

Briefing on Wiltshire and the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

Purpose of this briefing

To provide information on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme and an update on Wiltshire's participation in the scheme.

Background

Syrians are currently entering the UK through two main legal avenues – 1. claiming asylum once in the UK and 2. through two relocation programmes run in cooperation with the UNHCR – the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme and the Gateway Protection Programme.

1. Asylum

Asylum claims are processed within the UK, and whilst waiting for a decision, asylum seekers are dispersed away from London and the South East to cities across the UK. In the South West, Plymouth, Bristol, Gloucester and Swindon are designated Home Office dispersal areas and have Home Office, legal and voluntary sector infrastructure in place to support this. Whilst claims are being processed asylum seekers are forbidden from working, restricted to Home Office procured accommodation and receive reduced levels of benefits. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children become the responsibility of the relevant local authority.

If granted asylum (typically as a refugee or under Humanitarian Protection, for 5 years), then individuals are entitled to work, to claim mainstream benefits where eligible and to live where they wish. In due course, refugees or people with humanitarian protection are able to apply for settlement or UK citizenship.

From the beginning of the Syrian crisis in early 2011 to the first quarter of 2015, almost 4,200 Syrian refugees were granted asylum in the UK in the initial decision made on their application.

2. Relocation Programmes

A person must be in the UK to make an application for asylum for themselves and their dependents. However, the most vulnerable people may not be capable of undertaking the journey from Syria to the UK, or may have dependents that cannot make that journey. In recognition of this, the Home Office currently support two relocation schemes where asylum claims are processed in a third country.

The **Gateway Protection Programme** is a scheme operated in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and co-funded by the European Union (EU), offering a legal route for a quota of UNHCR-identified refugees to settle in the United Kingdom. Since its inception (2004), the programme has enjoyed broad support from the UK's main political parties. The Gateway Protection Programme initially operated a quota of 500 refugees per year, which was later increased to 750.

Under the Gateway Protection Programme and other resettlement schemes it is up to local authorities to approach the Home Office to ask for refugees to be resettled in their area. 18 councils mainly in the north of England receive these 'quota refugees'.

In January 2014 the UK Government announced that it would use its 'quota refugee' programme, the Gateway Protection Programme, to resettle refugees from Syria. The Government also announced that some more people from Syria may be given protection in the UK under a new **Syria Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme**. This scheme would be focused on the most vulnerable.

The Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme gives Syrian refugees a chance to be resettled in the UK. It focuses on transferring refugees from the region of Syria to the UK. The scheme targets the refugees "at greatest risk", where "evacuation from the region is the only option", according to the government. It says that particular attention is paid to survivors of torture and violence, the elderly, or women and children who need medical care. The scheme was launched after the UN refugee agency asked countries to take in 130,000 Syrian refugees above and beyond their ordinary asylum intake. The scheme has so far seen 216 people allowed to come to the UK.

Resettlement programmes such as the Gateway Protection Programme and the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme provide 12 months of funding from central government to support local authorities in the initial costs of bringing new people into their area and helping them to settle and build new lives. The funding covers health, education, accommodation and integration support. A Home Office case worker is also allocated. The resettled refugees are granted five years' Humanitarian Protection status, with all the rights and benefits that go with that status, including access to public funds, access to the labour market and the possibility of family reunion.

Latest Government Announcements and Related Campaigns

David Cameron announced on 7 September that the UK is to provide resettlement to 20,000 more Syrian refugees by 2020, in response to the crisis. The extra refugees will come from camps bordering Syria, and not from among people already in Europe. The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme will be used to achieve this, with the initial 12 months of funding support for local areas now coming from the international aid budget. Further details, including on possible funding after 12 months, are awaited and it is understood this is being considered as part of the spending review.

Voluntary sector organisations such as Citizens UK have launched a 'Home for Resettled Refugees Register' – the idea being that the more properties pledged on the Register, the more local areas will be able to fully participate in the Syrian VPR scheme. This asks private landlords to register property when they:

- own a family-sized rental property in the UK;

- would be prepared to offer it as a home for a Syrian refugee family if it is vacant when there is demand in your area;
- can offer a 3 year tenancy to enable the family to have some stability when they arrive;
- are able to rent the property for the Local Housing Allowance Rate.

Wiltshire's Response

Following the PM's statement, Wiltshire Council issued the following statement:

"In Wiltshire we will always protect the vulnerable and we want to offer support to help refugees. We have been monitoring the international situation whilst proactively planning both the short-term and long-term actions for us to provide help.

"We have been examining the implications for Wiltshire, including the impact upon health, housing, education and the economy and will work closely with our partners to ensure we are fully prepared to welcome refugees.

"We will work with the Government to play our part, ensuring that any refugees who come to Wiltshire are given the support they need to become self-sufficient. We want to thank all those people from our communities who have been doing what they can to offer help – we would urge them to get in touch with international aid organisations such as the Red Cross, Unicef and Oxfam"

Angus Macpherson, Police and Crime Commissioner said:

"I think we all have a human duty to do what we can to alleviate the suffering by looking after those in such urgent need. Working on the basis that 'many hands make light work', I hope that all of us in Wiltshire and Swindon will seek to do something for these poor families and orphaned children."

Update following Wiltshire Public Service Board meeting

The Wiltshire Public Service Board met on 16 September and agreed to provide strategic oversight for those arriving in Wiltshire under the VPR scheme, linking with existing partnership boards where appropriate.

Representatives from the NHS, DWP and Wiltshire Police will sit on an operational Refugee Programme Board with Wiltshire Council representatives (with a meeting scheduled for 22 September) to identify appropriate capacity and support work underway; and to work with faith groups and the voluntary and community sector (including any existing Syrian communities) as appropriate.

Members of the public will be asked to contact Wiltshire Council to help identify suitable self-contained housing and willing participants for fostering schemes for unaccompanied children.

A further update will be provided at full council.

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