EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Sets out issues around the resettlement of Syrian Refugee households and recommends that Elmbridge participates in the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) for five years and pledges to assist up to 5 households over this period.

RECOMMENDED: THAT

(A) THAT EBC PARTICIPATES IN THE VPRS TO ASSIST UP TO 5 SYRIAN REFUGEE HOUSEHOLDS OVER 5 YEARS.

(B) THAT MEMBERS NOTE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW LOCAL COMMUNITY GROUP TO SUPPORT A LOCAL REFUGEE RESPONSE AND THEIR PLANS TO HOLD A COMMUNITY EVENT LATER THIS YEAR.

REPORT:

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 The Home Secretary launched the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme in September 2015 in response to the escalating conflict in Syria. The Government has pledged to resettle 20,000 refugees over 5 years from refugee camps bordering Syria under this scheme and has invited all councils to participate.

1.2 As the name suggests, the VPRS aims to provide assistance and resettlement for the most vulnerable refugee households living in camps bordering Syria. Under the scheme, the Home Office (via the United Nations High Commission for Refugees or UNHCR) identify vulnerable households in the camps, handle their refugee applications and carry out the essential screening/vetting checks prior to them travelling to the UK.

1.3 A Summary Home Office Information Booklet for Local Authorities on the Resettlement Scheme is attached at Appendix 1

1.4 To date, according to a recent Home Affairs Committee Report, only in the region of 70 local authorities have taken households under the scheme (although many more may have pledged to do so). However it is clear the UK target of assisting 20,000 refugees from Syria under the scheme over 5 years is going to prove very challenging.
Within Surrey, 6 of the 11 B&D’s have so far joined the scheme, although not all of these have yet taken households. The following table provides an overview:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Council</th>
<th>Joined VPRS</th>
<th>No. of refugee households that council is aiming to assist over 5 years</th>
<th>No. of refugee households assisted up to 31/7/16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guildford</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No figure set</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mole Valley</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reigate &amp; Banstead</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runnymede</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey Heath</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woking</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elmbridge</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epsom &amp; Ewell</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelthorne</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tandridge</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waverley</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 4 councils who have not yet joined in addition to Elmbridge, it is understood that a further two councils are progressing with plans to join (Epsom & Ewell and Tandridge).

Although there is significant housing need in the Borough already, it is proposed that given the extent of the crisis in Syria that Elmbridge signs up to the scheme and offers to assist a small number of cases – up to 5 households over 5 years.

**DETAILS OF THE VPRS**

Probably the most challenging aspect of the scheme should the council join, is the requirement on the Council to provide a home for the household for at least the first 12 months and ideally for a period of 2 years from their date of arrival. This must be a self-contained furnished home. It does not need to be social housing - it can be a privately rented home but it cannot constitute ‘lodging with a host family’. Most councils in Surrey who have so far joined are intending to assist through securing a private rented sector tenancy rather than through a social housing tenancy.

In addition to providing a home, the council would also need to provide support and assistance to a household to enable them to adapt to a new country and integrate into the local community. This would involve specialist casework support and assistance with access to education, health care and language skills for example for at least their first 12 months. It would also include meeting and greeting the household from the airport and providing initial intensive support.

Household are given refugee status for 5 years and this carries eligibility to work and claim welfare benefits including Housing Benefit. Should the conflict in Syria ease then it is possible their permission to remain in the UK could change but in
any event, it would be expected that, over time, households would become less dependent and more self-sufficient, particularly in terms of securing employment and be in a position to secure their own accommodation longer term.

2.4 Within Surrey, those Boroughs that have so far pledged to assist are working with the County under a partnership umbrella to ensure support is planned and co-ordinated given the two tier challenges. This is currently led by the Chief Executive of Mole Valley. Elmbridge would become a member of this co-ordinating group.

2.5 Under the Scheme the council would receive funding from the Home Office to cover a range of expenses equivalent to approximately £8,600 per household member for the first year (therefore up to £32,000 for the first year for a family of four) with some follow on funding for a further four year period beyond this ranging from £5,000 per person in year two to £1,000 per person in Year 5. This can only be used to reimburse agreed costs associated with housing, support and social care. Any health costs are dealt with separately. As already stated, in addition, households are entitled to Housing Benefit so their rent (up to the LHA rate) can be paid through HB. It is therefore possible for the council to join the scheme and assist refugee households without a local financial burden albeit some level of ‘displacement’ cost for any home secured that might not otherwise be available for a local family in need or at risk of homelessness and some ‘upfront’ funding pending Home Office reimbursement.

2.6 The Council would be allocated refugee households some months ahead of their arrival into the UK. It is proposed that households would be accommodated within private sector tenancies or tenancies of property owned by church, faith or charitable organisations which would not normally have been used for meeting the needs of those on the Council’s housing register (so as to minimise any displacement impact). In some cases, up front security or deposit payments may be needed to hold the property prior to a household arriving. It is understood that these costs could be met by the Home Office funding, unless a landlord was willing to take a sympathetic stance.

2.7 It is proposed that the Council offers to assist up to 5 households over the 5 year period of the scheme, although this would not be set in stone and would be dependent on securing suitable accommodation. In addition, it is understood the Council would be able to stipulate the size of households to best match any available accommodation offers. No offers of accommodation are available to the council as this point so it may well be some time before the council would be able to assist its first household.

2.8 It is proposed that the Council would purchase specialist support services from another council already employing specialist staff, using the Home Office funding. Reigate and Banstead currently employ a Refugee Support Worker to work with Reigate & Banstead and Mole Valley cases. This post sits within their shared Family Support Service and it is understood that there would be some capacity for Elmbridge to buy into this post. In addition there may be some scope to do the same with the Woking resource should this be needed.
3.0 **Non VPRS cases**

3.1 Some Syrian people have fled the country and travelled to Europe, including the UK, independently and have claimed and been granted refugee status once here. In some cases families have travelled together or one or two family members have travelled first and once granted refugee status have then been able to bring remaining family members here. During the process of arriving and claiming asylum they will temporarily be accommodated through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Once they have been granted refugee status they can then seek accommodation through any local authority to whom they may have a family connection. A small number of households have sought assistance from Elmbridge Borough Council through this route and have been provided with temporary accommodation prior to being rehoused along with other homeless households. As these households have not gone through VPRS there has been no specific funding made available by the Home Office to support their resettlement.

4.0 **Unaccompanied children**

4.1 Surrey County Council is also involved in responding to the issue of children under the age of 18 travelling to the UK from Syria and other war torn countries unaccompanied. It is the responsibility of the relevant Social Services Authority receiving or first identifying the person as an unaccompanied asylum seeker child (UASC) that must take responsibility for them. Surrey currently has the third largest number of UASC in their care in the UK. There is currently a shortage of suitable placements including foster placements.

5.0 **Community and voluntary sector activity**

5.1 Since the crisis first came to public attention in the UK and particularly in the upsurge in interest from Summer 2015, there has been a steady stream of enquiries and offers of help from members of the community, faith group leaders and even from the business community although this has reduced over recent months. This has included a very active facebook group known as ‘Surrey Aid’ (originally it was Molesey focussed, then Elmbridge wide and now Surrey wide). This group co-ordinates aid to Calais and camps in Europe and uses storage facilities at Imber Court for storing donations and preparing shipments etc.

5.2 Out of this activity, a small voluntary organisation has recently formed called ‘Elmbridge CAN’ to work with the community in Elmbridge, Elmbridge Borough Council and also with Surrey County Council over various issues relating to assisting families from Syria and also unaccompanied children in Elmbridge specifically.

5.3 Elmbridge CAN are hoping to organise a community event later this year. This will be an event for community groups, businesses and faith group leaders to come together with the Borough and County Council in Elmbridge. Council Officers from Elmbridge and y have agreed to support the Elmbridge CAN steering Group with this event and Surrey County Council is currently considering what assistance it can offer.
Financial implications:
The full details of the funding available to participating local authorities is set out in a ‘Home Office Funding Instruction’ document and for Year One costs these are set at £8,520 per individual with additional specified amounts for education costs to be paid to educational establishments. Councils can also apply for top up payments where necessary where there may be extenuating circumstances where additional reimbursement of costs is necessary. Payment is made to the local authority on the basis of 40% of the yearly cost within 30 days of the household’s arrival into the UK and the remainder paid in arrears in two equal instalments at the end of the fourth and eighth month. Further funding for year 2 – 5 has also been confirmed although at a lower level to reflect the expectation that support needs will diminish and provision of housing is only a requirement for a period of 12 months, potentially up to 2 years depending on the changing household needs over that time.

This Home Office Funding should mean that there is minimal (if any) financial burden falling on Elmbridge Borough Council in joining the scheme.. It is clearly the intention of the Government that the funding scheme meets most if not all the council’s costs.

There could be some level of ‘displacement cost’ of a home being offered to a refugee household that might otherwise have been let a local family in need and potentially one that might otherwise require temporary or B&B accommodation from the council. This is minimised by Officers seeking to secure only private rented accommodation (as opposed to social housing) and seeking out offers of accommodation from owners/landlords who might not otherwise have let to council nominee. In addition any further financial risk is minimised in the small number of households to be assisted.

Environmental/Sustainability Implications:
Non for the purposes of this report

Legal implications:
These are set out in the report.

Equality Implications:
The proposal to join the VPRS will assist the council in meet its obligations to promote good race relations.

Risk Implications:
As set out in financial implications above.

Community Safety Implications:
None for the purposes of this report

Principal Consultees:
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Background papers:
None

Enclosures/Appendices:
Appendix 1 – Syrian Refugee Resettlement Summary Guide for Local Authorities

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