

CABINET RECOMMENDATION ON THE MOTION SUBMITTED TO COUNCIL ON MONDAY 5TH OCTOBER 2015

Cabinet Member: Councillor Mrs Julia Langley

Wards Affected: All

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RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL

That the motion submitted to the Council on Monday 5th October 2015 be considered by Cabinet and recommendations made to full Council.

Reason for Decision

The motion requests that the District Council accept a minimum of 200 refugees in the first batch of 10,000 over the next few months. An influx of large numbers of people requires a coordinated, planned approach in partnership with national government, county council- health and social care, the National Health Service, DWP and voluntary sector agencies and others. This is to ensure that the best possible care is taken to ensure such vulnerable people have appropriate support when resettling in the UK.

The District Council has statutory duties relating to housing and will need agreement with and close cooperation, of the County Council amongst other agencies before committing to any acceptance of refugee families in the District. As yet, only limited information has been provided by the Home Office and, therefore, further information will need to be made available to the council and partner agencies to enable a full and considered debate before any decisions are made

Standing Order 12.7 of the Council's Constitution provides for Cabinet to report back to Full Council on the Motion, by advising the Council as to whether or not the motion should be adopted or give any such other advice as is appropriate.

Standing Order 14.23 states that no amendment to a motion shall be allowed which is contrary to the motion before the meeting or has the effect of introducing a new proposal.

Corporate Implications

1. The acceptance of large numbers of households to the area could have a significant impact on the availability of accommodation for those in housing need in the district. This could greatly reduce our abilities to prevent homelessness and to meet housing need.

Executive Summary

2. A Motion was submitted to Council on Monday 5 October 2015, proposed by Councillor Khalil Ahmed and seconded by Councillor Rafiq Raja. The Motion stated that "In light of the Syrian refugee crisis and announcement by Government to take 20,000 refugees between now and 2020. This Council

resolves to take a minimum of 200 refugees in the first batch of 10,000 that will be in over the next few months”

3. Members should note that the Council no longer has any housing stock in which to offer accommodation to any additional households, and has over 1,500 households in housing need on Bucks Home Choice at present.
4. The relocation of refugees is not simply a matter of providing accommodation as full; wrap around support including education, social care, translations, help with utilities and benefits; are required to ensure integration into existing communities.
5. According to the Home Office, “Local authorities will need to think carefully about whether they have the infrastructure and support networks needed to ensure the appropriate care and integration of these refugees.” We will be unable to act alone in taking refugees into the District as we will need the support of County Council, NHS, Thames Valley Police, DWP, Home Office, as well as local communities.
6. 200 refugees would (if housed into social housing) take up almost a year’s supply of social housing in the District through Bucks Home Choice.

Sustainable Community Strategy/Council Priorities - Implications

7. Any assistance provided would contribute to the Council’s strategic priority of ensuring targeted and affordable help for those in most need is met.

Background and Issues

8. The Leader has stated previously that, “The world can see that this is a humanitarian crisis and thousands of people urgently need help. This is a crisis which has implications on an international, national and ultimately comes down to a local level. “
9. Housing is only part of the package of support and assistance required for refugees, with education, benefits, health care, social care, interpreters, benefits and counselling required ensuring those persons settled in the UK receive the care and support they deserve. The District Council does not have control over the non-housing aspects of the support required and as such would require a joined up, partnership arrangement with the County Council and other agencies.
10. Within Wycombe District we have a proud tradition of helping others and the generosity of local people, both here in our District and across the Country, has been shown once again with this humanitarian crisis. Support will need to be co-ordinated locally and nationally to ensure we provide effective support
11. The Home Office has stated that its existing dispersal policy is aimed at ensuring an equitable distribution of refugees across the country so that no individual local authority bears a disproportionate share of the burden. They are working closely with local authorities to ensure that this remains the case. They have stated that they are determined to ensure that no local authority is asked to take more than the local structures are able to cope with. They are talking to

local authorities and other partners to ensure that capacity can be identified and the impact on those taking new cases can be managed in a fair and controlled way.

12. As yet, no specific numbers of refugees have been discussed for the South East and discussions are on-going with the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration, Bucks County Council and the other Buckinghamshire Districts to consider what assistance can be provided locally.
13. As Members will no doubt be aware, accommodation is in very short supply in Wycombe with over 70 households in temporary accommodation at present and a further 1,500 in identified housing need. All of these households are seeking permanent homes within the district which is provided in partnership with Registered Housing Providers as we do not have any housing stock.
14. In 2014/15 we were able to allocate a total of 383 properties; of which 247 were for general needs housing through the housing register.
15. In the same period we have been able to access around 42 properties in the private rented sector for households to prevent or relieve homelessness.
16. The Home Office has advised us that any placements of refugees will require the accepting Local Authority to procure accommodation at local housing allowance levels (housing benefit).
17. The current benefit cap is £26,000 per annum, with plans for this to be reduced further in 2016. The local housing allowance for 2- 4 bedroom accommodation in the District currently ranging from £9,400 to £17,890 per annum. Any further reduction in the benefit cap will make private rented accommodation less likely to be affordable for large households.
18. Homelessness is increasing in the district and nationally, with a rise in the numbers of applicants seeking assistance.
19. As a result of increasing approaches for assistance, the reduced availability of private rented accommodation in the District due to placements or households from the London boroughs, the housing service is under increasing pressure to assist those households to whom we have an existing duty or will have a duty to assist.
20. Discussions with these agencies across Buckinghamshire and the South East are on-going, with Wycombe District Council a willing participant in these discussions and planning.
21. Cabinet are also asked to note the number of offers of assistance from various groups and agencies that have been received, including but not limited to, the Church Leaders of the District and 'High Wycombe Donation for Refugees'.
22. At present, the advice from the Home Office is that members of the public would not be expected to, nor requested to provide accommodation refugees in their own homes. However, all offers of assistance have been noted and will be passed to the Home Office or considered by the District Council should the need arise.

Consultation

23. No specific consultation has been undertaken in relation to this item. The Motion itself will be subject to debate at Council.

Conclusions

24. The motion should be considered and debated by Full Council

Next Steps

25. The Motion will be debated at Full Council.

Background Papers

None