

North Yorkshire County Council

Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee

19 April 2021

North Yorkshire Refugee Resettlement

1 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an update and progress report on refugee resettlement in North Yorkshire.

2 Background

- 2.1 Between July 2016 to February 2018 the eight local authorities in North Yorkshire received 238 refugees (50 families) combined under the Home Office's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)¹ and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS)².
- 2.2 The VPRS and VCRS schemes were due to end in spring 2020 when the agreed national commitment under those schemes had been expected to have been reached. These schemes were due to be replaced by the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS)³, which planned to resettle 5,000 refugees in the first year. North Yorkshire district councils and the county council responded to the government's call to participate in the UKRS by agreeing to resettle 200 refugees between 2020 and 2024 on a pro-rata population basis.
- 2.3 Resettlement had planned to commence in Hambleton and Richmondshire districts in July 2020 but was unable to proceed then or for the remainder of 2020 because of the national suspension of resettlement.
- 2.4 Resettlement has now recommenced and in February 2021, 24 persons (5 families) were resettled in North Yorkshire across Hambleton and Richmondshire districts. This was half the number of people that we had originally planned to resettle in 2020.

¹ In September 2015, as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS), Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the UK would accept up to 20,000 Syrian refugees who had fled to neighbouring countries because of the current crisis and who were particularly vulnerable.

² In April 2016, the UK government announced that it would be resettling an additional 3,000 refugees under the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). The scheme was open to refugees regardless of their nationality but specifically children at risk and their families from the Middle East and North Africa region.

³ The UKRS consolidates the previous legacy schemes into one global scheme.

2.5 The Home Office has confirmed that the funding for arrivals in 2021/22 will be the same as in previous financial years for local authorities and CCGs.

3 The impact of the global covid-19 pandemic on refugee resettlement

3.1 A report by the World Health Organisation published in December 2020 found that the COVID-19 pandemic only served to exacerbate the already poor living and working conditions of refugees and migrants.⁴

3.2 A global temporary suspension of resettlement came into force between March and June 2020 because of the pandemic.

3.3 Immediately prior to the suspension, many countries had restricted entry into their territories and so travel arrangements for resettling refugees became very difficult. The UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) and IOM (International Organization for Migration) also became concerned that international travel could increase refugees' exposure to the virus. As a result, IOM and UNHCR suspended resettlement departures for refugees. At the same time, the UNHCR and IOM appealed to countries to work in close coordination with them, to ensure that transfers could continue for the most critical emergency cases wherever possible.⁵

3.4 During the suspension, the conditions for refugees living in their countries of first asylum deteriorated further, particularly in Lebanon due to its political and economic turmoil⁶.

3.5 On 19 June 2020, the UNHCR and IOM issued a joint statement confirming that they were able to resume resettlement travel following the temporary suspension of all travel in March 2020.

3.6 In total only 15,425 refugees were resettled in the first nine months of 2020, compared to more than 50,000 in 2019.⁷

3.7 In the UK, resettlement stopped during the second and third quarters of 2020. Immediately prior to the suspension, the UK was just short of 232 persons from reaching its 20,000 VPRS commitment.

3.8 In November 2020, the UK government committed to restart resettlement but this was restricted to resettling the remaining 232 people required to complete the 20,000 VPRS target. The UK resettled eight persons in December 2020. The

⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/migrants-and-refugees-say-covid-19-has-dramatically-worsened-their-lives>

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2020/3/5e7103034/iom-unhcr-announce-temporary-suspension-resettlement-travel-refugees.html>

⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugees-coronavirus-uk-migrants-resettlement-covid-syria-lebanon-b806953.html>

[Lebanon | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1078052>

remaining 224 persons were resettled between January and March 2021, with Hambleton and Richmondshire districts resettling persons from that total.

- 3.9 The Home Office confirmed in January 2021 that agreement had been secured for the UK to continue with resettlement, once the UK's commitment under the VPRS had been met. That target was met in March 2021.
- 3.10 The Home Office have a backlog of in the region of 3000 persons scheduled for resettlement in 2020.

4 Preparations put in place to resettle new arrivals in North Yorkshire

- 4.1 Despite the challenges posed with the pandemic in the UK, our most recent resettlement of families in North Yorkshire has showed that there is a balance between the risk to their physical and mental health remaining in their countries of first asylum and the risks associated with covid-19. This is both in terms of travelling from their countries of first asylum (chiefly Lebanon, where some Covid-19 restrictions were tougher than in the UK at the time), and the risk of being infected in the UK.
- 4.2 Thorough preparations were put in place by the international, regional and local resettlement agencies in the weeks leading up to the five families arriving in February 2021, to ensure that their arrival in the UK, their subsequent 10 days quarantine period and the weeks to follow would be as safe and smooth as possible. The key organisations involved locally included the Refugee Council (integration provider), Hambleton District Council, Richmondshire District Council, North Yorkshire County Council, Broadacres, North Yorkshire Police, local GP practices, the DWP, North Yorkshire Public Health and the Healthy Child Service. Links were also made with the two local volunteer support groups.
- 4.3 Public Health England guidance was followed and additional arrangements were put in place. All adults and children aged 11 years and over had to provide a negative covid-19 test within 48 hours before they were allowed to board the plane to the UK and all family members quarantined after their arrival in accordance with government requirements. In addition to the requirement to quarantine for 10 days after arrival, some changes to the COVID-19 regulations came into force on 15 February 2021, which impacted upon a family who arrived on a later flight than the other four families. These changes included amongst other things taking a COVID-19 test on or before day 2 and on or after day 8 of the quarantine period.
- 4.4 Refugee Council staff accompanied the families in separate vehicles from the airport to their new homes. Although prior to their arrival in the UK, the families were briefed on the COVID-19 restrictions in the UK, we ensured that post-arrival the families were kept up to speed with the restrictions during and following their quarantine period.
- 4.5 On reflection, the quarantine period provided the families with much-needed breathing space to rest. However, we knew in advance that in the absence of a welcome reception and frequent face-to-face meetings, having a frequent and

reliable form of communication with the new arrivals would be very important to ensure that they felt less alone in those crucial first few days. To this end:

- We provided each family with a basic android mobile phone with pre-loaded data to last for the first month of their arrival so that all the resettlement agencies had a guaranteed way of communicating with families and so that the families had access to the internet and could use video conferencing tools such as Zoom and what's app.
- During the quarantine period, the Refugee Council and staff from North Yorkshire County Council were in frequent contact with the families by phone and using video-conferencing technology. The introductory 'meet and greet' sessions were followed up with welfare checks, using remote technology during and after the quarantine period. The respective housing providers in each district also arranged to be in contact with the families during that period.
- Existing refugee families living in the same town as the new arrivals made a hot meal for them on their first day in the UK. They also delivered extra shopping for the new families whilst they were quarantining and kept in contact by phone. Public health information was ramped up to existing families immediately prior to the new families arriving to make sure that all were aware about the need for social distancing and to remind them not to go into the new families' properties etc.
- The Refugee Council and North Yorkshire County Council provided detailed welcome packs – explaining who was who, what each agency did, interesting facts about the local area, basic words in English, learning resources and materials for the children, and information about the covid-19 restrictions in place at the time. The housing providers also provided information.
- Volunteers kindly donated clothes, children's books, toys, DVDs and televisions with an initial TV licence. Volunteer support groups arranged for a specific volunteer to support each of the new families.

4.6 Nearly all the school-aged children were in school within six days after their quarantine period. The exception was a child with special educational needs who required assessments to be undertaken first.

4.7 Prior to the families arriving in the UK, the EAL team in the County Council's Children and Young People's Service directorate:

- Worked proactively, liaising with schools, the Admissions Team the SEN Hub and supporting organisations agencies to plan for the arrival of the new children.
- Supported school staff to provide welcome videos that children and families could watch at home (COVID-19 restrictions meant that schools were not able to invite new pupils and parents to visit their schools before starting).
- Provided Continued Professional Development (CPD) sessions for school staff to prepare for the new arrivals (a programme of ongoing CPD according to teachers' needs will also take place).

4.8 Post-arrival the EAL service:

- Carried out assessments of the children's current English language skills.
- Supported the families and schools with the necessary documentation regarding school induction.

4.9 The English language classes for the adults will start in full from the week commencing 12 April using Zoom until the classes are safe to go back to face-to-face.

5 General support provided to all families during the covid pandemic

5.1 Despite the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns that followed most families have continued to progress well. The following key areas of support have been provided to the families:

Refugee Council:

5.2 With the onset of the pandemic and throughout most of 2020, a hold was put on face-to-face appointments including drop-ins and home visits, apart from emergencies. Caseworkers had to adapt to a new way of providing support to families online and through phone support. WhatsApp groups for families in each North Yorkshire district were set up and Zoom drop-in meetings were arranged on a fortnightly basis.

5.3 Attendance at the virtual drop-ins has been patchy in some districts and has usually only involved the men attending. However, the use of virtual technology has allowed briefing sessions to be held across more than one district. Two key briefing sessions that the Refugee Council organised recently related to the Census 2021, in partnership with the Office for National Statistics, and an information briefing on the covid-19 vaccination programme. Women and youth groups took place virtually and this enabled women and young people across the county to come together to meet and support each other remotely.

5.4 There are plans to recommence some face-to-face drop-in sessions in summer 2021 by having staggered appointments for each family. Priority areas will be districts that have recently resettled families in the UK.

5.5 Casework support is intensive for the new arrivals. For all other families resettled in North Yorkshire because they have been in the UK for longer than three years, they are increasingly being encouraged to do more things for themselves including making direct contact with various agencies. This is helping to build up their independence. We are seeing the benefits to existing families when new families arrive in their town because it highlights to the former how far they have progressed since arriving in the UK.

5.6 July 2021 will mark the fifth anniversary of the first Syrian refugee arrivals in North Yorkshire. A qualified adviser employed by the Refugee Council is helping those families to complete the application form for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the

UK. This is an in-depth and detailed application form. Indefinite Leave to Remain is currently not an automatic right for those refugees that we have resettled to date. Instead, the Home Office will review each case before making a decision as to whether an individual has a right to permanent residency in the UK or not. The conditions in the refugee's home country will be taken into account amongst other factors.

- **North Yorkshire County Council:**

- 5.7 Public Health information:

Timely information translated into Arabic was sent out to all families from the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 and has continued to date about the COVID-19 restrictions and related key government messages. We followed this up at drop-in briefings to make sure that families had received and understood the messages and were observing the government's measures to stay safe at home. We also sent key public health related messages and videos by WhatsApp to each of the district WhatsApp groups for the refugee families. In the early days of the pandemic there was a marked absence of translated Arabic materials produced by the government and national public health agencies, so there was a gap that we needed to fill locally.

- 5.8 English Language Classes:

With the start of the first lockdown, the County Council's tailored ESOL⁸ provision moved online in March 2020 and currently remains online. Chromebooks were provided for the adults actively engaged in classes in April 2020. Consequently, provision managed to continue without interruption during the various lockdowns thanks to the teachers adapting their lessons for online purposes in a short space of time.

- 5.9 The majority of adult learners have successfully developed their skills in using their Chromebook to access the ESOL classes delivered via Zoom video. In the main, there has been relatively good attendance despite the fact that during the first lockdown most children were not in school. A small minority (seven adult learners) have failed to engage; however, these learners may well not have continued to engage in face-to-face delivery as they suffer from health issues (including with mental health).

- 5.10 Continuing the ESOL provision online enabled many learners to gain City and Guilds Centre Assessed Grades (CAG) for their ESOL exams in July 2020. This has been followed by Online Speaking and Listening exams December 2020 to March 2021.

- 5.11 EAL service - Children's and Young People's Service:

The pandemic placed many additional pressures on refugee children, their families and the schools and agencies supporting them, most significantly the prolonged closures of schools and settings. In addition, the lack of opportunities to meet and interact with English speakers have meant language development opportunities

⁸ English as a Second Language

have been reduced for all EAL pupils, and they will need significant support to make up for lost learning. Some pupils however have achieved special commendation awards during the past year and a pupil who arrived in North Yorkshire in 2016, with no English, has secured a university place to study Pharmacy from September 2021.

5.12 The EAL team has worked remotely through Whatsapp Groups and Zoom, over the past year, to support 148 children from 47 families in 54 schools and settings across the county to address these challenges by:

- Ensuring that families were provided with up-to-date information regarding school closures.
- Reinforcing government public health messages relating to the pandemic.
- Supporting liaison between schools and families regarding home learning and ICT access, Free School Meals vouchers, revised dropping-off and picking-up times and places, guidance regarding mask wearing on school premises, and advice regarding self-isolation.
- Helping and advising families with online applications for nursery places and school transitions, supporting families with EHCP applications and reviews and choosing GCSE options.
- Providing parents with advice and ideas to support home learning, including sending out practical activities.
- Offering pupils and parents with individualised support for home learning, and supporting Refugee Council volunteer tutors with training and advice, including relating to safeguarding, for supporting pupils with home-based learning.
- Providing opportunities for parents to seek advice relating to education by attending regular 'virtual drop-ins'.
- Attending a weekly 'Virtual Youth Group' for girls aged 10-16.

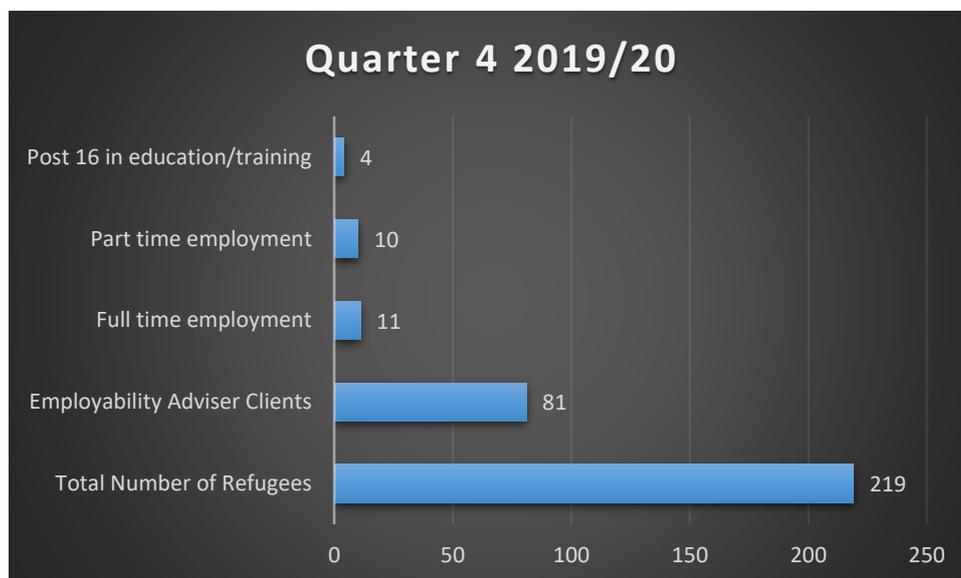
5.13 Over the last year, it has been increasingly clear that many families who are unfamiliar with the UK education system, continue to need support from the EAL Service after their first two years in the UK. Beyond the challenges of supporting the children to settle into schools and to learn English, help continues to be required with transitions between school stages, choosing GCSE options, addressing children's Special Educational Needs, and significantly, supporting effective and positive home school liaison. The value which the families place on the EAL team was highlighted in research carried out by a Masters student (February 2021), comparing educational support for refugee children in North Yorkshire, with that for refugee children in more metropolitan areas.

5.14 Employability Support:

The primary aim of the Refugee Employability Project, led by the County Council and funded from the Home Office grant, is to support working-age refugees into meaningful and sustainable employment and, through this, help them move towards

full integration and independence. This also involves the provision of relevant training to validate existing skills and to provide additional skills and training.

- 5.15 The past 12 months have been dominated by covid-19 restrictions. For comparative purposes, at the end of March 2020 (Q4 2019/20), and before the impact of the first lockdown was known, the key statistics relating to refugee clients were as illustrated in the table below:



- 5.16 In the 2020 calendar year, the situation continually changed depending upon the local or national lockdown restrictions. Jobs were lost, and gained, and all but a few volunteer roles were suspended. One of those still in operation is for a client, in Selby, who volunteers for Health Watch Yorkshire. He has helped provide valuable health related information to refugee families across the county.
- 5.17 A number of the adults in the county asked to volunteer to support their communities during the pandemic and so were put in touch with their local community support organisation. Typically, volunteering opportunities included delivering food and medicines to people who were shielding.⁹ Another volunteer put her seamstress skills to use by preparing scrubs and scrub bags for the NHS. As one volunteer said: "I feel it allows me to do something positive during this difficult time for us all, for the community which welcomed me and my family when we first arrived to the UK." For those refugees who took on volunteer roles there was a noticeable benefit from the added social contact and, for some, there has been a definite improvement in their spoken English and social skills. One of those volunteering went on to secure paid employment as a delivery driver for a food takeaway in his local town. All but two of the covid-19 volunteering positions ceased in late summer 2020 and, those that remain, continue to deliver medicines and food to vulnerable people in the community.

⁹ <https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/news/article/refugees-take-key-roles-community-response>

5.18 As at the 31 March 2021 (Q4 2020/21), and just as the third national lockdown was starting to ease, the updated situation was:



5.19 The current figure of 106, for Employability Adviser clients, includes refugees (16+ years) who are unpaid carers, volunteers and in post-16 education/training. Even though they are currently undertaking other activities, they are still supported by the Employability Adviser in terms of their work or education and possible future careers. The current figure of 106, active Employability Adviser clients does not include the latest arrivals (aged +16 years) who have not yet engaged with the Adviser.

5.20 Despite the challenging economic situation, over the 12 month period there has been a net increase of five part-time jobs and three full-time jobs. The new full-time jobs include an apprenticeship within the County Council. The full-time jobs also include three clients who have set up their own businesses and have continued to operate when allowed to do so in between the various lockdowns. There are currently three businesses operating in the county: two barbers shops and a food shop.

5.21 A number of the adults not yet in employment have done further training, chiefly online courses, such as Food Hygiene courses. Two clients have also undertaken the County Council's Adult Learning and Skills 'Starting your career in schools' online course, which has led to one of the clients securing a volunteer position at a local primary school. For those wishing to make use of their former skills in the construction industry, a series of training sessions are in the process of being arranged to help clients study for the Construction Skills Certification Scheme test. Two clients wanted to do a tiling course, one client was hoping to do a forklift truck course and another client was hoping to sit various tests to qualify to drive a Light Goods Vehicle. However, the training providers have remained closed for most of the last 12 months due to the pandemic but links will be re-established as soon as practicable with a view to commencing these courses.

- 5.22 The Employability Adviser has provided all working-age refugee clients with the opportunity to have Zoom and telecom calls with him, in the absence of face-to-face meetings. Zoom meetings are commonly used to discuss job applications and to provide training and general advice. Other support and advice provided to clients by the Employability Adviser has included:
- Small Business Rate Relief for business premises
 - Registration of new business premises
 - University and college applications
 - COVID-19 guidance and financial support
 - DBS applications
 - Completion of online Universal Credit applications
 - Preparation for interviews
 - HMRC queries and returns
 - Benefit related support
- 5.23 Face-to-face contact with employers was not been practicable during the past 12 months although several discussions have taken place relating to opportunities for work. When the current restrictions are lifted, greater emphasis will be devoted to building local employer contacts.
- 5.24 Looking ahead, with many thousands of additional unemployed in North Yorkshire and neighbouring areas, the competition for jobs will be intensified. In most instances, refugee clients will be competing against people with higher or more appropriate skill sets. To help combat this situation, the continuing focus will be to provide clients with additional relevant skills and to promote the continuation of volunteering and work experience opportunities that will help in this regard.
- 5.25 In order to better equip our refugee clients to secure employment, a series of employability modules, and supporting translated handouts, are available. These address topics such as:
- CV Writing (Updating)
 - Covering Letters
 - Job Search
 - Use of Social Media
 - Interview Techniques
 - Use of Universal Credit Accounts
 - Apprenticeships

5.26 Translated handouts relating to Interview Skills and CVs have already been used in several situations. With the initial success of individual Zoom meetings, the plan during the next quarter is to deliver small group sessions as required.

- **Volunteers**

5.27 Lockdown has resulted in a reduced number of volunteers being able to interact face-to-face with families on a regular basis. Contact has been maintained instead via phone and WhatsApp, although some socially-distanced face-to-face encounters have occurred in between the various lockdowns.

5.28 The pool of volunteers able to provide a car lift to appointments (e.g. hospital, dentist) dramatically reduced due to vulnerabilities in their own households and because of the nature of the covid-19 restrictions.

5.29 A number of volunteer support groups in the county are currently planning to widen their pool of volunteers as restrictions ease. This is in order to assign volunteers to new arrivals and because some existing volunteers are expected to step down.

5.30 Although we have seen a new dynamic of existing refugee families helping to support the new arrivals, the need for volunteers in the local community remains important. This is particularly so in relation to providing informal English in the home language learning and promoting wider community links such as putting families in contact with local clubs and societies and even potential employers. Some volunteer groups have also been leading on campaigning work and community cohesion initiatives, such as working with schools in their area to become Schools of Sanctuary¹⁰.

5.31 Separate to the local authority resettlement scheme, two volunteer support groups in Harrogate district are in the process of considering resettling an additional refugee family each in their local area through the Home Office's Community Sponsorship scheme. Since 2019, a volunteer support group in the county has been supporting a Syrian refugee family through the scheme.

5.32 Community Sponsorship groups are required to:

- Find and furnish an affordable home for a refugee family for a period of two years
- Raise at least £9,000 (to cover various costs like translation, furnishing the house, and English classes)
- Welcome the family at the airport and settle them in their new community (helping them register for benefits, access health services and enrol children in schools)
- Provide support and encouragement to the family for one year so that they can live securely and independently.

¹⁰ A School of Sanctuary is a school committed to being a safe and welcoming place for all especially those seeking sanctuary.

6 Key Implications

Local Member: None.

Financial: There are no additional financial implications to North Yorkshire County Council arising directly from this report. The Home Office funds the refugee resettlement programme in North Yorkshire.

Human Resources: There are no additional human resources implications to North Yorkshire County Council arising directly from this report. North Yorkshire County Council employs staff on the refugee resettlement programme but they are funded through the Home Office grant.

Legal: There are no legal implications to North Yorkshire County Council arising directly from this report. The refugee resettlement scheme is a voluntary scheme. However, participating local authorities are required to meet specific obligations set out in the funding instruction to local authorities from the Home Office.

Equalities: None.

Environmental Impacts/Benefits including Climate Change Impact Assessment:
No Impact.

7 Recommendation:

- 7.1 That the Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the progress of the refugee resettlement programme in North Yorkshire.

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8 April 2021

Appendices: None

Background documents: None