

TITLE OF REPORT: UPDATE ON THE CURRENT POSITION REGARDING THE PROPOSED RESETTLEMENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF HOUSING AND PUBLIC PROTECTION
EXECUTIVE MEMBER: COUNCILLOR BERNARD LOVEWELL

1. SUMMARY

1.1 The Cabinet, at its meeting on 29 September 2015, resolved:

That the Government position on the proposed resettlement of refugees from camps around the Syrian border be noted, the aims and intentions of this action be fully supported, and Officers be therefore requested to undertake investigations to establish:

- *In consultation with our partners the capacity to house refugee families taking into account the knock-on effects of any such action;*
- *The extent of government funding for any such actions;*
- *The potential costs of any such action over and above that that may be expected from government sources;*
- *In conjunction with our partners any other capacity issues such as pressure on social services in the District, family support etc. and establish indicative costs to allow these matters to be dealt with; and*
- *The legal implications of the Council in hosting a voluntary register of those prepared to host a refugee,*

and that a report on these matters be brought back to the Cabinet meeting to be held on 10 November 2015.

1.2 This report provides an update on the current position, although many details of how the resettlement scheme will run are still to be confirmed.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That the Cabinet notes the current situation regarding the proposed resettlement of Syrian refugees.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 To enable the Cabinet to note the latest position regarding the proposal to resettle Syrian refugees.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1 None.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

5.1 The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health, Cllr Bernard Lovewell has been consulted on the content of this report.

6. FORWARD PLAN

6.1 This item has not been added to the Forward Plan.

7. BACKGROUND

7.1 On 29th January 2014 the Government established the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) in order to provide a route for selected Syrian refugees to come to the UK. The scheme prioritised victims of sexual violence and torture and the elderly and disabled. The resettled refugees are given five years Humanitarian Protection status with permission to work and access public funds. They also have rights to family reunion comparable to refugees, whereby they are allowed to sponsor family members to come in from abroad under the special refugee family reunion rules. It is expected that, at the end of the five year period, they will be able to apply for permanent settlement in the UK. By the end of June 2015, 216 people had been resettled in the UK under the scheme.

7.2 On 7th September 2015, the Government announced an extension to the VPRS with a commitment to resettle up to 20,000 refugees from the Syrian region over the next five years. At the same time, priority for inclusion in the scheme was broadened to include children.

7.3 Resettlement is to be offered to Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, rather than those who have already travelled to Europe. Individual refugees cannot apply to the UK to be resettled. Refugees who are potentially suitable to be resettled are identified by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff. Local authorities participating in the scheme will be asked to consider cases that have been referred by the UNHCR on a case by case basis to allow them to assess their needs and requirements. It is proposed that unaccompanied children will be resettled through a scheme designed specifically for their needs.

7.4 The Home Office has asked local authorities to provide an indication of the number of adults, children and families that they could accommodate over the five years of the scheme. Local Authorities will not be bound by any offer they make and it will be treated as confidential. The Local Government Association (LGA) has the role of co-ordinating offers from lead local authorities via the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership (RSMP).

7.5 No single authority or public service is totally responsible for all the services that will be required to meet the needs of those accepted onto the scheme. As such, local authorities that choose to participate are expected to take the lead. Both tiers of local government in two tier local authorities will need to agree their approach. This usually involves the County Council taking the lead role of negotiating and co-ordinating offers from the numerous agencies involved in to delivering a comprehensive re-settlement package.

7.6 To submit a credible offer, the lead authority will need to consult with services providing housing, health and social care, education and personal care as well as faith groups and community and voluntary sector agencies to identify their capacity to support and resettle refugee households. Given the considerable vulnerability of the families and individuals that qualify for the scheme, it is likely that their need for services will extend beyond the first 12 months of their arrival.

7.7 Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) has pledged to play its full part, alongside other local public services, to support Syrian refugees. It has recently appointed a lead

officer to take this work forward. However, it does not appear that HCC is in negotiation with the LGA at the time of writing this report. Nevertheless, the scheme will run over five years and local authorities have the option to make a commitment at any time during this period. It is expected HCC will deliver a paper on the matter to the Hertfordshire Leaders Group on 19 November 2015.

- 7.8 The success of any accommodation offer from the Council is highly dependent on complementary offers from HCC and other agencies. An offer of accommodation alone cannot be made to any agency above lead authority level. Hence, until such a time as a lead authority is established, there is no authority to receive an offer from the Council.

8. ISSUES

- 8.1 At its meeting on the 29 September 2015, the Cabinet resolved:

That the Government position on the proposed resettlement of refugees from camps around the Syrian border be noted, the aims and intentions of this action be fully supported, and Officers be therefore requested to undertake investigations to establish:

- *In consultation with our partners the capacity to house refugee families taking into account the knock-on effects of any such action;*
- *The extent of government funding for any such actions;*
- *The potential costs of any such action over and above that that may be expected from government sources;*
- *In conjunction with our partners any other capacity issues such as pressure on social services in the District, family support etc. and establish indicative costs to allow these matters to be dealt with; and*
- *The legal implications of the Council in hosting a voluntary register of those prepared to host a refugee,*

and that a report on these matters be brought back to the Cabinet meeting to be held on 10 November 2015.

8.2 Establishing the capacity to house refugee households in North Herts.

- 8.2.1 As a non-stock holding authority, an offer to provide housing for Syrian refugees in North Hertfordshire requires a commitment of provision from stock holding registered providers (formerly known as housing associations) and/or private sector landlords. However, any accommodation offer made by the Council will be futile without a supporting commitment from HCC. Consequently, there is a risk that, should the Council seek offers from its partners prior to any commitment from HCC, their position will have altered by the time refugees arrive in Hertfordshire.

- 8.2.2 There is a high demand for housing in the district and indications are that this will continue to rise. The Council has been unable to secure sufficient accommodation within North Herts, in either the social or private sector, to meet its statutory duties towards homeless households. Consequently, there are presently seven homeless households being accommodated in neighbouring authorities and a further six households in bed and breakfast accommodation within the district.

8.3 The extent of Government funding

- 8.3.1 The Government has made an undertaking to meet the full cost of resettling refugee households for the first year. More recently, it has committed to additional funding for subsequent years; however, the extent of this funding is yet to be confirmed.

- 8.3.2 From the information available, it appears that funding for accommodation will cover the actual cost of two months void costs when securing accommodation, plus the actual cost of adapting and furnishing properties.
- 8.3.3 The Home Office is seeking local governments' views on arrangements for process and funding through the LGA.

8.4 The potential costs over and above funding from the Government

- 8.4.1 Rental costs will be met through the refugee household's entitlement to benefit at Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates. If rent exceeds LHA rates it will not be reimbursed through the scheme. In these circumstances any excess may need to be covered locally either through Discretionary Housing Payments or some other source.
- 8.4.2 There is no clear indication that councils will receive reimbursement for administration of the scheme.
- 8.4.3 The LGA's view is that utilising and funding central, regional and local government's strategic and operational expertise and innovative practice is an essential component for the success of the scheme. They are currently working with the Government to resolve the final funding package as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review. It is expected that any announcement will be made in time for the local government funding settlement.

8.5 Capacity issues such as pressure on Social Services and indicative costs

- 8.5.1 There is no information available on the potential impact that accommodating refugees in North Herts would have on services provided at county level. However, we are already aware of pressure on nursery, pre-school, and school places in several areas of the district which may be further impacted by settlement of refugees; similarly, until such stage as individual families needs are assessed, it would be difficult to evaluate additional resource implications such as provision of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other languages) and similar support services.

8.6 The legal implications of hosting a voluntary register of those prepared to host a refugee

- 8.6.1 There is legal capacity for the Council to host a voluntary register of those prepared to host a refugee. However, there will be challenges in terms of policing the arrangement as well as potential liability if anything goes wrong. In addition, there may well be risks concerning 'Safeguarding' in relation to the health and wellbeing of the refugees as they are likely to be extremely vulnerable.
- 8.6.2 The Government has indicated that, at this stage, it does not consider there will be a need to host Syrian refugees in homes and they are not asking private individuals to come forward. They have also advised, on their website (www.gov.uk), that many organisations in the UK operate accommodation hosting projects to help vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees, including the Red Cross.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The Council has a general power of competence under section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 to do anything that individuals generally may do. It has power to do so "otherwise than for, the benefit of the authority, its area or persons resident or present in its area", which this scheme would be.

- 9.2 Within its terms of reference, Cabinet has remit under 5.6.14 to carry out the Authority's responsibilities for the general power of competence; under 5.6.19 it may oversee the Authority's policy on the voluntary and community sector and under 5.6.28 it may make decision where a policy or strategy does not exist (and it not otherwise reserved to Council).
- 9.3 Furthermore, to the extent that this is relevant to hosting of refugee register, section 4 of the Homelessness Act 2002 confirms that the District Council is the Local Housing Authority under the Housing Act 1985 Section 1 (1).

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 In terms of resettling refugees, the LGA website (as of 22 October 2015) provides the following response:

The LGA has been pressing for the Government to confirm that councils will receive additional funding beyond the initial 12 months if they agree to take refugees through this scheme. As a result of these negotiations:

- In the expanded scheme, there will be additional funding for refugees beyond the first 12 months and we understand this will not be taken from the overall council allocation.*
- Funding will be made available for the full five years of each refugee's settlement in the UK to ensure LAs can plan ahead Government will also provide funding to assist with costs in future years'.*
- We will continue to press for an arrangement to 'top up' exceptional costs.*
- These arrangements will be applied to all cases since the 20,000 expansion was announced so councils which come forward early will not be disadvantaged.*

The Spending Review will finalise the funding package for the scheme, and the LGA will remain close to these negotiations until they are announced (the Spending Review is due to be announced on 25 November 2015).

- 10.2 Following a meeting between the Home Office and the RSMP on 13 October 2015, a draft funding process document for the Syrian Resettlement Scheme was circulated. This document appears to apply to Unitary Authorities with the payment for housing being combined with management of the scheme, cultural integration and social care.
- 10.3 As highlighted in paragraphs 8.3 and 8.4, the details concerning the funding position remain uncertain, including the net costs that may need to be met by the Council, although it is hoped that this will be clarified after the announcement of the Spending Review.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 One of the Council's Top Risks (TR60) is 'Increased homelessness and use of bed and breakfast accommodation'. Finding housing for Syrian refugees in the North Hertfordshire area will increase the already high demand for private rented sector accommodation and/or social housing.
- 11.2 By housing Syrian refugees in the District, the Council will illustrate its support for the Government's response to this humanitarian crisis. In addition, it demonstrates support for the Council's Strategic Objective (from 2016 onwards) "To work with our partners to

provide an attractive and safe environment for our residents, where diversity is welcomed and the disadvantaged are supported”.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 The Equality Act 2010 came into force on the 1st October 2010, a major piece of legislation. The Act also created a new Public Sector Equality Duty, which came into force on the 5th April 2011. There is a General duty, described in 12.2, that public bodies must meet, underpinned by more specific duties which are designed to help meet them.
- 12.2 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of its functions, give **due regard** to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.3 There are no direct equality issues arising from this report although consideration of the needs not only of any individual refugees/families but also the wider community in terms of enabling effective integration will remain relevant throughout the continued discussions surrounding resources and support services.
- 12.4 Once the relevant scheme details are confirmed, including the level of support from key agencies, a further assessment of potential equality implications can be made at that time.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 As the recommendations made in this report do not constitute a public service contract, the measurement of ‘social value’ as required by the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 need not be applied, although equalities implications and opportunities are identified in the relevant section at paragraphs 12.

14. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 None.

15. APPENDICES

- 15.1 None.

16. CONTACT OFFICERS

- 16.1 Report author:

Martin Lawrence
Strategic Housing Manager
01462 474250
martin.lawrence@north-herts.gov.uk

- 16.2 Contributors:

Liz Green
Head of Policy and Community Services
01462 474230
liz.green@north-herts.gov.uk

Jeanette Thompson
Senior Lawyer
01462 474370
jeanette.thompson@north-herts.gov.uk

Fiona Timms
Performance and Risk Manager
01462 474251
fiona.timms@north-herts.gov.uk

Reuben Ayavoo
Policy Officer
01462 474212
reuben.ayavoo@north-herts.gov.uk

Andy Cavanagh
Head of Financial Services
01462 474243
andrew.cavanagh@north-herts.gov.uk

17. BACKGROUND PAPERS

17.1 None.