

SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

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| <u>Report of the:</u> | Head of Housing & Environmental Services |
| <u>Contact:</u> | Rod Brown |
| Urgent Decision?(yes/no) | No |
| If yes, reason urgent decision required: | N/A |
| <u>Annexes/Appendices</u> (attached): | Annexe 1: Summary Home Office Information Booklet for Local Authorities on the Resettlement Scheme |
| <u>Other available papers</u> (not attached): | None stated |

REPORT SUMMARY

This report sets out issues around the Government's invitation to participate in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and details three possible options with a recommendation to support option 3, where the council participates in the (SVPRS) for five years and assists up to 5 households over this period, only using properties specifically identified for housing those arriving under the scheme.

RECOMMENDATION (S)

- (1) That the Council participates in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) to assist up to 5 Syrian refugee households over 5 years only using suitable properties provided for this specific purpose. As set out in Option 3 in the report.
- (2) That the Council note, and, in principle, support the intention of Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network to apply to become a Community Sponsor and authorise the Chief Executive, following consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee to endorse their application if she thinks it appropriate to do so.

Notes

1 Implications for the Council's Key Priorities, Service Plans and Sustainable Community Strategy

1.1 The report sets out how the council might support those refugees who participate in the government Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS). A decision to participate will include providing suitable housing for up to 2 years. The council's Corporate Plan includes Supporting our Community – helping those at risk of homelessness.

2 Background

2.1 The Home Secretary launched the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) in September 2015 in response to the escalating conflict in Syria. The Government has pledged to resettle 20,000 refugees over 5 years from refugee camps bordering Syria under this scheme and has invited all councils to participate.

2.2 The SVPRS aims to provide assistance and resettlement for the most vulnerable refugee households living in camps bordering Syria. Under the scheme, the Home Office (via the United Nations High Commission for Refugees or UNHCR) identify vulnerable households in the camps, handle their refugee applications and carry out the essential screening/vetting checks prior to them travelling to the UK.

2.3 A Summary Home Office Information Booklet for Local Authorities on the Resettlement Scheme is attached at Appendix 1

2.4 According to a recent Home Affairs Committee Report, about 70 local authorities have taken households under the scheme (although many more may have pledged to do so).

2.5 Within Surrey, 7 of the 11 Boroughs & Districts have so far joined the scheme, although not all of these have yet taken households. The following table provides an overview:

| Council | Joined VPRS | No. of refugee households that council is aiming to assist over 5 years | No. of refugee households assisted up to 31/7/16 |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|
| Guildford | Yes | No figure set | 2 |
| Mole Valley | Yes | 25 | 2 |
| Reigate & Banstead | Yes | 10 | 1 |
| Runnymede | Yes | 10 | 0 |
| Surrey Heath | Yes | 10 | 0 |
| Woking | Yes | 60 | 7 |

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| Council | Joined VPRS | No. of refugee households that council is aiming to assist over 5 years | No. of refugee households assisted up to 31/7/16 |
|----------------|--------------------|--|---|
| Elmbridge | Yes | 5 -15 | 0 |
| Epsom & Ewell | No | | |
| Spelthorne | No | | |
| Tandridge | No | | |
| Waverley | No | | |

- 2.6 There are four Surrey district or borough councils who have not yet confirmed their participation in SVPRS. It is understood that Tandridge and Waverley are considering the possibility of participation.
- 2.7 Epsom and Ewell Borough has and continues to experience significant demand for affordable housing with demand significantly outweighing supply. The council has approximately 100 families or individuals living in temporary accommodation within the borough. In addition there are approximately 50 families or individuals who are accommodated in nightly paid emergency temporary accommodation, often referred to as Bed and Breakfast accommodation.
- 2.8 There are approximately 2200 applicants on the council's Housing Needs Register. This register is currently being reviewed as part of the introduction of the new Housing Allocation Policy. Although it is expected that the number of eligible applicants will be much lower after the register is reviewed, the number of eligible applicants for housing is still expected to be between 800 to 1000.
- 2.9 Given the scarcity of suitable accommodation within the borough for our existing housing needs, the most challenging aspect of participating in the SVPRS would be the provision of suitable accommodation.
- 2.10 Suitable accommodation would need to be available before a family was accepted and the council would be able to decline a family in the event that suitable accommodation was not available. The council would be able to stipulate the household size it is intended to resettle. We do not currently have any offers of accommodation, although the council has not been seeking or advertising accommodation for this specific purpose.
- 2.11 It is a pre-requisite for participation in the SVPRS that the accommodation is available for at least the first 12 months and ideally for a period of 2 years from the date of arrival of the refugee household. This accommodation must be a self-contained furnished home. It does not need to be social housing and it can be a privately rented home but it cannot constitute 'lodging with a host family'. Most councils in Surrey who

have so far joined are intending to assist through securing a private rented sector tenancy rather than through a social housing tenancy.

- 2.12 In addition to providing a home, the council would also need to greet and transport the household from the UK airport to the accommodation provided. The council would also need to provide support and assistance to a household to enable them to adapt to a new country and integrate into the local community. As an example, this might involve specialist casework support and assistance with access to education, health care and language skills for at least their first 12 months.
- 2.13 Under this scheme arriving households are given refugee status for 5 years and this carries eligibility to work and claim welfare benefits including Housing Benefit. Should the conflict in Syria ease then it is possible their permission to remain in the UK could change but in any event, it would be expected that, over time, households would become less dependent and more self-sufficient, particularly in terms of securing employment and be in a position to secure their own accommodation longer term.
- 2.14 Within Surrey, those boroughs that have so far pledged to assist are working with the County Council under a partnership umbrella to ensure support is planned and co-ordinated given the two tier challenges. This is currently led by the Chief Executive of Mole Valley. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is represented at this co-ordinating group.
- 2.15 Should the council decide to participate in the scheme, the council would be allocated a refugee household some months ahead of their arrival into the UK. There would however need to be an available property in time for their arrival.

3 Previous Council consideration of refugee assistance

- 3.1 The Council debated a motion relating to assisting with the migration crisis at the meeting on 15th October 2015. Minute 24 of the meeting recorded the Motion as stating:

“This Council views with sorrow the on-going migration crisis on mainland Europe and expresses its deep regret at the tragic loss of lives and deeply distressing images that have resulted.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council notes that the European Union has failed to come up with credible policies to manage this humanitarian disaster, but recognises that the UK has a proud history of offering sanctuary to those who are fleeing from dangerous and desperate situations in other countries.

Notwithstanding the economic pressures that Epsom & Ewell is facing, this Council resolves to work with its eleven boroughs and districts and Surrey County Council to support initiatives to help migrants who may

seek refuge in the United Kingdom, and for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council to take its fair share of refugees.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council calls on the British Government to ensure adequate funding and resources are made available to all local authorities involved.”

3.2 During the debate the following points were noted:

- The Council had been in discussion with neighbouring Councils and Surrey County Council about how we may be able to help those caught up in this terrible crisis, and are committed to do what we can;
- The Council was in a challenging position in terms of its ability to accommodate refugees when there was already a chronic shortage of housing in the borough and it was currently facing difficulties accommodating homeless persons in the Borough;
- The Council did not have a housing stock and was reliant on its ability to nominate to vacancies in housing association accommodation;
- It was expected that the Local Government Association would have a key role to play in co-ordinating local authority response to the crisis, as it was important that all public services were able to provide a co-ordinated and effective response;
- It did not appear that the Council had the skills and capacity to offer the full range of requirements of the resettlement scheme;
- Whilst it seemed clear that the first 12 months of support would be fully funded by central Government, the position beyond that was far less clear;
- A public meeting was to be held on 18 November at King’s Church, Longmead Road on the issue.

Upon being put the **MOTION** was **CARRIED** (unanimously)

4 Option 1: The Council does not participate in the SVPRS

- 4.1 The advantage of not participating is that there is no loss of affordable housing which would otherwise be available for use for those living in temporary accommodation, out of borough bed and breakfast and those on our Housing Needs Register.
- 4.2 The disadvantages include the possibility of reputational damage from groups involved in refugee settlement, the government and wider public opinion.

5 Option 2: The council participating in the SVPRS to assist up to 5 Syrian refugee households over 5 years

- 5.1 Under this option, refugee households would be accommodated in suitable private rented properties that would otherwise have been used for those on the Housing Needs Register. Should suitable properties be offered by either private landlords, church, faith or charitable organisations for the express purpose of housing refugee households, then these would also be considered. .
- 5.2 The advantage of participating in this manner is that the council could support the national humanitarian efforts to resettle vulnerable Syrian families and there is a degree of certainty that suitable properties would be made available. This option could impact on those currently homeless as it relies on private rented properties that would otherwise be available to those on the Housing Needs Register. The impact of this option on the local supply of affordable housing would however be limited, as we would only be taking one household for each year of the scheme. Consequently we would only be losing one property per year of the scheme that would otherwise have been available to a person on the council's Housing Needs Register.
- 5.3 Under this option, the property used to settle the refugee household could be either a private sector rented property or a property made available for the specific purpose of assisting in the SVPRS.
- 5.4 The disadvantage of this option could be that participation could use up to 5 properties, over the 5 years, that may otherwise have been available to local households in housing need.

6 Option 3: This option involves the council participating in the SVPRS to assist up to 5 Syrian refugee households over 5 years, but avoids using accommodation that would otherwise be available to local households looking to the council to assist them with their housing needs.

- 6.1 Under this option only accommodation provided for the express use of SVPRS would be used. The property used would be made available to the council for this express purpose and could include properties offered by private landlords, church, faith or charitable organisations which would not be offered for use for meeting the needs of those on the Council's Housing Register.
- 6.2 The council would not be in a position to assist SVPRS households until a property was made available by such landlords, church, faith, charitable organisations or other landlords.
- 6.3 The advantage of this option would be that there would be no loss of available housing for local households in housing need.

- 6.4 The disadvantage of this option would be that we have no control over the supply of such properties and we may not be able to effectively participate in the SVPRS until such properties are made available. There are currently no properties being offered to the council for the resettlement of SVPRS households.

7 Funding resettlement under SVPRS

- 7.1 If the decision was to participate in the scheme through either option 2 or 3, the Council would use some of the government's funding to purchase specialist support services to assist the refugee family. This might be purchasing support currently being used by other nearby councils employing specialist staff. Reigate and Banstead currently employ a Refugee Support Worker to work with Reigate & Banstead and Mole Valley cases. This post sits within their shared Family Support Service and it is understood that there may be some capacity for Epsom and Ewell to buy into this post. In addition there may be some scope to do the same with the Woking resource should this be needed.
- 7.2 In some cases, up front security or deposit payments may be needed to hold a property prior to a household arriving. It is understood that these costs, up to 8 weeks, could be met by the Home Office, unless a landlord was willing to take a sympathetic stance.
- 7.3 Under the Scheme the council would receive funding from the Home Office to cover a range of expenses equivalent to £8,520 per household member for the first year. For a family of four this would equate to £34,080 for the first year. There would be separate funding for education depending on the age of the child.
- 7.4 The Scheme is intended to provide the essential support a refugee family requires from their immediate arrival until they become more able to support themselves. As a result the government funding is tapered down over five years, reducing to £5,000 per person in year 2, down to £1,000 per person in Year 5 (see table in 7.5.).
- 7.5 The SVPRS funding is phased over the five years of the scheme

| Year | Local Authority Costs (£ per person per year) |
|------|---|
| 1 | 8,520 |
| 2 | 5,000 |
| 3 | 3,700 |
| 4 | 2,300 |
| 5 | 1,000 |

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- 7.1 If the Council accommodated one four person household each year over five years, the total funding to the council would be as set out in the table below.

| | | Family 1 | Family 2 | Family 3 | Family 4 | Family 5 | Total |
|----------|--------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| £ | | £ | £ | £ | £ | £ | £ |
| 8,520 | Year 1 | 34,080 | | | | | 34,080 |
| 5,000 | Year 2 | 20,000 | 34,080 | | | | 54,080 |
| 3,700 | Year 3 | 14,800 | 20,000 | 34,080 | | | 68,880 |
| 2,300 | Year 4 | 9,200 | 14,800 | 20,000 | 34,080 | | 78,080 |
| 1,000 | Year 5 | 4,000 | 9,200 | 14,800 | 20,000 | 34,080 | 82,080 |
| | Year 6 | | 4,000 | 9,200 | 14,800 | 20,000 | 48,000 |
| | Year 7 | | | 4,000 | 9,200 | 14,800 | 28,000 |
| | Year 8 | | | | 4,000 | 9,200 | 13,200 |
| | Year 9 | | | | | 4,000 | 4,000 |
| | | 82,080 | 82,080 | 82,080 | 82,080 | 82,080 | 410,400 |

- 7.2 This funding can only be used to reimburse agreed costs associated with housing, support and social care. Any health costs are dealt with separately and education is subject to a separate payment depending on the age of the child.

- 7.3 Should Members decide to support the SVPRS, then it would be proposed that the refugees' housing costs would be met from their Housing Benefit (up to the LHA rate). Similar to other families reliant on benefits, refugee households might also be subject to the benefit cap.

8 Non VPRS cases

- 8.1 Some Syrian people have fled the country and travelled to Europe, including the UK, independently and have claimed and been granted refugee status once here. In some cases families have travelled together or one or two family members have travelled first and once granted refugee status have then been able to bring remaining family members here. During the process of arriving and claiming asylum they will temporarily be accommodated through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Once they have been granted refugee status they can then seek accommodation through any local authority to whom they may have a family connection. If they have no local connection they may approach any local authority.

- 8.2 Epsom and Ewell Borough Council currently do not have any Syrian refugees in temporary accommodation. The two refugee households in council accommodation are not Syrian. In the last six months the council has had one homeless application from a Syrian who at the time of the application was accommodated in a volunteer's home and was done independently of the council. However as other family members were due to join the individual shortly he required larger accommodation. It is believed that this potential homeless issue was resolved through a suitable property being offered by a charity or faith group from outside the borough. As these households have not gone through VPRS there has been no specific funding made available by the Home Office to support their resettlement.

9 Unaccompanied children

- 9.1 Surrey County Council is involved in responding to the issue of children under the age of 18 travelling to the UK from Syria and other war torn countries unaccompanied. It is the responsibility of the relevant Social Services Authority receiving or first identifying the person as an unaccompanied asylum seeker child (UASC) that must take responsibility for them. Surrey currently has the third largest number of UASC in their care in the UK. There is currently a shortage of suitable placements including foster placements.

10 Community and voluntary sector activity

- 10.1 Within the borough there has been a significant level of charitable and faith group involvement in providing for refugees. The Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network (EERN) are an active volunteer group who have been supporting refugees from various countries settle in the borough. They are willing to work with the council in providing the necessary support to any families arriving through the SVPRS.
- 10.2 The EERN are in the early stages of preparing an application for Community Sponsor status with the Home Office. This would enable EERN to become directly involved in supporting the resettlement of resettled families. Any successful application to become a Community Sponsor will require EERN to meet a number of pre-conditions including obtaining the endorsement of the local authority. EERN are not currently in a position to make their application which will be dependent on further discussions with the council.
- 10.3 There is potential for offers of suitable accommodation to be made from EERN and other voluntary sector organisations and individuals. The advantage of using accommodation provided for the express purpose of housing refugees is that it effectively avoids the displacement costs of using property that would otherwise have been used to accommodate an existing resident in housing need.
- 10.4 The potential for the council to work collaboratively with EERN through a formal arrangement, in delivering our responsibilities associated with SVPRS can be explored further.

- 10.5 The proposal is that members agree, in principle, to support the intention of Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network to apply to become a Community Sponsor and authorise the Chief Executive, following consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee to endorse their application if it is considered appropriate to do so.

11 Financial and Manpower Implications

- 11.1 The funding provided through the SVPRS is operated through a Home Office Funding Instruction where the council is allocated a specified amount for each resettled person.
- 11.2 The local authority funding is intended to include:
- Preparatory costs such as securing and setting up accommodation, translation, administration and transport costs.
 - Delivery costs including one off cash payments of £200 per person, providing housing and integration casework support, administration and finance and ESOL provision and social care costs
- 11.3 Funding for year 2 – 5 is at a lower level to reflect the expectation that support needs will diminish and provision of housing is only a requirement for a period of 12 months, potentially up to 2 years depending on the changing household needs over that time. Councils can also apply for top up payments where necessary where there may be extenuating circumstances where additional reimbursement of costs are necessary. .
- 11.4 It is clearly the intention of the Government that the funding scheme meets most if not all the council's costs.
- 11.5 The council's costs are likely to involve securing appropriate accommodation, furnishing accommodation, staff time and payments for commissioned specialist services. Separate payments are available for educational costs. Health costs are covered separately to those relating to local authorities.
- 11.6 Financial risk associated with options 2 and 3, to participate in the SVPRS, is minimised by restricting the level of assistance to the local circumstances within the borough. The offer to assist with 1 households per year of the scheme limits any potential impact of participating in the scheme.
- 11.7 In Option 2, there could be some level of 'displacement cost' of a home being offered to a refugee household that might otherwise have been let a local family in need and potentially one that might otherwise require temporary or B&B accommodation from the council. This is minimised by Officers seeking to secure only private rented accommodation (as opposed to social housing)

- 11.8 In Option 3, the risk of 'displacement cost' is further minimised by the council seeking out offers of accommodation from voluntary sector and owners/landlords who might not otherwise have let to council nominees.
- 11.9 Should option 2 or 3 be agreed, to assist one family per year, the additional demand associated with co-ordinating the support to the family and the provision and management of accommodation can be taken up within the existing Housing Services resources, along with specialist support. If the level of demand was to be significantly more, it would be necessary to examine other delivery models, including employing additional staff, financed through the government's funding per refugee.
- 11.10 **Chief Finance Officer's comments:** *Given the intention by the Government to reimburse Local Authorities for the majority, if not all, of the costs associated with this scheme, the financial risk to Council appears to be low. Officers are seeking to minimise the financial risk by recommending that if Members want to participate in the scheme, that this assistance is limited to one family a year for five years, and in option 3, by using accommodation that will not negatively impact on temporary accommodation or bed and breakfast expenditure. Endorsing or working closely with EERN may help to mitigate some of this risk also.*

12 Legal Implications (including implications for matters relating to equality)

- 12.1 Should the council agree to join the SVPRS, then the council will be required to abide by the Government's requirements for the scheme.
- 12.2 **Monitoring Officer's comments:** *There are no significant legal implications arising from a decision to participate in the SVPRS, suffice to say that once we have committed to join the scheme, we must ensure that we meet our obligations to Government and, most importantly, to the refugees themselves.*

13 Sustainability Policy and Community Safety Implications

- 13.1 The emphasis on programmed movement of refugees in SVPRS, with dedicated additional support both financial and practical, will optimise the successful resettlement of refugees in to the community.

14 Partnerships

- 14.1 The operation of the SVPRS in Surrey is reliant on the partnership working between Surrey County Council, the Home Office, Police, Clinical Commissioning Groups and the other boroughs and districts participating within the county. A multi-agency, pan-Surrey group has been established to bring the collective efforts of all the partners involved together, learning from each other, developing best practice and sharing resources where possible.

- 14.2 This scheme also offers the opportunity to develop a significant role for charity and voluntary groups within the borough. There is the potential for the council to work collaboratively with external groups keen to alleviate the problems associated with refugee resettlement.

15 Risk Assessment

- 15.1 Option 1 presents the risk of reputational damage with external groups, participating councils and possibly the wider public. There may be some degree of mitigation given the local housing situation and the shortage of affordable homes within the borough.
- 15.2 Option 2 presents the risk that there could be reputational damage from diverting accommodation away from those in local housing need for use with refugees. However, this is mitigated by limiting participation to only one household per year.
- 15.3 Participation in the scheme through either Option 2 and 3 present the risk that preparatory effort may be wasted should the intended family not arrive or decide to leave the accommodation provided. Each household will have their own needs and there is also a risk associated with expenses incurred not being recoverable from Home Office funding. This is mitigated by limiting the offer of participation to only one family per year.

16 Conclusion and Recommendations

- 16.1 The decision as to whether to participate in the SVPRS involves balancing local pressures and interests, not least in relation to housing and finances, against the wider desire to help those in dire need of assistance.
- 16.2 Whilst most Surrey councils have given a commitment to assist with the scheme to resettle vulnerable households from Syria, not all have taken refugees and in addition to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council there are three other Surrey councils who have yet to make a formal decision on the request for assistance.
- 16.3 The report sets out three options for Members to consider, in response to the Government's request that councils assist in the scheme. .
- 16.4 The recommendation is that Members advise which of the three options they wish to consider in response to the request to participate in Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) scheme
- 16.5 It is also recommended that the Committee give "in principle" support to the intentions of the Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network to seek "Community Sponsor" status and authorise the Chief Executive, following consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, to formally give the Council's endorsement to that application, should it be considered in all the circumstances that it is appropriate to do so.

WARD(S) AFFECTED: (All Wards);