

SHARED CITY PARTNERSHIP

Monday 13th May, 2024

MEETING OF SHARED CITY PARTNERSHIP HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillors Duffy (Chairperson) and McLaughlin.

External Members: Mr. P. Anderson, Department for Communities;
Ms. B. Arthurs, Community and Voluntary Sector;
Superintendent N. Henry, PSNI;
Ms. J. Irwin, Community Relations Council;
Mr. M. McBride, Education Authority;
Ms. C. McMenamin, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust;
Ms. T. Mimna, Good Relations, TEO;
Mr. W. Naeem, Interfaith Forum;
Mr. G. Walker, Community and Voluntary Sector; and
Ms. A. M. White, British Red Cross.

In attendance: Ms. D. McKinney, PEACE Programme Manager;
Mr. G. McCartney, Good Relations Manager;
Mr. D. Robinson, Acting Senior Good Relations Officer;
Mrs. L. Dolan, Acting Senior Good Relations Officer; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were recorded from Councillor Smyth and Ms. A. Roberts, Mr. J. Donnelly and Mr. L. Gunn.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 11th March, 2024, were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

Ms. B. Arthurs declared an interest in respect of agenda item 3, Good Relations Update, in that she worked for an organisation that was in receipt of funding, as the item did not become the subject of discussion, she was not required to leave the meeting.

Committee Papers of 8th April meeting which was inquorate - for notation

The Good Relations Manager advised the Members that the meeting scheduled for 8th April had been inquorate and had therefore not been held. He drew the Members' attention to the Committee pack for that date and advised that no

decisions had been required as the papers had all been update position reports. He advised the Members to contact him directly if they had any queries.

Noted.

Good Relations Update - verbal update

The Good Relations Manager advised that officers were still not in receipt of a Letter of Offer from The Executive Office, however, he hoped to be able to provide a further update at the June meeting.

Noted.

TEO Asylum Dispersal - verbal update

The Good Relations Manager advised that representatives from Mears had been invited to attend this month's meeting but had requested that the Working Group consider extending an invitation to a representative from the Home Office to also be in attendance to help address some of the queries.

The officer then drew the Members' attention to the undernoted briefing document that had been received from Mears in relation to questions that had been submitted to Mears by officers in advance of Mears attending the Partnership.

- **Overview of contract with HO**

Mears entered into the AASC (Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract) with the Home Office in 2019. Mears's role in the delivery of the AASC contract is to provide adequate, safe, and habitable accommodation. The financial support and asylum policy sits with the Home Office.

The 10-year contract reflects a change from the previous approach taken by the Home Office. The contract was designed to prevent homelessness and promote community cohesion.

Mears are contracted to house families and individuals seeking asylum within 4 hours of notification of arrival. It is important to note that Mears is not a 'dispersal region', in that we house families & individuals who present to claim asylum in Northern Ireland only.

- **Contingency accommodation**

Since 2021, a number of factors led to Mears taking on hotel-style accommodation. This was an emergency response to an unprecedented increase in new arrivals.

At the peak of contingency accommodation, Mears were operating within 23 hotel sites including smaller B&B style accommodations. As of June 2024, there will be 13 hotel sites

within the estate, following 5 closures which are currently underway. We endeavour to close an additional 3 hotel sites before the end of 2024 which will bring the total number of hotels used to 10 across the region.

Currently, asylum seeking families and individuals facing destitution will be initially placed into contingency or hotel-style accommodation. Hotels are separated into family, single-male and single-female cohorts. Each resident is entitled to full room and board, as well as essential toiletries. Each hotel has a welfare support officer on-site to facilitate initial property inductions, as well as key signposting and safeguarding duties.

- **Widening dispersal**

In 2022 the Home Office decided to widened dispersal outside of Belfast. Mears acquire new dispersal and contingency accommodation in new council areas, including: Derry & Strabane, Causeway Coast and Glens, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Newry Mourne & Down, Antrim & Newtownabbey, Mid & East Antrim, North Down & Ards, and Armagh Banbridge & Craigavon.

- **Reporting repairs and accommodation issues**

The AASC contract is not self-reporting. The AIRE (asylum issues reporting and eligibility) contract held by Migrant Help governs the relationship between the Home Office and contractor responsible for providing advice and assistance to people seeking asylum in understanding the asylum support system across the UK.

Migrant Help are contracted to provide advice and assistance logging of Issue Reported, and Eligibility for people seeking asylum. All issues relating to housing (maintenance and relocation) & welfare should be reported through this pathway, to be documented and relayed to the relevant team within Mears.

Migrant Help are contracted to send reported repairs to asylum accommodation providers. There are 3 categories applied to repair and maintenance issues: an immediate 2-hour make-safe, with 24-hour completion; 7 days; and 28 days.

- **Induction information**

Mears are contracted to provide a full induction for residents into contingency and dispersal accommodation. The induction includes taking the resident through their tenancy agreement utilising translation services to do so.

Additional information includes material provided by Migrant Help relating to the AIRE contract, material from the Home Office on the asylum process, rights & responsibilities, as well as a 'Local

Information Guide' developed by Mears and translated. This includes general information on the local area, guidance on access to Health & Education, as well as a directory of CVS support services and access pathways to these.

Please note that Mears are currently adapting Welcome Packs in consultation with residents and our front-line teams, with support from council good relations officers & trusts across Northern Ireland. This is a regular process as we aim to make the information provided more current, concise and accessible for our residents.

- **Procurement**

Heat mapping is to check safety and suitability of accommodation. Home Office, PSNI and NIHE provide the input on heat mapping. Mears is provided with heat mapped council areas broken down into ward level. Green, amber and red wards. Green is ok to procure, Amber can procure but propose property address for decision. Red do not procure.

- **Hotel allocation and standing up/closing hotels- response to protests and engagement with PSNI-local community.**

Allocations within contingency accommodation are based on available spaces, and matching families to the bed spaces & rooms available. Hotels are divided into family, male and female cohorts.

Mears work with PSNI and Home Office on by sharing information found on social media and other avenues in relation to planned protests. Robust procedures are in place to safeguard residents in hotels in the event of a protest. This includes additional on-site welfare support to monitor and support service users, as well as additional security presence to mitigate risk of escalation.

Mears work closely with the PSNI to facilitate productive engagement with residents, including orientation sessions on rights & responsibilities, community safety, hate crime reporting, and other issues including consent and domestic abuse.

This has been completed with the support of lived-experience organisation with an understanding of the barriers faced in this area. We believe that there is a collective responsibility of all parties to equip newcomer families and individuals with information on their rights and responsibilities in the UK, and we are always open to further engagement from the PSNI and community partners.

- **Data Sharing**

Mears are not in a position to share sensitive data relating to service users or the properties in which they are accommodated. We currently work within Information Sharing Agreements (ISAs) which are in place with NIHE, Health and Education to facilitate the implementation of key support.

Mears have been working to set up ISAs with a number of partners including councils.

Mears have no information that allows them forecast intake of people seeking asylum. Northern Ireland is a non-dispersal zone which mean that Northern Ireland only support those asylum seeker who arrive in Northern Ireland.

The Working Group noted the responses to the prepared questions but agreed that it would still like Mears to attend a future meeting, along with a representative from the Home Office, to enable discussion on the many issues of concern. It was further agreed that, if available, a TEO representative should also be invited to attend the meeting.

The Acting Senior Good Relations Officer reported that following the closure of the open call on 30th April, 16 submissions were received. These were assessed and scored according to agreed criteria. It has been agreed to award the remaining Asylum Dispersal funding to 5 projects following the Open Call for applications, and support a further 2 projects, submitted as part of this call, through the Good Relations Action Plan Budget under BCC5 and the existing action around Supporting Community Groups to develop integration, subject to funding for the Good Relations Action Plan.

Peace IV - Secretariat Update

The PEACE Programme Manager provided the Partnership with an update in respect of the activity associated with the closure of the PEACE IV Local Action Plan.

As previously advised, the PEACE IV delivery partners would be notified of the revised retention period of 31st December 2029, the archiving of Council records and documentation was continuing.

In relation to claims reimbursement, she reported that following legal advice on the process relating to the SSS claims impacted by the financial correction, officers were progressing the claims to the next stage. This would enable reimbursement of P31-33 claims, valued at approx. £1.26m to be progressed by SEUPB. She advised that senior officers were continuing to liaise with SEUPB through a legal approach on this issue.

At the time of writing the report, the value of the claims remained at £4.2m, however, the officer report that earlier in the week £1.07m had been received. She advised that officers would continue to liaise with the SEUPB in respect of a timeframe for the verification and reimbursement of the outstanding claims.

The Partnership agreed to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that it note the contents of the report.

Peace Plus Belfast City Council
Local Action Plan Update

The Working Group considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

The purpose of this report is to provide Shared City Partnership members with an update on the assessment of PEACE PLUS 1.1. Co-designed Belfast Local Community Peace Action Plan.

2.0 Recommendations

Members note the contents of the report and recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that they note the contents of the report.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Application Assessment Status

At April’s meeting, members were advised that clarifications had been received from The Executive Office (TEO) Corporate Governance Branch (CGB) and Economic Assessment Branch (EAB). Subsequent clarifications were also received from SEUPB, and all responses were to be provided within a tight timeframe.

3.2 Due to the extent of the clarifications, the introduction of new finance system, Easter holidays and end of leave year, CMT advised that an extended response timeframe should be requested. Subsequently responses were provided to TEO by 17 April 2024 to enable the consideration by the TEO Major Business Case Committee (MBCC) on 25 April 2024, and SEUPB Steering Committee in May 2024.

3.3 Following submission of the above responses, further clarifications were received and responded to from the TEO Communities in Transition team. TEO subsequently advised that further queries were raised by CGB and EAB) before providing advice to Major Business Case Committee.

3.4 Given the timeframe, the application will now be considered by the MBCC on 30 May 2024, and the SEUPB steering committee

on 19 June 2024, with a Letter of Offer to follow. TEO has advised this timeframe remains within the 28 week window outlined in the assessment process.

3.5 The Programme Manager has liaised with relevant officers to respond to all clarifications and will also consider the impact of the delayed timeframe on implementation and mobilisation, as well as community expectations.

3.6 Members are requested to note that responses to five clarification documents have been provided, and should also note the revised timeframe for approval,

3.7 Staff Recruitment

Appointments have been made for the Lead Officer, who will take up the role on 3 June 2024, and the Programme Support Assistant. Interviews are progressing for the Project Officer and Project Managers throughout April / May 2024.

3.8 Capacity Building Programme

Delivery of the Prepare to Procure Capacity Building Programme is continuing, with sessions focusing on the procurement process. The Writing Winning Tenders session which took place on 25 April 2024 was fully booked and well received.

Feedback from attendees has been positive, however further sessions on the procurement process focusing on building capacity of smaller community organisations is being considered.

3.9 Financial and Resource Implications

Expenditure associated with the PEACEPLUS LCAP is eligible from the submission date. As such expenditure is within the existing budget which will be claimed retrospectively from SEUPB. Advice on the drawdown of the £30K advance from SEUPB is outstanding and will be progressed by the Programme Manager, once the clarification process has been completed.

**3.10 Equality or Good Relations Implications/
Rural Needs Assessment**

Plan has been submitted for equality and good relations screening as well as rural needs assessment.”

The Working Group noted the update and agreed to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that it note the contents of the report.

Chairperson