natalie Don: I asked whether there are concerns that people who should be accessing the scheme cannot do so because the referral requirements mean that they cannot independently refer themselves. I am not sure whether you picked up on that or whether anybody else wants to come in.

Andrew Morrison: That is a challenge with refugee resettlement in general in that only a tiny minority of the people who are in need manage to get into refugee resettlement schemes in the UK and across the world. Yes, there are real concerns.

That leads on to the point that I was trying to make, which is that it forces people to take other routes to get to the UK or to get to safety, wherever that might be. Our concern is more about the differential treatment of people who come through different routes to get to the UK and there being different levels. We have concerns that the Nationality and Borders Bill accentuates those challenges.

The Convener: I will move on to theme 4 because we still have two themes to get through and our time is running short. Theme 4 is about the Nationality and Borders Bill.

Marie McNair: The Scottish Refugee Council has referred to the Nationality and Borders Bill as the "anti-refugee bill" and argues that it is the biggest threat to refugees' rights in decades. Does the panel share that view? What are the biggest concerns about the impact that it will have on migrants, refugees and asylum seekers? I will throw that out to the whole panel and anyone who wants to can answer it.

The Convener: We need somebody to start us off, so I will go to Susan Aitken, whose hand I can see.

Councillor Aitken: That is a political question and as I am the only politician on the panel, I should probably answer it. It might not be fair to ask officials to comment.

I agree entirely with the Scottish Refugee Council's assessment that the bill is draconian. It is not just the Scottish Refugee Council that thinks that. Many others who understand international laws and obligations around refugees far better than I do are of the view that the bill undermines the UK's commitment and obligations to support refugees under international treaties. The differentiation between the ways in which people enter the country, which Andrew Morrison has already touched on, will cause a whole number of operational difficulties and is very questionable in

how it tries to create categories of good and bad refugees and asylum seekers.

Certainly, the bill chooses to be ignorant of the circumstances in which desperate people are fleeing trauma or threats to their lives and their families, the desperate circumstances in which they find themselves and the lack of choice that they have in their ability to seek refuge and to remove themselves from life-threatening situations. People do not always—in fact, very seldom—have the choice of leaving their countries of origin and seeking asylum elsewhere through ordered and formal routes, and desperate people will take any route that they can and clutch at any straw to save themselves and their families.

There is another element to it that perhaps has been given less attention. I am grateful to the Scottish Refugee Council for the briefings that it has provided, which have helped to clarify the issue for me. There are other elements in the bill, which, if they were to take full effect would essentially lead to the dismantling of the asylum dispersal system in the UK as we understand it now. Although I have criticisms of the way in which system operates, particularly the chronic underfunding of it and the UK Government's insistence on running it through private contracts, that is another argument and discussion.

I do not think that we are blowing our own trumpet when we say that Glasgow is an example of a successful asylum authority with the outcomes that we have achieved, of integration between asylum seekers and the receiving community, and outcomes for asylum seekers themselves as individuals and households. The bill would massively undermine our ability to achieve those outcomes, which should be the point of an asylum system. The ultimate point should be to provide support to people to recover from trauma, to be able to go on and live as close to normal lives as they are able to, given the circumstances from which they have come, and to live as members of the community in which they resettle and make a contribution. Hundreds and thousands of people in Glasgow over the past 20 years have been able to do that. We all know of prominent individuals in the city who have great success stories; there are others, whose names will never be known, who live decent and good lives as members of their Glasgow community.

The bill could hugely undermine our ability as a local authority to support those positive outcomes for people by bypassing our ability to, for example, educate asylum seekers in our own schools, which has been enormously important. The bill proposes that the Home Office could reserve the right to remove asylum-seeking children from schools and have them educated separately, in the equivalent of the Napier barracks, for example, where we

have seen the issues in England more recently, or indeed in Dungavel, to use an example closer to home. As we know, that is not only reinforcing the trauma that people have been through, but adding to it and exacerbating it.

The bill will prevent the delivery of the outcomes that we want for people. It is an even greater conflation of the asylum system with a more hostile approach to immigration than we have already in the UK. That absolutely militates against what I believe the asylum and refugee system should be about, which is achieving positive outcomes for people who have fled trauma and violence, and our ability as nations who are able to provide them with a space to live their lives safely and securely as part of their new communities. It puts all of that at risk and we need to be very aware of that.

Many of the questions that we are discussing about the challenges that Glasgow faces as an asylum authority would become moot points, to be honest, because the asylum dispersal system, with both its weaknesses and its successes, would be pretty much dismantled.

Marie McNair: Siobhán Mullally, the United Nations special rapporteur, said that

“The bill fails to acknowledge the Government’s obligation to ensure protection for migrant and asylum-seeking children, and greatly increases risks of statelessness, in violation of international law.”

COSLA suggests that the bill might affect devolved safeguarding and protection duties. Andrew Morrison, can you explain further?

Andrew Morrison: Yes, I am happy to. Before coming on to that, I think that Councillor Aitken has explained it better than I can, but our concern is with the creation of a hierarchy of rights under which people are treated differently depending on how they have come into the country. Our fundamental belief is that local services are best placed to make decisions about the needs of individuals and families in their communities. What we are trying to get at is that some of the provisions in the bill will create a situation where that is no longer the case. For instance, local services undertake age assessments for young people who come into the asylum system, or young victims of trafficking for that matter, as and when they deem that to be appropriate. That could be overridden by what is proposed in the bill with the creation of a national age assessment board.

10:30

We have concerns about how that will play out. I am aware that the Scottish Government has highlighted its concerns and that there is now a legislative consent motion about that particular age assessment work.

On what Councillor Aitken was saying about the asylum system specifically, there are intentions for the creation or establishment of reception centres. Again, we have safeguarding concerns about how everybody—women, men and children—will be accommodated in them and whether they are appropriately protected in those situations, especially those who are particularly vulnerable.

We can provide examples of positive work with the Home Office, but it is being undermined by the overarching approach of the bill. To give one example about human trafficking, there is a pilot under way involving the Home Office, Glasgow, the Scottish Government and COSLA working together to see whether we can improve the national referral mechanism for victims of trafficking because the process is pretty cumbersome. We saw that as a very positive move in which it is acknowledged that the best people to make decisions are those who are on the ground, who know the children and the cases that they are dealing with. The bill seems to set that type of work aside and create a top-down approach, which causes us concern about safeguarding and protections.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Several of my questions on the Nationality and Borders Bill have been answered, but I want to say that I believe that it is a cruel and impractical bill that does not achieve what it sets out to achieve, even if we do not agree in the first place with what it is meant to achieve. It is important to put that on the record. I thank the panel for their answers.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): This question is for Alistair Dinnie. How does the Scottish Government's approach in the new Scots refugee integration strategy differ from the UK's approach towards asylum seekers and refugees?

Alistair Dinnie: I come to that question without entirely understanding the comparison, as my experience is entirely within Scotland and within the context of the new Scots strategy. The primary difference, as I understand it, is the Scottish Government's focus on integration from day 1, which provides an opportunity for and an obligation on those of us in local government and the third sector to work with people from the point of arrival. The strategy is comprehensive. It brings in all the players who wish to play a part. In the five years or so that I have been working in this field, I have found it to be a very helpful underpinning.

Emma Roddick: On the legislative consent motion that has been lodged this week, Scotland has established age assessment practices that are carried out by trained social work professionals in line with the getting it right for every child approach. What is your view on the UK

Government's proposals on reforming age assessment processes? I will put that question to others, as we are looking for a UK vision.

The Convener: That might need to be a question for Susan Aitken.

Councillor Aitken: Pat Togher might be better placed to answer on the operational impact. I am not familiar with the detail of that suggested policy change in the UK. The approach in Scotland is about trained professionals who have social work values and health service values assessing the needs of a young person so that we can meet those needs. If there is a shift towards age assessment as a way to try to catch out a young person—to say that they do not have needs or entitlements—I think that that is entirely the wrong approach and comes completely from the wrong direction. The approach that we are taking in Scotland, which is about trying to understand how we best support a young person, should be the underpinning of how we work with children and young people in the system.

Pat Togher: This picks up on the conversation that we were having earlier about the Nationality and Borders Bill but, specifically on age assessment, the pilot that is under way in Glasgow is precisely what we have been looking for for quite some time. It has already been pointed out that the national referral mechanism is hugely cumbersome; it takes a considerable amount of time to get any proper final assessment. It is right and proper that front-facing, qualified social workers undertake the assessment in relation to GIRFEC, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. What is proposed runs a considerable risk of confusing the entire landscape.

We have other questions, for example about the role of the national age assessment board. Does it supersede the assessment from the local authorities? That is compounded by the question of potential appeals processes and who people are appealing against, and indeed legal aid for all of that. We have a number of questions. We have to continue to work through quite significant operational practice issues. We are in close contact with the Scottish Government, working our way through this now, and we will continue to ask and probe those types of questions.

The pilot is what we have been looking for and asking for for quite some time. We did a substantial amount of work with the Home Office to get to where we are now, so it feels as though what is being proposed on age assessment is a backwards step.

Emma Roddick: I will group the questions that I was going to ask later for the sake of time. I am not sure whether Calum Maciver is here, but if not,

I will ask Susan Aitken. The Scottish Government guidance makes it clear that people seeking asylum can and should be entered on to social landlords' lists if they apply for social housing, even though they are not entitled to the housing until they are granted refugee status. Is there anything more that can be done to encourage people to get on the list early and to widen social landlord awareness of that guidance?

Councillor Aitken: Certainly in Glasgow, in the partnerships that we have with RSLs, of which there are over 80 in a network of community-led housing associations, the awareness is very good. RSLs have their own challenges with supply. We talked about it earlier with the Afghan resettlement scheme. Their ability to plan ahead, given the amount of time someone can spend in the system, is challenged. The issue is about trying to get decisions for people much faster, and that is very much in the hands of the Home Office. We have no control over that in Scotland.

The principle of planning as early as possible is absolutely correct, so that when a person gets a positive outcome, as we hope they will, we are able to move as quickly as possible to get all the support in place to transition them smoothly out of the asylum accommodation, which is run by the Home Office contractor, and into a home in Glasgow, whether that is with an RSL or through another route. All of that principle is absolutely correct and certainly the relationships and the partnerships that we have with our RSLs in Glasgow will focus on trying to have that happen as much as possible.

As I say, the issue is the uncertainty and the often very protracted timescales in the process. As you know, people are sometimes in asylum accommodation for years as they go through the process and as they work their way through appeals. That makes it challenging for RSLs, particularly the smaller ones, of which we have a number in the city, to be able to plan. This is the subject of an on-going discussion that we have had with Mears and previous contractors in the city. We are very keen in Glasgow that we have city-wide integration of people who have come through the asylum system and that there is not an overconcentration in one neighbourhood or another. The contractor has focused its purchase of accommodation where it is cheapest and where rents are lowest, and that has meant putting an overconcentration of asylum accommodation in parts of the city where there is already an overconcentration of deprivation according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, for example. We want exactly the same outcomes to be achieved when people have come through the system. We want them to have access to a range of accommodation right across the city, because

that is genuine integration, which we want to encourage as much as possible.

The Convener: I understand that we do not have Calum Maciver back. I do not know whether it would be helpful for us to get that information from him. He could write to the committee.

Emma Roddick: Thanks, convener.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have three short questions, and I will try to be brief. I put on record my thanks for the incredible work that Maryhill Integration Network is doing for the people it supports in Glasgow. It has highlighted that it is concerned to hear about Glasgow City Council withdrawing from the UK Government's dispersal scheme, but I think that I have heard today that that might not be the case, so I seek clarification from Councillor Aitken before I ask my further two questions.

Councillor Aitken: It is not the case. This has been widely misreported and it is very frustrating. Not only has Glasgow not withdrawn from the asylum dispersal scheme, we are by some distance the biggest asylum authority in the UK both in the number of asylum seekers per head of population and in the overall number. We have over 5,000 asylum seekers in Glasgow and have done for some time. As it happens, that is more than double the number that the Home Office's assessment says that Glasgow should host for the size of our population. We are an extremely active member of the scheme and an extremely active asylum dispersal authority.

We have an agreement with the Home Office that has been in place post the Park Inn incident. It was there before that, but I think that the Park Inn incident emphasised how important it is that there is a pause on the essentially unlimited dispersal of certain types of asylum seeker from the UK to Glasgow.

10:45

We still have asylum seekers coming into the city daily who are accommodated in Glasgow. We still have dispersal from other parts of the UK of families with children, for example, but we have a pause on the dispersal of primarily single male asylum seekers, who are a very large number and a very large proportion of the asylum-seeking population in the UK. That is because of very significant concerns about the impact on the welfare, wellbeing and best interests of asylum seekers coming into the city and asylum seekers who are already here. We still have asylum seekers living in hotel accommodation in Glasgow, which we are on the record as being fundamentally opposed to—we want to see an end to that. We have been pushing the Home Office very strongly, particularly since the Park Inn

incident, for a timetable for the end of asylum seekers being accommodated in hotel accommodation in the city.

Until we have a clear end in sight for that and a clear assurance from the Home Office and from its contractor that it will be able to accommodate people coming into the city safely and securely and with the focus on their best interests, we would prefer that pause to stay in place. This is entirely about the best interests of asylum seekers. It is very important that we do not fall into the trap of talking about an asylum authority and the numbers of people coming in as a numbers game. It is not about how many folk we can cram into the city; it is about the outcomes that we achieve for them and their best interests. This is not in Glasgow City Council's gift. I need to emphasise that we expressed those very significant concerns because the Home Office private contractor was not at that point accommodating people in accommodation that we consider to be appropriate.

Glasgow historically has not accommodated people in hotels, and that is because Pat Togher and his colleagues in the HSCP have, as much as they are able to, put their foot down on that and said to the contractor, "No, we do not agree with that. We do not believe that it is appropriate." We do not have the power to force the contractor not to put people in hotels, but we have used our influence as strongly as possible. It is pretty common in other parts of the UK for asylum seekers to be accommodated in hotels. We agreed temporarily with Mears that, once the pandemic set in, it could use hotel accommodation as a response to a public health emergency, because clearly getting people into accommodation and giving them the ability to self-isolate, for example, was extremely important at that point, but we always saw it very much as an emergency measure. We did not agree to people who were already in asylum accommodation being removed from that accommodation and put into hotels. We did not agree to that and we strongly opposed it. We have repeatedly made our views very clear to the Home Office.

I cannot emphasise enough that not only has Glasgow not withdrawn from the asylum dispersal scheme, we are the biggest contributor to that system in the UK by some distance. We continue to receive and accommodate asylum seekers in the city, but we will continue to do as much as we can to try to ensure that the system operates safely in the city. We are all too well aware of examples where it did not operate safely and where the use of hotel accommodation by the Home Office contractors ended in appalling tragedy. Those are the reasons why we now have the agreement with the Home Office to place some limits on the numbers of people who are

dispersed to Glasgow until we have that assurance that the best interests of people coming into the city are being served.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you for that lengthy and detailed answer. In the interests of time, there are a couple of points that I will follow up on outwith this session. I appreciate you putting that on the record.

An organisation called the Bridges Programmes contacted the committee ahead of today's meeting and explained its concerns about a number of changes that were made during the pandemic that did not take into account minority groups in the way that they could have. We know that that is seen across minority groups. For example, it seems that consideration was not given to the experience of the people who were living in such accommodation.

How important is it that asylum seekers and refugees are included in the Covid-19 inquiry in Scotland? I direct that question to Councillor Aitken and Andrew Morrison.

Councillor Aitken: That is important because, as we have heard, the public health emergency that we faced with the Covid situation significantly changed some of the ways in which we support asylum seekers and refugees, especially people with no recourse to public funds. It will be very important to capture that experience and response in all the lessons to be learned, not just in Scotland but across the UK.

In one of the meetings that I had with a UK minister last year, we discussed the restart of negative cessations, which at that point had started in other parts of the UK. We were doing everything in our power to insist that that did not start in Glasgow, precisely because of the public health emergency. It was very clear at that point that the Home Office drew a distinction between people who were homeless or sleeping rough because they had no recourse to public funds and what it would call an indigenous homeless population. It saw that they should be treated differently and that the emergency response that we were using for homeless people in Glasgow should not continue to apply to people with no recourse to public funds.

We strongly opposed that and said that the public health emergency was a public health emergency and that Covid did not react to somebody in a different way because they were an asylum seeker or an appeals-exhausted asylum seeker. They were just as vulnerable to catching Covid if they were placed in an at-risk situation as someone who had been in Scotland for a long time. There are some issues there around teasing out attempted distinctions between those two groups—distinctions that we in Glasgow

have strongly resisted, which we have done, up until this point, successfully.

I do not know at this stage how long we will be able to sustain that or how long it will be before the Home Office restarts negative cessations in Glasgow. I think that we are expecting that to happen soon, but we will continue to argue that we are still in a public health emergency that applies just as much to asylum seekers—and, indeed, people with no recourse to public funds—as it does to the rest of the population. For those kinds of reasons, I think that it is important to capture that experience in relation to the issues that have emerged during the pandemic in any lessons-learned exercise.

The Convener: I will bring Andrew Morrison in briefly to add any thoughts that he has. We are significantly over time, and I am conscious that I still have to get to Pam Gosal.

Andrew Morrison: I agree with everything that Councillor Aitken said. Refugees and asylum seekers should be considered across all policy considerations. That is a central aspect of the work that we are trying to do through the new Scots refugee integration strategy and the ending destitution together strategy. It is a case of ensuring that that happens. I just wanted to re-emphasise that.

The Convener: Pam, did you have another question?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I did but, in the interests of time, I will save it for another day.

The Convener: If there is information that you would like to receive in writing, we will make sure that we get it for you.

I know that Jeremy Balfour has some more questions, after which we will go to Pam Gosal.

Jeremy Balfour: My first question is for Alistair Dinnie. I should declare for the record that Alistair Dinnie and I worked together when I was at the council, so I know him.

We are running out of time, but I think that one of the things that worked very well in Edinburgh was the Syrian project. Could you write to the committee to give us some information about how that worked, why it worked so well and any lessons learned? I know that there is a lot in that question, so it might be easier if you could provide that information in writing, rather than giving us a brief answer.

Alistair Dinnie: I am happy to do that.

Jeremy Balfour: Some of the issues that we have talked about are reserved, but there are issues that are devolved. I was slightly surprised to learn from one of the submissions that the free

bus travel for under-22s has not been extended to asylum seekers.

Andrew Morrison, what discussions did you have with the Scottish Government about that? What reason did the Scottish Government give for not granting that to asylum seekers?

Andrew Morrison: I was going to come on to that in my answer to Pam Duncan-Glancy's question, but I thought that I would not have the time. Thank you for raising the issue.

That is an example of what I was saying about the need for refugees and asylum seekers to be considered at the outset of all policy making. That example shows that that did not happen. We became aware of that only in the past few weeks when the scheme was announced. My immediate question was, "Does this apply to asylum seekers?" Organisations such as the Bridges Programmes and the Scottish Refugee Council have flagged strongly, and rightly, that it does not apply to asylum seekers.

We have been feeding in to the Scottish Government on the position of asylum seekers. I am not sure whether the issue has been resolved in recent days, but I certainly hope that it will be. I am happy to follow up with you in writing on the latest position. I have not heard in the last week where we are on that.

Jeremy Balfour: That would be helpful. Issues such as health and education are devolved. If there are other policy areas that you feel have just been forgotten about or missed in relation to asylum seekers, could you let us know in writing so that we can follow up with the Scottish Government on areas where more can be done on devolved issues? I am conscious of time, so I would be obliged if you could do that in writing.

Andrew Morrison: No problem—I will do.

The Convener: That is fantastic. We look forward to receiving that information. Pam Gosal has a few questions.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): It has been very interesting and informative to listen to all the responses. As the convener said, I am a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, which has been discussing a human rights-based approach to budgets. Would local authorities benefit from looking through an intersectional lens when it comes to distributing and balancing resources to support those with no recourse to public funds?

Andrew Morrison: Again, that might be an issue that we can follow up on in writing. We want to achieve a human rights-based approach to all work. I know that that will be a key element of the work on the proposed human rights bill. The biggie for us will be ensuring that local authorities are

equipped to do that, so that staff across councils and the statutory services are equipped to know what it means to take a human right-based approach, whether to budgeting or to the provision of services. I think that a significant body of work will be required to support councils on that.

I probably do not have an immediate response on the approach to budgets, but I am happy to go away and provide something in writing if we have taken a particular position on that.

11:00

Pam Gosal: I have a quick question for Alistair Dinnie. The Home Secretary has announced £14 million of funding to support newly granted refugees to learn English, move into work, access housing and build links with local communities. Is that a sustainable approach to reducing destitution among refugees? If not, what more has to be done?

Alistair Dinnie: It may be that I do not entirely understand what is meant by the announcement but, in my experience, there is a big difference between the ability to support refugees, where the funding that comes via the UK Government is generally appropriate for the support that we want to give, particularly when it comes to things such as full support for English as a second language and ESOL training for adults, and the support that is available for those who do not benefit from that Home Office funding, whether that is people who are asylum seekers or, for example, households that have come together because a family member has come through the asylum system and has been joined by other family members under family reunion. That is where the difficulty comes. We can certainly see a situation in which two households with very similar profiles and experiences are treated very differently because of the funding that one can access and the other cannot.

I would like to know a bit more about exactly what the Home Secretary meant by her announcement before I express a full opinion.

Pam Gosal: Thank you.

The Convener: We had some questions about the Scottish Government's lodging of a legislative consent memorandum on the Nationality and Borders Bill but, in the interests of time, we will write to you and ask for your thoughts on the two specific clauses that fall within the devolved competencies.

I thank the witnesses for their evidence and Pam Gosal for joining the meeting. You are welcome to follow up on any points that you think we need to have fleshed out. I thank those who have already offered to do that.

That concludes the public part of the meeting. Next week, we will continue to take evidence on refugees and asylum seekers. We now move into private session to consider our remaining agenda items.

11:03

Meeting continued in private until 11:27.

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