

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RELOCATION SCHEME
Meeting: FALKIRK COUNCIL
Date: 16 DECEMBER 2015
Author: DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE & HOUSING SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide update information on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme and recommendations for Falkirk Council's participation in the scheme.
- 1.2 The report also provides a brief summary of the history of the Syrian conflict, detail on the current work taking place across Scotland to plan for Syrian Refugee Resettlement and also the work needed to be progressed locally across the partnership to assess the services required to be provided if this area is to receive refugees from Syria.
- 1.3 Meetings of the Syrian VPR Scheme Officer Group co-ordinated by COSLA and attended by Scottish Local Authorities have been held on 1st, 12th October and 5th November to discuss "phase 2" of the scheme, including funding and logistics.
- 1.4 In addition, a number of practical considerations were discussed in relation to Health, DWP, and liaison with Registered Social Landlords, Biometric Residence Permits, Interpretation & translation services and media interest.
- 1.5 The Syrian VPR Officers Group will meet every 3 weeks to ensure that all Local Authorities are kept up to date with any changes to the scheme.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 As outlined in a briefing note previously circulated to Members, on 4 September the First Minister announced that the Scottish Government would support the resettlement of 1000 refugees in both financial and practical terms over the next 5 years. Scottish Government have confirmed that the First Minister has made it very clear that 1,000 refugees coming to Scotland should be seen as an absolute minimum and very much an initial, immediate figure. On 7 September the Prime Minister announced that the UK would now receive 20,000 refugees over the life of the current parliament. These refugees will be brought to the UK from refugee camps in the Middle East. Based on the commitment by Scottish Government in relation to accommodating a minimum of 1%, c2000 refugees will therefore be resettled in Scotland over the period of the UK Parliament.
- 2.2 The Syrian VPR scheme runs parallel with the Gateway Protection Scheme, the UK Government's existing refugee resettlement scheme.

- 2.3 A recent announcement confirmed that Scotland is expecting to receive a third of the Syrian refugees due to arrive in the UK before Christmas.

3. FUNDING

- 3.1 Currently, the first 12 months of a refugee's resettlement costs are fully funded by central government using the overseas aid budget. The Home Office – Resettlement Gold Command announced on 30th September that “to ensure that LA can plan ahead” funding would be available to assist with costs in future years. The funding available for years 2 onwards has not yet been determined.
- 3.2 In addition, it has been confirmed that financial support will now be available for Health and Social Care, although it was unclear how this will be calculated at this stage.
- 3.3 There was no suggestion that additional financial support would be available for English as an Additional Language (EAL) courses/tutors as “this is a matter for local discretion”.
- 3.4 Scottish Government has also announced that they will provide £1m funding. No guidance has been provided in relation how to bid for this funding or details of the projects which would be eligible.

4. SYRIAN VPR PROCESS

- 4.1 As advised in the previous briefing, the Home Office carries out all medical and security checks; arranges for Exit Visas and issues Entry Visas into the UK, prior to notifying Local Authorities.
- 4.2 The current process takes around 4 months from the identification of the refugee to their arrival in the UK. The Government has advised that this process is to be streamlined and it is expected that this will now be 35-40 days.
- 4.3 At present the Biometric Residence Permits required for identification purposes can only be accessed via a few post offices in Scotland, however, the Home Office have announced that those refugees arriving from January onwards will have been issued with their Biometric card before leaving for the UK..
- 4.4 After the Local Authority advise the Home Office that they are ready to receive refugees, they are given access to the Home Office portal and are then able to see the information relating to the refugees allocated to them. The information includes family make up, age and any specific needs. Further medical information will be provided shortly after that via a full medical health assessment report. Local Authorities are expected to work with their Health partners to prepare a care plan if this is required. LA will have 7 days to accept or reject the refugees. The HO has indicated that if there are significant medical issues, the refugee(s) can be “accepted in principle” awaiting further medical information.

- 4.5 It is the LA responsibility to meet the refugees at the airport and transport them to their accommodation. Accommodation will be provided from the Council's own housing stock. Discussions have taken place with our local Registered Social Landlords who are also willing to provide accommodation if available.
- 4.6 In addition, the LA require to co-ordinate interpretation services; liaison with the DWP to issue NI numbers and benefits; Biometric Residence Permits (if not yet issued); enrolment of children in school; registration with a GP; getting a Bank Account; access to English language lessons and other integration and support services.
- 4.7 Previous experience from other Councils has highlighted that there is also a requirement for significant tenancy support as well as orientation e.g. public transport, shopping etc.

5. STRATEGIC WORKING GROUP / COMMUNITY PLANNING PARTNERSHIP

- 5.1 It is assumed that most areas in Scotland will offer accommodation for resettlement. Falkirk Council has agreed to participate in the scheme and has indicated to COSLA that we would be willing to accommodate 3% of those arriving in Scotland (pro-rata %age per population). Therefore it is anticipated that we would offer accommodation to approximately 60 refugees. Refugees would only be resettled once appropriate accommodation became available to meet the needs of the specific refugees allocated to us.
- 5.2 As noted above, there is a significant amount of work required in preparation and for on-going support and the requirement for early liaison with external partners was emphasised, in particular, Health and DWP.
- 5.3 In relation to Falkirk Council, a strategic working group has been set up to prepare an action plan to ensure that we have the necessary integration support in place. Representatives from Housing, Policy, Governance, Childrens Services, Adult Social Work Services and Finance are included in the working group.
- 5.4 In addition, the Community Planning Partnership will play a critical role in relation to the wider response to the resettlement programme; therefore a planning group has been established to consider this wider response and the support needed beyond that of the Council. The first meeting of this group took place on 23rd November 2015. This group will link with the Council's strategic planning group and ensure there is a co-ordinated and appropriate response to the needs of any refugees resettling in this area.
- 5.5 The following organisations are involved:
- NHS Forth Valley
 - DWP
 - Skills Development Scotland
 - Police Scotland
 - Forth Valley College
 - Translation Services
 - Scottish Refugee Council

- Relevant third sector orgs including befriending services etc. (represented in the first instance by CVS Falkirk & District and the Central Scotland Equalities Council).

In addition to identifying key services that our community planning partners can provide, we need to identify key links with other support organisations including the local mosques and other faith groups.

- 5.6 We know from the settlement of previous refugees and asylum seekers that there will be a need for support services, beyond those we would normally provide, to ensure that cultural differences and norms are addressed. The lack of this support has, in the past, led to some issues for people settling in Scotland. This is something the third sector might be best placed to provide and should be explored with partners.
- 5.7 It is anticipated that Falkirk Council will be in a position to accept refugees from the beginning of 2016 subject to suitable accommodation being available.
- 5.8 Members are therefore requested to authorise officers to contact the Home Office to advise them that we wish to participate in the scheme from January 2016.
- 5.9 Given the extent of the work involved in the resettlement programme, and in line with most other Local Authorities, consideration should also be given to employing a temporary Resettlement Officer for the first year – 18 months. The officer would provide advice and support to access appropriate services and establish community links, working closely with local stakeholders and in partnership with statutory and voluntary sector agencies.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 6.1 **Note the update regarding Syrian VPR schemes;**
- 6.2 **Note the work that the Council is proposing regarding this scheme;**
- 6.3 **Authorise officers to contact the Home Office to advise that Falkirk Council will be in a position to receive refugees from January 2016; and**
- 6.4 **Note that a temporary Resettlement Officer will be recruited in line with the Councils Recruitment and Selection Policy.**

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DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE & HOUSING SERVICES

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Ref: AAA161215 – Syrian VPR Scheme

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LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL