



DECISION OF: SHEILA SMITH, DIRECTOR, PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

WITH ADVICE FROM: MARK HUGHES, HEAD OF HOUSING AND STRATEGY

DIRECTORATE: PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

DECISION NO: 2017/18 SCHEME, P&C36

SUBJECT: REFUGEES – FUTURE PROGRAMME

KEY DECISION: YES

BACKGROUND:

In September 2015 the Government announced that in response to the Syrian refugee crisis Britain would resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees over the course of that Parliament (Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme). Subsequently Government committed to resettle an additional 3,000 children and their families/carer(s) from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region over the same period under the Children at Risk UNHCR vulnerability category and introduced the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme. It also extended the eligibility for the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme in July 2017 to all those refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria, regardless of their nationality

The council agreed to take part in both the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) and provide accommodation and support initially for 3 families (EXE 85, P & C 31 and P & C 69 refer). Subsequently it was agreed to take an additional family (P & C 89 refers) following an offer from Christians Together in Nailsea & District (CTINAD) to work in partnership with the council to enable further refugee families to be supported in North Somerset. CTINAD worked with local people to find suitable accommodation and provide volunteers to help support the family.

It was also agreed that officers should regularly review the potential to take additional households in the light of the Council's experience of accommodating and supporting the initial households. Decision making regarding the number of additional refugees to be accommodated in the future was delegated to the Director of People and Communities in consultation with the Leader of the Council. (EXE 85 AND P & C 69 refer). This decision sheet reviews the progress to date and sets out a proposal to resettle additional families to 2020

Progress

Arrivals and accommodation - Accommodation for 4 families (17 people) has been provided in a variety of locations in North Somerset and the 4th family has recently arrived. Given the high demand and limited supply of social housing the refugees have been housed in private rented housing or homes owned by Housing Associations which are not available for letting for secure tenancies.

Securing homes at rents that can be met through Housing Benefit/Universal Credit has been challenging due to the high demand for privately rented accommodation and rent levels generally being higher than benefit rates. However experience both locally and nationally has been that philanthropic owners who wish to rent their homes to refugees at a rent covered by benefits come forward and it is anticipated that this will be an important element of supply for the future.

The partnership with CTINAD has recently been developed and facilitated the provision of accommodation for the fourth family. It is anticipated that through continuing partnership work with Social and Private Landlords, CTINAD and other voluntary sector agencies it will be possible to secure properties for up to an additional 10 refugee families in North Somerset over the remainder of the Government programme, which it is anticipated will run until March 2020

Local Authorities' (LA's) are required to ensure that the accommodation provided is appropriately furnished and provided with the basic essentials, with the costs being met through funding provided to LA's by Government. The 4 homes provided through the programme were all unfurnished and generous public donations were received and managed by voluntary sector partners which reduced the costs. However, it has proved challenging to purchase the items required and co-ordinate their delivery and furnish the properties as this has been undertaken without any additional staffing. An extension of the work with partners to support this work would help reduce the resource requirements if additional refugee families were to be accommodated however there would be a need to recruit a part-time member of staff who would in part support this work. This would be funded through the income received from Government for this programme.

Support and Integration - A range of council and voluntary sector services supported by volunteers have been involved in the post arrival support and integration work with each family, with the costs being met through Government funding. Each family is allocated a Support Worker for at least the first year, supported by volunteers recruited and co-ordinated through Voluntary Action North Somerset. A resettlement support plan is being developed for each family and will be regularly reviewed over the 5 year period. The support provided has been key in enabling the families to settle and integrate in North Somerset and there is potential to further develop the role of volunteers through joint work with VANS, CTINAD and other partners.

There are a number of options for the provision of the support worker service in the future which could be further explored if additional families were to be resettled, however at this stage it is anticipated that a continuation of the current in-house arrangements will be preferred.

Language Skills - The development of English language skills where they do not already exist is key to the integration of the refugees into the UK. The provision of language training has been provided in a variety of ways to meet the needs of the families and will be further developed in partnership with Weston College, Community Learning, schools and other providers. All families now have access to appropriate provision to address their language skill needs for up to 8 hours per week. They are all engaging at the pre-entry level for their language skills and are keen to learn English which is key to linking into integration and job related opportunities.

Employment and Training – each adult refugee brings with them a variety of employment experiences, knowledge, qualifications and aspirations. The initial priority in supporting adults into training and employment has been on language skills development and identifying potential volunteering opportunities. Subsequently the focus moves to providing further support to access training and employment opportunities, co-ordinated through the resettlement plans for each family. This includes partnership work with Weston College, Team North Somerset and Department of Work and Pensions colleagues, with the aim of ensuring that each family is self-sustaining as soon as possible. The adult members of the families can also apply to the Refugee Council for a small grant to enable access to work e.g. interview clothing, driving lessons/test etc.

All families are keen for the adults to gain employment and not to be reliant on state benefits. One adult has shadowed an electrician on a voluntary basis and subject to further development of their language skills will be seeking an opportunity for employment. An adult from another family is taking their driving theory test to enhance their opportunity of finding work

Education – when potential accommodation has been identified school admissions check the potential availability of any school places that may be needed by the family local to the accommodation; to date this has been possible in all cases. Post arrival the council link education professional works has worked closely with the school to promote a shared understanding of the child's needs and provide access to any necessary support to teaching staff. This support and advice has built the capacity of schools to meet the needs of the newly arrived children through, for example, promotion of the use of bilingual resources and visual curriculum materials.

For newly arrived children aged 2-4 close working with the Early Years Team occurs to identify and access places at the most suitable nursery or pre-school provision.

If a child is identified as having medical or special educational needs the arrangements to meet the needs would be made by the councils Vulnerable Learners Service and additional funding from Government can be applied for if required.

Government Year 1 Education Funding has been provided to each school or nursery setting, as appropriate, to support inclusion. Typically, settings have used this funding to provide additional adult support for a child and this has proved successful in promoting their effective inclusion and achievement.

All newly arrived children have secured an appropriate nursery, pre-school or school placement without delay and Early Years/Education staff have made regular progress checks.

In the light of the restructuring of the councils Education Service and the transfer of a range of services to Somerset County Council new arrangements for delivering the Education and Early Years support and liaison will be put in place in the future if additional families are resettled.

Health and Wellbeing – North Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group have been the principal health care contact for the programme and have arranged for GP practices to register the refugee families. To date, a range of different practices have been involved, with each being local to the families' homes. In each instance the family members have been registered with a practice within days of their arrival. Full health assessments have then been undertaken by a GP partner in line with the Government Funding Instruction and a translator and health and community workers have also been present to ensure a comprehensive assessment. Dental services have been provided through NHS dentists local to where the families live.

Outcomes - Initial outcomes are promising with the families settling into North Somerset well. Once families have been in the area for 6 months they complete an assessment of how they feel they are progressing. In summary this shows they feel safe in their home, are registered with appropriate services and are supported by workers and volunteers and overall are very positive about residing in North Somerset and their experience so far in the area

Scheme co-ordination and project management is central to this project going forward. The experience so far has shown that there needs to be a co-ordinated and project managed approach in relation to all the key areas of work needed to accommodate and support the families and ensure they have the appropriate housing, essential household items, services and support in place. Maintaining links with the Home Office and the South West resettlement team and other participating authorities is essential to enable best practice to be shared and a common approach and understanding developed. It is proposed to further develop the role to include client role/commissioning, scheme development and reviewing responsibilities and sequencing of key activities including pre-arrival preparation, language skills acquisition, health, education, training and employment, support and integration. As a result if additional refugees are to be supported to 2020 a part time project officer will need to be employed on a fixed term basis.

Financial – Funding to support the families has been received from Government for refugee families supported by the scheme in accordance with the Funding Instructions (see Financial Implications below for further details). All costs incurred in supporting the families in accordance with the scheme including direct costs and the cost of the staff time expended have been fully met through the funding and are projected to continue to be met in the future. As set out below there is an exceptional costs fund to provide additional support for the most vulnerable persons.

Conclusion – To date through its participation in the VPRS and VCRS and with the support of partners in the voluntary and statutory sectors the council has been able to resettle 4 vulnerable refugee families comprising 17 people in North Somerset over a period of 1 year. With the support of partners it has been possible to put in place the support and services needed. Whilst it is early in the resettlement and integration process for the 4 families initial signs are promising and it is anticipated that the families will resettle and integrate well into the area and be able to establish new and satisfying lives here. All

the costs incurred in supporting the families in accordance with the scheme have been fully met through the funding provided to the council by Government

In the light of the positive outcomes being achieved for refugee families through North Somerset Councils participation in the VPRS and VCRS and the continuing need for LAs to support both programmes to help achieve the Government's commitments, it is recommended that North Somerset Council commits to resettling up to an additional 10 families over the remainder of the Government's current programme, which it is anticipated will run until March 2020. The recommended number is based on a consideration of the limited supply of accommodation where the rent can be met through Housing Benefit, the resources needed and the capacity of services to manage the arrival, settlement and integration of refugee families and the availability of school and Early Years places. Committing to a programme over a longer time period will enable resources to be better aligned to meeting needs and will enable the council and partners to more plan more effectively for arrivals. The Leader of the Council has been consulted and is supportive of the recommendations as set out.

DECISION:

1 To agree to resettle an additional 10 refugee households comprising immediate families and/or carer(s), with young children or vulnerable older people through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) in North Somerset over the remainder of the Government's current programme.

2. To delegate decision making regarding the acceptance of individual households to the Head of Housing and Strategy

REASONS: To enable an additional refugee households to be accommodated and supported

OPTIONS CONSIDERED:

Not agreeing to take additional households would mean further refugee families would not be able to be relocated to North Somerset.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Costs and funding - The funding arrangements to meet the costs incurred in supporting refugee families through the VPRS and VCRS are set out in 'Funding Instructions' issued jointly by the Home Office, DfID and DCLG. Funding Instructions are issued annually and funding levels may be reviewed and varied by Government from time to time; the figures below should therefore be regarded as indicative.

In summary the council receives funding of £8,520 per person for the first 12 months following the refugees arrival to meet the costs incurred and an additional £4,500 for each child aged 5-18 years and £2,250 for each child aged 3 or 4 towards the costs of education/early years provision (in subsequent years, funding is through the normal education funding regime). Health costs for year 1 are met through a separate agreement between Government and the CCG.

In years 2-5 funding tapers from £5,000 per person in year 2 to £3,700 in year 3, £2,300 in year 4 and £1,000 in year 5.

It is anticipated that the funding provided by Government would continue to be sufficient to cover the costs involved. There is some risk that the income from Government over the 5 year period does not cover costs however Government have provided an exceptional costs fund to provide additional support for the most vulnerable persons which could help mitigate any shortfall which will otherwise need to be covered through mainstream expenditure.

A part time project officer will need to be employed on a fixed term basis. The costs of this will be met through the funding received from Government

Implications for Future Years - Refugees are entitled to access public funds/services and access the labour market, and are granted limited leave to remain for a 5 year period. At the end of the 5 year period refugees can apply for permanent residency. Any costs in providing services after this time would need to be met by the council and other service providers.

LEGAL POWERS AND IMPLICATIONS

The council will have statutory responsibilities to provide services for refugees in the same way as for the settled population.

CONSULTATION

Consultation has taken place with: Councillor Ashton, Leader of the Council; Kathryn Davies, Lead Advisory Teacher – Vulnerable Learners' Service, People and Communities; Kay Eccles, Service Leader, Housing Solutions, People and Communities; Mark Francis, Operational Manager, Impact/High Impact Families, Corporate Services; Mark Hughes, Head of Housing and Strategy, People and Communities; Katherine Sokol, Finance Business Partner (People and Communities), Corporate Services; South West Migration Partnership, Tim James, Assistant Primary Care Development Manager, North Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group, Doreen Smith, Voluntary Action North Somerset..

RISK MANAGEMENT

Not being able to meet the support needs of refugees resettled in the area – low risk in the light of the range of services available and the funding support from government including the availability of exceptional circumstances funding, although further work would need to be undertaken with training providers to develop access to language skills training.

Lack of school places to meet needs – low/medium risk in the light of the checks on availability that are undertaken prior to accommodation being accepted. If school places were not available within the maximum travel to school distance, home to school transport would need to be provided and resourced through the funding income from Government

Lack of accommodation at an affordable rent to enable the resettlement of 10 families - medium risk however close partnership working would take place to mitigate this risk as far as possible.

Competing pressures for accommodation and services - the Home Office are working with their accommodation provider to identify further local authorities to take part in asylum seeker dispersal. There is a high risk that the council's ability to resettle refugees would be compromised if there were a decision to accommodate asylum seekers in North Somerset, given the pressures on the local housing market and services.

EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

Have you undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment? **Yes**

The decision to resettle up to an additional 10 refugee families in North Somerset will have a high and positive impact for those families who will have a range of protected characteristics.

Refugees resettled through the VPRS and VCRS were initially granted a five year humanitarian protection visa and subsequently government revised this to full refugee status with five years limited leave. Existing refugees who have been granted a 5 year visa can also apply for full refugee status.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

The resettlement of additional refugees in North Somerset will require the involvement and support of services across the council (and partners) depending on the needs of the refugees.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Decisions of the Director of People and Communities - P & C 31, P & C 69 P & C 89 (all 2016/17)

Report to the Executive – 2 February 2016 – Syrian refugees (EXE 85)

Local Government Association – Refugee resource information:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/refugees>

DECISION MAKER(S):

Signed: Sheila Smith

Title: Sheila Smith, Director, People and Communities

Date: 8.1.17

IN CONSULTATION WITH:

Signed: M. Hughes

Title: Mark Hughes, Head of Housing and Strategy, People and Communities

Date: 3/1/18

Footnote: Details of changes made and agreed by the decision taker since publication of the proposed (pre-signed) decision notice, if applicable: