

RAS 35

Ymchwiliad i ffoaduriaid a cheiswyr lloches yng Nghymru

Inquiry into refugees and asylum seekers in Wales

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Torfaen

Response from: Torfaen County Borough Council

Introduction

Torfaen County Borough Council (the Council) has taken a decision to fully contribute to the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers by supporting both national and regional governments' priorities in discharging their humanitarian duties, and through proactive engagement is participating in the:

- Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS)
- The Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Voluntary Transfer Scheme (UASC's) and
- Vulnerable Children Resettlement Programme (VCRP)

The Council is currently engaged with the Home Office, WLGA and Strategic Migration Partnerships to ensure a collective and joined up approach and smooth transition to resettlement for these very vulnerable families and their children.

The Council has not undertaken this process without the full engagement and support of its local partners that includes Gwent Police, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, Public Health Wales, Registered Social Landlords, Education and Social Care Departments, 3rd sector, Faith Groups, Advocacy agencies and Specialist Support Services.

Two working groups support this function: an Operation Group of senior managers to progress cases and a Community Group established to ensure wider community engagement, support and on the ground delivery. This system has worked well for us and we intend to duplicate this structure as we progress the 3 schemes in parallel, with community cohesion at the heart of the entire process

The Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Assembly's Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry. Our response is structured in accordance with the inquiry's terms of reference.

The pace and effectiveness of the Welsh Government approach to resettling refugees through the UK Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS)

As the participation of local authorities in the SRP remains voluntary and driven by the Home Office, the approach of Welsh Government to encourage, but not to prescribe, participation was welcomed.

It is also reassuring that Welsh Government have refrained from promoting any projected or anticipated total resettlement numbers; this has perhaps reassured the participating in areas not versed in programmes such as the SRP, and has allowed areas to respond appropriately in accordance with their area's local capacity to deliver a constructive programme of resettlement.

At the early stages of the programme many local authorities, including Torfaen, had limited experience of working with refugees, and at that time authorities participating within phase one of the SRP welcomed opportunities to share practice and ideas and lessons learned with other regions. Particularly useful (in late 2015) was the All Wales Strategic Migration Operations Group, which encouraged open dialogue between authorities who were receiving new arrivals, later this group included representation from Welsh Government which allowed for constructive conversations centred on the challenges authorities were experiencing such as ESOL provision, Education, and Primary health care.

As with other authority areas, Torfaen responded and developed partnership structures to support the scheme in a timescale that was appropriate for the area and local partners - this has led to successful resettlements. However some authorities, particularly those participating in phase 1 of the SRP, could have benefited from additional guidance from Welsh Government in sharing practices from Welsh Government's commissioned services, such as the Wales Refugee Council. At the preliminary stages this might have supported areas to prepare for challenges post arrival, such as community isolation and orientation complexities.

The pace question is a difficult conundrum, as it was out of Welsh Government's control at the early initial stages of the programme. The drive from the Home Office to resettle 1000 refugees before Christmas 2015 meant that individual conversations with receiving authorities took precedence to ensure delivery. Torfaen was one of those early participants, and we experienced a hiatus between the expectations of Central Government and a time lag where Welsh Government was playing 'catch up' for a little while. Despite having experienced this 'lag', there has been consistent dialogue between Torfaen, the Lead Director at the WLGA and senior officials at Welsh Government to ensure the delivery of the programme, particularly around the safer and cohesive agendas.

The pace did pick up following the direct intervention and leadership by the First Minister in establishing the Task Force of Leaders and key stakeholders to coordinate and take the programme forward in Autumn 2015.

During this period partnership working and coordination from Community Cohesion Coordinators has been absolutely vital to delivery, and responses from partners have been very positive.

A key partner to ensure that a consistent coordination process has been undertaken has been the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, which has an all Wales

membership of key partners who have helped all authorities, including the development of a tool kit for hosting refugees. This has been very helpful. Also the Syrian Refugee Operations Board has maintained a strategic overview of delivery of the process in Wales.

In terms of negative aspects, although not experienced directly in Torfaen, some local authorities have come under some pressure and criticism for not responding as quickly as others. There are good reasons for this; some being that this process is new to many authorities, and that critical to the whole process is effective partnership planning, without which vulnerable people will suffer. A smooth effective resettlement is infinitely more acceptable than a quick resettlement where families may fail.

The effectiveness of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan

The Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan (the plan) covers 8 key areas and has, in Torfaen's view, a limited profile in terms of its existence outside of those service areas and agencies working directly with the programme. It is reliant upon those staff working directly in this area to really make the plan a reality.

The Welsh Government are aware that local authorities are delivering programmes of work that are directly financed from the Home Office for the resettlement programme. Albeit that the delivery plan is 'generic' to all asylum seekers and refugees, there are no connections made within the plan to those requirements of contracting that report to the Home Office and will receive a separate reporting stream.

The delivery plan contains priority areas and actions required. Even though many of the actions that will be undertaken are 'normal business' for the Council (such as housing advice, access to the housing register, homelessness services etc), these are all very wide areas. The plan is generic, and not specific on those pertinent areas that Welsh Government could be concentrating on - such as ensuring effective ESOL takes place, which is the very key to integration through the understanding of English/Welsh.

Naturally, as with any action plan, suitable resources need to be found and, whilst there are connections within the plan to the cohesive communities agenda, wider resource application, such as additional translation, does not appear to attract additional resource and means that there is an additional financial burden to bear.

We are now moving into another two phases of delivery including the SVRP to supporting UASCS and VCRP, and there should be a recognition in the plan that numbers are likely to increase, which isn't currently reflected in the plan at either a strategic or operational level.

In terms of mental health, Torfaen considers that this area is vital to successful resettlement. The Council is working with its partners and neighbouring authorities to address the needs of both adults and children needing to access mental health services, which are already stretched to capacity. The likelihood of receiving

vulnerable people from war zones will mean that access to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services is particularly vital, and this would require not just policy guidance but also resourcing.

The plan does require timescales or a reporting stream for authorities to report relevant impact if this is outside of the National Community Cohesion Delivery Plan.

The support and advocacy available to UASC in Wales

The Council is pleased to note the specific reference to the provision of support and independent advocacy that UASC should have access to, and has little to add to this area other than its generic support of providing advocacy.

Children and young people who present or will be received as part of the voluntary transfer scheme will have access to these services.

Increasing numbers may have an operational impact on referrals, and we would suggest that Welsh Government considers the capacity across Wales to deliver on independent advocacy for children whose first language will not be English/Welsh.

The role and effectiveness of Welsh Government's Community Cohesion Delivery Plan in ensuring the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Welsh communities

The Community Cohesion Coordinators have provided an important function in supporting local authorities in their planning and preparations.

Coordinators have been able to support the standardisation of processes that local authorities have developed across regions, this has included the ways that authorities review and consult partners in discussing potential resettlement cases, as well as exploring community cohesion considerations, such as hate crime. In the wake of the recent EU referendum, the issue of immigration has been recognised as increasingly divisive within communities - factoring in possible tensions pre arrival has supported successful resettlements, and the coordinators have been important in facilitating this dialogue.

The all Wales cohesion delivery plan has also provided a blueprint for cohesion coordinators to explore how cultural orientation and community integration is embedded into the approaches of authorities receiving resettlements. This has involved coordinators working with the services commissioned to deliver case work support for resettled families, long term resettlement plans and ways to nurture community involvement.

The Council was pleased to note that a community cohesion programme, supporting issues such as Hate Crime, Modern Slavery, FGM and violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, is included in the delivery plan.

The Community Cohesion Coordinators have been pivotal to the entire delivery of the programme in Gwent, and Welsh Government have supported their role by allowing Councils to utilise this expertise within the grant. Whilst the Council

appreciates grant funding is by its nature temporary, these roles are very much a vital part to delivery; and we would suggest the plan is widened to encompass more of this work (as more refugees and asylum seekers arrive) and that therefore funding for this work should be on the basis of the wider programme – for example, SVRP is a 5 year programme that cannot be delivered without Community Cohesion Coordinators in Torfaen.