

Council Meeting – 29 September 2015

Motion - Taunton Deane open its arms to refugees

Moved by Councillor Simon Coles and seconded by Councillor Federica Smith

We have all witnessed the turmoil and human distress that has arisen from the flight of the refugees through Eastern Europe. We note also that the humanitarian response from Taunton Deane residents has been huge as illustrated by the work of the People to People Solidarity Group - Taunton Deane. We thank the administration for the promise of storage to assist with the hundreds of donations received from local residents and businesses.

We also welcome the statement from the Prime Minister that the United Kingdom (UK) will take some 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years and we understand that this will help reduce the refugee problem in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.

The overwhelming nature of this humanitarian crisis calls for an immediate response, especially as there is no sight of a long term political and diplomatic solution from the European Union or even worldwide.

We therefore urge Taunton Deane Borough Council to join the over 40 other local authorities who have offered support to meeting this humanitarian need and work towards providing accommodation and whatever other help by showing solidarity with our fellow human beings.

We move that Taunton Deane Borough Council be at the forefront of Councils looking to help relocate a minimum of 25 individuals and families under the UK Home Office's Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Motion to Full Council: Assistance to Refugees

An assessment of the implications for the Council

Background:

The Government has announced the following:

In his statement to the House of Commons on Monday 7 September, the Prime Minister announced that Britain should resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over the rest of the Parliament. These refugees will be taken from the camps in the countries neighbouring Syria using the established UNHCR process for identifying and resettling refugees. The Prime Minister also announced that the criteria for the existing Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme will be expanded. The Home Office and Department for Communities and Local Government will be working with local authorities and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales to put in place the arrangements to house and support the refugees. The cost of supporting the refugees in their first year in Britain will be funded from foreign aid spending.

Implications for the Council

From the above statement we should assume that arrivals from Syria will be refugees and NOT asylum seekers. This is an important distinction.

Asylum seekers are not entitled to Housing Benefit or any other form of benefit. They are financially supported by the Home Office

Refugees are entitled to benefits. We assume that arrivals from Syria will have received refugee status prior to entering the UK.

Government advice is for Local Authorities to seek more information and direction from their regional representative body. For TDBC this is Sarah Short at South West Councils: Sarah.Short@swcouncils.gov.uk

However, there is currently limited available information or direction. The LGA web site states "We are awaiting more information from Government on how any scheme for resettling Syrian refugees will be run and funded. We will update this page as we receive more information. See more at:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/refugees#sthash.PEF2B7LY.dpuf>"

We are still waiting to see the full proposals. However the Government has said:

Refugees will be granted a five year humanitarian protection visa. This will entitle them to access to public funds, access to the labour market and the possibility of a family reunion

As noted in the opening quote, the cost of supporting the refugees in their first year in Britain will be funded from foreign aid spending.

What can local authorities do now?

The LGA will coordinate offers from councils via the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership (RSMP). As such, offers of council support should be communicated to TDBC's RSMP contact – listed above – who will pass on relevant information to the LGA for a central record.

The LGA has advised that it would be useful to get an indicative sense of numbers of the adults, children or families that TDBC may be able to take given our local circumstances. This information will be treated as confidential. Giving a sense of numbers does not commit the Council to this figure, particularly in advance of information on funding and the cohort.

Accepting the Motion - Impact on TDBC resources

At this stage it is very difficult to provide any firm advice. There are a number of significant variables including timing of arrival, numbers, family size, status, government (or other) assistance etc.

Housing (Housing Options)

There is no information from central government to date instructing local authorities on how to administer the refugees from Syria. There was a vulnerable person's relocation scheme (VPRS) for Syrian migrants published in 2014. The VPRS was based on need rather than being designed to meet a quota so was prioritising help for survivors of torture and violence, and woman and children at risk or in need of medical care. The overview of the VPRS states that central government will meet the costs of the refugees in terms of accommodation and integration support, health and education costs for the first year from arrival. The individuals would be given 5 years leave to remain in the country with full access to public funds and benefits from the point of arrival. It was envisaged that the caseload of refugees would include families, woman and children and medical cases. Any unaccompanied children would fall under separate arrangements and would not be classed within the then total of 500 people (not cases) specified at the total amount of refugees expected to enter the UK. There was also mention of the possibility of family reunion. The VPRS was implemented when the Government were accepting 500 people under the scheme and this may have changed given the increase in numbers being accepted with refugee status.

The Government has given permission for the 20,000 refugees to enter the UK over the next 5 years. However, for this brief we have assumed that due to the crisis happening now, we would be looking to accept 25 families this year and not 5 families per year over the next 5 years.

Staffing Implications:

The caseload of 25 families could not be absorbed within the daily workload with the staffing resources as they currently stand so we would have to consider a temporary member of staff for a 3-6 month period to work with the families administering them onto Homefinder, identifying private rented accommodation, processing various paperwork and helping to integrate them, with the help of various agencies, into our community.

Resource Implications:

Although the refugees will have access to social housing, there will be a waiting period for accommodation to become available unless social providers hold accommodation when it becomes void. This would be assuming there is stock suitable for the family's need. We do not know the size of the family's coming to the UK but we do have to consider that there is a strong possibility that there will be large families among those coming to TDBC. This will be a major problem as we do not have much large family accommodation and few large private rental accommodation. There may be a need for two properties to be knocked through into one to accommodate a very large family as is the practise in inner cities. (This would be a financial implication also due to rent loss of a property and building work). The refugees are coming from a war torn area and it reasonable to assume there may be people with physical disabilities among them who need specific housing or adaptations, so again this may be an issue in providing suitable accommodation, either permanent or temporary.

When we have the dates of the family's entry into the UK, we would hold our temporary accommodation, if suitable, when it became vacant near their arrival time. This would have implications for our other homeless families and would result in the increase in B&B use for those who we are unable to place into TA. There would be a need to look for alternative B&B than those we currently use as these are more suitable for single clients than for families. This would have a cost implications as family rooms have a higher premium.

Other Impacts:

Family reunion may result in a settled family's accommodation no longer being suitable to their needs. This would result in having to move them to larger or additional accommodation.

Family's will need furniture, clothing, bedding which we may have to provide, and so may have a financial impact, however, we would work with voluntary groups to get these items at a much lower cost.

Estimated costs

Direct cost:

Additional staff member in Housing Options: £15.8k (based on 6 months officer post)

Indirect costs:

Keeping houses void prior to refugees arriving: £9.5k lost income (based on 25 dwellings for 4 weeks in HRA properties). In reality we are not sure that the HRA would be able to house 25 families in a short period, but this is an indication.

Additional use of B&B for families who are not able to move into temporary accommodation or tenancy: £550 per week, per family. This is an estimate of the cost over and above the housing benefit rate and so is the net cost to TDBC. We would have no indication of how many families would be displaced or for how long.

We are doubtful whether we would be able to reclaim the direct staffing cost from central government. We anticipate that we would get nothing towards the indirect costs.

Revenues and Benefits

If those fleeing Syria are granted refugee status, then any located in the Taunton Deane area would have access to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support. It is unlikely there would be significant implications for Revenues and Benefits staff in undertaking any additional work for 25 new residents. In general, the cost of Housing Benefit is met by subsidy from Central Government based on the needs of the applicant and their family and their weekly income. However, subsidy can be reduced depending on the type of accommodation provided, its size and the rent charged. Council Tax Support is funded by Taunton Deane Borough Council and the other major precepting authorities. If the new arrivals are considered to be asylum seekers, there would be no entitlement to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Support.

Partnership Implications

The Borough Council will need to work closely with a number of key partners

Community Safety Partnership: Integration within existing communities will be a key concern. This should be discussed with the Community Safety Partnership (these matters need debate at a county-wide level - we are aware of African refugee arrivals elsewhere in the county).

Education and Schools: Liaison with the education sector to discuss the needs / support for any person of school age (4-18).

Health Services: Arrivals from a war torn country may have physical injuries or mental health concerns. Liaison with GP surgeries and other health providers will be essential.

Children and Adult Services including Social Care: Vulnerable children and adults will be a key concern. Appropriate interventions (e.g. getset services for young children) will be essential

Voluntary and Community Sector: Critical for assisting with advice and support needs, including provision of furniture and clothing. Matter should be debated at strategic level.

Faith groups: Many arrivals will be practising Muslims (or indeed Christians/other faiths). Contacts with local faith groups for support.

The above will create additional demands on staff time (both TDBC and partners). However, for TDBC, this could be reasonably absorbed within existing arrangements through re-prioritising of existing tasks.

At this stage we will have no idea whether the arrivals can speak English. If they cannot, then this may result in costs associated with translation services (if local volunteers cannot be found).

Motions to Council – Assessment Proforma

(To be used in circumstances where it appears the wording of a proposed Motion will commit the Council to providing further financial or staffing resources which cannot be met from existing budgets)

Brief Details of the Motion -

That TDBC welcomes 25 families (Syrian refugees) with open arms. To work with Central Government by proactively integrating these families into our communities, as some 40 councils around the UK so far have pledged to do.

Questions to be addressed

- *What additional resource would be required to ensure the Motion (if approved) could be implemented?*

Answer – Staffing resources from various services (see above). Financial resources include a temporary appointment in Housing Options. Proposals will impact on both General Fund (Housing Options) and HRA (see above for details). Possible need for translation services.

- *What needs to be done to identify the level of resource necessary both in financial and staff terms?*

Answer – More clarity required on significant variables including timing of arrival, numbers, family size, status, level of vulnerability, availability of government (or other) assistance

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Are any approvals needed to provide these resources?</i> |
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Answer – Yes. Budget implications will need to be further assessed and approved in the usual manner

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Will this require reports to be submitted through Scrutiny and the Executive? If a Supplementary Estimate is required, Full Council approval will be required too.</i> |
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Answer – Yes

Likely timescale involved – unclear at this stage. Further dialogue required with key partners including SW Councils, LGA and Home Office

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For specific enquiries:

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Revenues and Benefits: Heather Tiso: h.tiso@tauntondeane.gov.uk

Partnerships: Mark Leeman