

To: Council
Date: 7 December 2015
Report of: Head of Law and Governance
Title of Report: Petitions scheme – petition asking for support for refugees and asylum seekers

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To set before Council a petition meeting the criteria for debate under the Council's petitions scheme.
Key decision:	No
Executive Board Member with responsibility for this area:	Councillor Bob Price, Leader of the Council
Policy Framework:	Not applicable.
Corporate Priority:	Not applicable
Recommendation(s): That Council :	
1. follow the procedure for large petitions in the Council's Petitions Scheme by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hearing the head petitioner for the petition; • debating the petition; and • deciding whether to make any recommendations to the City Executive Board or officers. 	

Introduction

1. The Council's petitions scheme is set out in the Constitution. The scheme specifies that petitions requesting action within the Council's powers and containing over 1,500 signatures will be considered by Full Council. The scheme also specifies that the petition organiser can address Council for up to five minutes at the start of the debate in order to present the petition.
2. Petitions are made available on the relevant section of the Council's website.

The petition

3. A petition stating it was signed by 2,467 people was delivered to the Head of Law and Governance on 23 September 2015. The petition is addressed to all six of the Oxfordshire councils.

4. The petition asks the Council to:

'Give shelter, support and a fair hearing to refugees and asylum seekers in our community. Work with existing organisations like Oxford City of Sanctuary, Refugee Resource & Asylum Welcome to help those who are already here and to take in more who are desperately in need.'

5. Signatures are valid and come from a wide range of postcodes, mostly but not wholly from Oxfordshire. The petition was available through the campaign website 38degrees and the stated number is accurate. The Council has some powers in this area should it choose to use them. The petition therefore meets the criteria for debate at Council.

Related petition

6. A second related petition (on paper and run through Change.org) addressed to this Council alone and signed by approximately 255 people was delivered. This petition does not meet the threshold for consideration. It is however available for inspection on the relevant section of the Council's website.

Actions for Council

7. The petition organiser has been invited to present the petition and under the scheme's rules is permitted to address Council for up to five minutes at the start of this item.
8. Council is asked to debate the petition and make recommendations to the City Executive Board and or officers, as appropriate. There are no minimum requirements in law or in the Constitution as to the format or duration of the debate.
9. Recommendations to the City Executive Board will subsequently be presented to them for their consideration.

Other considerations

10. On 23 September Council considered a motion on notice and resolved:

Oxford has a long tradition of welcoming immigrants and refugees from around the world. The cultural richness of the city is fundamental to its creativity, the excellence of our health services and the global reputation of our universities. Oxford is a truly global city, with one in three of our residents born overseas. 8000 students from 139 countries outside the UK are represented in the University of Oxford. Increasing numbers of refugees are fleeing bloody conflicts and oppressive regimes, deepening the global humanitarian crisis that has been developing over the last decade. Some of the most vulnerable people in the world are dying as they try to reach safety. The City Council welcomes the huge level of support shown by the Oxford and Oxfordshire communities for a local response to this crisis.

On 6 October 2008, the Council passed a motion declaring itself to be a City of Sanctuary; stating: "this Council wishes to promote the inclusion and welfare of those coming to Oxford to seek refuge and sanctuary."

We recognise the strong support local communities, voluntary bodies, faith groups and others in Oxford already give to those seeking refuge and sanctuary. The strength of public feeling was well expressed in the 'Oxford Welcomes Refugees' March on 6 September that attracted more than 2,000 people.

The UN refugee agency has asked EU Member States to immediately take 200,000 additional refugees to lessen the humanitarian crisis. In response, the EU has adopted a quota system which the UK Government has refused to participate in.

Rather than the 18,000 that would represent the UK's share of refugees, the Prime Minister has announced that his government would make provision for 20,000 over the course of this Parliament. This would simply be an extension of the existing UNHCR scheme for resettlement of vulnerable people (with a strong emphasis on young people) from the camps in the Lebanon and Jordan. This fails entirely to deal with the refugees who have fled the war and the camps and have already reached an EU country in order to find safety and refuge.

Recognising the humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in recent months and our moral responsibility to respond to it, this Council asks the Executive to:

- a) continue to coordinate the work of local charities, voluntary bodies and the public authorities in the Oxford area to ensure that there are effective procedures in place to welcome refugees of all ages and to offer appropriate housing and support.
- b) continue to encourage people in Oxford and the wider county to make financial donations to support the charities and voluntary bodies involved
- c) ensure that its policies and procedures are as effective as possible in supporting refugees and facilitating the accommodation of refugees in private homes.
- d) work with the Home Office to implement the extended Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme
- e) write to the City's Universities encouraging them to consider extending their funded studentships to include more places specifically for refugees
- f) write to the City's MPs expressing concern over the UK Government's weak response to the refugee crisis and asking them to lobby for the UK to welcome it's fair share of refugees

11. The Assistant Chief Executive is responsible for progressing these resolutions.

Financial implications

12. The implications will depend on Council's recommendations, if any, and Council should be mindful of the possible costs associated with these.

Legal issues

13. The implications will depend on Council's recommendations, if any.

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Background papers: petitions Make Oxford a beacon of hope and Refugees
Welcome in Oxford/Oxfordshire on www.oxford.gov.uk