



Northumberland

County Council

CABINET

DATE: 12TH MAY 2020

UPDATE ON THE CURRENT RESETTLEMENT SCHEME FOR REFUGEES AND THE RESETTLEMENT SCHEME PROPOSAL FOR 2020/21

Report of Juliemma McLoughlin, Executive Director of Regeneration, Commercial and Economy

Cabinet Member: Councillor John Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing & Resilience

Purpose of report

To update Members on the progress of the current scheme, formerly known as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

To obtain Member assent that an agreement be made to support the settlement of a further 12 refugee families through the new 2020/21 transition programme.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Members note the report and agree the resettlement of an additional 12 Refugee families in Northumberland during 2020/2021.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the “We want you to feel Safe, Healthy and Cared for ” [LIVING] ” “We want you to achieve and realise your potential” [LEARNING]” priorities included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021

Key issues

1. The current Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) is coming to an end in March 2020. The Council will have met their obligation to resettle 48 families in the period 2016 - 2020

2. The Government has announced an intention to commit to a further 5 year programme which will consolidate current schemes but no further financial detail has been released to date. No announcement is expected until after the Comprehensive Spending Review; which as a one-year Spending Round was completed in September 2019 to allow the Government to focus on delivering Brexit; is not being carried out until 2020
3. In the interim, the Government has proposed a transitional programme for 2020/21 with the same level of funding as the current programme. This means that any refugees accommodated during this period will have an agreed five years of funding at the current rate, mirroring the current programme.
4. It is proposed that Cabinet support the acceptance of an additional 12 Refugee families during 2020 / 2021 to support the delivery of the Government's transitional programme. This proposal is supported by Cllr Veronica Jones, Cabinet Member for Adult Wellbeing and Health, lead Member for Equality and Diversity.
5. If a decision is made not to sign up to a transition year or further tranches of the programme, an exit strategy will need to be formulated for the service and the staff as all funding payments will end in March 2025.

Background

The Home Office currently operate two distinct schemes for asylum seekers and refugees;

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- a) General dispersal of asylum seekers and refugees - contracted service with Mears for accommodation and limited support. No support is provided by Government to the Local Authority area where dispersal takes place.
- b) The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) - placement arrangements made with the Local Authority who source accommodation & support. A financial package is available with this scheme

Northumberland County Council agreed to resettle 48 families under the VPRS in the period 2016/20 and the first families arrived in Northumberland in November 2016. The current tranche of the programme is scheduled to end in March 2020. As the 48 families are resettled under the VPRS all of the costs associated with the programme are met by a Home Office grant.

Outcomes of the scheme to date

¹ In addition to the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme & the Gateway Protection Programme

To date (December 2019) the Council has accommodated 44 families with the remaining 4 to be settled by March 2020. There are currently 90 adults and 97 children and young people living in Northumberland.

After the initial needs of settlement have been met (housing, health and benefits) it is necessary to focus support on the mechanisms that promote independence and integration within communities. keystones to successful integration are the ability to be understood and make social connections by improving English language skills, and opportunities to seek employment.

As part of the funded programme all adults are offered a place on an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course, and all children are placed in schools or nurseries. Those adults claiming benefits (as the principal claimant) can have attendance at ESOL classes made mandatory. The level of provision in Northumberland is good, with adults offered 9 hours ESOL per week through the Learning & Skills Service (attended by 72 service users). There is also provision through Newcastle College which 10 adults attend.

In addition to the formal provision of English language lessons, the Asylum Seeker & Refugee team are piloting a Volunteer Programme, which is the next step in developing a mature and holistic offer beyond the initial settling in and integration activities provided to date.

There are three distinct roles for volunteers:

- The first as “befrienders” - to get refugees out of their homes and attending events in the community and finding opportunities for self development
- The second as “home visitors”- practicing English conversation in the relaxed security of the refugees own home
- The third as volunteers to run an informal group for conversational english which is more relaxed and less prescriptive in terms of subject matter than a formal class. Training for volunteers is provided by an external award winning charity specialising in supporting refugees and asylum seekers

The pilot launched in July 2019 in Amble and is currently being reviewed before a second pilot is launched in Blyth and Cramlington.

In addition to learning English, refugees are keen to seek opportunities to move into employment, having a strong work ethic and a wish to support their families and contribute to their local communities.

The ability to participate in opportunities that move clients towards the labour market or to gain employment is critical, and has been a challenge throughout the country. In Northumberland to tackle this issue a small focus group was formed made up of key

partners (including DWP & VCS) to drive the employability agenda forward. The group has a clearly defined remit and timescale.

The working age adult cohort are being encouraged to take a more active part in seeking opportunities that will move them towards the labour market, as are the services which provide support. An increased effort and directional steer has been implemented in order to offer residents the best chance of securing employment focussed opportunities.

Following the formation of the task & finish group significant progress has been made. Strong partnership working has made a very positive contribution to the opportunities available to refugees in Northumberland, and it's impact cannot be underestimated. For comparison in January 2019 only 1 individual was in paid employment. Currently there are 4 adults in employment and 11 adults are in (or have completed) an 8 week work placement with local employers. Placements are normally a structured opportunity which supports language development and exposes refugees to the UK workplace. The placement is added to their CV and demonstrates that an individual has been able to function in an environment that may be radically different from their experiences to date, especially with regard to Health & Safety. Employment Advisors from the DWP are working closely with the Asylum Seeker & Refugee team to understand the skill sets of our clients and to source further suitable work placements. The majority of refugees have also been supported by the National Careers Service to develop a CV ready for attendance at Jobs Fairs or other employment opportunities.

As a large employer in the county, the Council offered 2 refugees work placements in the Housing Management Voids team, which manages the repair of empty Council houses for relet. The placement has been invaluable in allowing the refugees to practice their English language skills (both have reported a positive impact on their confidence and ability), as well as an opportunity to experience practising their trades (plastering & carpentry) in a British workplace. At the end of the placement the refugees have references to show prospective employers, as well as being able to update their CV's. Housing Services have agreed to offer further placements going forward and other opportunities are being sought across other council services with the support of the Learning & Development Team.

Transition Programme 2020/21

The UK aims to resettle in the region of 5000 of the most vulnerable refugees in 2020/21², with a focus on those requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk. The area for resettlement will be expanded from the current MENA (Middle East and North Africa) scheme to a global plan but will be based on the same UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) criteria of assisting the most vulnerable.

² The UNHCR estimates 1.4 million refugees will require resettlement in 2020

The Government is seeking a smooth transition, with any arrivals under the new scheme starting once arrivals under the current scheme are completed (Spring 2020). This approach is in line with feedback from the Strategic Migration Partnerships on what local authorities would find most helpful in transition.

The Home Office has indicated that there is a long term commitment to the programme, but that further information will not be available until after the Comprehensive Spending Review (date to be confirmed in 2020). The number of refugees to be resettled post year 1 transition would be determined through future spending rounds, but will be subject to fluctuation according to overseas need and the ability of the UK to source suitable accommodation and support.

Local authority participation would continue to be voluntary with refugees allocated in the same way as currently under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme. Support would continue to be available from the Strategic Migration Partnership.

The funding package for the new scheme will mirror that currently paid under the VPRS & VCRS, with Northumberland receiving a five year tariff of £20,520 for each refugee with an additional education tariff (for 1 year) for children aged 3-18. Additional funding is available (as in previous years) for exceptional costs including property adaptations, special educational needs and adult social care. These costs are awarded on a case by case basis.

Refugees are subject to a health assessment as part of the resettlement process and the findings are shared with the local authority to ensure suitable treatment/ support can be offered. Refugees arrive with full access to NHS services and as under the current scheme £2600 per refugee will be made available to healthcare providers.

Refugees will continue to access English language tuition (as in the current scheme) which will be fully funded through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). In year 1 additional funding of £850 per person will still be available, to boost local capacity and supplement mainstream AEB provision. Local authorities will also continue to be able to use the tariff to top up costs associated with language provision. Funding will also be available to help with child care costs in relation to attendance at ESOL classes.

Currently the Council has agreed a yearly intake of 12 families per annum, and it is suggested that this cap be continued if a decision is made to sign up to the transition programme.

Implications

Policy	There are no direct implications to policies within the Council.
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	The support for the VPRS will in fact support the delivery of objectives and priorities within the Corporate Plan and the Housing Strategy 2019-2022
Finance and value for money	There will be costs associated with meeting the requirement of the VPRS; the Home Office will meet costs through grant funding at the same rate as the current scheme.
Legal	None
Procurement	None
Human Resources	None
Property	Accommodation for families will be identified from Council-owned residential general needs accommodation.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Equality has been considered and no issues have been determined
Risk Assessment	A risk assessment for both the families arriving and the communities in which they will be placed will be completed as part of the NCC Scheme
Crime & Disorder	None. There have been few incidents related to the resettlement of families within communities to date
Customer Consideration	Appropriate communications will be developed to keep customers informed
Carbon reduction	None
Health & Wellbeing	The Health & Wellbeing of all families re-settled is reviewed upon arrival and monitored throughout their time in support.
Wards	All

Background papers:

none

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

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