

**HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT IN COUNTY
DURHAM**

AN EVALUATION

AUGUST 2017

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SECTION ONE

THE SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME - BACKGROUND

The Refugee Crisis in Syria

- 1 In July 2013 the United Nations (UN) stopped counting the death toll in Syria due to a lack of confidence in its own data. In mid-2015 it estimated that over 250,000 people had been killed and well over a million injured since the conflict in Syria began in 2011.¹ Since then estimates of the death toll have varied.
- 2 In February 2016 the Syrian Centre for Policy Research claimed the figure was as high as 470,000.² In April 2016 the UN special envoy in Syria put the figure around 400,000.³
- 3 In December 2016, the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), concluded there are:
 - (a) 13.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, of which 5.8 million are children.
 - (b) 6.3 million Syrians who are internally displaced, of which 2.4 million are children.
 - (c) 4.9 million in hard-to-reach and besieged areas, of which 1.2 million are children.⁴
- 4 Since it began in 2011 the civil war in Syria has caused mass movement of Syrians, both within Syria and to neighbouring countries. Syrians now make up the largest refugee population in the world, with almost five million having fled to neighbouring countries to escape the devastation. Many countries currently hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees are developing countries and cannot afford to support such large numbers. As a result, the UN estimates that one in ten Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa region needs to be resettled elsewhere.

The UK Response

- 5 At the start of the Syrian crisis, government policy was to be generous with humanitarian aid to Syria's neighbours rather than to accept fleeing Syrians for resettlement in the UK. However, in January 2014, the UK government announced that it would establish a Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme to allow selected refugees to resettle in the UK.
- 6 On 7 September 2015, in response to the spiralling humanitarian crisis in the region, the government announced the programme would be expanded to

¹ UN press release, Alarmed by Continuing Syria Crisis, Security Council Affirms Its Support for Special Envoy's Approach in Moving Political Solution Forward, 17 August 2015

² Syrian Centre for Policy Research, Confronting fragmentation, February 2016

³ 'UN Envoy Revises Syria Death Toll to 400,000', Foreign Policy, 22 April 2016

⁴ UNOCHA, 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview, December 2016

resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in the UK by May 2020. The government later added a milestone to resettle 1,000 Syrian refugees before Christmas 2015.

The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme

- 7 The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) gives priority to the most vulnerable, including children and orphans. Refugees are resettled from border camps and nations neighbouring Syria to avoid refugees being encouraged to make dangerous journeys to central Europe; to ensure that the most vulnerable can be prioritised; and to help break the business models of criminal gangs preying on human misery.
- 8 In expanding the programme, its eligibility criteria were extended to include the seven vulnerability criteria recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR):
 - (a) Legal and or physical protection needs.
 - (b) Survivors of torture and/or violence.
 - (c) Medical needs.
 - (d) Women and girls at risk.
 - (e) Family reunification.
 - (f) Children and adolescents at risk.
 - (g) Lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions.
- 9 The programme is the joint responsibility of the Home Office, the Department for International Development and the Department for Communities and Local Government. A joint programme team has been established within the Home Office to manage the scheme.
- 10 Syrians supported under the programme were initially granted five years humanitarian protection status upon arrival in the UK, with permission to work and access public funds. In March 2017 the Home Secretary announced that from 1 July 2017 all those admitted to the UK under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (VPRP) would be granted refugee status. Syrians already resettled in the UK are able to apply for refugee status.
- 11 This move acknowledged that humanitarian protection status does not carry the same entitlements as refugee status, such as swifter access to student support for those in higher education and the internationally recognised refugee travel document. The duration of leave to remain in the UK will stay the same at five years and is not affected by the status change.
- 12 Refugees are able to choose where they wish to live in the UK, following their initial settlement into a location, although they may not receive resettlement support if they move to another local authority area.
- 13 Individuals resettled are eligible to apply for family reunion with immediate family members, in accordance with the immigration rules. The government has indicated that at the end of the five years resettled refugees will be eligible to apply for permanent settlement in the UK.

- 14 A refugee's resettlement costs are fully funded by central government using the overseas aid budget during the first 12 months. Resources are allocated on a tariff basis, with additional costs covered under an exceptional costs fund. The government subsequently committed £129 million to assist with local authority costs over years 2-5 of the scheme. This is also assigned on a tariff basis over four years, tapering from £5,000 per person in the second year in the UK, to £1,000 per person in year five.
- 15 Local authorities have a central role in the resettlement of refugees. For authorities supporting the scheme, a statement of outcomes specifies responsibilities during a refugee's first year in the UK. This stipulates a range of services for resettled refugees, including a meet-and-greet service at the airport, provision of furnished accommodation and assistance in accessing welfare benefits, education, employment and other integration services in accordance with a personalised support plan for the first 12 months.
- 16 Years 2-5 funding is intended as a contribution towards costs incurred in supporting a refugee's continued participation in the programme. To maximise flexibility, it is for local authorities to determine the best use of funding claimed to support refugees on their journey towards integration and self-sufficiency. Support may include, but is not limited to, ongoing integration into communities; social care costs for adults and children; additional educational support; supporting refugees into employment; formal or informal language training etc.
- 17 On 3 July 2017, the Home Secretary announced that the scheme would be extended to enable UNHCR to refer the most vulnerable refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region who have fled the Syrian conflict, regardless of nationality. Non-Syrian nationals will be eligible for the scheme if they fled the Syrian conflict and are genuine refugees who cannot return in safety to their country of origin. The policy change follows advice from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) who identified that a diversified resettlement scheme was required to address the needs of the refugee population in the region.
- 18 It is not expected that the change will significantly affect the delivery of the scheme at a local level. The overall number of vulnerable people the UK aims to resettle will remain the same and the same tariff will be paid to local authorities supporting those resettled, regardless of nationality.
- 19 The approach will continue to take refugees from the regions around Syria, specifically Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), discouraging the hazardous journey to Europe which has tragically cost so many lives.
- 20 In July 2016 the government launched a "community sponsorship" initiative to encourage and facilitate the direct resettlement of refugees by individuals, charities, faith groups and businesses, in addition to the support offered by local authorities.

- 21 Supporting a vulnerable resettled family is a significant responsibility and the Home Office will approve every sponsor. The approval process requires local authority consent for a prospective sponsor to operate as a community sponsor in the area. The approval process is designed to establish that the prospective sponsor:
- (a) has sufficient resources (housing, financial and personnel) to support a resettled family;
 - (b) has a credible plan for supporting a resettled family, backed by relevant experience; and
 - (c) does not present a risk to the resettled family.
- 22 Community sponsors will be allocated a family fleeing conflict and it will be the sponsor's responsibility to support the resettled family from the moment of arrival in the UK, including meeting the family at the airport; providing a welcome and cultural orientation; providing housing; supporting access to medical and social services; English language tuition; and support towards employment and self-sufficiency. The formal responsibility to support the resettled family will last for one year, with the exception of housing, for which the responsibility lasts for two years. Sponsors may choose to provide support beyond this, according to the needs of the resettled family.
- 23 In May 2017 the Bishop of Durham hosted an event in the North East to highlight the initiative in the region.
- 24 A total of 7,307 people have been granted humanitarian protection under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) since the scheme began. In the year ending March 2017, 5,453 people were resettled under the SVPRS across 235 different local authorities. Half (50%) of those resettled under the Syrian VPRS were under 18 years (2,726) and around half (47%) were female (2,571).⁵

Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership

- 25 To consider how County Durham can best support the UK's response to the crisis, the council established the Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership, which met for the first time on 25 September 2015.
- 26 The Partnership, which is chaired by the council, seeks to ensure that Durham's support for refugees placed in the county is joined up and promotes cross-service and agency working, as well as engagement with communities.
- 27 At its first meeting, the Partnership outlined its support for the UK's response to the crisis, welcomed the national commitment to ensure that support is resourced and confirmed it was preparing to play its part in welcoming refugees to County Durham.

⁵ Home Office Quarterly Immigration Statistics, January to March 2017, 25 May 2017

- 28 The Partnership also approved the establishment of a working group, comprising appropriate council services and partner representatives, to consider the operational aspects of accommodating refugees within the county.
- 29 In developing a model for supporting refugee arrivals in County Durham, the working group recommended a number of key principles which were agreed by the Partnership:
- (a) Resettling arrivals in the county's main towns/areas, avoiding isolation in smaller villages and settlements. The county's twelve main towns/areas were assessed against a number of key criteria including availability of appropriate housing, health provision/GP access, school places, Jobcentre plus access, cohesion and policing issues. This concluded that ten areas would be appropriate for resettlement. For each phase of resettlement, a further evaluation was undertaken with key partners, to confirm suitability.
 - (b) Offering support to family groups, who are more likely to assist one another and settle within County Durham's communities.
 - (c) Resettling arrivals in clusters of small family groups (approximately 25 people), which would hopefully offer a self-supporting mechanism within communities.
- 30 Whilst there was a strong desire to assist the government's support for the crisis, it was recognised that County Durham had limited experience in this area and the Partnership and working group therefore proposed that:
- (a) The county should consider offering support which is in line with the Council's share of the national population (this would equate to circa 200 Syrian refugees over five years, which is slightly more than the county's proportionate share), and the offer should focus on family groups. As the first phase of support within the North East commenced in May 2016, refugees would be accommodated over four years to May 2020.
 - (b) Within 12 months of the first group of refugees arriving in the county, an evaluation be completed into the effectiveness of the programme to determine if the number of Syrian refugees settled in County Durham could be increased.
- 31 The proposals were agreed by Cabinet at its meeting on 16 December 2015.

Delivering the Programme in County Durham

- 32 The programme is co-ordinated and managed within Transformation and Partnerships, ensuring cross-service and partnership working to deliver effective resettlement support. The day-to-day integration and casework support for the families is provided by the Family Intervention Project (FIP) Team within Regeneration and Local Services, utilising the Team's knowledge and experience of supporting vulnerable families.

- 33 In providing integration and casework support, the FIP Team employs a multi-agency method which ensures that all services are involved in a Team Around the Family (TAF) approach to deliver a co-ordinated response to the needs of individual families. A FIP key worker acts as the lead professional for each family and provides intensive and tailored packages of support.
- 34 Each family follows an initial 4-week action plan to ensure all essential assessments and registrations are completed in line with the requirements in the Home Office's statement of outcomes. Following the initial action plan, a full single assessment is undertaken and a whole family 12-month support plan is established. The plan is continuously reviewed to ensure families and individuals are achieving their goals in areas including health, education, social inclusion etc.
- 35 The intensity of the support offered gradually de-escalates over the 12-month period, as individuals become more integrated and self-sufficient. After the 12-month period, the FIP Team continues to provide lower level support, with quarterly welfare visits focusing on finances, education, employment and training, health and integration. Support workers also provide regular drop-in sessions at the befriending group which has been established within the community.
- 36 FIP casework support is provided by a dedicated team, including two keyworkers and an Arabic-speaking support officer. In recognition of the importance of adequate interpreting and translation support, an additional Arabic-speaking support officer has recently been recruited. The staffing establishment will be reviewed as additional families are supported in the county. Staffing costs are fully met by Home Office funding provided under the programme.
- 37 Other council services and teams have worked together to offer the full range of support for the families, including education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for adults, English as an Additional Language (EAL) for children, adult social care and health, occupational therapy, children's services, employment support, translation and equalities, resources, welfare rights, public health and communications.
- 38 This has been matched by outstanding support from external partners including social housing providers, the voluntary and community sector, faith groups, Department for Work and Pensions, health and police. Of particular note has been the degree of voluntary support from local voluntary and community sector and church organisations, as well as Durham University (including the University's Islamic Society), who have provided a significant range of goods for the family homes, hosted and contributed to welcome events, provided interpreters, organised conversation groups and befriending opportunities etc.
- 39 Durham Christian Partnership (DCP) and North East Churches Acting Together (NECAT) have played a key role in co-ordinating and offering additional support to families resettled under the scheme, from organising VCS support, requesting and matching contributions and storing and transporting property-related items. Additional items provided include welcome packs of toiletries,

cleaning products and non-perishable food items for each property, additional kitchen and household items, household accessories such as soft furnishings, additional bedding, towels, pushchairs and travel cots, toys and warm clothes. In addition, DCP and NECAT have raised funds to provide a television for each family, to support the development of English language skills.

- 40 Durham City of Sanctuary has been extremely supportive and active in assisting with the resettlement programme. Activities to date include the provision of welcome packs for each family upon arrival, interpreting services for the arrival and welcome events, the organisation of orientation and integration events and transporting families to healthcare appointments. Members of the City of Sanctuary also have a strong involvement in conversation groups and befriending initiatives to assist and support the integration of arrivals.
- 41 The police have assisted throughout the co-ordination of arrangements helping to ensure that the areas identified for resettlement are appropriate and undertaking neighbourhood liaison. Police staff play a part in the initial integration programme, providing an opportunity for new arrivals to meet police representatives in a relaxed community setting and to address any preconceptions refugees may have, based on negative previous experiences. The police have also been a keen and collaborative partner in facilitating community liaison and responding to any issues identified within local communities.
- 42 The Department for Work and Pensions has worked with the council to establish appropriate procedures to ensure swift access to benefit entitlements. Appointments are organised in advance of arrival, linked to the support programme, with the DWP facilitating group appointments to assist casework and interpreting support arrangements, and to provide arrivals with a positive experience of early interaction with DWP.
- 43 The social housing providers engaged with the programme to date have been extremely supportive and proactive in identifying and securing appropriate housing in suitable areas and in working to address any issues identified both prior to and following the arrival of refugee families.
- 44 The Clinical Commissioning Groups have effectively assisted the programme throughout each phase, identifying specific health needs which will require follow-up, allocating GP practices and liaising with primary and secondary healthcare providers where appropriate, to ensure an effective process for arrivals to access healthcare provision.

SVPRS - Phase I

- 45 In May 2016 five Syrian families arrived in the UK and were welcomed to central Durham. An additional family arrived at the end of June 2016 and has been housed in the same area.
- 46 The experience and feedback from phase one to date has been extremely positive.

- 47 County Durham Housing Group provided invaluable support and assistance in helping to identify suitable homes. The housing provider also worked closely with the council and other partners to respond to issues, helping to develop appropriate measures in response.
- 48 The approach of locating the families in a small cluster in relatively close proximity appears to have been effective. The families have maintained contact and are supporting one another. Concentrating the education support on two schools (one primary and one secondary school) helped to focus the provision of additional assistance.
- 49 There have been a number of low-level incidents within the community, including the shouting of negative comments at individuals and small-scale damage to property. Whilst relatively low level, the importance of addressing these was not underestimated and procedures have been established to review each incident rapidly and the council, police and housing provider worked together to address the issue and to investigate appropriate measures in response.
- 50 A key issue highlighted as part of the review of phase one was the amount of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision, to support integration and independence. The council's Adult Learning Service, which has delivered the bespoke and in-house provision to date, subsequently recruited a number of tutors to allow enhanced English language support for arrivals. This facilitated an increase in formal and informal language provision to offer 16 hours per week over five days for all adults from April 2017. The families previously received two 2-3 hour sessions per week.
- 51 One of the key aims of the language support is to enable transition to mainstream provision where possible, offering an important opportunity for arrivals to develop social connections and to enhance integration prospects.
- 52 A conversation group was established, organised by volunteers in the community and churches, and has been very successful in complementing the ESOL classes and providing refugee families with an opportunity to develop and practise language skills. This provision increased in 2017 from one session per week to two. This is an important resource, particularly for refugees who experience difficulties with more formal language support.
- 53 Building on the excellent links with Durham University, the support team has been able to progress the offer of volunteer job opportunities within one of the university's kitchens, to enable two refugees who have shown an interest in this type of work to gain practical work experience in the UK. Another individual is undertaking a work experience placement with the council's Service Direct, utilising the car mechanic skills he used in Syria; and one arrival has taken up a volunteer work opportunity in a local hair and beauty salon.
- 54 One young person who arrived in May 2016 attended a place on King's Undergraduate Summer Exchange Programme at King's College London. The programme covered English and international commercial law and upon completion the participant is awarded credits towards a university degree.

- 55 The Syrian families who arrived in the UK in phase one held a celebration event during Christmas 2016, to demonstrate their appreciation of the warm welcome they have received in Durham to the individuals and organisations who have offered them support.

SVPRS - Phase I Family Reunification

- 56 The council welcomed an additional family to Durham in March 2017, following a reunification request linked to a family resettled in phase one of the scheme.
- 57 The family has quickly resettled in the area and both families are extremely happy to be reunited.

SVPRS - Phase II

- 58 In November 2016 six Syrian families comprising 28 individuals arrived in the UK and were welcomed to County Durham. The families arriving in phase two have been housed in the south of the county.
- 59 The families are being supported by the full range of council services and teams assisting phase one families. The FIP Team are continuing to deliver a 12-month tailored support and orientation programme to assist families and individuals to quickly and effectively resettle in County Durham.
- 60 Outstanding support has again been received from partners in helping to resettle vulnerable families, including the input of housing provider livin.
- 61 The families are receiving the additional ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) support provided from Easter 2017.
- 62 The North East Churches Acting Together representative was pivotal in co-ordinating the establishment of a conversation group with the voluntary and community sector, to replicate the group successfully supporting phase one families.
- 63 One young person has secured a dental nurse apprenticeship at a dental practice in County Durham to resume her dental training and another young person is attending a college engineering course. In addition, one individual has participated in a Home Office self-employment scheme to pilot an approach previously used for Armed Forces veterans and, as part of this, is presently receiving support to develop a business plan.
- 64 In late December 2016 three families living in close proximity to one another were the target of anti-social behaviour which caused damage to windows. One family experienced three further incidents between late January and mid-March 2017.
- 65 A procedure to review each incident was implemented and the council, police and housing provider worked together to address the issue and arranged a

number of Remain Safe measures in response. No further incidents have been reported.

- 66 The family received additional support from the FIP Team, police, PCSO Community Cohesion Officer and Housing Officer. The family has been involved and consulted throughout and confirmed it does not wish to consider a move to another property, as the family feels at home and has received a great deal of support from both their immediate neighbours and the local community.
- 67 The families have settled well in the area and have received a significant amount of support from neighbours, voluntary groups and organisations, who have organised trips and invited them to events.
- 68 Families who arrived in phase two held an event in late July 2017, to express their thanks to the organisations and individuals in the area who have supported them. The families independently booked a venue and cooked traditional Syrian food as a gesture of their thanks and appreciation. The occasion was well attended by a range of friends, volunteers, support workers and elected members.

SVPRS - Phase III

- 69 In June 2017 five Syrian families comprising 25 individuals arrived in the UK and were welcomed to the north of the county.
- 70 Following a request from the Home Office, an additional family joined the families in the area in July 2017 and is being supported as part of the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programme. This scheme provides support to vulnerable children in families in the Middle East and North Africa area.
- 71 The families are receiving the support of the full range of council services and teams who have previously assisted the resettlement of families in County Durham. The FIP Team is in the early stages of delivering a support, orientation and integration programme, focusing on completing the appointments and assessments required within the statement of outcomes.
- 72 The exceptional support provided by partners in the earlier phases of resettlement has been repeated in phase three, including the assistance of housing provider Karbon Homes.
- 73 School visits and induction sessions were arranged for children prior to the summer break to assist in preparing expectations.
- 74 Initial ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) assessments have taken place and an ESOL programme has been developed based on the needs of learners.
- 75 A conversation group has quickly been established with the voluntary and community sector, to replicate the excellent provision delivered in previous phases in supporting families to develop English language skills.

- 76 Two separate incidents of inappropriate Facebook posts have been reported to the police relating to the location of refugees in the general area and government policy on migration.

SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMME - AN EVALUATION

National Context

- 77 In September 2016 the National Audit Office (NAO) published a report on its examination of the achievements of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme to date, the processes in place to deliver the programme, progress against the targets set, and the risks to future delivery of the programme and whether these were being addressed.

- 78 The evaluation acknowledged it was a progress review of a live programme and did not reach a judgement on whether the programme has achieved value for money as it is too early to assess this. The key conclusions of the review included:

- (a) The programme team, other central government departments, local authorities and delivery partners performed well in the pre-Christmas 2015 period in meeting the commitment to resettle 1,000 Syrian refugees. They achieved a great deal in a short amount of time, resettling much larger numbers of refugees than previous programmes. Success was due in large part to the dedication and goodwill of those involved.
- (b) The programme team sensibly reduced internal targets and expectations of the programme in the first quarter of 2016 to allow time to redesign it in the light of lessons learned. This redesign considered crucial aspects of the programme, such as improving process efficiency and communication and designing a monitoring and evaluation framework. While progress has been made, not all developments are operational yet.
- (c) The programme team identified and considered the main risks to delivering the programme in future. As the programme develops, the organisations involved need to ensure the goodwill of all involved is turned into actions to mitigate the risks to meeting the 20,000 target, such as finding suitable accommodation and school places. The characteristics of the refugees arriving in the UK will become clearer over time and with this new information, the programme team will need to ensure that budget assumptions are revised accordingly and that local authorities are not faced with costs that they struggle to meet. Local authorities continue to face budget cuts and if higher than predicted costs impact local authorities' ability to deliver quality services, the chances of refugees integrating successfully into the UK will be at risk.

- 79 Based on its findings, the NAO made the following recommendations for the programme team to implement:

- (a) Clarify to local authorities that there are no set requirements for what local authorities need to provide during refugees' second to fifth years in the UK, so as to encourage local authorities to tailor services to refugees' needs.
- (b) Clarify what refugees are entitled to in respect of travelling within and outside the UK, family reunion and their status after the fifth year of the programme. The departments should disseminate this information to all local authorities and providers involved in the programme.
- (c) Ensure other government departments and local authorities understand the risks to the wider success of the programme and have plans in place to manage these risks, for example finding suitable housing and school places and capacity to meet longer-term, uncertain costs. This could include encouraging local authorities not yet participating in the programme to join.
- (d) Ensure refugees' characteristics are collected and used to adapt programme budgets in light of any changes to initial assumptions, so no organisation taking part in the programme struggles to participate effectively due to cost pressures.
- (e) Ensure a full monitoring and evaluation framework is operational as soon as possible. This includes defining what success looks like beyond meeting the 20,000 target.
- (f) Engage with international partners and local authorities and their service providers to ensure refugees' opinions are listened to and factored in to new developments, such as community sponsorship, to enhance refugees' experiences of the programme and life in the UK.

A Regional Perspective - Refugee Voices

- 80 In May 2017 the North East Regional Refugee Forum presented the results of qualitative research to hear the voiced experience of some of the families brought to the region under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. This work also captured the collective experiential knowledge of Syrian and/or Arabic speaking community volunteers who had provided voluntary support to the families.
- 81 The Refugee Voices research involved structured conversations with 20 couples about their experience of the scheme by seven Syrian and/or Arabic speaking community volunteers with respondents who arrived in the region between November 2015 and 2017. Participants were hosted in eight local authority areas: Northumberland, North Tyneside, Newcastle, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland, Darlington and County Durham.
- 82 Feedback from the respondents was collated and fed into a workshop where community volunteers shared and compared their collective knowledge. It was acknowledged that some responses related to early contexts that may since have changed.

- 83 The research findings were presented at an event hosted by the North East Migration Partnership. This outlined both families' responses and recommendations on what works and/or what could work better made by families and by community volunteers.
- 84 The co-ordination and support teams evaluated the programme in County Durham against the findings and recommendations of the research to determine future actions.
- 85 Many of the key recommendations had already been implemented in County Durham. These included:

86 **First few days/weeks**

- (a) Resettlement support is provided by the council's Family Intervention Project (FIP) Team in Housing Services. This team provides dedicated resettlement support to the programme, delivered by keyworkers who are experienced in supporting vulnerable families and who have access to a wide range of expertise and tools within the Housing Solutions Service.
- (b) Regular contact with a FIP support worker and intensive resettlement support (daily visits) are established with families immediately following arrival in County Durham.
- (c) Pre-benefits money is provided in instalments by the FIP Team, with clear and repeated advice on budgeting and guidance confirming what the resources should cover.
- (d) Local orientation and visits are built into the support programme immediately following arrival and throughout the programme.
- (e) Previous arrivals are a critical part of the welcome event held shortly after arrival, to encourage involvement, establish connections and provide insight into life in the UK.
- (f) Links have been made with the local Arabic speaking community and volunteers via invitation to arrival and welcome events and involvement in activities including befriending and conversation groups.

87 **Support Work: The Support Team**

- (a) An Arabic-speaking support worker has been employed as part of the FIP support team and plays a fundamental role in communicating with families.
- (b) Training has been accessed for support workers to understand the background and respect the priorities and emotions of the refugees.
- (c) The assessment of individual needs and a planned exit strategy, which recognises that some people will move towards independence more

quickly than others, and which provides consistent reassurance, is a fundamental part of the support offered.

88 Support Work: Integration Plans

- (a) A holistic resettlement and integration support plan is developed, involving the family and key partners. The Team adopts a Team Around the Family approach, comprising a full single assessment for each family, which directs the development of a whole-family support plan. This approach recognises that whilst the aim is to support resettlement and promote independence and self-sufficiency, individuals and families progress at different rates.
- (b) Links are actively established with the voluntary sector and community groups from the outset for each resettlement phase, including the establishment of conversation groups, to aid integration into the wider local community.
- (c) The hugely valuable role of the voluntary sector has been recognised throughout the delivery of the programme in County Durham, with voluntary sector and faith organisations represented on Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership and the working group established to consider the operational aspects of resettlement.
- (d) Voluntary and community sector representatives are an essential part of the planning process for each phase of resettlement, using their local knowledge to establish and deliver integration support.
- (e) In addition, the voluntary and community sector has provided valuable additional items in homes to complement the local authority's offer, including soft furnishings, warm clothing, pushchairs, travel cots, toys and activities, as well as additional fundraising to provide each family with a television to support the development of English language skills.

89 Learning to Speak English (Adults)

- (a) Based on the review of each phase of resettlement in County Durham, the provision of additional ESOL lessons was agreed in late 2016. Unfortunately, these could not be fully implemented until Easter 2017, following the recruitment of additional tutors. However, adults were provided with 16 hours ESOL per week, including both formal lessons and informal provision via conversation groups. The provision is continually evaluated and revised based on the needs of learners, whilst recognising that English language support and development is key to successful integration and resettlement.

90 The Refugee Voices recommendations were also used to focus future improvement and/or reinforce the information provided. As a result, the following improvements were agreed:

91 **First Few Days/Weeks**

- (a) The FIP Team to explore alternative ways of communicating information, particularly focusing on verbal methods such as voice memo. This would be in addition to the information conveyed as part of the support briefings and the information provided upon arrival in a welcome pack, local information sheet and local area map.
- (b) The support team to build in opportunities for group learning/interaction, as part of the support plan for each phase of resettlement, allowing families resettled together to discuss matters of mutual concern and raise and clarify any relevant issues. Whilst these opportunities are already provided within the initial support arrangements, this will be an established part of the support programme for future phases.

92 **Raising and Escalating Issues: Access to Rights**

- (a) A verbal explanation be provided and reiterated as part of the support plan to clarify how an unresolved issue or complaint can be escalated. This is presently included in the support programme and is specifically outlined in the information pack provided to arrivals, but it was felt that this area could be reinforced further.
- (b) A briefing on family reunification to be included as part of the support programme in future, recognising that this is extremely important to many new arrivals. Although this happens in response to individual enquiries, this approach would recognise the significance of providing this information very quickly following arrival.

93 **Other Sources of Support: Voluntary Sector**

There is clear recognition in County Durham of the hugely significant role of the voluntary and community sector in enhancing the delivery of the programme, particularly around integration support. It was recognised that, following the arrival of refugees, at a time when support staff are fully engaged in providing intensive resettlement support, ad hoc offers from local organisations, groups and individuals may not be fully pursued initially. In order to ensure that all voluntary and community support can be quickly identified, explored and utilised, it was agreed that, as part of the expansion of the support team, an officer would be designated to undertake this role and explore all mechanisms to ensure effective partnership working with the voluntary and community sector.

94 **Prospects for Economic Inclusion**

It is recognised that refugees have a desire to secure paid employment, but face challenges in achieving this. To help address these challenges, a part-time refugee mentoring officer has been recruited, based within the council's Employability Team, to support the programme. This will be resourced by Home Office funding and will build on the employability support offered to individuals to date. The post will deliver a range of activities, advice and

support to help refugees move closer to the labour market and into placements and employment; working collaboratively to integrate employment, skills and financial inclusion as part of an action plan for each individual.

The County Durham Experience - Evaluation with Families

- 95 A key part of the process to continually review and improve the experience of refugees arriving in County Durham has included gathering the views of families. This has been undertaken at two stages to evaluate experiences at different points.
- 96 The first assessment was undertaken during the first two months following arrival to capture views and insight into the pre-arrival, arrival and early post-arrival experiences of individuals and families. This evaluation particularly focused on whether any part of the support programme could be improved or if there was anything missing which was an important part of a family's speedy and effective resettlement in the early stages.
- 97 The second consultation was undertaken towards the end of the 12-month support programme, to assist in planning future support programmes and to identify any gaps or barriers which may impede integration, self-sufficiency and independence.

Outcome of Initial Evaluation

- 98 The initial evaluation of the first phase of support in May 2016 identified some practical and easily addressed suggestions for an improved experience. The most popular request was for warm clothing and a coat on arrival, with families commenting on the cold weather in May. The provision of school shoes, to complete the school uniform provided for each family, was also suggested.
- 99 Other ideas included labelling food tins/packets in Arabic as the pictures were not always easily identifiable (in stage one only cans and packets illustrating a product were provided); a shower-head washing facility, which is a key part of some religious rituals; provision of coverings at all windows (including those with frosted glass) to allow removal of headscarves within the home; and the provision of translated local transport information immediately upon arrival.
- 100 Phase one families commented positively on the support provided, including appreciation that children were able to start school less than seven days after arrival. The availability of an Arabic-speaking support officer within the Team was also hugely valued. The suggestions made in the evaluation of phase one were implemented for families arriving in November 2016.
- 101 A key request from phase two families focused on the provision of ESOL and their wish to become proficient in English as soon as possible. This reinforced the view of the co-ordination and support teams that additional English language support would enable arrivals to become independent and self-sufficient at an early opportunity.

- 102 Families stated that all parts of the support provided had worked really well, including organisation and a smooth settling in process and advised they were satisfied with the welcome information pack provided on arrival and could not offer suggestions for improvement. All families reported that they were “very satisfied” with the overall service provided by the council.

Outcome of Evaluation of Support in Months 8-12

- 103 A further consultation was undertaken with refugees who arrived in May 2016 towards the end of the 12-month support programme. This provided the opportunity to review the overall experience of arrivals during their first year of resettlement support.
- 104 The first question focused on whether families felt welcomed and if there was anything that particularly assisted with this, or anything additional the council could have done. The response of all six families was very positive, with comments ranging from “more than excellent - everything, starting from reception day to integrating into the community” to “I can’t think of anything else that could have been done or have been missed by the council to make us feel more welcomed”. Respondents outlined their view that the council had done everything possible to support them, they felt welcome within County Durham, the welcome pack provided (in English and Arabic) was very useful, neighbours were extremely friendly and helpful and the help and assistance of support workers was greatly appreciated.
- 105 Families were asked to share the main challenges experienced in resettling in the UK. Responses indicated that the two main challenges were culture and the language barrier. Respondents confirmed that the support team were enormously helpful in explaining cultural differences and what is appropriate, and sometimes different, in the UK; and outlined their wish to avoid unintentionally offending anyone. The ESOL provision was also essential in assisting arrivals to overcome language difficulties. One family stated “Prior to our relocation, integration to our new community as well as adapting to a new lifestyle and new culture was one of our biggest worries and challenges. As soon as we arrived to Newcastle Airport and met with the local authority’s workers and the warm welcome, we felt extremely relieved and we then realised that things are going to be fine, as we are not going to be left to face challenges alone.”
- 106 In considering the model for resettling refugees in future phases, all families felt that it was beneficial to be resettled in relatively close proximity to other refugee families. This model was particularly helpful in ensuring families speak the same language in the initial stages of resettlement and are able to help and support one another. One family felt that it removed the feeling of isolation and another outlined gratitude to the council for accommodating a family reunification request, which allowed a relative to be resettled near to them.
- 107 Families were asked whether there were services they needed to be linked with, or if there was anything they would find helpful in connecting with and actively participating in the local community. The common theme was that there were no services families needed to be linked with, although it was felt that some

specialist support may continue to be required and two families indicated that the commencement of a work experience opportunity had been hugely beneficial and had reinforced their hopes of securing employment in the future.

- 108 Arrivals were asked to outline any support they were receiving in addition to the local authority assistance. The assistance provided by members of Durham City of Sanctuary and the activities of the befriending/conversation group established to support English language skills and offer additional assistance were hugely valued and respondents hoped this support would continue in the longer term.
- 109 Respondents were asked to outline the most important thing in assisting resettlement in County Durham. The safety and security of the families to live without fear was paramount, with English language provision, education and health provision all highlighted. The assistance of volunteers in helping one family to resettle was also highlighted.
- 110 Arrivals were asked what advice or guidance they would give to other families presently preparing to resettle in the UK. All families indicated positive support for resettlement, most referring to the freedom and safety offered in the UK, particularly for children. One family stated “Try your best to be resettled within Durham County Council as to our experience it’s the best local authority in terms of giving resettled refugees the best help and support ever.”
- 111 All families were afforded the opportunity to provide additional comments or raise issues they would like the council to consider in offering future support for resettled refugee families in County Durham. Two families indicated that positive support for future family reunifications should be considered, whilst most families wanted to express thanks for the support and assistance offered. One family commented “I just can’t find the words to show how grateful we are for all the help and support we’ve got so far. I would say a huge thank you to the UK in general and to Durham County Council in specific for everything you helped us with.”

Participation in the SVPRS - First Year Review with Partners

- 112 An event to review the council’s participation in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme took place on 10 February 2017. This sought the views and input of services and partners who delivered support to the families arriving in County Durham in spring and autumn 2016 to inform future phases of support.

Support to Arrivals in Year 1

- 113 A resettlement planning framework was circulated prior to the meeting identifying some of the main activities and tasks undertaken at key stages pre-arrival and post-arrival. An outline was given of actions taken, grouped under six key areas:

- (a) Housing
- (b) Health

- (c) Education, including English as an Additional Language (EAL) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
 - (d) Employment
 - (e) Cohesion
 - (f) Voluntary and Community Sector support
- 114 Partners and services considered how the programme had been delivered and areas for change or improvement, focusing on their area of expertise and/or involvement. Each group considered three key questions to focus discussions and formulate suggestions:
- (a) What worked well?
 - (b) What would you change?
 - (c) Could we do more/better?
- 115 The discussions were extremely positive and complimentary about the success of County Durham's programme to resettle vulnerable refugee families effectively and services and partners present were keen to build on this for future phases/initiatives.

What worked well?

- 116 In considering future arrangements for the resettlement programme, the following were identified as areas that had worked particularly well.

117 Education

- (a) Pupils were able to start school promptly, following an early information-gathering assessment and school visit.
- (b) The families supported to date have been very positive about engaging with education and schools.
- (c) Participation in the scheme has helped to build capacity within schools previously inexperienced in dealing with a diverse school population.

118 ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)

- (a) The links established between Durham County Council's ESOL provision (delivered by the council's Adult Learning Service) and the volunteer conversation group established to support phase one arrivals had been hugely beneficial.
- (b) The female cohort who arrived in phase one are very engaged and extremely keen to improve their English Language.
- (c) The venue used to deliver ESOL classes in phase two was a significant improvement on phase one, providing opportunities to split groups and provide additional focused tutoring/intensive support based on the ability of learners.

119 **Employment and Benefits**

- (a) Two separate job opportunities are pending and being pursued.
- (b) The establishment of links with Durham University, which has led to the opportunity for volunteer work experience, has been extremely beneficial.
- (c) Employment links within Durham County Council are being progressed via the council's Employability Service.

120 **Housing and Health**

- (a) The county's participation in the scheme was extremely well co-ordinated and organised and encouraged the involvement of key partners and services, leading to buy-in from all organisations involved.
- (b) The early involvement of partners was a key factor for success, with partners engaged from the outset, willing to work together to ensure everything was in place, and any problems encountered overcome quickly.
- (c) A single point of contact throughout the co-ordination of the scheme and subsequently for ongoing support was felt to be helpful and avoided the potential for confusion and duplication.
- (d) The "Team Around the Family" (TAF) approach to supporting the families was very effective, informing and engaging partners and addressing issues in a co-ordinated and joined-up manner.
- (e) The welcome event and welcome meetings were helpful in introducing partner and service staff to families and set the foundations to build positive relationships.
- (f) The briefing session held two weeks prior to arrival for service and partner staff involved in supporting the refugee families was informative and attendees commented on its usefulness in assisting them to prepare.
- (g) GPs in North Durham had communicated their view that everything was very well organised.

121 **Voluntary and Community Support**

- (a) The amount and range of support provided by the voluntary and community sector and the faith sector was widely recognised as being exemplary. It played a critical role in providing the enhanced package of support to the families, both during their initial welcome and throughout the subsequent months as they settle into communities.
- (b) This support has meant families have been able to settle quickly into their properties and feel welcomed into the UK through the provision of bespoke furnishing packages, over and above the minimal level the council is permitted to resource through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement

Scheme, by means of voluntary donations. Whilst, in the following weeks, the families have benefitted from a range of activities, particularly the volunteer-led conversation groups that have been designed to support the formal ESOL training.

122 **Cohesion**

- (a) The programme to brief key staff who will engage with resettled families, as well as customer services teams who will be likely to take enquiries from the public once families arrive, was extremely helpful.
- (b) In addition, the provision of the frequently asked questions information sheet, outlining key facts and explaining why the council and partners are supporting the scheme and the resources the council receives from central government to deliver support, was very helpful.

What can we change?

123 Representatives were asked to consider areas that might be changed to improve the effective delivery of the programme and suggestions included:

124 **ESOL**

Early consideration to be given to the availability of appropriate venues for ESOL provision as part of the planning process for providing ESOL for future arrivals.

125 **Housing and Health**

- (a) Problems with sharing confidential information had been identified, as some staff appeared very cautious about what information could be shared. It was agreed that this could be clarified by the FIP Team at the pre-Team Around the Family meeting with services and partners.
- (b) It was recognised that some of the information received from the camps/via the Home Office was poor, particularly in informing health care provision. Whilst it was acknowledged that this was an issue for the Home Office to pursue, and had been fed-back through the North East Migration Partnership, it may be appropriate to communicate this as a potential issue when briefing partners and services. It was agreed that this could be addressed by a reference to the issue in the briefing session for services and partners.
- (c) The need to identify appropriate representation via the Clinical Commissioning Group to attend planning meetings was raised. Different approaches had been adopted for the two separate phases and it was felt that the North Durham approach had been extremely effective in identifying an officer with clinical knowledge to support successful programme delivery. The CCG representative agreed to feedback for future consideration.

- (d) Housing providers had found it useful to have a translation app on mobile devices for professionals working with the families, particularly immediately following arrival when English language may be very limited. It was agreed that this would be suggested to other professionals working with the families, who may not always have ready access to interpreting services.

126 **Cohesion**

Although the current practice to brief head teachers in the schools where Syrian children are to be placed works well, it was felt consideration should be given to providing earlier diversity awareness training for pupils, focused on the challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers.

Could we do more/better?

- 127 Services and partners were asked to consider how the programme may be improved or enhanced within the resources available. The following suggestions were made:

128 **ESOL**

Increasing the provision of ESOL tuition, spread over five days, using the approach of “little and often” to enable refugees to resettle and integrate into life in the UK as soon as possible. This suggestion was consistent with an agreement to offer additional provision, with arrangements being progressed to offer 16 hours tuition per week for 2016 arrivals, comprising both formal and informal language support.

129 **Employment and Benefits**

- (a) Linking with the voluntary sector to identify potential work placement opportunities may be advantageous and should be explored where possible.
- (b) Closer monitoring of progress with volunteering or coaching opportunities would be beneficial, e.g. where an individual is engaging with a voluntary placement with an organisation, there is a need for ongoing support and review of the experience.

130 **Housing and Health**

- (a) Although a full translation of the tenant’s licence is provided for tenants during the initial sign-up process, the translation of the full tenancy agreement may be useful for refugees to refer to and consult at a later date. It was acknowledged that this was a very lengthy document and therefore one translated template, which could subsequently be used for all housing providers, would be the preferred approach.
- (b) Information on energy providers and costs would be a useful additional area to include in supporting refugee tenants.

- (c) Information on how to stay safe from scams would be a further helpful topic within the support programme.

131 Voluntary and Community Support

- (a) The relationship between the council and the sector has meant the vital input of the voluntary and community sector into the initial phases of the programme has been effectively managed. However, as the number of phases increase over the next few years, it was highlighted that it may be helpful to find dedicated resources to assist with co-ordinating volunteer support to the programme given the scale of offers from the local community.
- (b) Although it was acknowledged that the agreed approach has been followed, it was emphasised that if the success of the early phases is to be continued the key contacts within the sector need early notification and details of future phases if they are to plan for them effectively.

132 Cohesion

- (a) The benefits of holding conversation support groups within local communities not only helped develop refugees' language skills, but also helps individuals and families to make links with members of the local community. However, it was highlighted that in some instances difficulties were encountered in finding a home for the groups and resources would be helpful for the voluntary sector to support and run the sessions.
- (b) It was suggested that mechanisms should be developed to try to ensure the families are made aware of the wide range of community, cultural and sporting activities and clubs that are available throughout the county and, where appropriate, be encouraged to take up these opportunities.

The County Durham Model

- 133 Partners and services were asked to consider whether the model adopted for supporting refugee arrivals in County Durham was appropriate, based on their experiences of welcoming refugee families during 2016. The model is based on the following key principles:
- (a) Resettling arrivals in the county's main towns/areas, avoiding isolation in smaller villages and settlements (the county's twelve main towns/areas have been assessed against a number of key criteria including availability of appropriate housing, health provision/GP access, school places, Jobcentre plus access, cohesion and policing issues).
 - (b) Offering support to family groups, who are more likely to assist one another and settle within County Durham's communities.
 - (c) Resettling arrivals in clusters of small family groups (approximately 25 people), offering an immediate support mechanism within communities.

(d) The county should offer support which is in line with the county's share of the national population (this equates to approximately 200 Syrian refugees over the four years to May 2020).

134 The review meeting agreed that the model to focus on the main towns assessed as suitable for the resettlement of small clusters of family groups was appropriate. In addition, it was suggested that for future phases, the following should also be considered:

(a) Where appropriate, it might be preferable to locate future arrivals within a town or area where Syrian families had previously resettled and therefore a presence in the community was established rather than focusing on new resettlement areas for each phase. It was felt that the number of families resettled together was less critical in this approach, as there would be a supportive community in place.

(b) There was support for the suggestion that some of the larger villages and areas with good access and transport links to the City centre would be appropriate to consider, in consultation with partners to confirm suitability.

(c) There was strong support for partnerships with social landlords as the preferred approach. The experience of phase one and two reinforced the significant amount of time and resource required to identify suitable properties in appropriate areas, highlighted the important role of the housing provider in facilitating housing adaptations and the additional support that social landlords provide for tenants, including integration, support in response to problems etc. Representatives expressed the view that this support had been significant in contributing to the successful resettlement of families in County Durham.

SECTION TWO

OTHER HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT SCHEMES WITHIN COUNTY DURHAM

- 135 In addition to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, the government has a range of other initiatives and schemes to resettle refugees and support asylum-seekers throughout the UK. The key programmes include the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, schemes to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the government's national dispersal scheme for asylum-seekers.
- 136 To date County Durham has engaged with the programme to support vulnerable children and families under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme

- 137 On 21 April 2016 the government announced the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). The scheme is specifically tailored to provide resettlement for up to 3,000 vulnerable and refugee children (and their families) from conflict situations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The 3000 figure includes any adults resettled with the children.
- 138 The VCRS does not solely target unaccompanied children, but is open to all children deemed to be "at risk" by UNHCR. This could be for a number of reasons, including because they are at risk of child labour, forced marriage or other forms of abuse and exploitation or because they are child carers.
- 139 It is expected that the vast majority of children will arrive with their parents, with the remainder arriving with other carers or on their own. Unaccompanied refugee children brought to the UK under this programme will receive assistance under the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 140 The scheme will be open to all children deemed to be "at risk" within the MENA region so will not be limited to Syrians. Other nationalities may include, but not be limited to, Iraqis, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis, Afghans and Palestinians.
- 141 It will also include mixed families, containing more than one nationality, and those who are stateless. A stateless person is someone who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.

The County Durham Response

- 142 As part of the resettlement of families under the SVPRS in June/July 2017, an additional property was secured by the housing provider after the deadline for confirming the allocation of cases under the programme. As a result, in recognition that the scheme was largely similar to the SVPRS, and following consultation with key partners, agreement was given to resettle a sixth family

under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme. It was agreed that the resettled family would be Arabic speaking, allowing the FIP Team to continue to utilise its Arabic speaking support worker in offering resettlement assistance.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children - National Transfer Scheme

- 143 The crisis in Syria and events in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond have seen an unprecedented number of migrants and asylum-seekers arriving in Europe. Some have presented within the UK, including many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Other children are still in the Middle East or North Africa or are in Europe and the government has committed to resettle a number of these vulnerable children.
- 144 The current system means that in most cases children arriving in the UK stay in the care of the local authority where they claim asylum, resulting in a small number of local authorities looking after the vast majority of the children - most notably Kent - and many local authorities looking after very few or no unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 145 To address this, working in consultation with the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Children's Services, the government introduced a National Transfer Scheme (NTS), underpinned by powers in the Immigration Act 2016. The scheme aims to ensure there is a more equitable distribution of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children across the country. The NTS aims to be voluntary and locally led, though government would like to see all councils join the scheme.
- 146 The NTS is based on each region taking a proportion of unaccompanied children in order to achieve a more equal distribution across the UK. Thus, if an unaccompanied child or young person arrives in a council with low numbers of unaccompanied children, the expectation is that the child or young person will stay in the care of that area. If an unaccompanied child or young person arrives in a council with high numbers, the child will be transferred. Children will transfer within the region, unless the region has high numbers and then the expectation is that the child will transfer to a council in another region.
- 147 No region is expected to have in excess of 0.07% of its current total child population, but each region is expected to increase its UASC numbers to this threshold where appropriate.
- 148 The Immigration Act gives local authorities the power to transfer case responsibility for children to other councils around the country and a protocol has been developed to underpin the transfer process. Under this, the entry authority will provide immediate support to the child. After the child has been accommodated by the entry authority for 24 hours they become a looked after child. The decision to transfer will take into account a child's best interests alongside other considerations such as medical treatment, family ties and continuity of care.
- 149 The receiving local authority will become legally responsible for the child from the point that it confirms it transfers acceptance from the entry local authority.

Authorities receiving transferred children will then have to meet statutory duties around assessment and placements.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children - Dubs Amendment

- 150 A further scheme was introduced by section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 (known as “the Dubs amendment”), which required the government to relocate and support an unspecified number of unaccompanied refugee children currently in Europe.
- 151 On 8 February 2017 the government announced the number of unaccompanied children to be relocated under section 67 will be capped at 350.

The County Durham Response

- 152 Support for schemes to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is particularly challenging within County Durham, as a result of the significant demands on placement provision for children and young people in County Durham, at a time when the county has its highest level of looked after children.
- 153 Nevertheless, County Durham has endeavoured to offer support to initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and presently is providing support to ten young people/children, although this support is on the basis of ad hoc offers and not participation in the National Transfer Scheme.

Other Humanitarian Support Schemes within County Durham - The Views of Partners

- 154 At its meeting in January 2017 Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership was provided with an update on the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme and initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 155 The Partnership reiterated its commitment to focus on ensuring the effective delivery of humanitarian support schemes within County Durham and outlined its support for the continuation of the planned and incremental approach to assist refugees successfully adopted to date.
- 156 The Partnership agreed to support the consideration of assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers under the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme and the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children, where this was appropriate, adequately funded and could be effectively delivered in County Durham with the resources available.
- 157 At a humanitarian support review meeting on 10 February 2017 partners and services were updated on the government’s proposals to resettle up to 3,000 people from the Middle-East and North Africa Region under the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). The views of services and partners were invited to inform a response to the Home Office’s request for local authority pledges of support.

- 158 Concerns were expressed about the potential difficulties in supporting families under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, particularly focused on the health issues of children resettled under the scheme, the significant pressure on special education places in Durham and health services for children.
- 159 It was recommended that further consideration of support offered under this scheme would require considerable input and consideration from children's services, health and education, including the involvement of special educational needs professionals.

SECTION THREE

OTHER PROGRAMMES NOT OPERATING IN COUNTY DURHAM

National Dispersal Scheme for Asylum-seekers

- 173 In the UK, a person is a refugee when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the government. An asylum-seeker is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country, but whose application has not yet been concluded. The majority of asylum-seekers do not have the right to work in the United Kingdom and so must rely on state support.
- 174 Individuals seeking asylum in the UK, and who can prove they are destitute, are eligible for support from the Home Office. Support can be financial (asylum-seekers are entitled to receive £36.95 a week) and in the form of accommodation whilst a person's case for asylum is being considered.
- 175 Asylum-seekers are dispersed across the UK, apart from London. Since 2012 accommodation has been provided to asylum-seekers via six regional *Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services* contracts, known as COMPASS. The COMPASS contract in the north is delivered by G4S. Under the terms of the COMPASS contracts dispersal accommodation can only be located in areas where the local authority has agreed to accommodate asylum-seekers.
- 176 The COMPASS contracts were originally for a five year period, from 2012 to 2017, with a possible two-year extension. On 8 December 2016 the government announced that the COMPASS contracts would be extended for two years until August 2019 and that work had started on putting in place new arrangements for the period following the extension.
- 177 To date local authorities have voluntarily agreed to become dispersal areas. The Home Office has the potential to use its powers to ensure all authorities participate, but thus far this has not been used. At the end of September 2016, 121 local authorities of a total of 453 (27%) had asylum accommodation within their boundaries.
- 178 There is an agreed "cluster limit" for the number of asylum-seekers per head of population placed in any area (0.5% of the local population). Based on overall numbers, the North East ranks the highest nationally of all regions based on proportionate population size, with 10% of the national total.
- 179 The national asylum dispersal scheme, unlike the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, does not provide funding to local authorities for asylum dispersal placements, as these are progressed through the contract arrangement between the Home Office and G4S.
- 180 The Home Office is increasing efforts to widen asylum-seeker dispersal and since late 2015 Regional Migration Partnerships have established discussions

between the Home Office and local authorities not receiving asylum-seekers to explore participation in the dispersal process.

The Situation in County Durham

- 181 The Home Office has approached the council to discuss County Durham's participation in schemes to widen asylum-seeker dispersal in the region and meetings have taken place with the Home Office in summer 2016 and June 2017.
- 182 Although it has indicated in principle support to engage in programmes to support asylum-seekers, County Durham is the only North East authority not presently signed up to the national scheme to accommodate asylum-seekers.
- 183 In view of County Durham's lack of experience in resettling refugees, Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership proposed that Durham should initially focus on helping to deliver the government's commitment to resettle Syrian refugees, via the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. It was agreed that a decision to take part should not be taken until the evaluation of the implementation of the SVPRS over a full year of operation was completed.

House of Commons Home Affairs Committee - Asylum Accommodation Report

- 184 In January 2017 the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee reported on its examination of asylum accommodation provided under the COMPASS contracts. It concluded that the policy of dispersal introduced to deliver an equitable distribution of asylum-seekers across the UK had failed. The pressure on the south-east of England had been alleviated, but had been replaced by the clustering of asylum-seekers in some of the most deprived parts of the country.
- 185 The committee recommended that the government should revise its approach for the remainder of the COMPASS contract (which has been extended to 2019). It proposed giving local authorities greater flexibility over where accommodation is provided within their area and a longer timeframe in which to consider providers' requests, with the option for local authorities to refuse requests where there are genuine concerns over the quality or concentration of accommodation, the capacity of local health, education and other support services, and risks to social cohesion. It concluded that these changes would encourage more local authorities to become involved in providing asylum accommodation on a voluntary basis.
- 186 The report also recommended that following the implementation of these changes, if local authorities continue to refuse to become involved, the government should use its available powers to require those local authorities to take their fair share. In using such powers, the government should ensure that access to the necessary specialist services is available in the local authorities affected, including health care, legal representation and interpreters.
- 187 The committee acknowledged the holistic support that the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme had been designed to provide and

recommended the SVPRS model be replicated for all those whose asylum applications are accepted. It was felt that this would also help address local authorities' concerns that, in accepting asylum accommodation, they will face additional costs further down the line when the person seeking asylum has received a decision on their application and is accepted as a refugee, and may be transferred to the local authority's care.

The Views of Partners

- 188 In January 2017, Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership was invited to provide views to inform future proposals for asylum accommodation in County Durham. The Partnership includes representation from Clinical Commissioning Groups, County Durham Housing Forum, the Voluntary and Community Sector, North East Regional Faiths Network and North East Churches Acting Together.
- 189 The partnership reiterated its commitment to focus on ensuring the effective delivery of humanitarian support schemes within County Durham and outlined its support for the continuation of the planned and incremental approach to assist refugees successfully adopted to date.
- 190 The partnership expressed concerns about the present arrangements for asylum-seeker accommodation in the UK and the potentially negative impact on local areas. The concerns raised included:
- (a) The possibility of a private contractor focusing on locations with inexpensive housing stock and the difficulties this may present for community cohesion in some areas;
 - (b) The lack of infrastructure and established support mechanisms to assist asylum-seekers within County Durham;
 - (c) The challenges presented by smaller and rural communities which tended to be less desirable for individuals seeking asylum under the scheme;
 - (d) The experience in other parts of the region which indicated a significant demand for voluntary sector input, which was not established in County Durham;
 - (e) The absence of funding to local authorities to assist councils in effectively dealing with the challenges presented, particularly in areas with no significant experience or infrastructure to support migration initiatives.
- 191 Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership agreed:
- (a) To support continued participation in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.
 - (b) To support the consideration of assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children,

where this was appropriate, adequately funded and could be effectively delivered in County Durham with the resources available.

- (c) It could not advocate participation in a scheme to widen the dispersal of asylum-seekers at the present time, based on the concerns raised above.

- 192 In order to gain the views of partners and services involved in delivering the humanitarian support programme, further details of the national dispersal scheme for asylum-seekers and the Home Office's request for Durham's participation were outlined at a review meeting on 10 February 2017.
- 193 Some representatives present had previous experience of supporting asylum-seekers in other local authority areas and offered their insight into the types of support required.
- 194 A number of concerns were expressed about the practical delivery of the scheme in County Durham, including the demands on the housing service, particularly for single people; the demands on children's services; the lack of infrastructure and support services in County Durham, including asylum-seeker support, legal assistance and ESOL; and the significant impact on the voluntary and community sector.
- 195 The lack of local authority control in selecting areas for accommodation and the number of asylum-seekers dispersed to an area, together with the absence of funding to provide appropriate support and reimburse local authorities for the costs incurred, were considered major obstacles to participation in the scheme.
- 196 The review meeting expressed significant concerns about participation in the national scheme to provide accommodation for asylum-seekers.
- 197 Partners commended the work that had taken place in County Durham to welcome vulnerable Syrian refugee families to the area. Representatives strongly expressed their view that it would be inappropriate to engage in the asylum accommodation scheme at a time when the scheme had obvious problems and the county would be unable to deliver the same level of planned co-ordination and support to asylum-seekers as that offered under the resettlement scheme.
- 198 The meeting supported the view that County Durham should provide its fair share of support to humanitarian initiatives by assisting additional families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, which allowed a planned, incremental approach to resettlement and provided a support structure to facilitate successful integration.

SECTION FOUR

CONCLUSIONS

The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in County Durham

- 199 The evaluation of the first year of supporting Syrian refugee families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme paints a positive picture of County Durham's experience, with council services, partner organisations and the voluntary and community sector working together very effectively to make a difference to extremely vulnerable people's lives and local communities accepting and welcoming the families into their midst.
- 200 Partners were extremely positive about the added value of the council's co-ordination of the scheme, which encouraged and involved the input of partners in the planning and delivery of the scheme, ensuring effective support and a collaborative partnership approach throughout each phase of the scheme.
- 201 Partners involved in delivering the programme in County Durham supported continuation of the model adopted for resettlement, focusing on offering support to small clusters of family groups located in the county's main towns/areas.
- 202 For future resettlement, partners also supported consideration of areas where refugees were already resettled and some of the larger villages and areas with good access and transport links to the City centre, in consultation with partners to confirm suitability.
- 203 The families assisted are very satisfied and value the assistance provided and the welcome they have received from support services and their local neighbours and communities.
- 204 The availability of appropriate support is fundamental to successful resettlement. The vulnerable nature of the families arriving in County Durham under the programme requires a high level of resettlement support, requiring a range of experience, tools and resources. The need for this assistance is unlikely to reduce, particularly in the first twelve months following arrival, as the needs of the families resettled under the scheme increase, with a high number of complex cases referred, as the UNHCR prioritises those in most need.
- 205 The considerable knowledge and experience of the council's Family Intervention Project (FIP) Team, which has an established track-record in supporting vulnerable families within the county, has delivered first-class casework and integration support for arrivals. This support will be required for future arrivals under the scheme, as well as continued support during years two to five for individuals resettled. This is recognised in the allocation of tapering funding in years two to five.
- 206 The staffing resource available to support the scheme will need to be reassessed in the future, in line with the funding allocated, as the number of families increases and the support requirements expand.

- 207 The council's experience to date suggests that government funding for the scheme will fully meet any costs incurred. Additional funding is also available to meet any exceptional costs, e.g. special educational needs, adaptations etc., during the first year of resettlement. Whilst there is confidence that the majority of costs will be funded through the scheme, it is recognised that some additional costs incurred in future years may not be fully covered by the allocation in years two to five. This includes costs associated with meeting a young person's special educational needs, depending on the needs of the individual.
- 208 There have been positive early outcomes, including volunteering and employment opportunities and significant progress in the development of English language skills, which saw the majority of adults from phases one and two offered a place on a mainstream ESOL course in a further education college.
- 209 The continued progression and integration of arrivals in future years is a vital part of full and successful resettlement in the UK. The programme will therefore focus on delivering additional support, as part of the integration plan for years two to five, to realise opportunities for full integration, including employment, English language development, education etc.

Other Humanitarian Support Schemes within County Durham

Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children

- 210 The council continues to experience significant demands on placement provision for children and young people in County Durham, with its highest level of looked after children. Nevertheless, it has provided ad hoc support to initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and has provided support to ten young people/children.
- 211 County Durham is actively working to recruit additional carers and secure extra placements and will continue to review its ability to support initiatives to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as this develops.

Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme

- 212 The government's scheme to resettle 3,000 vulnerable children, including family members, is a much smaller programme than the Syrian scheme, focused on the vulnerabilities and needs of children/young people. Local authorities participating in the scheme are funded at the same rate, in the same way and with the same statement of outcomes as the SVPRS.
- 213 In order to secure the participation of local authorities, and to facilitate effective resettlement support, the Home Office has endeavoured to match cases in line with local authority services and provision.
- 214 In recognition of the similarities between the SVPRS and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, the council has supported the resettlement of one family under the scheme during phase three in June/July 2017. The

support team was able to utilise the same resources and programmes as those provided to other Syrian families being resettled.

Other Programmes

Asylum-seeker Accommodation Programme

215 The government is encouraging greater dispersal of asylum-seekers across the country and has approached the council to discuss County Durham's participation in schemes to widen asylum-seeker dispersal in the region.

216 Based on overall numbers, the north east ranks the highest nationally of all regions accommodating asylum-seekers comparative to proportionate population size, although County Durham is the only local authority area in the region not presently participating in the scheme. Whilst the Home Office has the potential to use its powers to ensure all authorities participate, thus far this has not been used and as at September 2016 73% of local authorities did not have asylum accommodation within their boundaries.

217 In view of Durham's lack of experience in resettling asylum-seekers, the humanitarian support partnership proposed that Durham should initially focus on helping to deliver the government's commitment to resettle Syrian refugees, via the SVPRS. It was agreed that a decision to take part should not be taken until the evaluation of the implementation of the SVPRS over a full year of operation was completed.

218 Earlier this year, the partnership reviewed its position in the light of the government's latest calls for asylum-seeker dispersal and its experience of assisting Syrian refugees and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The partnership expressed significant concerns about participation in the national dispersal scheme for asylum-seekers and County Durham's capacity and resources to provide the additional support and assistance required.

219 Partners were concerned about the practical delivery of the scheme in County Durham. Issues raised included the demands on the housing service, particularly for single people; the demands on children's services; the lack of infrastructure and support services in the county, including asylum-seeker support, legal assistance and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision; and the significant impact on the voluntary and community sector.

220 Whilst commending the work that had taken place to welcome vulnerable Syrian refugee families to the area, partners strongly expressed a view that it would be inappropriate to engage in the asylum accommodation scheme at a time when the scheme had problems and the county would be unable to deliver the same level of planned co-ordination and support to asylum-seekers as that offered to refugees under the resettlement scheme.

Next Steps

221 Local authorities throughout the UK have pledged sufficient support to meet the government's overall commitment to resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable

refugees by May 2020. The challenge for the Home Office now lies in converting those pledges into the resettlement of families and individuals.

222 In December 2015 Cabinet approved support for around 200 vulnerable refugees within County Durham. Based on the number of individuals supported in the first three phases of support to summer 2017, County Durham is on target to offer the support agreed by May 2020.

223 County Durham is presently contributing to the government's humanitarian support effort under three separate programmes: the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme, the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Programme and schemes to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These are three of the four main asylum/refugee programmes established by the government. Compared to national figures, the region is providing a key role in supporting the government's humanitarian efforts.

224 Whilst the government has called on Durham to participate in another programme, the scheme to disperse asylum-seekers in the UK, partners have expressed significant reservations about the nature of the asylum-seeker accommodation scheme and Durham's capacity and resources to provide the support and assistance required.

225 The humanitarian support partnership supported the view that the county should focus its support to humanitarian initiatives by assisting additional families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, which allowed a co-ordinated, incremental approach to resettlement and provided a support structure to facilitate successful integration.

226 Building on County Durham's success in supporting refugees to resettle, partners suggested that the county should look to increase the number of individuals supported in this way. It was therefore proposed that the county should consider increasing the number of refugees resettled by 50 to 100 people, under schemes which are adequately resourced and where the council can support arrivals, namely the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, suitable cases under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and, where possible, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, if the level of care and support required are available. This would ensure that refugees resettled in County Durham are supported to do so, with a planned, co-ordinated approach which avoids the creation of a two-tier system of those supported under resettlement programmes and those receiving no additional support under the national asylum-seeker accommodation scheme.