

***PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

INFORMATION NOTE ON ASYLUM DISPERSAL AND REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT SCHEMES

INFORMATION NOTE OF THE STRATEGIC HOUSING MANAGER

EXECUTIVE MEMBER CLLR SEAN PRENDERGAST

PRIORITY: PEOPLE FIRST

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 To inform Cabinet of the regional allocations for the dispersal of asylum seekers recently issued by the Home Office and to provide an update on refugee resettlement schemes.

2. STEPS TO DATE

- 2.1 This update has been requested by Cllr Sean Prendergast due to recent announcements by the Home Office.

3. INFORMATION TO NOTE

Asylum dispersal

- 3.1 Asylum seekers entering the UK and who do not have any other means of support are typically accommodated initially in reception centres and hotels before being moved to longer-term dispersal accommodation whilst they await the outcome of their asylum claims. Dispersal accommodation is usually in the private rented sector and is managed by accommodation providers on behalf of the Home Office.
- 3.2 Dispersal accommodation has historically been concentrated in a few regions in England, and in Wales and Scotland, and the government is working to move to a fairer distribution across the country. To this end, the Home Office announced in Spring of this year that all local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales would be expected to participate in a new system of “full dispersal” of asylum accommodation. Under this model, the Home Office will be procuring private rented sector housing across all local authority areas for use as dispersal accommodation, in line with new regional allocations.
- 3.3 The Home office has now issued regional allocations for the full dispersal model, based on an illustrative planning number of 100,000 asylum seekers in dispersed and core initial accommodation throughout the UK by December 2023 and a gradual alignment of the share of asylum seekers housed in each region (this is caveated by acknowledgement that there remains uncertainty around future intake and associated accommodation demand and that all parties therefore need to remain flexible). The allocation for the East region as a whole is 5,200 bedspaces by the end of December 2023.

- 3.4 Strategic Migration Partnerships – locally, the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) - have been asked to agree a breakdown of regional allocations down to local authority level and formulate these into Local Level Plans for early September 2022. The EELGA have proposed initial local authority allocations, which for **North Hertfordshire is 97 individuals by the end of December 2023**, based on a straight percentage share of 0.07% of each authority's total population. The Council is currently working with colleagues across the county to agree a view on these initial allocations and we will also need to urgently establish our responsibilities (if any) for procuring accommodation, providing wrap-around care or facilitating access to services etc. It is unlikely that the initial allocations will be reduced given that the only way to do so would be to gain the agreement of another county in the region to take on additional placements.
- 3.5 Locally (and indeed across Hertfordshire generally) affordable private rented accommodation is scarce and in high demand so, regardless of agreed allocations, it is far from clear how the Home Office would procure the necessary amount of suitable dispersal accommodation. It will nonetheless put additional pressure on our private rental market, further reducing availability for local people facing homelessness, and potentially leading to upward pressure on rents. There will of course be similar additional demands on other local services which will also need to be absorbed.

Refugee resettlement schemes

- 3.6 Over recent years, the government has put in place various resettlement schemes to provide safe and legal pathways to enable refugees to settle in the UK. The schemes have evolved as new global crises have developed and the most prominent schemes currently in operation are the UK Resettlement Scheme and Afghan resettlement schemes. These schemes rely upon local authorities - coordinated via regional Strategic Migration Partnerships - to provide offers of suitable accommodation in response to requests from the Home Office. The Home Office is responsible for liaising with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other international partners to identify candidates according to agreed criteria/priorities and arrange for their resettlement in the UK.
- 3.7 The UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) consolidated and replaced a number of older schemes including the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, under which the Council fulfilled a commitment to resettle ten Syrian families (50 individuals) in social housing in the district. Properties were provided by settle, First Garden Cities Homes and Clarion Housing (in addition, the St Mary's Church, Baldock has housed a Syrian family via the Community Sponsorship Scheme). The full cost of the resettlement was met by the Home Office. We are in the process of accommodating a further two Syrian families (10 individuals) in the coming months to meet our latest commitment under the UKRS.
- 3.8 Following the withdrawal of US and UK troops from Afghanistan last year, there are two formal refugee routes into the UK for Afghan nationals: the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme and the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy. Along with other Hertfordshire authorities, the Council committed to helping resettle Afghan refugees and in 2021/22 we housed two Afghan families (10 individuals) in properties provided by settle. Further pledges of resettlement assistance for refugees have been requested of all local authorities by the Minister of State for Refugees, Lord Harrington and the Council confirmed the imminent delivery of its commitment to resettle a further 10 Syrian refugees, as paragraph 3.7 above.
- 3.9 The Government has adopted a different approach in order to assist those fleeing the conflict in Ukraine, with community sponsors offering accommodation directly under the

Homes for Ukraine scheme. Under the scheme, sponsors (which may be individuals, charities or community groups) are able to nominate a named Ukrainian individual or family to stay with them in their home or in a separate property. In return for providing accommodation for a minimum of six months, sponsors will receive £350 per month. The Ukrainian applicant(s) and/or the sponsor are responsible for completing the visa application process. All arrangements under the scheme are administered and managed by Herts County Council, with the exception of property checks which the Council's Environmental Health service is responsible for.

- 3.10 Latest figures show that there are over 150 families who have been matched with hosts in the district (with over 250 individuals confirmed to have arrived). The initial six-month sponsorships are beginning to come to an end, with a clear potential for an increase in homelessness presentations to the Council. National and local surveys are suggesting that about one-quarter of sponsorships could end at the six month point as hosts had not anticipated participating beyond this period, require their accommodation for other purposes or increasingly, are worried about cost-of-living increases. Additionally, an unknown number of Ukrainian households may have joined family members in the UK through the Family Scheme, for which data are not collected.
- 3.11 We have also been approached by four Ukrainian households to date due to sponsorship arrangements having broken down or been unsuitable and are currently accommodating one of these households in temporary accommodation despite several offers of re-matches via Herts County Council.

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 Although the detail concerning some of these schemes is yet to be known, the collective impact could add significantly to the existing district demand for housing assistance (a broader housing update was published in the Members Information Service bulletin of 26 August 2022). A further cabinet report will be produced as and when further details emerge, and the Council is required consider a decision.
- 4.2 With regards asylum dispersal, the EELGA is due to submit its Local Level Plan with agreed local authority allocations to the Home Office by 6 September 2022. Meetings with county colleagues are ongoing at the time of writing and a final meeting of East of England Chief Executive Officers will be held on 2 September 2022. Early discussions with Hertfordshire local authorities indicate:
- Hertfordshire local authorities will face difficulty absorbing the Home Office allocation due to challenges in the local housing market, including affordability and existing demands from residents
 - If asylum seekers are placed in the county by the Home Office as proposed, all Hertfordshire local authorities to consider pooling of associated funding at a county level to source a single support service

As the initial local authority allocations of asylum seeker dispersals are likely to increase further due to growing migrant levels, the Council will share its concerns with local MPs, highlighting the potential impact on the local housing market and existing housing demands in the district.

- 4.3 The situation regarding Ukrainian households is constantly evolving with county-level activity around re-matching, supporting guests to find new hosts or alternative accommodation, community integration and support to increase/prolong the success of sponsorships. As with any household, the homelessness legislation can provide a safety net for some, however it has shown to negatively impact long term outcomes for

families and every effort should be made to avoid it whenever possible and the Council is working with other Herts housing authorities to monitor the situation and share best practice.

5. APPENDICES

5.1 None.

6. CONTACT OFFICERS

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

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1 None.