

# **North Somerset Council**

## **REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE**

**DATE OF MEETING: 2 FEBRUARY 2016**

**SUBJECT OF REPORT: SYRIAN REFUGEES**

**TOWN OR PARISH: ALL**

**OFFICER/MEMBER PRESENTING: COUNCILLOR NIGEL ASHTON - LEADER**

**KEY DECISION: YES**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. To authorise officers to respond to Government confirming that North Somerset Council would be willing to take part in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme and provide accommodation and support initially for up to 3 households comprising immediate families with young children or vulnerable older people.
2. To delegate decision making regarding entering into agreements with Government to facilitate North Somerset Councils participation in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme to the Director of People and Communities in consultation with the Leader of the Council
3. That officers regularly review the potential to take additional households in the light of our experience of accommodating and supporting the initial households and delegate decision making about the number of additional refugees to be accommodated in North Somerset in the future to the Director of People and Communities in consultation with the Leader of the Council.
4. To agree that the refugees could be housed in existing or new build affordable housing for rent or private rented sector accommodation depending on availability and suitability.

## **1. SUMMARY OF REPORT**

This reports provides details of the scheme being operated by Government to resettle Syrian refugees in the light of the Prime Ministers statement to the House of Commons on 7 September 2015 that in response to the Syrian refugee crisis Britain would resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees over the course of the current Parliament. The reports sets out details of how refugees are selected for resettlement to the UK, the responsibilities of Local Authorities who volunteer to take part in the scheme and the financial arrangements. It also sets out the potential contribution that North Somerset Council could make, for members to consider. An update is also provided on asylum seeker dispersal arrangements.

## **2. POLICY**

The UK sets the criteria for accepting refugees and then UN High Commissioner for Refugees identifies and submits potential cases for UK consideration. Cases are screened and considered by the Home Office and the UK retain the right to reject cases on security, war crimes or other grounds. Refugees are granted a five year humanitarian protection visa which will entitles them to access to public funds/services, access the labour market and the possibility of a family reunion. Access to North Somerset Council Services would be determined by mainstream service policies subject to any necessary amendments

## **3. DETAILS**

In his statement to the House of Commons on Monday 7 September 2015, the Prime Minister announced that in response to the Syrian refugee crisis Britain would resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees over the course of the current Parliament, in addition to the 5,000 Syrian refugees that the country has already resettled since 2011.

To enable this to happen the Government has expanded the existing Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS). The VPRS prioritises for resettlement the most vulnerable Syrian refugees who have been displaced to other countries in the region (rather than those who have already travelled to Europe) and 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. The criteria have been expanded to also include persons at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity and refugees with family links in resettlement countries

Refugees will be granted a five year humanitarian protection visa. This will entitle them to access to public funds, access the labour market and the possibility of a family reunion.

The Home Office has indicated that it will seek to ensure an equitable distribution of the refugees across the country so that no individual Local Authority (LA) receives a disproportionate share. Councils' are being approached by the Home Office to establish whether they would be willing to take refugees and if so what numbers and whether there are any preferences in relation to the types of households who could best be supported.

The UK Government is working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who identify and submit potential cases that meet the VPRS criteria for Home Office consideration. Cases are screened and considered by the Home Office and the UK retain the right to reject cases on security, war crimes or other grounds. Once the screening process has been completed a full medical assessment is conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in the host country. The Home Office pass full details of the case and medical history to a LA who has asked to participate in the scheme for assessment of need, including whether suitable accommodation and care are available locally.

LA's who choose to participate in the scheme enter into a written agreement with Government and take a lead role in working with local partners to ensure refugees are provided with suitable accommodation and that any specific needs are met.

Accommodation should be self-contained rather than rooms in shared houses and LA's are required to ensure that the accommodation is appropriately furnished. When refugees

arrive they are provided by the LA with basic essentials and a cash/clothing allowance to ensure they have sufficient funds to live on while their claims for benefits are being processed. LA's and their partners provide advice and assistance for refugees to help them access main stream benefits, work and services and are required to put in place a support plan for each family or individual for the first 12 months to facilitate their move to the area. Councils are also required to put in place arrangements for the provision of English language classes and interpreter services where required.

The Government has stated that it will provide financial support to LAs participating in the expanded scheme. For the first year of a refugees stay LAs are funded on a tariff basis by Government using the overseas aid budget. The Government have reviewed costs for existing schemes running elsewhere in the country and would provide LAs' in the first year with funding of £8,520 per person. Where Special Educational Needs exist LA's would receive £1,000 per child of nursery or school age and would be able to make applications for additional funding for specific cases where costs exceeded this amount. Additional funding would also be made available to DWP, Primary and Secondary Medical Care Providers (direct to Department of Health) and Education (direct to DFE)

Year two to five funding will be allocated on a tariff basis over four years, tapering from £5,000 in year 2 to £3,700 in year 3, to £2,300k in year 4 and £1,000k in year 5. Based on responses provided by LA's Government have said that they estimate this additional funding could assist with most of the expected costs in years' two to five. This funding includes support for integration such as additional English language training as well as social care. Government also intend to provide an extreme cases fund to provide additional support for the most vulnerable persons and will work with LAs to finalise the specific criteria for the fund, however it is understood that government expects it will primarily cover additional social care costs, for example for people with complex needs.

There is an opportunity for North Somerset to play its part in providing support for these most vulnerable refugees. North Somerset Council has a very high demand for affordable and privately rented housing and a limited supply. As a result we could not be confident about the number of refugees that we could house at this stage over the 5 year period. An alternative would be to accept a small number of households initially and the Council would then be in a position in the future to review the potential to take additional households in in the light of our experience of accommodating and supporting the initial households. North Somerset would be able to provide support to a small number of families with young children and to a small number of vulnerable older people.

It is anticipated that it will be important for the refugees to be located relatively close to each other to enable the provision of mutual support. This would be difficult to provide through private rented sector accommodation and as a result it is likely that the refugees would be housed in rented social housing in close proximity to each other potentially taking advantage of new developments which are currently under construction.

## **Asylum Seekers**

Initial contact has also been received regarding the possibility of placing asylum seekers in North Somerset. No decision is proposed on this matter at this stage as further discussions need to take place. Asylum seekers are provided with accommodation, transportation and cash/subsistence support, funded by the Home Office, whilst their application for asylum is being considered. Asylum seekers are accommodated in a number of local authority areas across the country (dispersal areas). In the South West these are Bristol, Gloucestershire, Plymouth and Swindon. Accommodation is provided by an accommodation provider

contracted by the Home Office and who typically works with private owners and landlords to obtain accommodation. Asylum seekers are able to access some services e.g.: schools, social care.

In the light of the need for additional accommodation for asylum seekers the Home Office are working with their accommodation provider to identify further local authorities to take part in asylum seeker dispersal. It is understood that a number of local authorities including North Somerset will be contacted in the near future about the potential to become a dispersal area. Any decision to accommodate Syrian Refugees is likely to reduce North Somerset's ability to take part in asylum seeker dispersal, given the pressures on the local housing market and services.

#### **4. CONSULTATION**

Voluntary Action North Somerset (VANS) are keen to support the Council in any response to the refugee crisis in a similar way to the support that Voluntary Action have been able to provide in Sheffield where they provide information for residents who wish to volunteer or provide support e.g. by making donations. The pages signpost people to organisations already undertaking work in this area and those that can take donations. VANS have already developed some initial web pages which provide information for residents.

#### **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

From conversations with other participating authorities it is anticipated that the funding provided by Government in the first year would be sufficient to cover the costs involved. There is some risk that the income from Government over the 5 year period does not cover costs however Government intend to provide an extreme cases fund to provide additional support for the most vulnerable persons which could help mitigate any shortfall which will otherwise need to be covered through mainstream expenditure.

#### **6. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

Continuing support and accommodation will need to be provided to the refugees for up to 5 years and potentially beyond should they be given leave to remain indefinitely.

#### **7. CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

The provisions of accommodation and support for refugees in North Somerset will require the involvement and support of services across the council (and partners) depending on the needs of the refugees.

#### **8. OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

Not taking part in this scheme would mean that vulnerable people in Syria would not be able to be relocated to North Somerset.

**AUTHOR     MARK HUGHES, HEAD OF HOUSING AND DIRECTORATE GOVERNANCE, PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES.**

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Local Government Association – Refugee resource information

<http://www.local.gov.uk/refugees>

Letter from Richard Harrington MP Minister for Syrian Refugees dated 26 November re: funding of the Syrian Refugee Resettlement programme

Syrian Refugee Resettlement funding briefing note received 15-1-16 - Syrian Refugee Resettlement Programme team LGA