

29 October 2015

Agenda Item	11
Report No	HC/45/15

Syrian Refugee Resettlement – Highland Response

Report by Depute Chief Executive/Director Corporate Development

Summary

This report sets out the current position with regards to the Syrian refugee situation and the preparations underway to ensure a joined up approach across the Highland public sector.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Leader convened a meeting of all Group Leaders, on 8 September, to discuss the Council's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Representatives from Blythswood were also invited to advise leaders on the most appropriate and helpful way for the Council to respond to the situation.
- 1.2 It was agreed that officers would commence preparation for the arrival of Syrian refugees in Highland, as part of the UK Refugee Resettlement Programme, and that communications would encourage Highland residents to support the response by providing cash donations, rather than collection of other items, at this stage.
- 1.3 The Leader subsequently raised the issue at the Community Planning Partnership Board, on 11 September, and a number of partners have offered their support and are working with the Council to ensure a joined up approach and response across the Highland public sector.

2. Progress

- 2.1 Further to a request from COSLA the Highland Council has also confirmed that it will be able to take refugees, through the UK Resettlement Programme, and that this would be at least 25-30 families.
- 2.2 Communications (via press, website and Inbrief) has been consistently supporting the message, advised by the voluntary sector, that at this stage anyone wishing to help should be making cash donations and sign-posting has been to Blythswood and the Red Cross.
- 2.3 Work has also commenced to prepare for the arrival of refugees and an officer working group has been established including officers from the Council, NHS Highland, Police Scotland, DWP and voluntary sector. The focus of the group has been to discuss and progress the preparation work plan; share information and best practice; and to ensure a joint approach to planning and communications across the Highland public sector.
- 2.4 The Council's lead officer has attended three COSLA Information Briefings to ensure that the work in Highland is part of the overall Scottish response and UK Refugee Resettlement Programme. Liaison through COSLA will continue.

3. Current Position

- 3.1 COSLA continues to co-ordinate the response from Scottish local government and up until now there has not been a great deal of clarity about numbers and when refugees are expected to arrive in Scotland. However, the current expectation is that the Highlands would not expect the arrival of refugees until early in 2016.
- 3.2 The current work of officers is focussed on determining the availability of housing in Highlands including working with housing associations and looking at options within the private rented sector. Scottish Government guidance is for a mixed tenure solution to housing for refugees.
- 3.3 As a result of this guidance, the Housing Service is now working with the Corporate Communications Team to prepare communications targeted at private landlords who may have housing available for long term rental. It is intended to have this in place by the end of October.
- 3.4 The other focus for the working group is the need to ensure that support services are available for refugees when they arrive. There will be a need to provide housing support, access to health services, community familiarisation support and access to education, training and employment opportunities. Access to appropriate language support, including interpretation and translation, English classes and language support in schools will also be required.
- 3.5 The Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI) is starting to develop a training / development programme for volunteers willing to provide some of this support and the Corporate Communications Team will be providing communications to encourage potential volunteers to come forward, particularly if they have specific skills such as appropriate languages. The HTSI is also holding an information day on 29 October for volunteers.
- 3.6 Finally the officers working group is planning detailed work to understand the steps we will have to go through to ensure we are fully ready to welcome refugees. This will allow us to refine and complete the preparation work. This will draw on the experience of other councils through the COSLA network.
- 3.7 The proposed activities above will aim to ensure that we must meet the wider needs of potentially vulnerable people so that they can integrate into our communities and feel safe and secure in Highland. Consideration would need to be given to ensuring good community relations are developed.

4. Implications

- 4.1 Legal Implications: The Head of Housing has confirmed that the Council's current policy allows for the allocation of housing to refugees and no amendment to the policy is required. This would be through the use of "Special Allocations Status" on individual housing applications, as set out in the Housing Allocations Policy. The use of this method would be reported to the Community Services Committee as part of the annual monitoring report on the Highland Housing Register.
- 4.2 Resource Implications: Negotiations on funding are being led by COSLA and the current position is that funding will be for at least a 2 year period and likely to be on a per person basis to ensure the process is not overly bureaucratic.
- 4.3 Equality Implications: This work will take place within the context of the public sector equality duty, which requires the Council to give regard to the need to: eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations between different groups. The proposals would be in line with the Council's commitments to ensure that people are treated fairly, with dignity and respect.

4.4 There are no further financial, legal or rural implications arising directly from this report, however these will be kept under review as plans become firm and housing opportunities are confirmed.

5. Recommendation

5.1 That Members note the report and the work being done to prepare for the arrival of Syrian refugees in the Highlands.

Designation: Depute Chief Executive/Director Corporate Development

Date: 14 October 2015