

Report of the Leader of the Council

I have been asked to report, by Councillor Brazil on

.....Syrian Refugee Resettlement and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

Summary

The UK Government's response to the displacement of millions of Syrians and the migrant crisis in Europe is based on four programmes. Three of these programmes are active and Devon is responding to all three, aiming to resettle at least 74 Syrian families over the next 4 years and to be able to be looking after at least 25 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children by the end of March 2017. The first few families and unaccompanied children have arrived in Devon. Finding sustainable, affordable housing for families and care placements for children is a major challenge.

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme

The UK Government's Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (SVPR) aims to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees in the UK between 2015 and 2020. Local authorities volunteer to resettle families by finding sustainable and affordable housing and registering it with the Government. Devon's city and district councils have taken individual decisions on the number of housing offers they feel able to make. At September 2016, Devon's councils have pledged to accommodate at least 74 families. The first few families have arrived and have been settled in three districts. More arrivals are planned shortly.

Devon has formed a partnership to coordinate the Government-funded programme. This brings together city and district councils, Devon County Council, the NHS, Devon and Cornwall Police and partners in the voluntary and community sector. Devon County Council is coordinating the partnership and has agreed to be accountable to the Government for the programme funding.

Syrian families are housed in private rented properties that the landlord has offered or agreed to rent to refugee families. The pace of resettlement therefore depends on the supply of sustainable and affordable housing from private landlords. The housing development teams of Devon's city and district councils are working to stimulate this supply.

Before housing offers are made, the partnership assesses the potential impact on resources such as local school places. Families become eligible for resettlement due to some vulnerability or additional need, which may be medical, psychological or educational. When families are referred to us by the Government, Devon carries out a multi-disciplinary assessment of any

additional needs to determine whether and how those needs could be met in the resettlement location.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

Apart from the Syrian Resettlement Programme, the Government has made commitments to bring unaccompanied children from the Middle East and Europe to the UK. There are three strands to the government's commitment and Devon is playing its part in the actions that are under way.

1. National Transfer of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

The government has asked local authorities to collaborate to take care of the children and young people who enter the country smuggled in lorries and by other means. Most of these young people are male teenagers, aged 15-17 years old, from a very wide range of countries across the Middle East and East Africa. These arrivals are currently concentrated in a small number of local authorities including Kent, Croydon, and Northamptonshire.

The government has agreed with local authorities across the UK to prioritise a "national transfer scheme" where the authorities in each region work together to receive and look after a proportion of all these young people. The scheme came into operation in July 2016. Devon is part of a coordinated regional response with all local authorities in the South West to receive children under the scheme. Devon has already received a small number of children and will continue to do so as they are referred to us. The scheme focusses on responding to the flow of arrivals, so there is no simple target number of children. However Devon aims to be able to look after at least 25 unaccompanied children by the end of March 2017.

Unaccompanied children have a very wide variety of needs. Some will have seen or experienced terrible things; others may have been in contact with trafficking gangs and be at risk of falling into the hands of those gangs again. There will not be a single best way of looking after them. We are working with existing and potential foster carers, as well as specialised organisations that have relevant experience and capacity to help. There is a great shortage of this experience and capacity across the country. We must also strengthen the capacity of our own staff in specific areas of expertise relevant to unaccompanied children, such as age assessment and understanding of asylum processes. We have mapped the existing expertise of staff and we are building an action plan to strengthen these areas.

As for any child in care, unaccompanied children have full access to universal services such as health and education. The government provides funding to local authorities for looking after unaccompanied children. The funding rates under the national transfer scheme are 20%-30% higher than previous national rates. However the shortage of placements and the additional needs of unaccompanied children will put pressure even on the enhanced funding.

2. Resettlement of Children at Risk

In April, the government announced a scheme to resettle “Children at risk”. This scheme aims to receive and support 3,000 people including vulnerable children who are in the Middle East and North Africa. The government expects that most of the children brought to the UK under this scheme will arrive with family members and will be resettled with that family, in a similar way to the Syrian Resettlement Programme. A minority will be unaccompanied and will be taken into the care of local authorities through the national transfer scheme.

3. Resettlement of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Greece, Italy and France

In May, the Government responded to the “Dubs Amendment” to the Immigration Bill by announcing a scheme to resettle unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Greece, Italy and France. This scheme refers only to children who had arrived and been registered in Europe before 20 March 2016. The government is working on the details though we understand that, at least in part, the scheme will aim to reunite children with extended family already in the UK. In its announcement about the scheme, the Government expected the first arrivals “before the end of the year”.

Councillor John Hart
Leader of the Council