



Report for:	Cabinet
Date of meeting:	27 th July 2021
Part:	1
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	Syrian Refugee Resettlement Program
Contact:	Margaret Griffiths, Portfolio Holder Housing Mandy Peters – Team Leader Tenancy Sustainment Team
Purpose of report:	To update Cabinet on the Refugee Families resettled in Dacorum and to consider their longer-term housing options, once Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) is obtained
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That, at the end of the 5-year flexible tenancy, each family within the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme is offered a secure Council tenancy, dependant on a successful application of Indefinite Leave to Remain. 2. That Cabinet delegates authority to the Assistant Director of Housing, to agree suitable arrangements for up to four families from Afghanistan to be accommodated under the Locally Employed Staff scheme, for an initial period of one year.
Corporate Objectives:	Building Strong & Vibrant Communities Providing Good Quality Affordable Homes, in particularly for those most in need.
Implications:	<u>Financial</u>
'Value For Money Implications'	<p>The current scheme provides sufficient grant to support the families. If Cabinet approves the recommendation, then a regular tenancy will be created, the income from which will cover the costs.</p> <p><u>Value for Money</u></p> <p>The Council took the approach of housing the refugee</p>

	households in its own stock which allowed the grant income to cover support requirements.
Risk Implications	There are risks to the wellbeing of the resettled individuals if they are required to relocate. Increased costs associated with alternative accommodation options. Reputational risk around the treatment of vulnerable persons.
Community Impact Assessment	The Community Impact Assessment is contained in Appendix A
Health And Safety Implications	The existing policies relating to the management of the health and safety will apply, so there are no additional implications.
Monitoring Officer/S.151 Officer Comments	Deputy Monitoring Officer: The proposed recommendation would provide Syrian Refugee families further certainty regarding their accommodation and confirms the Council's ongoing commitment to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Deputy S.151 Officer The proposed recommendation to transfer these families to secure Council tenancies will have no financial impact.
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:	
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 LAs – Local Authorities CMT – Corporate Management Team ILR – Indefinite Leave to Remain LES – Locally Employed Staff

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 these 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 (LAs) in Hertfordshire to fund the Refugee Council to provide support to the families, however, with its dedicated resources within 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 the Council 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 provide assistance with registering for benefits and services, and signposting to other advice and information.
- 2.2 Examples of this support includes: Registering with local schools, English language and literacy classes for adults, 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. The team ensures that interpreting services are available and has 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 offered must be available for the arriving Refugees, must meet local authority standards and must be affordable and sustainable.
- 3.2 For this reason, the Council opted to use its own housing stock rather than source accommodation in the private sector. Primarily, consideration was given to the lack of affordable housing in the area, the management of the accommodation, the quality and security of the property and choice of area to place the families. Careful consideration was also given to 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 visas, 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, should be 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 so a number of the families have tenancies that are due 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 the families may, in the future, be able to return to Syria. For this reason, 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.
- 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). Another alternative would be for families to move to cheaper areas away from Dacorum but they would be removed from their existing support networks and the connections they have 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 as well as the vulnerabilities and health issues that a number of the families have, means that it would be likely that the families would qualify for points on the housing register and receive a social housing offer.
- 5.3 Should the Council make the decision to terminate their tenancies at the end of the 5-year period, the families would be made unintentionally homeless and would then require 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 this has caused a considerable financial burden through either, regular applications for Discretionary Housing Payment to top up the housing costs received through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, or through the Local Authority paying for the top up amount 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 local residents' interest to understand what the Council has done in relation to the SVPRS scheme and other schemes, including resettling unaccompanied minors. The Council has delivered an effective and supportive scheme in relation to accepting the 10 families over a 5-year period in conjunction with other LAs.
- 5.6 The Council has recently considered a request from the Home Office to accommodate families of Afghanistan 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 is investigating the option of taking a maximum of four families through this scheme, with the intention of providing a similar type of tenancy, but initially for a period of one year, in line with the program. The exact number of families will be determined based upon capacity and resourcing level that would be required to assist with more complex family make-ups. This would result in a maximum of 14 vulnerable refugee households being accommodated in Dacorum.
- 5.7 Currently the Council has declined to consider Dacorum as an area for resettlement of a wider refugee cohort, on the basis that it has 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 provided the Council control over the location of the home, it reduced the cost to the families, to the Council and the public purse, given the higher rent levels in the private sector. This affordability of accommodation has led to some families finding employment and building safe secure homes within their communities.
- 6.2 It is considered 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 in 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 their 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 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 the Council's 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 families going forward.

7. Recommendations

7.1 The first recommendation of this report is that, at the end of their 5-year flexible tenancy, each family within the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme is offered a secure Council tenancy dependant on a successful application of Indefinite Leave to Remain.

7.2 The second recommendation is to delegate approval for the settlement of four families from Afghanistan, to support the Locally Employed Staff Scheme, to the Assistant Director of Housing.