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Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report for:	Housing & Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Title of report:	Humanitarian Response Programme Update
Date:	20 November 2024
Report on behalf of:	Councillor Simy Dhyani, Portfolio Holder for Housing & Property Services
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	N/A
Appendices:	Humanitarian Response Dashboard
Background papers:	N/A
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (VPRP) Afghan Locally Employed Scheme (ALES) Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) Local Authorities (LA's) Assistant Director (AD) Afghan Resettlement Accommodation Programme (ARAP) Home Office (HO) Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) Private Rented Sector (PRS) Initial asylum (IA) Dispersal Accommodation (DA) Overflow Asylum Accommodation (ODA) Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH) English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Report Author / Responsible Officer

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Corporate Priorities	<p>Community engagement: Engage with residents and partners to have a real say on our services and the borough</p> <p>Vibrant communities: Foster arts, culture and leisure opportunities</p> <p>Clean, safe and green: Provide a clean, safe and green-focussed environment</p> <p>Homes to be proud of: Enable well-maintained and affordable homes, where people want to live</p>
Wards affected	ALL
Purpose of the report:	1. Inform Members of the current position in relation to Humanitarian Response activity and the council's response in relation to resettlement and asylum cohorts.
Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s):	1. Provide feedback regarding the approach to date and potential impacts for the council.
Period for post policy/project review:	Annually or upon material change in delivery

1 Introduction/Background:

This report follows the commitment in October 2023, to report annually to committee on progress of activity linked to the Humanitarian Response Programme.

The Housing Service leads the council's operational response to resettling refugees in Dacorum, which started following the Government's commitment that during 2015 and 2020 the UK would resettle 20,000 Syrian Refugees. On 30 September 2015, the Council carried a motion supporting the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (VPRP) scheme agreed to welcome refugee families over a 5-year period – with the first arriving in September 2016. The council committed to resettling 10 households. To date the council has resettled 9 households via the programme and is yet to finalise arrangements to resettle the tenth household. There is 1 household continuing to be supported by the service from the VPRP scheme – due to the changes in Home Office (HO) priorities, this household will be resettled via the Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).

As indicated, more recently activity has been extended to our resettlement of Afghan's, via the Afghan Locally Employed Scheme (ALES) and ACRS helping households who had provided support to the British government. The council's decision to support the scheme, along with other Hertfordshire authorities on 24 June 2021. Between September 2021 and May 2022, the council resettled 5 Afghan households, there are now a total of 16 households resettled in Dacorum, 10 of which are being supported directly by the Humanitarian Response Team.

Russia's war on Ukraine has caused the worst refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Since the fleeing of refugees to the UK, large numbers have settled in Hertfordshire. Currently there are 73 households hosted in Dacorum, the Humanitarian Response team do not directly support these households, however the Private Sector Housing Team are engaged in assessing properties prior to settlement to ensure that they are suitable for occupation.

2 Key Issues/proposals/main body of the report:

The council anticipates that its commitment to support the final and tenth household via the ACRS scheme will be fulfilled in 2025. Engagement with the HO and EELGA will enable identification of a suitable household to be supported into accommodation. Prior to arrival the team will undertake activity to prepare identified accommodation and ensure key arrangements are made, such as securing school placements in liaison with HCC. Each household is different, and the support needs of the household will determine the length and extent of support provided.

The slide pack identifies the number of Asylum Seekers currently occupying contingency accommodation at the end of October: 259 at Holiday Inn and 265 at Hempstead House, whilst awaiting determination of their asylum claim. Each week the service receives discontinuation data from EELGA, which identifies the number of households who have received a decision and in turn those whose contingency accommodation will end. Households with a positive asylum decision and New Refugee status can approach Dacorum Borough Council for assistance with onward housing and each household will be assessed in line with the relevant legislation (Part 6, Housing Act 1996 – Allocations and Part 7, Housing Act 1996 – Homelessness), these assessments determine eligibility for onward housing assistance, which includes temporary accommodation.

Due to the high numbers of households occupying contingency accommodation in the borough, there is risk that this could place unprecedented demands for temporary accommodation and housing assistance. To abate this the Humanitarian Response team, engage proactively with the cohort by delivering weekly advice surgeries to ensure that individuals are given early housing advice and assistance to explore housing options. Additionally, proactive work is undertaken in collaboration with the Homeless Prevention Team, Community Safety, Private Sector Housing teams and local charities to prevent the risk of rough sleeping, ensure wherever possible safe access to suitable private sector accommodation and prevent exploitation or safeguarding concerns.

To support the exit from use of hotel accommodation, the HO accommodation agents Clear Springs Ready Homes (CRH) are actively procuring Dispersal Accommodation (DA) in the borough. This accommodation is long term dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers pending full determination of claim and is typically private sector accommodation. CRH actively consult with the council in advance of procuring such accommodation to ensure we can influence locality and avoid risk of properties being stood up in areas of concern – to date there are 46 bedspaces of dispersal accommodation in the borough.

Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF)

This fund is council's increase housing provision for refugees who are unable to find settled accommodation through resettlement schemes. The council was successful in Round 2 of the fund in securing an allocation of £950,000 and in Round 3 £828,375. A project lead in the Strategic Housing and Delivery team works closely with the Humanitarian Response Programme Manager and Housing Needs Manager to deliver the requirements of the scheme and acquire properties and oversee the refurbishment of properties to meet housing demands. To ensure swift occupation of properties, homes are allocated to households via the housing register or for temporary accommodation (where this is stipulated by grant conditions). This approach has helped the service to replace some of the housing provision used for placements already made to households via the ACRS. To date the following properties have been acquired:

LAHF Round 2

- Bryfield Cottages (complete and works underway)
- Grassy Close (complete and occupied)
- Typleden Close, Hemel Hempstead (purchase underway)
- Briery Way, Hemel Hempstead (purchase underway)
- Widmore Drive, Hemel Hempstead (TA unit purchase underway)

LAHF Round 3

- Our commitment is to acquire:
 - 1x 1 Bed properties
 - 2x 2/3 bed properties
 - 1x 4 bed property

Success

The Housing Service has built on already excellent working relationships that are in place to support vulnerable households across the borough, by extending current working arrangements and developing new with the voluntary, faith and statutory sector. This proactive partnership working supports collaboration on a range of activity, including delivery of workshops with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and hosting the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) in shadowing the service to gain insights into our approach surrounding delivery.

The Humanitarian Response Team have been recognised via the council's annual awards ceremony for their excellent work, which includes establishing women's integration, access to private sector accommodation alleviating pressure on statutory services such as homelessness and temporary accommodation and increasing access to employment.

Challenges

Aside from the complexities that arise from providing support to households with multiple disadvantages and have had to flee fear of persecution, war and terror in their home country, there are several other challenges that arise for the local authority linked to the delivery of activity – some of which are outlined below:

- Infrastructure demands – local voluntary and statutory services are directly impacted by increasing population flow from resettlement and asylum cohorts, as activity is often stood up in reactive response new population has not been forecast into local infrastructure planning for access to services such as health, education placement and delivery/funding of local services.
- PRS impacts – HO accommodation providers are procuring property in direct competition with LA's who often look to the PRS to prevent homelessness, which results in reduced availability and can inflate the market.
- Increased LA housing and homelessness pressures – diminished PRS access can drive up numbers of households that require housing assistance from LA's, which in turn could impact on the numbers and length of time that households spend in temporary accommodation. Households receiving positive asylum determinations following process are highly likely to seek assistance with housing from LA's, which could lengthen waiting times for new and existing households in need.
- Safeguarding concerns – vulnerable households and those with a history of persecution, or challenges integrating into a community are more likely to be subject to exploitation and modern slavery.
- Community safety – there are significant issues surrounding anti-social behaviour, crime and disorder from contingency accommodation, impacting on the Community Safety and policing teams, residents and businesses.

The service and leadership team work proactively to identify a place-based approach to delivery of local services, including the integration of resettled and asylum-seeking populations. Where needed intervention meetings and liaison with strategic leads and political members are held with the aim of influence decision making and improve outcome to address concerns arising.

3 Options and alternatives considered

Alternative options have not been considered. It is necessary for the council to ensure it delivers upon its commitments in line with defined frameworks.

4 Consultation

Due to the nature of the activity and stakeholders impacted, the service works collaboratively to ensure effective community integration and delivery of the scheme requirements for relevant cohorts.

5 Financial and value for money implications:

Activity must be delivered in line with grant funding requirements, monitoring of grant funding allocations is undertaken by the budget holder in collaboration with Finance colleagues, ensuring that memorandum of understanding's, grant expenditure determinations and other verification documentation or data is submitted in accordance with guidance. The service proactively identifies opportunities to minimise impact on council and stakeholder resources, through effective use of funding allocated and efficiency of service delivery.

6 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications outlined within this report.

7 Risk implications:

Safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children is pivotal to the delivery of humanitarian response activity. As many households seeking asylum or being resettled into the UK are likely to be vulnerable because of their circumstances and persecution in their home country, this could give heightened risk to exploitation, modern slavery, and race or hate crime and radicalisation.

The service is proactive in ensuring that staff and stakeholders are supported to respond effectively to issues as outlined as above, undertaking regular training, awareness and information sessions to ensure they can detect issues arising and reporting, or undertaking other key actions as appropriate.

8 Equalities, Community Impact and Human Rights:

Community Impact Assessment has not been completed for the purposes of this report. An impact assessment will be undertaken to support the development of the Humanitarian Response Integration Plan.

There are no Human Rights implications arising from this report.

9 Sustainability implications (including climate change, health and wellbeing, community safety)

There are no sustainability issues arising from the development of this policy.

10 Council infrastructure (including Health and Safety, HR/OD, assets and other resources)

Increasing refugee and asylum-seeking population has direct impacts for council and key stakeholder infrastructure including (not limited to) housing, health, education, emergency services and other resources such as VCS. It is crucial therefore that the service continues to work in partnership to alleviate and limit impacts on resources, through effective use of funding – in addition to engagement in local, regional and national forums and strategic groups to influence decision making and responses to asylum and resettlement activity.

11 Conclusions:

This report provides members with insight into the work led by the Humanitarian Response Team within the Housing & Property directorate and the associated challenges, or activity that may arise as a result.