

Local Government North Yorkshire and York**2 October 2015****Syrian Refugees and Asylum Dispersal Scheme****1. Purpose of report**

1.1. To propose that Craven District Council, Hambleton District Council, Harrogate Borough Council, North Yorkshire County Council, Richmondshire District Council, Ryedale District Council, Scarborough Borough Council and Selby District Council work together in partnership to respond to the government's requests regarding Syrian refugees and the asylum dispersal scheme.

2. Background

2.1. Representatives of the eight local authorities met with Home Office officials on 17 September 2015.

2.2. The meeting was planned some time ago to discuss the extension of asylum dispersal areas; however the developing humanitarian crisis involving Syrian refugees led to the scope of the meeting being extended to address the matter.

2.3. The meeting was supported by Migration Yorkshire, the local authority-led regional migration partnership hosted by Leeds City Council.

3. Asylum Dispersal Scheme

3.1. The Home Office provides accommodation, subsistence and ancillary services (for example advice and guidance) for eligible asylum seekers (individuals and families) while their applications for asylum are being processed. Asylum seekers are people who are in the UK, have asked for asylum in the UK, and are waiting for a decision on that claim. Most are people who originally arrived legally in the UK. To be eligible for accommodation and support an asylum seeker has to prove that their application has been recorded; they are destitute; they have applied for asylum 'as soon as reasonably practicable'; and, if unaccompanied, they are over 18 years of age.

3.2. The asylum dispersal scheme has operated since 2000. G4S, on behalf of the Home Office, has managed the service in Yorkshire and the Humber and

the North East since 2012. The current contract ends in 2017, with the Home Office having an option to extend it up to 2020.

- 3.3. Initially asylum seekers are placed in short-term, hostel-style accommodation provided whilst the asylum seeker makes an application to the Home Office. The local provision is in Wakefield. The Home Office target for the length of stay is no more than 19 days.
- 3.4. Once the Home Office has assessed and confirmed their eligibility for support, asylum seekers are then moved to more permanent dispersal accommodation (for example a flat or shared house; mostly housing leased from private landlords). The length of stay varies, typically six months if the asylum seeker's claim is successful or longer to allow for appeals processes.
- 3.5. If the asylum seeker's claim is successful they are known as a refugee and have the same rights and entitlements as any UK citizen. They are then issued with identify documents, a national insurance number and supported to find permanent accommodation.
- 3.6. In Yorkshire and the Humber there are 10 local authorities participating in the scheme: all the South and West Yorkshire authorities plus Hull. Nationally, the authorities participating have remained unchanged for the 15 years of the scheme and there are increasing pressures to expand the number of participating authorities.
- 3.7. Participating authorities (both the county and district councils in two-tier areas) are consulted before any house is used for asylum seekers regarding the suitability of the accommodation, the availability of other services including schools, and community cohesion issues.
- 3.8. Ministers have tasked the Home Office with significantly increasing the number of local authorities voluntarily participating in the scheme to enable the demand for dispersal accommodation to be spread across a much wider area. The Secretary of State has the power to instruct the cooperation and support of local authorities regarding asylum dispersal; however this power has not been used to date.
- 3.9. The Home Office wants to work closely with local authorities that give in principle support to becoming an asylum dispersal area regarding the potential numbers in particular locations. As part of this, a mapping exercise would need to be undertaken to establish what provision might realistically be provided and where. Many parts of North Yorkshire may not be appropriate because of factors such as housing affordability, availability of school places, proximity to services such as post offices and public transport.

4. Syrian refugees

- 4.1. In September 2015 the Prime Minister announced that, during the remainder of this parliament, the UK will accept up to 20,000 Syrian refugees from refugee camps in countries neighbouring Syria.
- 4.2. The government will work with the UNHCR to identify who will enter the UK. Those who are accepted will be granted a five year humanitarian protection visa before they enter the UK and have the same rights as UK citizens to education, employment, health care and public funds
- 4.3. There have been resettlement schemes in the UK for refugees for some years, known as the Gateway Protection Programme. However the numbers to date have been relatively small, for example until earlier this month the Home Office was planning on the basis of taking 750 of the most vulnerable people from refugee camps in countries neighbouring Syria over the next three years.
- 4.4. The Home Office pays a grant per person to local authorities accepting refugees under a resettlement programme. This covers the costs of support including 'induction' costs, initial accommodation costs, health and social care costs. In some cases the local authority has contracted with another organisation (such as the Refugee Council or Migration Yorkshire) to provide some or all of these services.
- 4.5. The grant should cover full costs in the first year. After this time it is expected that the refugee will have been 'mainstreamed' into society. Currently the refugees from Syria being resettled in the UK have very complex needs and the grant averages £18,000 to £25,000 per person. Given the significantly increased numbers of refugees who will now be accepted into the UK, almost all will have much less complex needs and it is anticipated that the average grant will be around £10,000 per person.
- 4.6. There is no expectation at present that local authorities will be required to resettle Syrian refugees. The Home Office is asking authorities to volunteer to offer to resettle a specific number of Syrian refugees over the five year period (the number to be set by the authority); and as part of this to agree a package of support measures that authorities would provide (directly or indirectly).
- 4.7. Migration Yorkshire is encouraging local authorities in the Yorkshire and Humber area to reach a collective agreement on the number of Syrian refugees that the region would be prepared to take in each authority area or group of authority areas.

5. Discussion

- 5.1. There is considerable public support regarding the resettlement of Syrian refugees and a consensus among all North Yorkshire local authorities that we should play our part in helping them with this.
- 5.2. However, given the implications associated with the resettlement of refugees, this is not something that can be entered into lightly or something an individual local authority in North Yorkshire can do alone. If refugees are to be resettled locally it is essential that they are given the support they need. In addition, given the financial pressures on authorities and the existing local demand on services we need to fully understand the resource implications associated with this before we are able to make any firm commitments to government in terms of numbers. An added dimension for 'non-stock holding' authorities such as Craven, Hambleton, Ryedale and Scarborough is that they have no housing stock of their own to directly support resettlement and are likely to require the support of their stock transfer housing association partners and/or private landlords.
- 5.3. Although the issue of asylum dispersal has not attracted the attention of the public in the same way as Syrian refugees, there is still a need to respond to government on the issue. As with the resettlement of refugees, this is not something that can be entered into lightly or something an individual local authority in North Yorkshire can do alone.
- 5.4. Asylum dispersal presents a very different set of challenges for participating authorities than the proposed resettlement of Syrian refugees. Although the Home Office supports eligible asylum seekers while their applications for asylum are being processed, there is no grant for local authorities towards any additional costs after the final decision on asylum has been made (for example increased costs associated with homelessness and the provision of temporary accommodation). Whilst local authorities appear to have some degree of control in relation to the location of any proposed dispersal accommodation, they appear to have less control over the numbers of asylum seekers being routed through the system. In addition, the government's recent consultation "Reforming support for failed asylum seekers and other illegal migrants" casts a degree of uncertainty over levels of support to be offered by Government to refused asylum seekers in future years.
- 5.5. Given the nature of local housing markets, it is anticipated that opportunities for asylum dispersal accommodation across North Yorkshire are limited. Potential opportunities are more likely to be located in areas with lower rents and higher concentrations of rented accommodation and Houses in Multiple Occupation. Strong concerns have already been expressed by

representatives from Scarborough Borough Council to the Home Office that the location of such accommodation in areas with high levels of deprivation would be at odds with Scarborough's wider housing and regeneration strategies.

5.6 Other issues, in addition to the availability of housing and public services, will also need to be considered such as 'myth busting', community cohesion and supporting refugees into economic activity. There can be significant benefits for the local economy if refugees are well integrated as they can help fill local skills shortages or build new businesses.

5.7 Because the government's requests regarding Syrian refugees and the asylum dispersal scheme cannot be managed alone by any one of the eight North Yorkshire local authorities, a joint approach is required. Given the immediacy of the refugee crisis, this work needs to be prioritised by the participating authorities. It also needs to involve other partners including the NHS, Police, Local Enterprise Partnership and relevant voluntary sector organisations.

5.8 It is envisaged the joint approach would include a mapping exercise to establish what provision might realistically be provided locally; detailed consideration of the funding to be made available by the government; and the development of options by the end of October 2015 that can then be considered by all eight authorities.

6 Recommendation

6.1 It is recommended that the eight local authorities in North Yorkshire work in partnership to develop a joint response to the government's requests regarding Syrian refugees and the asylum dispersal scheme.

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