

REPORT TO EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting: 6 December 2016

Report of: Assistant Director Customer Access

Title: The Syrian Resettlement Scheme

Is this a Key Decision?

No

* One that affects finances over £1m or significantly affects two or more wards. If this is a key decision then the item must be on the appropriate forward plan of key decisions.

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive

1. What is the report about?

This report seeks Members' endorsement for the City Council's participation in the Syrian Resettlement Scheme ('the Scheme'), as part of a wider Devon response which delivers on the Government's pledge to resettle 20,000 Syrian families during the current Parliament.

2. Recommendations:

That Members agree the City Council's participation in the resettlement of vulnerable Syrian families as part of the Government's Scheme.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

The provision of accommodation to families arriving in the local area is a fundamental part of the Scheme. Officers have worked to identify the impact on the Council of our participation in the Scheme and therefore are in a position to make a recommendation to Members.

4. What are the resource implications including non-financial resources?

The Government's intention is that the Scheme is cost-neutral to Councils. Currently, officer time is not being accounted for in the costings of the Scheme. One of the reasons for the City Council entering the Scheme prior to formal adoption was in order to assess the impact on the Council's resources. We now have a clearer idea of the time taken to source properties and support the Scheme and the Governance Group is now determining how Councils will be compensated for this without an overly bureaucratic process.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

There appear to be no additional financial implications arising from this report.

6. What are the legal aspects?

The Council's participation in the Scheme is outside the Council's statutory responsibility for meeting Housing Need.

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

This report raises no issues for the Monitoring Officer.

8. Report details:

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme

- 8.1** In his statement to the House of Commons on Monday, 7th September, 2015 the then Prime Minister announced that Britain should resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees over the life of the Parliament. It is intended that these refugees will be taken from the camps in the countries neighbouring Syria.
- 8.2** On 21st April 2016, the Government announced the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, to complement the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme, to resettle in the UK an additional 3000 vulnerable 'children at risk' with their families from the Middle East and North Africa region. The 3000 figure will include any adults resettled with the children.
- 8.3** The United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refers people to the scheme and the UK sets the criteria. The scheme currently prioritises those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin: women, children and young people at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence, refugees with legal and/or physical protection needs; refugees with medical needs or disabilities; persons at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; and refugees with family links in resettlement countries.
- 8.4** Refugees are granted a five year humanitarian protection visa and this will entitle them access to public funds and access to the labour market.
- 8.5** The UNHCR conducts a series of checks, including a robust identification process prior to referring a refugee to the UK scheme. Referrals are then further screened and considered by the Home Office for suitability for entry to the UK. The Home Office checks they meet eligibility criteria and then carries out medical and security checks. The Home Office retains the right to reject on security, war crimes or other grounds.
- 8.6** By the time UNHCR referred refugees arrive in the UK, they will have been through two-stage vetting process to ensure Government knows who is entering the country. This includes the taking of biometrics, documentary evidence and interviews. Security is also regarded as a continual process that does not stop when refugees arrive in the UK.

9. Pan- Devon Response to the Scheme

- 9.1** To date, Devon's councils have pledged to accommodate at least 74 families. The City Council has agreed to accommodate up to eight families. The first few families have arrived and have been settled in three districts. More arrivals are planned shortly.
- 9.2** Devon County Council (DCC) has formed a partnership to coordinate the Government-funded programme. This brings together city and district councils, Devon County Council, the NHS, Devon and Cornwall Police and partners in the voluntary and community sector. Devon County Council is coordinating the partnership and has

agreed to be accountable to the Government for the programme funding. By agreement with the City and District Councils, DCC has taken a lead role for:

- Meet and greet arrangements
- Provision of medical and travel services
- Integration caseworker support, including language courses
- Availability and set up of appropriate accommodation (for at least 12 months, ideally two years) and related services
- Welcome pack of food, clothing, cash
- Support to access benefits

9.3 The support to families described above has been commissioned by DCC and is being delivered by Refugee Support Devon working with other community organisations as required.

9.4 Syrian families are housed in private rented properties that the landlord has offered or agreed to rent to refugee families. The pace of resettlement therefore depends on the supply of sustainable and affordable housing from private landlords. The housing development teams of Devon's city and district councils are working to stimulate this supply. Before housing offers are made, the partnership assesses the potential impact on resources such as local school places. Families become eligible for resettlement due to some vulnerability or additional need, which may be medical, psychological or educational. When families are referred to us by the Government, Devon carries out a multi-disciplinary assessment of any additional needs to determine whether and how those needs could be met in the resettlement location.

10. Learning from the Pilot approach taken in Exeter

10.1 Officers have sought to understand the impact of the Scheme prior to recommending its formal adoption by the City Council. There has been a significant amount of planning and development work with primarily DCC but also District Councils, the Police and Community and Voluntary sector. One significant issue has of course been the availability of suitable accommodation within the available rent amounts. Officers are using the Private Sector Leasing approach to source accommodation. Teams across Customers Access and Housing have worked to identify and inspect appropriate properties as well as working alongside Refugee Support Devon to support families moving into the accommodation.

10.2 In some cases, properties have identified but not progressed because of various reasons such as restrictions by Mortgage companies, the rent being asked for by landlords being too high or advice from the Police's Diverse Communities Team. Through our work on the Scheme, we are now better able to identify the impact on the Council in terms of officer time which we are feeding into the Governance Group.

11. Governance of the Scheme

11.1 An Operations Group exists to address issues in the day to day running and support of the Scheme. Membership includes the County, City and District Councils (mainly Housing Officers from the latter two), Refugee Support Devon and Police.

11.2 A Governance Group made up of senior officers from DCC, District Councils, Police and Refugee Support Devon meets monthly to provide leadership of the Scheme and resolve issues raised by the Operations Group. This Group also keeps oversight of the

funding of the Scheme, community support and issues and communication. The Group also works to identify potential solutions to the challenging situation regarding the availability of properties and assessing the amount of time being spent on the Scheme by officers. The City Council's representative on the Governance Group is the Assistant Director Customer Access.

12. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

This decision sits outside the Council's priorities as stated in its Corporate Plan but reflects members' desire to respond positively to the plight of vulnerable communities overseas facing devastating conditions, without impacting on the Council's ability to deliver its services to our local communities.

13. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

13.1 There is a risk that families once accepted into the Scheme are not supported adequately. This has been mitigated by the provision of support to the families through the services commissioned by DCC as well ensuring that there are adequate mechanisms in place to refer families to other specialist agencies as required to support families with additional physical or other needs.

13.2 There is also a risk that the Council is not able to meet its commitment due to the lack of availability of suitable housing. Efforts are being made to make direct contact with landlords who may be willing to provide properties specifically for this Scheme.

14. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

Issues around safeguarding, health and wellbeing, vulnerability and community safety have been considered and taken account of by the Operational and Governance Groups.

15. Are there any other options?

The Council could choose not to continue to participate in the Scheme.

Bindu Arjoon
Assistant Director

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

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