

Cheshire East Council

Cabinet

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| Date of Meeting: | 10 th October 2017 |
| Report of: | Linda Couchman – Acting Strategic Director of Adults, Communities and Health |
| Subject/Title: | Support for Syrian Refugees and Asylum Seekers |
| Portfolio Holder: | Cllr P Bates, Finance and Communities |

1. Report Summary

This report is to update Cabinet on the three programmes under support for Syrian Refugees and Asylum Seekers, which are:

- Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children
- Asylum Seeker Dispersal

The report requires Cabinet to agree next steps in the Asylum Seeker Dispersal programme.

Syrian Vulnerable Person Relocation

1.1 We informed Cabinet on 11 April 2017 in the [Syrian Vulnerable Person Relocation & Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Update](#) that we had received 5 Syrian refugee families in January, March and April 2017 (totalling 27 individuals made up of 10 adults and 17 children). This demonstrates this Council's commitment to fulfilling its agreed recommendation on 13 September 2016 to welcome up to 3-5 families as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement programme. The work that has been done in preparation for the families arriving has been phenomenal in terms of the commitment from Council staff, partner agencies and the local community, in particular the faith community.

1.2 All 5 families have settled in smoothly with a welcoming and supportive local community response. All relevant issues regarding health, social care, education, housing and benefits have been resolved. There are some on-going support needs regarding health appointments and housing which is being supported by the Care4CE case workers. The children within the families are well settled in school and ESOL support to the parents is progressing well. The Council's Supported Employment team are now engaged in the next step of support which is to secure employment for the parents. The outcomes of this programme continue to be a great success story for Cheshire East

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1.3 One of the Syrian families has made a resettlement submission under the Family Reunification category to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for other family members, specifically grown-up children, who have remained in Syria. We have yet to hear the outcome of this submission, which could take some time to process.

1.4 The contract for Refugees Welcome and SLA with Care4CE are capable to be extended for a further 12 months, which can be met financially through the Home Office funding agreement. This could then further support the 5 Syrian families as they transition through arrival, learning the English language and prepare for employment.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

1.5 In relation to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, we have transferred three groups of young people into the Council's care in June, October and December of 2016 and as at 1st August we have responsibility for 17 young people in total, 4 as Looked After Children and 13 as Care-Leavers. We are particularly grateful to one of our 16+ accommodation providers whose staff have repeatedly demonstrated their flexibility and commitment to assisting us in meeting the needs of this group of young people. As a result, young people who have endured extraordinary life experiences in their journeys to this country have been fully supported in settling into their new lives in Cheshire East.

1.6 We last met with the NW Regional Strategic Migration Partnership in early July and there was little to report on the outstanding commitment to take young people under the Dubs amendment which still falls around 280 short of the Government's revised ceiling of 480 cases; the Home Office says that this is because of delays in the member states (France, Italy and Greece) identifying suitable young people. Some authorities including a number in the North West have still not taken their original commitment of 4 Dubs cases. Our next meeting with the RSMP is in September when we hope that the position will be more clear.

Asylum Seeker Dispersal

1.7 We received a communication from the Home Office, in March of this year, requesting a meeting with officers to discuss the Council commencing delivery of the Asylum Seeker Dispersal programme. The last meeting held with officers took place in November 2016. At this meeting officers described the community resilience work, which was underway to address recent community tensions in the primary placement area of Crewe. The primary area is where properties would be sourced for economic reasons by the Home Office Asylum Seeker Dispersal delivery partner Serco. This meeting emphasised the priority for the Borough at that time as the resettlement of children (Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children) and families (Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement). This work is now positively embedded.

1.8 In the Home Office communication it states that Cheshire East is now the only North West Local Authority not delivering this programme, and reminds us of our

initial pledge of 15-20 properties which was taken in Cabinet in November 2015 in the [Cheshire East Council Position on Support for Syrian Refugees and Asylum Seekers report](#) and the following recommendation was agreed:

'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'.

This represented a measured and proportionate response to the Home Office ask of Councils, whilst ensuring that consideration of local needs are prioritised, when requests are made by Serco for properties within the primary area. However Serco would require delivery volume to enable the provision here to be financially viable (e.g. staffing resource and property rental). Therefore we would propose the development and mutual agreement of a phased implementation plan with Serco and the Home Office be developed. That this plan would include an initial property and a review of learning, and not exceed previous agreement by Cabinet.

- 1.5 The purpose of this report is to consider the delivery approach for our response to the Home Office over a specific timeframe that allows for reflective learning to occur following initial programme delivery.

2. Recommendation

- (i) To delegate to the Executive Director of People in conjunction with the Executive Director of Place the authority to work both sub-regionally and with the Home Office to further consider this Council's delivery of the Asylum Seeker Dispersal programme, accounting for the experience and learning from the delivery of Syrian Vulnerable People Resettlement and Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children programmes.
- (ii) To agree a commencement date with the Home Office, preferably January 2018, for the initial delivery of 15-20 properties over a three year period under the Asylum Seeker Dispersal programme, building in an initial review of learning once the programme commences (an agreed phased implementation plan).
- (iii) To report to the portfolio holders for Finance and Communities, Children and Families and Housing and Planning on programme delivery updates following programme commencement, along with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement updates.

3. Other Options Considered

- 3.1. Government may move to require Cheshire East to deliver the Asylum Seeker Dispersal programme by making a specific allocation to ensure fair and equitable distribution across local authorities at a national or regional level. We

could opt to await this occurring, prior to commencing programme involvement, however this would not give us control of numbers of properties and individuals.

- 3.2. Alternatively, we could make a revised pledge to the Home Office that specifies the range of properties and anticipated number of people per property as set out in our initial pledge to be delivered over a three year programme. Allowing for a review of learning following initial programme commencement.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1. People and Places will need to work together to deliver Asylum Seeker Dispersal with Serco as the Home Office delivery partner within the Borough. The operational lead would be held by Strategic Housing supported by People's Directorate for this programme. Peoples Diretorate would need to work closely with partners:South Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group and Cheshire Police.
- 4.2. Community Cohesion – Crewe is a place with great potential and an increasingly diverse community which attracts many people from different cultures and communities to live and work. The diverse cultures and communities in Crewe provide social, cultural and spiritual capital that people can tap into and improve their community wellbeing. The government has also recognised the benefits and importance of diversity in providing cultural and social resources to the learning and development of young people. This is being realised in some communities of Crewe, some of whom have never been exposed to other cultures / religions other than their own.

Cheshire East vision is to be a warm and friendly place – where people get on with each other across every community, which welcomes new people and makes them feel at home, and where everyone can respect the place and each other.

For many people, the term Community Cohesion can be unclear and it is often confused with race relations, or perhaps seen as relating only to minority groups or migrants. The government defines community cohesion as including; having a common vision and sense of belonging for all communities. Also, that strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds and circumstances in the workplace, schools and neighbourhoods.

With this in mind we have developed a Crewe Community Cohesion Action Plan, a partnership between communities and organisations with the aim of tackling barriers to community cohesion and accessing of services. Furthermore, reinforcing the positives and benefits of multi-cultural communities and encouraging positive messages around immigration and integration. This ongoing pilot work focuses on people being able to build strong and positive relationships with each other, and the intention is to evaluate the pilot work in 2017 and use the learning gained to develop and implement actions across other towns and areas in Cheshire East.

4.3 Controlled implementation of Asylum Seeker Dispersal delivery would enable us to review this experience and to learn from it. This would be more appropriate for our local circumstances, the Council and its partners. The controlled implementation of asylum seeker dispersal also means that we have mechanisms in place that help people feel welcome and have different communities involved in the work, thus taking ownership of their communities and how to build and improve community relations.

5. Background

5.1. Nationally the Refugee Council publishes asylum seeker statistics. The February 2017 quarterly asylum statistics summarise data for quarter four 2016 (full document link is at 9.3) provides contextual information when considering this Council's position:

5.1.1. The number of asylum applicants in the quarter were 7419, a decrease when compared with the same quarter in 2015 (10,196).

5.1.2. Decisions reached in the quarter were 6088. 32% were granted asylum. 4% were granted humanitarian protection, discretionary leave or other. 64% of asylum requests were refused.

5.1.3. Appeals held in the quarter were 4077. 35% were allowed, 57% were dismissed and 8% were withdrawn.

5.1.4. The top ten nationalities seeking asylum in quarter four were: Iran (832), Iraqi (659), Pakistan (606), Afghanistan (578), Sudan (512), Eritrea (442), Bangladesh (439), Albania (416), India (360), Nigeria (273).

5.2 The Asylum Seeker Dispersal programme is for those individuals who arrive in the UK where their status is to be determined following the submission of an application for asylum. A Home Office decision on refugee status is generally determined in 182 days. Approximately eighty percent of those seeking asylum are generally single males aged 18 to 40 years. More information on the ASD delivery approach is as follows:

5.2.1 The Home Office have a contract with a service delivery partner to accommodate and support asylum seekers; for the North West this is Serco. Serco sources and equips dispersal accommodation (including maintenance and payment of utility bills, entering into lease agreements for accommodation for up to five years). They then provide support to individuals to settle within the community whilst their application is being assessed.

5.2.2 Serco will identify housing officers, a community link person, and a partnership lead who will work within the borough consistently; this would allow good working relationships to develop. Serco require our assistance to identify suitable locations within the authority where they can source accommodation that is economically viable, with access to

good public transport routes, closeness to a post office and other community services.

5.2.3 Serco requests a local authority to agree to the provision of 20-30 properties over a 6 – 10 month period. This allows for both a phased commencement plan and assurance that the staffing provision is financially sustainable. This is not a level as a Council we could commit to, given the high levels of housing demand in the private rental sector.

5.2.4 There has recently been a lot of negative publicity around the increase in levels of Homes of Multiple Occupation within Crewe, therefore it is essential that the properties identified by Serco do not add to this situation and fuel further community tensions within these areas. Strategic Housing will work closely with Serco when they are considering the properties to potentially lease.

5.3 By contrast our nearest neighbour Cheshire West and Chester agreed up to 20 properties maximum to be procured, with a review after this point. Serco have secured lower unit numbers so far, as they are competing with others in the private rental sector, and not all landlords are keen to be involved in this programme. The requests for post code checks have resulted in a high property attrition rate.

6. Wards Affected and Local Ward Members

6.1. The area that is most economically viable for properties for multiple occupation is within the Crewe area. Therefore all wards could potentially be considered as a part of the post code check with the Council and the Police prior to Serco entering into any formal contracts with landlords.

7. Implications of Recommendation

7.1. Policy Implications

7.1.1. There are no immediate policy implications for consideration.

7.2. Legal Implications

7.2.1. **Asylum Seeker Dispersal:** The Council has neither the statutory duty nor the power to provide financial support or accommodation to asylum seekers. Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 provides that the Secretary of State may provide, or arrange for the provision of support for asylum seekers and their dependants who appear to be destitute.

This support is provided by the Home Office under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the only exception being cases in which asylum seekers have eligible social care needs. In those cases, the Council may have duties to provide support.

Asylum seekers have access to a range of public services including health and education. Section 100 of the 1999 Act makes provision for the Secretary of State to instruct the cooperation and support of local authorities in carrying out her functions under the Act.

For asylum seekers who arrive in our area we have responsibility for assessing and meeting their care and support needs whether they were a child / young person and/or adult under the Children Act 1989 and the Care Act 2014.

If an asylum seeker is granted Refugee Status; Humanitarian Protection; Discretionary Leave (unless a “No Recourse to Public Funds” condition is attached); or Indefinite Leave to Remain they are then able to access mainstream benefits on the same basis as a British national. Where an asylum seeker is granted one of these statuses the Council may have a statutory obligation to prevent homelessness.

Failed asylum seekers may remain in the UK with no recourse to public funds until they are served with removal directions by the Home Office. Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have ‘no recourse to public funds’ if they are subject to immigration control. Public funds include welfare benefits and public housing. Since local authority support provided under community care and children’s legislation is not a public fund, a destitute person with NRPF (No Recourse to Public funds Network) can turn to their local authority for assistance. In those cases, there may be duties on the Council to provide support in the form of subsistence and accommodation. However, if such persons fail to comply with removal directions they will be in breach of immigration law and the Council’s duties would end (subject to the outcome of any human rights assessment).

7.3. Financial Implications

- 7.3.1. Accommodation and support is funded by the Home Office directly therefore no funding would be received by the Council.
- 7.3.2. Whilst a decision on an asylum seekers right to remain as a refugee is made all costs are covered by the Home Office through their delivery partner Serco.
- 7.3.3. Post decision, there may be financial costs for interim housing rental & benefit payments (see section 8).
- 7.3.4. Should an individual be granted leave to remain, there may be ongoing rental accommodation and benefit costs until the person secures employment and becomes financially independent. Those asylum seekers who are granted refugee status may seek to apply for family

reunion. This may have further financial impact for the Council and its partners. Eligibility to claim housing benefit is determined by the status awarded when someone enters the country. If granted the right to reside, then entitlement to claim housing benefit would be at Local Housing Allowance levels for properties within the private rented sector.

7.4. Equality Implications

- 7.4.1. An Equality Impact Assessment is in place and is reviewed by the Multi Agency Group. This provides an active assessment to ensure we consider any unintended consequences for specific characteristic groups through the delivery of all humanitarian programmes.

7.5. Rural Community Implications

- 7.5.1. From our work to date, it is seen as important that accommodation has good access to infrastructure services, and transport routes. Therefore it is considered that accommodation in rural areas may not best suit this programme's delivery.

7.6. Human Resources Implications

- 7.6.1. There are no immediate policy implications for consideration. There would be implications for Primary Care as GP provision would be needed for these individuals. This needs to be considered in the context of existing pressures within the Primary Care system.

7.7. Public Health Implications

- 7.7.1. Health Screening is undertaken by the Home Office to determine if someone is fit to travel to their initial accommodation. Serco would then speak with the relevant GP practice to make arrangements for initial patient registration. The indication is that those seeking asylum are generally 18 to 40 years. The asylum seekers country of origin, and their experiences leading to them seeking asylum, could impact on their general health. However the initial health screening and registration with a local GP practice would mitigate any wider implications for health.

7.8. Implications for Children and Young People

- 7.8.1. There are no immediate implications for consideration.

7.9 Other Implications

- 7.9.1 Cheshire Police are not aware of any policing implications, or community tension that would cause any policing concerns to Asylum Seeker Dispersal delivery in the Borough.

- 7.9.2 Should the Council agree to Asylum Seeker Dispersal delivery DWP would support the suggested phased implementation approach. As there is a 182 day period before refugee status is granted and possible entitlement to public funds is determined then DWP feel that this would give adequate lead in time to plan and prepare its capacity to deal with any claims to benefit that would be required.
- 7.9.3 We have an established Multi Agency Group that reviews Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement and Asylum Seeker Dispersal could be monitored through this group. Partners would value this and this would support our continuous collaboration with them. Multi Agency Group includes: Clinical Commissioning Groups, Department of Work and Pensions, Police, Mental Health Services, Adults, Children & Families, Strategic Housing, Public Health, Communities and the Faith Sector.

8. Risk Management

8.1 Risk - Not agreeing a commencement date for the Asylum Seeker Dispersal programme could result in higher numbers of properties than agreed in the November 2015 cabinet report being imposed on the Council by the Home Office.

Risk Mitigation – To agree a commencement date and deliver on the agreement made in the Cabinet report of November 2015.

8.2 Risk - Post an asylum decision being made the Council may need to financially support accommodation (rental and benefits) for those who have the right to remain.

Risk Mitigation – One of the greatest needs within both social and private housing stock is for one bedroomed/shared accommodation for single applicants. Therefore there would be increased competition for a limited housing resource. If we are unable to secure accommodation for single people we have a duty to, then this could put a pressure on temporary accommodation costs. However we understand that in reality, individuals who secure refugee status tend to relocate to major cities such as Manchester, Liverpool and London seeking employment.

8.3 Risk – Community Cohesion - The increase in migrant and minority populations also brings with it some challenges to the local authority, service providers and some settled communities. Some of these challenges include disengagement and mistrust of services and communities by both settled and migrant communities. The effective integration of migrants into our local communities is dependent on migrants having contact with settled residents and access to services, including having an understanding of how our local services work.

Risk Mitigation - The Community Cohesion Action Plan has been developed as a result of identifying these challenges and its key objectives are:

- To improve our understanding of our communities and cultures, so we are better able to plan and support our communities effectively.
- Increase community engagement and capacity building, so, we can build trust and better working relationships with our communities and they can also identify their own social, cultural and spiritual capital and be self-sufficient.
- Improve equality of service delivery by the Council and its partners to reduce barriers to service delivery.
- Strengthen the role of voluntary, community and faith sector organisations.
- Increased capacity and support for minority communities.
- Tackle racism and reduce hate crime.
- Supporting those newly arrived / newly settling, to integrate into the local community.
- Helping to develop active citizenship opportunities in education and cultural identities and improve relations between young people from different ethnicities and cultures and help schools become the centre of developing social cohesion within their communities.
- Increasing access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and other language support within local communities, so we are able to reduce barriers to accessing services and support, thereby improving health and wellbeing outcomes for migrant communities.

Community Connectors – These trained volunteers support communities to become more connected to local people and organisations. The aim is to bring local people together to share information and ideas and make Crewe a welcoming place to live. Community Connectors will enable people to address social challenges by using resources from within their communities.

8.4 Risk – Securing property on a one-by-one basis for Serco would financially be unviable when considering the staffing resource needed to support Asylum Seeker Dispersal, and the potential for efficiencies when securing more than one property from a landlord (e.g volume rental efficiencies for a publicly funded programme).

Risk Mitigation – Working directly with Serco to agree an initial property and phase develop a plan for subsequent properties on an incremental basis would ensure that controls are in place to mitigate local risk for the Council and also for Serco as the Home Offices delivery partner in respect of delivery being economically viable.

9 Access to Information/Bibliography

9.1 Cabinet Report September 2016

<http://moderngov.cheshireeast.gov.uk/ecminutes/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=241&MId=6103>

9.2 Cabinet Report November 2015

[http://moderngov.cheshireeast.gov.uk/ecminutes/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=241&MId=5810:](http://moderngov.cheshireeast.gov.uk/ecminutes/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=241&MId=5810)

9.3 Refugee Council Quarterly Asylum Statistics February 2017

http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/9782/Asylum_Statistics_Feb_2017.pdf

10 Contact Information

Contact details for this report are as follows:

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