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To: County Council – 22 October 2015.

Subject: Kent's response to the Syrian refugee crisis

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme was set up in 2014 in response to the current refugee crisis emanating from Syria. Under the scheme, Syrian refugees who are particularly at risk are brought to the UK direct from the camps in the Middle East. They are given five years Humanitarian Leave to Remain which enables them to work and claim public funds. On 7 September the Government announced an expansion to the scheme with a target to resettle 20,000 vulnerable refugees over the next five years. Local authority participation is key to the success of the scheme.

Following the announcement of the expansion to the scheme, the issue was briefly discussed during the Leader's Report at the previous meeting of the County Council on 17 September. It was acknowledged that local authorities would be expected to take the lead (on a voluntary basis) in the resettlement of the 20,000 refugees. Following discussions with Kent Leaders and Chief Executives, the County Council is currently working with the district/borough councils, health and other key partners to agree where and to what extent support may be offered.

In response to the crisis there have been overwhelming offers of support for refugees from members of the public, community and voluntary organisations and businesses in Kent. Everything possible is being done to harness these offers in coordination with the district and borough councils.

Local authorities wishing to take part in the Syrian scheme are able to state the profile of the refugees they are able to accept, both in general and in individual cases, depending on level of need. In this regard the County Council is keen to play its full part in the scheme provided this does not add to the enormous burden it currently faces looking after the unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC).

Recommendations:

The County Council is asked to COMMENT on the report and ENDORSE:

- The proposal to support those districts that wish to take part in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme with the caveats outlined in section 7 of the report AND
- The continuing efforts to persuade Government to develop a sustainable national dispersal scheme for UASC.

1. Introduction

1.1 The current crisis in Syria has led to approximately 250,000 deaths with almost 12 million people being forced to leave their homes since the outbreak of civil war in 2011. It is estimated that between 7-8 million are internally displaced within Syria and about 4 million are in refugee camps in the surrounding countries (mainly in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt). In addition many thousands are in the process of moving across Europe to what they consider to be safe countries in which to claim asylum.

1.2 As part of its response to the situation in Syria, the Government set up the Syrian Vulnerable persons Relocation Scheme in February 2014. This scheme involves taking particularly vulnerable refugees straight from the camps and resettling them in the UK. The refugees are given five years Humanitarian Leave to Remain and as such are able to work and claim benefits and other public funds.

1.3 By June this year 216 people had been supported by the above scheme. In addition (and not part of the scheme) almost 5,000 Syrians (including dependents) have been granted asylum or other forms of leave under the normal asylum procedures, whereby they claim once in the UK. It is important to note that Kent does not currently participate in the dispersal scheme for adult asylum seekers in the UK but, as is well known, takes a very disproportionate number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

1.4 On 7 September 2015 the Prime Minister announced that the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme will be expanded so that up to 20,000 people will be assisted under the scheme by the end of the Parliament. Local authorities are key to the delivery of this offer. A purely arithmetic calculation of what Kent's share should be would mean we might expect about 4-500 individuals over the next 5 years. However participation in the scheme is voluntary and local authorities are being asked to consider if they wish to participate in the scheme.

2. How the scheme works and the role of local authorities

2.1 The scheme is based on need. Working closely with the UNHCR, it prioritises those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin, including:

- women and girls at risk
- survivors of violence and/or torture
- refugees with legal and/or physical protection needs
- refugees with medical needs or disabilities
- children and adolescents at risk
- persons at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity

2.2 Individuals accepted onto the scheme will be able to bring their immediate family with them.

2.3 Once cases have been referred from the UNHCR, the Home Office checks that the individual meets the eligibility criteria, carries out medical and security checks and arranges the necessary visas. At the same time, the cases are passed to a local authority that has asked to participate in the scheme. The referral will include details on family make up, age and specific needs. Further detail on any medical needs will follow shortly after via a full medical health assessment report. The Local

Authority is asked to accept or reject the case. If accepted the local authority will need to arrange housing, school places and any additional support that is required. An arrival date would be agreed with the Home Office.

2.4 It is important to point out that the Government has stated that local authorities wishing to participate in the scheme can specify the profile of individuals and families they are willing to accept (for example ages and needs of children).

2.5 Although the Government is not being prescriptive about this, it is highly likely that accommodation will in most cases be arranged in the private rented sector provided this can be rented at Housing Benefit rates. Clearly if a member of the household is able to work the Housing Benefit awarded will reduce and may not even be necessary in the future depending on earnings.

3. Funding for the scheme

3.1 Currently funding for the scheme is given partly upfront and partly as expenditure is incurred. It includes two months void costs to help secure accommodation, funding for adaptations and furnishings, orientation costs (including language training), a one off allowance until benefits kick in, amounts for health, education and specialist support if required.

3.2 Initially funding for the scheme was only available for the first year. However the Government has just announced (on 2 October 2015) that it will “also provide additional funding to assist with costs incurred in future years” (letter to Local Authority Chief Executives and Leaders on 2.10.15). It should be borne in mind, however, that there may be some degree of unfunded costs in future years.

3.3 We hope to receive further details soon about the process for drawing down the additional funding. The County Council will then work with the districts to agree the best way to administer this.

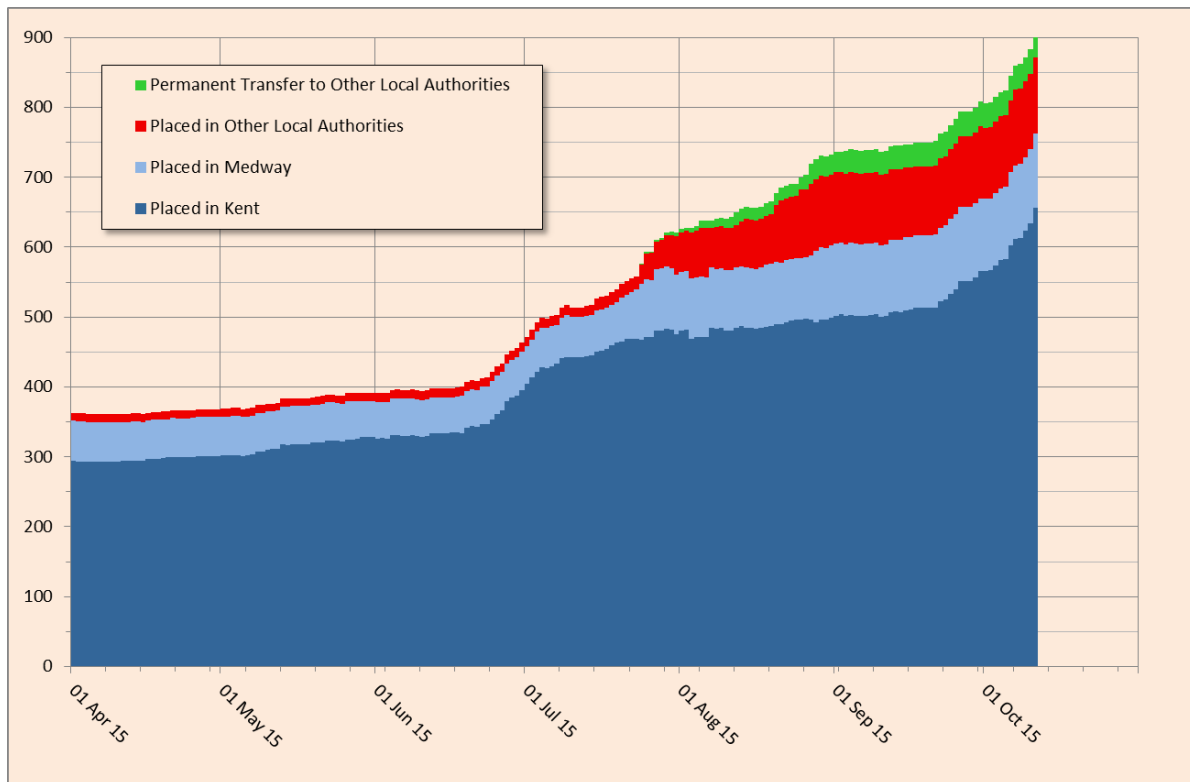
4. Wider context of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children in Kent

4.1 It is necessary that Kent’s response to the request from Government to assist with the Syrian Relocation Scheme is considered in the context of the unprecedented numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) currently being looked after by Kent County Council.

4.2 As at 14 October, the total number of UASC in KCC’s care is 895, with 93 children coming into Kent’s care in the previous 10 days. UASC now make up more than a third of all children that KCC looks after. Additionally KCC is supporting 400 young people who are 18 plus, who were UASC and for whom KCC has statutory responsibilities as care leavers.

4.3 It is interesting to note that of the 224 UASCs that have arrived in the last 6 Weeks (as at 14 October), only 8% are from Syria. The largest group (38%) are from Eritrea, followed by Afghanistan (17%). Other significant groups are Sudanese (7%) and Vietnamese (6%).

4.4 As the table below shows, the current numbers of UASC present more than a 260% increase from the situation in April this year.



4.5 The above situation is causing severe strain on KCC's Children's Services. Due to the limited supply of suitable foster or supported living placements in Kent, we are increasingly having to place unaccompanied children in more expensive independent foster care or supported placements in other local authority areas, whilst retaining Corporate Parent responsibility. Following a request to all 150 other English local authorities with social services responsibility, 15 authorities have agreed to take full responsibility for 35 UASC. This voluntary support to Kent is very welcome however it is clear that this alone is not going to deal with the pressure on the county.

4.6 In order to try to cope with the increasingly difficult situation two new Reception Centres (creating another 80 places) were opened in September, in addition to the centre at Millbank. All centres are now completely full.

4.7 The Council has for many years been underfunded by the Home Office, and has never been able to reclaim all of the costs of supporting UASC and former UASC who are Care Leavers. In the current year the weekly grants proposed for UASC have been reduced greatly from those paid in 2014-15. For Under 16s we are receiving £798 per week compared to the £1,085 per week last year and our costs for new arrivals are on average £1,211 per week. For 16-17 year olds we are receiving £637 per week compared to £784 per week last year and our costs for new arrivals are on average £733 per week. For Care Leavers (18+) we have been funded at £150 per week since 2010, with no increase and our costs are currently at £274 per week.

4.8 Based on our numbers of young people in September plus an estimate of future arrivals based on previous trends we anticipated a shortfall of almost £7 million in grant funding. However as the numbers of arrivals in the last 2 weeks have greatly exceeded our estimates it is likely that this shortfall is now in excess of £8 million.

4.9 There are a number of UASC in KCC's care who are still awaiting full assessment, the situation being exacerbated by the need to assess children who have been placed outside Kent. The backlog is now reducing but only following the recruitment of additional staff (including an agency Service Manager, 3 Team Leaders and 23 Social Workers).

4.10 It is clear from the above, that any participation in the Syrian Relocation Scheme must not add to the burden KCC currently faces looking after Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. Although there are not expected to be many unaccompanied children arriving in the first few months of the scheme, this may change and therefore KCC needs to make it clear that we cannot accept such children under this scheme.

4.11 Clearly KCC will still have duties to UASC that come through the usual route. Kent County Council has for some time been in discussions with the Home Office about the urgent need for a national dispersal scheme but to date satisfactory progress has not been made. As mentioned above other local authorities have agreed so far to take on the legal responsibility for 35 UASC. Whilst this is much appreciated by Kent it falls far short of a workable solution and further negotiations with the Home Office are taking place.

4.12 The Leader of the County Council has on several occasions highlighted the need to the Home Secretary for a national dispersal scheme and for full reimbursement of the costs associated with UASC and Care Leavers. It is to be hoped that solutions will be found in the near future.

5. Wider context of services for children/young people with complex needs

5.1 With regard to children and young people who have Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) the current impact of having to work under a dual statutory framework (the Children and Families Act 2014 and the Education Act 1996) has stretched existing resources to the extent that there is no immediate spare capacity. The new legal duties have increased the age range KCC is responsible for (from age 19 to 25). Further, in the last year, there has been a 10% increase in the number of pre-school children requiring statutory support and a 20% increase in demand for supporting early intervention for younger children with SEND. Virtually all of our special schools are at capacity, which has led to a further increase in the number of children we have to place in the independent special school sector.

5.2 With regard to mental health services for children and young people, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is currently working at full capacity.

5.3 Given the above pressures, although each case will be considered on its merits, if the children in families coming to Kent through the scheme have particularly high/complex needs, we will need to ensure the extra funding required can be accessed and is sustainable before agreeing that they be placed in Kent.

6. Kent County Council and district/borough councils' response to date

6.1 The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme was discussed at the Kent Council Leaders meeting on 23 September, at which Chief Executives were also

present. Roy Millard, the Partnership Manager for the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration, briefed Leaders and Chiefs about the scheme. Leaders were supportive in principle, wanting Kent to play its part, but agreed that it was vital for there to be a co-ordinated approach to ensure that the needs of any Syrian Refugees placed in Kent would be properly met. There were concerns that the areas with the most available accommodation were also the areas that were most stretched in terms of wrap-around public services. It was resolved at the meeting that KCC should work closely with the districts and boroughs to ensure there is a coordinated approach. This is being done, as recommended, by working closely with the Kent Housing Group, Health, JobCentre Plus, the voluntary sector and other key partners.

6.2 Since the above meeting, KCC has brought together a co-ordination group which met on 7 October and is meeting again on 19 October. The group is developing a multi-agency process for agreeing which families should be taken and how they will be supported. Actions being taken forward by the group include:

- Learn from other authorities with more experience of taking in refugee families (e.g. Coventry, Colchester, Brighton)
- Work with the SE Strategic Partnership for Migration to influence the UNHCR assessment process, to ensure that authorities are given relevant information about particular families before making the decision about whether to take them.
- Develop a process/protocol for the decision-making process for individual families, to ensure that a comprehensive assessment involving all relevant agencies is made, and that organisations commit to providing the necessary support before a decision is taken to accept the family.
- Estimate the net unit costs of likely 'wrap around' services, and the process by which costs will be logged and reimbursed.
- Put in place training for those staff (across all relevant agencies) who will be working with the refugees to ensure they are aware of, for example, the cultural needs of Syrians and the likely impact of trauma/torture.

6.3 To date all districts within Kent are supportive of the scheme in principle but most are still considering the extent of any support they can offer in their own areas.

6.4 With regard to the numbers they are likely to support, Ashford has confirmed that they will be one of the early participants in the expanded Scheme (referred to as "Trailblazers") and they have committed to taking 50 people (about 10 families) per year for the next 5 years. It is possible they will begin receiving refugees before Christmas. Shepway has indicated it will take about 2 families per year. An update on the other districts will be provided at the County Council meeting if further offers have been confirmed by this date.

7. KCC's proposed position

7.1 Following discussions with the Leader and Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services it is planned that KCC should support those districts that wish to take part but with the following caveats:

- There should be a full analysis in each individual case of services provided by both the districts, the county council and other key partners (e.g. housing availability, school places, social care, health etc) in local areas to ensure placements are sustainable, refugee needs are met and the needs of the existing community are taken into account.
- Due to the extreme pressures on Kent children's services severely exacerbated by the unprecedented numbers of UASC, Kent cannot accommodate unaccompanied minors through the Syrian refugee scheme as we would be unable to meet their needs given current circumstances.
- With regard to other children with particularly high/complex needs, each case presented to us will be individually assessed before a decision is made as our ability to meet such needs will vary depending on their nature, whether they are health, education or social care needs, what statutory and community resources are available and the availability of additional funding.

8. Response from the public and community/voluntary organisations in Kent

8.1 It is important to acknowledge in this report the overwhelming response to the Syrian crisis (and refugee crisis in general) from individuals, community and voluntary groups, institutions and businesses in Kent.

8.2 As at 13 October, KCC has received 179 specific offers of help. Two of these offers included details of 90 and 70 volunteers from groups, making over 300 people who have volunteered support. A number of these offers are from retired or part time teachers who we will be utilising to provide additional help with English and other skills to support these young people.

8.3 The support offered also included spare rooms in people's homes, foster care, translation, counselling, equipment, bedding, help with removals and mentoring. Local churches and charities have, amongst other things, helped with the collection of goods, such as providing a table tennis table for one of the Reception Centres. We are extremely grateful for all of these offers.

8.4 Everything possible is being done to harness these offers and coordinate with similar offers being made to the district and borough councils. Where people have offered accommodation for children they have been given the details of application process for the council's fostering service.

9. Recommendations

The County Council is asked to COMMENT on the report and ENDORSE:

- The proposal to support those districts that wish to take part in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme with the caveats outlined in section 7 of the report AND
- The continuing efforts to persuade Government to develop a sustainable national dispersal scheme for UASC.

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