

Appendix A to the Council Minutes – 23 September 2015

Item 6 – Questions from Members of the Public

One question was submitted from a member of the public.

1. From Mr Perrin to Councillor J. Kent

During the Sky News televised final debate, featuring the candidates for the Leadership of the Labour Party, Yvette Cooper stated Local Government Councils should accept refugees. If you agree with her would you give some indication as to how many refugees Thurrock Council considers it would be capable of assimilating into the Borough?

Mayor

Councillor Kent?

Councillor Kent

Madam Mayor. I think there are very few people who having seen the pictures of the body of Aylan Kurdi the young Syrian boy washed up on a beach that wouldn't have been deeply moved and residents have been quick to offer support including offers of accommodation for Syrian refugees. I think the situation has moved on somewhat since the question was submitted, as the Prime Minister has announced that up to 20,000 Syrian refugees, directly from the region, will be accepted into the United Kingdom over the next five years and the Government has taken the lead in coordinating the operation. I have to say Madam Mayor that the job of coordination has not been handled at all well. We still don't know exactly how the scheme will operate and councils up and down the country in a cross party consensus are pressing the government through the local government association for clarity around a number of issues that need to be urgently resolved. In particular the need for a firm commitment that councils re-settling refugees will receive full financial support. Government so far is suggesting that the foreign aid budget will be used to pay those costs for the first year with no commitment for future years. And if we take the current arrangements for unaccompanied children seeking asylum where we are reimbursed of 75% of the costs, not including social care costs so closer to 60%. I have to say that it is difficult to see how we can successfully assimilate any number of refugees.

Mayor

Thank you Councillor Kent. Mr Perrin, do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Mr Perrin

Thank you Madam Mayor. Yes I do actually. Thank Councillor Kent. The refugee problem has become a highly emotive especially when the plight of children is so been graphically illustrated the government says that the UK will accept 20,000 refugees over the next four years ie. 5,000 a year. There are 433 councils in the UK, divide 5,000 by 433 you get a figure of 11 or 12 ie. a total of 48 refugees per council. That number of refugees may be considered manageable. But it is unlikely that refugees will be distributed in such an equitable manner. I doubt councils such as Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea will welcome refugees and Thurrock will probably be looking to accept 100 or more, most of them in the first year. Bearing in mind the problems Thurrock residents already face, such as 6,000 homeless. Do you accept that a soft heart needs to be balanced with a hard head and every effort should be made to avoid exacerbating the problem? Generosity and care for others are admiral qualities and easily dispensed when it is at the expense of someone else. It is as distressing for a Thurrock resident to be homeless as it is for a refugee from another country. Will you give assurance that no resident from Thurrock will suffer further hardship or deprivation as a consequence of this council's response to the issue of refugees coming into the borough? And they need to receive equal priority alongside those of refugees or for that matter economic migrants from the EU.

Mayor

Thank you Mr Perrin. Councillor Kent do you wish to answer that supplementary.

Councillor Kent

Thank you Madam Mayor. We are used to Mr Perrin coming month in month out but I think he really should learn to listen to the answer and not just read the supplementary question that he had prepared. I think I have been quite clear that it is very difficult to see how we could successfully simulate any refugees from Syria and I think the comment about hearts and heads is right we need to look at this with our responsibilities to residents of Thurrock. There is a motion on this issue later this evening and I am sure the debate there will be illuminated.

Mayor

Thank you Councillor Kent. Thank you Mr Perrin.