



Agenda Item 4

Update on Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme

Falkirk Council

Title: Update on Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme
Meeting: Emergency Executive
Date: 6 August 2020
Submitted By: Director of Corporate and Housing Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the Council's involvement in the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. It provides information and seeks approval to continue participation in the new Resettlement Scheme which will amalgamate the three largest existing Home Office Resettlement schemes.

2. Recommendations

2.1 The Executive is asked to:-

- (1) Note the work carried out in Support of the Vulnerable Persons Refugee Programme in Falkirk.**
- (2) Agree that Falkirk Council participates in the new Global Resettlement scheme on the same pro rata basis, subject to the same level of funding being confirmed by the Home Office.**

3. Background

- 3.1 Since 2015, Scottish Councils have played a leading role in the resettlement of refugees to the UK, with all 32 councils actively participating. To date, over 3,000 refugees have been resettled under the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme and the associated Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, exceeding the initial commitment made by Scottish Councils to resettle 2,000 refugees.
- 3.2 Falkirk Council agreed to participate in the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme in December 2015, pledging to welcome 60 people over a 5 year period which is pro-rata based on population (3%). So far the Council has welcomed 54 refugees, with a final family to arrive once Covid restrictions are lifted to complete our initial pledge. Progress of the current resettled families can be seen in Appendix A.
- 3.3 The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme were due to conclude at the end of March 2020. The Home Secretary made an announcement on 17th June 2019, providing

clarity on continued resettlement. This outlined details of the UK's ongoing commitment to the resettlement of refugees and the amalgamation of the largest resettlement schemes into a new global resettlement scheme which will be called UK Resettlement Scheme.

- 3.4 The Secretary of State announced on 17th June 2019, that Scotland would continue to be involved in the resettlement of vulnerable refugees which was endorsed by COSLA leaders on 28th June 2019.
- 3.5 COSLA is now in the process of engaging with Scottish Councils on their commitment to the resettlement programmes beyond 2020 and the end of the current resettlement schemes.

4. Considerations

- 4.1 While the details of the new UK Resettlement Scheme is still a work in progress, the current information available about the scheme is that:-
 - (1) The three largest resettlement schemes will be replaced by one broad global scheme. This will bring consistency of provision for all refugees who are resettled in the UK and will broaden the geographical focus of current schemes beyond the Middle East and North Africa;
 - (2) The funding tariff that is currently in place for both the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme is confirmed for 2020/21, along with the provision of additional funding for exceptional cases. Current funding rates are a five-year tariff of £20,520 for each refugee, with a top-up for year 1 for children aged 3-18 years. This decreases in each subsequent year as the individuals become more integrated;
 - (3) Current levels of resettlement will be sustained, with the aim of resettling approximately 5,000 people across the UK in the first year of the new scheme in 2020/21;
 - (4) The scheme will continue Local Authorities to sign up on a voluntary basis;
 - (5) The scheme will remain to be based on United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees vulnerability criteria. However, it will not just be focused on Syrian refugees but on those that are in the greatest need across the world, to enable the UK to respond to immediate crises where appropriate.

- 4.2 COSLA is anticipating that the request from UK Government will be that Scotland resettles approximately ten per cent of all those being resettled in the UK. It is assumed that most areas in Scotland will continue to participate in Resettlement. Based on Falkirk Council's previous pro rata pledge, this would equate to a pledge of resettling 15 people in Year 1 of the new scheme.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 There is no requirement for consultation. However, we will contact current partners to inform them of the new global scheme and the Strategic Working Group will reconvene to ensure all considerations in regard to new refugees coming to the Falkirk area are addressed.

6. Implications

Financial

- 6.1 A five year fund budget is provided to the Council by the Home Office for every individual that arrives under the VPR scheme and it has been confirmed this will continue in year one (2020/21) of the new scheme.

Additional funding is paid to cover school education costs and there is also additional funding which the Council can apply for, to cover excess English language training for adults.

NHS Forth Valley is paid separately by the Home Office to cover additional health costs.

Staff and overhead costs incurred in running the resettlement schemes in Falkirk are met through the funding from the Home Office.

Resources

- 6.2 We know from our work in this area since 2016 that there is a significant amount of work required in preparation for arrivals and for on-going support for resettled Refugees. There is a need for support services, beyond which we would normally provide to ensure that cultural differences and norms are addressed. Lack of such support in the past has led to issues for people settling in Scotland.

The Council is obliged, through its funding agreement, to provide up to five years support for each individual after arrival. In the majority of cases this follows a linear model, with a period of intensive support in year one, declining in years two to five. Support includes English language training, employability support and integration planning, as well as direct casework support.

A temporary Resettlement Officer was recruited in 2016 and, in 2017, a temporary Resettlement Worker was also recruited. Both now have fixed term contracts until March 2022.

Legal

- 6.3 Refugees on the scheme are entitled to 5 years leave to remain. They are entitled access to all statutory health, care and education services as if they were UK nationals during this time. They are also entitled to work and claim benefits, including child benefit, tax credit, Universal Credit, etc. At the end of the 5 years they can apply for indefinite leave to remain in the UK. If indefinite leave to remain was not granted, it would be in Falkirk Council's interest to assist the person to leave the UK or appeal the decision, otherwise they would have no recourse to public funds.

Risk

- 6.4 There would be a potential risk to the Council reputation in not participating given several of the Scottish Councils have already committed.

Equalities

- 6.5 EPIA has been completed and determines that this action will have a positive impact in future refugee families arriving in Falkirk under this scheme and on the wider community.

Sustainability/Environmental Impact

- 6.6 There are no sustainability or environmental impacts.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The UK Government has made a commitment to support and safeguard vulnerable people who seek protection in the UK through resettlement and asylum routes. They are relying on the support of local authorities and communities to voluntarily participate in the resettlement schemes with funding to provide this support. The majority of Scottish Local Authorities are committing to ongoing participation. It is recommended that Falkirk also continues to participate, subject to funding, to further develop the services created since 2016 and help support a balanced and diverse community.

Director of Corporate & Housing Services

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List of Background Papers:

The following papers were relied on in the preparation of this report in terms of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973:

- Resettlement Policy Document
- Letter for Immigration Minister to Local Authority Leaders

Appendices

- **Appendix 1 – Progress of the Syrians Resettlement Project thus far**
- **Appendix 2 – Letter from Ahlam Al Suwaidani**

Current Status of Resettled VPR Families in Falkirk

- As of January 2020, Falkirk has resettled 12 families with family sizes ranging from families of 4 to 6.
- In total, Falkirk has resettled 26 adults and 30 children.
- One family have recently relocated to Edinburgh and one individual moved to Glasgow in 2018 to get married.
- All families have been resettled under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.
- Of the 26 adults:
 - 2 are in full-time employment
 - 5 are in part-time employment
 - 2 individuals are retired
 - 2 are attending Forth Valley College full time
 - 6 are attending Forth Valley College part time
 - All are attending classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages
 - 6 individuals have obtained Fork Lift Truck license
 - 1 individual has attained a CSCS (labourers permit)
- 11 Adults have participated in various opportunities for volunteering including:
 - Salvation Army
 - CSREC
 - Re-Act , Refugee Action Scotland
 - Jupiter Urban Wildlife Centre
 - The Conservation Volunteers
 - Falkirk Re Union Canal Boats
 - Forth Valley Sensory Centre
 - Falkirk Library
 - Forth Valley Hospital
- We have:
 - 7 children in High School
 - 16 children in Primary School
 - 5 children in Nursery
- One of the children is currently volunteering with Police Youth Scotland Volunteers.
- Other Activities:
 - 3 individuals created a Digital Story, one of which was screened at an event at the Bo'ness Hippodrome in August 2019 as part of The People's Story project in Scotland.
 - 8 Ladies have completed an Inspiring Women Course
 - 1 individual has graduated from Canal College
 - 1 individual has participated in the creation of a Community Garden with his neighbours at Telford Square in which he now grows fruit and vegetables – featured in Tenant Talk
 - 2 families participated in a residential Community Learning Development trip to Fordell Firs

- Falkirk Community Trust have an exhibit scheduled for 2020 at The Park Gallery based on migrants called "Uprooted". We are currently in discussion with the Trust and our service users as to how they can participate and contribute to this exhibition should they wish to do so.

Ahlam Al Suwaidani – My Story

Hello. My name is Ahlam. I come from a small place in Syria called Dar'aa-Izraa'. Four years ago, I arrived to Scotland with my four children fleeing the civil war in Syria. This is my story.

Before 2011 life seemed to be, to a large extent, normal. Like every household we had our own problems, but life always went on. All until one day, some primary school kids dared to scribble "Freedom" on the walls of their school. Little did they know about what the word "Freedom" meant.

Soon after, the Assaad Regime hunted the kids down, displaying the most inhumane torture methods they possibly could. This was the Primary School of my hometown Dar'aa. Life has never been the same since. Not for us, neither the rest of Syrian towns, villages and cities. The Civil War in Syria had started.

My house was near a military barrack. The sound of artillery shells alone was enough for the windows of the house to shatter. My youngest child was only 3 years old back then. The harrowing trauma and fear made him lose his ability to speak. My super sharp bundle of joy that started speaking much earlier than his peers, is now muted. This remained the case until I got him treated in Lebanon well over a year later.

The place soon turned into a military camp. There were security barriers in every street, road and alley. The Assad Regime would stop and detain anyone, regardless of their age, gender or status. No reasons or justifications were ever given. My youngest brother was detained amongst hundreds of other youngsters. He had just turned 16. He now is a young 24. Still detained. His youth wasted. His life stolen away. For nothing wrong he has done.

Witnessing what the kids of my own town had gone through. How my little precious 3 year old lost his ability to speak, out of fear. How my grieving mother wept her heart out every day for her youngest boy, not knowing his fate or whether or not she'll ever live to see him again, longing to hold him in her arms just once more. The sense of bereavement was so extreme. Witnessing all of this, I knew "home" was not safe anymore. "Home" is not "home" anymore.

I took my four children and fled to nearby Lebanon where my husband used to live and work. How naïve I was thinking life would be better and the sun was going to shine again. Little did I know what was yet to happen. My husband was a narcissist, abusive and violent man. My children and I were victims of one of the nastiest forms of domestic violence.

Two years on, my kids and I could not bear this anymore. We were finally housed in a shelter, now fleeing domestic violence. I finally got my divorce. The fading candle light will now start to shimmer. Glimmer with hope for some form of life. My heart was so heavy, as we were still in the same country as my husband. While housed at the UN shelter in Lebanon I was able to work full time and provide for my four kids. Still

combatting all the traumas, alone. My deeply wounded heart festering, trying to heal in silence. The silence I grew up learning to be the only way to survive.

But life, does go on. So, I have submitted my first application to migrate to the UK. Something in my head was keeping that flicker of hope alive. I had faith that humanity exists. I just had to find it. And so, I did.

The moment my children and I touched British soil, was very definitive in our lives. Arriving to a foreign country as vulnerable as we were, with nothing in common that we share with people of this nation: no language, no culture, nothing we thought. We really needed a miracle to survive. A God-send. Michelle – you were our God-send. Our guardian angel. You and your incredible team of good Samaritans of Falkirk Council were my family's saviours. You reminded us of the humans we were, and that none of our differences mattered because we shared what was most important: being Humans. For that and much more, we are forever grateful.

Thank you Britain, for opening your borders to us. Thank you Scotland, for being our 'Home'. Thank you Falkirk, for welcoming us with open hearts before open arms. Thank you Michelle and the team, for being our backbone of support, our shoulders, our guidance, our 'light of hope'. Thank you CSREC, for all the opportunities, the understanding, and the support throughout our journey so far. Thank you to each and every single fellow human, who poured their pure love, acceptance, friendship, and goodness, for nothing in return. And last but not least, thank you our audience for listening with your hearts to the story of one Syrian refugee woman, who now found herself and her family a 'new home'.

Ladies and gentlemen: My story has not ended. My story, has just begun.