

SUBJECT: A COUNTY OF SANCTUARY

MEETING: Cabinet

DATE: 9th June 2021

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE:

To ensure that Monmouthshire plays its part in accommodating and supporting a small number of asylum seekers as part of the vision for Wales to be a nation of sanctuary providing a safe haven for those fleeing persecution .

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the authority formally confirms a commitment in principle to playing its part in the national scheme to offer accommodation to those seeking asylum while their claims are processed, becoming a county of sanctuary for those fleeing persecution.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 There is a recognition that pressure on the asylum system has been increasing steadily for several years. Accordingly there is a desire from both the UK and Wales Governments to increase the number of local authority areas supporting the temporary accommodation of asylum seekers while their claims are processed.
- 3.2 There are presently five local authorities in Wales involved in the national scheme. While Monmouthshire is not one of these, our county has a strong record of providing support and hospitality to those in greatest need. This has included playing a role in helping settling people from Afghanistan facing persecution in their homeland after working as translators for the British armed forces as well as assisting in the Syrian Resettlement Programme.
- 3.3 Any Monmouthshire involvement will be proportionate to the size of the county. While the cities of Newport, Cardiff and Swansea have supported many hundreds of people, Conwy, with a population a little larger than Monmouthshire has accommodated six people as part of its commitment to the scheme. While we do not have exact figures at this stage, this is the sort of number we envisage for Monmouthshire. It's also important to remember that once claims are decided people may not choose to remain in Monmouthshire but can re-locate to other parts of the UK which is what we have found with previous schemes.

- 3.4 It is recognised that there will be concerns in some communities about the impact on local public services such as housing and school places. While the numbers will be small it will still be important to ensure that these matters are addressed as our local approach is developed.
- 3.5 Councils have raised a number of questions where more information was needed from the Home Office, and discussions are ongoing at both UK and Wales levels. These include:
- Funding, including to build capacity and more broadly in terms of support services that would be needed;
 - Ensuring a partnership approach between national and local government to ensure we are able to influence how dispersal happens locally;
 - The importance of sharing information and data, including clear and well-understood and followed safeguarding processes.
- 3.6 Following this paper, officers will engage with the relevant agencies and partners on key issues. This will include the availability of accommodation; health services and access to language support. It is likely that accommodation will be located in towns to ensure that families arriving have access to local amenities and support networks.
- 3.7 Alongside formal partnerships it is important to recognise the welcome afforded to people settling in Monmouthshire. One example being the Abergavenny Town of Sanctuary which helps people and challenging misconceptions about refugees and asylum seekers.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

- 4.1 There are a number of equalities and safeguarding issues concerning the safe introduction of this programme. These include some of the difficulties that will be associated with arrivals living in a new cultural context which could cause difficulties settling into new communities. Asylum seekers will be unable to work and will not receive the same level of financial support as UK residents. They will be at greater risk of poverty and the associated disadvantages and lack of opportunities. Given the nature of their arrival in the UK some may need emotional support or access to mental health services
- 4.2 At this stage a decision is being sought in principle to participate in the scheme and further research will be undertaken to refine and improve the impact assessment should be recommendations be approved.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

- 5.1 The two clear options are either to participate in the scheme or not. There is a strong desire to engage positively in discussions and extend the offer of assistance to people who find themselves in the most difficult of circumstances. Not engaging would place increased burden on a small number of locations the point where the system become unsustainable, the likely outcome of this being that we would find ourselves subject to a mandated approach with opportunity to engage and shape the scheme.

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA:

6.1 Evaluation criteria will be identified as the scheme is developed. These are likely to include measures related to access to housing, health services and education.

7. REASONS:

To ensure that Monmouthshire is able to play its part in accommodating its share of people fleeing persecution and ensuring that responsibility is shared across Wales and the UK

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

We will continue to engage with partners regarding the costs of the scheme. While it will require some officer capacity it is anticipated that the financial costs will be borne by the UK Government.

9. CONSULTEES:

Strategic Leadership Team
Cabinet
Head of Enterprise and Community Animation
Housing and Communities Manager
Tackling Poverty and Inequality Manager
Community Cohesion Officer

Following consultation reference was added to the need to accommodate people close to local amenities and the potential need to ensure access to emotional support and mental health services for those who had experienced trauma while fleeing their homes.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None

11. AUTHOR:

Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy, Performance and Scrutiny

12. CONTACT DETAILS:

Tel: 01633 644397

E-mail: matthewgatehouse@monmouthshire.gov.uk