

BEAM HOUSE PROJECT

Report of the Chief Officer Children's Services

Background/Introduction

Earlier this year the government introduced the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). Every Local Authority is required to receive UASC, equivalent to 0.07 of its child population, over the next couple of years. For Devon this equates to about 100 young people.

The clearance of the refugee camp in Calais has required a more urgent and substantial response from Local Authorities to meet the needs of young people who can be reunited with family in the UK (known as Dublin Three) and those who have a legitimate claim to apply for asylum/refugee status in the UK (known as Dubs or Dubs amendment)

The purpose of this report is to update cabinet/CLT on Devon's response and ensure colleagues are fully sighted on the issues and risks

The Project

The County Council made clear its expectation that Devon would 'play its part' in responding to the national challenge. It has also taken an unequivocally child-centred approach, which, in the context of an often hostile national media environment, has successfully ignited a very positive community response in Devon. Colleagues in communications suggest the balance of positive/negative comment is about 80/20 and the local media has been measured and broadly positive.

Devon's response has been in two parts

1. Devon was asked by the Home Office to support a partnership between the Home Office, PGL (a private company with a large adventure holiday site in North Devon) and catch 22, (a highly respected, national provider of child care services). Devon agreed that up to 70 young people (boys aged 16/17) at any time could stay at Beam House as a respite centre for Dublin 3 and Dubs young people. Devon's respite centre is one of a number, but it would be fair to say that the Home Office approach to the challenge was not systematic and did not use the usual LGA/ADCS channels, relying instead on the third sector and ad hoc contacts from interested parties.

In the first week of operation 30 young people have come into Beam House and there have been 8 reunifications. This data changes daily, and higher numbers are anticipated in the coming weeks.

2. All Local Authorities were asked to identify all in-house and IFA (Independent Fostering Agency) capacity in the area and make it available to receive girls and young children, Dublin 3 and Dubs. Devon offered 7 places

(4 in-house, 3 IFA) and received and placed 7 girls from Eritrea/Ethiopia. Devon has agreed to accept these 7 as part of its NTS allocation. Work is underway to reunite with family where possible and, where not possible, to settle as UASC in Devon. As capacity becomes free through moving on arrangements, Devon is likely to be asked to take further emergency foster care placements which are likely to convert to NTS allocations.

This report is focused on the Beam House Project

Operations

A strong and effective multi-agency partnership was quickly established, covering operations, social work, health, police, community and communications. This partnership will remain in place for the duration of the project (expected to be six weeks). The young people have arrived in cohorts of between 6 and 20, we have been notified to expect larger cohorts in the coming weeks. The range of countries of origin is wide, requiring interpreters and translators. Health needs have been minor, mostly antibiotics for infection and anti-histamine for allergies. Mental health needs are at tier two. Early concerns about young people going missing have not materialised but the risk profile is cohort dependent and can change accordingly.

The young people are all hugely appreciative of the welcome and the safe space that they are in. They are engaging in usual activities outdoor and indoor (football, basketball, cards, games) and are keen to apply themselves to learning English. They are understandably anxious about delays in reunification plans and/or destinations for NTS. Some initial uncertainty about immigration status has been clarified by the Home Office and we are exploring with the Home Office whether the council might be better placed to expedite reunification plans.

Community

The council has been inundated with offers of support and messages of goodwill. There have been some hostile and/or racist communications from, usually anonymous, members of the public. The pervasive national message that these are adults masquerading as young people is evident in some communications

The Mayor of Torridge and the Town Council alongside some community activists have done a first class job of local community reassurance with the Lead Member acting as spokesperson for Devon as a whole.

Ex-social workers, teachers and volunteers from Calais have come forward. The Communities team are putting together a strategy. During the first week the focus has been on clothing donations as the young people had only the clothes they were wearing. The Plough Arts Centre in Torrington has been the base for this effort. Donations have flooded in and many cards and well-wishes have been sent from the public to the young people.

Communications

The initial media strategy has successfully secured local media support. The comms team have issued a Q and A briefing to arm community leaders with the information they need to reassure the public and correct misinformation.

Daily ops and strategic meetings have ensured effective information flow for the Leader, Lead Member and Chief Executive. These have now been stood

down and a weekly ops and strategy meeting convened, followed by a weekly briefing for key stakeholders.

Strategic Considerations

The independent chair of LSCB will determine an appropriate test of assurance for the project's safeguarding arrangements. We are exploring how we might use the Council's Overview and Scrutiny group on 17th November to enable Catch 22 and/or young people to tell their stories. The relationship with national government is appropriate with a planned conversation every other day.

Financial Considerations

The Home Office has contracted PGL and Catch 22 independently of the Council. The Home Office has agreed to meet all reasonable expenses incurred by the Council, the most significant being the additional social work costs to enable assessments and re-unifications.

All costs related to the Beam House Project will be met by the Home Office. Costs related to the young women in foster care, upto the agreement to transfer to the NTS, will be met by the Home Office. Once accepted under NTS, the financial liability, offset by some grant income (which does not meet the full cost), are met by the Council. The month six finance report sets out the headline financial issues in relation to the projected financial liabilities through the NTS

Risks

In advance of the project becoming operational, the overall risk was rated at medium/high. At the end of the first week this was downgraded to low/medium

The identified risks are all operational, and are all being actively managed. The risk profile is cohort specific and is under daily review.

Equality Considerations

The project supports the Council's commitment to equality and will promote equality of opportunity/good relations.

The project has not yet had an equalities impact and needs assessment (EINA). This is because it was established as an urgent response to need.

Advice will be taken on a proportionate EINA

Legal Considerations

There are no specific legal considerations

Public Health Impact

Because the project is short term there are no anticipated public health issues

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Skills: Councillor James McInnes

Chief Officer for Childrens Services: Jo Olsson