

Overview and Scrutiny Report

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Borough Response to Refugees

Executive Summary

The Overview and Scrutiny committee requested information and an update on Guildford Borough Council's response to refugees. The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee about the support given to refugees in Guildford and ask for comment on the services delivered.

The Council is involved in supporting refugees through the following:

- Syrian Vulnerable People Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)
- Afghanistan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP)
- Community Sponsorship
- Homes For Ukraine Scheme
- Asylum seeking bridging hotel (where people have claimed asylum and are awaiting a decision as to whether they will be allowed to stay in the UK as a refugee)

Each of the above is a different scheme led by central government to support the refugee crisis within the UK. The Council's duty and involvement varies depending on the scheme

For VPRS and ARAP, the Family Support Team within Community Services supports the refugee families to resettle safely within local Guildford communities. The Home Office provided funding to assist with this resettlement and Guildford has supported

- 8 Syrian families under VPRS
- 2 Afghan families under ARAP.

The Council also facilitates the Community Sponsorship Programme where a local community group can provide housing and wider support to Home Office registered refugee families from anywhere in the world in need of resettlement. Guildford has two community sponsorship programmes

- Resettle@Guildford
- Camino

The Homes For Ukraine Scheme was launched by the Department of Levelling Up: Housing and Communities (DLUHC) in March 2022 to support the crisis caused by the Ukraine invasion. The scheme facilitates Hosts in the UK to sponsor individuals or families – referred to as Guests- to live either with them or in a property owned by them for a minimum of 6 months. All Hosts receive a monthly thank you payment to contribute towards costs and on arrival the Guests are given a one-off welcome payment.

The scheme is coordinated through our Regulatory, Community and Housing teams and involves

- Housing compliance checks for Hosts
- Administration of welcome and thank you payments
- Safeguarding of Guests and Hosts
- Resettlement support within the wider community – help accessing Schools, GPs and Dentists
- Advice on housing options once Guest/Host arrangement ends

Guildford under the Homes For Ukraine Scheme has to date

- 207 host families
- 570 Guests

The Asylum-Seeking Bridging Hotel is independently contracted by the Home Office to Clearsprings Ready Homes (CSRH). CSRH provide a variety of ‘asylum-seeking housing’ across the South-East that includes purposing hotels and purchasing housing to become homes of multiple occupation.

In the East of Guildford, a hotel has been commissioned to support people whilst their asylum application is being considered. Although the council has no statutory obligation to support the hotel, the situation is incredibly sensitive for both residents within the hotel and local residents in the locality. The Community Services team offer support to the management team of the hotel and coordinate support from the health inclusion team and local volunteers.

Recommendation to Committee

The Committee is asked to

- Comment on the Council’s support to refugees.

Reason(s) for Recommendation:

To ensure Councillors are aware of this council’s approach to supporting refugees within our local communities.

Is the report (or part of it) exempt from publication?

No

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested information and an update on Guildford Borough Council's response to refugees. The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee about the support given to refugees within our communities. The Committee is asked to comment on this council's services and support provided to refugees.

2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 Supporting Refugees within our borough contributes to the strategic priority of supporting vulnerable people in our community.

3. Background

- 3.1 The definition of a refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war and persecution. They are unable to return home until conditions are safe for them again.

- 3.2 Refugees are protected by international law under the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, of which the UK is a signatory.

- 3.3 Guildford Borough Council is supporting refugees (and those claiming asylum whilst their application to live in the UK as a refugee is considered) through the following schemes led by central government to support the refugee crisis within the UK.

- Syrian Vulnerable People Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)
- Afghanistan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP)
- Community Sponsorship
- Homes For Ukraine Scheme
- Asylum seeking bridging hotel

3.4 Syrian Vulnerable People Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)

The Home Office launched the VPRS in January 2014 (working closely with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) to identify those most at risk from the war in Syria and bring them to the UK. The greatest need included people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk.

- 3.5 The scheme was intended to provide sanctuary nationwide to several hundred vulnerable Syrians over three years. In July 2017, the Home Office expanded the scope of the scheme to include other refugees who fled the conflict in Syria but did not have Syrian nationality.
- 3.6 From 2016 to 2018, Guildford welcomed Eight Syrian families comprising of 47 individuals (16 adults, 31 children) under the VPRS. 5 children were later born in the UK post arrival.

3.7 The families were to be supported by the Family Support Team within Community Services for five years and the Home Office provided funding to the council to support the eight families at the following rates.

- Year 1 £8250 per person
- Year 2 £5000 per person
- Year 3 £3700 per person
- Year 4 £2300 per person
- Year 5 £1000 per person

3.8 Three families remain under the five-year programme and will stay within the scheme until late 2023.

3.9 The support offered entails access to private housing, health, education and learning English as a second language. A lot of support is given to help families acclimatise to life in the UK so that their needs are met to help them work towards independence and financial stability.

3.10 Afghanistan Relocation and Assistance Programme (ARAP)

The ARAP launched on 1 April 2021 to offer relocation or other assistance to former Locally Employed Staff who helped the British government and Armed Forces and were now deemed at risk due to the changing political dynamics within Afghanistan.

3.11 To support ARAP the council in 2021 secured the lease on two Ministry of Defence properties in Pirbright for up to five years to offer to families fleeing Afghanistan. Two families moved into the properties in January and February of 2022.

3.12 In accordance with Home Office guidelines, the council will provide three years of support to these two families with the following funding arrangements

- Year 1 £10,500 per person
- Year 2 £6000 per person
- Year 3 £4020 per person

3.13 These two families consist of 8 individuals – 4 adults and 4 children and they are both supported by the Family Support Team to help the families access health and education services as well as finding work so that they will become financially independent.

3.14 Community Sponsorship Programmes

In 2015 the Home Office introduced a Community Sponsorship Scheme whereby local community groups can take responsibility to welcome and support refugees from Syria and the surrounding region directly into their communities.

The programme is to complement the resettlement work undertaken by local authorities as part of the VPRS and is designed to support refugee families resettle in the UK within a 5-year support window.

- 3.15 Guildford has two community sponsorship groups, Resettle@Guildford and Camino who both provide housing for a refugee family alongside the wider support needed. The council's involvement is to support the group with their safeguarding practices and to inspect the property to ensure it is compliant and safe for occupation.
- 3.16 The Home Office community sponsorship team undertake a rigorous application process and on completion require both the borough and county councils to support and approve the arrival of a family into the care of the sponsorship group.
- 3.17 The Homes For Ukraine Scheme
- The Homes For Ukraine Scheme was launched by the Department of Levelling Up: Housing and Communities (DLUHC) in March 2022 to support the crisis caused by the Ukraine invasion.
- 3.18 The scheme facilitates Hosts in the UK to sponsor Ukrainian individuals or families who have been impacted by the war in Ukraine (referred to as Guests) to live either with them or in a separate identified property for a minimum of six months.
- 3.19 All Hosts receive a monthly thank you payment to contribute towards costs and on arrival the Guests are given a one-off welcome payment via a pre-payment card to help with start-up costs.
- 3.20 The council coordinates this through our Regulatory, Community and Housing teams and the work involves
- Housing compliance checks for Hosts
 - Administration of welcome and thank you payments
 - Safeguarding of Guests and Hosts
 - Resettlement support within the wider community – help accessing Schools, GPs and Dentists
 - Advice on housing options once guest/host arrangement ends
 - Assistance with moving into new accommodation
- 3.21 £10,500 is given to the county and borough council for each person who arrives under the scheme to help provide the variety of resettlement support needed. This support includes any staffing costs associated with administering the scheme as well as supporting Guests to access school placements, NHS services, and possible future housing provision. The £10,500 will be divided between the county and borough councils with Guildford receiving 50% of funding per person.
- 3.22 Guildford under the Homes For Ukraine Scheme has to date

- 207 host families
 - 570 Guests
- 3.23 The Homes For Ukraine scheme is a serious challenge for the council. There have been significant difficulties in ensuring Guests can access school places, doctors and dentists. Most pressing however is the lack of suitable and affordable housing provision once the arrangement of Host and Guest ends.
- 3.24 From a series of community support events, it is clear that the expectations of both Hosts and Guests around the scheme have not been met. Many believed that the council would provide social housing for the Guests once the 6- month sponsor arrangement completed.
- 3.25 The council is offering Housing Options support to any of the Guests who require help with securing more permanent accommodation, but as with all our refugee support schemes, we cannot offer immediate social housing. Guests under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme are encouraged to explore a variety of options that include
- Extending their arrangement with their Host to 12 months
 - Searching for private housing
 - Joining the Housing Register
- 3.26 It continues to be a very challenging situation on a number of fronts. Access to private accommodation is not easy in Guildford. There is a significant lack of private housing available at an affordable rent and many Guests may find themselves in difficulty with the benefit gap, the need for a deposit and possibly a guarantor. Guests are also more than likely going to have to find accommodation in a different area to where they currently reside with their host meaning that there will be a further change in schooling and GP services.
- 3.27 We are seeing some breakdowns in the Host and Guest relationship and when this happens, we do all we can to rematch families to another registered sponsor. However, we are finding the appetite to be a sponsor and Host is dwindling. Until a rematch is made, we offer 7 days temporary accommodation under the scheme but if this is not successful, Guests will be advised to seek advice about housing options. The route to homelessness is something that we really want to prevent as much as possible.
- 3.28 We are also seeing a significant impact on the mental health of both Hosts and Guests within the scheme that cannot be underestimated. Not only are some Guests traumatised by what has happened to their country and their home, but Hosts are often trying to support their Guests to settle but are not equipped to help or cope with the diverse and traumatic needs of people who have fled a war zone and still have friends and family in the country.
- 3.29 Asylum-seeking Bridging Hotel

The Home Office as part of their response to the significant amount of people in the asylum accommodation system, have commissioned in the South-East,

ClearSprings Ready Homes (CSRH) to provide a variety of accommodation offers for those seeking asylum and applying to live in the UK as a refugee.

Accommodation may take the form of a hotel or houses of multiple occupation and be used as an initial form of accommodation for people who have recently made an asylum claim or as longer-term dispersal accommodation.

- 3.30 CSR has commissioned a hotel in the East of Guildford to act as a bridging hotel for those seeking to live in the UK as a refugee. The residents in the hotel are from all over the world and are at various stages of their asylum application process. There is a CSRH management team present at the hotel who are to support the everyday needs of the residents.
- 3.31 Although the council has no statutory obligation to support the hotel, the situation is incredibly sensitive for both residents within the hotel and local residents in the locality. The Community Services team offer support to the management team of the hotel and coordinate support from the Health Inclusion Team and local volunteers.
- 3.32 The local volunteer networks have been crucial in ensuring clothing and toiletries are provided to residents and have worked with Community Services to liaise with the hotel about ensuring children are registered for schooling and wider e language classes and supportive activities can take place in the hotel to help residents live well.
- 3.33 There are severe mental and physical health needs amongst the residents – many of whom have experienced significant trauma. The Health Inclusion Team visit the hotel weekly to hold clinics to support the residents with their health and wellbeing needs.

4. Key Risks

- 4.1 Refugee support within the borough is a very sensitive issue. Our teams work tirelessly to ensure all our residents are treated with humanity and dignity often in the face of local tensions around perceived favouritism of refugees when accessing housing and jobs or upset at perceived illegal entry to the UK.
- 4.2 The funding provided under the schemes helps the provision we offer remain sustainable, but the Homes For Ukraine scheme may require more financial input from central government if local authorities are expected to assist with the housing shortage. This will inevitably raise the number of homeless cases presented to the borough and the costs associated with our obligation to assist.
- 4.3 Ensuring we have staffing resilience for the Homes For Ukraine work is paramount and we have ensured that some of the funding provided has been allocated to recruit fixed term contract posts within the Regulatory, Community and Housing teams.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 Funding has been provided for the schemes by central government. There is an allocation per family as mentioned above. However, despite this allocation, there are back office and staffing costs absorbed by the council.
- 5.2 The £10,500 given to local authorities for each Ukrainian guest under the Homes For Ukraine Scheme is split between Surrey County Council and this council, There is a risk that this funding will not be enough to help guests transition into private rented accommodation. This has been raised by the South-East Migration Partnership with Central Government.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from refugee support the council offers. We operate under agreed government guidance for all of the schemes and have ensured proper governance is in place for any support offered to Community Sponsorship groups.
- 6.2 Legal implications may arise around the issue of homelessness prevention should refugees present as homeless, and these cases would be assessed by the Housing Team and legal advice sought on a case-by-case basis.

7. Human Resource Implications

- 7.1 We have resourced the VPRS and ARAP staffing within the Family Support Team with appropriate government funding and have used some of the Homes For Ukraine allocation to provide extra support to the Regulatory, Community and Housing teams. However, there is a lot of officer time and resource absorbed by the council within business as usual.

8 Equality and Diversity Implications

- 8.1 Public authorities are required to have due regard to the aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) when making decisions and setting policies.

Any work with refugees would require consideration of protected characteristics of the individuals involved, and we are with the Equality Act 2010.

- 8.2 Surrey County Council as part of the process supporting refugees will also have completed all the relevant assessments to ensure their statutory duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 is fulfilled.
- 8.3 There are therefore no direct implications for this Council arising from the support offered to refugees.

9. Climate Change/Sustainability Implications

- 9.1 There are no specific climate change/sustainability implications directly related or attributed to refugee support in the borough.

10. Suggested issues for overview and scrutiny

- Are there any comments from the committee about the Borough's response to refugees?

11 Conclusion

11.1 The council offers significant support to refugees within our communities through the

- Syrian Vulnerable People Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)
- Afghanistan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP)
- Community Sponsorship Programme
- Homes For Ukraine Scheme
- Asylum seeking bridging hotel

11.2 Our corporate commitment to supporting vulnerable people across the borough means that we actively work within the government schemes to ensure refugees are offered a safe place to live in Guildford with as much support as possible to integrate into the community and live independent and financially stable lives.

12. Background Papers

[VPRS \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

[Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

['Homes for Ukraine' scheme launches - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

[Apply for community sponsorship - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

[Supporting Ukraine - Guildford Borough Council](#)