

**Cabinet**

**15 November 2017**



**Review of humanitarian support in  
County Durham**

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**Report of Corporate Management Team**

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**Councillor Joy Allen, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Transformation**

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**Purpose of the Report**

- 1 This report:
  - (a) outlines the findings of the evaluation of the first year of delivering resettlement support under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and considers future support for the programme;
  - (b) updates Members on other humanitarian support schemes in the county, specifically the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children;
  - (c) informs Members about the government's national scheme for accommodating asylum-seekers and considers approaches received from the Home Office to encourage County Durham to participate in asylum-seeker dispersal.

**Background**

- 2 On 16 December 2015, Cabinet considered a report on the government's response to the Syrian refugee crisis and the development of the Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership. The partnership includes 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.
- 3 The partnership recommended a number of key principles for the resettlement of families:
  - (a) Resettling arrivals in the County's main towns/areas, avoiding isolation in smaller villages and settlements.
  - (b) Offering support to family groups, who are more likely to assist one another and settle within County Durham's communities.

- (c) Resettling arrivals in clusters of small family groups (approximately 25 people), which would hopefully offer a self-supporting mechanism within communities.
- 4 In line with the partnership's recommendations, Cabinet agreed to participate in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, offering to support around 200 vulnerable people in family groups, over the duration of the scheme to May 2020.
- 5 Cabinet agreed to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme within 12 months of the arrival of the first group of refugees in order to determine if the number of Syrian refugees supported to settle in the county could be increased.
- 6 It was also agreed that the outcome of the review would be used to inform Durham's participation in wider programmes to support asylum-seekers.
- 7 Since the report to Cabinet, the council has worked with the humanitarian support partnership to support three phases of resettlement, commencing in May 2016.
- 8 To date, 92 vulnerable people have been helped to settle in the county. Arrangements are currently being made for a fourth phase, which will see a further six families supported to lead new lives in the county. This would bring the total number of people supported to approximately 120.

## **Evaluation**

- 9 In line with Cabinet's decision, and in conjunction with partner organisations in the humanitarian support partnership, officers have undertaken a review of the first phases of the resettlement scheme.
- 10 The evaluation report, which is attached as Appendix 2, also considered other support schemes which the council and its partners have been asked to consider by government.
- 11 The principal findings and conclusions from the review in relation to the SVPRS are:
  - (a) Council services have been effectively co-ordinated to settle refugees into their new homes and to support their integration into the Durham community.
  - (b) This has been matched by outstanding support from external partners including social housing providers, the voluntary and community sector, faith groups, Department for Work and Pensions, health and police.
  - (c) Of particular note has been the degree of voluntary support from local voluntary and community sector and church organisations, as well as Durham University (including the University's Islamic Society), who have provided a significant range of goods for the family homes,

hosted and contributed to welcome events, provided interpreters, organised conversation groups and befriending opportunities.

- (d) Neighbours and local communities have extended a warm welcome to the families resettled in the county. Unfortunately, some families have experienced a few incidents of low-level anti-social behaviour. These have been dealt with by the local police, housing providers and council services.
- (e) The first three phases funded by the SVPRS have worked well, with the vulnerable people assisted settling well in the county and reporting a very high degree of satisfaction and appreciation for the help and assistance provided.
- (f) Despite its lack of previous experience, the council is seen as a model of best practice regionally in resettling families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.
- (g) Families stated that all parts of the support provided had worked really well, including pre and post-arrival organisation and a smooth settling in process. Refugees advised they were satisfied with the welcome information pack (in English and Arabic) provided on arrival and could not offer suggestions for improvement. All families reported that they were “very satisfied” with the overall service provided by the council.
- (h) Families said that the council had done everything possible to support them, they felt welcome within County Durham, the welcome pack provided was very useful, neighbours were extremely friendly and helpful and the help and assistance of support workers was greatly valued.
- (i) Review discussions amongst partner organisations were extremely positive and complimentary about the success of the scheme and partners were keen to build on this for future phases/initiatives.
- (j) Partners felt that the model adopted in County Durham, focusing on the main towns assessed as suitable for the resettlement of small clusters of family groups, was appropriate.
- (k) It was suggested that for future phases, the following should also be considered:
  - (i) Where appropriate, it might be preferable to locate future arrivals within a town or area where Syrian families had previously resettled and therefore a presence in the community was established rather than focusing on new resettlement areas for each phase.
  - (ii) Some of the larger villages and areas with good access and transport links to the City centre would be appropriate to consider, in consultation with partners to confirm suitability.

- (iii) There was strong support for partnerships with social landlords as the preferred approach. The experience of phase one and two reinforced the significant amount of time and resource required to identify suitable properties in appropriate areas, highlighting the important role of the housing provider in facilitating housing adaptations and the additional support that social landlords provide for tenants, including integration, support in response to problems etc. The partnership working with social landlords had been significant in contributing to the successful resettlement of families in the county.

### **Other humanitarian support schemes**

- 12 The evaluation also considered Durham's experience of other humanitarian support schemes, namely the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children National Transfer Scheme.
- 13 Partners agreed to use a property secured for the SVPRS, to house a family under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), on the basis that the scheme and the family assisted were similar to the SVPRS.
- 14 The National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) seeks to disperse unaccompanied asylum-seeking children across the country, in order to relieve the pressure on local authorities at entry points to the country, most notably Kent. When children arrive and seek asylum, they are treated as looked after children (LAC) and become the legal responsibility of the local authority.
- 15 The government is encouraging local authorities to accept UASC, which involves the local authority becoming legally responsible for the child at the point it accepts transfer from the entry point local authority. Authorities receiving transferred children then have to meet statutory duties around assessment and placement as the child is recognised as looked after.
- 16 Support for schemes to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is particularly challenging within the county, as a result of the significant demands on placement provision for children and young people in County Durham, at a time when the county has its highest level of looked after children.
- 17 Nevertheless, the county has endeavoured to offer support to initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and presently is providing support to 10 young people/children, although this support is on the basis of ad hoc offers and not participation in the National Transfer Scheme.
- 18 At its meeting in January 2017, the humanitarian support partnership was provided with an update on the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 19 The partnership reiterated its commitment to focus on ensuring the effective delivery of humanitarian support schemes within the county and outlined its

support for the continuation of the planned and incremental approach to assist refugees successfully adopted to date.

- 20 The partnership agreed to support the consideration of assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, where this was appropriate, adequately funded and could be effectively delivered in the county with the resources available.
- 21 At a humanitarian support review meeting on 10 February 2017, which was held as part of the evaluation process, partners and services were updated on the government's proposals to resettle up to 3,000 people from the Middle-East and North Africa Region under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). The views of services and partners were invited to inform a response to the Home Office's request for local authority pledges of support.
- 22 Concerns were expressed about the potential difficulties in supporting families under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, particularly focused on the health issues of children resettled under the scheme and the availability of appropriate health services and the significant pressure on special education places in Durham.
- 23 It was recommended that further consideration of support offered under this scheme would require considerable input and consideration from children's services, health and education, including the involvement of special educational needs professionals where appropriate.

### **National Dispersal Scheme for Asylum-seekers**

- 24 In the United Kingdom, a person is a refugee when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the government. 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.
- 25 Individuals seeking asylum who can prove they are destitute, are eligible for support from the Home Office. Support can be financial (asylum-seekers are entitled to receive £36.95 a week) and in the form of accommodation whilst a person's claim for asylum is being considered.
- 26 The government is encouraging greater dispersal of asylum-seekers across the country and since 2015 has been encouraging local authorities which do not currently accommodate asylum-seekers to do so.
- 27 The national dispersal scheme, unlike the SVPRS, does not provide funding for local authorities for asylum dispersal placements, as these are progressed through a contract arrangement between the Home Office and their contracted providers.
- 28 The Home Office has approached the council to discuss County Durham's participation in schemes to widen asylum-seeker dispersal in the region and

meetings have taken place with the Home Office in summer 2016 and June 2017.

- 29 The evaluation report considered the government scheme and partners' views on whether Durham should participate.
- 30 Although the humanitarian support partnership has indicated in principle support to engage in programmes to support asylum-seekers, County Durham is the only local authority area in the North East not presently signed up to the national scheme to accommodate asylum-seekers. However, a number of local authorities are not involved in the humanitarian support schemes in which Durham is participating.
- 31 In view of Durham's lack of experience in resettling asylum-seekers, the humanitarian support partnership proposed that Durham should initially focus on helping to deliver the government's commitment to resettle Syrian refugees, via the SVPRS. It was agreed that a decision to take part should not be taken until the evaluation of the implementation of the SVPRS over a full year of operation was completed.
- 32 Earlier this year, the partnership reviewed its position in the light of the government's latest calls for asylum-seeker dispersal and its experience of assisting Syrian refugees and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 33 The partnership expressed significant concerns about participation in the national dispersal scheme for asylum-seekers.
- 34 Partners were concerned about the practical delivery of the scheme in County Durham. Issues raised included the demands on the housing service, particularly for single people; the demands on children's services; the lack of infrastructure and support services in the county, including asylum-seeker support, legal assistance and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision; and the significant impact on the voluntary and community sector.
- 35 These concerns and others were raised with the Home Office, following the meeting in June 2017. Whilst the Home Office has responded, a number of points have not been fully addressed. The most crucial issues concern the number of asylum seekers accommodated in future years should the council take the decision to participate in the scheme, and the ability of the council to withdraw from the scheme.
- 36 In its response the Home Office confirmed that it is content to establish a clear plan for year one asylum dispersal with the council at a pace and timescale that the local authority is comfortable with. In terms of future growth, it also confirmed that this would not take place without discussion with the local authority in the first instance, involving the Strategic Migration Partnership, UK Visas and Immigration and G4S.
- 37 Whilst participation in the asylum seeker accommodation scheme is voluntary, local authorities are unable to subsequently withdraw from the scheme, as

this is likely to require the relocation of individuals from an area where they have settled and made links. The council therefore sought an assurance that, if it was to participate in the scheme, it can cease at any time to accept additional numbers, should this be deemed necessary, whilst clarifying that we would not propose relocating asylum seekers who had already resettled in the county. This would be in line with the recommendations of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee for councils to do so where there are genuine concerns over issues such as the quality or concentration of accommodation, the capacity of support services and risks to social cohesion.

- 38 In response, the Home Office confirmed that it would not normally agree to an area withdrawing from the scheme, although it would meet with the council to discuss any future concerns around asylum dispersal and numbers.

### **Participation in future schemes**

- 39 Whilst commending the work that had taken place to welcome vulnerable Syrian refugee families to the area, partners strongly expressed a view that it would be inappropriate to engage in the asylum accommodation scheme at a time when there were a number of issues with the scheme and the county would be unable to deliver the same level of planned co-ordination and support to asylum-seekers as that offered to refugees under the resettlement scheme.
- 40 The partnership supported the view that the county should provide its fair share of support to humanitarian initiatives by assisting additional families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, which allowed a co-ordinated, incremental approach to resettlement and provided a support structure to facilitate successful integration.
- 41 It is therefore suggested that the county should consider increasing the numbers resettled by 50 to 100 people, under schemes which are adequately resourced and where we can support arrivals, namely the Syrian 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.

### **Conclusions**

- 42 The evaluation report paints a positive picture of Durham's experience supporting Syrian refugee families, with council services, partner organisations and the voluntary and community sector working together very effectively to make a difference to extremely vulnerable people's lives and local communities accepting and welcoming the families into their midst. The council's co-ordination role has been key in facilitating this approach throughout each phase of the scheme.
- 43 Partners are positive about what has been achieved through the co-ordinated and collaborative approach and the families assisted are very satisfied and appreciative of the assistance provided and the welcome they have received from support services and their local neighbours and communities.

- 44 County Durham is presently contributing to the government's humanitarian support effort under three separate programmes: the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme, the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programme and schemes to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These are three of the four main asylum/refugee programmes established by the government. Compared to national figures, the region is providing a key role in supporting the government's humanitarian efforts.
- 45 Whilst the government has called on Durham to participate in another scheme, the scheme to disperse asylum-seekers, partners have expressed significant reservations about the nature of the scheme and Durham's capacity and resources to provide the support and assistance required.
- 46 Partners are suggesting that the county should increase the numbers resettled by 50 to 100 people, under schemes which are adequately resourced and where we can support arrivals, namely the Syrian 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.

### **Recommendations and reasons**

- 47 Cabinet is recommended to:
- (a) note the contents of the evaluation report;
  - (b) commend the organisations and partners involved in resettling the Syrian refugee families for their effective approach;
  - (c) support the view of partners that the numbers resettled in the county could be increased by an additional 50 to 100 people, under appropriate schemes where the county has capacity and resources to do so, as outlined in paragraph 46;
  - (d) agree to delegate authority to progress Durham's offer of support, as outlined in paragraph 47(c), to the Director of Transformation and Partnerships, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Transformation;
  - (e) support the Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership's view that the county should decline to participate in the National Dispersal Scheme for Asylum-seekers at this stage.

### **Background papers**

Cabinet, 16 December 2015, Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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**Finance** – The government has provided funding for local authorities engaging with the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) and the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). This is provided, on a tapering basis, for the 5 years refugees are accommodated under the scheme. Funding is also provided to local authorities supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Direct funding for local authorities is not allocated for the wider range of asylum-seeker accommodation programmes operated by the government.

**Staffing** – An element 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.

**Risk** – The Government has announced the contribution that will be made to councils taking part in the resettlement schemes, along with a commitment to meet full costs in year one. Government funding is also provided under the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. There is a risk that the Government may change these funding arrangements and that the funding for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children may be insufficient to meet the costs of care and placement provision. There is also a risk that resettlement costs incurred in years two to five may not be fully covered by the tariff funding provided.

**Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty** – There is a significant requirement for language support for refugees. The vulnerable nature of refugees supported under the scheme will include a number of medical issues. The funding provided by the government is intended to meet these costs.

**Accommodation** – Close liaison with housing providers is central to successful implementation of the resettlement support scheme. This is ongoing and the initial response suggests the approach adopted has been effective. It has also been 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’s continued participation.

**Human Rights** – Human Rights is a key driver for the government’s implementation of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme and the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children.

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

**Procurement** – None.

**Disability Issues** – The SVPRS and the VCRS 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** – The council will become legally responsible for all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children supported under the National Transfer Scheme from the point transfer acceptance is confirmed under section 69 of the Immigration Act 2016. As the receiving local authority, the council will then need to comply with its obligations under the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.