

Cherwell District Council

Executive

4 November 2019

Proposal to Extend Cherwell District Council's Participation in Refugee Resettlement

Report of Assistant Director Housing and Social Care Commissioning

This report is public

Purpose of report

To provide an update on Cherwell District Council's participation in the Government's Vulnerable Person's Relocation Scheme (VPRS) and agree to participate in the new global scheme by resettling a further 6 families from April 2020 onwards.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To support Cherwell District Council's participation in the new global scheme which begins in April 2020.
- 1.2 To accept a further 6 families for resettlement under the new scheme.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 On 17 June 2019 the UK Government announced plans for a new resettlement scheme beginning April 2020. The new scheme will be open to refugees identified by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as needing resettlement to the UK regardless of their origin. The new scheme will consolidate 3 existing programmes; the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS – supporting refugees affected by the conflict in Syria), the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS – supporting vulnerable children and their families from the Middle East North Africa region) and the gateway protection programme.
- 2.2 The UK plans to resettle 5,000 refugees in the first year of the new scheme and has asked local authorities to participate on a voluntary basis. There has been no information to say whether the scheme will run beyond the one year committed and we expect further announcements to be made in 2020.

- 2.3 The new scheme is a continuation of the current programme with arrivals expected to start once the VPRS scheme is completed in Spring 2020.
- 2.4 The funding package available under the new scheme will mirror that currently paid under the VPRS and means Cherwell will receive a five-year tariff for each refugee resettled in the district. Additional funding is also available for education needs for children aged 3-18 years in the first year of arrival. Additional funding will also be made available for exceptional costs incurred by local authorities.

3.0 Report Details

- 3.1 Cherwell District Council has pledged to resettle 12 families under the existing scheme and is on track to have all families resettled by the end of March 2020.

Oxfordshire

- 3.2 All Oxfordshire district/city councils have participated in the VPRS and have resettled the following numbers of families:

Oxford City	30
West	6
South	2
Vale of White Horse	6

- 3.3 We understand that the other Oxfordshire District/City Councils are also considering whether they will participate in the new scheme.

Housing

- 3.4 Accommodation in Cherwell has been secured for the families within the private rented sector. To date 10 properties have been secured with 9 families resettled into the district. The 10th family is due to arrive November 2019.
- 3.5 We have been able to secure some properties at Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates (6 out of the 10 properties sourced). This has been possible as a result of socially minded landlords who have an interest in the scheme. One such example is a property in Bicester. The Churches in Bicester Group worked collectively to raise money to purchase a property specifically for a refugee family. This property is rented at LHA rates for the 5-year period.
- 3.6 Some properties have needed to be secured above the local housing allowance rates with shortfalls being paid from Home Office funding.
- 3.7 CDC has secured accommodation by funding all initial property costs; 12 months' rent in advance, a £1,000 finder's fee, up to 8 weeks void costs and now a 10-week cashless deposit bond. All property costs come from the Home Office funding with Housing Benefit/Universal Credit housing costs reclaimed via the family after they arrive.

Support

- 3.8 CDC has contracted Connection Support to provide a phased programme of support in the first year of each family's arrival. Phase 1 (2 weeks) covers intensive resettlement work to support families to register with services and apply for all eligible assistance. In Phase 2 (50 weeks) floating support is provided to help families attend appointments, language classes and sustain their tenancy.
- 3.9 Families continue to receive support beyond the first year but due to all families being at different stages of becoming independent and integrating into their communities the support in their 2nd year is flexible based upon their support needs. The emphasis of the support is to help families to:
- Access mainstream services independently
 - Maintain their accommodation
 - Integrate into their local communities
 - Access formal and informal ESOL
 - Access employment and training opportunities
- 3.10 An Evaluation Questionnaire has recently been sent to all adults receiving a Year 2 support service to identify any gaps in service provision. All 11 adults asked took part in the survey. Of the 11 asked, 10 adults (91%) were very satisfied with the service. When asked for reasons for their answers, some of the responses were as follows:
- "Very good support with the paperwork. We received big support for the kids."*
- "Good help and support."*
- "They are kind and helpful."*
- "They have fulfilled all our requirements. They helped as much as possible."*
- "They are not available all the time or when we need help and support."*
- 3.11 Families who have entered Year 3 are also continuing to be supported by Connection Support.
- 3.12 All costs incurred for providing the support to families are covered by the funding received from the Home Office.

Community Engagement

- 3.13 The community has played a significant role in the success of the scheme in Cherwell.
- 3.14 A quarterly newsletter is circulated to a mailing list of residents who have expressed an interest in being kept up to date on work taking place within the district, whilst maintaining families' anonymity.
- 3.15 Connection Support has a Volunteer Coordinator whose role includes recruiting volunteers to support families to resettle. Skilled volunteers are utilised to teach

informal ESOL to those adult members whose health needs and childcare needs prevent them from accessing class-based learning. Connection Support also co-ordinate churches and community groups to adopt rooms within secured accommodation to ensure the property is suitably furnished prior to a families' arrival.

Partnerships

3.16 The success of the scheme in Cherwell has also been as a result of strong partnership working with other agencies including:

- Oxfordshire County Council: lead agency for both adult and children's social care and school admissions.
- Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group: decide whether a family can be accepted depending on resources being available to meet any identified health needs.
- Thames Valley Police: Neighbourhood Team identify any issues that may put a family at risk; meet the family within the first two weeks of arrival.
- Job Centre Plus: assist families to apply for benefits on arrival and provide the Work & Health Programme.
- EMBS, Banbury College and City of Oxford College: provide pre-entry and accredited ESOL in Banbury and Oxford City.
- Activate Learning: provide pre-entry Employment Training course for adults.
- Fire Safety: meet the family within 2 weeks of arrival to explain fire safety in the home.
- NHS: meet the family within 2 weeks of arrival to explain health system in the UK.
- Red Cross: meet the family soon after arrival to explain the family tracing service offered.
- South East Strategic Partnership for Migration
- Local Community/Voluntary sector and Faith Groups

3.17 The current scheme has been very successful with outcomes as follows:

- 3 out of 19 adults are in employment
- 4 adults are in voluntary work
- 2 adults are working towards teaching qualifications and are studying at college
- 2 young adults are in college
- All adults are accessing ESOL, English conversation classes, 1-1 English classes at home or informal English lessons provided by qualified volunteer English teachers and improving their English language skills
- All children have settled in school or nursery placements and children have accessed summer school camps and community activities.
- All families have participated in community events and become active members of their local community.
- All families have linked with other VPRS families across Oxfordshire forming friendships across the county.
- 1 child won the Young Writers award; this work has since been published.
- 1 child achieved the Duke of Edinburgh Award.
- 3 adults are engaging with the Pre-Employment Training Course for non-English speakers at Banbury College, facilitated by Activate Learning.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 CDC is on track to meet the pledge of resettling 12 VPRS families by March 2020.
- 4.2 The number of people resettled in Britain since the start of the scheme is 17,051 (Refugee Council). According to the most recently published statistics, in the South East 1,599 people have been resettled.
- 4.3 The support provided to arriving families under the new scheme will need to be flexible according to the nationalities of arriving families. We currently provide a resettlement service to Arabic speaking refugees only. The new service will need to reflect the diversity of the families accepted and respond to diverse cultural needs. The Home Office will work closely with Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) and local authorities to match refugees to areas that have the appropriate resources to support those resettled.
- 4.4 CDC is in a good position to accept 6 more families under the new scheme, given our ability to source accommodation and appropriate support services. There are established support networks and partnerships across the county all well placed to support additional families as they move in to private rented sector accommodation.

5.0 Consultation

- 5.1 All adults receiving a Year 2 support service were asked to complete a short survey about the support they had received to resettle in the district, access to ESOL, employment, voluntary work and community participation. The feedback overall was extremely positive with almost all adults reporting they were “very satisfied” with the support service.

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 not participate in the scheme. If this option is chosen there could be negative criticism from local residents who have been largely supportive of CDC’s participation to date and negative media coverage could result. More importantly fewer vulnerable families would be helped to resettle in a safe environment that supports their recovery from conflict and trauma.

Option 2: To increase the number of refugee families to more than the 6 recommended. Cherwell is in a good position to accept a further 6 families based on the availability of private rented sector accommodation and the infrastructure we have in place to support refugees. This number can always be reviewed in future.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 It is anticipated that this service will be delivered at no net cost to the council. The scheme costs will be covered by the Home Office funding.
- 7.2 The worker overseeing the current VPRS service is employed on a fixed term 2-year contract which is due to end 1 March 2021. Consideration will need to be given to the resources needed for the new scheme.

Comments checked by:

Kelly Wheeler, Business Partner, 01295 225170,

Kelly.wheeler@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Legal Implications

- 7.3 Government grant is invariably provided subject to conditions as to its use, and failure to meet those conditions often entitles the grant provider to demand repayment of some or all of the grant received, and so the Council will need to meet its contractual obligations under the new scheme as specified by the Home Office.

Comments checked by:

Richard Hawtin, Team Leader – Non-contentious, Tel: 01295 221695, email:

Richard.hawtin@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

7.4 Risk Implications

There are a number of risk implications when delivering this scheme that will need to be managed by the council.

These are:

- Public opinion can vary. Some residents may question resettlement schemes and believe that refugees are being given preferential treatment. Others may feel that we should do more.
- The cost of accommodating refugees in private rented accommodation is high and may be unsustainable for families in the long-term. Top-ups are currently met by the Home Office funding and there is active planning to meet future housing needs in order to mitigate this risk.

These risks will be managed through the operational risk register and escalated to the corporate risk register as and when necessary.

Comments checked by:

Louise Tustian, Acting Performance and Communications Manager 01295 221786

Louise.tustian@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: No

Community Impact Threshold Met: No

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

Thriving Communities and Wellbeing – Support and Safeguard Vulnerable People

Lead Councillor

Councillor John Donaldson, Lead Member for Housing

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
None	
Background Papers	
None	
Report Author	Lise Jamieson Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme Project Manager
Contact Information	Lise.jamieson@cherwell-dc.gov.uk 01295 753766