

SUBJECT:	<i>Response to the Petition to the Council in relation to Refugees</i>
REPORT OF:	<i>Graham Harris, Healthy Communities Portfolio Holder</i>
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WARD/S AFFECTED	<i>All</i>

1. Purpose of Report

To consider the petition presented to Council in relation to; '*welcoming 50 refugee families to Chesham and its surrounding villages and help them to find a safe place to stay where they can stop running from the living hell of war*'.

RECOMMENDATION

1. To work in partnership with the other local authorities and agencies in Buckinghamshire to provide a full system response to the Governments request to support Syrian Refugees under the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme.
2. To report to Cabinet on any future proposals as to the needs of refugees and the numbers that could be accommodated under the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme. That report to consider the cost to the Council over a 5 year period.

2. Executive Summary

3. Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 Currently there has been no decision by Members in any of the local authorities in Buckinghamshire on how many people we may be able to assist. There is however the recognition that no single authority in Bucks can provide the totality of services required by refugees and that the Buckinghamshire position needs to be a partnership response.
- 3.2 There is uncertainty as to the level of assurance that the Government has currently provided in relation to the full recovery of costs associated with supporting refugees. The government has indicated that the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme would operate through a pooled budget approach. There are concerns amongst partners that the health needs of refugees could be such that the remaining allocated funding would be insufficient to cover other costs such as education, social care, housing etc.

3.3 Social housing is under immense pressure from existing local needs so any housing solution would need to be via the Government fully funding accommodation in the private sector. With the rollout of the welfare benefit changes combined with high demand for rental properties there is currently a significant risk that the costs of private rental accommodation will not be fully met through housing benefit and the additional costs could fall to the Council.

3.4 As well as financial risks to partners there are risks associated with safeguarding and community cohesion which would also require consideration.

4. Content of Report

4.1 A petition signed by 273 petitioners was presented to Council in relation to; *'welcoming 50 refugee families to Chesham and its surrounding villages and help them to find a safe place to stay where they can stop running from the living hell of war'*

4.2 The Government has written to all Councils requesting that they consider what support they could provide under the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme.

4.3 Officers have met with colleagues from Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust, the Clinical Commissioning Groups, Buckinghamshire County Council, Thames Valley Police and the other District Councils in Buckinghamshire to assess the needs of Syrian Refugees and the guidance to local authorities and partners in relation to the operation of the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme.

4.4 The Home Office is of the view that at least 20% of the refugees may have complex needs. But because of the nature of their experiences leading to their inclusion in the programme, there is a real possibility that many will have long term conditions with significant primary and secondary health care needs. Officers will consider if there are any advantages in housing refugees in cluster to encourage mutual support which may assist any integration in to the community.

4.5 The guidance would require a whole system approach to supporting the needs of refugees dispersed through the programme which would include access to health care, welfare, social care, education, and accommodation for the period of their stay in the UK.

4.6 As part of the whole system approach partners have been asked to gather and share information about the services they provide and what resources have been offered locally, which would meet the anticipated needs of refugees, (accepting that some individuals may have very specific needs) to help us to develop a view of what sort of capacity we might have in Bucks.

4.7 The District Council, in supporting a countywide approach to the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme, would be required to find self-contained accommodation for its allocated number of refugee families, providing letting rooms in a family home would not be suitable due to the need to safeguard vulnerable persons.

4.8 It is not fully understood as to the level of support that local communities would wish to provide to refugees; however the resident's petition would indicate some interest in supporting up to 50 families in the Chesham and surrounding village area. The Council has not received similar approaches from other communities or from the Town and Parish Council. A small number of residents have contacted the Council to offer support but none to offer self-contained housing accommodation. The Housing division is recording offers of assistance and directing persons to the government website on how they can assist.

4.9 Government has through its guidance provided some guarantees of financial support in relation to the 1st year of any settlement and an indication has been provided that financial support would continue. However welfare benefit changes may adversely impact on the ability of the authority to secure affordable rented housing.

4.10 The recent partnership meeting agreed that greater clarity was required on;

- The Government proposals to cover the full costs of refugees over a 5 year period
- The sufficiency of the primary care costs to meet potential needs
- With the high demand on social housing currently experienced and the changes to social housing provision, what availability is there in the private sector to accommodate refugees
- What are the potential risks associated with a pooled budget particularly in relation to the role out of the welfare benefit changes and Universal Credit and the impact of higher health or social care costs.
- What lessons can we learn from peers in providing support and in identifying the needs of refugees?

5. Consultation

Not Applicable

6. Options

There are two main options and these are as follows:-

- a) To decline the offer of support to refugees at the current time based on the identified financial risks to the Council
- b) To continue to work in partnership to mitigate the risks and identify opportunities to accommodate a number of refugees

7. Corporate Implications

- 3.1 Financial – There is a risk that accommodation costs may not be fully met through the programme and larger families in the private sector may be impacted by the restrictions in relation to the benefit cap and local housing allowance. As a pooled budget approach would be undertaken to fund the health and social care, education needs of refugees through the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme the gap in housing costs may fall to the council to fund.
- 3.2 Legal – the council would have a duty to provide housing advice and assistance including finding accommodation for refugees that have been provided entry in to the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme.
- 3.3 Other risks – specialist support would be required to be provided to refugees to enable access to housing, work, welfare, education, healthcare and social care and to enable integration into the local community. Whilst there is support for refugees in some quarters of the local community, there is a risk of crime and disorder from those with opposing views requiring specialist support and mediation to reduce the risk of community tensions.

8. Links to Council Policy Objectives

A key aim of the Council is to ‘address the needs of the elderly and those who are vulnerable’ and ‘work with partners to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour’ and to ‘improve community safety, working with our key partners to help safeguard children and vulnerable adults and prevent them becoming victims of crime’.

9. Next Steps

Following agreement officers would participate with partners to identify a whole systems approach to the government request to support the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme and bring a further report to Cabinet.

Background	None other than those referred to in this report
Papers:	