

**Agenda Item No:** 8 (c)



**Report To:** Ashford Health & Wellbeing Board

**Date:** 19<sup>th</sup> October 2016

**Report Title:** Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) in Ashford

**Report Author:** Anne Forbes – Refugee Resettlement Co-Ordinator

**Organisation:** Ashford Borough Council

**Summary:** Following the pledge from the UK Government in September 2015 to provide refuge for 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees from Syria, Ashford committed to accepting up to 50 refugees per year for 5 years under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. This report outlines the background, the current position, what has gone well and the challenges faced in developing a refugee support programme in Ashford since the first families arrived in December 2015. We ask for the support of the Board in further developing a robust resettlement and integration programme to enable this vulnerable group to re-build their lives.

**Recommendations: The Board be asked to:-**

Support Ashford Borough Council's Refugee Resettlement Project to enable, ensure and improve access to health and social care services for the refugees re-settled in Ashford through the SVPR Scheme and, where possible extend initiatives to other individuals or groups who have settled in Ashford but who are not supported directly under the Scheme.

### **Purpose of the report**

1. To inform the Board regarding Ashford Borough Council's commitment to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, how it has progressed so far, the challenges faces and plans for the future.
2. To ask for the support of the Board to encourage partnership working and innovative thinking to enable Ashford Borough Council to continue to develop a proactive, supportive resettlement and integration programme for the Syrian refugees. The ultimate aim is to ensure the refugees relocated to Ashford under the Scheme have the best possible chance to rebuild their lives having escaped such tragic and traumatic circumstances and that they are enabled to make a positive contribution to their new community.

## Background

3. On 7<sup>th</sup> September 2015 the Government announced that the UK would commit to accepting 20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees from their exile in the countries bordering Syria (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt) over the subsequent 5 years. Ashford Borough Council stepped forward and agreed to offer resettlement for up to 50 Syrians per year for 5 years. Ashford, recognising the pressures on Kent County Council as a result of the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) supported by Social Services, agreed that the refugees accepted to the Borough would be family groups and not individuals. In recognition of the shortage of available social housing in the whole South East region it was decided that no social housing would be used to meet the commitment and that private sector housing would be identified.
4. The first 3 families, totalling 14 people, arrived in Ashford in December 2015 and were housed in private rented accommodation spread across the Borough. 2 more families arrived in January, one in April and one in August. To date there are 33 people in 7 family units. 3 families are expecting babies. We are likely to accept 3 or 4 more families before Christmas 2016.
5. The refugees arrive in the UK with 5 years Leave to Remain with Humanitarian Protection giving the same rights to access services and benefits as a resident UK citizen.
6. The families are provided with intensive keyworker support after arrival to help them to settle into their new environment and to access services including education and healthcare. Support is continued throughout the first year and available, if needed, for the subsequent 4 years.
7. The support provided by Ashford Borough Council is funded via a tariff paid through the Home Office from the Foreign Aid Budget and so does not pose any financial burden on the Local Authority. In the first year funding to support the educational needs of school age children is paid to KCC Education via this tariff. The local CCG are able to claim funding for healthcare needs of families resettled in their area directly from the Home Office.
8. Close partnership working with KCC education, schools, the CCG, the DWP and other key partners has enabled Ashford BC to ensure that access to essential services for refugees on arrival is as smooth as possible. This has gone well generally but there is still work to be done.
9. The refugees are eager to access employment as soon as possible after arrival to support their families and make better lives. The main barrier to employment is lack of English.
10. The majority of the refugees that have arrived in Ashford to date have had no English learning prior to coming to the UK.
11. Supporting the refugees has been a steep learning curve for all those involved and many lessons have been learned. Barriers and challenges have emerged, many of which have been solved and some of which still need to be overcome to give the refugees the best possible opportunity to build fulfilling and productive lives in their new home.

## **Removing barriers to successful integration for the Syrian refugees**

12. The project to support the resettlement of Syrian Refugees in Ashford has almost reached its first anniversary. The families that have arrived so far are settling in and making the most of the opportunities they are given. Many challenges and barriers have been met and many have already been solved. Some have yet to be uncovered. Some of the so far unsolved difficulties are:
  - a. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision for adults is patchy. Where ESOL has been accessed the refugees have fed back that they do not find it intensive enough to give them a really good start.
  - b. There is no automatic offer for educational provision for newly arrived 16-18 year olds living with their family and courses suitable for that age group who have minimal or no English either do not exist or are difficult to access.
  - c. Access to GP services has sometimes proven to be difficult for families with limited English. This can be frustrating and has, on occasion, led to inappropriate use of emergency services (999 and A&E).
  - d. Additional funding provided by the Home Office for education is inadequate to cover the costs of support if a child has a higher than average level of need. Other funding streams to support children experiencing difficulties with their learning are not accessible for this group.
13. Ashford Borough Council remains fully committed to working hard with partners in both the statutory and voluntary sector to provide the best possible service for the Syrian refugees coming to the Borough, to enable them to successfully integrate into the community and build successful new lives in Ashford.

## **Conclusion**

14. Ashford Borough Council is committed to providing refuge and support for up to 250 of the most vulnerable Syrians over the next 5 years. The families that have arrived so far are settling in well however some barriers to accessing services and challenges to successful integration have been identified.
15. Close partnership working with both statutory and voluntary services is central to ensuring the success of the project.
16. In order to address the outstanding barriers and challenges identified above and any further issues that may be identified Ashford Borough Council would like the Board to support the establishment of a working group of key partners to discuss and find solutions and to develop innovative models for supporting this group.

## **Contacts:**

Email: [anne.forbes@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:anne.forbes@ashford.gov.uk)  
Tel: 01233 330826 or 07909 800425