



**REPORT of
CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**to
COUNCIL
16 FEBRUARY 2017**

SUPPORT FOR THE VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMME

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide the Council with an overview of the two Refugees Resettlement Schemes, and the Asylum Dispersal Scheme for which the Homes Office has asked the Council to pledge its support.
- 1.2 To advise that there has been an offer of accommodation made that would be suitable to meet the needs of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. The timetable for the next arrival of families in June 2017 requires the Council to give an early indication of whether it wishes to continue to explore this offer of accommodation.
- 1.3 To seek Members' views about the extent to which they wish to support the various schemes, including financial implications

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (i) that the Council considers whether it wishes to pledge an in principle support for:
 - a. the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme
 - b. the Wider Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (Refugee families from a wider area, including Middle East and North Africa)
 - c. the National Asylum Dispersal Scheme
- (ii) that the Council determines to what extent it is prepared to accept the financial risks of families being placed in the District under the schemes at (i).

or
- (iii) on condition that the Home Office provides assurance that there will be no direct financial cost to the Council in respect of families being placed in the District under the schemes at (i).

3. SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

3.1 Overview of Schemes

3.1.1 The Home Office has approached all Local Authorities to pledge support for two schemes to resettle Refugees that are currently outside the UK, and a third scheme to house Asylum Seekers that have already entered the UK. The three schemes are:

1. Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS)

To offer to resettle vulnerable Syrian families who have left Syria and are currently registered with United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and living in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq. The Government has pledged to resettle 20,000 Syrian Refugees by 2020. The scheme is funded in the form of a fixed tariff payment for each refugee resettled. Rent and day to day living costs are funded through the Social Security benefits system.

2. Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programme (VCRP)

To offer to resettle refugee families from a wider area than just Syria, such as North Africa and the Middle East. The families must have a vulnerable child amongst them. The Government has pledged to resettle 3,000 Refugees under this scheme by 2020. The funding for the scheme is the same as the Syrian VPRS above.

3. Widening Asylum Dispersal Scheme

To offer accommodation to those who have already entered the UK, and are claiming Asylum. As Asylum Seekers generally do not have any recourse to public funds the Home Office, through its contractor meets the cost of the accommodation (rent and other outgoings such as utility bills) and provide a weekly allowance to the Asylum seeker whilst their application is being considered.

3.1.2 For SVPRS Essex County Council (ECC) has, due to the cross cutting nature of the humanitarian crisis and differing responsibilities across the public sector, taken on a coordinating role working alongside the East of England Local Government Association Regional Strategic Migration Partnership, Essex local authorities, health partners, schools and the voluntary and community sector. ECC is also acting as the finance lead for the programme across their administrative area. Local authorities make indicative pledges to Government to resettle refugees, which become firm offers once Government has identified the refugees and the local authority has secured appropriate accommodation, support and services to meet their needs.

3.1.3 The wider Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programme (VCRP), which was introduced after the original Syrian Resettlement Scheme, is not as yet being proactively taken forward, but the Council is being asked by the Home Office to consider pledging its support for this scheme.

3.1.4 The Widening Asylum Dispersal Scheme is being taken forward in Essex by the Home Offices Contracted Partner Clear Springs. The Home Office has approached the Council to pledge its support to allow them to source suitable accommodation.

3.2 Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS)

- 3.2.1 On 7 September 2015, the Government announced that the UK would resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years through an expansion of an existing VPR scheme. The Syrian Vulnerable Resettlement Programme (SVPR) is the name of this expanded scheme. SVPR is a national voluntary scheme and there is currently no duty on any area to take part in the scheme if they are not able to provide suitable housing and fulfil the Home Office statement of requirements. The SVPR programme is a managed process with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). After a concerted effort to resettle 1,000 refugees before Christmas 2015, the Government programme team took a step back in early 2016 to redesign a more sustainable programme. However, meeting the overall target, to resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in the UK by May 2020, remains a significant challenge.
- 3.2.2 Over the following months the Home Office has set out how the scheme to support the resettlement of Refugees would work, both practically and financially.
- 3.2.3 In summary, a fixed financial contribution would be paid towards the cost of resettling each Syrian Refugee, which would cover support costs, education and medical costs. The only cost not covered from this direct grant was the day to day living expenses of the family and rent, both of which would be paid through the benefits scheme. Housing Benefit payments are paid at Local Housing Allowance rates.
- 3.2.4 ECC agreed to be the Finance Lead on behalf of Essex Authorities, taking responsibility for not only the co-ordination of the response, but also for the grant from the Home Office to fund the scheme and utilise this to commission the support services that would be needed to resettle and integrate the Syrian families.
- 3.2.5 All Local Authorities in Essex were approached to identify housing that could be made available for Syrian Refugees, and were given a list of minimum requirements to meet by Government.
- 3.2.6 As the Council does not have any housing stock of its own, approaches were made to local Housing Associations.
- 3.2.7 No properties were made available for the scheme, and the high demand for privately rented accommodation made it very difficult to identify any other suitable properties. Whilst there was some local interest in offering rooms to the families, the Home Office advice was that this was not suitable as the accommodation needed to be self-contained.
- 3.2.8 An approach from a local Church Group resulted in a meeting with local Faith Groups and the Leader of the Council, culminating in an offer of suitable accommodation being made.
- 3.2.9 The process of reviewing the housing offer to ensure that it sustainable has identified a financial risk to the Council, in that Refugees are not exempt from the Benefit Cap (which has recently reduced to £20,000), which restricts the total amount of social security benefits a family can receive.

- 3.2.10 As a consequence, depending on the size, ages and genders of the family members, a family's benefit entitlement could vary significantly, and could leave a shortfall in the rent of anything up to £1,000 per month (which is the maximum Local Housing Allowance rate)
- 3.2.11 We would seek to minimise the risks of the family not being entitled to maximum housing benefit by working with regional LGA and Home Office to identify a family where exceptions from the cap may be inherent within the family makeup. Assessment would be made with all partners prior to any formal family case acceptance. However this is not a guarantee of the benefit cap risk in the short to mid term
- 3.2.12 It is possible that we could have to consider a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) to fund any shortfall in the rent. As the Council's current DHP budget granted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is generally over committed, it is possible that the Council could be asked to fund an additional budget to meet that cost. As the offer of housing has to be for at least a two year period, the total maximum financial risk to the Council would be in the region of £24,000 per family (Maximum Local Housing Allowance rate for 24 months) .
- 3.2.13 Additionally at the end of the initial tenancy period it is highly likely that the Council would have a statutory duty to the family should they not be successful in securing move-on accommodation.
- 3.2.14 In summary, whilst it may be possible to support the SVPRS through the accommodation offer, there are risks to the Council: short term, in that the Council could be asked to fund a shortfall in housing benefit of up to £1,000 per month and a longer term risk of having a statutory duty to house the family, which could be very challenging, particularly if the family is large.
- 3.2.15 Whilst we currently have a landlord that is willing to work with us, for future schemes there is also the practical problem of identifying other landlords of a suitable property who would be able to guarantee a property being available and willing to keep it vacant pending the process during which a family is identified.

3.3 Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programme (VCRP)

- 3.3.1 HM Government wrote to all Councils advising that the scheme needs to be widened and has stated that a further 3,000 people in addition to the 20,000 under the Syrian scheme, require resettlement into the UK. These will be refugees from Middle East and North Africa and will again be in family groups and go through the same resettlement processes as used for VPR.
- 3.3.2 The arrangements, funding and risks for the scheme mirror the Syrian VPRS.
- 3.3.3 As the Council has had only one offer of accommodation to date, there are no current plans to resettle families under this scheme, but the Council may wish to indicate their support for the scheme.

3.4 Widening Asylum Dispersal Scheme

- 3.4.1 This scheme has been running for some years, and aims to accommodate Asylum Seekers who have entered the Country, and whose applications are under consideration.
- 3.4.2 To date the majority of Asylum Seekers have been placed in Scotland and the North, but the Government are keen to explore placements in other parts of the Country.
- 3.4.3 The Home Office have procured a provider, to both source and manage the accommodation for Asylum Seekers.
- 3.4.4 All outgoings on the property are paid directly by the Home Office, including rent (which in line with other schemes which are capped at the Local Housing Allowance Rates). As the Asylum Seekers do not have recourse to public funds, they only receive a weekly allowance for living expenses.
- 3.4.5 This Council has been advised that Asylum seekers under this scheme are likely to be single people and, unlike the other schemes, it is possible to consider shared accommodation, although the accommodation can only be shared with other Asylum Seekers.
- 3.4.6 There is no financial risk because rent is paid directly to the landlord and is not dependant on entitlement to housing benefit. However, as single people of working age the likelihood under existing legislation that the Council may have a duty to accommodate if granted asylum is less than it would be with the resettlement schemes at 3.1.1 but the Homelessness Reduction Bill could mean that at some time in the future the level of assistance that the Council has to provide could increase.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 Members' views are sought on which of the three schemes at paragraph 3.1.1 above the Council wishes to support and the extent to which it wishes to support them financially.
- 4.2 Officers are currently exploring a definite offer of accommodation to settle a Syrian Refugee family from one of the Refugee camps outside of Syria. The Council is not actively exploring accommodation under any of the other two schemes at paragraphs 3.3 and 3.4 above, at present.
- 4.3 The process has identified a financial risk to the Council of up to £24,000 should we make an offer to resettle a family under either the Syrian Refugee or the Wider Vulnerable Children's scheme. This is because the rent payments would be subject to entitlement to housing benefit and there is no exemption from the welfare reforms, such as the Benefit Cap, for Refugees. Should the family not be entitled (or the entitlement is capped), the Council would have to consider a Discretionary Housing Payment for any shortfall. It is possible that some of the financial risk could be mitigated through allocating a proportion of the grant current paid to ECC directly to us, however until the costs of commissioning the support services for the scheme are determined there cannot be any certainty as to the level of financial contribution that

could be made. There is no financial risk under the Asylum Dispersal Scheme as the rent is paid directly by the Home Office.

- 4.4 In addition to the financial risk, at the end of all three schemes the Council may have a statutory housing duty to the families, although this is less likely under the Asylum Dispersal Scheme, as they are generally single people but this could increase as mentioned in paragraph 3.4.6 above.
- 4.5 Any of the three Schemes would involve taking accommodation out of the housing supply within the District. Members are aware of the high demand and low supply of housing in the District.
- 4.6 Finally, any offer under any of the three schemes would need to ensure that not only was the accommodation suitable and sustainable, that there was access to essential services such as education and health. As Members are aware, access to GP services is an issue for this District, particularly in Maldon Town.
- 4.7 It is understood that the Home Office will be writing to Local Authorities soon to seek clarity on the extent to which they are supporting the three schemes.

5. IMPACT ON CORPORATE GOALS

- 5.1 Engagement with these schemes supports the Councils Goal of Strengthening communities to be safe active and healthy.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- (i) **Impact on Customers** – Use of accommodation for these schemes would reduce the supply of housing that is available within the District.
- (ii) **Impact on Equalities** – None identified.
- (iii) **Impact on Risk** - All three schemes carry risks associated with the use of accommodation which is already in short supply, a future statutory housing duty, as well as the impact on services such as health and education
- (iv) **Impact on Resources (financial)** – Both resettlement schemes could present a financial risk of up to £24,000 over a two year period for each family, although we would seek to mitigate that risk through making any offer of housing conditional on the makeup of the family, and through exploration of the use of the grant paid by the Home Office to ECC. There is no financial risk attached to the Asylum Dispersal Scheme. There could be a further cost should the Council have a statutory housing duty to the family at the end of the scheme.
- (v) **Impact on Resources (human)** – Resources to support the exploration and implementation of an offer under any of the three schemes, although the asylum Dispersal Scheme would require lower levels of resources, as the schemes are sourced and run by Home Office Contractors. At present this is being met from within existing resources.

(vi) **Impact on the Environment** – None.

Enquiries to: Sue Green, Group Manager: Customers, (Tel: 01621 875892).