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**MINUTES OF THE WEST YORKSHIRE SUB REGIONAL MIGRATION GROUP MEETING THAT TOOK PLACE ON TUESDAY 9 MARCH 2021**

**Attendees**

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| Vicky Ledwidge | Migration Yorkshire |
| Sarah Botterill | Migration Yorkshire |
| Ally Swaddling | PAFRAS |
| Pat McCusker | MESMAC |
| Nicki Batley | Mears |
| Jonathan Kingham | Home Office |
| Abed Moubayed | Kirklees |
| Ian Day | Bradford |
| Jane Callaghan | Wakefield |
| Stefan Robert | Migration Yorkshire |
| Pria Bhabra | Leeds |
| Adam Smith | Home Office |
| Sarah Mitchell | Kirklees |
| Natja Thorbjornsen | Bradford Rape Crisis |
| Kate Smith | WomenCentre |
| Saulo Cwerner | Migration Yorkshire |
| Hiron Miah | Bradford |
| Maria Philburn | Bradford |
| Becky Hellewell | St. Augustine’s |
| Marsela Hoxha | Migrant Help |
| Emma Taylor | Wakefield |
| Kirsten Fussing | Calderdale |
| Adam Atack | Migration Yorkshire |
| Cllr Maureen Cummings | Wakefield |
| Cllr Aubrey Smith | Calderdale |
| Emma Fitzpatrick | Mears |

**Apologies**

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| Cllr Pattison | Kirklees |
| Will Sutcliffe | Beacon Bradford |
| Mick Martin | Home Office |

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| **1.**  | **Welcome Introductions and Apologies**The chair welcomed attendees and introductions were made. |  |
| **2.** | **Minutes of the Last Meeting – 9 December 2020** The minutes were agreed as an accurate record. |  |
| **3.** | **Matters Arising**It was noted that housing and modern slavery will be added to the agenda of future meetings. | Migration Yorkshire |
| **4.** | **Hong Kong British National (overseas) visa**Stefan Robert joined the meeting to give an overview of the Hong Kong British National (overseas) visa briefing.From the briefing Stefan highlighted:* In June 2020, in response to new laws affecting citizens of Hong Kong the UK government announced its intention to provide a route for Hong Kong citizens with British National (Overseas) status to come to the UK and live and work.
* From 31 January 2021, people with BN(O) status can apply for a Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa to come and live and work in the UK for an initial period of 30 months. This can be extended and there is a clear route to Settlement and British Citizenship.
* With as many as 3 million people registered with BN(O) status, the highest possible forecasts of arrivals via this visa would mean a number of potential impacts on local communities.
* Visa fees are £180 to apply to stay for 30 months or £250 to apply to stay for 5 years. Additional costs include the Immigration Health Surcharge, which is currently £1,560 for a 30 month visa, and maintenance requirements evidencing the applicant’s ability to support themselves financially.
* Notably, there is a no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition attached to the visa. However applicants can lift themselves out of this.
* Where new migrants settle into new areas, this will have an impact on local communities and local authorities will be mindful of community cohesion, particularly if new arrivals like people with BN(O) status settle in areas already under stress.
* Well-established Chinese communities and whether or not this will be a source of support or tension for these new arrivals.
* At the moment, there is an absence of any government funded integration programme for local authorities, voluntary and community sector services.
* We don’t have an accurate forecast of the number of applications for the visa.
* We have limited data on who will apply and where they will chose to settle in the UK.

Members questions how BN(O) visa holders can lift themselves out of NRPF conditions. Stefan replied that it is still speculative but it visa holders would need to make an application to the Home Office to for a change to their conditions of leave. However, there is no support available for this and no specific timeframe for a decision. Jonathan Kingham also added that this would be the course for BN(O) visa holders to lift the NRPF conditions, but they may need to prove destitution on order to do so. Jonathan also noted that this is still speculative.It was stated by VCS a representative that there is no current service standard on the time it takes for the Home Office to make a decision on a change to conditions of leave.Members asked how LAs are preparing for Hong Kong arrivals. Stefan replied that through conversation with LAs in the Y&H region, he has found that some LAs are working on finding data to help predict and map where potential arrivals will settle in order to plan services.It was agreed that an update on arrivals from Hong Kong be added to the next agenda. | Migration Yorkshire |
| **5.** | **Integration and cohesion**Members were asked to note the update from Migration Yorkshire. Vicky Ledwidge highlighted from the update:* With effect from 1st January 2021, the Refugee Integration Service (RIS) is now operational in 11 local authority asylum dispersal areas across Yorkshire and Humber.
* The service is offered to those who have been granted refugee status, those who have been given humanitarian leave to remain, discretionary leave to remain of over 20 months and those unaccompanied asylum seekers who have been given leave to remain in the UK. Support can now be for up to 6 months in length.
* Additionally, Solidaritech, an organisation committed to tackling digital exclusion for migrants has come on board as a partner.
* Sheffield Hallam University’s Family Reunion Service is also offering its services under the RIS umbrella and is extending its own services across the region.
* Connecting Opportunities (CO) continues to remain open for business during the COVID-19 crisis and is continuing to support participants and take on new referrals.
* At the end of January, the Community Fund confirmed it will be continuing to extend the national Building Better Opportunities funding to mid- 2023. We hope to have final details for the Connecting Opportunities project confirmed by the Community Fund by the end of March.
* 2,506 potential modern slavery victims were referred to the NRM between July and September 2020.
* The government’s annual report on modern slavery sets out plans for its National Referral Mechanism (NRM) Transformation Programme to speed up decision-making and ensure victim support meets individual needs.
* The Humber Modern Slavery Partnership published its first modern slavery strategy covering 2020-2023.

Vicky also added that Migration Yorkshire have published the new ESOL for Refugees Toolkit. For more information and to download the toolkit visit: <https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/?page=esol-for-refugees-toolkit> |  |
| **6.** | **EU & EUSS**Members were asked to note the update from Migration Yorkshire. Vicky Ledwidge highlighted from the update:* The latest statistics at local authority level (up to September 2020) show over 212,000 applications have been made in Yorkshire and the Humber.
* From 1st January, EU nationals have been included in the Home Office’s voluntary returns scheme
* The Home Office has confirmed a further £4.85 million of grant funding will be given to organisations supporting vulnerable people in applying to the EUSS, extending existing funding until September 2021.
* A briefing by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner outlines potential risks of exploitation related to the EUSS and the UK’s new points-based immigration system. The main concerns are linked to the lack of physical proof of status and documentation proving residence in the UK, the lack of clarity on late applications and the need to convert pre-settled status into settled status.
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| **7.** | **Resettlement and UASC**Members were asked to note the update from Migration Yorkshire. Vicky Ledwidge highlighted from the update:* There have been a total of 2,436 individuals resettled in Yorkshire & Humber up to December 2020 (there were no arrivals after the beginning of February 2020 through to early January 2021).
* Following the Home Office announcement (Nov 2020) that they wish to complete the VPRS pledge to bring 20,000 individuals into the UK, arrangements are currently underway to bring in an additional 232 individuals to the UK.
* Migration Yorkshire have worked closely with these LAs and the Refugee Council to ensure robust support plans are in place for self-isolation on arrival.
* On 22nd January 2021, the Home Office informed Migration Yorkshire that agreement for the UK to continue with resettlement activity once commitments under VPRS have been fulfilled, had been secured.
* Migration Yorkshire has liaised with LAs to confirm commitments to the programme made last year and continues to work with LAs, voluntary sector partners and the Home Office to plan for further arrivals in the interim.
* The evaluation of the Children and Families Wellbeing Project is now available. The evaluation highlights the impact of the project, the need for this type of specialist support and has many case studies that make compelling reading. <https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/userfiles/file/publications/cfw-evaluationreport-july2020-v2.pdf>
* Migration Yorkshire have worked with Legal Aid Solicitors and Refugee Council to develop a regional co-ordination project to support each individual and family to make the application. By December 2020 the co-ordinator, Muhammad Nayyer (Refugee Council) had supported 168 individuals to meet the deadlines around applications and Legal Aid.
* The latest locally collected data (30th Sept 2020) shows that there are 219 UASC looked after by Local Authorities in Yorkshire and Humber and 565 former-UASC care leavers supported. The data also shows that there are 26 young people with Appeal Rights Exhausted (but still supported by LAs).
* There has been a significant increase in number of regional spontaneous arrivals in the last 3 months especially in East Coast Local authorities.
* UASC are also still being transferred into our region through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS).
* We are pleased to have been able to secure AMIF funding to continue some of the Welcoming Young Refugees project work in supporting local authorities to recruit new foster carers for unaccompanied children.
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| **8.** | **Asylum**Migrant HelpFrom the NEYH Regional update provided by Migrant Help, Marsela Hoxha highlighted:* Migrant Help continue to maintain a presence in the office and have continued to deliver services. Staff are working as part of 50% home/office rota.
* The office is Covid-19 compliant and ‘face to face’ appointments for SUs are being made in UH where necessary.
* ASPEN Rollout for our Region has been completed, so that eligible clients in IA can receive their additional payments.
* Work continue with Mears in hotels, where Migrant Help staff have regular and daily contact with SU’s to complete ASF1’s and briefings as they arrive.

From the National update, Marsela highlighted:* FRC progress:
	+ January saw the FRC reach its busiest day seeing over 4100 calls.
	+ The average wait to get through to the helpline across the 24/7 for the month was 10 minutes but in the last week of January this had reduced to an average of under 4 minutes across the 24/7 for the week.
	+ The remainder of new recruits are currently in the first weeks of their training. It is hoped they will be on the lines by mid to end of February.
* EAGL progress:
	+ Volumes remain high and the team continue to work hard to improve the average wait time and increase the number of calls being answered and therefore clients being supported. The average wait for January was under 10 minutes and progress is being made to reduce this further.

Marsela also added that requests for regional breakdowns of data have been acknowledged and Migrant Help are working with the Home Office to provide these.Members asked Marsela to clarify that face to face appointments were taking place at Urban House. Marsela confirmed that face to face appointments have continued throughout the pandemic when they have been needed. Migrant Help are working to get all their staff vaccinated so that this provision can be increases and a larger number of staff can be in the office at one time.Pat McCusker offered support to Migrant Help in making sure all staff are vaccinated. It was agreed that Marsela and Pat would have a conversation outside of this meeting.Pat McCusker also added that the VCS in Wakefield hoped to be back in Urban House in March and plan to deliver workshops and information sessions to promote the positive information on vaccines.Home OfficeMembers were asked to note the update provided by Adam Smith on Asylum Operations. From the update, Adam highlighted:* The Asylum Intake Unit in Croydon has continued to provide an appointment service. This is supported by temporary locations, allowing asylum claims to be made in a safe way. There are no plans to end these temporary operation sites.
* Asylum Operations is working with accommodation service providers to pilot interviewing in initial accommodation and hotels, whilst also working with Kent County Council on a pilot to conduct Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) interviews in their local offices to increase the output of interviews.
* Remote UASC interviewing has proven successful and the Home Office are presenting the concept to other local authorities to see if they may be able to offer a similar solution.
* Asylum Operations have introduced digital interviewing capability across the business as part of the wider Home Office digital transformation programme, which aims for the department to become ‘digital by default’.
* There has been inconsistency in the processing of visa applications for family reunion. All decision making has been moved to the Sheffield team to improve the service.
* UKVI is unable to inform local authorities of Family Reunion arrivals as we do not know or have access to information regarding:
	+ whether a sponsor is in receipt of local authority housing or will need access to local authority housing
	+ when their family will travel to join them in the UK
* However, in order to assist local authorities, the Home Office are exploring the possibility of informing applicants and sponsors to contact their Local Authority to discuss housing arrangements if it is applicable to them.

Adam also added that families are required to quarantine when they arrive, and the Home Office are looking at solutions to support with this with the Red Cross. This has led to the setting up of the new National Asylum Stakeholder Forum (NASF) Sub Group for Family Reunion, which is co-chaired by the Home Office and Red Cross.It was raised by VCS members that there has been delays with NINos for family reunions. Adam replied that this issue should be resolved not that all applications are being processed through the team in Sheffield. But if any problems are encountered, please do let Adam know.Jonathan Kingham also provided a verbal update.He noted that there is still a high level of DA procurement taking place in order to continue to empty hotels. The number of SUs being dispersed in the Yorkshire and Humber region will be the number in hotels in the region and the number from London hotels that would have been proportionately dispersed to the region under normal circumstances.There are ongoing discussions with LAs around procurement and the issues and concerns related to it. There are also ongoing adjudications for most LAs.The Home Office is also working with Mears around procurement, aiming to increase potential for acceptance on requests. One way this is being done is by asking Mears to contact the police prior to a property request going to LAs. However this is a new initiative and it may not be seen yet.It was requested whether there could be an estimate of property procurement at a local level to help the VCS plan their delivery. Jonathan agreed to take this request away and get more information.VCS members also raised concerns about capacity post-pandemic along with increased procurement (including new areas of procurement), and in particular a concern over increased multiple occupancy accommodation. Jonathan Kingham acknowledged that the Home Office recognises the difficulties created by multiple occupancy accommodation, and Mears have agreed to avoid it where possible. However, due to the pressure and volume of accommodation needed, it may be that there are some procurement of this property type. There is nothing in the contract that will prevent Mears from doing this, but consideration to the wellbeing and safeguarding of occupants should be given.MearsMembers were asked to note the update provided by Mears. From the report Nicki Batley highlighted:* Mears appreciate the feedback received for Urban House and the feedback is leading to plans and improvements.
* Mears recognise the need to improve service user satisfaction surveys return rate across DA and to do so they have appointed Customer Focused Champions, promoted survey during inspections and welfare checks, shared simple summarised results – ‘You Said, We Did’, and fed back through the quarterly DA newsletter.
* Two new Welfare Operations Managers have been appointed and the role in West Yorkshire has been filled by Sarah Gough.
* Kirsty Ware has been appointed as Initial Accommodation Operations Manager.

Following the update, members asked whether Mears intend to have focus groups in hotels as well as in Urban House. Nicki replied that there have been focus groups taking place in hotels since they were stood up in the region, along with several other platforms for SUs to use for engagement.A query was raised around the maintenance ‘not resolved in within the response time’ stats in the Mears report. The report states that there have been zero instances of a maintenance issue not being resolved. Members wished to know how this figure had been reached, as based on experience of group members this didn’t seem to be accurate.Emma Fitzpatrick replied that the information is based on the KPIs for property maintenance. Issues are raised through AIRE, reported to Mears, categorised accordingly and the resolved within the time frame of the specific category. However this can include temporary solutions to the issue. If a service user thinks that the issue has not been resolved then it will need reporting again through AIRE.In response to this members raised that many services users do not feel comfortable in ‘complaining’ about issues in properties. There are also serious concerns around self-isolation and services users not receiving the additional support they need for this. The VCS are then having to fill gaps in the service that Mears are contracted and paid to provide.Jonathan Kingham responded to this, accepting that reports vs. reality don’t always line up and the Home Office are aware of the ‘softer intelligence’ that doesn’t match the hard data. However, the Home Office wishes to reach a point where service users are comfortable reporting issues; fully understanding that it will not affect their asylum claim. There is also issue logs being held by Migration Yorkshire and Kirklees Council as ways of unofficially recording persistent failures. If there are instances of the right support not being provided by Mears to service users in DA, please report it to Jonathan Kingham.The issue of services users being dispersed to accommodation unsuitable for their individual needs was raised. Mears have helped with relocations when this has happened (in Calderdale specifically), but there are questions as to why it happened in the first place.Jonathan Kingham replied that specific accommodation requirements should be set out with supporting evidence in the ASF1 so that they can be considered by the Home Office’s Assessment team. Where appropriate, the HO will instruct Mears to provide accommodation in accordance with those requirements. Where accommodation becomes inappropriate as a result of a change in circumstances then the SU is able to requests a relocation via Migrant Help, or, in other cases, by Mears conducting a provider-led relocation.It was also added that Mears do make emergency moves when necessary and all dispersal properties have monthly inspections as a minimum as well as a property readiness check prior to SUs being dispersed. Mears are recruiting more housing managers. If there are issues, please raise specific cases directly with Mears.It was noted that there are wider, national issues such as the hostile environment that prevents and deters service users from reporting issues.There have been instances of hotel staff giving wrong information to services users, such as complaints affecting their asylum claim. There have also been several cases of safeguarding concerns in hotels. The group asked to know how Mears intend to improve this situation. Emma and Nicki replied that all issues should continue to be raised through the official channels and they agreed to share what is provided for hotel staff in terms of information, training and support.Migration YorkshireMembers were asked to note the update provided by Migration Yorkshire. There have been new statistics released since the update was written and a summary of these will be circulated with the minutes.  | Home Office |
| **9.** | **Sub-Regional Meetings – Format Review**Please could members take time to look at the terms of reference for the sub regional meetings and consider whether there are any changes or additional information that could be added to the meetings. Please send any considerations to Vicky Ledwidge so they can be reviewed at the next meeting. |  |
| **10.**  | **Other updates**Members were asked to note the policy update. |  |

Sarah Botterill, Migration Yorkshire

24 March 2021