

**REFUGEE WORKING GROUP MEETING held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 25 SEPTEMBER 2015 at 1pm**

Present: Councillor Julie Redfern – Chairman
Councillors Graham Barker, Sharon Morris and Elizabeth Parr

Officers in attendance: Roger Harborough (Director of Public Services), Roz Millership (Assistant Director – Housing and Environmental Services).

RWG1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Marie Felton.

RWG2 INTRODUCTION

The Working Group considered the following matters:

- Its purpose was to manage and oversee the policy set by council at its extraordinary meeting;
- There would be an Essex-wide multi agency approach (The ECC press release and LGA task group message were noted, ie that in two tier areas councils were encouraged to collaborate and to make a joint offer. The Home Office expected County Councils to take the lead in coordinating and feeding back offers and numbers to Home Office via Strategic Migration Partnerships);
- Support for the Churches Refugee Network and working with other initiatives, local communities and individuals to find accommodation and address other human needs within the Uttlesford area - need to note that the Home Office is only looking at offers of self-contained accommodation, not offers of spare rooms (for safeguarding reasons);
- Important to note that the context of asks of local authorities is a carefully managed programme with resettlement arrangements for each household resolved before they depart from refugee camps in the Middle East;
- Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme prioritises women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of violence and torture. The government is working with UNHCR to identify these cases;

- Government VPR scheme aims to be sensitive to impact on receiving local communities and infrastructure. The impact on those taking new cases will be managed in a fair and controlled way. It aims to achieve an equitable distribution of refugees across the country. No individual authority is to be asked to share a disproportionate share of the burden. A degree of tension exists, however, between these objectives and enabling clusters of refugee households to have access to mutual support and reduce the risk of isolation adding to the distress of diaspora);
- We are not being asked to gear up to respond to a planeload of displaced persons with no ongoing arrangements in place. A number of offers received by the council relate back to experience of previous crises (Lebanon, Kossova).

RWG3

SUPPORT FOR REFUGEES WITHIN THE UTTLESFORD AREA

Members considered the implementation of the Council's policies for support for Syrian refugees within the Uttlesford area. The following points were made during discussion:

- Concern about refugees already in the country (GB);
- transit process - does it include holding camps where immediate needs will be assessed and met (GB);
- 5-8 properties fall empty every fortnight so direct lets could be made if flow is a trickle over time (RM);
- The council could use discretionary housing benefit to pay for refugees to be housed in Private Rented Sector (RM);
- The issue will be raised at the landlord forum to assess willingness of Private Rented Sector to help (RM);
- The council needs to ask whether there is any self-contained accommodation that the owner would be prepared to make available at social rent. (JR)
- The Home Office should be asked if it has criteria for suitable accommodation, although officers are used to making assessment of such factors in housing homeless households;
- ECC should be informed that we are prepared to accommodate managed flow (RH);

- Press release and other communications - setting up database, finding out more information, asking for criteria as to suitable accommodation;
- Approach CAB to help us access civic society organisations locally (RM);
- Safeguarding Children's Board has stressed the importance of safeguarding (RM);
- Uttlesford District Council would pay for checks on volunteers (RM);
- Home Office is assumed to be working first with unitaries who have declared quantity. Uttlesford not in position to propose numbers yet to ECC (RH).

Summary of conclusions

The following actions were noted:

- Acknowledge offers of assistance already received and commit to keep benefactors informed;
- Database already established to collate offers;
- Communications strategy to be implemented including press releases, website page and e mail newsletter to interested parties;
- Appeal to be made to property owners seeking self-contained accommodation that might be available for up to 5 years which the Council could lease from the owner at social rents;
- Enquiries to be made via the Eastern Region Strategic Migration Partnership as to whether the Home Office has any criteria that suitable accommodation must meet.