

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 10 November 2015
Report of: Steph Cordon, Head of Communities
Subject/Title: Cheshire East Council Position on Support for Syrian Refugees and Asylum Seekers
Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Les Gilbert- Cabinet Member for Communities

1. Report Summary

1.1 This report sets out:

- the situation in Syria and what Central Government is doing
- the definition of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants
- current national arrangements for refugees and asylum seekers and what they might mean for Councils
- Cheshire East's position based on the above
- how local residents, communities, faith and voluntary sector can help out.

1.2 There are:

- over 220,000 people who have been detected crossing the Mediterranean to Europe in the first 6 months of 2015
- 12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria and 7.6 million of these internally displaced: (UNOCHA 01.09.2015)
- 4 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries (UNHCR 01.09.2015)
- 7.6 million Children in need of which 2 million are refugees (UNICEF 01.09.2015)
- Over 250,000 People who have been killed as a result of the conflict (UN 01.08.2015).

1.3 The UK government have been taking part in the UN's programme to resettle refugees who have fled from their home countries, including those affected by conflict or civil war. Since 2011, the UK has granted humanitarian protection to almost 5,000 Syrians through normal asylum procedures. A further 216 people have been relocated under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme so far.

1.4 The Prime Minister, David Cameron announced on 7 September 2015 that the UK would accept up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next 5 years. This would be an extension to the existing arrangements for the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. The UK is the second largest bilateral donor to the Syria crisis. The UK has made a total contribution of

£1.12 billion since 2012 to help vulnerable people in Syria and refugees in the region. In addition, the UK Government has allocated £9.5 million from the UK Conflict, Stability and Security Fund to support local capacity and build longer term stability.

1.5 The following is a helpful definition provided by the UK Refugee Council.

- **Refugee** - *“A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. .In the UK, a person is officially a refugee when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the government.*
- **Asylum Seeker:** *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.*
- **Refused asylum seeker** - *A person whose asylum application has been unsuccessful and who has no other claim for protection awaiting a decision. Some refused asylum seekers voluntarily return home, others are forcibly returned and for some it is not safe or practical for them to return until conditions in their country change.*
- **Economic migrant** - *Someone who has moved to another country to work. Refugees are not economic migrants.*

1.6 All Councils have been asked whether they would consider helping out and supporting Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. This request has come through two routes:

- (1) COMPASS the existing asylum dispersal scheme
- (2) Expansion of the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

1.7 **COMPASS**

1.7.1 The existing asylum dispersal scheme is called COMPASS (Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services). Across the UK, the Home Office has contracted with one private sector provider per region to provide asylum accommodation, transport and support.

1.7.2 The provider for the North West, Serco, is required by the COMPASS contract to consult with local authorities on its procurement of dispersal accommodation. The only exception to this is when temporary dispersal accommodation is needed and this can be placed in a Borough with no consultation with the Council. This is normally in hotels.

1.7.3 This contract has identified key areas in the North West as agreed areas for dispersal and these places have dedicated funded staffing arrangements in

place to support asylum seekers and refugees. They are predominantly city based and cover Greater Manchester, Liverpool and Blackburn. These areas are now at capacity due to recent steep increases in numbers, especially in the last 3 months, which means areas like Manchester are now using contingency measures using hotels rather than suitable accommodation.

- 1.7.4 Cheshire East is not participating in this contract, but has been approached by The Home Office and Regional Strategic Migration Partnership to ask whether on a voluntary basis we would consider accepting asylum seekers as the contracted areas are experiencing capacity issues. Whilst this a voluntary agreement at this stage, refusal will result in the Home Office levying a requirement on Cheshire East, reducing our ability to influence where and how many properties Serco procure.
- 1.7.5 Serco has to consult with each affected Council and get agreement from them before any asylum seeker can be housed in an area. Serco can appeal, but hasn't to date on any decision made by a Council to reject an application. The considerations are wide ranging and cover housing strategy, type of property, any school issues and availability of places, similarly availability and capacity of health services, issues of crime and community safety and any possible community tensions and also a population ratio of 1 asylum seeker to 200 existing population at ward level which cannot be breached.
- 1.7.6 Serco develop the local voluntary, community and faith sector infrastructure to support users and to enable them to integrate into the community. They manage all cases on a one to one basis, until a decision is made. Depending on whether there is an appeal, this is normally between 6 months and a year. During this period, the Council is responsible for the education of any children and ensuring registration with GPs.
- 1.7.7 Around 35% of applications receive a positive outcome and those people are then refugees and can access services and welfare benefits. Many of these refugees are from Syria and other conflict areas, and are individuals with high skills levels who have a lot to offer to our communities and economy.
- 1.7.8 The request from Serco is to procure 30 properties over a 3-4 month period and then review. 30 properties would normally house 100 service users.
- 1.7.9 Currently most Asylum Seekers are single people who tend to move to cities once awarded refugee status. Families who are awarded refugee status often stay in the dispersal area but sometimes move on.

1.8 Expansion of Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

- 1.8.1 The expansion of this scheme will enable a further 20,000 Syrian refugees to be admitted to the UK by 2020. Candidates for relocation to the UK under this scheme will be referred by the UN High Commission for Refugees, (UNHCR) from camps in countries neighbouring Syria.

- 1.8.2 The LGA has been lobbying the Government to ensure that funding is available to support Councils and their partners to meet the costs. To date the first 12 months of resettlement costs would be met with an indication as yet unquantified that it would be available in future years.
- 1.8.3 The Regional Strategic Migration Partnership is advising Local Authorities not to volunteer for Phase 1, but to await the outcome of the Spending Review to ensure funding is in place for 2 years, with additional funding being made available for years 3 to 5 to provide the additional services which will be required such as health and social care and ESOL provision.
- 1.8.4 The UK Government has indicated that it will try and place Syrian refugees equitably across the country to ensure that no one Council is disproportionately affected. It expects Councils to take an innovative approach, working in close partnership with communities and voluntary organisations. Councils will be responsible for sourcing accommodation and ensuring refugees are integrated into the community.
- 1.8.5 In order to access funding from Government, Councils will need to make claims. There is significant work required to co-ordinate the scheme and carry out the necessary administration. Therefore, it needs a joint response as it needs to operate at a sub-regional level in order to justify the costs involved in running the scheme.
- 1.8.6 More details of what the expanded scheme would look like are being worked up. At this point: it prioritises those that cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin; women, children and young people at risk; people in severe need of medical care; survivors of torture and violence; refugees with legal and/or physical protection needs; refugees with medical needs or disabilities; persons at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; and refugees with family links in resettlement countries.
- 1.8.7 The UNHCR refers eligible individuals to the Home Office who undertake medical and security checks. The Home Office reserves the right to reject candidates on the basis of war crimes or security.
- 1.8.8 The Home Office pass on all approved cases to Councils who have expressed interest in participating in the scheme. The Council would then accept or reject the client – if they accept they submit an estimated cost of resettlement to the Home Office, who confirm the arrival date.
- 1.8.9 Councils can request a particular make up of cases from the Home Office.
- 1.8.10 Final details of the funding for the expanded scheme will be announced in the Spending Review in November 2015. The LGA is continuing to lobby for exceptional costs top up due to the complex issues faced by people coming through VPR.

1.9 Cheshire East Position

- 1.9.1** The view of Officers is that we should take a measured and proportionate response to the issue working with our sub regional partners in Cheshire, the Home Office and UNCHR. Therefore, we would propose that we express our commitment to taking part in the expanded VPR scheme, but do not commit to taking any refugees until after the CSR. If a 5 year funding agreement is in place, to work with partners in the sub-region to jointly fund a Co-ordinator and administration support to operate a Cheshire wide scheme.
- 1.9.2** To participate in the COMPASS scheme on a voluntary basis, allowing Serco to procure up to 15-20 properties in the first instance and then to review the scheme. Engagement with the procurement process allows local authorities to maintain a degree of influence over asylum dispersal. The influence that the process affords can be used to limit and mitigate the adverse impacts of dispersal, and can ensure that we maximise potential benefits e.g. returning empty homes to the rental market.
- 1.9.3** The Council has set up a small Task and Finish Group of Council Officers and partner organisations such as Clinical Commissioning Groups and CVS on behalf of the voluntary, community and faith sector. This group will drive forward how we can practically manage both the demands on existing services and support the needs of asylum seekers and refugees.
- 1.9.4** For example, we will need to mitigate the potential impacts on housing demand as we have 7,000 people currently on the waiting list. The Council's Homelessness team currently deals with 200 homeless decisions per year and are working to capacity. The average homeless application takes 25 working days to process and the average wait for housing for a household to be accepted for a full duty is 6-12 weeks.
- 1.9.5** We have had some fantastic offers of support particularly from the faith community and members of the public. A webpage has been set up on our Council webpage at www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/refugees to keep residents, VCF and Town and Parish Councils up to date on latest issues. There is a dedicated email address (refugeeinfo@cheshireeast.gov.uk) as well which we are encouraging people to put forward ideas and questions to about how they can help.
- 1.9.6** Council put forward a motion on 22 October 2015 which asked that "This Council would welcome an appropriate number of Syrian refugees to Cheshire East". This was proposed by Cllr Sam Corcoran and seconded by Cllr Irene Faseyi. Council agreed that this was an important issue and they would bring a report to Cabinet which clearly set out the stance of Cheshire East Council. This report deals with the motion.

2. Recommendation

2.1. That Cabinet agree that we:

- (i) Thank all of those that have offered help and publicly recognise the great community spirit of Cheshire East.
- (ii) Inform Government that we are committed to supporting Syrian Refugees, and will consider our position regarding VPR once we know the outcomes of the CSR.
- (iv.) Aim at the consideration of people on a case by case basis under VPR criteria and learn from the examples of best practice elsewhere to ensure that we provide effective support which is measured and proportionate and takes into account the needs of our existing communities in Cheshire East. To work with partner authorities in the sub region to establish a robust operational mechanism to oversee the scheme in Cheshire.
- (iii) Whilst this is not just about money, await the announcement in the Autumn Statement on financial support and determine any further engagement and contribution at this stage.
- (v.) Work with our partners to deliver the best outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees that we can that are sensitive to their needs.
- (vi.) Volunteer to participate in COMPASS on a voluntary basis, working with the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership to consider procurement requests from Serco on a one by one basis, up to 15-20 properties, before reviewing the scheme.
- (viii) Support the motion “that this Council would welcome an appropriate number of Syrian refugees”.

3. Other Options Considered

3.1 An option would be to volunteer to join the VPR scheme now. However, the scheme requires sub-regional operational arrangements and a regional strategic overview to make it work effectively. No other authorities in the North West have volunteered at this stage, due to issues raised in this paper. Funding announcements are due in November 2015 which will then enable us to work with partners in the sub region to explore options for a viable business case to operate the scheme.

3.2 We could refuse to participate in COMPASS on a voluntary basis, however the authority would then be required by the Home Office to participate and we would have no control over the volume of properties procured in the area.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 To ensure Cheshire East Council is able to influence the process and that we limit and mitigate the adverse impacts of dispersal, and maximise the potential

benefits, enabling good support mechanisms and integration into our communities.

4.2 Mitigation plans and work with partners including the VCF sector is integral to the planning of our response.

5. Wards Affected and Local Ward Members

5.1 Due to the need for infrastructure and affordable rents, the COMPASS Scheme is most likely to operate in our larger towns. Potentially all wards could be affected, but there will be absolute consideration given to the needs of both the existing community and the asylum seekers and refugees.

6. Implications of Recommendation

6.1 Policy Implications

6.1.1 Consideration will need to be given to the priority that would be given to asylum seekers and refugees against our existing policies and the impact that this would have on service delivery and also potentially on redirection of budgets to accommodate unplanned for costs.

6.2 Legal Implications

6.2.1 The Council is empowered to take the proposed action under Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 and can be compelled to assist under Sections 100 and 101 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

6.3 Financial Implications

6.3.1 The Autumn Statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer will determine the level of financial assistance that will be awarded to each Council for supporting the additional 20,000 Syrian refugees under the VPR scheme. The Local Government Association (LGA) has been working with Councils to lobby on their behalf for appropriate financial assistance for a five year period. At the moment, this has been agreed for the first year with the amount to be agreed and a potential sliding scale over the next few years.

6.3.2 The costs of providing asylum under Compass are met by the Government. There will however be resource implications for services if refugees are given a positive decision

6.3.3 However, quantifying the actual costs to Councils is fairly difficult and one County Council with vast experience in supporting refugees has for example, estimated the costs of looking after a child at £50,000 per year.

6.4 Equality Implications

6.4.1 Due regard will be given to the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Act 2010 and all action taken will be proportionate.

6.5 Rural Community Implications

6.5.1 It will be important to be sensitive and practical around where refugees could be housed. An important consideration will be finding suitable accommodation and ensuring appropriate accessibility to services and places of worship. This would be more challenging in a rural setting and we would need to recognise that in any considerations.

6.6 Human Resources Implications

6.6.1 There is no doubt that this will require some considerable work from the Council and partners to support both the infrastructure and longer term support for vulnerable people. The funding which is proposed in the Autumn Statement needs to be considered for any infrastructure support needed to engender effective community cohesion and for specific service delivery that may be needed i.e. housing.

6.7 Public Health Implications

6.7.1 Access to services and the consideration of the specialist health needs of asylum seekers and refugees will be an important consideration for Public Health.

6.8 Other Implications (Please Specify)

6.8.1 There are no other implications

7 Risk Management

7.1 All risks will be assessed and mitigated where possible. At the moment, it is difficult to quantify as the refugees will be by definition vulnerable, but their individual situation and needs not known. The complexity of support will need to be defined, the capacity of the community needs to be assessed and also the level of infrastructure support needed.

8 Access to Information/Bibliography

www.lga.gov.uk/refugees

www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council_and_democracy/.../refugees.asp

LGIU Policy Briefing – 25 October 2015

9 Contact Information

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