

Agenda Item No: 8

Report To: Cabinet

Date: 8th September 2016

Report Title: Progress Report on Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme

Report Author: Sylvia Roberts

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Clokie – Portfolio Holder for Housing & Home Ownership



Summary:	This report provides an update to members on progress to date with regard the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.
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Key Decision: NO

Affected Wards: All

Recommendations: **The Cabinet be asked to:-** Note the success of the scheme thus far and re-affirm the council's commitment to continue with the scheme for the duration of the 5 year Government programme.

Policy Overview: Living Ashford: quality housing and homes for all

Financial Implications: There are no financial implications to the Authority as this scheme is fully funded by the Home Office.

Risk Assessment YES – details are contained within the report

Impact Assessment YES see appendix A to this report

Other Material Implications: None

Exemption Clauses: None

Background Papers: None

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Report Title: Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide members with feedback on the progress and development of the borough council's involvement in the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement scheme in Ashford, from commencement to date.

Issue to be decided

2. To note the progress with this scheme so far in Ashford and for members to re-affirm commitment to continue with the scheme for the duration of the 5 year Government programme.

Background

3. The UK is at the forefront of the response to the crisis in Syria. It was recognised that for some vulnerable people the only solution is to bring them to countries like the UK.
4. In 2015, the Government announced it was to expand the existing Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (SVPR) Scheme and intends to resettle up to 20,000 Syrians in need of protection during this Parliament.
5. Individuals who have been identified via this scheme for resettlement in the UK often present signs of trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; anxiety following family separation; health needs; and 'learned' behaviours following time spent in refugee camps, which are difficult to abandon. Fundamentally, the scheme will aide the transitional needs of the resettled persons and address the need for access to local services in order to fully and permanently integrate into UK society. We, along with partner agencies, will work to empower individuals to achieve their full potential and meet their responsibilities as members of British society.
6. The council began preparing for its involvement in this project in September 2015, ahead of its anticipated participation which had to be ratified by Cabinet members, A dedicated council officer was put in place to co-ordinate matters and work with the families and their immediate support networks.
7. The council's excellent rapport with its public and private sector partners ensured that it was able to quickly put in place matters such as school provision where required, links into the healthcare system and access to other essential items appropriate to each family.
8. The council made the decision early on to not use any of its social housing stock to house the families it was resettling. This was made possible through its excellent ABC Lettings 'social lettings agency' service and its rapport with the private and voluntary sector. The continued sustainability of using housing from the private sector is discussed in more detail later in this report.

9. It was unanimously decided by Ashford Borough Council's Cabinet on 8th October 2015 that the authority would be proud to welcome and help re-settle up to 50 refugees per year for the next five years as part of the Government scheme. This equates to around ten families per year – the authority has been able to request that it resettles families through its extensive contact with the Home Office, as they are who the borough is best equipped to support.
10. The first three families arrived in December at the height of the media's interest in the resettlement scheme. Given the stance taken by Ashford Borough Council, we received a lot of welcome media interest and while the refugees indicated to us that they did not wish to engage in interviews with reporters, the council's marketing and communications team were able to put forward private landlords, volunteers and councillors to talk about how the borough had been preparing for the arrival of the first families.
11. The council would like to thank publicly the print and broadcast media at this point for the mature way in which they have reported on the programme – they have worked with us in respecting the wish of the refugees to integrate without intrusion and have been supportive of the stance taken.
12. Members agreed in October 2015 that the council's involvement in the project would be reviewed after the first year, which is the purpose of this report.

The programme so far

13. To date, we have received seven families, comprising 17 adults and 16 children - a total of 33 people. All the school age children are in school and are generally doing well, with the exception of 2 of the new family who are school age and will be starting in September. The adults are having English classes, which are delivered by Kent Adult Education. The men are desperate to get into employment stating this as their most urgent desire and are being held back only by their struggle to gain a level of English that will enable them to get jobs. The one man who spoke English prior to coming to the UK is already in employment within the borough.
14. The families have been housed in both urban and rural locations and all are in private rented accommodation. Initially, the supplies of properties were generated by publicity and have been offered by landlords as a gesture of goodwill towards this scheme. Although nationally publicity of the plight of many refugees has slowed, we are still working hard to find private sector vacancies that will not impact upon those on the housing register or those households who are homeless.
15. The three most common questions that the families ask on their arrival are: When can we learn English, when can the children go to school and when can we get into employment? The next section addresses these matters.
16. As indicated, we have robust procedures in place to access places for education for 5-16 year olds and have been successful in accessing a pre-school place for the 3-year-old and training opportunities for the 18-year-old who have so far arrived.

17. The biggest barrier to employment is proficiency in English, particularly language skills needed in the work place. A more intensive and employment focussed English course on arrival would enable the families to access employment opportunities more quickly. We are working with partner agencies to be able to deliver this locally. Tuition in a basic level of English prior to arrival would also be of huge benefit to the families in the early days and weeks following arrival so we are working closely with the Home Office, UNHCR and IOM to enable this wherever possible.
18. The families have all expressed the importance of being able to get together periodically to socialise and share their experiences. We have enabled this on a regular basis, working in partnership with Gateway Church, which has kindly provided both the venue and willing volunteers. We plan to continue and further develop this facility.
19. On Friday 12th August 2016 the Ashford meeting hosted all SVP families from all over Kent. The evening was enjoyed by all participants and it was felt it was of particular benefit to those families currently in more isolated situations in other areas of Kent.

The position countywide

20. The table below provides an update on the indicative pledges and arrivals so far for the whole of Kent district authorities

District/Borough	Latest position
ASHFORD	250 people (approx. 50 families) over the 5 years; currently have 7 families (33 people). Resettlement support is provided by ABC staff.
CANTERBURY	10 families over the 5 years.
DARTFORD	Wish to take one at a time and will be reviewed after each family.
DOVER	12 families over the 5 years; two properties found and soon to receive families (end of June). Resettlement support is being provided by Migrant Help.
GRAVESHAM	5 families over the 5 years.
MAIDSTONE	Plan to take 6 single men or women over the 5 years.
SEVENOAKS	To be confirmed.
SHEPWAY	10 families over the 5 years.
SWALE	10 families over the 5 years (2 per year).
THANET	8 families over the 5 years.
TONBRIDGE & MALLING	10 families over the 5 years; 1 family arrived in April. Resettlement support provided by Rethink
TUNBRIDGE WELLS	10 families over the 5 years; 2 families arrived in December; soon to receive another. Resettlement support provided by Rethink
TOTAL	Approx. 130 families over the 5 years, of which Ashford is aiming to support 50 families.

21. As at the end of June 2016, 43 people have been resettled in Kent (10 families). In the UK as a whole 1,854 people had been resettled by end of March 2016.

22. Generally, before the first arrivals, the overwhelming response from the public was that of willingness to help and a media release was issued thanking the public for its first-class response in offering help of all kinds. The positive response has continued as the scheme has welcomed families, and there has been only very limited negative comment on social media and this has quickly faded.
23. Refugees do not get preferential access to benefits and services. They are provided with support to enable them to access those benefits and services efficiently and quickly, in the same way that we would support anyone to return to work. The council has gone to great lengths to ensure publicity or press releases regarding the scheme stress that only private accommodation is being used and explain clearly that funding for the scheme is coming directly from government.
24. Thus far, national support for this scheme has been very positive but we do need to be mindful of any change in government policy which could affect our ability to deliver this support.
25. It should be noted that a report published by the Home Affairs Select Committee on 3rd August indicated that Ashford had received more refugee families through the Government's national programme than any other district authority in Kent. In addition to interviewing the Leader of this authority on the day the report's findings were made public, BBC Radio Kent interviewed Keith Vaz MP, Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, who said that "Ashford should be commended" for its work to date.

Finances & Funding

26. The first 12 months of a refugee's resettlement costs, excluding economic integration, are fully funded by central government using the overseas aid budget, in accordance with international guidelines and practice.
27. To ensure that local authorities can plan ahead and continue to respond to the overwhelmingly generous response of the British people, the Home Office will also provide additional funding to assist with costs incurred in future years. The funding is on a decreasing scale. This reflects the fact that the initial set up costs for a household are high however over time, the need for support should reduce as the families gain employment and therefore become self sufficient.
28. It has been recognised that the council will need financial certainty about the financing of the scheme in order to enter into contracts and commit resources. The Home Office therefore will be working closely with local government to develop the process for drawing down the funding in order that this certainty can be given.

Risk Assessment

29. Financially, the funding from central government in support of our work on SVPR means we have very little, if any risk in this regard. However it is important that we monitor this closely should there be any change in policy or central government commitment, and adapt our response accordingly.
30. In many regards, as the Home Affairs report indicates, Ashford has led the way in Kent and the south east with our commitment to supporting these vulnerable people. It has enhanced the council's reputation in terms of both its compassion and 'can do' attitude, as well as practising what it preaches – in that this is an international town and one which is in the top 10% of desirable places to live in the country. Again though, we must continue to ensure we are delivering the scheme properly and competently to ensure this is maintained.

Impact Assessment

31. See appendix A

Other Options Considered

32. ABC have considered operating this scheme in the same manner as the other Kent authorities, where the direct resettlement, support and integration programme are sourced to a third partner agency to carry out.
33. The decision was made to provide the support package to refugee families "in house" using officers employed directly by Ashford Borough Council (although fully funded through the Home Office tariff) working in conjunction with local statutory and voluntary agencies to achieve an holistic integration programme. This decision was made in part because it was felt that, in order to provide a high quality support and integration package, local knowledge and networks are essential.
34. Another factor was that we wanted to be able to monitor the project closely and be able to develop and adapt provisions easily as the project progresses. Both would be more difficult to deliver and complex to manage if support were being provided by a third party organisation located outside the borough, and offer less flexibility in the approach.
35. As the number of resettled families increase, there may be a need for additional staffing resources. Specifically the addition of an Arabic speaking support worker to the team would both cut down interpretation costs and provide extra resources for support tasks. This could in fact become an opportunity for one of the resettled refugees themselves, should they develop adequate English skills.

Consultation

36. The Home Office, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IoM) have all consulted with the families that have arrived so far in Ashford and feedback has been positive

about their welcome, the way their needs have been met, the support communities in which they have been placed and the level of contact with Ashford Borough Council, which is supporting them to support themselves and integrate as quickly as possible.

37. Feedback from the families already in Ashford is gathered regularly as part of the support activities. As a result, tailored programmes are being developed to increase the intensity of English language support for the adults post - arrival and to shift the emphasis of provision further toward work readiness. We are keen to engage the refugees themselves in the development of future provision and they have proved equally keen to participate.

Implications Assessment

38. There is the need for continued central government commitment of resources for this scheme in terms of both staffing and financial assistance.
39. One of the challenges facing this scheme is that although Ashford has an increasingly diverse ethnic minority population this remains relatively small in comparison to many other areas, including parts of Kent. There is no current established Arabic community and only a small handful of people of Syrian origin or decent. There is a Mosque on Torrington Road in Ashford and an Ashford Muslim Society. There is, within the borough, one small Halal butcher (although there is a slaughterhouse that complies with Halal requirements supplying the wholesale meat market this is only available for those with capacity to purchase meat in considerable bulk). We are working closely with the refugees to ensure that they can maintain and celebrate their own culture whilst working to build their new lives in Ashford.

Handling

40. The borough council's in-house marketing and communications team has liaised closely with colleagues in housing and at the Home Office to report positive publicity and our success stories. Indeed, its 'media pack' has been shared by the Home Office as best practice. Operationally, other councils from Kent and beyond have spoken to our officers in housing and communications to better understand the processes required and to see what has worked well.
41. More publicity work is needed to particularly to maximise potential interest in finding private landlords willing to provide accommodation.

Conclusion

42. The general view thus far is that the scheme has been a success here in Ashford. The families who have arrived are settling well. They are all making good progress in learning English and are able to manage their lives successfully with continuing appropriate support. All have expressed both a desire and will to give back to the communities who have offered them safety and the chance to build new lives.

43. There is a desire to continue with this scheme for the duration of the five-year period of the Government scheme and we would like members to re-affirm this commitment.

Portfolio Holder's Views

44. I am pleased with the progress made in terms of helping these refugees and the enormous difference we are making to the lives of some of those most affected by the troubles in Syria. It is important that we continue this good work and I fully support our continuing efforts to provide this level of assistance, welcoming these families into our communities.
45. I thank all those private landlords who have already helped, and would also like to encourage others to offer suitable properties they may have in support of this project.

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Impact Assessment

When is an assessment needed?

Councils must assess the impact of **proposed policies or practices** while they are being developed, with analysis available for members before a decision is made (i.e. at Cabinet).

Broadly, *policies and practices* can be understood to embrace a full range of different activities, such as Cabinet decisions which substantially change the way in which we do something, setting budgets, developing high-level strategies, and organisational practices such as internal restructuring. Assessments should especially be undertaken if the activity relates closely to an equalities group (see next page).

Importantly, this does not include reports that are 'for note' or do not propose substantial changes – assessments should only be considered when we propose to do something differently.

Assessments should also be carried out when conducting a large-scale review of **existing policies or practices** to check that they remain non-discriminatory. This does not mean filling out an assessment on every report on a subject – it is up to you to decide if the report's scope or scale warrants an assessment.

1. General Information	
1.1 Name of project, policy, procedure, practice or issue being assessed	Progress Report on Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme
1.2 Service / Department	Housing Services
1.3 Head of Service	Sharon Williams
1.4 Assessment Lead Officer	Richard Robinson
1.5 Date of Assessment	15 th July 2016
1.6 Is this assessment of an existing or a proposed project, policy, procedure, practice or issue?	Existing policy and practice

2. What is Being Assessed?	
2.1 What are the aims of this project, policy, procedure, practice or issue?	To support the resettlement of vulnerable Syrian refugees into the community
2.2 Who is intended to benefit from this project, policy, procedure, practice or issue?	Vulnerable Syrian refugees
2.3 Who else is involved in the provision of this project, policy, procedure, practice or issue? i.e. other sections, public or private bodies	
- within Ashford BC	Housing staff
- from other agencies	Home Office – provision of funding Kent County Council Private sector landlords; (various) faith groups

3. Possible Sources of Information

In order to assess the impact of proposed decision it is important to bring together all information you have on it to, analyse them and come to conclusions on how it affects those with protected characteristics.

Information on a policy, project or procedure can come in many forms :-

- Census and other demographic information
- User satisfaction and other surveys
- Previous consultation exercises
- Performance Indicators
- Eligibility Criteria
- Service uptake data
- Complaints
- Customer Profiling
- MOSAIC data

In order to come to conclusions on impacts in section 4 you **must** have taken in to account all appropriate information, and be able to provide this if necessary in support of the judgements you make.

Also, it is not enough to have broad information on service users – to meet equalities duties this information **must** be broken down – where applicable – into the relevant protected characteristics which may be affected by this decision. For example, when considering disabled access to a new community facility, overall usage figures are not enough – an understanding of how many disabled users within this total must be demonstrated.

The protected characteristics are :-

Age	Disability	Gender reassignment	Marriage and civil partnership	Pregnancy and maternity
Race	Religion and belief	Sex	Sexual orientation	

More information on the definitions of these characteristics can be found here - <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/new-equality-act-guidance/protected-characteristics-definitions/>

4. What judgements can we make?				
4.1 Does the evidence already available indicate that the project, policy, procedure, practice or issue may affect these groups differently? (please check the relevant box and provide evidence where possible)	Positive Impact?	Negative Impact?	No Differential Impact	If yes, can it be justified (and how)?
Impact Factors:				
Age (please detail any specific groups considered)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	People of a wide range of ages have been helped thus far, from babies to pensioners
Disability (please detail any specific groups considered)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Latest arrival, the eldest son is partially sighted.
Gender (please detail any specific groups considered)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Gender Reassignment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Marriage / Civil Partnership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Pregnancy & Maternity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Race (please detail any specific groups considered)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Thus far all people helped have been Syrian nationals, and all have been practicing Muslims, with the exception of one Christian family.
Religion / Belief	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	See above
Sexual Orientation (please detail any specific groups considered)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

5. Conclusions	
5.1 Does the decision maximise opportunities to promote equality and good inter-group relations? If "yes" please state how?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes – a key part of the programme has been to help integrate these refugees into their new communities <input type="checkbox"/> No
5.2 Based on the answers to the above can we confidently say that in its present form the decision treats different groups <u>fairly</u> (bearing in mind "fairly" may mean differently) and that no further amendment is required?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes – although getting more support than other non-refugee groups this reflects the desperate situations they are fleeing. <input type="checkbox"/> No
If further action is identified to ensure fair impacts please complete the Action Plan available on the intranet and attach it to this form	

6. Monitoring and Review	
How will monitoring of this policy, procedure or practice be reported (where appropriate)?	Regular reports to Cabinet and on-going monitoring of central government policy and funding in support of the SVPR scheme
When is it proposed to next review the project, policy, procedure, practice or issue?	September 2017
Any additional comments?	None