

EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING – 11 APRIL 2002

Agenda Item No: 2
Title: Removals Centre
Author: Elizabeth Forbes (01799) 510400

Summary

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide members with some background information to assist in the debate at the Council meeting. It includes for consideration a recommendation from the Scrutiny Committee for Resources and Environment.
- 2 The Home Office has very recently decided to suspend work on progressing the future development programme for asylum seekers' provision until the outcomes of inquiries following the fire at Yarl's Wood are known. More details on this decision will be made available as soon as possible. The Council may nevertheless wish to come to some conclusions in principle at this stage since it is understood that this suspension will not affect the decision to locate a removals centre near Stansted airport.

Background

- 3 The Council was first advised about the possible location of a removals centre within the district through an informal telephone contact to the Head of Planning & Building Surveying on 14 February 2002. This was followed up immediately and a meeting with the Home office was organised for 13 March to establish more of their intentions. Members have been kept up to date as matters have progressed.
- 4 The meeting with the Home Office on 13 March was attended by senior councillors and officers and provided an opportunity to learn more of the Government's plans. A press release was issued following this meeting.
- 5 There has been extensive media coverage of the proposals and a range of views has been expressed. Members and officers have also received significant numbers of letters and telephone calls from local people about the matter. Great Dunmow Town Council has been particularly vocal about the possible sites and has passed a policy resolution opposing the housing of asylum seekers in Great Dunmow for a number of specified reasons.
- 6 The Scrutiny Committee for Resources and Environment gave preliminary consideration to this issue at its meeting on 27 March 2002 and passed the following recommendation:

RECOMMENDED that "This Council strongly opposes any siting of an asylum seekers' removals centre in the district which impacts upon the economic, environmental and social lives of established communities and that, in the

event of an unavoidable requirement for such a centre, asks that detailed consideration be given to under-used or disused airfields within the area surrounding Stansted Airport.”

- 7 Summarised below are the Government’s relevant policies and plans, the outcome of discussions to date with the Home Office and the concerns and views expressed by local people. Councillor A Dean has also circulated to all members some information from the Immigration Advisory Service and has made available to officers a report from the Refugee Council.

Home Office Policy

- 8 The Government announced changes to the policy and procedures for handling asylum seekers on 29 October 2001. The aim was to establish a national network of induction, accommodation and removal centres. A three tier structure was set out to include: induction, accommodation and reporting and fast-track removal or integration. Removals Centres were defined as housing those who are about to be removed from the country. The intention was to increase the number of places in such centres from 2800 to 4000. At this stage, no locations were identified for any new centres.
- 9 At the meeting on 13 March, officials confirmed that nationally they are required to develop a further 1000 detention places by Spring 2003. The policy is for these to be located near major airports and therefore approx 500 places each are being sought near Stansted and near Liverpool. It is the clear intention of the Home Secretary that there will be a centre near Stansted airport.
- 10 The Government is seeking to accelerate the decision-making process for asylum seekers; the target is for applications to be determined in 2 months and for appeals to be heard within 6 months. The target for removals is 2500+ per month in 2002/03. In addition the immigration service deals with approximately 3500 straightforward immigration offenders per year. Removals centres provide for those who are being held for a very short period of time before removal and for those who are at the final stages of appeal. The latter may be at a centre for several months. Departures are from main airports, sometimes on charter flights.
- 11 While removals centres are secure, individuals held are not prisoners. They are able to associate with each other and may have visits from lawyers and relatives. Centres are operated by a private contractor or through a service level agreement with the prison service.

Proposals for Uttlesford

- 12 As indicated above, it is clear that the Home Office intends to establish a removals centre within reach of Stansted airport. The preliminary site search identified the sites on the airport, at Smith’s Farm Great Dunmow and Thremhall Priory. The Home Office has stated that it is open to suggestions of alternative sites. The Administration Group of the Council issued a press release on 2 April suggesting that the Home Office should consider the former

RAF bases at Wethersfield in Braintree District and North Weald in Epping Forest District.

- 13 The Home Office is now assessing the feasibility of the sites it has identified. This includes traffic modelling and evaluation of other planning considerations. It is not yet known whether the Government will exercise compulsory purchase powers if required. The required site is at least 13-15 acres assuming a two-storey building. Good access to the road network is essential. The Home Office has stated that a balance has to be established between accessibility and the impact on the local community; they have not ruled out sites near residential areas, although officials have stressed they are very conscious of community views on such proximity.
- 14 Facilities for the proposed centre will include accommodation for 500 men, women and families. The centre will include recreational and health facilities, a library and education centre and prayer rooms. There will also be a hearings centre and case-working office on site. The site will be secure and will be surrounded by a 5.2metre high fence. There will be approximately 250-300 employees for the centre, with about 50% of this number on site at any one time. It is intended that the centre will be self-contained and therefore will not have an impact on local services. Implications and contingency plans will however be built into local emergency planning arrangements.
- 15 When a preferred site has been established, this will be announced and UDC as planning authority will be formally notified in accordance with statutory procedures. The Council will carry out widespread notification in accordance with usual practice for planning applications, although this may be widened further in the light of the high level of public interest in this matter. It is expected that Home Office officials will attend public meetings as part of this consultation process. There is then an eight-week statutory period for comment/acceptance/objection, at the end of which the Council will forward its comments, together with all those made by individuals and others, to the Home Office and (if there is objection) to the DTLR. If the Council objects then the Secretary of State for Local Government, Transport & the Regions will pursue the matter and, if necessary, hold a public inquiry.
- 16 Mechanisms for liaison between the local community and the Home Office will be established during the planning and construction phase and will continue during the operation of the centre.

Local Views

- 17 While some of the opinions expressed have been about the principles of removals centres and the location of a site within reach of Stansted Airport, the majority of specific comments have been in relation to the site at Smith's Farm Great Dunmow. Concerns from members of the public have focused in particular on security and the proximity of the site to residential areas. There have also been comments about the loss of land designated for employment purposes. Great Dunmow Town Council spelt out the following reasons for its opposition to the siting of a centre in the town:

“The people to be housed are those whose application have been refused and are awaiting deportation. Consequently they would have every reason to want to escape. The A130 and the new A 120 would be conveniently at hand. Nearby residents would live in perpetual apprehension. Smith’s Farm is earmarked for business/industrial purposes, which is much needed to ensure the prosperity of our town and diversity of employment. Indeed, such a development about half a mile from the town centre, for 500-700 people would make Great Dunmow a much less attractive place in which to live. The Home Office should look for an isolated site; this would make escape much more difficult, and show concern for the fears of homeowners. The Council would emphasise that they do not oppose suitable provision being made for genuine asylum seekers and, indeed, Great Dunmow has an honourable record in this respect. The suggested Removal centre is considered unsuitable provision in the wrong location.”

- 18 Concerns have also been expressed by other Uttlesford residents, including those of Stansted Mountfichet and the matter was raised at the Annual Stansted Parish Meeting on 20 March. Again most have focused on security aspects. Other concerns identified include the burden on local emergency services, impact on traffic movements, pressure on the jobs market and the potential for the centre to act as a ‘magnet’ for protesters and other individuals.
- 19 There have also been comments and contacts from individuals wishing to express sympathy or offering assistance to asylum seekers.
- 20 The Home Office Officials have assured us that there will be opportunity for public consultation and comment prior to and during the statutory eight-week comment period. The Home Office will be happy to attend public meetings. They also advised that if there are local objections they will encourage the Secretary of State to hold a local inquiry.

Conclusion

- 21 The question of a possible Removals Centre for asylum seekers in Uttlesford is clearly an emotive issue and strong views have already been expressed on a number of aspects. The Council will be invited to comment formally on specific proposals in due course. The Council is asked to consider forming an initial view in principle on the proposed siting of a removals centre and whether it wishes to accept the recommendation of the scrutiny committee.

Background Papers:

Home Office statement 29 October 2001
Note of Meeting with Home Office officials 13 March 2002
UDC Press releases 14 and 28 March 2002
Recommendation of Scrutiny Committee 27 March 2002
Administration Group press release 2 April 2002