

REPORT TO: East Lothian Council

MEETING DATE: 27 October 2015

BY: Depute Chief Executive (Partnerships and Community Service)

SUBJECT: Syrian Refugees

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To advise the Council of the progress made since it passed a resolution on 8 September 2015 to support and assist both the UK and Scottish Government in resettling Syrian refugees.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Council notes the content of this report and agrees to the continuation of the action taken by officers to establish an agreement with the Government to resettle up to 7 families per year for the next 5 years. This is estimated to be 30 refugees per year.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The United Nations (UN) estimates that as of February 2015, 12.2 million people are in need of humanitarian aid within Syria. At least 7.6 million people in Syria have been forced to flee their homes and there are some 3.8 million refugees in neighbouring countries. On 29 January 2014, the Home Secretary made a statement to Parliament outlining the Government's intention to relocate to the UK some of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees displaced to neighbouring countries by the ongoing conflict.
- 3.2 Earlier this year the Government announced its intention to expand the existing Syrian Vulnerable Person Scheme with an intention to resettle 20,000 Syrians in need of protection during the next 5 years. The Scottish Government has agreed to co-operate with central government on this re-settlement process and it is estimated that Scotland will resettle approximately 2000 refugees in the next 5 years.

- 3.3 During September the Scottish Government, in conjunction with COSLA, was in contact with all Scottish local authorities to establish the support for the project and likely number of refugees each authority would be able to assist.
- 3.4 At present all Scottish councils have indicated an interest in assisting with the resettlement of refugees and 20, including East Lothian, have started the process of discussing a formal agreement with the Home Office to begin the resettlement in the near future.
- 3.5 East Lothian's contribution has been assessed as being between 5 and 7 families (approximately 30 refugees) per year. This figure was based on the proportion of refugees which East Lothian would expect to accept on a pro-rata basis, an acceptance of the spirit of the Council's wishes, and a concern that some Councils may be unable to assist for other reasons. Therefore it was suggested that we take slightly more families than would represent our proportional share.
- 3.6 The process which will now be followed is that we will seek to reach formal agreement with the Home Office on the number of refugees or families they are willing to resettle.
- 3.7 Having concluded this agreement, councils then have access to information on the potential families concerned. This information is of a much greater quality and depth on the needs of the families concerned in comparison to our previous experience in refugee projects where one of the key difficulties was the lack of effective information.
- 3.8 In addition to improved information, unlike previous projects, families will be transported to East Lothian in more manageable numbers, which will make the reception process more manageable.
- 3.9 During discussions with both COSLA and the Home Office, it is apparent that both organisations are of a view that the improved level of information, the smaller number of families arriving at any time, along with the experience of directly settling refugees in housing in host communities in a range of other refugee initiatives, means that the approach used in the late 1990s of initially establishing refugees in a "reception centre" was not appropriate.
- 3.10 In terms of re-housing, no decision has yet been made on any specific areas of East Lothian but it is anticipated that we will follow our successful practice from previous projects of clustering families within reasonable distance of each other providing the opportunity for some element of mutual support.
- 3.11 The Housing Associations active in East Lothian have indicated an interest in assisting the Council with this project. The project will be "tenure neutral" and as such the Council will use any appropriate rented accommodation to meet its requirements.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The re-housing of refugees can be established within existing housing allocation arrangements, and within the Council's responsibilities under the homelessness legislation.

5 EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 Given the urgency of this issue a Combined Impact Assessment has not been undertaken but will be completed before any refugee families arrive in East Lothian.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Financial – The agreement with the Home Office will include the agreed costs for resettling refugee families. At present these costs are specific to a number of areas of a project such as additional Education or void rent costs etc.

6.1.1 However, at the time of writing this report, negotiations are under way to change the existing process to one where the agreement will outline the costs covered by central Government on a cost model based on a individual payment per refugee family.

6.1.2 If the Council proceeds with an agreement with the Home Office, the income we will receive from either model is sufficient to ensure that East Lothian Council does not incur any additional costs from this project.

- 6.2 Personnel – Given the relatively small number of families concerned all of the activities can be managed within existing staff resources.

6.3 Other – None.

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1 Motion agreed by East Lothian Council 8 September 2015

7.2 Briefing note to Councillors – 6 October 2015

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