

**HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP
13 AUGUST 2019**

SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

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

Reason for Report: To provide an update on work relating to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and in particular to research:

- What could be achieved by working with a third party or parties such as CHAT and;
- How other local authorities are managing to resettle families given that they are also required to comply with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and are likely to be experiencing the same time constraints

RECOMMENDATION: That Members note the report and that the content informs further discussion about the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and any decision-making regarding further action

Financial Implications: 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. The Council's duties associated with homelessness 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 is designed to 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.

Impact on Climate Change: Whilst Officers will endeavour to plan their work in advance in order to minimise environmental impact, there will be times when they

have to visit refugee families in order to respond to a pressing matter. In such cases, this work must take priority and will involve an unplanned journey to and from a property which cannot necessarily be organised to coincide with other visits elsewhere within the District.

1.0 Introduction/Background

- 1.1 At the last meeting of the Policy Development Group (PDG) on 18 June 2019, Members considered a report on issues relating to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and asked Officers to liaise with other local authorities and partners. The aim of this was to research other options with regard to the management of properties used to accommodate refugee families, to inform further discussions about the SVPRS and how any accommodation secured for use through the scheme could be managed.
- 1.2 Following this request, Officers have liaised with the Communities team at Devon County Council (DCC), which co-ordinates the SVPRS work across the County, and five other second tier authorities working in Devon. They have also liaised with one Town Council located within the District and with two unitary authorities, one District Council, and one County Council, all located in the South West. In addition, DCC has provided information about a scheme operating in a neighbouring County. Officers have also spoken with the Manager of Churches Housing Action Team (CHAT).

2.0 Securing Properties

- 2.1 In Mid Devon, the Council is currently using two properties for the SVPRS and the model in operation involved the Council signing lease agreements with the landlords. These existing leases were initially agreed for a two year period, with the ability to extend for a further two years.
- 2.2 Whilst this model offers some reassurance to landlords who may wish to support the scheme, due to the fact that it offers a guaranteed income stream over a longer period, it means that, in practice, the Council may have to cover the costs associated with a protracted void period or periods. This may be the case should the chosen refugee family decide at a late stage that they do not wish to be relocated; or if, once settled, they opt to move on to alternative accommodation. The Council could also be held liable for any tenant damage. Although the scheme is funded by the Home Office and there may be a potential to reclaim these costs, other local authorities operating outside of Devon do not contract with landlords directly, in order to minimise risk.
- 2.3 The decision to sign leases with landlords was informed by a desire to offer long-term security to landlords who agreed to participate in the scheme, in order to make it a more attractive proposition. In other areas, it has been hard for local authorities to find landlords willing to make properties available for refugees due to the buoyancy of the private rented sector, resulting in increased rental income being available if the property were to be rented on the open market.
- 2.4 In other areas, refugee families are expected to sign tenancy agreements with the landlords of available properties. This being on the understanding that

they are provided with a translation of relevant documents, and that an interpreter is present whilst the formalities associated with the letting are completed. In such models, the Councils generally contract with third party agencies in respect of the day to day housing management of each property.

- 2.5 A unitary authority has advised that it pays landlords two months' rent and the Council Tax due for the same period, in advance, and also the deposit, in order to secure a property for the scheme. In addition, it pays any rent due during any void periods between one tenancy and another. The deposit goes back to the family at the end of the tenancy to help them to secure future accommodation. That Council has noted that families often move on after a period of adjustment; they source their own alternative accommodation in the private rented sector if they feel that it might better meet their needs in relation to their employment, cultural requirements and friendship groups.
- 2.6 Elsewhere, another unitary authority commits to meeting any void costs for up to three months and to paying the deposit. It allows the tenants to retain the deposit at the end of the tenancy. It does not accept any liability with regard to the property, with keeping it secure during void periods or with making good tenant damage. It does not meet any costs associated with Council Tax.
- 2.7 Another neighbouring local authority uses direct lets between landlord and refugees; and supports this arrangement by paying rent in advance to secure the property, and to cover any void periods. It will pay for a longer period if the arrival of the refugee family is delayed, for whatever reason. It pays the rent and the deposit direct to the landlord.
- 2.8 DCC co-ordinates regular meetings of the second tier authorities which provide accommodation for those refugees resettled through the SVPRS.

3.0 **Tenancy Management**

- 3.1 There is no imposed model regarding how properties should be managed in Devon.
- 3.2 DCC has confirmed that the operation of the SVPRS in the County may be tailored to meet individual circumstances in each second tier authority area. There is an acceptance that there will be different policies and procedures used by each local authority. Research has shown that some other Housing Options teams within Devon are responsible for managing the homes used by refugee families; however, in others areas, the tenancy and property management is contracted out.
- 3.3 One neighbouring authority has contracted the management of the homes to the housing association which owns and manages its own housing stock which was transferred following a voluntary large-scale transfer; and two others use an agency which is run by one of them. This provides a full property management service to private landlords, for a fee. In such cases, any management fees can be claimed back through the scheme.
- 3.4 The existing landlords currently working with the Council in Mid Devon to deliver homes through the SVPRS are very supportive of the refugee families

living in their homes. If, for whatever reason, a landlord, due to their own personal circumstances, was unable to provide the same level of assistance, it is likely that this could have an impact upon the work needed to manage the property and the tenancy and this would impact management costs.

4.0 Specialist Support for Families

4.1 DCC has contracted with a specialist agency to provide support to the families housed in Devon through the SVPRS. This agency provides help with a whole range of issues and also co-ordinates voluntary work with each family. The families housed through the scheme are exceptionally vulnerable and it is important that they are not made to feel overwhelmed by a large number of people trying to engage with them. Support must be managed and the third party agency is well-placed to organise this. It should be noted that any volunteers planning to befriend any of the refugees will need to have their criminal records verified by way of a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and the agency applies for these.

4.2 Churches Housing Action Team (CHAT) has provided the following statement: "CHAT always seeks to work in partnership with other organisations to make sure that people in need of support in the Mid Devon community are assisted with their housing and tenancy issues. We can offer short or long term advice and support by working with the clients and associated organisations directly based on their individual needs."

5.0 Recommendation

5.1 Members are asked to note the report and agree any further actions, as appropriate, under the circumstances.

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Circulation of the Report: Councillor Simon Clist, Cabinet Member for Housing, Leadership Team

List of Background Papers: