

RAS 29

Ymchwiliad i ffoaduriaid a cheiswyr lloches yng Nghymru

Inquiry into refugees and asylum seekers in Wales

Ymateb gan: Llywodraethau Lleol Conwy, Gwynedd ac Ynys Môn (Gogledd-orllewin Cymru)

Response from: Conwy, Gwynedd and the Isle of Anglesey Local Authorities (North West Wales)

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales

Joint Submission on behalf of Conwy, Gwynedd and the Isle of Anglesey Local Authorities (North West Wales).

Introduction:

The three Local Authorities in North West Wales have agreed to send the following joint response to the inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales by the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee.

This inputs within this report are offered without prejudice to any particular Local Authority since there exists similar but slightly different delivery mechanisms within each Local Authority boundary, each with it's own strengths and particularities.

It is acknowledged that due to the various conflicts throughout the World, that the UK has made a pledge to support the millions of people displaced or evacuated from the various conflicts in the Middle East and surrounding areas, which has subsequently led to the increase of asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Wales and the United Kingdom.

This response is therefore opportune in that progress across the three Local Authorities in North-West Wales can be reported on, in the theme of evolving and developing schemes which may bring about further consistency towards a common delivery approach within the different regions of Wales.

The need for consistency, quality of support, delivery standards and stability in terms of managing expectations has been paramount in building the foundations to go on for the next five years, and to ensure that refugees have a good chance of success in terms of integration, feeling safe and being able to make a positive contribution to the areas in which they have been re-settled.

It must also be acknowledged that there are no current Home Office designated dispersal areas in North-West Wales – Wrexham is the only official dispersal area in the region and is located in North-East Wales.

The North Wales Region has a long and successful history of successfully regionalising projects - some projects and workstreams are ripe for regionalisation, however others are more suitable for close collaboration with local management and delivery structures. The schemes which will be reported on in this paper have been delivered with excellent Regional Collaboration, reporting up to National (All-Wales)

committees but being locally operationally managed under cost effective local structures.

The diversity of the population in North-West Wales is very low compared to other areas of Wales and the UK, and so capacity in terms of the number of 'regular' or third sector organisations and support agencies who may be involved and with experience to support refugees is very much lacking compared to larger conurbations.

Creative solutions have therefore had to be sought e.g. additions to existing support contracts, searching for suitably qualified and experienced staff and building new relationships with Mosques etc. in order to expedite effective delivery.

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

Since the initial summit hosted by the First Minister in Wales, and the initial Briefing Paper circulated by the Home Office in October, 2015, Local Authorities have worked diligently to co-operate on this scheme. The WLGA and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership have also played an important role in liaising with Local Authorities to promulgate the scheme throughout Wales under the stewardship of the Welsh Government and the Home Office.

From the initial engagement with Council Leaders and Chief Executives to ascertain an initial position statement, there has been support for the need to have a co-ordinated approach to respond to the humanitarian crises presented by the plight of the refugees arriving from Europe, and Local Authorities have recognised their obligation to play their part in the scheme.

There is a recognition that whilst overall co-ordination must be planned on a National basis taking account of the immediate and longer term requirements of the refugees, including financial commitments and deployment of resources such as housing and access to education, then local arrangements needed to be expedited in line with available local structures and resources.

Following the initial approach from the WLGA and the Department of Communities and Local Government / Home Office, the Welsh Government organised an 'All-Wales' conference in Llandrindod Wells through the 'Fairer Futures' division. This event was **the catalyst** required to move up a gear in Wales, and following the excellent grounding received by key stakeholders at that event, a series of regional briefings were held to go through scheme requirements and expectations in a more robust manner.

There was also a need across all Local Authorities to seek political ratification for the scheme and its deliverables which required bilingual reports and portfolio member briefings. The requirement to seek cabinet/council approval may have caused some initial delay, but in the medium to long-term the Authority from above has allowed a fully corporate approach to be taken by each Local Authority which has proved beneficial. Local Government Departments have reviewed their likely contribution

and the impact such a demand would have on service continuity (particularly in the current climate of dwindling budgets and austerity measures).

Local Authorities already have day to day structures and processes which would ensure an appropriate and humanitarian response within such a national programme, however this client group raised new challenges in respect of potential language barriers e.g. the need to provide transportation, an initial induction, and to establish basic requirements which were not typical of the local population e.g. biometric details, new bank accounts, new registration for health support and fast-track access to benefits etc.

The Welsh Government developed a useful 'Welcome to Wales' guide in English and Arabic as part of the 'understanding Wales' pack. They also developed a helpful booklet for young people on the same topic in an 'easy to read' format. However in terms of orientation, there is a need to have access to an induction toolkit (An All-Wales version?) to assist with the settling in process. Latterly some of the scheme guidance issued by the Home Office has helped with defining key agency roles and responsibilities, however a Wales version would be preferred.

It was advantageous for key lead officers from North Wales to join the previously established South Wales SVPRS Operational Delivery group (Chaired by the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership), but it soon became apparent that as several members of that group had been selected to be the initial UK pilot areas, it was necessary for North Wales to go through a phase of 'catching-up'. This necessitated the establishment of North Wales' own sic-county Regional SVPRS Group to find common ground and to learn from each other's experiences.

Whilst the initial links within Local Authorities and other key agencies were established through the Regional Community Cohesion Co-ordinators, Local Authorities have now nominated key lead officers to host meetings, prepare minutes and agendas. The two Regional Community Cohesion Co-ordinators for North Wales now attend the All-Wales meeting and provide updates as well as feedback on all Regional matters (*more effective use of everyone's time*).

From the outset, there have also been local delivery groups in each Local Authority area and after the initial take-up of the scheme. County groups have facilitated the development of collection, reception and support arrangements, and the lead officer status has been transferred from Community Cohesion Co-ordinators to managerial posts in Housing etc. with close support from Education, Social Services and other key partners like the Police, Health and the Department of Work and Pensions.

The approach in all areas has been handled sensitively, ranging from sourcing suitable accommodation, be it within the private or social rented to liaising with local services to ensure refugee families were able to integrate. As with such complex matters, the timeframe for families arriving in the UK has varied considerably and the needs of what Local Authorities can offer varies depending on what can practically be offered at specific locations, particularly in respect of rurality and transport links.

To date the settlement areas have been carefully chosen in order to maximise the chances of successful integration, i.e. access to schools, good access to Public Transport, prayer facilities, specialist food outlets, access to peer support networks and Health Facilities etc. however in future refugees will need to be settled in different areas where there is adequate capacity and support. One factor that has needed some input is the management of the geographical expectation i.e. especially when families have left a large city and are being re-settled in a different landscape. In future this will require further work up-front so that expectations are as realistic as possible and the Home Office has promised that clients will receive an up-front briefing in order that expectations are fair and reasonable.

Local Support Providers have worked closely with each Local Authority to develop a trusting relationship within County SVPRS Steering Groups and case officers, however there appears to have been a deficiency in the information content shared or presented to families prior to their arrival in the UK. It is important that there is consistency in respect of UK Law, Citizenship and what refugees can reasonably expect after arrival, and that comparisons are not made with facilities offered in other countries.

Similarly the definition of 'vulnerable persons' may have been taken out of context originally in terms of the varying medical conditions suffered by the refugees. In several cases, there have been significant health issues which has necessitated additional resources and support and even those cases were classed Nationally by the Home Office as 'low vulnerability families'.

The support from local residents, community leaders and voluntary groups has been excellent – they have been keen to offer their services and donate to the scheme with local events being arranged to welcome the families and individuals. Some counties have organised special volunteer/third sector briefing meetings to keep everyone up to date but taking care not to breach any data protection issues.

There has been a continuous tirade of press and media enquiries, which has needed careful handling in order to protect vulnerable families and to give them every opportunity of success.

Support from Education and local Colleges has been excellent, however in some counties there is a shortage of pupil availability capacity in schools which are deemed to be in areas suitable for settlement. In one school on Anglesey, the Local Authority even match-funded an application for additional capacity in order to meet a shortfall.

Whilst the provision of ESOL has been arranged locally, there have also been opportunities for young people within the scheme to attend an intensive Welsh Language Learner's Course in a Welsh Language Centre in one county.

Operational toolkits like the one prepared by the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP) has also played a key co-ordination and supportive role in assisting authorities in developing arrangements. They have also hosted the All-Wales Local Authority Delivery Group and have enabled the sharing of information and good practice. It is understood that the WSMP have recently appointed an All-

Wales Refugee Resettlement Co-ordinator to co-ordinate the arrival of families under the Programme which will be of further assistance across Wales.

Overall, after a moderate start, the scheme continues to gather momentum and the foundations have been laid to support a robust and dynamic scheme to assist Vulnerable Syrian Refugees.

B: The effectiveness of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan

The general consensus reading the Welsh Government's 'Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan' is that many aspects of the plan have yet to be achieved.

For the plan to be effective, there needs to be a more active campaign of awareness raising the objectives and the actions within the plan need further ownership in terms of being responsible for the deliverables.

It is therefore fair to report that the plan has had limited profile or impact across Local Authorities to date, but that further work needs to be done to raise its profile.

In the light of the recent work undertaken with the SVPRS scheme, it might be a worthwhile exercise to review the content and re-engage with key partners so that expectations can be more realistic and achievable given that there are more pressures on dwindling resources and staff.

Aspects of the plan need to be owned by a specific group or groups, be that local or regional to track progress and to be clearer on monitoring mechanisms.

The range of organisations mentioned in the plan in the context of Community Cohesion mentions references to Housing, Education, Health & Social Care, Young People, Employment, Crime (Hate Crime, Modern Day Slavery, FGM, Domestic Abuse, Sexual Violence), Communities first, Flying Start, Families First, Arts, Culture & Sport – a very wide and diverse range of activities which would require input from a multitude of sources – yet the plan does not allocate the objectives to specific organisations or partnerships.

The plan makes several references to 'dispersal areas' and meetings have taken place with the Home Office in North Wales to explore the need for further designated areas, however discussions with this respect are at an early stage of development and due to other more immediate requirements i.e. SVPRS and UASC, progress on discussions on potential future dispersal areas has been stunted, however the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership have recently been tasked by the Home Office to meet Local Authorities on an individual basis to provide more detail regarding expectations.

The plan makes mention of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and that cohesion and equality are at the heart of how Public Bodies deliver policies and services in the future, yet there appears to be no method of measuring progress and there is no reference to inputs, outputs, designated leads or cost implications. The plan is currently in an aspirational state in terms of what it seeks to

achieve, which is why the list of intended actions needs further work in order to produce a workable SMART action plan.

C: The support and advocacy available to UASC in Wales

The National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum seeking children has been considered by all three Local Authorities in North-West Wales, with the aim of sharing more equitably the care of UASC across the UK. Two out of three Authorities have indicated a potential ability to support the scheme, whilst the third has outlined reasonably why it can't at this time take part.

One Local Authority has presented a briefing paper to their Leadership Team with a recommendation to support the scheme by accommodating young people aged between 16 and 18 years in an appropriate area within the County with external provider support.

Another Authority has presented a briefing paper to members to explain the background to the scheme and to seek their views / participation in the scheme so that placements of children who are to be reunited with family living in the UK or those who may be unaccompanied could be arranged to alleviate the problems in Kent and Calais.

Both the reasoning behind the scheme and the breakdown (statistics) appertaining to those affected have been shared, together with the expectation principles based on the proportion of the local child population (up to 0.07%). The scheme is being considered in the light of recent pressures brought about by Welfare Reform and housing pressures and the ability to meet the need of care leavers and vulnerable young people.

Placement options have been explored in line with current legislation, together with the ability to support those aged above or below 16 years, and an options appraisal has been prepared. In one county this favours a tendency to take those aged 16+ years of age by way of supported housing model with a delivery partner, although exemptions might be required for commissioning purposes.

The resource requirements have also been investigated and the financial position and risks has been explored, especially the potential for local support costs to be in excess of the grant made available by the Home Office for certain age ranges i.e. there would be additional costs for case management, placement, educational psychology, special needs, translation and interpretation, health co-ordination, cultural and religious needs, legal advice, personal advisor etc. amongst Local Authorities and Partners.

Opportunities for joint collaboration with neighbouring Local Authorities is also being assessed to see if there is a potential to provide some joint service provision.

One Local Authority has during recent years received UASC cases, and most due to their complex needs have been placed out of area to allow for their cultural needs to

be met as far as practical. They have also been designated as 'Looked After Children' (LAC). The typical receiving process has involved:-

- Attending custody initially to commence an age assessment;
- Utilising the 'BIG word' for general communication and individual translators for assessments and meetings;
- A local service provider would offer advocacy;
- An asylum solicitor would assist with applications and appeals;
- There were no specific services regarding advocacy, however assistance would be sought from any service that might have those skills to assist.

Another Authority has discussed the request for support and advocacy available to UASC or participation in the VCRP at length and has had to decline involvement with the scheme due to legitimate reasons i.e.

- Already receiving a high number of unaccompanied children due to the throughput of passengers through a busy international port;
- Inability to meet language and culture needs, and often (if not always) unaccompanied children are placed with foster carers located out of county – which results in them not only losing their home, it makes the link with any area and the feeling of belonging difficult;
- The lack of capacity for appropriate specialist services i.e. children will have experienced trauma.

The All Wales Heads of Children's Services have recently drawn together a position statement in an attempt to outline the need for a co-ordinated Welsh response to the requests in relation to the UASC. They have acknowledged there is a moral duty to do all they can to support children and young people who have entered the UK seeking asylum regardless of their categorisation under various legislation. They have nominated two leads in Wales to receive and cascade all communications relating to UASC and will be preparing a weekly bulletin to Directors and Heads of Service.

Notwithstanding that the UK already has a formula for working out how many young people should be admitted on County basis, they are proposing that Wales should receive a total of 44 children based on Wales having 6% of the UK population. They equate this to each Region in Wales taking 6 to 7 children and young people, and that this be handled through seven regional partnership boards with a lead Local Authority being identified within each of the seven sub-regions.

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

The 2016/17 Community Cohesion Plan contains seven key outcomes and continues to be an aspiring and challenging workstream with many new aspects being included e.g. SVPRS.

The fourth outcome within the Cohesion Plan promotes increased evidence and awareness on immigration and supporting the inclusion of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. The objective is to provide support in dispersal areas and work with Local Authorities at a strategic level to support implementation of the Welsh Government's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan (where applicable). This objective's profile has been raised in light of the other work being undertaken across the significant work being undertaken to embed the SVPRS, UASC and migration aspects across Wales.

The Cohesion work has also needed to cover aspects of a recent rise in Community Tensions both pre and post BREXIT with one large-scale right-wing demonstration and a peak in hate crime in one County which involved several hundred police officers.

Regional Community Cohesion Co-ordinators cover a total of 33 key objectives over numerous counties (in this case 3) within the annual delivery plan, but to date extensive time has been invested to get the SVPRS scheme established and to assist with migration issues e.g. via the Wales Migration Project.

The initial role played by Regional Community Cohesion Co-ordinators has been useful in terms of acting as a strategic link between Local Authority areas within their patch, and to enable the sharing of good practice, new ideas and to help circulate and promulgate new policy and scheme development documents through well-established communication channels.

In North Wales, the two Regional Community Cohesion Co-ordinators (RCCC's) have acted as conduits to All-Wales groups and have been a valuable resource to work with lead officers in each County to attend to any queries, difficulties or barriers to delivery, and to work across several Regional delivery groups, voluntary groups and providers to create strategic links with partnerships etc. through Public Service Boards. There are also other examples of support e.g. contributing to sensitive press releases, provide input on Cabinet reports, members briefings, Lead officer support etc.

The RCCC's task is to mainstream workstreams as far as possible, and to forge new links with appropriate groups to support scheme development e.g. Communities First (where some refugees have been located).

The delivery plan has also enabled better links to Wellbeing Plans, under the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, Strategic Equality Plans and cross cutting issues in other relevant plans and strategies (even down to departmental business plans in some cases).

The delivery plan has played a useful role in supporting Local Authorities in their planning and preparations for the arrival and resettlement of refugees, however the resource implications need to be explored further e.g. RCCC's are currently funded one year at a time, which makes planning programmes for the medium to long term plan e.g. over three years difficult. There needs to be more stability for the Community Cohesion programme if the objectives of the delivery plan are to be properly serviced.

Under the auspices of the plan, the RCCC's have worked closely with the Police and other partners to ensure that appropriate areas have been selected for refugees, and to monitor community tensions in and around those areas through e.g. monitoring social media, newspapers and media sources, and close co-operation with Local Authority and Police press and media officers.

The plan's objectives has enabled the provisions of advice and support on engaging with local communities to prepare areas for the arrival of refugees, a role highly valued by local authorities and external partners, and a key resource for creating new bridges and strategic links.