

To: Cabinet
Date: 12 July 2023
Report of: Head of Housing
Title of Report: Future resettlement commitments for new refugee families

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To seek approval for future commitments for resettling new refugee families into Oxford and seek approval to go to tender to commission the provision of person centred support
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet member for Housing,
Corporate Priority:	Deliver More Affordable Housing and Support Thriving Communities
Policy Framework:	Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023 – 2028

Recommendations: That Cabinet resolves to:	
1.	Approve the resettlement of a minimum of 8 refugee families per year from any of the resettlement schemes highlighted in this report for a period of 5 years from 2023 to 2028, on the condition that the requirements in paragraph 21 of this report are consistently met to ensure scheme viability;
2.	Delegate authority to the Executive Director (Communities and People), in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, to agree the resettlement of additional refugees above this allocation (which will incur additional expenditure from Home Office grant funding for support provision) subject to sufficient grant funding;
3.	Approve the use of Home Office grant funding of up to £1,313,840 (see Appendix 2) to procure the provision of 2 years of person centred support for each refugee family arriving in Oxford during the 5 year period between 2023 -2028;
4.	Delegate authority to the Head of Housing in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing to approve the use of the Home Office grant funding to procure additional person centred support as required; and

5. **Delegate authority** to the Head of Housing in consultation with the Head of Financial Services/S151 Officer, the Head of Law and Governance and the Cabinet Member for Housing to allocate the approved budget and enter into contract(s) with a provider(s) for the provision of person centred support.

Appendices

Appendix 1	Home Office Funding Schedule
Appendix 2	Financial modelling for future refugee resettlement
Appendix 3	Family funding comparison over 5 years for new United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) based on proposed new person centred model (updated 08/07/21)
Appendix 4	Risk Register

Introduction and background

1. The purpose of this report is to seek approval to continue the Council's resettlement programme to potentially resettle a further minimum of 40 families over the next 5 year period and includes the approval of budget provision to procure wrap around support provision for the households.
2. There is an ongoing need to resettle refugee families as globally there are circa 100 million forcibly displaced people. There are currently circa 7000 Afghan refugees that continue to live in bridging hotels across the UK and the Government has committed to resettling 20,000 Afghan refugees over a 3 year period. This requires all local authorities to consider and plan for the successful resettlement of new households into our area.
3. Since December 2015 Oxford City Council has successfully resettled 47 refugee families that have arrived through government resettlement schemes namely Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS), Afghan Relocations and Allocations Policy (ARAP), Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) with the last family of our current commitment due to arrive in June 2023.
4. Oxfordshire has been recognised as one of the few counties that continue to support the resettling of refugees within UKRS. Oxford City Council's resettlement programme has proved its success by assisting refugees to become financially independent to the extent that 66% of the 30 SVPRS families and 80% of the 10 Afghan families have at least one person in employment. This report outlines the potential to continue and build on this work in the coming years by resettling more households.

Context of wider asylum, migrant & refugee challenges in Oxfordshire

5. There are many challenges in supporting refugees and asylum seekers as more people seek refuge in the UK and Oxford from war and crisis in other parts of the world. This context is important as we consider new resettlement commitments, alongside the pressures upon resources of housing, support, community and specialist services.

6. At present the Home Office have commissioned the Kassam Stadium Hotel to be used as Asylum Seeker Contingency accommodation where it currently hosts approximately 220 asylum seekers who are currently awaiting the outcome of their respective asylum claims. Once asylum has been granted, there is potential for some individuals to remain in or around the city and will therefore be looking to seek accommodation and support locally, including support for housing from the City Council.
7. Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Oxford City has welcomed 424 Ukrainian guests as of 21st of April, through hosting arrangements. 39 Ukrainian households have moved on into private rent/social housing, some of those moves supported by Oxford City Council, some entirely independent. While Oxford has welcomed Ukrainian refugees this inevitably puts further demand on the housing market.
8. Oxford City Council is working collaboratively with Oxfordshire County Council and District Councils to implement and deliver the Countywide Re-matching Service for the Homes for Ukraine project, moving those who have to leave hosting arrangements to new accommodation, to minimise homeless presentations across all City and Districts in Oxfordshire. Countywide work is also ongoing to increase the supply of longer term accommodation for Ukrainian guests and Afghan bridging hotel families, and to implement a support contract to support Ukrainian families.
9. Afghan households in bridging hotel nationally are being moved on by central government, and therefore are being encouraged to self-find their own accommodation. We are already receiving enquiries of support from this cohort.
10. Oxford city has a population of circa 165,000, of which, approximately 56,000 are migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. The Council has already made a commitment to renew its City of Sanctuary accreditation and make any necessary adaptations to its practice to meet the criteria, which will lead it to become a more accessible and welcoming organisation for all migrant cohorts.

Why make further refugee resettlement commitments?

11. Within this difficult national and local context, the Council needs to consider what its plans are for the future of refugee resettlement as there continues to be a growing need to offer sanctuary to those who are victims of war, persecution and the impacts of a changing climate for the foreseeable future.
12. There is a strong ongoing case to take further cohorts of households, seeing as welcoming refugee families into our community meets the Council's obligations of being an Authority of Sanctuary and aligns to our corporate strategy priorities. In addition, the government resettlement schemes are grant funded by the Home Office, therefore the success that the Council has had with resettling 47 families has not incurred a financial burden to the Council and the community.
13. The shared learning of welcoming refugee families has allowed the Council to use the resettlement grant funding to develop and deliver projects such as:
 - a. School Advocacy project – helping parents understand and be part of their child's educational journey.
 - b. Refugee Employment Support Programme – Due to be launched in June 2023, this will be a pilot project which will be a co-produced, bespoke service to assist refugees into their aspired employment pathway.

- c. Refugee Counselling Service – dedicated counselling service for refugees who have been impacted by the effects of trauma which hinders their progress into leading a fulfilling life.
14. The success that has been attained so far with the 17 (UKRS/Afghan) families that have recently arrived here is that 13 of the families do not require additional financial help as they are able to cover their rent through their benefit and/or employment income. The remaining 4 families are claiming Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) which is paid for by grant funding received for the duration of the programme. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the resettlement support to help the families become financially independent.

A new refugee resettlement programme for Oxford

15. Officers have planned for a new 5 year programme for refugee resettlement from any of the Home Office schemes such as Afghan Relocations and Allocations Policy (ARAP), Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS). It is planned to resettle a minimum of 8 households in the City each year, where the Council will be housing the households in affordable private rented accommodation, with wrap around support for each household which is procured by the Council and all funded via the Home Office grant.
16. As part of this planning, officers have considered the optimum number of households to resettle to deliver in a new resettlement programme, both by using current experience as per financial modelling in Appendix 2, and as per previous modelling comparison (Appendix 3 – Extract from SVPRS/UKRS Brief Update July 2021); 8 families proved to be the most financially viable and would allow for the scheme to be completely self-financing, while still being an ambitious programme that would make a huge difference for refugee households.
17. The Council would receive grant funding of £20,520 per person for each household that it resettles in Oxford through the programme. This figure has not changed since the SVPRS programme commenced in 2015 and it is the same for all resettlement schemes listed above, whether a 3 year or 5 year programme.
18. Appendix 2 illustrates the grant income and expenditure on households, for the UKRS and Afghan families that have arrived since Dec 2021. The first year is the largest expenditure as that includes housing setup costs. The support and resource costs have been based on current costs, and does not factor increase in cost of living.
19. Officers are proposing a 5 year programme of resettlement. The opportunity of a new tender to commission support provision for a longer term will enable design refinement of support delivery encouraging the support provider and stakeholder partners to be able to make efficiencies, and help the planning of local provision giving job security and stability for staff, which in turn helps recruitment and retention.
20. A longer programme of delivery also allows for new longer term investments and opportunities of collaborative working with landlords and partners respectively, improving efficiency of council resources to the benefit of both the refugee community and the wider community in the city.

21. To ensure that there are adequate safeguards in place over a 5 year programme, our commitment will only continue if the following conditions are met, that government funding continues to support the schemes and suitable, and viable private rented accommodation can be secured to resettle households. Should an excess of 8 properties per year be secured, that excess will contribute to the following year's commitment. There will be an annual review of programme viability.

Options available

22. Recommendation –To resettle a minimum of 8 refugee families per year for as long as financially viable for up to 5 years, and for budget provision made available to proceed with the open tender process to secure a support provider to deliver person centred support for new family arrivals.
23. Do nothing – The Council would not facilitate any resettlement in the city, but resettlement is likely to occur anyway through household choice and Home Office decisions, and the Council would not benefit from grant funding to support households. Potential for homelessness presentations from resettling households, that the Council may under its' statutory duties be obliged to rehouse. It would also be perceived that the council will be not fulfilling its commitment to becoming an Authority of Sanctuary and not aligned to its strategic priorities.

Financial implications.

24. There are no budget implications to the Council as the resettlement schemes are modelled and covered by grant provision. To date, there have been no overspend and there is robust mitigation and risk assessment in place to manage the risk of overspend. The Council's successful previous experience has required it to secure properties with upfront costs as per Appendix 2 and to cover costs of the support provision which is currently paid quarterly in arrears. Recommendation 2 will be completely funded by Home Office grant funding. Should there be a need to relieve initial pressure of project setup costs or inflationary pressures, there is an existing underspend on the current programme that can be utilised that is held back and ring fenced for use for refugee resettlement.
25. Appendix 2 has identified a potential surplus and potential allocation of funds for rent bonds on the scheme which to date, no claims have ever been received, therefore both could be used to support Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) or as a potential hardship fund, should the cost of living impact cohort families to the point where we need to provide further support. However, as highlighted in paragraphs 4 and 14 above, families are supported to become financially independent earlier to alleviate potential financial pressures during the remaining term of their respective resettlement programme
26. There will be an annual viability review on the delivery of this programme, so that if financially the scheme is no longer viable costs can be contained by taking no further families, and further details of risks and mitigations can be found in Appendix 4.

Legal issues

27. The Home Office issue annual funding instructions for all resettlement schemes to ensure all funds are used in accordance to their guidance. The Council would be required to monitor and evaluate families' progress and complete evaluation reports as and when required by the Home Office.

Level of risk

28. Highlighted in para. 21 the council are keen to ensure that this project remains viable. Using appropriate communication tools it will promote the benefits of welcoming refugee families to our city clarifying that there will be minimal impact on public resource i.e. social housing etc. See risk register Appendix 4 for further details.

Equalities impact

29. This new programme of refugee resettlement is aligned to and forms part of the effort to deliver the Council's Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy which has been subject to a full equality impact assessment. There are no adverse impacts in undertaking this activity to continue on the Council's success of welcoming more vulnerable families into our diverse community.

Environmental

30. There are few environmental considerations arising directly from this report as any new welcomed families would be placed into existing private rented properties within the city which will be registered with the council's selective licensing scheme which takes into consideration environmental impact.

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Background Papers: None
