

Local Government Association briefing, Westminster Hall debate, the resettlement of Syrian Refugees

27 January 2016



Key messages

Supporting refugees

- Local authorities are the primary point of engagement for identifying where refugees are to be resettled. Councils have an excellent track record in supporting refugee children and their families over many years, and they have so far worked hard to ensure Syrian refugees are settled safely in the UK.
- Local authorities and the Local Government Association (LGA) will continue to work with central government on the future of the resettlement programme in 2016 and beyond. In the future a regional approach to resettling refugees, rather than a case-by-case model controlled centrally, would be more effective in utilising the funding for local authorities to support resettlement. As well as a more effective use of resources, regional coordination can help facilitate the exchange of good practice both within the UK and internationally, particularly around supporting integration and helping people into employment.
- The LGA is working alongside the Government, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) to ensure individual needs are assessed so that the resettlement offers match people's requirements, including for any care and health needs and for school places. Local authorities also work with partner organisations in the health sector to help those who will need ongoing support to cope with injuries, disabilities and any trauma they have experienced; and with local businesses, faith, community and voluntary sector leaders to support access to employment and integration into new communities.
- We are supporting councils and central government through the Asylum, Refugee and Migration Task Group. This Group is led by Councillors and includes representation from regional partners across the UK. This Group has been involved in discussions with Government on how to work together to find sustainable solutions that minimise the pressures on local authorities, communities and vulnerable individuals. The LGA is also funding regional events and online resources to support local government and their partners.
- Councils have a strong track record of supporting vulnerable children, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and stand ready to provide care and support to those who need it. However, an additional 3,000 unaccompanied asylum seeking children would more than double the number currently in local authority care in England, and represent an increase in the total population of looked after children which would usually take more than three years. It is therefore vital that any increased resettlement programme is planned in full partnership with councils across the country to ensure that services are able to cope with this additional demand.

Briefing

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The Immigration Bill

- Local authorities support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and failed asylum seeking families or individuals may also be supported if they have children or social care needs. The current Immigration Bill makes a number of proposals to the law which will change the process by which local authorities provide support to these individuals. We have been working closely with Government and parliamentarians to help ensure that the proposed changes support councils in their work.
- Of particular note in terms of resettling people, Clause 42 of the Immigration Bill seeks to confer powers for the Secretary of State to compel local authorities to take responsibility for unaccompanied minors who arrive elsewhere in the UK, without providing clarity on how their support needs will be funded. The need for this is questionable as local authorities have a strong track record of supporting each other in settling refugees, and councils across the country stand ready to help ease the burden on port authorities and other areas which have long suffered significant resource pressures through their work with unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
- If powers to direct local authorities to take legal responsibility for additional children and young people are to be enacted, they must be recognised as a new burden and funded accordingly. No council should be made to choose between supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children and providing vital services for their local community.

Further information

Resettling Syrian refugees from 2016 onwards

The LGA is working with Government and other national partners to develop the existing programme for settling refugees. This would work along the following lines:

- **Regional coordination:** there will be one point of contact for placing new arrivals, liaising with local authorities and central government and building local and regional arrangements to support resettlement.
- **A 'transition' phase** would look at how best to run a scheme in a way that allows for significant numbers of refugees to be resettled. This will both ensure any barriers or problems are resolved prior to rolling out the approach across the UK and allow for innovative practice to be captured and shared.
- **Funding:** regions need be funded at a sufficient level to deliver on this model. This means funding both strategic and operational co-ordination functions that can both match refugees to the places available in the region and continue to support authorities and partners in each region in resettling refugees. This will also ensure that existing resources can continue to support local authority engagement in other Government schemes such as the dispersal of adult and families, and potentially asylum seeking children.
- **Flexible approach:** Arrangements would need to be flexible enough to ensure local dynamics and existing strategic partnership structures are taken into account. Regions will need to identify the model that works best for them. Existing local authority led Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships (RMSPs) are already engaged with local authorities in their regions, with arrangements well developed in many areas, and several regions ready to become transition areas (subject to funding).

The role of the LGA

The LGA has been supporting councils in their work resettling refugees. This includes:

- Supporting the councillor-led LGA Asylum, Refugee and Migration Task Group. This Group is made up of regional member and Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships, which cover all of the English regions, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and focuses upon the issues around the asylum, refugee and migration agenda from a local government perspective. The LGA, via the Task Group, has been involved in discussions with Government and with regions for a long period of time on how to work together to find sustainable solutions that minimise the pressures on local authorities, local communities and vulnerable individuals.
- As well as working on how the scheme for settling refugees will be funded, we are also working with central government and partner organisations to clarify when this initial short term phase that secured the arrival of a thousand refugees before Christmas 2015 will move to the subsequent longer term phase, and what the second phase of the scheme will look like in practice. A regionally coordinated programme can meet the needs of more people, whilst minimising the impact on communities.
- The LGA is sharing good practice through the Asylum, Refugee and Migration Task Group and its online communications hubs such as our refugee resource on the LGA website and the Knowledge Hub. The LGA has funded regional events on the challenges faced; has set up a 'Knowledge Hub' to share good practice; and has commissioned a 'how to' resource. We also are working with Government to investigate how regions can access the offers made via business and individuals via the 'community sponsorship' route, and in turn share them with local authorities.

For further information please visit the LGA's online resources on Syrian resettlement which includes a Question and Answers page and key information on the programme and the role of local government.ⁱ

Support for unaccompanied Syrian refugee children

Children may find themselves alone for a number of reasons, and not all children currently presenting as unaccompanied will be orphans. Some will have been separated from family members during long and arduous journeys, others may have been left with people smugglers or traffickers by desperate parents seeking safety for their children.

As of 31 March 2015, councils were looking after 2,630 unaccompanied asylum seeking children. This figure has already increased significantly following the pressures experienced over the summer of 2015, with Kent alone seeing their numbers increase from 365 unaccompanied asylum seeking children in March to over 1,000 by December, and the LGA has long argued that a properly funded national system is vital to ensure a robust response to these pressures. Councils in England currently look after 69,540 children who are unable to live with their birth parents, a figure that has increased by just under 2,500 over the past three years. In 2015, the Fostering Network estimated a shortfall of 8,000 foster carers to fully meet the needs of looked after children already in local authority care.

Councils have a strong track record of supporting vulnerable children, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and stand ready to provide care and support to those who need it. Nevertheless, an additional 3,000 unaccompanied asylum seeking children would more than double the number currently in local authority care in England, and represent an increase in the total population of looked after children which would usually take more than three years. It is therefore vital that any increased resettlement programme is planned in full partnership with councils across the country to ensure that services are able to cope with this additional demand. For such a programme to be successful, the Government would need to include:

- Full co-operation with the UNHCR, to ensure that resettlement is in children's best interests and would not inadvertently hamper efforts towards family reunification.
- A national system to ensure that the burden is spread fairly between local authorities, with costs fully funded to ensure that no local authority is forced to choose between providing services for their local community and supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
- A phased approach to ensure that sufficient care placements are available to meet the specific needs of these children and young people, and additional resources made available to allow councils to boost their existing provision.
- Consultation with councils to ensure there is sufficient capacity and funding to support vulnerable children and families already part of existing schemes for resettling refugees and asylum seeking children, identifying and sharing good practice.

The Immigration Bill

Those who claim asylum after they arrive in the UK go through a different process to those settled under the resettlement scheme and in general, are not directly supported by local authorities. Councils do however provide support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and failed asylum seeking families or individuals may also be supported if they have children or social care needs.

The current Immigration Bill makes a number of proposed changes to the law which will alter the process for local authority support of these asylum seekers (the LGA's briefings on the Bill are available online).ⁱⁱ We have been working closely with Government and parliamentarians to help ensure that the proposed changes support councils in their work. Councils will need to manage existing schemes for resettling refugees, including Syrian resettlement, dispersing increasing numbers of asylum seekers, supporting asylum seeking children and changes resulting from the Immigration Bill.

Clauses 39-42, Transfer of responsibility for relevant children

Local authorities have a strong track record of supporting each other in settling asylum seekers and refugees, and councils across the country stand ready to help ease the burden on port authorities and other areas which have long suffered significant resource pressures through their work with unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

The Immigration Bill introduces a new process for transferring legal responsibility for unaccompanied asylum seeking children between local authorities. Under current legislation, unaccompanied children arriving in the UK remain the legal responsibility of the local authority at which they first present. This has historically placed an unfair burden on a small number of councils, primarily (but not exclusively) port authorities, which retain legal and financial responsibility for children even if they are placed in another local authority area. The existing system also introduces additional costs to the entry authority, which is required to monitor the quality of these distant placements, and additional risk in terms of the distance between the young person and their legal guardians.

The current system of funding for unaccompanied minors is recognised as insufficient to cover council costs, and the Home Office has subsequently agreed to increase the rates paid to councils taking responsibility for children from Kent County Council if they accept them before the end of this financial year. If these current arrangements for the dispersal of children from Kent are to be expanded into a national scheme, it must be fully funded to enable councils who have experienced a reduction in their resources to offer support to these children.

We are concerned that this provision seeks to confer powers for the Secretary of State to

compel local authorities to accept the transfer of children from other areas, with no clarity as to how their long-term support needs will be funded. If powers to direct local authorities to take legal responsibility for additional children and young people are to be enacted, they must be recognised as a new burden and funded accordingly. No council should be made to choose between supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children and providing vital services for their local community.

The current ad hoc arrangement of local authorities volunteering to take on additional burdens in support of areas seeing high numbers is unlikely to work at the scale needed, particularly as numbers also are increasing across the country. We very much wish to continue to work with central government to agree a national, voluntary and sustainable rota-based system as soon as possible that meets both the needs of authorities and young people and has an equitable distribution of risk and funding.

ⁱ Please visit: <http://www.local.gov.uk/refugees>

ⁱⁱ The LGA's parliamentary briefings on the Immigration Bill are available at:
http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/briefings-and-responses/-/journal_content/56/10180/7522212/ARTICLE