

Syrian Refugees Update

An update was provided to Cabinet in December 2015. This set out the following progress:

- Confirmation from DCLG of the additional funding for local authorities for years 2 to 5
- Initial conversations held by housing officers with Home Office to clarify the process
- Discussions held with 7 other District partners in Hertfordshire who would like to work with us. SADC has led these meetings
- Presentation by the Refugee Council setting out the support services they can provide. Formal request made by SADC on behalf of 8 Districts to them to submit a proposal with costs
- Conversations held with local organisations including Oaklands College about english classes
- Updating Hertfordshire Welcomes Syrian Families Group with progress. This group is a network formed to help implement the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme in Hertfordshire
- Meeting held with local church representatives regarding using church-owned residential properties at market rent as they become available
- Grants Panel agreed to allocate up to £25k of the Project Commissioning Fund to underwrite the Council's commitment to help Syrian Refugees. This is in the event Government funding is not sufficient to cover the costs

Significant progress has been made since December. The team have been focusing on three areas:

- Securing support for the refugee families once they arrive
- Clarifying the Government process for allocating refugee families
- Finding suitable accommodation

Support

The Head of Housing chaired a meeting in January with District partners to review the proposal from the Refugee Council to provide support services for the first 12 months. This is their area of particular expertise. The proposal was acceptable to all partners and met the statement of requirements as set out in the documentation

provided by the Home Office. The Refugee Council were appointed to provide the support service required for 90 refugees in year one across 8 Districts in Hertfordshire. The support service works out at £3,700 per refugee and should leave sufficient resources for housing costs, furniture etc. The Government grant per refugee in the first year is £8,520 to cover local authority costs.

We are now working up a Service Level Agreement with the Refugee Council that all partners can sign up to. Each District Council will individually contract with the Refugee Council. The Refugee Council have now started to advertise for staff.

Allocation process

The Head of Housing met the Home Office on 2 February 2016 to discuss the next steps. The Home Office will provide us with access to a secure electronic portal. This will provide information on families who match the size of accommodation we have available. Once accepted it will take between 4-6 weeks for the refugees to arrive in UK.

We discussed whether it is possible to allocate families from similar areas of Syria to Hertfordshire, to help with providing support networks when they arrive. The Home did say that where there are connected families, they do make those links on the portal to encourage settling in similar areas.

The Home Office provided some additional updates. All refugees now receive two 4 hour sessions before they arrive in the UK on managing expectations. In terms of needs, all cases will meet the vulnerability criteria with 80% having straightforward needs and 20% more complex needs. The more complex cases will have significant medical needs.

The grant we will receive will be paid in instalments. The first instalment of 22% of the cost per refugee will be paid on arrival in UK. The remainder will be paid in six equal instalments, in arrears, over the coming months. We will be required to make a claim on a standard form which is being sent to us. A budget cost centre covering expenditure and grant income has been set up in the General Fund Housing budget. The Home Office also advised that going forward the process will transfer to the Regions, to be managed by LGA Strategic Migration Partnerships. There is an East of England conference on the Syrian Refugee Programme on 3 March that we will be attending. The Home Office are keen to see local authorities working closely together to make economies of scale.

Accommodation

We are now in a position to move forward and secure accommodation in the private rented sector. Initial conversations have been held with Lettings Agents and we are now contacting them and private landlords directly. One of the key issues for landlords is reassurance about the support needs for refugees, which we now have in place. We will be guaranteeing the rent for the first twelve months and providing a deposit. Properties will be inspected by the Council's Private Sector Housing officer to ensure they meet the required standard. The funding from the Government can be used to bridge the gap between market rent and Local Housing Allowance.

We will be following up our conversations with church representatives and London Strategic Housing, both of whom have offered us their next available property. They have accommodation in the City Centre and on the hospital site respectively.

Next steps

If we can secure accommodation in the coming weeks we would be in a position to receive our first refugees towards the end of March or during April.

A further update will be included in the Performance report to March Cabinet.