

NOTICE OF MOTION – TO WELCOME, SUPPORT AND ACCOMMODATE OUR FAIR SHARE OF REFUGEES BOTH LOCALLY AND NATIONALLY

To be proposed by Councillor Novell. Seconded by Councillor Armstrong:

“This Council notes that:

Conflicts in the Middle East and Africa are driving men, women and children in their millions to seek safety in the West.

This summer has seen the largest displacement of people since the Second World War. In July, more than 100,000 individuals crossed into European Union countries - a record figure.

Thousands of people have died this year alone, trying to cross the Mediterranean sea; many of them were children.

Responding to the movement of so many desperate people is not straightforward. Yet it is clear that many of Europe’s existing policies are inadequate.

A large number of refugees can become much less daunting to the public and less of a drain on resources if each and every county and borough council agrees to house refugee families. 10 families per authority would house approximately 10,000 families.

This Council believes:

- *We have a duty to prevent the deaths of innocent people seeking refuge;*
- *That this crisis will be better managed if incoming refugees are accommodated around the whole country;*
- *The UK must welcome its fair share of refugees to ease this crisis.*

This Council resolves to:

- *Call on the Government to work with Europe in order to establish and accept Britain’s fair share of refugees fleeing war-torn countries.*
- *Call on the Government to allocate resources to Local Councils so that they may accommodate and integrate refugees in to the local community.*
- *Commit to ensuring that refugees are welcomed in this district and help facilitate this process in Lancaster, by working with local services to ensure housing, legal advice, trauma-recovery support and careers advice, amongst other things.*
- *Formally express interest in both the UN Gateway Programme and the Government’s VPR to the Home Office by 1st November 2015.”*

OFFICER BRIEFING NOTE:

Over the course of the last few weeks, there has been much media and political attention regarding refugees sparked by the emotive images that have been seen from those fleeing violence particularly from Syria. The council has received several media enquiries and contact from some members of the public asking what the council is doing to support refugees. The Local Government Association has issued statements in response to the situation stressing the need for full funding for local authorities to support refugees. A joint statement was issued by the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive on Tuesday 8th September 2015 which stated

“Yesterday (Monday September 7) the Prime Minister announced that the UK will accept 20,000 Syrian refugees between now and 2020.

“We understand that the government will provide financial support from the international aid budget. The council awaits further details on how this will be administered and the number of refugees the district may be asked to accommodate.

“It is, of course, essential that the solution is sustainable and funding is made available in the long term to ensure that those resettled, along with our communities, have the support and resources they need until they are either granted asylum or safely returned to their own country.”

At the time of writing no further details are available about exactly how local authorities will be asked to support and until this detail is known, it is difficult to be precise about the resource and practical implications of this.

Members may be aware that the Home Office is also widening its asylum dispersal programme in the North West and Lancashire authorities are being requested to support this programme. Officers are investigating how we can assist in supporting placement of asylum seekers. This is a separate issue to the resettlement of Syrian refugees and resources required by the council to assist in the asylum dispersal programme (which is coordinated by Serco on behalf of the Government) are minimal and can be met from within existing staffing capacity. In terms of accommodation, we are looking to the private rented sector.

The UN gateway programme and the vulnerable persons relocation scheme are schemes currently operated by central government. If by “to formally express interest in both the UN Gateway Programme and the Government’s VPR to the Home Office by 1st November 2015” is taken to mean that the council wishes to become a place to accept refugees, then at this stage it is impossible to say what the implications for us would be in terms of staffing capacity required, resources, availability of housing stock in the area and support required from other agencies in the district.

It is worth noting that only 10% of our total housing stock is social rented properties compared to 78% owner occupied and 12% private rented. The council housing stock comprises 3,800 properties in total and we currently don’t have a high level of voids. Furthermore, there are approximately 1900 applicants on our housing register (waiting list) who are in need of accommodation (some of these have a high need) and for this reason we don’t intend to use council housing as an option for placing asylum seekers. For the same reason, placement of refugees in council housing would not be a viable option.

Officers would therefore urge any commitment to be in principle on the basis that full funding is provided and further detail is known.

Monitoring Officer Comments

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments

Section 151 Officer Comments

The s151 Officer has been consulted and reiterates the need for any commitment to be in principle, subject to having further details particularly regarding funding and its sustainability.