

Update on Syrian Families

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Cabinet Member: Cllr Frances Nicholson and Cllr Christine Lawrence

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1. Summary

- 1.1. In the period September 2016 – August 2017, Somerset County Council has resettled 9 Syrian family groups, 3 in Mendip, 2 in Sedgemoor, 1 in South Somerset and 3 in Taunton Deane. Two more families are due in September 2017 and October 2017. A further family has arrived being supported by a community group who have worked in partnership with the Council. Progress is in line with the Council aspiration to resettle 30 families over a three year period subject to capacity in relevant services.
- 1.2. There has been much progress on integration and resettlement. All families have been enrolled in adult English classes; all children are either in school / nursery and are making progress. Two males from within the first six families to resettle are in work after first year. There has been facilitation of links and integration with local communities including Brownies, Saturday football, and local allotments.

2. Issues for consideration

- 2.1. Overall the lack of support services and culturally relevant services is an enduring challenge to the programme. Difficulties continue in accessing halal foods, mosques and distance from other Syrian or Arabic speaking families have contributed to some of the recent families to have resettled to each area feeling isolated. Two of the original six families have moved out of Somerset to a larger city and others have wanted to move within Somerset. Unsurprisingly many express a preference to be in larger urban areas with larger numbers of other Syrian or Arabic speaking families and closer proximity to related resources. To address this we have re-considered suitable resettlement locations in the county and have taken steps to try ensure a critical minimal number of families in each area and to reject offers of resettlement in areas where the prospect of bringing in other families is less likely or will take longer.
- 2.2. Sourcing accommodation is probably the most limiting factor in expansion. As further funding has come through from the Home Office we have been able to explore more creative approaches to rental accommodation with the Council paying rent in advance for a period to reassure Landlords. We have also been grateful for a number of 'philanthropic landlords' who have come forward willing to rent properties at below market rates and also flex with the inherent uncertainty that the resettlement programme involves with agreeing to rent to a family not yet present in the country. In Taunton, in conjunction with Taunton Welcomes Refugees volunteer group we have also set up a Housing Action Group dedicated to sourcing properties and liaising with prospective landlords.
- 2.3. Setting up suitable English classes has also been a challenge. Many refugees

have come with such limited levels of English and sometimes unfamiliarity with education that they have been unable to access the beginners' provision currently available and this has been limited in scope in most areas compared to a Home Office aspiration of 8 hours a week. We have used additional Home Office funding to commission more suitable bespoke English classes in some areas. This remains a work in progress and in the next year we aim to expand provision. The rate of improved participation is limited in some areas by a lack of numbers to make classes financially or structurally viable. Volunteers have been able to support this by providing English classes. We recognise the value of comprehensive English provision to facilitate integration to the resident communities and provide social networks between resettled families.

- 2.4.** The Syrian Resettlement Programme is continuing to operate successfully and within the budget constraints. The Committee is asked to consider and comment on the aspirations for the programme for the forthcoming year September 2017- August 2018:
1. Resettle approximately ten further families across the county subject to service and support capacity;
 2. Strengthen English class provision in each area;
 3. Concentrate on volunteering and assistance into work for those resettled for a longer period of time;
 4. Strengthen workforce and other support services.

3. Background

- 3.1.** From September 2015- August 2016, Somerset worked on plans to prepare and resettle its first six Syrian families. Based on the early success of this resettlement a decision was approved by Council in August 2016 to aspire to resettle a further 30 families over a three year period. The costs of the scheme have remained within the Home Office funding which provides funding for five years post arrival, on a tapered basis, recognising a diminishing level of support required over time as families acquire English language and familiarity with UK services and norms.
- 3.2.** As the scheme intake has expanded, funds have become available to expand the workforce. This currently encompasses three Arabic speaking Resettlement Workers, with other support outsourced to getset and Yeovil4family for vulnerable family support and via the main council contract with DALanguages for interpreter services. A Consultant in Public Health provides overall strategic direction with local input from getset senior management, the Clinical Commissioning Group, District Council colleagues and volunteer groups. There are vacancies for: an additional resettlement worker to support additional families yet to arrive; a Resettlement Officer to take on more of the day-to-day operational issues; and a Business Support role to cover finance. These have been approved and are in the process of being recruited.
- 3.3.** The scheme receives input from colleagues across partner organisations and volunteer groups in Somerset as well as engaging and sharing good practice with other councils across the South West. The families have also shaped resettlement plans including input to household furnishing, welcome grocery provisions and the 'need to know' essential early skills.
- 3.4.** We have received wonderful support from volunteers across the county. These groups are more formally structured in Taunton and Frome but we have

welcomed support from many dedicated individuals across the County: Bridgwater, Glastonbury / Street, Langport, Wells, Wincanton and Yeovil. This has been especially important as refugee numbers have increased, to make commissioned services more viable and to plug the gaps where professional services have been stretched or cover areas which are helpful but outside our funding envelope. These volunteers have truly provided the welcome to the communities of Somerset as well as augmenting the basic funded provision that the Council has been able to provide.