

Cabinet

15 January 2020

**Humanitarian Support in County
Durham**

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

Jane Robinson, Corporate Director of Adult and Health Services

Councillor Angela Surtees, Portfolio Holder for Social Inclusion

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide.

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report provides an update on County Durham's support for vulnerable refugees and seeks approval to participate in the UK's global resettlement programme following the conclusion of current resettlement schemes in 2020.

Executive summary

- 2 In 2015 County Durham pledged to play its part in supporting the UK's commitment to assist some of the world's most vulnerable refugees. With no significant experience of delivering humanitarian support, the council developed a model to support refugee resettlement in County Durham in a collaborative approach with partners and services.
- 3 Since 2016, when County Durham welcomed its first refugee arrivals, the county has supported 259 individuals in 56 family groups over eight separate phases. The programme is on track to deliver Cabinet's commitment to support between 250 and 300 vulnerable refugees by the conclusion of current resettlement programmes in 2020.
- 4 The county is recognised regionally and nationally as an example of best practice in delivering a successful resettlement programme that effectively supports vulnerable refugee families starting a new life in the UK.

- 5 The Home Office continues to encourage local authorities to engage in refugee and asylum support programmes. The main schemes include the Vulnerable Persons' and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programmes which County Durham is supporting, and a separate asylum process which accommodates asylum seekers throughout the UK under private contract arrangements which County Durham is not engaged in. Local authorities are not funded to support individuals seeking asylum under the asylum accommodation scheme and evidence shows a significant impact on participating councils and the voluntary and community sector, who are not reimbursed for additional work and services required. In 2017 partners expressed a strong view that the county should not engage in asylum accommodation arrangements, as they did not allow the council to co-ordinate arrivals and provide associated support. Concerns were also expressed that support infrastructure and services for individuals seeking asylum were lacking in the county.
- 6 Pledges under the UK's key resettlement schemes for vulnerable refugees are scheduled to conclude in 2020. In summer 2019 the government announced its commitment to a long-term programme for refugee resettlement, consolidating key programmes into a global resettlement scheme from April 2020. Numbers and funding for year one only are confirmed presently but are equivalent to current schemes. The Home Office has confirmed it will seek identical terms for the programme for year two onwards as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.
- 7 County Durham's participation in a refugee resettlement programme following the conclusion of existing resettlement schemes in 2020 would demonstrate the council's commitment to contribute to the UK's humanitarian assistance effort in a way which offers genuine support to vulnerable individuals and families in line with local circumstances.

Recommendation(s)

- 8 Cabinet is recommended to:
 - (a) note progress on County Durham's commitment to assist between 250 and 300 individuals under the Vulnerable Persons' and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programmes.
 - (b) agree to participate in the UK's new global refugee resettlement programme over the next four years following conclusion of the current resettlement schemes in 2020, proportionate with the county's share of the national population, subject to:
 - (i) the government confirming future funding arrangements in line with the current programme; and

- (ii) ongoing monitoring continues to demonstrate that the programme to resettle refugees can be effectively delivered in the county.
- (c) agree that in the event it is considered that the programme cannot continue to be effectively delivered, the Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Social Inclusion and the key partners highlighted in paragraph 43, is delegated authority to determine whether the level of involvement should reduce or cease.

Background

- 9 In 2015 the government announced a commitment to assist 20,000 vulnerable refugees caught up in the crisis in Syria. This was followed by an announcement to support 3,000 vulnerable children and their families displaced in the Middle East and North Africa Region. The government appealed to local authorities to help deliver this promise through the Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme.
- 10 Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership was established to consider how the county could play its part, ensure that support for refugees placed in the county is joined up and to promote cross-service and agency working, as well as engagement with communities. The Partnership, chaired by the council, included representation from Clinical Commissioning Groups, County Durham Housing Forum, the Voluntary and Community Sector, North East Regional Faiths Network and North East Churches Acting Together.
- 11 The Partnership proposed that the county should offer resettlement support proportionate to the council's share of the UK population, equating to approximately 200 refugees over the lifetime of the programme. It also recommended an evaluation of the programme's first year be undertaken to determine if the county's support could be expanded. Cabinet agreed the proposals in December 2015.
- 12 The evaluation of Durham's first year support painted a positive picture of resettlement, with council services, partner organisations and the voluntary and community sector working together effectively to make a difference to the lives of extremely vulnerable people and local communities accepting and welcoming refugee families into their midst.
- 13 In November 2017 Cabinet agreed to increase the county's support to between 250 and 300 individuals, under schemes which are adequately resourced to allow the county to successfully resettle arrivals, including the Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme, suitable cases under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and, where possible, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, if the level of care and support required are available.
- 14 County Durham has also been encouraged to engage in UK asylum accommodation arrangements and discussions have been held with the Home Office. This scheme is distinct from refugee resettlement programmes and is delivered via a private contract with the contractor securing accommodation and providing support services for asylum seekers within a participating local authority area. Local authorities are not funded to offer support to individuals seeking asylum. Evidence presented by authorities involved in the scheme, and an investigation by

the Home Affairs Select Committee, show a significant impact on participating authorities and local voluntary and community sector organisations, who are not reimbursed for additional work and services provided.

- 15 In November 2018 the LGA Asylum, Migration and Refugee Task Group met the Immigration Minister to discuss local authority concerns about the asylum dispersal system and new asylum accommodation contracts. The Minister expressed a commitment to improve engagement and to revisit existing ratios, exploring how asylum seekers could be allocated across areas. The Home Office established a national Chief Executives Group, which has met three times since December 2018.
- 16 One of the priorities of both the LGA Task Group and the Chief Executive/Home Office Group is the development of a more equitable, place-based approach to asylum dispersal in the UK. A change plan has been developed outlining a process to achieve this, aiming to more closely align the regional proportions of dispersed asylum seekers to the regional proportions of the national population over the 10 year cycle of the asylum accommodation contract. The approach will be driven by a year-on-year proportional reduction in areas which accommodate the highest proportion of asylum seekers, alongside a managed increase in less-affected areas.
- 17 Following the work of the Chief Executive's Group, consideration is now being given to how disparity can be addressed within regions. This has yet to commence in the North East, primarily because the challenges of implementing a new asylum accommodation contract has been the focus, but it is likely to be the subject of discussions with local authority Leaders and Chief Executives. There has been no change in the government's position that involvement in asylum dispersal arrangements should be voluntary and there is no commitment to mandate local authorities to participate.
- 18 The first year review of resettlement support sought partners' views on participation in the asylum accommodation scheme. Significant reservations were expressed about the system, Durham's capacity and resources to deliver additional services arising from the scheme and the lack of support infrastructure for individuals seeking asylum. Partners recommended that the county should focus its humanitarian support efforts on schemes which are adequately resourced to provide support for individuals arriving in the area. Cabinet agreed the approach in November 2017 and County Durham is not participating in asylum accommodation arrangements.

UK global resettlement programme

- 19 The UK's resettlement programmes aim to support refugees in crises and are distinct from national asylum arrangements. Arrivals under resettlement schemes have refugee status, can access public services, work and claim benefits; whilst participating local authorities receive government funding to provide full resettlement support.
- 20 With pledges under the UK's key resettlement schemes scheduled to conclude in 2020, in June 2019 the government announced its commitment to a long-term programme for resettlement, recognising the global humanitarian need, with over 68.5 million people around the world forced from their homes and nearly 25.4 million refugees fleeing persecution; whether due to conflict, religious belief, sexuality or any reason under the Refugee Convention. This seeks to provide certainty to partners on the future of the UK's refugee resettlement offer.
- 21 The announcement confirmed the UK will consolidate its main resettlement schemes into a global resettlement programme from April 2020, broadening its geographical focus beyond the Middle East and North Africa region, and being better placed to swiftly respond to international crises in coordination with global partners. The priority will be to continue to resettle the most vulnerable refugees and target those greatest in need of assistance, identified and referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
- 22 In 2020-2021, the first year of operation, the scheme aims to resettle around 5,000 of the world's most vulnerable refugees, equivalent to the number of refugees assisted each year under current resettlement programmes.
- 23 Although a global scheme, the North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) confirmed the scheme will continue to largely focus on refugees in the Middle East and North Africa, in line with concentration of need.
- 24 Numbers and funding for year one only are confirmed presently, which the Home Office indicated is linked to Comprehensive Spending Review timescales. It has confirmed it will seek identical terms for the programme for year two onwards, i.e. equal tariff funding, the same additional funding streams, including exceptional costs and health, and five years of ongoing funding.
- 25 The NEMP is organising an event in early 2020 to discuss the success of the current programmes with political leaders and is seeking a potential ministerial presence.

- 26 As a participating authority, County Durham has been approached by the NEMP, on behalf of the Home Office, to discuss how the council wishes to progress and potential future pledges.

The resettlement support programme in County Durham

- 27 A model for resettling refugee arrivals in County Durham was developed by key services and partners, recognising the county's distinctive characteristics, including the challenges presented by smaller and rural communities, the lack of diversity in many areas and communities and the lack of established infrastructure and support mechanisms.
- 28 The partnership-focused approach to resettlement agreed by the council included the adoption of several key principles:
- (a) Resettling arrivals in the county's main towns/areas, avoiding isolation in smaller villages and settlements. The first year review of resettlement agreed that some larger villages and areas with good access and transport links to the City centre should also be considered, in consultation with partners to confirm suitability.
 - (b) Assisting family groups, who are more likely to support one another and settle within County Durham's communities.
 - (c) Resettling arrivals in clusters of small family groups, offering a self-supporting mechanism within communities.
- 29 A phased approach has been adopted, welcoming arrivals to the county in two main phases each year. This allows effective programme planning, enabling the council to arrange accommodation in appropriate areas and provide the full range of resettlement support services during the first year, including education, English language, employability and resettlement support, and ensures best value from allocated funding.
- 30 Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership recommended resettlement in the county's main towns/areas which were assessed against key criteria including availability of suitable housing, health provision/GP access, school places, Jobcentre Plus access, cohesion and policing issues. This concluded that ten areas would be appropriate for resettlement. A further evaluation is undertaken with partners for each phase of resettlement, to confirm suitability and identify issues.
- 31 Following the first-year evaluation of the scheme, it was agreed that some smaller communities with good access to other facilities, e.g. close to the City centre, may be suitable locations for resettlement.
- 32 The county's model recognises and balances community impact with resettling an appropriate number of families in each phase, thus

allowing provision of dedicated intensive resettlement support in each area for the first 12 months.

- 33 Since 2016, when County Durham welcomed its first refugee arrivals, the county has supported 259 individuals in 56 family groups over eight separate phases. Plans and preparations are continuing for the final phase of resettlement support under the current programme.
- 34 The council is widely regarded as delivering an effective, successful resettlement programme. County Durham is cited as an example of best practice by the Strategic Migration Partnership for authorities with no previous experience of resettlement, or for areas with less diverse communities. In June 2019 the county was ranked 12 in the UK for the number of refugees supported under resettlement programmes.

Material considerations

- 35 The council has developed an effective programme to plan, co-ordinate and successfully support refugee families arriving in the county. The first-year evaluation of support outlined a positive picture of successful resettlement and collaborative partnership working. Families have resettled well and have indicated high levels of satisfaction with the support provided and welcome received from services, partners and local neighbours and communities.
- 36 There have been positive early outcomes, including volunteering opportunities and significant progress in the development of English language skills. Children and young people have settled exceptionally well in schools and further education, supported by the council's English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Medical Needs Team and Employability Team. Achievements include individuals securing employment, awards of excellence for progress and achievement, a police Young Heroes Award, outstanding exam results and in 2019 one student secured a university place, despite having no English language on arrival in the county two years ago.
- 37 The government's announcement of a UK global resettlement scheme includes a pledge to ensure the scheme is well-funded, allowing provision of the best possible support to refugees. Although funding arrangements have been approved for year one only, the Home Office has confirmed it will be seeking identical terms for the programme as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.
- 38 The council's experience suggests funding for the scheme fully meets costs incurred and has enabled the council to adopt innovative, partnership-focused approaches to delivery. Additional funding is available, and has been accessed, to meet exceptional costs in year

one, including special educational needs and adaptations, and a reserve has been established to cover costs in future years. Local authorities taking part in asylum dispersal arrangements may use this funding to balance the impact of such initiatives, for example if the county were to take part in the UK's asylum accommodation programme in the future.

- 39 The concentration of need means a global resettlement scheme will continue its focus on the Middle East and North Africa. The council has demonstrated it can effectively resettle refugee arrivals from these areas, with a dedicated resettlement team including Arabic-speaking support officers to deliver translation and interpreting support. The additional staffing resource within the council's Housing Solutions and Employability Services and the Education EAL Team offer the opportunity to enhance wider services.
- 40 In contrast to the asylum accommodation scheme, where councils are unable to withdraw involvement, local authorities can determine individual support for resettlement and how this will be delivered. This flexibility allows the county to plan its support based on local circumstances, and to review this in response to future events.
- 41 County Durham is the only North East local authority not engaged in the UK's asylum accommodation programme. As part of the evaluation of resettlement support in 2017 partners strongly expressed the view that it would be inappropriate to engage in this scheme as it did not allow the county to co-ordinate arrivals and provide associated support similar to that offered by the resettlement programme. Participation in a global resettlement scheme, which is resourced to facilitate successful resettlement of refugee families, allows a planned, co-ordinated approach which recognises the importance of suitably supporting vulnerable refugees.
- 42 The resettlement of a small number of families each year under the resettlement programme offers an opportunity to increase diversity and potentially improve understanding, eliminate barriers and promote the acceptance of difference in some of the county's communities.
- 43 County Durham has established a reputation for a successful resettlement offer and is cited as a model of best practice by the Strategic Migration Partnership. The input of key partners is an essential component in the successful delivery of the programme in the county. Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership established the strategic direction for humanitarian support within County Durham, strongly supporting participation in resettlement schemes which are co-ordinated by the council and fully funded by government. The Partnership last met in 2017. A working group is consulted for each

phase and includes members of the wider Partnership. In order to inform a final view and recommendation about future participation, the working group of key services and partners was convened in December 2019, chaired by the Portfolio Holder for Social Inclusion, with representation from health, police, the voluntary and community sector, Department for Work and Pensions, education and housing.

- 44 Partners expressed high levels of satisfaction with the effectiveness of the programme, the collaborative approach to co-ordination and support and a genuine sense of pride at the successful resettlement of vulnerable families within the county. Members were keen to endorse the resettlement programme and express appreciation of the council's efforts, which partners felt had exceeded the high expectations of those involved. The working group reiterated its view that the county should focus on delivering humanitarian support via the resettlement programme and confirmed a strong commitment to continue to resettle families within County Durham. The concerns expressed previously about participation in the asylum accommodation programme were still felt to be valid.

The challenges

- 45 Whilst social housing providers have been keen and willing partners in the resettlement programme, securing housing in suitable areas is fundamental. It is desirable to work with social providers, but the council may also need to explore other options where social housing is limited, including accredited private landlords. The council's agreement to establish a local lettings agency in the county may offer one such mechanism in future. This approach would be in line with the council's Housing Strategy and would support efforts to raise standards across the private rented sector, improving the quality of the county's housing stock and wider housing environment. The costs of using the council's lettings agency to secure accommodation could be met from resettlement programme funding.
- 46 Families have settled well within the county, with a largely warm welcome from communities. It is recognised that compassion for the plight of refugees may diminish, as the crisis in Syria becomes a less influential news topic, despite the ongoing humanitarian disaster. This may be exacerbated by future political and economic events. It is therefore difficult to predict whether and what tensions may arise.
- 47 A continuation of the county's model to focus on main towns/areas or villages/areas with good access and transport links to the City centre means some communities will see additional refugee families resettled. However, the lettings agency approach might provide access to other suitable locations with little social housing stock. The programme is

carefully planned, with two phases each year. It is likely therefore that the arrival of additional families would be spread over several years, with a small number (approximately five families) resettled in each phase in line with the county's share of the UK population. Arrivals may also be offset by families relocating to other parts of the county or the UK.

- 48 The council's resettlement offer includes a dedicated staffing resource supporting the programme within the Housing Solutions, Employability and EAL teams. There is a funding reserve to prepare for a planned reduction in resettlement provision over the duration of the scheme. Nevertheless, withdrawing future engagement would inevitably impact Teams and staffing in the future.
- 49 Any proposal to discontinue resettlement support at this stage is unlikely to be supported by partners. The programme evaluation found that partners were extremely positive about the collaborative nature of the scheme and their involvement in each phase. The consultation event with partners in December 2019 confirmed there is strong interest and support for continued involvement in resettlement from all partners, including voluntary and community and church representatives, who are active, dedicated delivery partners keen that the county plays its part in offering humanitarian support to vulnerable people.

Conclusion

- 50 In 2015 County Durham pledged to play its part in supporting the UK's commitment to assist some of the world's most vulnerable refugees. The county had no significant experience of delivering humanitarian support and therefore utilised the knowledge of partners and services to develop a model to support resettlement in County Durham. Four years on and County Durham is delivering a successful resettlement programme that effectively supports vulnerable refugee families starting a new life in the UK and is recognised as an example of best practice.
- 51 The global humanitarian need persists, with over 68.5 million people around the world forced from their homes and nearly 25.4 million refugees fleeing persecution. The government's announcement of a UK global resettlement programme, to ensure it can contribute to the need for humanitarian support, even during a time of austerity, recognises this.
- 52 In contrast to the national asylum accommodation programme, the resettlement scheme provides flexibility to co-ordinate support in line with local circumstances and is well resourced to provide appropriate support for vulnerable families arriving in the county. Continued participation in the scheme demonstrates a positive contribution to the

UK's wider humanitarian support effort. At the same time, resettlement support is not a contractual commitment and allows the county's offer to be amended if there are significant changes, including the availability of housing, cohesion issues and future funding arrangements.

- 53 The council has worked successfully with partners to establish a truly collaborative, highly-commended programme in the county. The programme's success has positively reflected on the council, bringing national and regional recognition. County Durham's resettlement scheme has been a finalist in four prestigious national awards, the county has shared its experience and insight on numerous occasions at a regional level, has represented the region at Home Office national events and supported other authorities with peer mentoring. Withdrawing participation from such a successful programme could therefore be strongly criticised, at a time when local authorities are being urged to participate in other initiatives, including unfunded schemes.
- 54 Delivering a successful programme can be challenging, but there are a significant number of positive elements linked to involvement in the scheme, not least the genuine contribution the county is making to the lives of vulnerable individuals. It is therefore recommended that, subject to confirmation of future funding arrangements, the county should support the scheme over the next four years, resettling a small cluster of families in each phase proportionate to the county's share of the population. This would amount to approximately five families arriving twice per year and reflects the council's pledge under the Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme, with a commitment to review future participation thereafter.
- 55 The Home Office is keen to seek expressions of interest for participation from 2020 and the NEMP is facilitating discussions with participating local authorities.

Background papers

- None.

Other useful documents

- Cabinet Report: Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership, 16 December 2015
- Cabinet Report: Review of Humanitarian Support in County Durham, 15 November 2017

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

None.

Finance

The government provides funding for local authorities engaging with the Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). First year funding has been agreed for the UK's global resettlement scheme, confirming a refugee's resettlement costs will be fully funded by central government during the first 12 months.

Resources are allocated on a tariff basis, with additional costs covered under an exceptional costs fund. Local authorities are also provided with tariff funding to meet support costs in years 2-5, tapering from £5,000 per person in the second year in the UK to £1,000 per person in year five. Funding is also provided to local authorities supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Direct funding for local authorities is not allocated under the asylum accommodation and support contract.

Consultation

Consultation with partners is a key element of the approach set out in this report.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

There is a significant requirement for language support for refugees. The vulnerable nature of refugees assisted under the scheme will include support to individuals with complex needs, including physical and mental health issues. Government funding is intended to meet these costs.

The resettlement programmes prioritise 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 is a need to ensure that accommodation meets the needs of the individuals resettled and links are made with health.

Climate Change

None.

Human Rights

Human Rights is a key driver for the government's implementation of a global resettlement scheme for the UK, and the operation of the Vulnerable Persons'

Resettlement Scheme, the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children.

Crime and Disorder

Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership and the county's resettlement support model involves input from the police. The police continue to be engaged in the implementation of each phase of the resettlement programme and have designated a senior officer to co-ordinate liaison.

Staffing

A proportion of the resources provided by government to support the resettlement schemes is being used to employ a team to assist refugees to settle in the county. This funding would also support a staffing resource to co-ordinate and support refugee arrivals under a UK global resettlement programme.

Accommodation

Close liaison with housing providers is central to successful implementation of the resettlement support scheme. The use of the council's local lettings agency would also support the provision of accommodation for families supported under the scheme.

The refugee resettlement support team is accommodated within the council's estate.

Risk

The government has announced the contribution that will be made to councils taking part in the global resettlement scheme, along with a commitment to costs in year one. There is a risk that the government may change funding arrangements in future years. There is also a risk that resettlement costs incurred in years two to five may not be fully covered by the tariff funding provided. However, the council's experience of the scheme over the past three years suggests the funding provided meets all resettlement costs.

Procurement

None.