

# **Starting and Developing a Project for Syrian Refugees -**

## **A Guide for Parishes or Groups**

### **Introduction**

In response to the Pope's call for every parish to take in one refugee family, and at Bishop Philip's request, the Diocesan Refugee Response Working Group has been set up to see how the Diocese and parishes can best assist the Syrian refugees arriving in this country in the next five years, as well as prepare the community for them.

This group focuses on supporting parishes in the settlement, care, welcoming, practical help and integration for incoming refugees, with an initial focus on the 20,000 Syrians arriving in the UK from refugee camps. Every parish will not receive a Syrian family, but every parish can help.

Especially in light of the year of mercy, Pope Francis's call for us to be close to the smallest and forsaken beckons us to action. It would be useful to start raising money and making plans now. There is also work to be done in persuading those who are currently opposed to the idea of accepting refugees that it is our Christian duty to help those exiled from their homes, their country, their friends and their culture.

In this document, we present guidance for parishes or groups in two sections. These are:

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.

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

It contains:

1. Syrian Refugees Arriving from Refugee Camps – A Briefing. This is a very brief explanation which could be used in parishes.
2. Questions, Thoughts and Comments – this looks at the concerns, information and misinformation which may arise. These are not the thoughts of the group; these are representative questions and answers.
3. A Syrian Family (case study) – this gives an idea of a Syrian refugee family's experience.

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 promise to keep you up to date on the work of the working group and on what we can all do to support these people who need our help.

We hope 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*

## **Making a Plan**

### **Considerations**

In any response, five key elements need to be considered. There are many possible models of how these can be enacted, but these core elements should be considered in every possible instance.

#### 1. Settlement

Where will the refugees be settled? Can the parish show willingness to support locally or more broadly within the region or support or adopt a family in another part of the country?

#### 2. Care

Working with the local lead, people can help to put together a package of people who can help with settlement. This could be anything from experts (psychologists, teachers of English as a foreign language, tutors for adults or children) to volunteers (people who can help with initial shopping, DIY, driving, setting up a home). Even people who were mentally sound before the start of the war now have to cope with the damage of the last 5 years to their families and their lives; psychological care must be prioritised. This need may not present itself now, or in the adults arriving, but will probably arise in children, especially over time.

#### 3. Practical Help

How can the community provide practical help? Arriving in a new country with limited language skills and no knowledge of how retail works here, refugees will need very practical help, not only money. Knowing John Lewis from Asda from Harrods is easy to UK long-term residents but baffling to a newcomer. The initial start-up package is crucial – buying beds, cooker, sheets, tables, crockery, cutlery etc. It might be best to have a ready-made package available via Argos or something similar.

Education is crucial. Before the war started, 50% of the Syrian population was under 18. Only 60% of Syrians attended secondary school (so many only have 6 years of education). Large sections of Syria are agricultural, less than 20% of people have had internet access, information has been controlled. The country was largely socialist for many years and many people will have challenges linguistically, culturally and socially. This is true for women and for men, as the roles in Syria are different.

#### 4. Welcoming Refugees and Educating the Community

This is more than just a smile and greeting. It involves preparing the community. It should ideally include something like:

- Factsheet / mythbusting
- Information for parishioners /booklet available about the crisis and what is happening
- Local speeches
- Local events to inform and educate the community
- Ideas of how people can help
- Information for schools
- Fundraising ideas
- Practical guidance – a guidebook (for parishes)
- Events to celebrate multi-cultural diversity

## 5. Integration

How can the community help the refugees to settle and thrive? Work to support into school, jobs, volunteer work, community activities and psychological / medical care will be needed.

### **The Plan: process and models**

There is no one-size-fits-all guidance or plan. Responses will have to be generated dependent on the number of families coming in; the sizes and types of family; the abilities, commitment and financial contributions locally (from the government, parishes or community) and the time and willingness committed by individuals.

To start discussion, here is a list of some possible models:

### **Optional models (for guidance only)**

1. Parish raises funds for and provides a practical start-up package. No ongoing financial obligation, one up-front cost with associated logistics.
2. Parish arranges for and pays for or acquires voluntarily the necessary services to improve integration. This could be for an initial, specified time or a longer view.
3. Parish “adopts” a household for a year, with a full financial and care package to complement the one from the government.
4. Parish adopts a number of households for a year, with a reduced package focusing on specific needs – whether housing, language, jobsearch, psychology, education.
4. Parish raises funds to provide to another local group where there is greater need and greater numbers – for example, cities where significant numbers of refugees have been located, such as Coventry. Establish a framework of where donations can go.
5. Parish arranges speakers / local campaign to help educate local area and provide a better environment for integration.

### **Process**

A recommended process:

1. Determine who is taking the lead in the local area. Are there going to be refugees taken into the local area, and if so, how many? Where? Of which type of household? Assess education, medical needs, language ability, age(s), qualifications, foreign experience.
2. Determine the financial willingness of parishioners / locals to contribute. This could be through one-off or regular donations.
3. Assess the package being offered and see what is needed. Be clear to assess what is expected from government funding and what is expected from local contribution.

Key areas:

- Housing\*
- Start-up grant / arrangements\*\*

- TEFL / tutors
- Education\*\*\*
- Psychological support
- Medical support
- Job-seeking

4. Determine what skills the local parish / community can volunteer, and how much it will cost to obtain the other support. Agree this with key / lead worker as needed.

5. Considering these needs, determine the cost of the package needed for the households.

6. Raise promised funds and allocate funding.

7. Feedback. It is important that in any project there is some form of feedback, anonymous for safeguarding purposes. This is what motivates people to continue. They need to know how many people have been helped and in what manner.

\*If the group is considering arranging and providing housing, it will need to assess local willingness to provide move-on accommodation. If a property is found, the group will need to determine benefit levels on the appropriate family profiles and learn the specifications for housing benefit to ensure the property is allocated to a family of the correct size (avoiding the “Bedroom Tax.”) Local housing officers can advise on this. Additionally, contents insurance may be considered. The Refugee Council may be able to advise on which insurers have been sympathetic.

\*\* These Syrian refugees will have full access to public funds on the same basis as UK nationals, such as Jobseekers’ Allowance, Child Tax Credits and Housing Benefit. There will also be funds from central government for such things as a security deposit. Groups will need to liaise with the key worker to determine how many weeks’ delay there is in providing cash from the government. A start-up grant to cover initial costs would be very helpful. Groups could consider putting together a sample basket of start-up requirements for a home for families.

\*\*\* If considering support of education, groups will need to consider response of schools and ability to meet their needs. Liaise with schools or with Hampshire County Council’s Minority Community Achievement Service to determine the best way to help.

**What else can the parishes, local groups and the Diocesan Refugee Response Working Group do?**

1. Find a way to connect across dioceses and across the parishes. The Diocesan Refugee Response Working Group will try to connect parishes, working groups, St. Vincent de Paul groups, Justice and Peace Groups, Caritas and local community groups as much as possible. This can act as an umbrella across the parishes, and possibly help provide support for other dioceses that have a larger influx.

2. Facilitate communication. What are parishes doing and what would they like to do? How do we connect with local authorities, refugees, donors and volunteers?

3. Support for parishes that do not know what to do. The Diocesan Refugee Response Working Group can signpost towards legal agreements, information, safeguarding.

4. Provide a single point of contact. The DRRWG contact details are provided at the front of this document for website or telephone enquiries. This could be for local authorities, donors or volunteers.

5. Create publicity to re-educate, telling the story and dispelling myths. We need to put human faces on stories, separate what is happening here and abroad. This could be through parishes, using approved speakers or through local press.
6. Provide a forum to share information and disseminate models and good practice.
7. Liaise with other faith organisations and charities, as well as local initiatives.
8. Advise the Bishop to say that this is what is happening and what we need to be doing.

## CULTURAL NORMS

Syrians who are arriving are likely to have different cultural norms than in the general UK population.

The Syrian population is not homogenous. 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 country before the war. Therefore their cultural norms may be very different.

It is best not to ask people about their political affiliation. It would likely cause fear, as the war is highly political, and not inspire trust. The war is being fought over political affiliation, overlaid with religious and ethnic differences. So while it is useful to determine which language they speak and to help arrange support in worship and community if needed, these questions should be posed to their key worker.

Great care should be exercised initially, to ensure that we do not cause offence and to make the experience as positive as possible. There are some useful guidelines and information available on the internet, among the best being:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/syrian-refugee-adjustments-canada-1.3322081>

<http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/ci-ic-eng.asp?iso=sy>

<http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/refugees-from-syria>

We also need to give some consideration of the extent to which the refugees will adapt to the host country. We should not expect refugees to adapt quickly or as much as some people would like.

It may seem reasonable to expect refugees to adapt quickly to the UK's customs, practises and social norms. However, we should not expect this for a number of reasons, including:

1. Causing offense to the refugees will impede future relationships between them and the people working with them and the wider community. In other words, tactically, expecting them to change is a bad idea for integration.
2. Some things will change as they recognise certain local customs. However, if they are religious or culturally conservative, some things will seem horrific to them. Many Muslims have a very different perception of the human body, human fallibility, temptation and sin than Westerners do. Expecting them to do something, or change, to do or accept something which they think is wrong or will lead to wrongdoing is not respectful of them and their dignity.
3. These people have lived through great trauma. Expecting them to change their image of themselves, of manners, to give up part of their culture, heritage, custom and understanding of their faith is not only disrespectful but harmful.

So, if you are planning to work with refugees, please read up on the cultural norms of the area and proceed with great caution, sensitivity and conservative behaviour. Be particularly aware of the pitfalls of how men and women speak or touch (or do not). Do not be offended if a woman will not shake hands with a man. Women should dress conservatively (Muslim women traditionally are covered from base of neck to wrists to ankles). Take time to build relationships and trust.