EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL
CABINET: 7 OCTOBER 2015

SYRIAN REFUGEES RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

Report by the Depute Chief Executive (Safer Communities)

PURPOSE

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on developments relating to the current Syrian refugee crisis and the actions that the Council is taking to support the national Refugee Resettlement Scheme.

BACKGROUND

2. The current conflict in Syria has created a humanitarian crisis that has so far resulted in 4.5 million people fleeing the country to seek refuge elsewhere, and an estimated further 6.5 million people who have been forced to flee their homes but who still remain within Syria. The majority of the refugees able to leave Syria have been hosted by neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, but these countries are struggling to cope with the scale of the crisis. This summer has seen thousands of Syrians attempt to enter Europe by land and sea. They have been joined by people from Eritrea, Afghanistan and Algeria, which are also unstable countries that have experienced recent political unrest and conflict. It is estimated that more than 350,000 refugees have arrived in Europe this summer, and an estimated 2,600 people have died on the journey.

3. The Governments of the UK and other European countries have a legal responsibility under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention to consider the case of any individual who requests protection in their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country. Under EU law (the Dublin Convention) potential refugees must make their claim for protection in the first European country they come to. This obviously places a great deal of pressure on the countries of the Mediterranean, particularly Spain, Greece, Italy, Malta and Cyprus. There has been increasing pressure on other Governments within the EU to volunteer to receive more refugees in order to relieve pressure upon Southern Europe.

4. Until recently, the UK Government’s response to the crisis has been focused around the provision of international aid, and to date they have resettled just over 200 refugees through the Home Office’s Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. However, on 7 September 2015, the Prime Minister announced that the UK would now receive 20,000 refugees over the life of the current Parliament. These refugees will be brought to the UK from refugee camps in the middle-east. This followed on from a statement by the First Minister who had already indicated that the Scottish Government would support the resettlement of refugees in both
financial and practical terms. At a summit held on 4 September 2015, the First Minister committed to taking 1,000 refugees or 10% of the total received by the UK.

**SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE**

5. The Scottish Local Government response has been co-ordinated by COSLA’s Migration Team which has been working for eighteen months to build interest in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons scheme and to support local authorities as they explore participating and then plan their response. As part of this work, the Migration Team have developed close working relationships with the UK Government, the Home Office and other partner agencies as the resettlement scheme is accelerated.

6. COSLA has now contacted all 32 local authorities in Scotland to gauge interest in being involved in the resettlement programme. The majority, including East Ayrshire Council, have intimated that they are now actively considering participating in a scheme to resettle Syrian refugees.

7. In committing to participate in the scheme, many local authorities understandably have sought clarification on a number of matters and, in order for that information to be made available, decisions need to be taken by the UK and Scottish Governments about how the resettlement programme will be upscaled, and what resources and support will be made available. COSLA is working closely with both the UK and Scottish Government as they plan their response and will make information available to local authorities as soon as it is available.

8. An information sharing session for local authorities was held on Thursday 17 September 2015 where contributions were made from the Home Office, Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council and other local authorities who have participated in earlier resettlement programmes. Information that is available at this time in respect of the Scheme is summarised in the following paragraphs.

**The Resettlement Process**

9. Refugees who come to the UK through the resettlement scheme will be identified in camps in countries neighbouring Syria such as Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) will identify people who fit the criteria identified by the UK Government (the criteria is yet to be confirmed, but it is likely to be relaxed from the previous criteria of women and children at risk of violence, medical cases and victims of torture). Refugees will then be subject to security checks and provided with documentation before they leave the camp. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) normally accompany them to the UK where the local authority will take over their care. Due to the scale of the project, it may be necessary to introduce reception centres in the UK where refugees will be accommodated in the first instance before travelling on to the local authority that will host them but firm decisions have not been made.
10. Based on CoSLA’s discussions with the Home Office, it is expected that refugees will start arriving within a couple of months. In order to achieve the target of resettling 20,000 people in the UK within the life of the Parliament it is expected that around 100 people will need to arrive in the UK each week for the next 4-5 years. Previously, with other resettlement schemes, there had been a significant time lag between local authorities committing to participate and people arriving into their area. We expect that this will change and people will arrive quite quickly after a local authority decides to go ahead with the scheme.

11. At present the Home Office provides funding to local authorities accommodating resettled refugees for the first year to cover the cost of providing accommodation and financial support prior to mainstream benefits coming on stream. Refugees will be granted immigration status which allows them to access mainstream benefits including housing benefit. Local authorities and their community planning partners will be responsible for providing a range of services to the refugees in their area including housing, education and health. Refugees will also require some support to settle into communities, and there will need to be preparation work with communities in order to promote community cohesion. CoSLA has called upon the Home Office and the Scottish Government to ensure that the programme is fully funded so that local authorities and their community planning partners can afford to put appropriate services in place to meet the needs of refugees.

**Co-ordinating the Response**

12. The Scottish Government has convened a task force, chaired by Humza Yousaf MSP, Minister for Europe and International Development, with Alex Neil MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Human Rights and Pensioners, also attending, to plan the response to the refugee crisis within Scotland. COSLA is also represented on this group along with representation from NHS Scotland, Police Scotland, STUC, the Scottish Refugee Council and relevant charities. In addition, the task force has established two working groups on housing and integration and the Council is seeking representation at officer level at these working groups.

**COUNCIL RESPONSE**

13. As indicated at paragraph 6 above, the Council has confirmed to CoSLA that it is committed to working with the Scottish Government and other partners in any way possible to help those refugees in need of urgent assistance and will participate in the resettlement scheme. The Leader of the Council, along with other Group Leaders and Council Members, recently met with representatives of local churches, faith groups and East Ayrshire CVO to begin discussions on developing effective local responses to the humanitarian crisis and that engagement with key partners and our wider communities will continue over coming months.

14. Having consulted with partners and colleagues in Housing, Education and the Health and Social Care Partnership, we currently anticipate being able to receive up to 50 refugees in East Ayrshire over a five year period. Clearly, however, our
ability to do that will be heavily influenced by the level of resources made available by Scottish Government and the Home Office. Officers are in the process of examining all of the options required to deliver on the stated commitment and a Steering Group, including representation from all key Services in the Council and Police Scotland, Chaired by the Depute Chief Executive (Safer Communities), has been established to lead this work. The Group is considering all aspects of the resettlement programme and related risks, including, the provision of housing, access to health and social care services, education provision, community integration and engagement, adult and child protection considerations and community safety.

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

15. CoSLA has called on the Home Office and the Scottish Government to ensure that any financial implications for the Council arising from the resettlement scheme are fully funded.

**HUMAN RESOURCE, LEGAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS**

16. There are no direct human resource, legal or risk implications arising from this report.

**EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

17. The Council’s commitment to supporting the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme aligns with the underpinning values of our Community Plan and the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusiveness.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

18. Cabinet is asked:

   i. To endorse the commitment to support the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme;
   
   ii. To note the actions taken by the Council to date in support of this commitment;
   
   iii. To note the establishment of an Officer Steering Group, Chaired by the Depute Chief Executive (Safer Communities), to co-ordinate the Council’s and Community Planning Partners’ work in this regard;

   iv. To request that further progress updates in respect of the Council’s support for the Resettlement Scheme are provided to Members as appropriate, and

   v. To otherwise note the contents of the report.

Chris McAleavey
Depute Chief Executive (Safer Communities)
25 September 2015
BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil

IMPLEMENTATION OFFICER

Chris McAleavey, Depute Chief Executive (Safer Communities)