

# **Education Resources for Parishes regarding Syrian Refugees**

## **Introduction**

20,000 Syrians will be arriving in the UK from refugee camps. Every parish will not receive a Syrian family, but every parish can help. What can we do to help? How can we help those exiled from their homes, their country, their friends and their culture?

The Portsmouth Diocese Refugee Response Working Group focuses on supporting parishes in the settlement, care, welcoming, practical help and integration for incoming refugees.

In this document, we offer education resources for parishes or groups in three sections. These are:

1. Syrian Refugees Arriving from Refugee Camps – A Briefing.
2. Questions, Thoughts and Comments about Syrian Refugees in the UK.
3. A Syrian Refugee Family (case study).

There is a separate project management resource available to be used by parish groups. This is available at ( ).

It contains:

1. Making a Plan. This looks at considerations for any actions, process, models, and how the diocese can help.
2. Cultural Norms – Syrian culture is different in many ways from the UK's culture. This provides a brief commentary and references to reputable work.

If your parish or local area is planning or doing something towards helping and supporting refugees, please let us know. Please also contact us if you have skills which you would be willing to offer the new arrivals – such as teaching English as a foreign language, psychology, relevant language skills (Arabic, Kurdish, French or other regional languages), willingness to drive, practical skills like carpentry or anything which you think could help. You can contact the working group via [pcs@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk](mailto:pcs@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk) or 01730 262 290.

We hope you, your parish, school or local area finds this useful and wish you all the best and blessings upon your endeavours.

*The Portsmouth Diocese Refugee Response Working Group*

*June 2016*

## **SYRIAN REFUGEES ARRIVING FROM REFUGEE CAMPS – A Briefing**

### **Who**

The UK is accepting Syrian bona fide refugees who will be coming directly from refugee camps. These will be families, elderly, disabled, educated, uneducated, farmers, office workers, traders... anyone. They may speak Arabic, or one of five other languages. All that they have in common is that they are fleeing a brutal civil war and have made it to refugee camps and lived there in very basic conditions, for up to five years. Over 12 million people have been forced to leave their homes.

Who can help them? All of us can.

### **What will happen?**

People will be distributed across the country. We don't know where and will probably not have much notice if and when any are sent to our local area. They will enter with full refugee status – this means that they are entitled to live here, work here, use the NHS and settle here. They will have funding from the government to meet living costs for one year, then have recourse to normal benefits, like Jobseekers' Allowance, Child Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Housing Benefit and others. They will arrive with nothing so will need to start with nothing.

### **When**

We don't know, any time in the next five years.

### **Where?**

Anywhere in the country. Local councils, including Southampton, East Hampshire and Winchester, have offered to take some, as have many other councils across the country.

### **Why?**

#### **Matthew 25: 35-40. The Sheep and the Goats**

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

### **How can we help?**

These people will need huge amounts of help – everything from setting up home in a new and strange country, to opening bank accounts, getting a job, getting medical or psychological care, help in schools, understanding the systems and making networks. The most important thing is to help people become a part of British society – to help them put down roots and integrate into our multi-cultural, tolerant society. Financial assistance can be given through reputable charities, but offers of help are needed locally. If you can help, please contact Fr. Peter Hollins on [pcs@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk](mailto:pcs@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk) or 01730 262 290.

## **Questions, Thoughts and Comments about Syrian refugees in the UK**

*In this section we look at the concerns, information and misinformation which may arise. For many reasons, there may be concerns or resistance within the community; these answers may be helpful. These are not the thoughts of the group, parishes or diocese; these are representative questions and answers.*

### **“Our country is being overrun by foreigners.”**

The population of the UK in 2014 was 64.6 million. Net migration for the year 2014-2015 was 336,000. That is the number of people who came into the UK less the number who left.

20,000 Syrians therefore represents a tiny proportion.

### **“But surely these people are dangerous?”**

The 20,000 who are being brought in as part of the relief programme are not coming directly from Syria. They will be selected from people who have fled the war and have left behind everything they ever had. They have lived in basic refugee camps for up to 5 years. They are probably worn down and hungry. The children have had their education interrupted. They have had to live in close proximity with other Syrian people from different ethnic groups. They have survived conditions and trials that we find hard to imagine. They hope for a better future, one where they can be safe. Without doubt, many will have physical or mental health issues, including depression.

The refugees will be vetted. They are not members of Islamic State – they are running away from it.

Until 2010 Syrian men had to do national service for at least 18 months (with some exceptions).<sup>i</sup> While this affects the ability of men to fight, the experience of living through war has led the refugees to leave Syria. Refugees do not want to fight.

### **“They aren’t part of our way of life.”**

“Our way of life” is always changing. Britain before WWII was different to Britain after the fall of the Empire to Britain today. Some things change; some things stay the same. Everything changes. Companies, people or countries who don’t grow and develop become stale.

Britain does not have one “way of life.” It has hundreds. Different cities, religions, cultures, heritages, place in society, workplaces and social networks all define different ways of life. Britain is big enough to accommodate difference.

That being said, it is important to weave the newcomers into British life. People who feel that they belong here, who have friends and networks, jobs and education, who care about their local community, are going to be better residents or even citizens.

### **“We don’t have enough housing or money for our own citizens.”**

The UK is one of the most prosperous countries in the world. If we cannot or will not spare a small amount of our good fortune to help those in the most desperate need, what does that say about us? It is true, taking 20,000 people and helping them rebuild their lives will cost money, but there is a greater cost in doing nothing – allowing talented people who have a lot of potential to wither,

allowing lives to be wasted, or allowing them to grow up disaffected, angry and resentful in horrible conditions.

The majority of refugees will be placed in areas which welcome them, such as Coventry, which has declared itself a “City of Sanctuary”. This has the benefit of allowing local services to be adapted to meet the specific needs. However, there is a benefit in allowing dispersal to other areas – reducing the strain on those services, allowing people to build lives in different parts of the country, reducing exposure to other groups which might have been hostile in Syria, as well as allowing all areas to help.

### **“They will get benefits.”**

Bona fide refugees will have the same access to public funds as someone granted indefinite leave to remain or humanitarian protection status. This means that they have to apply for benefits like Child Tax Credit, Jobseekers Allowance, Council Tax Benefit or Housing Benefit. They will not be receiving large amounts of money, but enough to help them get started on building a new life. Statistically, immigrants (including refugees) pay more into the public purse than their UK-born counterparts.<sup>ii</sup>

### **“They will get housing/ be drains on social housing.”**

Local authorities are trying to find accommodation which is not currently in use, seeking landlords who might be willing to house them. Yes, people already here need better housing; this is part of a larger problem. The government will send more people to areas without such large housing issues.

### **“They will take jobs.”**

Some Syrians are highly qualified and may be able to seamlessly acquire jobs in the UK. The minimum length of education in Syria was only 6 years; only 60% of the population went to secondary school as of 2010. It will take time to educate people and get them “on their feet.” They will need help and mercy.

### **“They will need school places.”**

This is absolutely true. Particular need will be for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. Schools will have to accommodate the needs of these children and young people.

### **“They won’t belong here.”**

According to the census in 2011, 86% of the population of the UK is white (including White British, White Irish and White Other). This means 14% of the population is not white, or approximately 9,044,000 people. The most diverse part of the UK is London; the least is Wales.

One of the greatest qualities of Britain is tolerance. Britain is a very multicultural country now. Accepting 20,000 suffering people is not going to cause a major cultural shift.

It is our obligation as human beings to help to integrate these newcomers into our country. If we give them a stake in our society, a reason to believe that this is a good place to live, we reduce any risk to our society. If we make them feel like outcasts, unwelcome, not one of us, we encourage them to look elsewhere for something that can make them feel a sense of belonging – which leads to dangerous groups that could hurt them or the country.

### **“They don’t believe the same things we do.”**

Refugees from Syria may be Muslim (Sunni, Shia or Alawi), Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Kurd, Druze, Armenian Christians or atheist. Syria was a very diverse and largely tolerant country before the war.<sup>iii</sup>

The UK is an even more diverse and tolerant country. In the 2011 census in England and Wales, 33.2 million people identified as Christian; this is 59% of the usual resident population. 2.7 million people identified as Muslim – that is 5% of the population. People who reported that they did not have a religion accounted for 14.1 million, or 25% of the population.

### **“They don’t speak our language. They speak different languages and I don’t like it.”**

Certainly Britain is changing. People in Britain speak many more languages now than they did 100 years ago. Given the changes in the modern world, this is not likely to change, whether because of European law, cheaper air fare, international business, immigration, natural disasters, multiculturalism, multinational organisations, marriage or a multitude of other reasons. In 2011, 92.3% of the population of England and Wales reported English or Welsh as their first language. 1.3% reported that they could not speak English well and .3% reported that they could not speak English at all.<sup>iv</sup>

Certainly it is disconcerting to hear conversations which we cannot understand. This is one reason why it is important to include teaching of English as a foreign language as part of the package for refugees. They cannot integrate, get jobs, advance in education and become full parts of British society if they cannot speak the local language. Not being able to speak English also makes people more vulnerable to issues such as exploitation in the workplace.

Being able to talk with neighbours and make friends helps to tie people into the local society and help them to put down roots.

### **“I won’t feel safe.”**

Safety is a very subjective thing. People can feel unsafe in a largely safe area. Overall, the UK is one of the safest countries in the world. There are strict rules regarding hand guns. Overall crime has fallen in recent years.<sup>v</sup>

### **“What exactly is ISIL / IS / ISIS?”**

Islamic State. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Daesh. These are all names of a relatively small group that is trying to set up a separate state from sections of Syria and

Iraq. It is a Salafi militant group that has a fundamentalist approach, deriving from a strain of Sunni Islam. It is not to be confused with the more mainstream Sunni Islam. It has taken control of the northeast portion of Syria and part of Iraq.

### **“Are ISIS members among the Syrian refugees?”**

No. Refugees are people running from the war; ISIS wants to engage in war to expand territory. In the unlikely event that ISIS members went to a refugee camp, they would not be admitted to the UK under the refugee camp programme. The people being admitted to the UK have been living in refugee camps; their affiliations are known and the people being brought here are vetted carefully.

The refugees are victims of a civil war which has resulted from struggles between the al-Bashar Syrian government and a variety of political and ethnic groups which are battling to take over parts of Syria.

### **“Why is Syria such an unsafe place that 12 million people have left their homes?”**

Syria was created after World War I as a French mandate from the remains of the Ottoman Empire and created as a country thereafter. It was not created with sensitivity to the variety of ethnic groups and populations therein. It had relative stability under the al-Bashar government, but at a great cost to a number of groups. When some groups began to fight against the government, they were initially supported by other countries. The situation deteriorated into a full civil war with multiple warring parties. Cities have been isolated and starved as part of this struggle, as the minority Alawi government has tried to reassert power and control. A resolution between all the parties will be extremely difficult. Meanwhile, ISIS has encroached, taking territory in the northwest. So a number of militant groups are fighting and many people have been killed, trapped or forced to leave in hopes to survive.

### **“What if people don’t appreciate our help? What if we don’t like them, or they don’t like us?”**

We can’t take action in hope of appreciation or gratitude. We have to do what we believe to be right and generous, in line with our own values.

It is entirely possible that recipients may not show signs of gratitude. They have been through a horrible experience and not been helped or comforted adequately. They have lost everything. This may cause detachment or a sense that this is the least we can do.

Also, it is possible that some recipients may not be very personable, may be awkward or difficult. It is our calling to recognise the dignity of their humanity and do the best that we can. We must also remember that these refugees will be here for a considerable time; even pragmatically, it is in our best interests as a society to welcome, integrate, support and show charity and kindness to all.

Of course we can’t force our help on people. To do so would be to disrespect and dishonour them. In such cases, speak to the key worker and determine the best way to help in future.

### **A Syrian Refugee Family (case study)**

It helps us to understand the refugees' situation if we consider where they've been, what they've been through and what they might hope for.

Macleans is a Canadian newsmagazine which has covered the arrivals of refugees into Canada, which has a programme of community sponsorship. Here is a brief summary of a story published in December 2015.

Abeer Falah and her six children arrived at Petersborough, Ontario, Canada to a very warm welcome, greeted by five strangers. The family knew nothing of Canada before this journey.

"In early 2011, Falah was living in Daraa, Syria, with her children when the government launched a siege on its own people in response to growing protests. The army came in with tanks and snipers. Soldiers and civilians were killed. Homes were destroyed. The city was reduced to rubble. Falah's family, meanwhile, escaped and found shelter at a refugee camp in Amman, Jordan. It was a temporary dwelling for nearly five years—until today."

The family does not speak English. Riem, the eldest at 16, is learning and is confident enough to practise but doesn't know enough to carry on a conversation. The others are beginning to pick up phrases. The children are interested in their education. The two eldest will be in high school, the younger four in elementary school.

Hope for Homes Peterborough was created as a sponsorship group, initiated by Jill Emery. It took little over three months from making initial phone calls to set up the community organisation to receiving a call that a Syrian family was ready for them, if they were ready to sponsor.

Enthusiastic, passionate and energetic volunteers have arranged a three-bedroomed townhouse for them, provided furniture and clothes, a translator and transportation from the airport, among other things.

The Syrian family were greeted joyfully at the airport, with Canadian flags and balloons saying "Welcome Home." The family "greeted everyone with bright smiles – and a sense of disbelief."

Credit: "The Long Road from Syria to Peterborough," Aaron Hutchins, Macleans magazine, 11 December 2015. <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/refugee-dreams-the-long-road-from-syria-to-peterborough/>

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<sup>i</sup> [www.refworld.org/docid/54042353a.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/54042353a.html)

<sup>ii</sup> [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_research/the\\_truth\\_about\\_asylum/facts\\_about\\_asylum\\_-\\_page\\_3](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_research/the_truth_about_asylum/facts_about_asylum_-_page_3)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2012/10/18/whos-fighting-who-in-syria/>

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<sup>iv</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/language-in-england-and-wales-2011/rpt---language-in-england-and-wales--2011.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/language-in-england-and-wales-2011/rpt---language-in-england-and-wales--2011.html)

<sup>v</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/crime-stats/crime-statistics/year-ending-june-2015/stb-crime--ye-june-2015.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/crime-stats/crime-statistics/year-ending-june-2015/stb-crime--ye-june-2015.html)