

A Community Refugee Sponsorship Scheme for our area in Norwich?

The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)

is a programme instigated by the UK government to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees from camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey over the period September 2015 to May 2020. It was expanded in July 2017 to include other nationalities caught in the conflict (Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish minorities who had themselves sought refuge in Syria). By March 2017, 7,307 Syrian refugees had been brought to the UK, half are children. Norfolk is one of 235 Local Authorities who have provided places and 53 refugees have been resettled in Norwich.

The refugees have been identified by the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) and are those who have the most significant needs – for example survivors of torture and violence, those in need of urgent medical attention, and vulnerable families. The UK government retains the right to reject on the grounds of security or war crimes.

Refugee status means they are entitled to the same benefits as UK citizens, including Housing Benefit. They may apply for the right to permanently remain after 5 years when their refugee status ends.

The Community Sponsorship Scheme

was launched in July 2017 by the Home Secretary and the Archbishop of Canterbury (see ref 1 below). It enables communities to take on the role of supporting resettled refugees. Lambeth Palace was the first community group to be approved to receive a refugee family. The Archbishop said:

“Refugees, like all people, are treasured human beings, made in the image of God, who deserve safety, freedom and the opportunity to flourish.”

What do sponsors do?

Sponsors provide housing. They help the refugee family integrate, access medical and social services, they arrange English language tuition and interpreters and provide support towards employment and self-sufficiency. Sponsors must commit to this for a minimum of 2 years. Essentially the sponsors are doing the same job as the Local Authorities.

To sponsor a family a group must have status either as a registered charity or community interest group, the consent of the local authority and a comprehensive plan for resettlement. The Home Office considers all offers of sponsorship. The whole process for approval to arrival has taken groups a minimum of 6 months.

Can we sponsor a family?

Our community can welcome a family. We can provide practical and emotional support to enable the family to integrate and make the most of their new life in Norwich. It is not about raising large sums of money: it is about commitment, friendship and support. It will not be a one sided relationship and we strongly believe that we will all benefit from this initiative.

From our research it seems that a small core group is needed to take responsibility for the various aspects of looking after the family, organising the activities of the volunteers and liaising with our partner organisations.

Bishop Graham has expressed support. The Bishop has said he would cover the £9,000 required by the Home Office for expenses for 2 adult refugees.

What now?

A meeting for all our community and local residents has been arranged for 21 June to which our local partner organisations will be invited. We shall also invite someone from a scheme which already up and running.

The purpose of this meeting will be to provide more information about the scheme and see whether there are enough people from our community to support setting one up. The experience of other communities who are sponsoring a family suggests that a core group of 6 – 10 people would be needed, with a further 20 or 30 volunteers to carry out the occasional practical work and perhaps raise extra funds. This would be the parishes' and community's main contribution.

Please consider if you might have a part to play and come to the meeting when the date is advertised. Thank you.

Jane Saunders and Jenny Holcombe