

## Cabinet

16 December 2015



## Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership

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### Report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive and Councillor Eddie Tomlinson, Portfolio Holder for Assets, Strategic Housing and Rural Issues

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#### Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report:
  - a) provides an update on the Government's response to the Syrian refugee crisis.
  - b) outlines the work of the Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership and working group to ensure Durham can effectively support Syrian refugees.
  - c) provides an update on the offers of support and assistance received.
  - d) seeks agreement for Durham to take part in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (SVPR) scheme in line with the approach recommended by the Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership.
  - e) seeks delegated authority for the Assistant Chief Executive, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Assets, Strategic Housing and Rural Issues, to agree Durham's response to the accommodation of asylum seekers and refugees in the County.

#### Background

- 2 On 7 September 2015, in response to the humanitarian crisis in the region, the Government announced the UK would take an additional 20,000 refugees fleeing war in Syria by 2020. Priority will be given to those most vulnerable, including children and orphans. Refugees will be taken from border camps and nations neighbouring Syria to avoid refugees being encouraged to make dangerous journeys to central Europe; to ensure that the most vulnerable can be prioritised; and to help break the business models of criminal gangs preying on human misery.
- 3 Syrians supported under this programme will be granted a five year humanitarian protection visa. This will entitle them to access to public funds, access to the labour market and the possibility of a family reunion. Refugees will also be able to choose where they want to live in the UK, following their initial settlement into a location.

- 4 The Government confirmed that it will work intensively with local authorities to put in place the necessary arrangements to house and support the refugees who resettle in the UK. The Prime Minister confirmed that the full cost of supporting thousands of Syrian refugees in the UK will be met through the international aid budget for the first year. Subsequently, details of further financial support for years two to five have been announced by the Minister.

### **Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership**

- 5 To consider how the County can best support the UK's response to the crisis, the council established the Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership, which met for the first time on 25 September 2015.
- 6 The Partnership, which is chaired by the Cabinet Member for Assets, Strategic Housing and Rural Issues, seeks to ensure that Durham's support for refugees placed in the County is joined up and will promote cross-service and agency working, as well as engagement with communities (for membership see Appendix II).
- 7 At its first meeting, the Partnership agreed the following response to the Home Office's request to local authorities for in principle support to progress the Syrian Refugee Relocation Scheme:

“Durham County Council and partners recognise that the current crisis in Syria is a national issue and welcomes the national commitment to ensure that support is resourced. We therefore support the UK's response to the crisis and are preparing to play our part in welcoming refugees to County Durham.”

- 8 The Partnership also approved the establishment of a working group, which includes appropriate council services and partner representatives, to support the Partnership and consider the operational aspects of accommodating refugees within the County (for membership see Appendix III).
- 9 The primary focus of the working group to date has been to plan the requirements for welcoming and supporting refugees, including capacity within the County. This has involved consideration of service needs, settlement patterns and cultural and support networks. As part of this work, advice and input from other authorities which have participated in refugee resettlement schemes has been sought.

### **Offers of support and assistance**

- 10 The council continues to co-ordinate and record offers of support and assistance received from members of the public and other organisations in response to the refugee crisis.
- 11 A number of approaches have been received from individuals and families offering to provide accommodation, host a family or to provide clothes, toiletries

and bedding. Current government advice is to direct residents to aid organisations, which have developed mechanisms to offer support.

- 12 The Partnership has also received petitions urging the County Council to offer support for the Syrian refugee crisis.

### **County Durham's Proposed Response**

- 13 Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership is strongly supportive of Durham playing its part in the UK's response to the refugee crisis. It recognises however that County Durham does not have significant experience or knowledge on which to build in relocating vulnerable refugees in the area. It will therefore be important to develop effective links with religious and voluntary and community sector groups that can offer support, as well as neighbouring authorities.
- 14 The Home Office is keen for authorities to indicate their willingness to participate in phase two of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, scheduled to be implemented from March 2016. The Government has recently clarified decisions about funding for the scheme and initial analysis indicates this will meet the council's costs.
- 15 In response to this request, the Partnership has proposed that a considered and incremental approach be adopted to ensure refugees are able to settle, become part of our local communities and thrive in the County. There is a strong desire to assist, but to ensure that Durham, with limited experience in this area, does so in a way that effectively meets the needs of refugees and local communities. In line with this, the Partnership and working group propose that:
- a) The County should consider offering support which is in line with the Council's share of the national population (this would equate to circa 200 Syrian refugees over five years), and our offer should focus on family groups.
  - b) Within 12 months of the first group of refugees arriving in the County, an evaluation be completed into the effectiveness of the programme to determine if the number of Syrian refugees settled in County Durham could be increased.
- 16 In addition to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, there is a range of other Government initiatives to resettle refugees and disperse asylum seekers and an approach has been received from the Home Office to discuss Durham's participation in schemes to widen asylum seeker dispersal in the region.
- 17 An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country, but whose application has not yet been concluded. The majority of asylum seekers do not have the right to work in the United Kingdom and so must rely on state support. Cash support is available and housing is provided. In the government's key asylum seeker scheme, housing is provided whilst a person's case for asylum is being considered through a contract with G4S. In the UK, a person is a refugee when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the government.

18 In line with the approach set out above, Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership proposes that Durham should initially focus on helping to deliver the Government's commitment to resettle Syrian refugees, via the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. Whilst there is in principle support to engage in programmes to support asylum seekers, a decision to take part should not be taken until the evaluation outlined in paragraph 15(b) above is completed.

19 In progressing Durham's proposal, the important focus will be on co-ordinating services and developing mechanisms to deliver the support required. It is therefore proposed that the Assistant Chief Executive, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Assets, Strategic Housing and Rural Issues, be given delegated authority to progress Durham's offer of support.

### **Recommendation**

20 Cabinet is requested to:

- a) note and endorse the work carried out by Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership.
- b) agree the proposed response to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme and widening dispersal scheme set out in this report.
- c) agree to delegate authority to progress Durham's offer of support to the Assistant Chief Executive, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Assets, Strategic Housing and Rural Issues.

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## Appendix I: Implications

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**Finance** – As highlighted in the report, the government has announced that funding for local authorities engaging with the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) will be provided, on a tapering basis, for the 5 years Syrian refugees are accommodated under this scheme. The programme's evaluation that will be carried out within 12 months of the first refugees being resettled in the County will include a full cost analysis. Direct funding for local authorities is not generally allocated for the wider range of asylum seeker programmes operated by the government. However, this report is not proposing the Council engages in those programmes until the evaluation detailed above is completed.

**Staffing** – If the Council engages in the SVPRS, based on the experience of local authorities that currently implement the scheme, an element of the resources provided by Government to support the scheme will be used to employ a team to assist refugees to settle in the County.

**Risk** – The Government has announced the contribution that will be made to councils taking part in the scheme, along with a commitment to meet full costs in year one. There is a risk that the Government may change these funding arrangements.

**Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty** – A significant number of refugees are likely to require language support and have medical issues. The funding provided by the government is intended to meet these costs.

**Accommodation** – Close liaison with housing providers will be central to successfully implementing a support scheme. This is ongoing and the initial response suggests the approach set out in this report will be manageable. It will also be necessary to accommodate the Refugee Support Team within the Council's estate.

**Crime and Disorder** – The Partnership involves input from the Police and they support the approach set out in this report. The Police will continue to be engaged in the implementation of a resettlement programme if approval is given for Durham to take part in the SVPR scheme.

**Human Rights** – Human Rights is a key driver for the Government's implementation of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.

**Consultation** – Consultation with partners and neighbouring authorities is a key element of the approach set out in this report.

**Procurement** – The North East Regional Migration Partnership is leading on a co-ordinated approach to procuring services for refugees on behalf of North East local authorities.

**Disability Issues** – The SVPRS prioritises those in the greatest need who cannot be supported in the region and prioritises people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of torture and violence, and women and children at risk. There will be a need to ensure that accommodation meets the needs of the individuals relocated and links are made with health.

**Legal Implications** – N/A

## **DURHAM HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT PARTNERSHIP**

### **Membership**

#### **Chair**

Durham County Council, Cllr Eddie Tomlinson

#### **Core Members**

Durham County Council (Cllr Joy Allen, Cllr Anne Bonner, Cllr, David Boyes, Cllr Mike Dixon, Cllr Grenville Holland, Cllr John Lindsay, Cllr Peter May, Cllr Trish Pemberton, Cllr James Rowlandson)

North Durham and Durham Dales, Easington and Sedgefield Clinical Commissioning Groups, Nicola Bailey

County Durham Housing Forum, Geraldine Kay

Voluntary and Community Sector, Peter MacLellan

North East Regional Faiths Network, Jim Robertson

North East Churches Acting Together, Rev Joanne Thorns

## **DURHAM HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT WORKING GROUP**

### **Membership**

#### **Partners**

Durham Constabulary - Safeguarding Neighbourhoods Command  
Voluntary and Community Sector representative  
North East Churches Acting Together  
North East Regional Faiths Network  
Durham Dales, Easington and Sedgfield Clinical Commissioning Group  
Department for Work and Pensions - Jobcentre Plus Partnership Manager (County Durham)

#### **Durham County Council**

Assistant Chief Executive's Office - Policy and Communications  
Assistant Chief Executive's Office - Partnerships and Community Engagement  
Assistant Chief Executive's Office - Equalities Team  
Children and Adults Services - School Places and Admissions  
Children and Adults Services - Children's Services  
Children and Adults Services - Adult Care  
Children and Adults Services - Public Health  
Regeneration and Economic Development - Housing Solutions  
Regeneration and Economic Development - Economic Development  
Resources - Financial Services