

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT TO CABINET EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

9th March 2017

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR – OPERATIONAL AND PARTNERSHIP SERVICES

SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RELOCATION SCHEME

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview to the Cabinet Equalities Committee on the progress of the UK Government Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) in the County Borough of Bridgend.

2. Connection to Corporate Improvement Objectives/Other Corporate Priorities

2.1 The report contributes to the following outcomes within the Corporate Plan 2016-20:

- Helping people to become more self-reliant

2.2 The report contributes to the following goals within the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015:

- A more equal Wales
- A Wales of cohesive communities
- A globally responsive Wales

3. Background

3.1 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that as at 1st February 2017 around 5 million people are registered as Syrian Refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, North Africa and Turkey, the majority of which are registered in Turkey. The UK Government has committed to resettling 20,000 of these Syrian refugees in the lifetime of this Parliament.

3.2 The number of refugees likely to be received in Wales is 1,000 to 1,500 over the five years of the Scheme. Four Welsh authorities (Caerphilly, Ceredigion, Neath Port Talbot and Torfaen) participated in Phase 1 of the Scheme and between them received and resettled just under 50 refugees before Christmas 2015. Phase 2 of the Scheme began in April 2016 and all Welsh authorities are participating.

3.3 Those Syrian refugees resettled in the UK are allowed to bring their immediate family with them. This is limited to one spouse / partner (who must be over 18) and their dependant children (under 18 and not living an independent life). Applicants can only bring over-age dependant relatives if they also meet the vulnerability criteria in their own right or the Home Office is satisfied that there is an existing dependency. Generally, families will comprise of between 4-6 people (inclusive of the head of family).

- 3.4 The Scheme prioritises help for people who fall under the falling categories which are not in order or priority:
- Legal and/or physical protection needs
 - Survivors of torture and/or violence
 - Medical needs or disabilities
 - Women and girls at risk
 - Family reunification
 - Children and adolescents at risk
 - Lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions
- 3.5 All applicants (including accompanying family members) are subject to the usual immigration checks and screening prior to a visa being granted. Those with a criminal past or links to war crimes or extremism are excluded from the scheme. Settlement may be refused if the person is convicted of a criminal offence during their leave and will be refused if they pose a danger to the public, or to national security. Leave to remain can also be curtailed if such evidence comes to light during the initial 5 year period. Settlement can be revoked if evidence emerges after it has been granted.
- 3.6 Individuals are granted humanitarian protection giving them leave to remain for 5 years with full access to employment and public funds and rights to family reunion comparable to refugees. At the end of the 5 years, if they have not been able to return to Syria, they may be eligible to apply for settlement in the UK.
- 3.7 Local authorities take the lead in working with other key local partners to ensure that arrivals are provided with suitable accommodation and support in order for the specific needs of these vulnerable individuals to be met. Consideration will also need to be given to bringing in specialist support providers subject to individuals' specific requirements. The minimum support requirements that must be met are specified by the Home Office.
- 3.8 A multi-disciplinary / multi-agency meeting chaired by the Local Authority Chief Executive was held on 7th December 2015 to assess appropriateness, accessibility and availability of key services in delivering the Scheme within the County Borough. The multi-agency meeting consisted of representatives from Bridgend County Borough Council (including Cabinet Member for Communities, Housing, Community Safety on behalf of the Community Safety Partnership, Benefits, Education, Social Services (adults and children), Safeguarding and Communication); the Department for Work and Pensions; Jobcentre Plus; the Bridgend Association of Voluntary Agencies (BAVO); South Wales Police; the Community Cohesion Coordinator; Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) V2C, Hafod, Linc Cymru and Wales and West; and Primary Health Care and GPs (Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board (ABMU)).
- 3.9 The meeting discussed key themes which were; Housing & Support; Education; Community Cohesion; Social Services / Safeguarding; DWP / Job Centre Plus; Health; Interpretation / Translation and; Communication. Each agency provided their position statement on their relevant theme(s) which was used to inform and agree the planning assumptions going forward. The key planning assumptions were;

- single person households cannot currently be accommodated due to the existing high demand for 1 bedroom accommodation;
- households to be normally accommodated in the private rented sector with one RSL co-ordinating the management;
- the location will be dependent on the availability of housing, the proximity to amenities, and school capacity both in primary and secondary schools;
- children will be integrated into mainstream education with appropriate support;
- 6 families will initially be accommodated in 2016/18. The number of families and individuals to be resettled in any subsequent years of the Scheme will be subject to a review in 2017-18 and dependent on the availability of housing, school capacity and access to GP surgeries.

3.10 An over-arching Steering Group was established to make decisions on resettlement (as and when required or when issues escalated by the Operational Group) and monitor the delivery of the Scheme.

3.11 An Operational Group was established for mobilisation and delivery. The Operational Group is led by the Senior Strategy Officer (Housing & Community Regeneration) and includes representatives from adult and children's safeguarding, education, housing solutions, benefits, community safety, the police and health.

3.12 On 5th July 2016 Cabinet approved a) participation in the Scheme b) the planning assumptions informed by the multi-agency meeting and c) the commissioning of a support provider in compliance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

4. Current situation / proposal.

4.1 The Welsh Refugee Council has been awarded the contract for the provision of support for refugee families. The minimum support requirements to be provided by the support provider, as specified by the Home Office, are as follows:

4.1.1 Greet arriving Beneficiaries from the relevant airport and escort them to their properties briefing them on how to use the amenities

4.1.2 Ensure that the Beneficiaries are registered with utility companies and ensure that arrangements for payments are put in place (no pre pay/card accounts)

4.1.3 Provide briefings on the accommodation and health and safety issues for all new arrivals including the provision of an emergency contact point

4.1.4 Provide Beneficiaries with a welcome pack of groceries on their arrival

4.1.5 Provide cash/ clothing allowances for each Beneficiary of £200 – this is to ensure they have sufficient funds to live on while their claim for benefits is being processed

4.1.6 Provide advice and assistance with registering for mainstream benefits and services and signposting to other advice and information giving agencies – this support includes:

- Assisting with registration for and collection of Biometric Residence Permits following arrival

- Registering with local schools, English language and literacy classes
- Attending local Job Centre Plus appointments for benefit assessments
- Registering with a local GP
- Advice around and referral to appropriate mental health services and to specialist services for victims of torture as appropriate
- Providing assistance with access to employment
- Put in place a support plan for each family or individual for the 12 month period of their support to facilitate their orientation into their new home/area.
- Put in place arrangements for the provision of English language classes which Beneficiaries should be able to access within one month of arrival. This should be provided following an assessment to determine the appropriate level of provision
- Ensure interpreting services are available

- 4.2 Cartrefi Hafod has been awarded the contract for the provision of housing management (the landlord function). Cartrefi Hafod has experience in managing tenancies for Syrian Refugees in other local authority areas and has resources available to assist with a variety of tenancy issues e.g. financial inclusions and/or community cohesion. The properties used for resettlement are leased from private sector landlords by Cartrefi Hafod and rents are charged at the rate of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA).
- 4.3 Families who are resettled usually do not speak any English. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) sessions are available at Bridgend College for the parents to attend. Bridgend College is also making available a family learning ESOL model utilising Home Office funding and held in the local schools the children attend. These family learning sessions enable focused ESOL each week for one hour for the parents followed by one hour with the parents and children.
- 4.4 An Arabic speaking Learning Support Officer has been made available to support the children in school however there is a shortage of suitably qualified Arabic speaking persons to increase this capacity. Therefore, the plan is to utilise English speaking Learning Support Officers as required who can access online translation. Experience demonstrates it is often beneficial to immerse the children in the classroom and the English language to enable them to learn quicker and build confidence and independence, rather than creating an over reliance on the support.
- 4.5 The first Syrian family arrived in the County Borough on 2nd November 2016. The family is settling well and is happy in their new home. The family is Sunni Muslim and is now attending the Mosque in Aberkenfig every week. The children are settling into the local schools and have been welcomed by their classmates who are keen to learn more about the family's language and culture. The family is utilising local buses to travel around the County Borough and also to travel to Cardiff to access halal shops.
- 4.6 The South Wales Police Hate Crime Officer and relevant Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), together with the support provider, visit the families once they have settled into their new homes to introduce themselves and help settle the families into their communities. The PCSOs have spoken to the local school children who spoke highly of their new classmates and the opportunity to learn and speak Arabic with them.

4.7 A second family is arriving on 28th February 2017 and a property has been secured to resettle a third family at the end of March / beginning of April 2017. It is anticipated that a total of 6 families will be resettled by June 2017. A report will be taken to Cabinet following this to agree the way forward in regards to further families being resettled.

5. Effect upon Policy Framework & Procedure Rules

5.1 The report has no direct effect upon the policy framework or procedure rules.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

6.1 Screening for Equality Impact has been undertaken and the Scheme will positively help to deliver the Council's equality duties as it helps to secure accommodation for a group of people with protected characteristics.

7. Financial Implications.

7.1 Year one funding is available from the Overseas Development Aid budget (Home Office) to fund costs of Syrian refugees on a per tariff basis. The year one tariff is for direct local authority costs and there is also additional support for educational and medical needs. Direct local authority costs cover management of the scheme, housing management costs (rents will be subject to Housing Benefit Claims), support costs and cultural integration including English language provision.

7.2 Year two to five funding will be allocated on a tapered tariff basis over four years. This funding includes support for integration such as additional English language training as well as social care. The Home Office funding is flexible to enable the Authority to continue to provide funding for schools and health services in years two to five. However, there is an expectation that the reliance on paid support will be reduced in line with the tapering of the tariff and that existing funding routes will be used to provide funding for schools and health services in years two to five. This approach will be an integral part of any commissioned support services.

7.3 In addition, individuals will be able to access welfare benefit payments (subject to the statutory limit) and other public services.

8. Recommendation.

8.1 That Cabinet Equalities Committee receives and considers this report.

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Date: 17th February 2017

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Background documents

None