

Is the final decision on the recommendations in this report to be made at this meeting?

Yes

Maidstone's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis

Final Decision-Maker	Communities, Housing and Environment
Lead Head of Service	John Littlemore
Lead Officer and Report Author	Ellie Kershaw
Classification	Public
Wards affected	

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That Maidstone Borough Council commits to take part in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme.
2. That, as per 4.1, the council's offer is 6 single males over the five year period, to be reviewed periodically with an aim of increasing this through the lifetime of the scheme if viable.
3. That the council investigate options for the provision of housing including the purchase of property from capital funds.
4. That households should be accepted as soon as suitable housing is available.
5. That if the recommendation at 4.1 is agreed, a periodic review is undertaken, with a view to increasing the offer throughout the life of the scheme if it is running successfully and thought to be viable.

This report relates to the following corporate priorities:

- Keeping Maidstone Borough an attractive place for all

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Communities, Housing and Environment	8 th December 2015

Maidstone's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Purpose of the report is to seek the Committee's approval for Maidstone Borough Council to assist Syrian Refugees, as outlined by the Prime Minister in October 2015.
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2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2.1 National Context

- 2.1.1 Due to the ongoing situation in Syria, the Government has expanded the existing Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPR), and intends to resettle 20,000 Syrians in need of protection between now and 2020. It is expected that this will be at a rate of several hundred per month.
- 2.1.2 The scheme is based on need, prioritising those who cannot be effectively supported in their region of origin, such as women and girls at risk, people in severe need of medical care, survivors of torture and violence, those at risk due to their sexuality or gender identity and refugees with family links in the UK. Referrals will be made in the first instance to the Home Office, who will check that they meet the criteria, and carry out medical and security checks. Once verified, these will be passed to the Local Authority who will be asked to accept or reject the case. Once accepted, the Local Authority will take responsibility for all aspects of the resettlement, including housing, education, health and any other needs such as interpretation services.
- 2.1.3 Refugees will initially be given a five year leave to remain in the UK and will have full entitlement to benefits on arrival. Whilst it is expected that many will then wish to make the UK their permanent home, previous schemes have also shown that a number of people wish to return when their place of origin is safer to assist with rebuilding.
- 2.1.4 There are 12.2 million people in Syria in need of humanitarian assistance, and four in every five live in poverty. There are many human rights violations, attacks against densely populated areas and targeting of civilian infrastructure.
- 2.1.5 So far 266 Syrians have been relocated to the UK under the VPR scheme, in addition to almost 5,000 Syrians (including dependants) who have been granted protection under normal asylum rules since the crisis began in April 2011.

2.2 Kent context

2.2.1 Kent County Council has a responsibility for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). Kent has the highest population of UASC in the country by some way, and has started asking authorities in other areas to assist. Due to the high numbers of UASC, which has increased significantly in the last few months, and the demand that this places on services such as education, health and mental health, KCC has said that it would not be willing to take any families in Kent who have children with high support needs, or unaccompanied children. All district councils have agreed to this.

2.2.2 When UASC leave care, they require an appropriate form of housing. Initially this may be in supported lodgings or semi independent accommodation provided by KCC. However, at some point between the ages of 18 and 21, they will require support to access their own accommodation, which requires involvement from the district housing team. Care leavers are a priority need group, meaning that in the vast majority of cases they will be owed the main housing duty under the Homelessness legislation. This puts a requirement on the district to provide temporary accommodation if needed, and then assist the individual in finding a property in either the social or private sector. Maidstone has the fourth highest level of UASC in Kent and this also needs to be taken into account when agreeing the number of refugees the council can assist. A breakdown of distribution across Kent can be found at Appendix A.

2.2.3 One of the biggest concerns for Maidstone at the moment is the increase in homelessness and the lack of available, affordable property for household, particularly families, to move into. As of the end of Quarter 2, 313 homelessness decisions had been made, which is slightly higher than the same period last year. There are currently 95 households in some form of temporary accommodation, 57 of whom are owed the main housing duty. This number has been steadily rising and is due to the lack of available accommodation for households to move into.

2.2.4 Local Housing Allowance rates in Maidstone (the amount housing benefit will pay for a property per week) are shown below.

Size	LHA	Private rent *
Shared accommodation	£68.28	
1 bed	£123.58	£155
2 bed	£157.56	£200
3 bed	£180.45	£254
4 bed	£235.41	£316

*Home.co.uk Maidstone market rent summary

Single people under 35 are only entitled to the shared accommodation rate, regardless of whether they live in something larger.

2.2.5 This upward trend in terms of homelessness means that housing is a key consideration when deciding the make up and numbers of refugees which Maidstone Borough Council could assist under this scheme.

2.2.6 As each referral is received, a panel discussion to include health and education will be held to ensure that the needs of the household can be met before they are accepted.

2.3 Considerations

- 2.3.1 Each council has discretion to not only decide on the number of refugees they will assist, but also to set parameters as to the type of household (household make up, level of need etc). Once a household is accepted, there is a high level of work involved in settling them. This includes any interpretation and translation needs, registering with a GP, registering with the jobcentre and any other agencies that may be required. In material terms, accommodation must be found and furnished to a basic standard. The council plans to ask for support from the community and relevant local businesses in order to keep the costs of this down so that the funding can be utilised in ongoing support. The household must also be provided with a cash amount, and an initial shop.
- 2.3.2 This initial introduction will take approximately two weeks of officer time for each refugee. It is anticipated that this role will be met from existing resources within the Housing and Inclusion Team. This will have an impact on the day to day service of that team which will have to be considered, as this will effectively leave the team one member short for that period. A virtual Team Leader will also be appointed who will be responsible for the co-ordination of the work referred to at 2.3.1.
- 2.3.3 Each household will require a single point of contact, who will liaise with agencies on their behalf. Often they will have a mistrust of authority figures such as the Police, so it is important that they develop confidence with their point of contact. Support services could be accessed via the existing KCC contract with Rethink Sahayak, that already works with migrants. This contract currently runs until March 2017.
- 2.3.4 It is unlikely that information will be available about the skills refugees possess to enable them to seek employment. However, Maidstone has skills gaps across the board, so it should be possible to find suitable employment for anyone who is able to work.
- 2.3.5 At a recent seminar held by Centre on Migration- Policy and Society, it was suggested that use of mainstream services, with language support is the best way for refugees to integrate rather than commissioning separate services.
- 2.3.6 Integrating refugees will be hugely important to the success of the programme. The council will meet with parties who can offer advice, such as the Imam of Maidstone Mosque and representatives from the Gurkha community. The voluntary and community sector will form an important part of this integration. It would also be beneficial to look at a work experience/volunteering programme for those refugees who have the necessary language skills.

- 2.3.7 A welcome pack will be created for each household, the contents of which are to be determined, but could include small luxury items and pictorial information about Maidstone.
- 2.3.8 Members of the Housing and Communities Team are visiting other Authorities and agencies that have experience in this and similar schemes in order to learn lessons from them. A visit to Coventry led to them sending a large amount of useful information, including some which has been translated into Arabic.
- 2.3.9 There is some thinking that due to the funding levels (shown below) councils may be less incentivised to offer placements to single males. This could therefore be a real gap that Maidstone could fill.
- 2.3.10 When refugees arrive in the UK they have been through a two-stage vetting process to ensure it is known who is entering the country. Work is being done with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who has their own robust identification process in place. This includes the taking of biometrics, documentary evidence and interviews. When cases are submitted by the UNHCR for consideration they are screened and considered by the Home Office for suitability for entry to the UK. This includes the taking of further biometric data. The right is retained to reject individuals on security, war crimes or other grounds, including where there is insufficient information to undertake effective screening.

2.4 Funding

- 2.4.1 Home Office has indicated that the funding provided will be as below

UNIT COST FOR SYRIA VPR SCHEME					
	Adult Benefit Claimant	Other Adults	Children 5-18	Children 3-4	Children U-3
	£	£	£	£	£
Local Authority Costs	8,520	8,520	8,520	8,520	8,520
Education	0	0	4,500	2,250	0
Special Educational Needs	0	0	1,000	1,000	0
DWP Benefits	12,700	0	0	0	0
Primary medical care	200	200	200	200	200
Secondary medical care	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
TOTALS	23,420	10,720	16,220	13,970	10,720

- 2.4.2 There is a commitment from the Home Office to provide funding for the full five years. However, the level has not been agreed. It is likely to be less than in the first year as it is anticipated that the needs of the household will reduce with time.

2.4.3 Adults will enter the country as refugees, meaning they have recourse to public funds from the day they enter the UK. This will include housing benefit.

2.4.4 The scheme is to be run in such a way as to ensure that the impact on revenue funding is minimised.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

3.1 The first option is to accept families with needs as described in section 2. The advantage of this is that the funding received would be higher, and could therefore allow for more support to be commissioned, or a member of staff employed to work with these families. The disadvantage to this option is that, as stated, homelessness in Maidstone is increasing, and there is a severe shortage of family accommodation, particularly at the LHA rate. It would therefore both be difficult to source appropriate housing, and to prioritise refugee families above families to whom the council already owes the main housing duty. For this reason, this option is not recommended.

3.2 Option two is to accept single males. This would allow the council to place within shared accommodation, for which there are two options that can be further explored; a property owned by a local Church has been offered to the council to use as accommodation, though it would need some work before it was suitable. Alternatively, the council could use capital funding to buy houses that would be suitable as shared accommodation. This could be used later for placing other homeless households. The advantage of this option is that it would allow the council to place people in the same house, giving them a small community for support and allowing the council to make good use of support as it would be targeted to one place. The disadvantage to this option is the potential for people who do not get on to be placed in one house; however, this could in some way be mitigated through the referral process. This is the preferred option. If this option is agreed, it is recommended that the council's initial offer is to take six males over the five year period.

3.3 Option three is to not assist any refugees under the VPR scheme. It is believed that for humanitarian reasons, this is not a viable option. Colleagues across Kent are committed to taking various numbers of households, and therefore within the limitations stated in this report, it is appropriate for Maidstone to share the challenge of assisting the refugees.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The preferred option is that described in 3.2, that the council should make an offer of 6 single males over the five year period. With no previous experience in this area, it is felt that it would not be wise to make a higher offer at this point. As the scheme progresses and more is learned, it may be possible to increase this number.

5. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 5.1 The next step would be to make this offer, and to investigate suitable housing options.
- 5.2 Whilst this work is ongoing, contact will be made with community leaders and any agencies who may wish to be involved, to ensure that everyone is clear about their roles and responsibilities.
- 5.3 It is proposed that the council could start to accept referrals from April 2016- earlier if suitable housing can be identified more quickly.

6. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	Any work undertaken must take into account the wider community as well as the refugees. This will be assessed at each stage of planning.	[Head of Service or Manager]
Risk Management	Risks will be assessed throughout the programme, and managed by the Head of Housing and Community Services.	[Head of Service or Manager]
Financial	There will be financial implications. However, the full extent, is not known at this stage	[Section 151 Officer & Finance Team]
Staffing	The work will be undertaken within existing resources	[Head of Service]
Legal		[Legal Team]
Equality Impact Needs Assessment		[Policy & Information Manager]
Environmental/Sustainable Development		[Head of Service or Manager]
Community Safety	This will become clearer as referrals are made. The CSU will be included in planning.	[Head of Service or Manager]
Human Rights Act		[Head of Service or

		Manager]
Procurement		[Head of Service & Section 151 Officer]
Asset Management		[Head of Service & Manager]

7. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix A: Distribution of UASC through Kent
- Appendix B: Home Office fact sheet on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.

