



*Helping the South East Monitor Trends, Address Challenges,
Maximise Opportunities and Inform National Policy*

Consultation on the future of VPRS - South East Local Authority contribution

Brief

To consult with local authority colleagues in the South East and feedback collective responses to the Home Office questionnaire regarding the future of UK resettlement schemes. This contribution from the South East feeds into the national consultation overseen by the Home Office, DfID and MHCLG which will be used to advise ministers as to the future of the VPRS post 2020.

Following a meeting with the Home Office and the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) Head of Partnership, it was agreed that local authority officers would not be required to answer questions relating to the numbers of resettlement, for this reason these questions have been removed from this report.

Methodology

Upon receipt, the Home Office consultation questionnaire was circulated to all South East local authority lead officers for the Refugee Vulnerable Persons Scheme requesting written responses. In addition authorities were offered the opportunity to participate in focus groups on the consultation, which proved an effective means of distilling key issues and engaging time pressed authorities. Written responses were received from 6 authorities with salient points incorporated into the interview guide as prompts for the focus groups. Three focus groups each comprised of 6 authorities were held simultaneously, with the facilitators following the same interview guide (see annex A). In total 19 authorities comprised of 5 top tier authorities, 6 unitary authorities and 8 districts participated in the consultation, totaling 26% of authorities in the South East. However, once it is taken into account that four of the counties which took part lead on the VPRS for their districts also, this means that this consultation actually reached 81% of all authorities participating on the VPRS, and 50% of the authorities not participating.

Results

- 1. In your view, what do you think the objectives of a future resettlement scheme should be?**

Respondents did not feel that they were in a position to input into the wider political policy objectives for future resettlement, other than maintaining the focus on the most vulnerable.

However, there were many lessons learnt from the scheme which the authorities felt should be at the core of any future resettlement implementation such as: sustained support for ESOL, with particular focus on pre-entry or assistance to those who are illiterate; better joined up services and coordination between government departments at central and local level to facilitate coordinated working, such as access to interpreters; increased efforts on pathways to employment and recognition that the current funding model's assumption that people would be able to access the work force after Year 1, was in practice the exception, and not the rule. The impact of the benefit cap on vulnerable refugees many of whom will have little genuine prospect of accessing work in the first year, was frequently referenced as an example of where future programmes should consider the implications of domestic policies and where appropriate seek to make reasonable adjustments to allow for the particular circumstances of refugees.

Respondents felt that local authorities have stepped up in responding to a global crisis and there was a general willingness to be part of future programmes.

2. Looking at our current schemes, what do you think are the main strengths?

New partnerships created both within authorities, but also externally with community groups, faith based groups, greater working with SESPM and the Home Office, were all celebrated as being major strengths to the scheme. It was mentioned that the scheme fosters working outside of traditional local authority models and that this has opened up opportunities not just reserved to the VPRS. The level of financial support and flexibility of funding were both significant strengths, though it was acknowledged that authorities unable to take enough families to benefit from an economy of scale faced a harder position, (more information on funding is given under question 10). The services and coordination role provided by SESPM were mentioned (without prompt) as being assets to the scheme in 4/6 of the written responses and in every focus group. Authorities also appreciated the open communication channels with the resettlement team within the Home Office and their assistance with exceptional cases funding.

3. Looking at our current schemes, what do you think are the main areas for improvement?

Authorities have found that the expectation that the need for intensive support would diminish after year 1 is not proving to be the case for a variety of reasons. Limited local availability for pre-entry level ESOL or assistance for those who are illiterate in their native language, have proved particularly difficult and have meant that pathways to employment are limited. This is one area where it was wondered whether additional funding could be provided as volunteer or training opportunities often rest of the pre-acquisition of English, this means that many of the trainings offered by the DWP are not suitable for those on the VPRS and bespoke

trainings such as those offered by CONCEPT training need to be contracted in. Similarly within education, young people on the VPRS can find themselves unable to obtain the kind of educational opportunities they need. 14 to 16 year olds, who sit GCSEs with little English and years of interrupted schooling, are often unable to progress to A'levels due to insufficient grades, and people in their early 20s can find there is little support available for them from further education colleges due to cuts in adult education budgets.

Misinformation is a wide scale problem faced by all authorities as VPRS families compare stories or pass on rumours on social media such as Facebook or WhastsApp. Sadly, in some cases this has lead to refusal to participate on ESOL or employment training activities as rumours have been circulated that this is not necessary. Whilst it was acknowledged that there is little which can be done to stem misinformation, it was wondered whether there might be more which could be done to improve the information given to families prior to arrival in country. One authority had managed to hold a video conference with a family prior to arrival which proved highly useful. Some authorities are charging their training providers with the responsibility of correcting misinformation as part of their regular courses as the families might be more likely to believe the third party training provider rather than their authority.

The Benefit Cap and Universal Credit were cited by all authorities as being key obstacles to the VPRS with two focus groups saying that case worker support time spent on helping families' benefits had gone up four fold as UC has been rolled out. Whilst authorities understood that refugees could not be exempt from the cap, it was wondered whether a temporary exemption could be allowed in order for there to be some time for refugees to learn English.

There were also concerns about the long term sustainability of the staffing for this scheme and the need to strengthen institutional knowledge. Due to the nature of how the programme began, in many localities staffing structures are transitory with people being seconded into place or who manage the scheme as an ad on to their existing role. The same holds for local contacts within DWP or the CCG, meaning that the scheme is vulnerable to the loss of key expertise. However, whereas authorities have the statement of requirements outlining their responsibilities, there is no comparable document for the statutory services, meaning that authorities can have to start over again developing contacts afresh. It was suggested that in order to ensure joined up working across departments, in addition to the statement of requirements, a similar formalization of roles be created for the statutory services that also collaborate on this scheme. This would help to ensure some sustainability to the structures in place. Authorities felt that they had learned a great deal as to the difficulties faced by many migrants over bureaucratic integration issues, such as opening a bank account, registering with statutory services and obtaining translating services. Whilst these aspects have been challenging on the VPRS, authorities felt that if these issues are identified and addressed at local and central level this could become a strength of the programme.

6. Should community sponsorship contribute to our resettlement targets, or be additional to them?

This question prompted mixed responses but all with similar underlying motivations. It was felt that there is the possibility to bring more people in on the scheme if the targets were separate however it was also felt that some acknowledgement needs to be made of the significant role undertaken by local authorities in facilitating and underwriting the risk involved in community sponsorship. More information is given on community sponsorship under questions 12 and 13.

7. Should we maintain our focus on the most vulnerable refugees, as determined by UNHCR's seven vulnerability criteria?

There was widespread support for the continuation of vulnerability being key criteria and for continuing to use the UNHCRs criteria as they are tried and tested. One respondent commented that sometimes they wondered how consistently UNHCR criteria was applied, but it was also acknowledged that not all vulnerabilities are immediately apparent, such as PTSD. The only hesitation regarding continuing to work with this cohort concerns housing prices in the south east, as if a family's vulnerability is so severe that they are unable to work, will they be able to afford to stay in the South East after the end of the programme.

8. Are there other criteria we should consider?

There was no consensus on additional criteria. One query was whether the UK should focus on taking those with particularly severe medical or social issues in order to show that the UK's international contribution was taking the most vulnerable rather than taking internationally competitive numbers. Another suggestion from one authority was that the scheme could be extended to include a category to accommodate those with skill sets which would enable them to integrate more easily into the UK, thus helping to facilitate social bridges and facilitating redevelopment if the family return to Syria in future. One other suggestion was that UNHCR Family Reunification be reclassified to Family Links as the name can unintentionally raises expectation.

9. How can we best enable the integration of resettled refugees? Please give any suggestions or examples of innovative or creative solutions for resettlement delivery.

The following suggestions were given as to key facilitators of integration

- The role of the voluntary and community sector was agreed by all to be fundamental to the successful integration outcomes. This can be facilitated in a number of ways, some authorities have a designated community liaison officer whereas others include volunteer groups within their steering groups. Other authorities pay for DBS checks for volunteer ESOL providers who teach in the homes of the VPRS families.
- Ensuring that families can learn English is essential as this is a key determiner of integration.

- Several authorities mentioned working with schools as assisting with integration both in terms of helping build the capacity of teachers to teach VPRS children and also in terms of giving talks in schools to reduce stigma of refugees.
- One authority wondered whether the local authority might try and facilitate apprenticeships in areas where there is a known local skills shortage such as the care industry.
- Identifying, addressing and overcoming bureaucratic barriers to integration such as ensuring continued access to interpreters at meetings with GPs, DWP and hospitals.

10. What are your views on the current levels of funding provided to local authorities? In your experience, how is the years 2-5 funding used?

The level of financial support and flexibility of funding were both significant strengths to the programme. However it was acknowledged that the funding was designed to match an anticipated reduction in the needs of the families which in reality is not diminishing at the same rate. Most authorities were using years 2-5 funding for ESOL, discretionary housing payments, case workers and efforts to move families towards employment.

- ESOL requirements are still high for a variety of reasons including a greater number of pre-entry and illiterate people coming on the scheme than anticipated and also partly due to the difficulty in providing suitable ESOL locally.
- The ability to use the tariff for discretionary housing payment is essential to the participation of authorities in the South East of England where rent costs tend to be higher. Whilst the arrangement currently works well some authorities wondered if this arrangement could be formalized more officially so as to calm the fears of authorities who are worried about future auditing.
- Case worker time remains high partly due to increasingly amounts of time spent working on issues surrounding benefits. However, authorities are also conscious that they do not wish to develop a culture of dependency with the families.
- Many authorities are now focusing efforts and funding on getting their authorities on pathways to employment, some are contracting CONCEPT training, others have been able to find volunteering opportunities.

11. How far do you feel that local support for resettlement rests on the initial association to the conflict in Syria?

Most authorities felt that the conflict in Syria had largely fallen from the headlines whilst other issues such as rising numbers of street homeless was more in the public's mind. This being said, a number of authorities felt that the community and voluntary groups engaged on the scheme were just as motivated as they had been initially, and in some places a snowball effect has taken place as new volunteers are recruited bringing fresh vigor to the scheme.

12. How can UK government help to create the conditions that will maintain support for resettlement?

One authority has worked with the local media in order to keep the VPRS scheme current in the minds of local constituents who have taken pride in the work their authority is doing. One authority suggested that it would help if the central government were more public about the success of the programme and came out more publically in support like it did at the beginning of the scheme which would help local government to persuade public and political leaders locally.

13. What role should Community sponsorship play in the delivery of resettlement? & 14. How could the existing community sponsorship scheme be improved?

One authority wondered whether community sponsorship could take people of slightly less vulnerable criteria and thus increase the chances of the sponsorship being successful and therefore less of a potential risk to authorities. Several authorities felt that if community sponsorship fails and falls back upon local authority there needs to be some kind of recognition of the local authority which has been involved and clarification on the level of financial remuneration. Consequently several authorities felt that within their locality the best use of community support is to get behind the existing authority led VPRS scheme rather than creating a parallel programme.

15. Should we continue with the current model of a variety of schemes with a range of criteria, or move to a single more flexible, more global resettlement scheme?

Within the current climate of Brexit and increasing numbers of street homeless authorities felt that authorities would likely be able to 'sell' continued resettlement best under the auspice of supporting the most vulnerable refugees from Syria, even though several officers working on the scheme disliked the 'two tier' system for refugees being created.

16. What should the key considerations be for our international delivery, to ensure the greatest levels of access to our scheme?

Several authorities on the written responses felt that this was not an area they could comment on.

One authority queried whether the UNHCR could provide feedback on family reunification requests more regularly as this is a source of concern for family members in the UK.