

**PROOF OF EVIDENCE ON BEHALF OF STAFFORD BOROUGH
COUNCIL**

Councillor Frances Beatty MBE, JP, ARAGs

Planning Appeal Reference: APP/Y3425/W/23/3315258

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Serco consultation letter and leaflet

(376)

The Occupier
35 Holden Park
STAFFORD
ST18 0ZQ



Dear resident,

Proposed change of use to Stafford Court, Beaconside

We are writing to inform you of proposals by Serco, the leading provider of public services, for change of use planning application to repurpose the Stafford Court student accommodation buildings on Weston Road, Beaconside, Stafford. We are inviting you to comment on the proposals during a 10-day period of local engagement which will run until **midnight on Monday 7 March 2022**.

Our proposal is to provide an Initial Accommodation Centre (IAC) and Dispersed Accommodation (DA) for asylum seekers. The Home Office has a statutory requirement, under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, to arrange accommodation for asylum seekers and their dependents who would otherwise be destitute. Serco believes that Stafford Court is well suited to support the proposed facility. This is due to the configuration of the building to provide self-contained clusters allowing for flexibility and protection.

The centre will be comprised of Initial Accommodation (IA) and Dispersed Accommodation (DA). Initial Accommodation is urgent accommodation (usually for around four-to-six weeks) for asylum seekers who are waiting for their support applications to be assessed in order to arrange longer term accommodation. Dispersed Accommodation is longer term accommodation for single (male and female) asylum seekers to stay until their asylum claim has been fully determined. We have enclosed an information booklet outlining our proposals and explaining how to view them online and provide feedback via our consultation website www.staffordcourt.consultationonline.co.uk.

Yours faithfully,

Lisa Dysek

**Property Director, AASC
Serco**

Proposed change of use to Stafford Court, Beaconside



This booklet provides more information about a change of use planning application, being brought forward by Serco, to repurpose the Stafford Court student accommodation buildings on Weston Road, Beaconside.



Who is Serco?

Serco is a renowned service and outsourcing company that has been delivering essential public services to governments around the world for more than 40 years. In 2012, Serco was awarded the COMPASS contract (subsequently renamed the Asylum Accommodation Support Services Contracts (AASC)) by the Home Office to provide accommodation and transport services for asylum seekers in the North West. In 2019, Serco was re-appointed to deliver services under the new AASC in the North West and was additionally awarded the contract for the Midlands and East of England.

In delivering support to asylum seekers, Serco works alongside Migrant Help, a charitable organisation, appointed by the Home Office, which operates an independent national service called Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE). Migrant Help can provide asylum seekers with independent advice and guidance on the asylum process and also direct them to other services available in the UK.

What is being proposed?

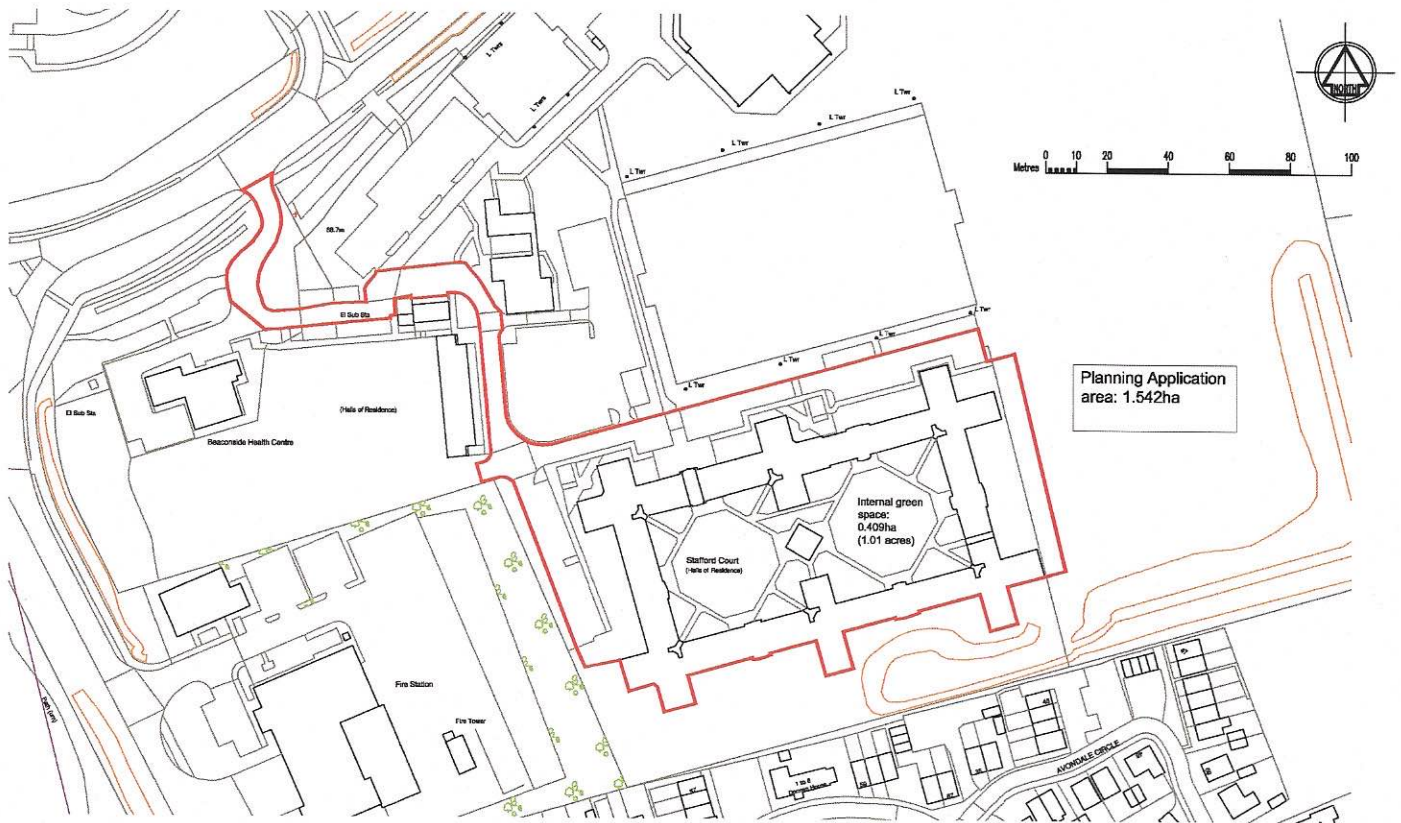
The proposals are for an Initial Accommodation Centre (IAC) and Dispersed Accommodation (DA) for asylum seekers.

Initial Accommodation is urgent accommodation (usually for around three to four weeks) for asylum seekers who are waiting for their support applications to be assessed in order to arrange longer term accommodation. Dispersed Accommodation is longer term accommodation for asylum seekers to stay until their asylum claim has been fully determined.

The overall number of bed spaces in use at Stafford Court would be reduced from its current capacity of 556 to 482 bed spaces comprising the following mix:

- Initial Accommodation – 160 beds
- Dispersed Accommodation – 322 beds

There will be no external alterations to the current building or surrounding environment.



Site location

The proposed site is occupied by the former Stafford Court student accommodation buildings on Weston Road, Beaconside, Stafford. It is these existing buildings that Serco seeks to repurpose via a change of use planning application.

The buildings previously formed part of a wider campus site owned by Staffordshire University. The University sold Stafford Court in 2014 following the closure of its campus in this location. Since then, the majority of the accommodation has remained vacant.

Land to the north of the site comprises indoor and outdoor sports facilities. To the east of the site is open countryside. To the south of the site is a new housing development and over the road to the west of the site is Stafford Fire Station.

Stafford town centre is approximately 3km from the site and bus stops within a three-minute walk of Stafford Court on Weston Road and Hydrant Way provide regular connections to the town centre.



Bringing service to life

The need for this type of accommodation

The Home Office provides accommodation and support for asylum seekers and their families while their cases are processed, under the UK government's international obligation to support asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increasing demand for accommodation facilities for asylum seekers. National lockdowns meant that no asylum seekers left the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts system although many continued to enter it, resulting in thousands of people being accommodated in hotels across the UK and an increased demand for a longer-term solution.

By population, Stafford Borough Council is the fifth largest of twenty Local Authorities within the West Midlands which does not facilitate the accommodation of asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers are housed across the UK in accordance with a ratio set by the Home Office at one asylum seeker for every 200 of the settled population. Currently Stafford Borough Council operates at 0% of this limit in contrast to other local authorities such as Liverpool and Derby which operate at over 80% and Birmingham which operates at 44%.

N.B all figures accurate in October 2021

Why Stafford Court?

The existing building configuration at Stafford Court is ideal to host this type of facility. The building offers self-contained clusters providing flexibility and the ability to offer protection to occupants with no external alterations to the building necessary.

The existing car parking provision provides ample secure parking space for transport, staff and visitors and under the terms of any lease granted, Serco would have exclusive use of thirty car parking spaces adjacent to Stafford Court.

Once operational, a shuttle service would be provided for people staying at the accommodation to allow journeys to and from nearby urban centres.

Our application and next steps

Thank you for taking the time to read through our information booklet.

We are currently preparing our planning application which will be submitted to Stafford Borough Council in the coming weeks.

You can view the plans on our website and provide any feedback you have. Our website is available:

At: www.staffordcourt.consultationonline.co.uk

Until: Midnight on Monday 7 March 2022



We have highlighted some common questions that people have raised in response to similar proposals below. Further FAQs can be found on our website where you can also ask questions that we have not answered here.

How will Serco ensure the health, safety and well-being of the asylum seekers and the local community?

The health, safety and wellbeing of our asylum seekers and the local community is of the utmost priority. Serco will closely engage with the police and fire authorities to ensure any concerns are addressed in an open and transparent forum. Serco has a dedicated Partnership team who are responsible for any safeguarding issues. The team also engages with local community groups and 3rd sector and faith groups to facilitate mutual understanding through workshops, drop-in groups and activities. All of the above agencies, including police and fire, meet on a regular basis at the Multi Agency Forum (MAF), which Serco will also attend.

What will the asylum seekers do every day?

Asylum seekers are free to come and go and there are no restrictions placed upon their day-to-day whereabouts. There are a number of appointments they are required to attend with the Home Office. In addition, our Partnership team will facilitate on site leisure activities.

Are the asylum seekers able to work and/or have access to benefits?

No, the asylum seekers are not allowed to work whilst their claim for asylum is being assessed. Nor do they have access to any benefits that would be afforded to a UK citizen. They do however receive a daily payment of £5.00 per person.

What influence do the local community have in this process?

There is no requirement to consult the local community on a change of use planning application, however, Serco is undertaking this engagement exercise to provide more information to the local community. Stafford Borough Council will consult local residents and statutory consultees as part of its determination of the planning application.

Do you envisage any site access safety issues - in vehicles or on foot?

No. Serco briefs all our asylum seekers on the basics of road safety as part of their induction. We will be using existing entrance and exit points for vehicular access.

We do not anticipate traffic to significantly increase as only Serco authorised vehicles will be using the site.

Do you have crime statistics for similar establishments?

Through our close engagement with local police authorities, we are advised that crime has not increased in areas where any of our properties are located.

Will asylum seekers hang around on the streets outside Stafford Court?

Serco advises people staying at our accommodation not to congregate in groups, as we are mindful that some members of the local community could perceive this as unsettling.

What steps will be taken to minimise noise from Stafford Court?

We do not anticipate noise levels to be significantly high and as the property will be staffed 24 hours a day, this will be closely managed.

Are records maintained to ensure asylum seekers do not "disappear"? What happens if they do?

If any of our asylum seekers do not obtain prior notification before leaving the accommodation for more than 24 hours, Serco will report any absences to the Home Office for further action.

How many asylum seekers are currently located in Stafford?

Serco does not currently accommodate any asylum seekers in Stafford.

When would Stafford Court be open for use by asylum seekers?

If planning is successful, we would hope to open the accommodation centre by the end of 2022.

How long will Stafford Court be used to house asylum seekers?

The term of the AASC contract between Serco and the Home Office expires on 31st August 2029 and so it is anticipated that the use of Stafford Court will continue until that date.

Appendix 2 - Plan identifying the location of the appeal site, along with the adjoining housing to the south



Stafford Court

St Mary's Gate

Appendix 3 - Scanned image of card left at planning committee meeting

PATRIOTIC ALTERNATIVE

PatrioticAlternative.org.uk

- ✓ Stop Immigration
- ✓ Deport Illegal Immigrants
- ✓ Ban Halal and Kosher Slaughter
- ✓ Ensure Freedom of Speech
- ✓ Ban LGBT Propaganda in Schools
- ✓ Protect our Countryside
- ✓ House British Families First
- ✓ British Jobs for British Workers

Printed & promoted by Patriotic Alternative: PO Box 275, Pudsey, LS28 0FQ.

**Appendix 4 - Express and Star press article dated 4 February 2023
concerning a protest in in Cannock town centre**

<https://www.expressandstar.com/news/politics/2023/02/04/police-oversee-protest-and-counter-protest-over-asylum-seekers-in-cannock/>

Police on hand for protest and counter protest in Cannock over asylum seekers

Published: Feb 4, 2023 Last Updated: Feb 6, 2023

Police were on hand for a demonstration in a Staffordshire town centre by people calling on the Government to take a harder line on immigration, as well as counter-protesters with welcoming messages for refugees.



The demonstration in Cannock town centre

Several dozen people marched from the Beecroft Road car park near the centre of Cannock to the town's main shopping area on Saturday morning with signs including one that said: "Our Government needs to deport not support."

A number of men were carrying an England flag on which the words "Illegal [sic] invaders" had been drawn.

There were around 150 people involved in the demonstration once it arrived in the town centre, and it was met with a counter-protest of about 40 people with signs reading "refugees welcome here" and "no-one is illegal".

Police officers formed a barrier between the two protests and chants were exchanged.

Protesters who walked behind the "deport not support" sign insisted the message was not a racist one, and complained about hotels in Staffordshire being used as accommodation for asylum seekers.



In Cannock town centre

One man said there were homeless people in Cannock who needed support and suggested that money spent on housing asylum seekers, estimated by the Home Office to be around £6.8 million per day, could help them instead.

He said: "There's homeless people in Cannock sleeping on the streets and someone in his family, in this country, has paid taxes to ensure he's supported from cradle to grave. But here he is, on the street."

And another protester said: "Nobody is standing for us which is why people are here, they've had enough."

Earlier in the week Staffordshire Police [appealed for calm](#) amid rising tensions, and confirmed that one man had been arrested and charged with a 'vehicle interference' offence.

The force could not substantiate other claims made about asylum seekers.

Tracey Sweeney, who lives nearby and organised the march with Kaz Southall, said: "We're disgusted with the Government deciding to put immigrants up in our town.

"It's about time and it's about time the Government heard our voices. We're not racist one little bit, we just want the Government to see that we've had enough of this."



In Cannock town centre

She added she was hopeful others, in towns across the country, would hold similar demonstrations and that they all would take coaches to Downing Street to share their message to the Government.

Some protesters complained that money was being spent on accommodation for asylum seekers whilst people were struggling with the cost of living crisis.

Children could be seen, and heard, joining in with chants against asylum seekers as the protesters set up at the bandstand near Greggs – across from the counter-protesters at the opposite bandstand.

One man added: "Why do the councils, or MPs, never consult us at all about this? They forget that we put them there and we pay their exuberant wages and they work for us, like the police and the Government but the way they continue to act you wouldn't think so."

The group split into two half way through a talk through a PA system the organisers had set up – with calls for "calm" as others headed to confront the counter

protesters, with a line of police forming to act as a 'barricade' between both sides and ensuring the demonstration remained peaceful.



The counter demonstration

Nick Kelleher, secretary of Wolverhampton's TUC branch, said the country only accepted a "very few" people from overseas compared to other countries – and "we should be doing our best for those fleeing from war zones".

He added he had joined the counter-protesters to show solidarity with them, but felt "disappointed" at the numbers on the opposing side – adding the Government's use of hotels to house migrants was "bringing money into the local economy".

Another woman who did not want to be named said: "I'm here today to oppose people who are coming out on the streets today, I'm here in solidarity with all asylum seekers and anyone who has experienced racism and racist abuse."

Shaz Akhtar, secretary of Walsall's TUC, said "We're all here today to say refugees are welcome here. No one leaves their homeland without a choice, they leave because they've got no choice – because our country is making decisions affecting people whether that's in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and it's really upsetting to be faced with a crowd like this.

"I'm hopeful people are understanding that when asylum seekers are coming into our country they are not doing it by choice, they've got no other option."

The counter-protesters stood behind a line of police, playing music promoting understanding, whilst the other group shouted, chanted and confronted the police officers – with some waving flags with "Patriotic Alliance" scrawled across them.

Another counter-protester, from Birmingham, initially confronted the other group when they first arrived. "I don't like to see people using refugees as scapegoats," he said.

Soon after the protest began to dissipate with members on both sides deciding to call it a day at around 12.30pm.