

## AGENDA ITEM:

<b>Report for:</b>	<b>Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>Date of meeting:</b>	<b>21 July 2021</b>
<b>Part:</b>	<b>Part I</b>
If Part II, reason:	

<b>Title of report:</b>	<b>Syrian Refugee Resettlement Program</b>
Contact:	Margaret Griffiths, Portfolio Holder Housing  Author - Mandy Peters, Tenancy Sustainment Team leader
Purpose of report:	To update the Committee on the Refugee Families resettled in Dacorum and consider their longer term housing options, once Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) is obtained.
Recommendations	That members consider the report and recommendations and comment as appropriate.
Corporate Objectives:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Building Strong &amp; Vibrant Communities</li> <li>2. Providing Good Quality Affordable Homes, in particularly for those most in need.</li> </ol>
Implications:	
'Value For Money Implications'	
Risk Implications	
Equalities Implications	The recommendation would provide certainty and stability to a group of families that were forced to leave a very dangerous and war torn country and one that remains so and arrived in the UK with government support..
Health And Safety Implications	
Consultees:	Mark Gaynor, Corporate Director of Housing & Regeneration  Fiona Williamson – Assistant Director Housing  Natasha Beresford – Group Manager Strategic Housing  Oliver Jackson – Group Manager Tenants & Leaseholders  Senior Leadership Team
Background papers or appendices	
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	DBC – Dacorum Borough Council LHA – Local Housing Allowance DHP – Discretionary Housing Payment SVPRS – Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme LA – Local Authority

	ESOL – English as a Second Language GP – General Practitioner LA’s – Local Authorities CMT – Corporate Management Team ILR – Indefinite Leave to Remain
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## **1. Introduction and Executive Summary**

- 1.1 The government advised that the UK would commit to resettling 20,000 Syrian Refugees over a period of 5 years between 2015 and 2020. On the 30th September 2015 the Council carried a motion supporting the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and along with 8 other Hertfordshire districts, Dacorum agreed to welcome 10 refugee families over the course of 5 years, with the first family arriving in September 2016. Appendix 1 details the household make up and the support still required by the families. The plan was to resettle 2 families per year, we have yet to welcome our final family as the scheme is currently on hold due to the Covid19 pandemic.
- 1.2 There was an option to join other local authorities (LA's) in Hertfordshire to fund the Refugee Council to provide support to the families, however with dedicated resources such as the Welfare and Sustainment Team, Dacorum Borough Council (DBC) has provided the support directly with the help of our partners in the community and voluntary/faith sector. This has allowed us to invest more of the grant funding in the provision of ESOL (English as a second language) and support to assist the families to integrate. The Home Office guidance gave clear details about the use of the annual funding.

## **2. Initial Reception Arrangements**

- 2.1 Operationally, the responsibility for the resettlement of the refugees sits with the Welfare and Sustainment Team, The Welfare and Sustainment officer's role is to ensure that Refugees are provided with a dedicated source of advice and support, to assist with registering for benefits and services, and signposting to other advice and information.
- 2.2 Examples of this support includes: Registering with local schools, or if Adults, English language and literacy classes. Registering with a local GP, and other healthcare providers in line with identified medical needs, advice around and referral to appropriate mental health services and to specialist services for victims of torture as appropriate.
- 2.3 Additionally the officers provide assistance with access to employment. Bespoke support plans are developed for each family to document and monitor progress and to facilitate their orientation into their new home and area. We ensure that interpreting services are available and have built up a trusted team in partnership with Hertfordshire's Interpreting service.

## **3. Provision of Accommodation**

- 3.1 An integral part of the resettlement process is the provision of accommodation. The property must be available for the arriving Refugees, must meet local authority standards and be affordable and sustainable.
- 3.2 For this reason the Council opted to use our own housing stock rather than source accommodation in the private sector. This was for a number of reasons, but in the main, consideration had to be given to the lack of affordable housing in the area, the management of the accommodation, quality and security of the

property and choice of area to place the families. Careful consideration was undertaken in respect of the location and suitability of properties for families with young school aged children.

#### **4. Current Tenancy Position**

- 4.1 With the families arriving and receiving humanitarian protection visa's it was deemed appropriate to initially provide them with a license rather than a flexible tenancy. With the change to Refugee Status and following a consultation with the legal team, it was recommended that each existing and future family were given a flexible tenancy.
- 4.2 The flexible tenancies provided each household with more security and rents were charged at normal formula rent, rather than the higher Temporary Accommodation licence levels. In line with the tenancy strategy the minimum term offered by the Council was 5 years and so a number of the families have tenancies that were started on 6th May 2019 and therefore, due to expire in May 2024. Additionally, due to the ages of two of the households, they have been allocated supported housing properties, which are in lower demand and therefore have a secure council tenancy.
- 4.3 The original report, outlining the various options for housing and support, was presented to CMT and Cabinet, in 2015, and anticipated that the requirement would be for a 5 year period, as it was hoped that they may, in the future, be able to return to Syria. The report did not fully consider the option of these families remaining in the UK and their ongoing housing situation after the 5 year period, as it was anticipated they may be resettled back in Syria.
- 4.4 The crisis in Syria has continued to escalate with a huge number of Syrians still fleeing homes and villages because of outbreaks of violence. The change to Refugee status, for all the families settled in Dacorum, means that within a month of their 5 year anniversary of arriving in this country, they will either have to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain or lose their status and along with it any right to healthcare, welfare benefits and support.

#### **5. Alternative Housing Options**

- 5.1 An alternative to remaining in DBC housing stock is that families could be supported to move into the private rented sector. Unfortunately there is a considerable shortage of affordable private homes at the moment especially where the rent levels would be below the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). The alternative would be for families to move to cheaper areas away from Dacorum removing existing support networks and connections made in the local area.
- 5.2 The Council's Allocations Policy is currently under review and consultation is underway on the option to reduce the local connection to 5 years in line with neighbouring authorities. With the Indefinite Leave to Remain, a local connection of over 5 years and the vulnerabilities and health issues that a number of the families have, it would be likely that they would qualify for points on the housing register and be successful in gaining social housing.

- 5.3 Should the Council make the decision to terminate their tenancies at the end of the 5 year period, we would be making the families unintentionally homeless and requiring intervention from the triage and homeless prevention teams, at a time when they are already under considerable pressure.
- 5.4 A number of the Hertfordshire Local Authorities have used private properties to house families they have resettled through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS). All of these homes have rent levels higher than the LHA and has caused a considerable financial burden through either regular applications for Discretionary Housing Payment to top up the housing costs they receive through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, or by the Local Authority, paying for the extra from the funding received from the home office.
- 5.5 There is still a lot of media interest in refugees at home and abroad and it remains in residents interest to understand what the Council have done in relation to the SVPRS scheme and others including resettling unaccompanied minors. The Council have been clear in accepting the 10 families over a 5 year period in conjunction with other LA's and the support of this scheme has enabled it to be effective.
- 5.6 The Council has recently considered a request from the Home Office, to accommodate Afghan Locally Employed Staff, who assisted with interpreting for the military personnel based in the country. It is considered that these families will be at high risk of reprisals in Afghanistan now that troops are withdrawing from the region. The Council are investigating the option to take 4 families through this scheme with the intention to provide a similar type of tenancy, so the numbers using the Council owned accommodation would be limited to 14.
- 5.7 Currently the Council have declined to consider Dacorum as an areas for resettlement of a wider refugee cohort, on the basis that we have already accommodated a number of families, whereas other districts have declined to take part in either the SVPRS or the Afghan Locally employed staff (LES) scheme.

## **6. Conclusion**

- 6.1 Most of the families have integrated and settled well into the community. The decision to use council properties was one that allowed us control over the location of the home, reduce the cost to the families, to the Council and the public purse, considering the higher rent levels in the private sector. This affordability has led to some families finding employment and building safe secure homes within their communities.
- 6.2 It could be argued that uprooting and requiring these families to move house would have a significant impact on their wellbeing. Properties were selected for these families based on proximity to local services, access to places of worship, schools and health services and areas where it was felt these families would be able to integrate into local communities. The children are settled and doing well at school, have made friends and met other families locally and the families now feel comfortable in their surroundings and have invested in the homes and gardens. We have had no incidents of hate crime or concerns from residents

and have received no complaints about the resettling of these families.

6.3 Requesting the families to move, at the end of their 5 year flexible tenancies, could lead to a requirement to offer them housing through the allocations policy or homeless responsibilities and could significantly disrupt the support networks and positive steps taken by these families. This scheme has received very little negative reaction from residents and currently the Council has confirmed that these 10 SVPRS households and the 4 Afghan Locally Employed staff and their families will be the only resettled going forward.

## **7. Recommendation**

7.1 The recommendation of this report is that at the end of the 5 year flexible tenancy each family is offered a secure council tenancy dependant on a successful application of ILR.

## Appendix 1 - Current family update

The below table sets out the families who have been resettled in Dacorum

	Arrival date	Family make up	Current circumstances	Remaining support needs
Family 1	Sept 2016	Mum, Dad 2 older sons 1 teenage daughter	Dad working, Mum on PIP, 1 son married and moved out of area, other working full time and moved out. Daughter performing well at school	-Parents still have low level of English and not computer literate +support from sons -Mum has significant health issues
Family 2	Sept 2016	Mum, Dad 2 daughters, one son	Dad working, Mum supporting children who are performing well at school.	+Very independent and provide support to other families +Completed driving license and got car using grant scheme
Family 3	Feb 2017	Mum, Dad 3 sons plus baby born in 2019	Dad found employment previously and volunteering pre-covid, Mum supporting children who require more help as behind with school work	-Mum still reluctant to attend ESOL -Few tenancy and DV issues so child protection plan in place. +Dad engaging with refugee council and looking at parenting support for Mum
Family 4	Feb 2017	Mum of family number 3	Receives PIP due to health but currently on UC after issue at ESA healing. Was originally living with family no.3 but following family issues moved into her own SH property nearby	-Had to learn how to use a bank card and make payments as never been financially independent +working to get to know neighbours
Family 5	Feb 2018	Mum, Dad 2 sons and daughter	Not in employment. Mum previously volunteered. Mum and Dad have health issues and reluctant to find employment	-needing more financial support with budgeting +Children have good English and supporting parents -Opportunities not being accepted to help do activities, find employment and weight loss
Family 6	Feb 2018	Husband and Wife	Both retirement age and have a number of health issues	-low levels of English although have attended ESOL -reliant on WSO team and other

				families as not computer literate +take a lot of pride in property and garden
Family 7 and 8	March 2019	Grandma & Grandad, Mum & Dad Daughter, son and baby	Originally 2 households but moved into 1 property Grandparents don't attend ESOL and have a number of health issues Mum and Dad volunteered before Covid	-Lots of medical appointments and reliant on Dad -none of the family computer literate and require support +Mum and Dad doing English classes and encourage children to learn
Family 9	Feb 2020	Mum, Dad 2 daughters and 1 older son	Dad has severe PTSD and neither parent attending ESOL classes. Son struggles with MH as result of lockdown but found v.brief employment so hopeful will progress alongside college Older daughter has hearing impairment and struggling at school and with English Younger daughter doing well at school	+have family living in the UK but due to Covid not becoming as independent as expected -still require a lot of support to attend health appointments, encourage ESOL, pay bills and keep appointments
Family 10	To arrive 2021			