Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme - Briefing

In his statement to the House of Commons in September 2015, the Prime Minister announced that Britain should resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over the rest of the Parliament. These refugees will be taken from the camps in the countries neighbouring Syria. The UK has been involved in an existing scheme to resettle Syrian refugees for a couple of years. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will continue to refer people to the scheme. The UK sets the criteria. It currently prioritises those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin: women, children and young people at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence, refugees with legal and/or physical protection needs; refugees with medical needs or disabilities; persons at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; and refugees with family links in resettlement countries.

The UNHCR conducts a series of checks including a robust identification process prior to referring a refugee to the UK scheme. Referrals are then further screened and considered by the Home Office for suitability for entry to the UK. The Home Office checks that they meet eligibility criteria and carries out medical and security checks.

By the time a UNHCR referred refugee arrives in the UK they have been through a thorough two-stage vetting process to ensure government knows who is entering the country. This includes the taking of biometrics, documentary evidence and interviews. Security is also regarded as a continual process that does not stop as soon as a refugee arrives in the UK.

What this means in practice

Local authorities can choose whether to participate in the scheme. Participating Local Authorities pass offers of suitable accommodation to the Home Office who then match available accommodation to a refugee family. Case information is exchanged including details of family make up, age and specific needs. The Local Authority is asked to confirm whether it can accommodate and support those specific cases, having consulted key local agencies.

On accepting to arrange resettlement, local authorities then need to co-ordinate activity to ensure that provision and support needed under the terms of the scheme is available and ready to access. Refugees will be granted a five year humanitarian protection visa. Refugees will have a National Insurance number, access to UK benefits and the right to work. Housing benefit will fund accommodation costs initially.
We would expect that in vast majority of case refugees will want to stay in the area of the UK in which they have been resettled. However refugees are free to move elsewhere in the UK if they choose. If a refugee and their family wish to move to another part of the UK after their initial arrival, under the terms of the scheme, they will no longer be entitled to the accommodation that had been allocated and they will no longer have resettlement support in the authority in which they were first placed. The scheme will continue to run alongside other resettlement schemes and other asylum procedures.

The role of Local Authorities in Devon

The County Council and District Councils across Devon are committed to working together to provide a local response to the scheme. Responsibilities lie in different places in two-tier areas like Devon (e.g. accommodation sits with District Councils; education and social care with the County Council, healthcare with the NHS). This needs careful coordination in order to deliver the scheme.

The scheme depends on finding suitable accommodation that is aligned to the current requirements of local housing authorities and that can be paid for initially through existing housing benefit allocation. The scheme sets out to resettle refugees not simply to shelter them. Accommodation must be suitable for families to live safe, independent and productive lives, just as local authorities would aim to provide for any homeless family.

Clearly housing costs and availability varies considerably across the County and whilst there is support in most parts of the County to support resettlement, this has to be aligned to affordable and available accommodation. Whilst some very rural parts of Devon may provide suitable accommodation opportunities, this needs to be balanced with meeting the anticipated wider needs of resettled refugees, i.e. access to schools, healthcare, cultural, religious and support networks as required alongside opportunities for employment.

The County Council recognises that expertise of supporting refugees (alongside those seeking asylum and dealing with wider migration issues) largely sits in other organisations, largely within the voluntary and community sector. It is therefore the intention to Refugee Support Devon organisations to deliver much of the Syrian Scheme on behalf of the wider partnership. Refugee Support Devon will be playing a leading and significant part in this, but it is anticipated that other groups may also be able to take a role at a community level as resettlement develops across the County.

District Councils are assessing a number of options for accommodation. Should any of these be suitable and available the County Council on behalf of wider partners will be making a formal offer to the Home Office to initiate resettlement of Syrian families.

Until families have begun to be safely and successfully resettled, we do not intend to make public announcements with regards to the arrival date or destination of refugee families.