

**HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP
15 SEPTEMBER 2020**

SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS REFUGEE SCHEME & THE NEW UNITED KINGDOM RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

15 SEPTEMBER 2020

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

Reason for Report: To provide a written briefing on latest developments relating to the Syrian Refugee Settlement Scheme and the new United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme and to seek decisions relating to the Council's continuing involvement; and approval for a proposal made by a community sponsorship group to support the resettlement of an additional household in Mid Devon, and to agree consent to enable this to move forward

RECOMMENDATION: That Members note the report and agree the following recommendation to the Cabinet:

- 1. To approve the proposal made by a community sponsorship group with regard to the resettlement of an additional refugee household in the District under the existing Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme and to agree consent**
- 2. Whether or not the Council should take part in the new United Kingdom Refugee Scheme (UKRS)**
- 3. If this is agreed, the number of households which should be settled in the District under UKRS**

Financial Implications: Costs associated with the resettlement of refugees through the current or proposed schemes can be reclaimed from the Refugee Resettlement team operated by Devon County Council (DCC) on behalf of Districts in the county. The team manages budgets funded by Central Government.

Currently, Mid Devon District Council (the Council) has contracted with a third party to manage one privately rented property in Crediton for use through the scheme and all the associated costs are reclaimed from DCC, meaning that there is no financial impact upon Council budgets. If the Policy Development Group (PDG) agrees to resettle more households in Mid Devon, this is the model which would be used going forward.

The other two properties currently in use for this purpose are managed by the Housing Service and relevant costs are reclaimed, as necessary. However, the Council has entered directly into leases with two landlords in the private sector and there is a potential that the Council could become liable for any costs arising from void periods.

Legal Implications: 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. All families will have legal status. The existing resettlement scheme ends shortly. It is currently paused as a result of the pandemic but once the quota has been reached, a new scheme will be started, which has a wider scope, being a worldwide resettlement scheme.

Risk Assessment: None arising from this report.

Equality Impact Assessment: Persons settled through the existing scheme have been accommodated in private rented properties. They are treated in the same way as any other local residents with regard to places at schools, GP and dentist lists and waiting lists for secondary care. In the more rural areas of the District, rural isolation may be an issue due to the distance from Exeter where there are more services able to provide for the needs of refugees.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: This initiative supports work relating to local communities working in partnership with Town and Parish Councils and the voluntary sector.

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 Background

- 1.1. On 2 February 2017, the Cabinet approved the recommendation that the Council support / house up to 5 refugee families in the District, with these families being supported / housed as and when properties came forward, for the duration of the scheme. This was on the basis that the costs were met by the Devon County Council (DCC) led resettlement programme and that this be reviewed four months after the arrival of the first family.
- 1.2. Income for the county-wide scheme from the Home Office (HO) is received in various instalments, including annually. DCC therefore carries forward any apparent surplus or deficit shown at the end of each financial year into the next year. There is sufficient funding available for the full duration of the programme, based on the families arrived to date. Families' needs become evident at different levels and rates.
- 1.3. It was agreed that those refugee families re-settled in Mid Devon would be accommodated in Private Sector accommodation. At the time, it was agreed that consideration should be given to the need for support which would involve a minimum of weekly visits by one or more officers to each family; and also an exit strategy involving the landlord, the Council and DCC.
- 1.4. On 13 August 2019, the Homes PDG agreed that representations be made to DCC requesting it to develop a scheme that allowed landlords to accept Syrian

refugees with a direct contract with the landlord through the Home Office Scheme. It was noted that Mid Devon District Council would not expand the scheme.

- 1.5. At the Homes PDG meeting on 3 December 2019 (item 49), it was agreed that the Council should enter into a contract with a third party to manage another property.
- 1.6. On 18 December 2019, the Home Office confirmed an accommodation offer in Crediton for a third family for Mid Devon and identified a family consisting of two adults and two children who could be accommodated in the property.
- 1.7. This property had been offered by a concerned landlord and this offer was taken up with effect from 15 January 2020. The management of the property and family was contracted to a third party, due to capacity issues, and this was a lettings agency wholly owned by two other local authorities in Devon.

2.0 **Update**

- 2.1 The family accommodated in this property arrived in Crediton in early March 2020, bringing the total to three refugee families in Mid Devon. No further accommodation offers have come forward for the scheme since then but given the current circumstances this is not unexpected.

3.0 **The National Emergency**

- 3.1 Since the restrictions on personal movement commenced on 23 March 2020, the existing refugee resettlement scheme has been put "on pause". Due to restrictions on movements related to the pandemic both overseas and in the United Kingdom (UK), there has been an inability to undertake any resettlement activity. The HO has identified a number of tests which need to be met before the pledge to resettle 20,000 families can be met. Restarting the programme will be dependent on several factors, including:

- restarting of flights from refugee hosting countries,
- lifting of restrictions imposed by the governments of those countries, and in the UK,
- the ability of international partners (the United Nations' Refugee Agency - UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration - IOM) to operate,
- the re-opening of the UK's visa application centres.

- 3.2 As a result, there have been no refugees resettled in the UK since 12 March 2020, following the outbreak of COVID-19 (meaning that the family accommodated in Crediton was one of the last, if not the last, family to be accommodated ahead of the restrictions). All refugee resettlement arrivals to the UK planned prior to the current crisis have now been cancelled.
- 3.3 The Home Office (HO) is still not expecting any new offers of accommodation and will not be allocating any cases to new property offers previously received.
- 3.4 The HO are actively keeping this situation under review.

- 3.5 Support for families in Mid Devon has continued to be provided between Devon County Council, Refugee Support Devon and a range of other local services.
- 3.6 All support services have been providing resettled families with relevant advice from the GOV.UK and NHS England websites in both an English and Arabic format. Weekly engagement with families has been undertaken electronically through WhatsApp and video calling.
- 3.7 Online resources have also been made available for children to continue with their learning/education and adults with their ESOL (English Language) studies. We understand that generally, the families have reported positively about their wellbeing and the support which they have been receiving through the “lock down” period.
- 3.8 During the pandemic, the families have been provided with support to minimise the financial impact and to help them resolve issues relating to schooling. Support workers are using IT and distance learning and remain in frequent contact.

4.0 General update/issues for resettled families in Mid Devon

- 4.1 Other issues which were identified prior to the current national emergency related to an ability to travel to and from Exeter (for ESOL classes) which could be problematic throughout the year, but especially in the winter.
- 4.2 During adverse weather periods, families often reported black mould in homes. In response to this, the Council has provided advice to families on suitably ventilating their homes and understanding climate differences.
- 4.3 Support services can assist with medical appointments, translation services and with accessing other services, as necessary. In addition, they can help families to establish financial independence

5.0 Tenant Challenges due to location

- 5.1 The locations of two of the properties have caused problems for both families. This is mainly due to the lack of access to local places of worship, access to Halal food/shopping, friends, health services and educational services. Both families are finding it difficult with transport costs and travel time commuting to Exeter to access health services and education facilities. One family is now requesting financial help from the Council to move to Exeter. Any financial assistance given will be reclaimed from the Devon County Council budget.

6.0 Indefinite Leave to Remain

- 6.1 Over the next 12 months, some of the Syrian Refugees families in Devon will be applying for indefinite leave to remain in the country. Some families may have to seek legal advice which is not a free service due to restrictions on legal aid immigration advice in the South West.

7.0 Government Refugee resettlement programme

- 7.1 When resettlement resumes, at present, it is the HO's intention to complete the pledge to accommodate 20,000 families before they launch a new scheme, the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS). There are about 200 further families to be housed in order to reach the target.
- 7.2 There are indications that the emphasis of the new UKRS will be changing and that it will operate in a different way to the existing resettlement scheme. In particular, it will have a wider focus and be open to other nationalities on a worldwide basis, rather than restricted to Syrian refugees.
- 7.3 In February 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration and the HO held an event in London which focused on the future plans for resettlement in the UK. At this event, the HO confirmed the development of the new consolidated scheme. When pressed for information regarding what would be happening with regard to this beyond 2021, the Home Office reiterated their commitment to the principle of resettlement. Going forward, future resettlement numbers and allocated funding will be tied to the forthcoming spending review.
- 7.4 It is expected that the focus will remain on the resettlement of families from Syria during 2020/21 and that other nationalities will be gradually incorporated into the UKRS. High resettlement needs have been noted in Africa, particularly South Sudan. The rationale for a gradual change to the scheme is that this will provide some time in which support services can adapt and change to meet the broader resettlement needs.
- 7.5 Three nationalities were highlighted during the conference as being part of UKRS:

Nationally	Host County	Languages Spoken
Afghan	Iran	Dari, Pashto
Somali	Kenya	Somali, Arabic, Oromo
Sudanese	Libya	Sudanese Arabic

- 7.6 DCC has asked the second tier authorities in Devon for confirmation as to whether they will be making a further pledge in respect of the UKRS. If there is to be a commitment to the UKRS in Mid Devon, the Council will then need to agree the number of families which could be resettled in the local authority area.
- 7.7 There are several considerations which must be taken into account with regard to the widening of the scheme. In particular, the current situation worldwide may influence the willingness and ability of landlords in the private sector to make suitable accommodation available to accommodate refugees in Mid Devon. In a recession, the sale of some of those homes bought on a buy to let basis can be anticipated.
- 7.8 In addition, the Refugee Resettlement team at DCC has identified a need for existing infrastructure to be developed to enable the resettlement of those from other areas outside of Syria.

8 Transition to the UKRS

- 8.1 The UKRS will start the day after 20,000th arrival under the existing Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. At that point the HO will make a public statement and formally launch UKRS. This will be underpinned by cross-departmental support within Central Government but in the context of the economic impact of the pandemic, this may be an issue especially given that any further commitment to refugee resettlement will, as stated, be linked to the next spending review.
- 8.2 There will be no further acceptances under the existing scheme. However, there are still approximately 1,000 individuals awaiting resettlement under the previous programmes and these people will be given priority. It should be noted that these households have some of the most complex needs. Most of the individuals concerned are Syrian.
- 8.3 With regard to the UKRS, 3,000 pledges have been received so far from other local authorities nationally against the 2020/2021 target of 5,000.
- 8.4 The UKRS will operate using broadly the same structure as the existing scheme, including the same tariffs which includes provision for ESOL (English Language lessons) and Education.
- 8.5 For information, it can be noted that the other local authorities in Devon have made the following commitments to resettle refugee households in their areas:

Area	LA Pledge(s)
East Devon	5 (over three years)
Exeter	3
Mid Devon	TBC
North Devon	2
South Hams & West Devon	3 (Shared)
Teignbridge	1
Torridge	1 (20/21), 1 (21/22)
Total (20/21)	12

- 8.6 Some local communities offer Community Sponsorship of individual families. One such group has recently come forward seeking consent to assist with the resettlement of a family in the District. It should be noted that the management and support functions in this case would fall to the sponsorship group itself and that the involvement of the Council following the granting of any consent is likely to be minimal.
- 8.7 DCC has advised that the Government will not count any such offers within the 5,000 target. However, local authorities will still need to offer consent to such groups which are planning to resettle a household within their area.

- 8.8 DCC has also advised that the total number of family arrivals across Devon is likely to meet or exceed the total pledged, due to a small number of ongoing property offers and Community Sponsorship applications.
- 8.9 Given the changes being effected by the transition to the UKRS, it is likely that the DCC communication strategy relating to the resettlement strategy will be changed to make it clear that the offer will be more ethnically diverse.

9 Conclusion

- 9.1 Members are asked to note the report and agree the following recommendation to the Council:
- 1 To approve the proposal made by a community sponsorship group with regard to the resettlement of an additional refugee household in the District under the existing Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme and to agree consent
 - 2 Whether or not the Council should take part in the the new United Kingdom Refugee Scheme (UKRS)
 - 3 If this is agreed, the number of households which should be settled in the District under UKRS

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Circulation of the Report: Councillor Bob Deed, Leader of the Council; Councillor Bob Evans, Cabinet Member for Housing and other Members of the Cabinet; Simon Newcombe, Group Manager for Public Health and Regulatory Services; Jill May, Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation