

**Summary Sheet**

**Council Report**

Cabinet Meeting

**Title**

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Refugee (VPR) Resettlement Scheme

**Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?**

Yes

**Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report**

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**Report Author(s)**

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**Ward(s) Affected**

All

**Summary**

The report provides an overview of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme (VPR) and the implications for the Council and partners should the Council agree to voluntarily participate in the programme along with 21 other local authorities across Yorkshire and Humber (Y&H).

The report provides details of how the scheme is being managed on a regional and national basis, the practical implications of how the scheme will operate, how it will be funded and the outstanding issues where further clarity is awaited from the Home Office.

The report also addresses the governance and strategic co-ordination of migration and asylum issues within the authority.

**Recommendations**

Cabinet is asked to:

1. Agree to the Council participating in phase two of the Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme.
2. Recommend to Cabinet that up to 10 Syrian refugees (in family units) are accepted per annum for an initial three year period subject to annual review.
3. Delegate authority to the office of Assistant Chief Executive to take all necessary actions to implement recommendation 1 above. This is to include strategic and corporate oversight of the wider policy agenda for migration, refugees and asylum.

**List of Appendices Included**

None

**Background Papers**

Home Office (2015) Guidance for Local Authorities on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement (VPR) Programme.

**Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel**

No

**Council Approval Required**

No

**Exempt from the Press and Public**

No

## **Title Syrian Vulnerable Persons Refugee (VPR) Resettlement Scheme**

### **1. Recommendations**

- 1.1 Agree to the Council participating in phase two of the Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.
- 1.2 Recommend to Cabinet that up to 10 Syrian refugees (in family units) are accepted per annum for an initial three year period subject to annual review.
- 1.3 Delegate authority to the office of Assistant Chief Executive to take all necessary actions to implement recommendation 1 above. This is to include strategic and corporate oversight of the wider policy agenda for migration, refugees and asylum.

### **2. Background**

- 2.1 In September 2015 the Government announced an expansion to the existing Syrian VPR Scheme to resettle 20,000 Syrians over a five year period. No formal quota has been set for each local authority's participation in the scheme, which is voluntary. Under the first phase of the resettlement programme 1000 Syrians came to the UK before Christmas 2015. This included 100 refugees settling in six local authorities across Yorkshire and the Humber (Y&H).
- 2.2 The Home Office has indicated that it will seek to ensure an equitable distribution of refugees across the country so that no individual local authority bears a disproportionate share.
- 2.3 The Home Office has also expressed a preference for a regionalised approach to the settlement of refugees to ensure strategic co-ordination, planning and oversight. In Y&H the regional programme is being co-ordinated across 22 local authority areas by Migration Yorkshire (part of Leeds City Council), who act as one of ten national Strategic Regional Migration Partnerships established to liaise with the Home Office, Department of Health and the Local Government Association over migration, asylum and refugee issues on behalf of local authorities.
- 2.4 Under the scheme the refugees will be given Humanitarian Protection. This status enables them to be given leave to remain in the UK for five years and claim benefits from the date of arrival. This status also facilitates their future return to Syria should they wish.
- 2.5 Refugees will be matched with local authorities at the camps and will travel only when housing and other support arrangements have been agreed and put in place by host local authorities. Refugees will be screened for health issues and security cleared in United Nations High Commission refugee camps before being accepted by the UK government. All the necessary health and social care needs assessments will take place at the camps, with information shared with relevant UK agencies to ensure adequate match to local provision. This will take an

estimated time of 42 days including a typical 3 weeks for an exit visa to be granted by the country hosting the refugee camp. The refugees will be allocated a National Insurance numbers and biometric residence permits before they travel.

- 2.6 All participating Councils will have the right not to accept a refugee if they feel they cannot meet the needs of the refugee, although it is hoped that all eligible refugees will have their needs met. Reasons for limiting applications and or rejection would be around capacity of services or availability of suitable accommodation.
- 2.7 The first tranche of refugees from the extended programme have already arrived in the UK for resettlement by Scottish local authorities. It is expected that an indicative timescale for the first resettlement to Rotherham would be October 2016.
- 2.8 Once the refugees arrive the support package starts. They will be arriving at a regional airport and then be taken to their new homes for initial orientation in their environment. It is expected that a wrap-around tenancy support package will be resourced through the funding made available by the Home Office. The specific requirements are set out in Home Office guidance on pre and post support. This states that utility accounts should be set up and refugees helped to complete benefit applications, register with schools and tax authorities, doctors, dentists and so on. They should be given orientation with their neighbourhood including the location of essential services.
- 2.9 Following arrival an assessment of their employment and language skills will take place. Where refugees have professional or highly skilled backgrounds the aim is to offer conversion courses to enable them to practice or trade in the UK. Otherwise skills and language training will be arranged to enable entry to the labour market within the first year, except where medical conditions prevent this.
- 2.10 Once the initial resettlement has taken place and the refugees have achieved independence they have the right to move where they choose within the UK.
- 2.11 After an initial intake of up to 10 refugees in the financial year 2016/17 officers will review the scheme and report to Cabinet before accepting further arrivals. This will enable Cabinet and its partners to establish confidence and expertise in the pre and post support services, monitor the adequacy of funding, impact on services and evaluate the success of the resettlement programme. Our similar sized neighbouring Councils are accepting comparable initial numbers, so resettling 10 refugees in family units is a viable proposition.
- 2.12 A multi-agency officers group, chaired by the Assistant Director, Housing, and Neighbourhood Services, has been established with representatives from housing, public health, school admissions, emergency planning, Early Years and adult safeguarding, together with external representatives from the health sector and South Yorkshire Police (SYP). Should Cabinet

agree to participate in the scheme then this group, would act as an Evaluation Panel to review profiles of families offered to Rotherham to ensure a match between known needs and capacity of local support systems and prepare services in advance of arrival.

### **3. Key Issues**

#### **3.1 Community Engagement.**

Locally the churches and the wider voluntary and community sector are coordinating a local pastoral offer to include a befriending scheme, practical support such as English language conversation clubs and the production of guides to services as part of a “Welcome Pack”. Once a formal decision has been made to resettle refugees further and more detailed discussions can take place with the VCS and wider faith groups on the support they are making available.

#### **3.2 Community Integration**

Given the status of Syrian Refugees in being able to access all services and support as available to other residents, the key task incumbent on local authorities will be to ensure that those subject to this programme are supported to understand what is expected of them, what is available to them and how to secure employment and contact services for assistance when required.

Whilst there is significant goodwill and a wish to help resettled Syrian refugees in the community there is also a potential risk, albeit very small, of victimisation or harassment for any new arrivals. There will be ongoing liaison with SYP on local community policing issues. As part of the integration and orientation process details of how to contact the police regarding any criminal or ASB will be made available to the refugees. All applicants to the Syrian VPR scheme will be subject to enhanced screening designed to ensure that there is no security risk to the UK from those resettled. This is also subject to nationally led on going monitoring processes.

#### **3.3 Strategic oversight and coordination**

Interim arrangements have been put in place to manage the Council’s approach to migration, asylum and refugees with co-ordination taking place currently through the Assistant Director, Housing, and Neighbourhood Services. It is proposed that strategic oversight and co-ordination is led by the office of the Assistant Chief Executive given the strong policy links to equality, diversity and cohesion which currently fall within the same portfolio. The office would lead on negotiations with Migration Yorkshire, represent the Council at regional and sub-regional planning meetings, co-ordinate the multi-agency officer group, represent the Council at the local Rotherham Multi-Agency Asylum Group, and act as single point of contact to G4S who hold the Home Office contract to house asylum seekers in Rotherham.

#### **4. Options considered and recommended proposal**

- 4.1 Non-participation has been considered, but is not the preferred option as it would not be a humanitarian response and it would mean that Rotherham would be the only major town in Y&H not to participate. Currently local authorities with no history of managing migration, refugee or asylum issues such as those in North Yorkshire have volunteered, as have all three other South Yorkshire councils. Experience from the six local authorities who took part in the phase one programme has indicated that the scheme is viable, and has largely been a positive experience. Non-participation also carries the risk that a quota could be imposed at a later date.
- 4.2 Participation in the scheme is therefore recommended as the preferred option for managing the process and ensuring that there is a positive outcome for the Syrian refugees.
- 4.3 Consideration has been given to accepting more than 10 individual refugees in family units; however, this option is not preferred as it increases the risk that the needs of the families may not be adequately met.

#### **5. Consultation**

- 5.1 This paper is informed by consultation with Migration Yorkshire, discussions and information sharing with neighbouring Councils, and incorporates comments from Legal, Procurement, Housing, Finance and Public Health.
- 5.2 Officers have also met with representatives of the local voluntary, faith and community sectors to gain an understanding of the pastoral and practical support they are able to offer to Syrian refugees.

#### **6. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

- 6.1 Subject to approval by Cabinet and successful housing and support provision being sourced an indicative date to receive the first Syrian refugee families could be October 2016.

#### **7. Financial and Procurement Implications**

- 7.1 The Home Office will allocate a grant towards the resettlement costs of each refugee in a household. The scheme aims to fully fund all local authority, education, welfare, social care and health care costs. It is permissible to pool costs within a category across families so in due course any surplus could be used to support families with more complex needs.
- 7.2 The amount of grant is prescribed with local authorities receiving a 5 year settlement. In year one, Councils will receive £8,520 per individual and an additional sum for education based on age cohorts. This is £4,500 for

ages 5-18 and £2,250 for ages 3-4. There is no contribution towards Special Education Needs costs. Funding for employability or employment support cannot be funded in year one.

- 7.3 An announcement is awaited on health costs as these are subject to separate agreements with the Department of Health (DoH).
- 7.4 Over years two to five local authorities will receive £12,000 per individual which the Government has modelled and built into the Comprehensive Spending Review 2015. The £12,000 is split as follows over years two to five: £5,000 (year two); £3,700 (year three); £2,300 (year four); and £1,000 (year five). Additional funds will be made available, on a case by case basis, for extreme cases/high costs social care packages, although no further details have been provided on criteria or thresholds.
- 7.5 The bulk of the funding will be used to pay for resettlement support such as English language classes, job skills updating, interpretation and translation, housing and integration support.
- 7.6 It should be noted that under the Syrian VPR Scheme there is a welfare benefit entitlement from the date of entry to the UK so the refugees will have access to job-seekers allowance, employment support allowance, Housing Benefit, Council Tax reduction.
- 7.7 Migration Yorkshire are leading on regional discussions with all 22 Local Authorities to explore the possibility of commissioning wrap-around support services on a regional or sub-regional basis because of the limited number of specialist providers available. Once further details are known, consideration will be given to the Council becoming party to a regional or sub-regional offer with negotiations taking place through the Corporate Procurement Team to ensure compliance with Council financial regulations. This will also include agreement on the Council's contribution to the wrap-around support service which will be funded through the Government grant the Council will receive.

## **8. Legal Implications**

- 8.1 There is no statutory duty for the Council to participate in the resettlement programme although mandatory quotas could be introduced, for example through the Immigration Bill 2015/2016, in the event there are not enough places available nationally.
- 8.2 See also paragraph 11.2 below.

## **9. Human Resources Implications**

- 9.1 There are no direct human resources implications.

## **10. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults**

- 10.1 There are direct implications for children, young people, and vulnerable adults as the Syrian VPR scheme is specifically aimed at this cohort. The scheme is based on need and prioritises those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin, for example, women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care, and survivors of torture and violence.
- 10.2 As part of the resettlement process a comprehensive referral form is completed giving details on family make up, ethnicity, religion, language and dialect spoken, age and specific needs. Additionally, full details of any medical needs and a full medical health screening assessment report will be made available. The medical assessment will include general health, disabilities, vaccination history, long standing conditions, and equipment and medication/treatment requirements.
- 10.4 In all cases full cognisance will need to be given to safeguarding issues given the vulnerability of the refugees and the trauma they may have experienced.
- 10.3 Local authorities will be given advance sight of these referral forms (minimum 8 weeks) to enable the Council and its partners to assess need and form a view whether local services such as housing, mental health, and school places etc are available to meet the need and accept the referral.

## **11 Equalities and Human Rights Implications**

- 11.1 Persons settled under the Syrian VPR Scheme would be housed in private rented properties so there would not be an impact on housing waiting lists. They would also be subject to the same consideration as local residents for places at schools, GP and dentist lists and waiting lists for secondary care.

## **12. Implications for Partners and Other Directorates**

- 12.1 There are direct implications for health partners and the DoH are undertaking direct consultations with Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG) and Public Health England. These discussions are ongoing and Migration Yorkshire are seeking urgent confirmation and clarity of the “health offer” including specific provision of mental health services, so that locally informed choices can be made about accepting refugees with existing health conditions.
- 12.2 There are direct implications for all Council directorates and the local voluntary, community and faith sectors as a joined up and coordinated approach is required to manage resettlement.
- 12.3 Advice and guidance is also being taken regularly from Migration Yorkshire so that the lessons learnt from the phase one programme can be incorporated into the phase two process.



### **13. Risks and Mitigation**

- 13.1 There are a number of key questions and risks that are being clarified by Migration Yorkshire with the Home Office on behalf of the Y&H Local Authorities. These include the extent of flexibility within the Grant Agreement to vire spend across all 5 years of the scheme, evidence of spend, the criteria for top up payments in exceptional hardship cases and the funding position if a refugee moves out of the initial host local authority area. Clarification is also required on whether funds can be pooled regionally or sub-regionally and used collectively. These risks should be mitigated through the issuing of further guidance and response to these direct questions by the Home Office.
- 13.2 As indicated in paragraph 12.1 above, further clarification is awaited from the DoH regarding health provision, and this risk is being mitigated through the intervention of Migration Yorkshire.
- 13.3 There is also a risk to the health and wellbeing of the refugees if they are not adequately supported. This has been mitigated through the establishment of the multi-agency group referred to in paragraph 3.3 through the capturing of needs on the Home Office referral forms, and forward planning and learning from other areas with earlier cohorts.
- 13.4 The financial risks to the Council are limited by the initial scoping exercise which has modelled a support programme which fits the funding available, the small number of refugees being taken in each cohort, the monitoring of costs, and the ability to apply for additional funding to the Home Office if required. However, at this point in time it is unclear what financial support may be available to Local Authorities or the NHS if refugees develop unforeseen medical needs or require specialist accommodation and care.

### **14. Accountable Officer(s)**

Dave Richmond, Assistant Director of Housing

Approvals Obtained from:

Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services: Stuart Booth

Strategic Director of Regeneration and Environment: Damien Wilson

Head of Procurement (if appropriate): Helen Chambers

*Zafar Saleem, Neighbourhood Partnerships & Engagement Manager*

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