

HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP
18 JUNE 2019

SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME (SVPRS)

Cabinet Member(s): Councillor Simon Clist
Responsible Officer: Mrs Claire Fry, Group Manager for Housing Services

Reason for Report: Update on the Provision of Housing for Syrian Refugees in Mid Devon

RECOMMENDATION: Members of the Policy Development Group note the report

Financial Implications: These are discussed in the body of the report. The homelessness functions of the Council are funded through the General Fund.

Legal Implications: There is no statutory duty for the Council to participate in the resettlement programme.

Risk Assessment: The use of private sector accommodation to house Syrian refugees could result in the Council having to continue paying rent in respect of a home if the tenancy fails or is ended, for whatever reason, as the agreement specifies that the let is for a minimum of 5 years.

Equality Impact Assessment: Single people are not housed due to the fact that it was agreed that the Council would work with families. A household may include individuals of different ages and different generations. Potentially, those who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) may be disadvantaged due to the decision to only house families although it is recognised that families may reflect all different sections of society. Those housed through the scheme may experience isolation as their religious and cultural needs cannot necessarily be met in rural areas. The support provided by Council Officers and the Refugee Support worker will mitigate the risk of this.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: The Council is working in partnership with Devon County Council and other agencies in connection with this scheme. This work involves support to ensure safeguarding and protection for vulnerable people.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Council is working with Devon County Council (DCC) to support the Government's pledge to bring vulnerable refugees who have fled Syria due to conflict, sought refuge in countries around Syria and who are registered with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).
- 1.2 The United Nations High Commission for Refugees identifies individuals and families who are particularly vulnerable for medical and other reasons.
- 1.3 The Government's resettlement programme provides funding to Councils for housing and other resettlement costs including English classes, interpreting and help into work. In Devon, Devon County Council administers the funding

from the Home Office. The Council recharges Devon County Council for the work required to deliver housing management services to those housed by the scheme. The Resettlement Co-ordinator working with Refugee Support Devon is also funded through the scheme.

- 1.4 In Devon, it was agreed that the District Councils should work in partnership with the County Council, which would lead on work relating to the programme.
- 1.5 The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme was discussed at a meeting of the Council on 31 August 2016 in response to a Motion seeking support for it.
- 1.6 This matter was referred to the Homes Policy Development Group for discussion on 13 September 2016. The Policy Development Group recommended to full Council that the Motion be supported and that the Council worked with the private sector to achieve placements. It also recommended that the details regarding the practicalities be brought back to the Policy Development Group for detailed consideration.
- 1.7 The Council approved this recommendation on 26 October 2016.
- 1.8 On 15 November 2016, the Homes Policy Development Group agreed to set up a Working Group to consider all relevant issues and to agree a recommendation for the following meeting which would then be forwarded to the Cabinet for approval.
- 1.9 At the meeting of the Homes Policy Development Group on 17 January 2017, the Homes Policy Development Group recommended to Cabinet :
 - 1.9.1 Up to 5 refugee families are housed / supported, as and when properties come forward, for the duration of the scheme providing the costs are met by the Devon County Council led resettlement programme and that this be reviewed four months after the arrival of the first family (Note: the programme was of 4 years duration at that point).
 - 1.9.2 These refugee families be accommodated in Private Sector accommodation. However, further consideration must be given to the need for support (help) which would involve a minimum of weekly visits by one or more officers and also an exit strategy involving the landlord, the Council and DCC.
- 1.10 The PDG in their deliberations were made aware of a number of factors, including:
 - Homeless applicants having to wait longer for an Officer to deal with their enquiry
 - Potential delays with regard to the processing of homeless applications
 - Leaving families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for longer periods
 - Increased temporary accommodation expenditure

- Delays in allocating properties in the Council’s own stock and the potential increase in void turnaround times
- Delays in relation to the processing of housing waiting list applications
- The report stated that: *“The additional workload may lead to a requirement for additional staffing to maintain existing service levels”*.

1.11 These recommendations were approved by the Cabinet on 2 February 2017.

2.0 The Existing Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme

2.1 The aims of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme were supported by a number of community groups. Several properties were offered by private individuals and in consultation with the Home Office and Devon County Council, two were chosen.

2.2 Two refugee families have been accommodated and supported by our Housing Options team.

2.3 Our Housing Options Officers visited each property twice weekly in the early months after each family had moved in, in order to provide support to them and to ensure that they understood the responsibilities of their landlords and also their own obligations. Translators had to be present and Officers had to assist those housed to maximise their income by ensuring that they were in receipt of all to which they were entitled.

3.0 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

3.1 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was implemented with effect from April 2018 and changed the way in which issues relating to homelessness are responded to. In the past, most of the homelessness and relief work undertaken by local authorities was not undertaken as a statutory obligation.

3.2 There had been cross-party support to this legislation, which started life as a Private Members Bill. This demonstrates that there was a recognition that more needed to be done to prevent homelessness at an earlier stage than previously.

3.3 The new legislation extended the period when a household is considered to be “threatened with homelessness” from 28 to 56 days meaning that our Housing Options team now has to begin working with clients at a much earlier stage than previously.

3.4 The Housing Options Officers now have to work with all eligible applicants, regardless of any priority need, in accordance with a new duty.

3.5 The Council has a new duty to relieve homelessness for all eligible homeless applicants, regardless of need.

- 3.6 Anyone who is found to be homeless or threatened with homelessness will be entitled to an assessment; and will be expected to work with the Council to develop a personalised housing plan. This must set out what action both the client and their Housing Options Officer must take to enable the client to remain in their existing home, or to find suitable accommodation. For example, clients may be referred to mediation or the Officer may liaise with their landlord on their behalf. If someone is already homeless, Officers will have to find accommodation for that individual and to engage with other support agencies, as appropriate. The Officer for that case must monitor progress relating to the plan because the duties can be ended if a client deliberately and unreasonably refuses to cooperate with actions agreed in their personalised housing plans.
- 3.7 Under the prevention duty, the Council must take “reasonable steps” to help people avoid becoming homeless and the personalised housing plan must be taken into account. Therefore, the Housing Options Officers must work with clients to help them to remain in their existing accommodation, or to help them to find somewhere to live.
- 3.8 Under the relief duty, the Council must take reasonable steps to help the applicant into accommodation, with reference to their personalised housing plan. There is a whole range of interventions which must be considered and this may include the provision of assistance with a deposit, or debt advice, but if accommodation is provided, the Housing Options Officers must be satisfied that the accommodation will be available for at least six months.
- 3.9 Workloads have increased as a result of the new duties. During 2017/18, the Housing Options Team responded to 455 homeless approaches. During 2018/19, there were 599 approaches and the work associated with each case significantly increased in line with the new duties. During April and May 2019, there have been 124 homeless approaches.
- 3.10 Due to the additional work required to meet the additional statutory obligations, there is no spare capacity to take on any additional work at the present time.
- 3.11 The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) provided some additional new burdens funding associated with the additional duties contained within the Act over the course of the Spending Review. This was in addition to the flexible homelessness support grant paid to the Council.

4.0 Conflicting Priorities

- 4.1 Since the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the Housing Options Team has been fully committed to managing activity relating to their statutory obligations. This has meant that some areas of work, which are non-statutory, have not been resourced. For example, work liaising with local landlords to increase the supply of suitable accommodation in the private sector has stopped.

- 4.2 At the meeting of the Homes Policy Development Group on 17 January 2017 it was made clear to Members that “*The Council could not afford to employ a dedicated officer for this resettlement programme, it would need to be fitted into the day to day business of the Housing Options team, this might have a detrimental effect upon homelessness work.*” The risk identified is what has now come to fruition; the funding provided by the Home Office is a basic per-hour payment that fails to meet the true cost to Mid Devon District Council for that employee’s time; it is insufficient to fund additional staff.
- 4.3 The work involved in the provision of housing management services to the two existing landlords who are involved in the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme has been extensive, with Housing Options Officers being required to make twice weekly visits to both properties to ensure that the families involved understood their rights and responsibilities, in accordance with their licence agreements, and were settling in well.
- 4.4 There was a recent offer to purchase a property to house a third family under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, which was given due consideration by officers. There were detailed discussions with the prospective purchaser about the type of property required and the best location in which to purchase to support the needs of refugees who might be housed. However, after taking all relevant facts into account, it was agreed that the work which would be involved in supporting a refugee family new to the area would impact resources to such an extent that the proposal was not viable at the present time.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 The decision not to commit to provide resource to support a third refugee family was taken with due regard to all relevant factors. Officers of the Council had to balance conflicting priorities in order to ensure it met its statutory obligations. At this time the Housing Options Team is fully committed delivering the statutory duties relating to the prevention and management of homelessness.

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Circulation of the Report: Leadership Team

List of Background Papers: