

To: City Executive Board
Date: 20th December 2017
Report of: Head of Housing Services
Title of Report: Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) and Vulnerable Childrens Relocation Scheme (VCRS) Continuation 2017 to 2018.

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To approve the continuation of SVPRS and VCRS in 2017 to 2018 including families supported under Community Sponsorship schemes.
Key decision:	Yes
Executive Board Member:	Councillor Bob Price, Leader
Corporate Priority:	Corporate Plan
Policy Framework:	None
Recommendation(s): That the City Executive Board resolves to:	
1.	Approve the continuation of the SVPRS and VCRS scheme to accommodate a further 10 families by the end of 2018.
2.	Approve the inclusion of families supported under the Community Sponsorship model in this offer.

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Equality Impact Assessment

Introduction and background

1. Following the worsening situation in Syria in August/September 2015, with huge numbers of refugees seeking to reach Western and Northern Europe, the Prime Minister committed the UK to take 20,000 refugees (1,000 by the end of 2015). Oxford City Council subsequently agreed a motion on Oxford as a City of Sanctuary for refugees and asylum seekers, and the Leader of the Council indicated that Oxford City Council would participate in this new scheme.
2. Oxford City Council's offer and approach are set out in the report to CEB on 17th December 2015. In brief, the Council resolved to develop arrangements, working with neighbouring Councils, health services, and voluntary groups to participate in the scheme.
3. Operationally, it was agreed that the Council would accommodate 10 families from December 2015, using a phased approach of around 2 households every 1-2 months thereafter. Operating processes with various statutory partners were agreed, and the Council contracted with two local organisations to provide intensive resettlement support (of 2-3 weeks duration per arrival) and on-going housing support (initially 1 year per household). Accommodation was to be sourced from the private rented market at market rates, so as not to compete with other local households in housing need. The scheme was to be operated over five years, within the funding provided by the Home Office with respect to this scheme.
4. Following a review in mid-2016 it was decided that the Council would extend its offer to accommodate a further 10 households between September 2016 and August 2017. Following a request from the Home Office, this offer included 3 families who arrived under the Vulnerable Childrens Relocation Scheme (VCRS). VCRS operates in exactly the same way and with exactly the same funding as SVPRS . The families are not necessarily Syrian but are refugees selected by the UN as suitable for resettlement on the grounds of the particular vulnerability of a child or children in the family. This second offer has now been completed and 20 households are now successfully resettled in Oxford.
5. It is proposed that a further offer is made to accommodate a further 10 households between 2017 and 2018. This will include families under SVPRS, VCRS and Community Sponsorship.

Success of scheme to date

6. The scheme has successfully resettled 20 very vulnerable refugee families in Oxford City. This includes 43 Adults and 45 children. These families meet the criteria for refugee status and are all deemed to be especially vulnerable. The criteria for this include physical and psychological injuries and experiences of detention, having to flee their homes, witnessing the destruction of their homes and loss and separation from family members. Many families include a member with a serious health condition.
7. The effectiveness of the Council's approach has been reviewed and refined since December 2015. Both community co-ordination work and the operation of the

scheme (housing and support) have continued to go well. The scheme was evaluated by an independent academic researcher commissioned by the UNHCR and IOM (International Organisation for Migration) in December 16 as part of a more extensive study into the success of SVPRS. All families contributed and the feedback was positive. As part of this, Dr. Christopher McDowell, Associate Dean (International), School of Arts and Social Sciences, University of London, commented, "The work of Oxford and your partners was most impressive, and the refugee families we met with were very grateful for the warm welcome and help they have received."

8. The Council conducted its own internal evaluation in October 17. At the time of writing 20 adults from 11 households had returned their questionnaires. 100% of respondents reported that they were very satisfied with the service they had received from Asylum Welcome which provides intensive support for the first two weeks. 100% of respondents reported that they were very satisfied with the support they received from the Council. 75% reported that they were very satisfied with the support they received from Connection, with a further 10% saying they were quite satisfied and 15% saying they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
9. The following areas of work and impact were evaluated:

Housing

10. The Council has been able to procure private rented sector housing and has used Home Office grant funding to top up rents where necessary. All households have been supported to sustain their tenancies effectively and to date no family is in arrears. However the high cost of housing continues to be a risk for families in terms of their ability to achieve independence after five years when grant funding which is currently used to "top up" rents is no longer available.

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

11. 100% of children are enrolled in school and making excellent progress. 97% of adults are engaged with ESOL classes. This does vary from person to person so for example some women with young children are doing informal ESOL at home at their request. We have successfully applied for and received funding from the Home office to assist with childcare for mothers with pre-school aged children.
12. The vast majority of family members are educated to between year 6 and year 9 in their country of origin. Many are not literate in Arabic. This poses problems in terms of learning another language. The Home Office provides £850 per adult to assist with ESOL. Their goal is that learners are assisted to reach Entry Level 3 – the level at which one could expect to gain employment and cope independently in English. To date we have commissioned extra pre entry conversation classes and an extra six hours of classes a week for Entry level one and two learners. 56% of adults are at pre entry level. 32% are at Entry Level one or two and 12 % are at Entry Level 3 or above.

Employment

13. We have commissioned a SVPRS consolidation worker or year two support post from Connection Floating Support. The post holder started in June 17 and has made enormous progress in furthering the aims of the post which was to help families progress towards independence and gaining employment. We now have 18% of adults in employment working over 24 hours a week. (6 adults out of 43). This is the level that they can claim Working Tax Credit and move out of the Benefit Cap. 25% (5 out of 20 households) now have a working adult in the household. One household has two working adults in the household.

Integration

14. The Home office requires us to return evaluation data twice a year for a certain number of families. According to the 11 families who were monitored in October 17, 100% reported that they definitely agreed with the statement that “This local area (within 15 to 20 minutes’ walk) is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together.” All families reported that they were involved in activities both within and outside of their own ethnic community mostly based around their children and their religion. However in our own evaluation all families also reported that they would like more help in some of the following areas: getting to know friends and neighbours/community activities/understanding how schools work/getting involved with local clubs. This is reflected in our planned future work.

Support and joint working

15. Contracts with support agencies; Asylum Welcome, Connection and Refugee Resource are set up and working well. Arrangements with statutory partners in order to agree families and plan for their arrival are well established and work effectively.

Key Achievements

16. The key achievements recorded for the project to date are:

- All families have sustained their tenancies, are linked to local education, support and health services and are enabled to fully access these through the support of our support partners
- The five year funding decreases year on year but provides an effective resource for ensuring families are well supported until they are able to achieve independence. All costs for the scheme have been met through Home Office funding and it is anticipated that this will continue to be the case for the life of the scheme.
- Family members are keen to work and integrate and contribute economically and socially to life in the UK. Considering families’ vulnerability, high support needs low level of education and English levels the rate of employment and integration in their communities is very good. It is hoped that families will be able to sustain employment but we are at very early stages of families moving into work and we are still seeing what support families need and what issues come up.

- Some families have required extra support, for various (identified) reasons, but these have been managed within the normal statutory and voluntary frameworks.

Challenges

17. The challenges to these achievements have been:

- Some family members are not progressing with English at the pace originally expected, and so are finding it much harder to move into work.
- Some families have been benefit capped and have been receiving Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP).
- Women face huge barriers in accessing the work place due to lack of experience in the work place; cultural barriers; lack of support for this client group in employment support services; and childcare.
- Families are housed in the private rented sector with expensive rent so will find it hard to achieve financial independence without improved incomes from work.
- Families vary according to their ability to adapt to cultural norms and some have needed extra support in this area.
- Families will start to move into Universal Credit and may face considerable problems navigating the on line claim system, budgeting and meeting demanding claimant commitment. Oxford City Council will not be able to support private landlords as we do at present by ensuring claims are processed speedily, as these will be processed by the DWP instead of the Housing Benefit team.

Planned work to minimise impact of challenges

18. Work being undertaken to address these challenges include:

- SVPRS Officer working with Aspire to develop a work based ESOL programme which would be accessible for those with basic English. It is anticipated this could be up and running by January 2018.
- SVPRS Officer can use ESOL funding for bespoke help for struggling family members.
- SVPRS Officer is working with Aspire to develop a supported pathway into employment for women.
- SVPRS officer is investigating ways the Council can assist with work placements for refugees.
- SVPRS budget can overset any DHP budget payments as required
- The Council has commissioned a support partner to do outreach work with faith and community groups in order to find landlords who may be willing to rent at affordable rent levels in order to minimise exposure to high rents for next cohort of families.
- The Council has commissioned a support partner to develop a volunteer service to aid families to integrate, practice English and make local friends soon after arrival.
- Work is being undertaken to prepare families for Universal Credit, for example running information session and ensuring support workers are trained to help families navigate system.

Options going forward

19. The Council could discontinue participation in the scheme and stop taking new households from now on, having met its commitment to assist 20 families to date; or could vary the proposed annual programme to a different level.
20. A full review has been undertaken and has concluded that: the programme has been a considerable success, it has achieved good outcomes, it has been managed within the budget envelope, and it has received high satisfaction levels from the refugees that have been assisted. It is proposed therefore that the Council should extend the programme and make a commitment to assist a further 10 households.
21. Continuation of the scheme means that we could consider family reunification cases i.e. families who are related to our resettled families who have also been considered suitable for the scheme. Families are desperate to be reunited and when this does happen it is beneficial for both family units.

Community Sponsorship

22. The Home Office is keen to promote this alternative model of refugee resettlement and support, which is widely used in other countries, most notably in Canada. It involves a group coming together, often a group associated with a church or pre-existing community organisation, and pooling their skills and resources to resettle a refugee family in the local community. The Council has approved one Community sponsorship group to provide all support, including housing, to one refugee family for 1-2 years.
23. The group has to undergo a rigorous application process to be approved by the Home Office who checks their resettlement plan, financial viability, policies and procedures including safeguarding and their general fitness and capacity to take on the task of supporting a family. The SVPRS Officer works closely with the group and it is anticipated that the family may slot into the year 2-5 support system after either year one or two. We would then claim funding for the family. The proposal is that the Community Sponsorship families form part of the proposed offer of a further 10 families.

Financial implications

24. The entire programme including all Council staffing costs can be met from the Home Office grant. It is anticipated that the proposed extension of the scheme into year three will necessitate a further 0.5 post at the Council but this will be met from grant funding also.

Legal issues

25. There are no legal implications. This is a non-statutory activity that is fully funded from Home Office grants.

Level of risk

26. There are no identified risks in relation to the content of this report, which relates to the continuation of this initiative.

Equalities impact

27. An Equalities Impact Assessment is attached as Appendix 1.

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Background Papers: None

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