

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND HOME OFFICE FUNDING UPDATE

REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR – HOUSING & ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: COUNCILLOR SEAN PRENDERGAST

COUNCIL PRIORITY: PEOPLE FIRST

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The Council has successfully housed 70 refugees in direct response to government resettlement schemes over recent years. As the general demands from the public for housing assistance continue to grow, this includes refugees from places such as Afghanistan and Ukraine.
- 1.2. The Home Office has provided multi-year funding for local authorities for its direct resettlement schemes (where specific allocations were agreed) and it continues to do so to ensure the growing demands from refugees can be met.
- 1.3. This report seeks to update the Cabinet on the current position regarding refugees and to provide a flexible approach to meeting increased housing demands whilst also ensuring appropriate support is provided to refugees.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That Cabinet notes the local position regarding the resettlement of refugees and it supports more focused resettlement efforts for this client group as part of the Council's wider housing role;
- 2.2. That Cabinet delegates to the Service Director – Housing and Environmental Health in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, the authority to decide the allocation of Home Office funding to support the resettlement of refugees (for matters that are not reserved for Cabinet).

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1. There is likely to be increased demand for housing services from refugees in the foreseeable future and the recommendations in this report seek to manage this efficiently, whilst ensuring appropriate support services are in place.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1. Cabinet could decide against the recommendations in this report, however due to a likely increased demand for housing services from refugees and the uncertainty over the full impact of evolving government policy in this area, this could lead to a more reactive response and a significant increase in temporary accommodation placements, including widespread hotel usage.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1 The Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, Cllr Sean Prendergast and the Deputy Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, Cllr Dave Winstanley, have both been consulted and are supportive of the proposals contained in this report.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key Executive decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on 26 May 2023.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. Although the resettlement of refugees typically requires a multi-agency response, this report has been produced in the context of the Council's role of local housing authority. The Council has resettled 70 refugees in the district over recent years (55 Syrian and 15 Afghan) under Home Office schemes following government requests for housing assistance. The resettlement schemes have been fully funded by the Home Office with multi-year funding in recognition of the mid/longer term process for integration and this typically funds important services, such as the crucial daily support provided by the Refugee Council.
- 7.2. There are currently no specific Home Office allocations for refugee resettlements and they are eligible to approach any local authority for housing assistance. To date, the Council has received around 30 approaches for housing assistance from Ukrainians who were due/have become homeless from their Homes for Ukraine placement or their Ukraine Family Scheme arrangements. Although there have been no approaches from Afghan families as yet, it is noted that the entire bridging hotel programme across the country closed on 31 August 2023 and as there were two bridging hotels in Hertfordshire there are likely to be some housing impacts across the county.
- 7.3. Although asylum seekers are ineligible for local authority housing services, if they are successful with their applications, they will be granted refugee status by the Home Office. The Home Office has secured two hotels in the district, with a total of almost 250 occupants (these are separate to the Afghan bridging hotels). Should refugee status be granted to any of the occupants they would be able to present to the Council as being in need of accommodation.
- 7.4. Registered Providers (RPs), especially settle and First Garden City Homes, have been very supportive with refugee resettlements to date and DLUHC's Local Authority Housing Fund will provide more affordable housing to help with these demands (three properties were funded in round one and there are another 20 potential units in round two). The support from RPs has provided housing stability for the refugees whilst also enabling cost effective resettlements. However, it is anticipated there will be more focus on the option of using the private rented sector for the resettlement of refugees going forward which will involve much higher costs (for example, significant payments for deposits and/or rent in advance).
- 7.5. A new member of staff has been recruited, based in the Council's housing team, in order to manage resettlement activity (the fixed term post of three years has been fully funded by the Home Office funding). Consideration will be given to extending this role beyond this term using available funding if required.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 The current demand for housing services is high and is likely to grow further, primarily due to the cost-of-living crisis and housing market challenges. In addition, government policy regarding refugee resettlement and future demands are unknown, however it is highly likely refugee numbers will increase, and there is an opportunity to provide a more focused response to ensure their needs are met alongside those of the wider public.
- 8.2 The Home Office is procuring hotels across the country for the placement of asylum seekers due to high demand levels. They are also beginning a process whereby asylum seekers from certain countries can receive fast-tracked decisions, with the majority being positive. This means that refugee status can be granted in a shorter timescale and for those in hotels, they will be given 28 days-notice to vacate as their places are required for new asylum seekers. This process has already been initiated and there have already been instances of refugees arriving at Hertfordshire local authorities for housing assistance without the 28 days-notice and being placed into temporary accommodation. In addition, around 12 months ago, the Home Office also asked Hertfordshire to assist with the placement of 801 asylum seekers by December 2023, with North Herts' allocation being 97; further clarity is being sought on this extra demand bearing in mind the relatively recent procurement of the 12 hotels in Hertfordshire accommodating almost 1800 asylum seekers.
- 8.3 Some refugees require support in order to fully settle and integrate in the community and there are specialist services that are available, including those offering basic language skills and assistance with acclimatising to the new environment. As a result, the needs of refugees will be reviewed periodically to assess if a need exists for these types of support services for refugees living in the district.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. The Housing Act 1985 Section 1 (1) confirms that the District Council is the Local Housing Authority (LHA).
- 9.2 LHAs' homelessness duties are contained within the Housing Act 1996 Part VII, as amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which placed significant new duties on English local housing authorities.
- 9.3 LHAs have a legal duty to provide interim (also known as emergency) accommodation to homeless applicants, if, at any point during their enquiries, there is a reason to believe that an applicant may be:
- homeless
 - eligible for assistance, and
 - in priority need

If an LHA fails to provide interim accommodation, or if the accommodation provided is unsuitable for the applicant, this can be challenged by way of judicial review.

- 9.4 The LHA also holds the 'Relief Duty'¹ which applies when a council is satisfied that an applicant is homeless and eligible for assistance; it requires the Council to take reasonable steps to help the applicant secure that suitable accommodation becomes available for the applicant's occupation for at least six months. This therefore requires the Council to work with the applicant to help them find and retain accommodation to meet this legal duty.

¹ s.189B(1) Housing Act 1996 as inserted by s.5(2) Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

9.5 The Cabinet's Terms of Reference provides at paragraph 5.7.15; "To oversee the provision of all the Council's services other than those functions reserved to the Council".

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There is a balance of £488k of Home Office funding currently unallocated, with expected income to 2027/28 of an additional £362k which is available for the resettlement of refugees.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There is likely increased demand for housing services from refugees and the uncertainty over the full impact of evolving government policy in this area could lead to a more reactive response and a significant increase in temporary accommodation placements, including widespread hotel usage.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their 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.

12.2 This resettlement scheme seeks to support vulnerable refugees into the district. As paragraph 8.3 notes, specific support is required to ensure effective integration and therefore the fostering of good relations between existing and new communities.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

13.1. The Social Value Act and "go local" requirements do not apply to this report.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

14.1. There are no known Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to the proposals in this report.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

15.1 No impact.

16. APPENDICES

16.1 None.

17. CONTACT OFFICERS

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

18.1 None