

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING and ENVIRONMENT SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD

09 November 2015

Report of the Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)

1 SYRIAN REFUGEES

Summary

- 1.1 This report updates Members of the Board on the efforts underway to accommodate refugees fleeing Syria. Members will be aware of the initiatives announced nationally and this report deals with how the Borough Council, working with partners, can play its part to assist in the overall effort.**
- 1.1.1** Since January 2014, the government has operated The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS). It is a managed migration scheme, run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since March 2014, it has resettled 216 people directly from refugee camps. In addition (and not part of the scheme) almost 5,000 Syrians have been granted asylum, or other forms of leave under the normal asylum procedures, whereby they claim once in the UK.
- 1.1.2** On 7 September 2015, the Prime Minister announced a significant extension of the SVPRS scheme. The Government intends to resettle up to 20,000 refugees from the camps in the countries neighbouring Syria over the next five years. Over 12.2 million Syrians need help, with many having been displaced by civil war since 2011; 7.6 million are internally displaced and 4.1 million Syrians have fled abroad.
- 1.1.3** Local authorities UK-wide are being asked, on a voluntary basis, to estimate the numbers of individuals they might be able to accommodate. In the South East these numbers are being collated by the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) to help the Home Office scope an arrivals plan. It is important to point out that the Government has stated that local authorities, wishing to participate in the scheme, can specify the profile of individuals and families they are willing to accept (for example ages and needs of children).
- 1.1.4** To date, the UNHCR has identified people in need of resettlement based on the following criteria: women and girls at risk; survivors of violence and/or torture; refugees with legal and/or physical protection needs; refugees with medical needs or disabilities; children and adolescents at risk; persons at risk due to sexual

orientation or gender identity and refugees with family links in resettlement countries. However, the Home Office has confirmed that it is now working towards a split of 80 per cent “standard” cases and 20 per cent with more “complex” needs. It should be noted that a number of the refugees are highly skilled professional people, many of whom are keen to work.

1.2 Costs covered by the SVPRS

1.2.1 The Government has said that it will meet the costs of the arrivals in terms of orientation support, health and education costs for the first year, based on the existing scheme. Earlier this month the Home Office confirmed that further funding will be available to assist with costs incurred in future years. The detail is still emerging and it is unclear if future funding will be at the same rate as year one. Government funding is intended to cover a range of measures. The list below provides an indication of the kind of funding that is provided for the scheme:

- Reception and ground travel costs to the receiving area.
- The actual costs of up to two months’ expenses when securing accommodation plus the actual cost of adapting and furnishing properties where necessary.
- One-off cash and clothing allowance for new arrivals of £200 per person paid in advance of receipt of mainstream benefits.
- Staffing costs to cover administration of the Scheme.
- Primary care costs, plus first year secondary health care costs, including any specialist services that are necessary.
- Education costs for 3-18 year olds, plus any first year costs for specialist educational support which may be required.
- Where necessary, first year adult and child social care costs as incurred.
- Actual costs of providing one year’s orientation support including provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

1.3 The County wide position

1.3.1 The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme was discussed at the Kent Council Leaders meeting on 23 September. Roy Millard, the Partnership Manager for the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration, briefed Leaders and Chief Executives about the scheme. Leaders were supportive in principle, wanting Kent to play its part, but agreed that it was vital for there to be a coordinated approach to ensure that the needs of any Syrian Refugees placed in Kent would be properly met.

1.3.2 On behalf of Tonbridge and Malling, in our role as a Housing Authority, but also as part of the public sector effort, the Borough Council's Leader has given a commitment to play our part in the overall effort to meet the needs of refugees.

1.3.3 A coordination group has since been established, including representatives from Districts Councils, Education, Health, Clinical Commissioning Groups, the voluntary sector and the Department of Works and Pensions. The group is developing a multi-agency process for agreeing the profile of refugees to be rehoused and how they will be supported.

1.4 Kent County Council

1.4.1 KCC has approved support to those District Councils that wish to participate in the scheme with the following caveats:

- There should be a full analysis in each individual case of services provided by the districts, the county council and other key partners (e.g. housing availability, school places, social care, health etc.) in local areas, to ensure placements are sustainable, refugee needs are met and the needs of the existing community are taken into account.
- Due to the extreme pressures on Kent children's services which are severely exacerbated by the unprecedented numbers of UASC, Kent cannot accommodate unaccompanied minors through the Syrian refugee scheme as KCC would be unable to meet their needs, given current circumstances.
- With regard to other children with particularly high/complex needs, each case presented will be individually assessed before a decision is made.

1.5 Districts Councils

1.5.1 The position with District Councils in Kent is that Ashford has firmly committed to accommodating 250 people over a 5 year period; Dover, 12 families and Shepway 10 families. All other authorities are in a similar position of working through the detail of the scheme. Whilst the Home Office has confirmed it is not being prescriptive about how housing needs should be met, a common stance amongst districts in Kent, is that refugees are unlikely to be accommodated in 'public' sector housing to avoid displacing local households in need. Most see private rented accommodation as being the way forward.

1.5.2 One of the main challenges facing local authorities across the South East is the cost of housing accommodation. The rent levels on the majority of private rented sector accommodation are higher than the maximum levels of housing benefit that can be claimed. The Home Office is fully aware of this and is trying to develop a flexible funding model to help address this issue. It is of the view that the funding available for the scheme should be used flexibly. So, for example, if less money is needed for healthcare, some of this can be transferred to help top up housing

costs. Negotiations are continuing with the Home Office for the scheme to cover rental costs over and above Local Housing Allowance rates.

- 1.5.3** For us locally, the key area of uncertainty is our ability to facilitate accommodation in the private rented sector. Most other councils will be in a similar position and if the Council were to wish to take a positive stance then we would work hard with local landlords to negotiate and secure appropriate availability. Clearly this is an area that introduces some new and uncertain territory for many landlords and our efforts will be to form some workable partnerships to deliver the accommodation that might be required.
- 1.5.4** Officers have also met with the representatives from the Church to discuss the availability of any property the Church might have in which we can rehouse refugees. Senior Officers are meeting with the clergy shortly and will take the opportunity to further discuss this issue.

1.6 How the Scheme Works in Practice

- 1.6.1** Once cases have been referred from the UNHCR, the Home Office checks that the individual meets the eligibility criteria, carries out medical and security screening and arranges the necessary visas. Six to eight weeks before the arrival date, information is sent via a secure portal with basic information about the refugee's family make up and their needs (including information about any medical conditions or disabilities). Further detail on any medical needs will follow shortly after a full medical health assessment report.
- 1.6.2** For Kent it has been agreed that the referrals will come directly to KCC (mainly as this reduces the administrative burden on the Home Office potentially having to contact 12 districts and boroughs individually). A 'virtual' panel will then be convened consisting of districts that have committed to the scheme, Education, Social Care, voluntary and support services, Health - CCGs and NHS England and the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP). The purpose of the panel will be to decide where best to relocate individuals and families in Kent. At this stage, if it is decided that the particular needs of the refugees referred cannot be reasonably met across Kent, we can go back to the Home Office and "refuse" the referral(s). If accepted, the host local authority will need to arrange housing, school places and any additional support that is required.
- 1.6.3** Mass arrivals are not envisaged but a steady stream of arrivals is expected through charter flights. Refugees will be granted a five year 'humanitarian leave' to stay in the UK. This means access to public funds, access to the labour market and the possibility of a family reunion. Currently the lead-in period, from referral to resettlement, is approximately 4 months but the Home Office is looking to reduce this to 42 days.
- 1.6.4** Intensive support will initially be required. Upon arrival, support workers will carry out a full needs assessment with each household. Individual support and

integration plans will be developed and additional support identified where necessary.

- 1.6.5** The crisis has generated some heartfelt concern from various quarters in Tonbridge and Malling and we are liaising with local community and voluntary organisations to record and respond to the goodwill offers that are being made, to make sure they are directed in the most effective way.
- 1.6.6** Taking all the issues into account and given our broad commitment to the effort it is recommended that the Council moves forward with a firm commitment on numbers as local authorities have been encouraged to do. It is difficult to know where to estimate the number of households that we reasonably provide for; but a notional figure of 10 households over the five year period would seem an appropriate aim, which of course could be revised.

1.7 Legal Implications

- 1.7.1** The Council has a discretionary power to participate in the scheme, arising from the general power of competence in s.1 of the Localism Act 2011 and the ability under s.111 of the Local Government Act 1972 to do anything incidental or conducive to the Council's functions (in this case, as a housing authority).
- 1.7.2** In considering whether or not to participate, the Board must keep in mind the Public Sector Equality Duty as set out in the Equalities Act 2010 which requires the authority to have "due regard" to the need to promote equality of opportunity for persons with a protected characteristic, and the need to eliminate discrimination. Protected characteristics for these purposes include race and religion or belief.

1.8 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.8.1** Details on the level of future funding for the scheme and the level of finance to be made available for housing costs, which has initially been set at LHA rates, is still emerging. This may mean that some additional 'gap' funding may be required to be found.
- 1.8.2** Depending on how details emerge I will be liaising closely with the Director of Finance and Transformation on what level of financial assistance might be reasonably found. I do not envisage this as a significant sum and the need may not arise in any event, but it would be inappropriate not to draw this to Members attention at this stage. Needless to say any necessary authority will be obtained when we are clearer.

1.9 Risk Assessment

- 1.9.1** The overwhelming risk in this matter is that insufficient appropriate accommodation is found for refugees in need of help. Locally for Tonbridge and Malling there remains uncertainty in exactly how we will help and whether there

might ultimately be any cost implications. That is in the nature of dealing with a subject that in itself is full of uncertainties. We will manage our input carefully with controls managed through the Corporate Management Team.

1.10 Equality Impact Assessment

1.10.1 The decision recommended through this paper has a positive impact on the need to promote equality of opportunity for persons with a protected characteristic.

1.11 Recommendations

1.11.1 The Board are recommended to ask Cabinet to:

- **AGREE** to the Council formally participating in The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme; and
- **AGREE** to resettling 10 Syrian refugee households over the next 5 years.

The Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers:

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Nil

Steve Humphrey

Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health