

ANGUS COUNCIL

10 SEPTEMBER 2020

"OUR TURN" INITIATIVE AND REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMMES

REPORT BY MARK ARMSTRONG, DEPUTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

ABSTRACT

This report has been prepared following a motion to Full Council on 5 December 2019 and outlines the position with regards to the 'Our Turn' campaign, led by the child refugee charity 'Safe Passage International', which asks the UK Government to welcome 10,000 at-risk child refugees over the next 10 years as part of a new child resettlement scheme. The report also refers to the wider range of schemes in operation and outlines the Council's current participation arrangements.

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Council:

- (i) Note the position regarding the Council's current participation in resettlement activity;
- (ii) Note the anticipated resource implications relating to any further resettlement scheme referenced throughout the report;
- (iii) Agree the policy position proposed at section 5.2 below to continue with participation in existing resettlement schemes;
- (iv) Require Mark Armstrong, Depute Chief Executive to write to the Scottish Government and Home Office to seek the development of a national strategy and framework, and accompanying clarification regarding the long-term funding in place to support the resettlement of refugees and UASC in Scotland.

2. ALIGNMENT TO THE ANGUS LOCAL OUTCOMES IMPROVEMENT PLAN/CORPORATE PLAN

This report contributes to the following local outcome contained within the Angus Local Outcomes Improvement Plan and Locality Plans:

- Children are given the best start in life
- Physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing is improved
- There are more opportunities for people to achieve success

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Reference is made to Item 6(i) of the minute of meeting of Angus Council of 5 December 2019 and a motion by Councillor Lynne Devine: "This Council would welcome a report from officers detailing the anticipated resource implications for the Council to support the STUC/Safe Passage/Kindertransport Association "Our Turn" Initiative, to help find places in volunteer households for at least 3 unaccompanied child refugees per year for each of the next 10 years provided that the UK Government fully underwrites support for these refugees in line with current Scottish legislation." (STUC refers to The Scottish Trades Union Congress who campaign on a wide range of issues).
- 3.2 Members will recall that Angus Council, like other Local Authorities across the UK, has already played an active role in welcoming refugee families from the Middle East and Africa, and provided a safe place for many to settle. This has included the resettlement of a small number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

4. CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 Members will be aware of the increasing number of crisis situations occurring in different parts of the world that are leading to an increase in refugees leaving their home soil. The geo-political landscape is both complex and evolving, but the causes remain historically constant, including: regional conflict; civil war; human rights violations; environmental disasters; and failed states leading to economic hardship.
- 4.2 There are currently several regions which are the focus of world attention including:
- a) In the Eastern Mediterranean, refugees from conflict and political instability in Syria, Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan have migrated in large numbers to neighbouring Greece, Turkey and Lebanon. Lebanon itself is now experiencing economic and political turmoil (as well as the recent devastating explosion in Beirut), and this may lead to further hardship and movement of people.
 - b) In South America, the collapse of the Venezuelan economy has caused some 5 million migrants to move into neighbouring countries such as Columbia and Peru.
 - c) In the Southern Mediterranean, refugees from sub-Saharan Africa continue to cross from Libya to the Island of Lampedusa off Sicily, putting pressure on the South of Italy.
 - d) In Bangladesh, large numbers of Rohingya Muslims have fled from the oppressive regime in Myanmar, settling in enormous refugee camps.
 - e) In the far east there is the potential for migration from Hong Kong due to the increasing restrictions to democracy, and tensions around state security measures.
- 4.3 These are the current areas of most concern, but it's clear from recent changes to climate that more extreme weather may lead to increasing drought or flooding, causing local refugee crises occurring in areas of the world not previously known for environmental disaster.
- 4.4 In response to these events in the past, Angus Council has participated in several schemes to resettle refugees. Since 2015, over 40 refugees have been resettled in Angus (with an additional four babies born here after families settling), from several countries including Syria, Iraq and Sudan. A further two individual young people have also been resettled through the UASC scheme. Staff across the Council and the wider Community Planning Partnership have worked hard to ensure that the appropriate mechanisms have been put in place to support our resettled community.
- 4.5 The financial position for local authorities in relation to the accommodation and support of UASC, young people and families, continues to be complex. The position of the STUC referred to in the December 2019 motion, was to seek pledges from Scottish local authorities to support the 'Our Turn' initiative.
- 4.6 More recently, further approaches have been received both from COSLA on behalf of the Home Office seeking commitment to receive further UASC, and from other groups lobbying individual local authorities to participate in the resettlement of specific groups.

5. PROPOSAL

- 5.1 It is apparent that a number of schemes are likely to continue to emerge seeking local support for the resettlement of refugees or UASC in local communities. It is not possible for Angus Council to appropriately and consistently respond to a variety of request routes and individual schemes. A more effective contribution might be possible as part of a longer-term National Strategy for Refugee and UASC Re-settlement. A jointly developed strategy supported by both the UK and Scottish Governments in partnership with local authorities could set out a more robust and unambiguous framework within which there could be clear targets and criteria for participation, and a clearer funding settlement to support decision making both nationally and locally. It would enable a more planned holistic approach to be taken with confidence by partnerships and inform a more integrated infrastructure to be planned and put in place, both nationally, and locally as part of the Local Housing Strategy (LHS).

- 5.2 It is therefore proposed that the Council continue to participate in the schemes under existing agreements and commit to supporting the development of such a strategy to enable us to better consider individual applications for resettlement in the future.
- 5.3 It is also proposed that Mark Armstrong, Depute Chief Executive of Angus Council write to the Scottish Government and Home Office to seek the development of a national strategy and framework, and accompanying clarification regarding the long-term funding in place to support the resettlement of refugees and UASC in Scotland.

6. FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Details of the legislative and local practical implications of how such initiatives would operate are not clearly laid out nor fully understood. Therefore, the extent of the financial and wider resource implications cannot be fully assessed. Broadly, there are potential financial and other resource implications from supporting volunteers, from the progression and management of assessments and from the appropriate administration of proposed initiatives.
- 6.2 When considering the holistic needs of those being settled, there are further financial implications around housing, education, health and translation services, and other likely requirements relating to emotional wellbeing and mental health services, as well as appropriate specialist responses to specific trauma likely to have been endured. Such needs may be physical and/or psychological in nature.
- 6.3 In the context of unaccompanied children, the statutory duties which Scottish local authorities have in relation to children who are looked after applies up to and including the age of 25; it remains unclear if refugee children are to be considered 'looked after children' and whether any placements with volunteers require to comply with current regulations and legislation regarding the accommodation of looked after children. In any case, good practice would suggest that they should, to ensure parity of safeguarding and monitoring arrangements is afforded.
- 6.4 In terms of Housing, once refugees have been formally accepted as part of resettlement schemes, there is a legislative duty to provide accommodation, either temporary or permanent. This means that participation in schemes is not without significant impact as an already finite resource (accommodation provision) would be prioritised in favour of refugees over others waiting for it. There is also a duty to accommodate any other needs that develop (in terms of medical needs or family profile changes such as births). These considerations are not currently included in the Housing Need and Demand assessments which are carried out to inform updates or reviews of the LHS.
- 6.5 As well as staffing and financial demands such a scheme would inevitably present, there is also a risk in terms of the limited capacity within the overall support infrastructure in Scotland. Considerable pressure exists for the current looked after children population in respect of residential and foster care placement availability and it is widely considered that mental health services have limited capacity to respond to existing demand.
- 6.6 There are no additional financial implications for the Council arising specifically from the recommendations in this report. Our participation in existing resettlement schemes is funded by Government and the proposed way forward would require a National Strategy to be developed as the next step. The costs and funding for such a National Strategy would be the subject of further reports.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The legislative implications of supporting the "Our Turn" initiative and other UASC schemes are currently unknown, however it is likely there will be legislative impacts in respect of the children being looked after children with associated procedures and obligations.

NOTE: No background papers, as detailed by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.

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