

Proposal for a Scottish Asylum Stakeholder Forum December 2008

Introduction

In recent years a strong partnership approach has evolved to resolving issues around the asylum system in Scotland. However, there is still the **need for a body that has oversight of asylum issues in the Scottish context**. The group's role should involve resolving issues that are not addressed through informal partnership working and would include horizon scanning to identify emerging problems within the system, and exploring the implications of UK policy within a devolved context. With some adjustments, the existing stakeholder group convened by the UK Border Agency could perform this role and this paper outlines how this can be achieved. The new group would be known as the Scottish Asylum Stakeholder Forum (SASF).

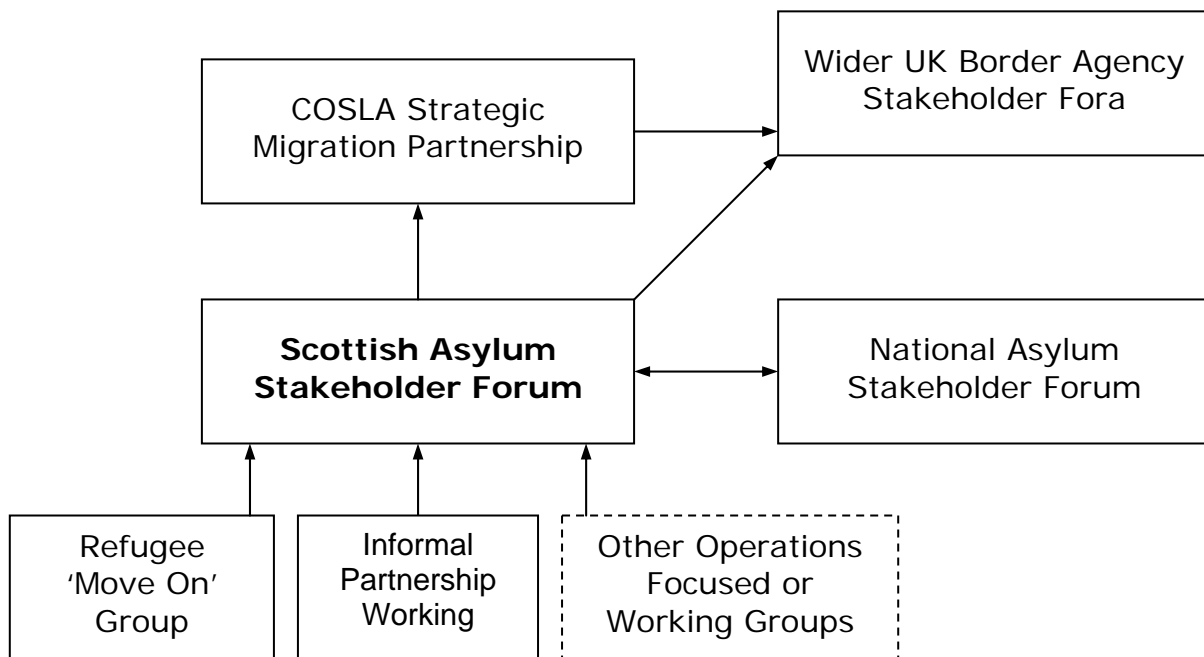
Role of the group and relationship with other stakeholder fora

The new group will perform strategic and operational functions. The group will complement the role of the COSLA Strategic Migration Partnership Board (CSMP Board) by providing strategic oversight to the services provided to asylum seekers in Scotland, but unlike the CSMP Board there will be space within the agenda to address ongoing operational issues. This is an important role since the CSMP Board remit and membership expanded in 2007 to include wider migration issues and as a result only a section of the group's membership are involved in asylum issues and there is less space on the agenda to consider those issues. **The aim of SASF will be to serve as a forum in Scotland for dialogue on asylum issues, which will feed into CSMP Board and other Fora when appropriate.**

The recent issue of the increase in asylum seeking women from China who request asylum support while they are pregnant provides a good example of how this could operate in practice. This is primarily an operational issue, and there have been attempts by a range of organisations to identify what is causing this trend and to resolve associated problems. However, this issue has not been resolved through informal partnership working and needs for further attention and a degree of strategic oversight. The CSMP Board meeting is not an ideal forum for this for the reasons outlined above. **The issue could be included on a SASF agenda where there would be time to discuss the issue, share information and identify courses of action that could be monitored at future meetings. If the issue cannot be resolved in this way and it is judged that further strategic or political intervention is required then the issue could then be referred up to the CSMP Board.** In this respect the SASF would replace one of the roles of the COSLA Operations Subgroup, which attempted to address this type of operational issue. SASF will differ from the Operations Subgroup in other respects because its agenda will not include a focus on the operational minutiae and individual cases which are more appropriately dealt with between relevant organisations.

SASF can also consider the implications of asylum policy within a devolved context in more depth than CSMP Board and can undertake horizon scanning to identify upcoming issues. It will be important to establish links with other stakeholder groups in order to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure the group has time to progress key issues. For example, refugee integration issues will not be included on the SASF agenda as a matter of course because

these can be referred to the existing Move On Working Group. The diagram below illustrates the relationships between the new SASF and existing Stakeholder Fora:



Relationships with National fora

It is also important that SASF relates to stakeholder fora at a national level. The proposed group would effectively function as a Scottish equivalent of the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum (NASF). It is worth noting that it is questionable whether NASF in its current form is fit for purpose since Scottish issues are often marginalised or excluded from the agenda. This is part of the impetus for establishing SASF. SASF would function as a forum to discuss Scottish issues in more depth and the outcomes of those discussions can then be fed into NASF. This should be facilitated by the inclusion of a NASF member who is a senior UK Border Agency Officer within SASF's membership. Given that asylum policy continues to be generated at a UK level, it is important to stress that the establishment of SASF does not mean that Scottish stakeholders will relinquish their seats at NASF.

SASF can also serve as a platform for developing Scottish perspectives on the issues included on the agendas of other UK Border Agency stakeholder fora and these perspectives can be represented to those meetings as appropriate.

Draft objectives

The objectives of the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum are as follows:

- To facilitate a regular and ongoing dialogue between UK Border Agency and key asylum stakeholders on policy, integration and operational asylum issues.
- To provide ongoing views on the effectiveness and consequences of asylum strategies, policies and procedures (excluding any reference to individual cases).
- To provide an environment in which members may raise issues on behalf of their organisations.
- To inform the creation or refinement of strategies, policies and operational guidelines

The role of SASF would be to deliver these objectives within a Scottish context. An additional objective could be:

- To provide strategic oversight to the services provided to asylum seekers in Scotland

The objectives should be discussed and agreed at the first meeting of the new group. It is worth noting that NASF is currently under review and that their objectives may change.

Proposed Membership

The following organisations and groups would be invited to send one representative:

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| 1. UK Border Agency Regional Office | 11. British Red Cross |
| 2. Scottish Government | 12. Medical Foundation |
| 3. Scotland Office | 13. Refugee Survival Trust |
| 4. COSLA | 14. Community Resource Coordinating Group |
| 5. Glasgow City Council | 15. Refugee Policy Forum |
| 6. City of Edinburgh Council | 16. UK BA Contract Compliance team leader
for region |
| 7. ACPOS/Strathclyde Police | 17. IOM |
| 8. Health representative | 18. Legal representative |
| 9. Education representative | 19. Senior representative of NASF |
| 10. Scottish Refugee Council | |

Other agencies can be invited to attend particular meetings when appropriate. The UK Border Agency Regional Director will ensure that appropriate members of his team are present to address issues on the agenda.

Frequency of Meetings

The group should meet quarterly. Consideration should be given to scheduling the meetings at appropriate intervals to allow the group to feed into the agendas of other stakeholder fora, including NASF, National Migration Group and Migration Impact Forum. A calendar of meetings should be established a year in advance.

Secretariat and Agenda Setting

We hope that UK Border Agency would continue to provide secretariat support to the group, especially since it is the regional director's key means of engaging with stakeholders on the asylum agenda. The regional director should continue to chair the meetings. A minute of each meeting with action points should be produced.

Members of the group should be consulted in advance for agenda items and encouraged to bring issues to the table. Consideration should be given to having themed agendas, especially if it would facilitate the group feeding into the agendas of other groups. Another possible approach is to aim to consider the asylum process from start to end at each meeting. These issues can be discussed and agreed at the first meeting.