

Mayoral Minute - Support for Ukrainian Refugees

1.

Author: Philip Stone, General Manager

Authoriser: Peta Betts, Mayor

2. RECOMMENDATION

That Council seek informal expressions of interest from Edward River residents, industry groups and peak bodies via usual media channels to support Ukrainian refugees with job opportunities and accommodation and potentially instigate both a humanitarian and economic opportunity for our region

3. BACKGROUND

The war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on the people of Ukraine with an estimated 12 million fleeing their homes since the conflict began. About 6,000 Ukrainians have been granted humanitarian visas in Australia, allowing the refugees to work and study for up to three years.

At 11 May briefing for councillors, Mr Bill Hetherington, presented an idea to encourage Ukrainian refugees to be supported to move to the Southern Riverina region to experience the rural Australian lifestyle out of the cities and potentially resettle permanently into the region.

4. ISSUE/DISCUSSION

Benefits

Visible public support for refugees from Ukraine would be a worthwhile humanitarian activity, providing shelter and support to the refugees on a temporary basis. It may also be an opportunity for these families to settle in Australia and our community permanently, providing a strong message to other regions to undertake similar activities and demonstrate the charity and benevolence of all Australians.

Furthermore, there are examples where similar initiatives have resulted in improved economic activity and provide an exemplar of mutual benefit to both the refugees and the community.

One such example is the value of the Karen (south Myanmar) community in Nhill, north western Victoria. Since early 2010, approximately 160 Karen refugees have resettled in Nhill through a staged recruitment and resettlement process. The Karen community now comprises approximately 10% of the Nhill population, of which almost 40% are directly employed in Luv-a-Duck and affiliated companies. More than 70 Full Time positions have been added to the regional economy and the economic impact of this increased labour supply, is estimated to be \$41.5 million as at 2015*.

The wider social impacts of the resettlement of the Karen in Nhill has helped to:

- redress population decline for the township
- revitalise local services and attract increased government funding
- increase social capital across both communities*

(* information extracted from *Small towns, Big returns, 2015 - A joint Ames and Deloitte Access Economics Economics Report*)

Therefore, there will be benefits to supporting a call for Ukrainian refugees to be supported to move to our community. The Edward River Region is experiencing labour shortages and Council has signalled a desire to promote population growth, adding to the social and economic fabric of the region.

Challenges

There are many initiatives and programs supported by dozens of humanitarian refugee groups across Australia. There are also several government programs which provide visas and economic support to resettle refugees.

However, as outlined in the *Small towns, Big Towns* report, there are a number of success factors that will need consideration for an initiative like this.

1. Employment – jobs available for the new settlers
2. Strong leadership in the host community by local champions/ influencers
3. Host community prepared for the new settlers
4. Initial (short term) accommodation
5. Support for families (partners, children, elders)
6. Degree and complexity of ‘cultural adjustment’ on both sides considered and managed
7. Strong leadership in the resettling community
8. Potential settlers prepared for the new environment

Many of these factors are challenges already for Edward River Council. From economic data, there is low unemployment locally and labour shortages are evident in Deniliquin and surrounds.

Without a message to the community, it is uncertain whether there will be local champions or influencers available to provide touch points for the refugees on behalf of the community.

Accommodation is scarce in Deniliquin, which is a high risk to success. If the refugees have no place to live, then this initiative will likely fail

Cultural adjustment risk for Ukrainian refugees appears to be not as high as may be experienced by Asian or middle eastern refugees. As Ukraine is predominantly European/Slavic/christian culture - according to *Wikipedia* heavily influenced by the Ukrainian and Ruthenian Greek Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Church and traditions from Slavic mythology - it remains a highly traditional country, where the observance of certain customs and practices play a central role in its culture, such as Christmas and New Year's Eve. There are also many parallels between the Australian lifestyle and economic activities and Ukraine.

Nevertheless, there remains a number of challenges to overcome for this idea to become a reality.

It is therefore suggested that Council plays a leadership and facilitation role to encourage local champions and influencers in the community to progress a campaign to support, in the first instance, one or two families to come to our region.

5. STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Discussed above.

6. COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

1. A great place to live
 - 1.1 Our community has access to essential services
 - 1.2 Our community is safe, happy and healthy, both physically and mentally
 - 1.3 Our community and public spaces are accessible and inclusive and reflect our history, heritage and culture
5. A community working together to achieve its potential
 - 5.1 Our community is informed and engaged
 - 5.2 We collaborate and pursue partnerships that achieve great outcomes for our community
 - 5.3 Our local government is efficient, innovative and financially sustainable

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Nil

8. LEGISLATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Nil

9. ATTACHMENTS