

# Policy and Resources Committee

Date: **Monday 28 September 2015**

Time: **10am**

Venue: **Edwards Room, County Hall, Norwich**

## **SUPPLEMENTARY A g e n d a**

### **12. Syrian refugee crisis – Norfolk response**

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#### **Report by Managing Director**

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# Policy & Resources Committee

Item No 12

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| <b>Report title:</b>  | <b>Syrian refugee crisis – Norfolk response</b> |
| <b>Date of meeting:</b>   | <b>28 September 2015</b>                        |
| <b>Responsible Chief Officer:</b>   | <b>Dr Wendy Thomson, Managing Director</b>      |
| <b>Strategic impact:</b> Local authorities can volunteer to participate in the Syrian Vulnerable Person's Relocation scheme for humanitarian and compassionate reasons. There is no direct impact on the Council's ambition or four priorities. |   |

## Executive summary

This report updates Policy & Resources Committee on work to explore a countywide response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

It highlights concerns raised by Norfolk residents about the plight of Syrian Refugees, and a range of actions being taken by the Council to respond to this. It summarises the Government's policy on the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis, and the latest guidance available from the Home Office about the Syrian Vulnerable Person's Relocation Scheme.

On 25 September 2015, the leader is hosting a task force meeting with community leaders to consider the matter further. An update will be provided at the meeting.

### Recommendations:

That Policy & Resources Committee note the actions being taken and concern expressed across Norfolk by residents.

## Introduction

### The national policy context

1. Since the outbreak of civil conflict in Syria in 2011, the number of refugees fleeing the country has reached a massive scale. By July 2015 it had surpassed four million - 20% of the country's pre-war population.
2. Until January 2014, the Government's policy on the Syrian conflict was to commit large amounts of humanitarian aid (£100 million to date) to the relief effort, seek a solution to the crisis in Syria and stabilise countries where Syrian refugees are coming from. Initially, the Government declined to participate in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement programme for Syria, arguing that it would be tokenistic given the huge numbers of refugees.
3. On 29 January 2014, following considerable pressure from across the House, the Home Secretary announced that a UK programme – the Syrian's Vulnerable Person's Refugee (VPR) Scheme - would be established to resettle vulnerable Syrian refugees. At the time, it was expected that around 500 refugees would arrive to the UK through the scheme.

4. On 7 September this month, following news of the worsening humanitarian crisis, the Prime Minister announced that Britain would resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over the rest of this Parliament. This would take place through the existing VPR Scheme.

## **The Syrian Vulnerable Person's Refugee Scheme**

5. UK Visas & Immigration (UKVI), part of the Home Office, administers the VPR scheme.
6. The scheme currently prioritises help for survivors of torture and violence, women and children at risk, and those in need of medical care. However, following the Prime Minister's announcement on 7 September, the eligibility criteria for the scheme will be lowered. The amended scheme will accept refugees with less complex needs.
7. Refugees selected for the scheme will continue to be taken from camps around Syria and elsewhere in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. The scheme will not accept people who have already crossed into Europe. This will provide refugees with a direct and safe route to the UK, rather than risking the journey to Europe.
8. There are no plans in the initial phases of the resettlement programme to include unaccompanied minors.
9. Refugees are over 90% Sunni Muslim and Arabic speaking. Generally, families comprise between 4-6 people. Further background information is provided in Annex 1.
10. Refugees on the scheme are granted five years humanitarian protection, with leave to remain in the UK for five years. This gives eligibility for universal benefits, e.g. NHS healthcare, housing and employment benefits and all public funds. At the end of five years, if refugees are unable to return to Syria, they may be eligible to apply to settle permanently in the UK.
11. In order to participate in the VPR scheme, an organisation takes the lead role in an area. This could be a county, district or even voluntary agency in a two tier area. The lead agency is responsible for engaging with relevant stakeholders and working through local issues to agree an approach and develop an appropriate delivery model. The lead agency agrees and holds a grant agreement with the Home Office for running the scheme.

## **Central Government funding for the VPR scheme**

12. The original VPR scheme was funded for the first year only. This covered social care, education, health, orientation support and English language tuition, the precise amounts to be negotiated. When refugees are accepted on the scheme they undergo a medical examination to identify implications for service provision and costs in the first year. The details are shared with the lead agency six weeks prior to arrival of the refugees.
13. Following the Prime Minister's announcement on 7 September, there may be significant changes to the funding for the scheme. Whilst the first year of the scheme will be funded, the extent of this and whether it will address all costs, such as housing costs, where housing rents are above the housing benefit cap, is unknown.
14. The LGA is lobbying the Government to provide funding for five years, to address issues raised by many local authorities about affordability. This is a position that it is proposed the County Council support, as it is clear from the authority's experience of resettling

refugees through the Gateway Protection Programme (see below) that vulnerable refugees may need support for a number of years in order to settle successfully.

15. The Home Office will provide guidance to local authorities about funding as soon as possible.

### **The Government's other refugee resettlement programmes**

16. In addition to the VPR scheme, the Government runs two programs for the resettlement of refugees: the Gateway Protection Programme and the Mandate Refugee Programme.
17. These schemes are operated by the Home Office in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Gateway resettles approximately 750 vulnerable refugees from around the world each year. Mandate allows refugees from around the world with close family ties with the UK to be resettled in the UK.
18. Refugees on Gateway and the VPR scheme can apply to bring family members to the UK through the Home Office's family reunion programme.

### **The distinction between refugee resettlement schemes and asylum dispersal**

19. Norwich is one of three asylum dispersal areas in East Anglia (including Peterborough and Ipswich). This was agreed with the Government 10 years ago.
20. Asylum dispersal is a separate process to resettlement schemes. Asylum dispersal deals with people who have already crossed to Europe to claim asylum. Asylum dispersal areas cannot accept the VPR scheme in place of an increase in asylum seekers.

### **Norfolk's involvement with the Gateway Protection Programme**

21. Between 2006 and 2011, Norfolk County Council was one of only 18 local authorities in the country to participate in the Gateway Protection Programme. During this period the Council worked with partners across Norfolk to resettle 420 vulnerable people (family groups and individuals) from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Jordan.
22. This work has provided an insight into the infrastructure and support that must be in place to help refugees integrate into a new country and culture, and ensure that adults and children achieve good outcomes. Many of the refugees who came to Norfolk through Gateway have found it difficult to achieve independence and have required long-term support.

### **The County Council's key learning from Gateway is that:**

23. After the first year, most refugees should have developed sufficient basic language skills to access local services, go shopping etc. However, few will be in paid employment and many may be reliant on benefits for the duration of their stay. This means that affordable housing, which can be paid for by housing benefit, is essential, to avoid any risk of refugees being made homeless.
24. Housing should be within walking distance of schools that have sufficient spaces to take sibling groups, so that siblings are not separated. If refugee young people attend school miles from their home, the cost of transport to school over many years is significant, and

in addition, they have reduced opportunities to build friendships and social networks in their local area. Schools should have the expertise to support refugees who may be many years behind in their education and for whom English is a second language.

25. Refugee young people of all ages will need specialist education support for many years and there must be the infrastructure in place to address this. In practice this means establishing a physical, then virtual, 'refugee school', embedded into Norfolk schools, to provide young people from reception to 18 years with the skills, confidence and knowledge necessary to succeed in mainstream education.
26. Experience shows that children whose first language is not English are at risk of delayed educational progress and tend to significantly underperform at Key stages 3 and 4, when language requirements shift from functional to academic. Gateway has also shown that lack of support is linked to an increased risk of behavioural issues and permanent exclusions. Refugee young people are also at an increased risk of youth offending as a reaction to trauma. Desensitization to violence as a result of conflict has made some refugees a target for recruitment by drug gangs, an emerging problem nationally.
27. Housing should be within walking distance of key services, e.g. health services, and community resources, for example, advice centres and refugee support groups. Travel is expensive for refugees reliant on benefits, and difficulties affording transport is a major factor in social isolation.
28. Ideally, at first, services for refugees should be co-located in a community hub, allowing family support and access to a wider range of services. This provides a safe and nurturing base, which allows assessment of children's and families' needs and any necessary support or interventions to be tailored to support integration.
29. There is a high risk of family breakdown in refugee families, so specialist whole-family social care may be necessary for several years to support families who are struggling to deal with lone parenting, limited social networks, and the challenges of starting life in a new country.
30. Specialist mental health provision for five+ years may be necessary to support families to come to terms with the difficulties they have faced. Refugee families are at increased risk of drug and alcohol dependency to cope with the traumatic experiences they have been through.

### **Action taken so far**

31. Norfolk Sanctuary, a community organisation campaigning for Norfolk to resettle 50 Syrian refugees, has met with the County Council to share concerns about the plight of Syrian refugees and the worsening humanitarian crisis.
32. Following this meeting, in recognition of the concerns raised, the Council agreed to clarify the support available from the Home Office about the VPR scheme, as there were misunderstandings about the programme support available.
33. Discussions have taken place with the Home Office and the Local Government Association (LGA) to better understand the scheme, the profile and needs of vulnerable Syrian refugees, and the funding available for local authorities.

34. The Managing Director has written to local and health authority chief executives communicating members' concern about the humanitarian crisis, and sharing information about the VPR scheme.
35. Discussions have taken place with Norwich City Council, Great Yarmouth Council and King's Lynn Council, to assess the availability of affordable housing (a summary is attached at Annex 2). Further discussions are planned.
36. The Leader of the Council has communicated concerns about the humanitarian crisis with community leaders across Norfolk. He is chairing a task force of community leaders on 25 September 2015 to consider the matter further, and discuss next steps. An update will be provided to Policy & Resources Committee.
37. On 11 September group leaders and Norwich City Council met to consider the latest update from the Home Office. The concerns raised by many Norfolk people about the plight of Syrian refugees were noted. The need to represent these concerns, and find a way to respond which successfully balanced the needs of refugees, as well as those of county residents, alongside current pressures on health, housing, education and social services, was also noted.
38. The Council's Public Health service is advising on the likely health needs of Syrian refugees, based on data collected by the UNHCR.
39. Discussions are taking place across key services, including adults and children's social care, mental health, and education, to identify the services necessary to support vulnerable refugees, and the costs associated with this.

## **Financial implications**

40. The financial implications to Norfolk County Council cannot be quantified with certainty until the Government has confirmed details of the funding available.
41. An indication of the estimated costs is being developed with services and partners.
42. The actual financial implications will depend on the needs of individual refugees, the funding available, the availability of services that need to be brought in, and opportunities for working collaboratively with other authorities in the region.

## **Recommendations:**

That Policy & Resources Committee note the actions being taken and concern expressed across Norfolk by residents.

## **Evidence**

- Home Office guidance about the VPR scheme
- Prime Minister's announcement 7 September 2015
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report – Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict (2015)

## **Officer Contact**

If you have any questions about matters contained in this report or want to see copies of any assessments, e.g. equality impact assessment, please get in touch with:

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# ANNEX 1

## **Excerpt from Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report – Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict (2015)**

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The agency is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide.

The full report was commissioned by UNHCR to provide advice and background information to inform mental health and psychosocial care practitioners of some of the impact of the current crisis on the population in Syria as well as the different social and cultural context within which mental health and psychosocial problems may emerge. It also provides advice on the range of support and care services that are recommended in host countries receiving refugees.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Ethnic Diversity**

Over the centuries, the region that is now Syria was populated with people from a wide diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds, often fleeing conflict elsewhere. While the majority of Syrians are considered Arabs, this is based on spoken language (Arabic), not ethnicity and without census data it is only possible to estimate the ethnic and religious composition of the current Syrian population.

Around 10% of Syria's population is Kurdish (2 million people), followed by Turkmen, Assyrians, Circassians and Armenians. There are also small communities of Dom, Greeks, Persians, Albanians, Bosniacs, Russians, Chechens and Ossetians.

Many of these have become 'Arabicised' and may not necessarily maintain a specific ethnic affiliation. In other cases tribal affiliation has gained importance as a way for Syrians to identify and organise themselves, with a lack of other state structures.

#### **Language**

The Syrian Constitution refers to Arabic as the only official language. The second most common language is Kurdish but this was barred in 1958 schools and only since 2012 have Syrian Kurds began to reassert cultural rights with Kurdish language publications, radio and TV stations and restoring Kurdish language teaching in school. Smaller numbers of Syrians have Armenian as their mother tongue.

#### **Religion**

Prior to the recent conflict Sunnis accounted for the religious affiliation of approximately three-quarters of the population with other Muslim groups, particularly Shi'a, constitute approximately a 10% of the percent of the population. The Christian population in Syria representing a further 10% can be Arab or non-Arab (Syriac/Aramaic and Armenians) and typically orthodox eastern Christian or Catholic. There are small groups of Yezidi tribes and Protestants.

# Annex 2

## Housing pressures – initial analysis

- 43. Refugees could be housed in any part of the county.
- 44. Norwich would provide access to the county's main Arabic speaking Sunni mosque community, social integration initiatives, voluntary and community support and employment opportunities. It would minimise transport costs and the risk of social isolation.
- 45. Social housing is unlikely to be an option in Norfolk, because local authorities' housing policies have residency criteria of two or more years.
- 46. In view of this, pressures around private housing in the Norwich, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn areas have been explored:

### ***Private housing in Norwich, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn***

- 47. Demand for private housing of every tenure type is extremely high in Norwich. Discussions with Norwich City Council confirm it would be impossible to secure private rental housing for refugees reliant on housing benefit.
- 48. Supply is also a problem, as family-sized properties, even in deprived areas, tend to be subdivided for use as house-share, which enables landlords to maximise rental income.
- 49. One way around this would be to try to negotiate with UKVI for additional funding to top up housing benefits. The top up required would depend on individual family circumstances, but could be up to £300 per family per month (assuming an average rent of £850 - £1200 pcm for a 3-4 bedroom property, with a housing benefit payment of £540 - £795).
- 50. This option is risky and not recommended. After one year, when top-up funding for housing benefit is withdrawn by UKVI, refugees could be at risk of homelessness if they are unable to afford rents. Service providers in Norwich supporting asylum seekers have highlighted concerns about the number of people being made homeless when granted leave to remain because of a lack of suitable accommodation.
- 51. Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn have similar housing challenges, but with the disadvantage of limited access to Sunni mosque communities, social integration initiatives, voluntary and community support, transport links and employment opportunities. There are fewer organisations in these areas offering support to refugees.
- 52. Private housing is in demand in both areas, which, similarly to Norwich, would make it difficult to secure family-sized accommodation at market rates. There is some affordable private rented accommodation in Great Yarmouth, but this is predominately located in the town centre and tends to be flats, making it unsuitable for large families. A top-up to housing benefit is likely in other areas.
- 53. There is a greater risk of social isolation in Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn. These areas are mainly White British, with relatively tiny populations of West Asian origin. There is only one Sunni mosque community in each area.

54. The LGA has advised that spare room offers from residents are not appropriate because of safeguarding considerations. Accommodation provided must be self-contained.