

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme

Background

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011, at least 6.5 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes. Of these, more than 3 million have taken refuge in neighbouring countries: Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. In Lebanon this equates to roughly a quarter of the population. These countries are struggling to cope. Iraq is no longer safe, and Syrians are among those attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach safety in Europe.

The Syrian VPR scheme

In January 2014 the Home Secretary made a statement to parliament announcing the Government's intention to relocate some of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees. As the first refugees arrived on 25th March, James Brokenshire, at the time Minister for Security and Immigration at the Home Office, made a speech in Parliament spelling out how the scheme would work:

'Those admitted under the VPR scheme will be granted five years' humanitarian protection 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. We believe that the VPR scheme will make a real difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable Syrians displaced by the conflict by giving them protection and support in the UK.'

Cross-party support

All parties recognise the terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention and support resettling refugees. The Home Secretary Theresa May supports Syrian resettlement in the tradition of the UK 'helping those who need it the most', and David Cameron has described the current situation as the 'greatest refugee crisis of our time'. (There are

currently almost 60 million displaced people in the world, more than at any time in recorded history.) Politicians of all parties are backing the VPR scheme in their local areas, for example the Leader of Kingston Borough Council, Kevin Davis (Conservative), who is an enthusiastic supporter.

How it works

The scheme prioritises survivors of torture and violence, women and children at risk and those in need of medical care. Individuals identified by the UNHCR are allowed to bring their immediate family with them: one spouse/partner and their under-18 dependent children (generally 4-6 people). Medical reports and immigration checks are carried out before visas are granted and those with a criminal past or links to war crimes or extremism are excluded. Local authorities discuss with the Home Office how many families they can take and make sure the individual needs of refugees can be covered.

How well is the scheme working?

In authorities where the VPR scheme has been implemented it is reported to be working well and local authorities have found the funding to be adequate. It is important to remember that while one person per family group will need specific and ongoing support, other family members will be working and supporting the local economy.

Syrians have been keen to integrate and become economically independent as soon as possible. Many are likely to have held professional and skilled jobs. We need to avoid seeing refugees as a burden: they contribute to and enrich their communities.

It is significant that many in the Jewish community are supporting the scheme,

drawing parallels with their own experiences in World War II. Rabbi Danny Rich says:

'[This] isn't an open-door immigration policy, but it is about reviving the proud British tradition of offering shelter and hope to those who are in dire need. We should look back to acts like the Kindertransport programme to give politicians the courage and support to do more now.'

Funding

Central Government will meet costs of arrivals' orientation, support, health, education, housing and adult English tuition (ESOL) for one year. After this they will be eligible for refugee rights and benefits (see James Brokenshire's speech above).

Local and specialist support

There is strong support from a wide variety of faith groups and other organisations, including local Amnesty groups, and members of the community are identifying areas where they can offer practical help, such as interpreting, teaching English to adults and offering ongoing support to families. We could also call on specialist organisations such as the Refugee Council.

Housing

Undoubtedly the biggest challenge will be finding housing. However, all authorities signing up to the scheme have housing shortages to a greater or lesser extent and have identified a variety of options. These include renting from private landlords, university accommodation, unoccupied housing association homes and adapting unused buildings, for which there is government funding available. It is important that families are not scattered too widely across the county, that they have access to transport networks and, ideally, places of worship.

What is already happening in Hertfordshire?

St Albans City and District Council have adopted a motion put forward by Simon

Grover, a Green Party Councillor, to participate in the VPR scheme. This has been referred to their Scrutiny Committee and an officer has been asked to contact the housing department and those of other councils to see if they will also participate.

As far as I know none have responded so far. St Albans District Council is currently seeking funding to adapt an unused building. At county level it has been confirmed that adult and children's social care will provide support and that the county would support the voluntary and community sector, while not providing housing from their own stock.

We are asking our District Councillors to propose a motion requesting their respective councils to sign up to support the scheme. We can then begin to work with councillors to identify housing and begin putting together support.

Further information: info@citizensuk.org (this organisation is involved in co-ordinating the scheme);
the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in London to discuss how resettlement works gbrlo@unhcr.org;
SVPRScheme@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk