

To: City Executive Board

Date: 17 December 2015

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Resettling Syrian Refugees in Oxford

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the Scrutiny Committee recommendations on Resettling Syrian Refugees in Oxford

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Craig Simmons

Executive lead member: Councillor Bob Price, Leader of the Council and Board Member for Corporate Strategy and Economic Development

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the six recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Committee pre-scrutinised the Resettling Syrian Refugees in Oxford report at its public meeting on 9 December 2015. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Price, Caroline Green and Val Johnson for attending the Committee to discuss this report.

Summary of recommendations

2. The Committee heard that the City Council had consulted widely with different agencies on the issue of resettling refugees and was ahead of many other local authorities in terms of developing good practice. Good practice was being shared locally and nationally. The Committee commended officers for the speed and quality of their work in this important area.
3. The Committee noted that since the report was written, government had announced funding to assist with the resettlement of Syrian refugees that was guaranteed for 5 years and would taper away from years 2 to 5.

4. The Committee noted the motion agreed by Council on 23 September 2015. In response to a question about the need for non- Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) refugees to prove a local connection in order to be housed, the Committee heard that engagement with local support groups could be used to demonstrate a local connection. The Committee sought assurances that this was the case.
5. The Committee questioned what assistance young refugees would receive to help them to integrate at school. The Committee heard that separate funding was being made available by the government for education but that additional support might be needed for example when refugee children have to take exams. The City Council was working with the County Council to co-ordinate support, including educational and language services, on a case by case basis. The Committee suggest that the Council should continue to develop this partnership working to improve the co-ordination of support services available to Syrian refugees.

Recommendation 1 - That the City Council should continue to work with partners to co-ordinate and strengthen local arrangements for accommodating and supporting Syrian refugees, including educational support and language services.

6. In response to a question about unaccompanied minors, the Committee heard that none would arrive as part of the VPRS but that increasing numbers had arrived locally by other means. These young people had been referred to Asylum Welcome for support before being housed outside of Oxfordshire. The Committee noted that there was a need for more foster carers locally and heard that the City Council had supported a County Council campaign aimed at promoting fostering and adoption. The Committee suggest that the City Council should do what it can to assist the County Council in promoting fostering and adoption, including of refugee children.

Recommendation 2 - That the City Council should assist the County Council in promoting campaigns aimed at recruiting new foster carers and adopters.

7. The Committee noted that although the City Council provided funding to Asylum Welcome, there was less provision in place to support the relatively high numbers of refugees in the city who were outside of the VPRS. The Committee suggest that the Council should maintain a focus on the support available to these refugees too, as well as its impacts.

Recommendation 3 - That the City Council should also maintain a focus on the types and impacts of support available to the refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford that are not part of the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS).

8. The Committee noted that Oxford had some specific circumstances and needs in terms of supporting refugees, such as the very high cost and pressure on

housing in the city. The Committee suggest that the City Council should actively engage with local MPs on these issues, and update them on what the City Council is already doing to support refugees.

Recommendation 4 - That the City Council should update local MPs on what the Council is doing to support refugees in Oxford, and engage with them about the challenges and needs that are more specific to Oxford.

9. The Committee questioned what representations the Council had made to Government and whether there might be opportunities to make the case for additional resources to fund specific facilities or services for refugees.

Recommendation 5 - That the City Council should look for opportunities to engage constructively with government about the city's needs and how these can be met.

10. The Committee suggest that the Council should monitor progress and developments over time and that further updates should be provided on these important issues that are of public interest.

Recommendation 6 - That progress and developments should be monitored and periodic updates should be provided to City Councillors at public meetings.

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