

# Cherwell District Council

## Executive

3 April 2018

### Participation in the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

#### Report of Interim Director of Wellbeing

This report is public

#### Purpose of report

To consider Cherwell District Council's progress regarding the resettlement of six refugee families into the district as part of the Government's Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS). This report also intends to inform future decision making regarding the resettlement of refugee families in Cherwell District, wider engagement in the asylum seeker dispersal programme and preparation of a bid for Controlling Migration Fund monies.

#### 1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To note the contents of the report.
- 1.2 To note the findings of the evaluation report of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) in Cherwell.
- 1.3 To consider resettlement of additional Syrian Refugee families within Cherwell district.
- 1.4 To support the establishment of a dedicated post to deal with Syrian Refugee work in Cherwell (funded by VPRS funding).
- 1.5 To support officers to develop a bid to the Controlling Migration Fund in relation to Cherwell district.
- 1.6 To consider participation in the Asylum Seeker Dispersal Programme in Cherwell district, and advise officers accordingly.

#### 2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The Syrian VPRS was launched in January 2014 to provide sanctuary to several hundred vulnerable Syrians over 3 years. In September 2015, the scheme was expanded to resettle 20,000 Syrians in need of protection by 2020. Then in July 2017 the eligibility criteria for the VPRS was extended to all those fleeing the

conflict of Syria regardless of nationality. The primary purpose of the scheme is to resettle refugees in a way that:

- Secures national security and public protection
- Has the wellbeing of the vulnerable persons and the welcoming communities at the centre of decision making
- Delivers value for money for the UK taxpayer

- 2.2 In January 2016 Cherwell District Council pledged to support the Government with its commitment to assist vulnerable Syrians and agreed to resettle 6 families into the district under the VPRS complementing efforts in the other Oxfordshire district/city councils.
- 2.3 In January 2017, Senior Members in Cherwell District Council received a request from the Churches in Bicester Group to resettle a total of 50 Syrian Refugees (this would equate to around 12 families)
- 2.4 With the 6<sup>th</sup> family due to arrive during Spring 2018 the council will have fulfilled its initial pledge. This creates an opportunity to consider whether Cherwell District Council wishes to see more families resettled into the district under the VPRS and consider if there is support for engagement in associated Government programmes such as the asylum seeker dispersal programme. There is also additional government funding (Controlling Migration Fund) available relating to this area of work that the Council could bid for.

### **3.0 Report Details**

- 3.1 In the local arrangements for VPRS, in Cherwell the Council has been the lead agency in resettling families into the district linking with the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) and the Home Office.
- 3.2 The Housing Team has taken overall responsibility for the project and overseen all aspects of the project delivery to ensure families resettled into the district are supported to the VPRS requirements. However, a number of other departments have also been involved in the resettlement process including Community Services, Revenue and Benefits and Communications Team.
- 3.3 The Council has procured the services of Connection Support to deliver the required support to individuals being resettled into the district. Connection Support are a long-established and well regarded support agency working predominantly in Oxfordshire but also providing services in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Connection Support has experience and expertise in this type of support work supporting refugees in Oxford City.
- 3.4 As well as providing support to the refugee families, Connection Support also utilise help and support from volunteers who are able to offer particular skills such as providing informal English lessons, acting as translators for the family and befriending families. All volunteers working with families undergo a Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) check. Connection Support also co-ordinate volunteers, churches and community groups to adopt rooms within the secured accommodation to help ensure the property is furnished ready for each families arrival.
- 3.5 Various other agencies assist with the resettlement of refugee families:

- Oxfordshire County Council: identify school places for the children; social care teams if the family has social care needs
- Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group: involvement at the beginning of the resettlement process and the decision whether a family are to be resettled into the district depending on whether they have the ability to support any identified health issues individuals may have.
- Thames Valley Police: check that the proposed accommodation is not within an area with known problems that could put the families at risk, meet the family within the first few weeks of arrival and put a priority response alert on the families' addresses in case any incidents occur.
- Job Centre Plus: assists families to apply for benefits upon their arrival.

3.6 Cherwell District Council have secured accommodation for refugees' families within the private rented sector. This was a conscious decision to ensure that the limited resource of social housing available within the district was not taken away from local residents in housing need. The Council has also focused on securing larger accommodation for families being resettled as part of the VPRS. This decision has been made because:

- The greatest housing need on the Council's housing register is for 1 and 2 bedroom properties
- Larger families also allow the Council to claim more funding for the programme to make it more financially viable and deliverable at nil cost to the Council

3.7 Officers have undertaken an evaluation of the project to fully understand what has worked, what has not worked so well, the implications this project has had on local services and the resources needed to resettle more families within the district.

3.8 The purpose of this evaluation was to provide an overview of the work that has been completed to date, identify lessons learnt during the resettlement process and provide recommendations for the future.

3.9 The key headlines from the evaluation of the project are outlined below.

3.10 Cherwell District Council is well placed to resettle refugees within the district as:

- There are strong partnerships with other statutory and voluntary partners which have helped the delivery of the project to date
- There is considerable community support, especially from within faith groups
- All of the children from the refugee families have been able to access education
- The refugee families are extremely satisfied with the help and support they have received and continue to receive
- A good range of services/facilities are available for families to access

3.11 The evaluation has highlighted some difficulties including:

- A lack of services in certain parts of the District, in particular in Kidlington and to a lesser extent in Bicester although this does not prevent families from being supported as required
- Difficulty with accessing a dentist for families living in Bicester
- Conflicting priorities between the requirements of the VPRS to attend language classes and requirements to receive benefits at the Job Centre Plus is difficult but is understood to be experienced elsewhere within the country and not specifically an issue just in Cherwell

- Securing accommodation for families that is affordable has been difficult and it has been necessary to use some of the funding from Central Government to bridge the gap between local housing allowance and rent levels charged by landlords.

- 3.12 The evaluation has shown that the resettlement of refugees has been very successful to date. The project has been delivered at minimal cost to the Council as all expenses have been funded completely from the money payable by Central Government to Cherwell District Council to support and resettle families. The contribution that the Council has made towards the project is on officer time which has had a small impact on the Housing Team's resources to deliver other services.
- 3.13 Despite some difficulties being identified through the evaluation, these would not prevent Cherwell District Council from being able to resettle more families into the district and appropriate plans could be devised to ensure these types of issues are mitigated moving forwards.
- 3.14 In addition to the VPRS there are some associated Government programmes that Cherwell District Council should be aware of and consider if they would like to offer their support.
- 3.15 *Dispersal of Asylum Seekers* - In March 2016 all Local Authority Chief Executives in the UK received a request from the Director General of UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) team to participate in permitting people seeking asylum to live in their areas. The UKVI are experiencing a shortage of accommodation within their existing dispersal areas and are looking for local authorities to participate within the dispersal scheme to increase the number of locations available to them throughout the UK. The UKVI have contracted providers to secure accommodation within areas that have provided agreement for them to source accommodation for people seeking asylum. The contracted accommodation providers are required to source and maintain any accommodation used and will need to submit any proposals to the local authority for approval being the property can be used. Asylum seekers receive asylum support payments of £37.75 per week. Once a decision is made on their application, they have between 21 and 28 days to vacate the property. If the decision is positive the local housing connection will be with the local authority area in which they have been accommodated, although new refugees may choose to move to larger urban centres of population. The overriding aim of the scheme is to have as many local authorities participating as possible, spreading the demand across the country. If Cherwell District Council were to support the Asylum seeker dispersal programme in their areas the staff resource and input would be minimal. The main consideration would be the impact on availability of private rented accommodation for use by the VPRS and local residents in housing need.
- 3.16 *The Controlling Migration Fund* – The Controlling Migration Fund is designed to support local authorities in England who are experiencing pressures on services from either:
- Illegal migration
  - Legitimate migration

The Fund is available for local authorities to apply for over four years 2016/17 – 2019/20 and focuses on responding to problems caused by high migration into localities and is designed to help deliver benefits to the local population. The fund consists of two elements –

- 1) A local service impact element of £100m (£25m each year) to help English local authorities ease pressures on local services
- 2) An enforcement part of £40m to enforce action of those in the UK illegally to reduce pressures on local areas

The funding will consider proposals across a broad range of activities. Areas of work that officers have identified (informed by the VPRS evaluation) as potential areas to bid for funding for are:

- Help to build community cohesion and encourage integration such as English as a second language (ESOL)
- Opportunities to work collectively with other local authorities to reshape services – possibly a shared service dimension and/or working with other local authorities within the county
- Improve local intelligence data to help improve the understanding migration is having on the local area

## **4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1 Based upon the success of the programme to date, there is an opportunity for Cherwell District Council to resettle additional Syrian Refugee families into the district. A further 6 families would approximately equate to 50 individuals in total. This would align with the request made to senior politicians from the Churches in Bicester group in January 2017.
- 4.2 If further families are resettled, Cherwell District Council should continue to source accommodation from the private rented sector for VPRS use. Also the Council should continue to focus on securing 3 and 4 bedroom properties. This would ensure smaller accommodation is not being taken away from others in the district in housing need and ensures that the Council has sufficient funding available to support the families being resettled.
- 4.3 If Cherwell District Council choose to resettle more families into the district consideration needs to be given to how these families will be supported. The existing contract with Connection Support is to provide support to 6 families for the first year of their resettlement only. The Council could consider delivering the support in-house but this would require recruitment of additional staff and would be a significant commitment by the Council to deliver this in-house. Also an assessment would need to be made about whether the Council's officers have the appropriate skills and knowledge to deliver this type of support. The preferred way forward at this stage is that a procurement exercise would be undertaken to secure a support provider for a subsequent phase of VPRS in Cherwell District.
- 4.4 The evaluation has highlighted that the resettlement of refugees into the district requires significant amounts of officer time to be committed to ensure families are resettled successfully and that a joined up approach is achieved with other statutory agencies and partners. If further families are resettled, it is proposed that a dedicated member of staff is employed using some of the funding available to support the programme moving forwards to help the Council deliver the project further.

## **5.0 Consultation**

- 5.1 As part of the evaluation officers have asked families to complete a short satisfaction survey about the support they have received to help them resettle into the district to date. The responses were completed with the help of volunteers. The feedback overall was extremely positive with all families advising they had been extremely satisfied with the support they have received from Connection Support. The majority of families were extremely satisfied with the accommodation secured for them.

## **6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

- 6.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: To approve the findings of the evaluation as recommended in this report and commit to the resettlement of a further 6 families into the district. However, not approve the dedicated staff resource that has been requested. This would mean that considerable amounts of existing staff time would be spent on this project diverting this resource from other housing activities.

Option 2: Not to resettle any more refugees into Cherwell district. By not accepting any more families into the district, the Council may receive criticism that it is not continuing to help families beyond the 6 families already pledged.

Option 3: To resettle less than 6 refugees into Cherwell district. Officers expect to have resettled approximately 30 individuals into the district once the 6 family arrive in the spring. Due to the uncertainty about the number of people within each family arriving until accommodation has been secured there is potential for the Council to not be able to fulfil the petition's request to resettle 50 refugees.

Option 4: To resettle more than 6 refugees into the district. Resettling more families into the district at this time would be difficult. Staff resources in excess of the dedicated post being requested would need to be made available to the project and it would be difficult to find enough private rented accommodation for families.

## **7.0 Implications**

### **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 7.1 The project is supported with a funding package for Cherwell to claim and is expected to be delivered at nil cost to the council.

Comments checked by:

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## Legal Implications

- 7.2 The project will not give direct rise to any legal implications, however there are ancillary issues around the services which the Council will need to procure in order to provide the package of support to the families which are located in the district and an EU compliant procurement process will need to be followed. The in-house legal team will assist in drawing up and negotiating contracts with suppliers as was the case on the initial families which were assisted through this scheme.

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## 8.0 Decision Information

### Key Decision

**Financial Threshold Met:** Yes

**Community Impact Threshold Met:** No

### Wards Affected

Potentially any ward in the district.

### Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

Thriving Communities & Wellbeing:

- Prevent homelessness
- Safeguard the vulnerable
- Provide and support health and wellbeing

### Lead Councillor

Councillor John Donaldson, Lead Member for Housing

## Document Information

Appendix No	Title
None	
Background Papers	
None	
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