PURPOSE OF REPORT

To update the Comhairle about the Syrian Resettlement Scheme and to support in principle the Comhairle’s involvement in the Scheme.

COMPETENCE

1.1 There are no legal, equality or other constraints to the recommendations being implemented. There may be financial and resource implications in the long term as detailed in the Report.

SUMMARY

2.1 The UK Government has made a commitment to take 20,000 Syrian refugees from camps under the Syrian Resettlement Scheme during the course of this Parliament. Scottish Government has made a commitment to take a minimum of 1,000 refugees. The logistics of this process will be managed through Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships (RSMPs) of which there 11 UK–wide, and Task Groups, to coordinate integration. RSMPs are funded by the Home Office.

2.2 The First Minister established a Task Group following the recent summit held on 4 September 2015, comprising a range of public and third sector organisations. Two Working Groups from the Task Group have been established, one on Housing and one on Integration. As this is a reserved matter, Scottish Government’s role is one of coordination and support.

2.3 The majority of local authorities have indicated strong support towards the resettlement scheme although much of the detail has yet to be finalised. However, it is apparent that some local authorities, e.g. Glasgow City and North Ayrshire have considerable experience and expertise from managing refugee programmes over the years while others have little experience. Some local authorities are also better placed infrastructurally than others to take refugees more quickly. It is anticipated that it will take several months for the scheme’s intake of 700 persons per calendar month to be achieved although the aim is to fast track an existing scheme, the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.

2.4 CoSLA held a meeting on 17 September 2015 at which 31 out of 32 local authorities were represented to discuss the Syrian Resettlement Scheme. The Comhairle attended by VC. This event was attended by Scottish Government; the Scottish Refugee Council and Police Scotland who gave presentations on background, context, proposals and key issues from their varying perspectives. This was followed by a discussion in private between local authorities about the proposals and key issues. The Note of the CoSLA Information Sharing Event on 17 September 2015 is appended to the Report.

2.5 CoSLA has a number of roles: a collective voice for Scottish local authorities with the Home Office and Scottish Government; a coordinating role acting as a central point for information and organisation of the scheme through the Task Groups and sub-groups; as facilitators
bringing together key contact from local authorities on a regular basis to share information; and as a hub for best practice to develop migration kit welcome packs, checklists and other necessary materials.

2.6 The criteria and process for identifying refugees is currently under review and at present that assessment is made before refugees enter the country. The highest priority cases are women and children; people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence.

2.7 Involvement in the programme requires a multi-agency approach most probably through Community Planning as the most suitable vehicle. It also requires resources and the current grant agreement between local authorities and Home Office Legal teams can take several months to conclude. In terms of financial allocations, it was proposed that a flat rate for single people; couples and families would be a simpler system to determine levels of grant funding although this would not be ideal for the islands and the more remote areas where cost of travel, goods and services are higher. Refugees have some say in where they are located as they come from both rural and urban areas.

2.8 There are a range of other aspects that need to be in place before/immediately on refugees’ arrival such as housing; benefits; National Insurance; school enrolment; employability; policing; community support; interpreters; maps; faith group support; biometric residency permits; bank accounts; financial management and cash; GP and dentist registration and ESOL classes.

2.9 There are only three post offices in Scotland that deal with biometric residency permits – in Glasgow and Dundee - which presents immediate logistical problems. For this reason it was proposed that refugees stay in a Refugee Centre for 7 to 10 days until their initial financial and registration issues were addressed. Some local authorities thought that this would add an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy.

**ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION BY THE COMHAIRLE**

3.1 Based on information to date, the key issues for further consideration are as follows:
- Anticipated regional intake
- Urban/rural split
- Flat rate mechanism versus differentiated rates of grant
- Other additional resources
- Centralised registration or host area registration
- Accommodation/housing availability
- Employability
- Levels of disability
- Resource Implications/potential pressures across all services

3.2 Delegation is sought due to the urgency of the situation to allow the Comhairle to participate fully in discussions. Regular Reports would be submitted to the Committee.
RECOMMENDATION

4.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle:

(a) continue to support in principle its involvement in the Syrian Resettlement Scheme and delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Comhairle, to conduct any future negotiations on this matter, and

(b) note that regular progress Reports will be submitted to the Comhairle.

Contact Officer: Angus Murray, Corporate Policy Manager; Tel: 211218

Appendix: Note of CoSLA Information Sharing Event: 17 September 2015

Appendix

COSLA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT INFORMATION SHARING EVENT – 17 SEPT 2015, COSLA CONFERENCE CENTRE, EDINBURGH

1. Welcome and introductions

Derek Mitchell of the COSLA Migration, Population and Diversity Team gave an update on recent discussions and structures in place at Scottish and UK level. He highlighted the fast moving pace of this agenda and that discussions are taking place on an hourly and daily basis with civil servants, politicians and the Local Government Association.

The response from Scottish local authorities to the initial question about support on Tuesday 8 September and at the COSLA Community Wellbeing Executive Group on 11 September had indicated strong and positive support from across the country.

The general approach being promoted is to fast track/scale up the current arrangements – established through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) – rather than create something completely new.

A small number of Councils have expertise and experience from a number of different refugee programmes and Schemes including Kosovans, Iraqis, Congolese, Zimbabweans, Afghans and Syrians – the length of time they have been involved varies considerably from 15 years to a few months.

National Government Perspective

2. Home Office Syrian Resettlement Scheme (slides attached)

Key messages:
- the criteria and process of identifying refugees to come from the camps is under review – at present the assessment of need takes place before the refugees arrive in the UK; and the highest priority cases are women and children; people in severe need of medical care; and survivors of torture and violence.
- it may take several months for the intake to reach 700 pcmp arriving in the UK.
- first checks will continue to be made by the Home Office (criminal and security background etc) and the assessment of need will be matched with the infrastructure available in a potential host area (including housing, healthcare, ESOL, social and community support). Home Office transports refugees to the UK airport and the host local area collects them there.
- unaccompanied children are not part of this programme – UNHCR advises that they are best supported by remaining in their home region and so it would only be in exceptional, individual cases that they would be brought to the UK.
- the best way of supporting the refugee crisis is financial support for people in their home country and this therefore remains the preference of the UK Government in terms of allocating the Aid budget.
3. Scottish Government contribution to the Refugee Resettlement

Donna McKinnon, Head of Policy Local Government Division gave an outline of the First Minister’s (FM) Humanitarian Summit on Friday 4 September; the establishment of the Task Group comprising a wide selection of public and third sector organisations; and the cross-party support for this work.
- it is the clear view of the Scottish Government that local authorities are ‘in the driving seat’.
- two Working Groups of the FM’s Task Group have been established: one on housing and one on integration and both are expected to meet next week
- this is a reserved matter and therefore the SG role is one of co-ordination and support.
- SG officials have expertise and experience that they can offer – in particular the press office can assist with handling media interest around the arrival of refugees in communities.
- the SG Emergency Response has not been activated but some of the principles about communications and engagement are transferrable

4. Questions and Answers

Key issues:
- children are supported until they are 18 years old
- some refugees are already in the pipeline under the current Scheme – need to manage through any changes (e.g. different selection criteria; funding arrangements)
- refugees can move freely around the UK. However at present the 12 month funding package is allocated to the original host area remains there.
- even if the host area has fabulous services and support, refugees may well move (e.g.to be nearer family) and host areas should not see this as a failure

Local Government experiences

5. Glasgow City Council’s experience of Refugee Resettlement

Key messages:
- a multi-agency approach is vital, even if the local authority is seen as the contact point
- the grant agreement is the current mechanism to determine the performance targets and funding. This can take several months to agree between Council and Home Office Legal Teams
- there are a whole range of aspects that need to be in place before/immediately on their arrival: housing, benefits and national insurance, school enrolment, employability, policing (to explain UK laws as well as community policing/protection), community support, interpreters, maps, faith group support, biometric residency permits, bank accounts, financial management and cash, GP and dentist registration, ESOL classes.
- Two FT support workers are in place to deal with the 3 families at present and will continue until all 11 families have arrived and are settled. Personal Integration Plan is required for each individual which is reviewed quarterly. Very intensive and constant support is required

6. North Ayrshire Council experience of Afghan Relocation Scheme (slides attached)

Key messages:
- Six families accepted by North Ayrshire (est 30+ people) on a phased basis and planned review before accept any more
- Council accommodation with two FT tenancy support workers allocated to the project.
- Council cross service working group established and support sought from NHS, Police Scotland and Third Sector
- Families easily overwhelmed; high expectations not met (e.g. no TV); some practical difficulties (e.g. sourcing halal meat)
- Multicultural Association had a major role to play
- Challenges of working with DWP partly due to lack of documentation
- No issues with local community and minimal press interest
Integration and Community Safety

8. Scottish Refugee Council’s contribution to Integration
John Wilkes of the SRC outlined the work of the ‘Integration’ Working Group which has been set up and his role as chair. He commended Councils for ‘stepping up’ and their willingness to assist. However it was important to remember that there was a broad spectrum of public opinion from those who were very positive about support; those who were cautious; and those who were opposed and this needs to be reflected in all our decision-making.

Key messages:
- There could be an alternative approach which could see all refugees accommodated together in a central location and benefits, biometric registration and a more detailed needs assessment undertaken before they are allocated to a host area
- We need to think long term about refugee settlement – we are aiming for full and active citizenship so integration into communities, education and employment are important. It’s not just short-term housing and benefits support that we need to think about.
- We have the opportunity to have a coherent and co-ordinated approach in Scotland – local government is very much a family itself and there are strong relationships to build on
- A new website has set up scotlandwelcomesrefugees.com to co-ordinate individual and group offers of support and various sources of information

9. Police Scotland and Community Safety
Nadine Aliane of the Safer Communities Department of Police Scotland gave an overview of the policing experience with refugees.

Key messages:
- Hate crime can be a problem, although it doesn’t measure refugee crime as such (it covers race, disability and sexuality)
- Divisional commanders have already had messages about preparing for refugees and the potential issues
- It is important to recognise that things in the host country may be illegal but they aren’t here, so there is a period of readjustment
- Police Scotland uses an Impact Assessment to ensure that they are responding sensitively and mitigating any potential negative issues.

10. Questions and Answers

Key issues:
- People would be likely to stay in the possible ‘Refugee Centre’ for 7-10 days until their initial financial and registration issues were dealt with and any special needs identified. A couple of charities in Glasgow have indicated support and possible premises
- Refugees themselves are involved in the discussion about their location and needs assessment. They come from a wide range of backgrounds, some urban, some rural.
- The Home Office would be keen to have a central contact point rather than individual local authorities to arrange settlements.
- There is a significant bureaucracy for health services under the present scheme – e.g. recoding the number of individual visits to GPs and hospitals. This is not sustainable for the number of refugees we are expecting to have
- The costs of individual health packages are difficult to quantify but recent experience in Greater Glasgow NHS suggest that the monies allocated do not cover the actual costs
- Mental health issues because of the trauma they have experienced tend to surface some time after the refugees have settled – perhaps even a year later
- Health and social care integration should assist in providing seamless services across different types of healthcare
DWP is planning to have dedicated officers in Scotland in recognition that this is an area of expertise and with 10,000 staff they have some capacity to identify resource

11. New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland’s Communities (slides attached)

Key messages:
- Vision behind the Strategy is a place where refugees build a new life, supported by mainstream services and become active members of our communities (New Scots Strategy - http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/12/4581)
- It’s about adapting existing services, and ensuring sustainability after the initial funding runs out
- 10 aspects are identified that require to be addressed ranging from fundamental issues like housing and health to cultural knowledge and citizenship (Indicators of Integration Framework - http://www.migrationscotland.org.uk/ager-and-strang-2004-indicators-integration-final-report).