

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

Briefing document

December 2015

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Section 1

Key Points

- The Syrian refugees coming to Northern Ireland will be resettled under the UK Government's Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme.
- This scheme resettles refugees currently living in camps in the countries bordering Syria. It does not involve the relocation of refugees who have arrived in other EU countries.
- The Northern Ireland Executive offered to receive a group of between 50 and 100 refugees by the end of December 2015 and further groups on a phased basis from early 2016.
- The first group will arrive in Northern Ireland on 15 December 2015. This will be the tenth group to arrive in the UK under the expanded VPR scheme.
- There will be 10 families totalling 51 people in the group arriving on 15 December.
- 11 of the first group will be children under the age of 5, including a baby.
- The group arriving on 15 December will be mixed religion including both Muslims and Christians from Syria.
- The first group will be settled in the Belfast area.
- The second group will be settled in the North West. The arrival date for this group is not yet known, but is likely to be in the first quarter of 2016.

Section 2

Background to Northern Ireland's Participation in the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

On 7 September 2015 the Prime Minister announced a significant expansion of the Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian Refugees over the course of the current UK Parliament. The scheme will resettle displaced refugees who are currently living in camps in countries neighbouring Syria, principally Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. It does not extend to asylum seekers in Europe or in countries such as Libya.

The VPR scheme is based on need. It priorities those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin: women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence. Individuals will be assessed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the camps and if accepted under the scheme will be granted five years humanitarian protection status and will have access to employment and public funds and rights to family reunion comparable to other refugees. At the end of five years, if individuals are not able to return to Syria they may be eligible to apply for resettlement in the UK.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister signalled to the UK Government their willingness to welcome some of the most vulnerable refugees here under the VPR scheme. They have committed to welcoming between 50 to 100 refugees by the end of December 2015, with the expectation that further groups will arrive on a phased basis thereafter.

How the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme works

UN High Commissioner for Refugees takes applications from refugees in the countries bordering Syria (principally Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey) and assesses them for eligibility to be included in the scheme. The core criteria for resettlement are:

- their life, liberty, safety, health, or other fundamental human rights are at risk in the country where they have sought refuge; or
- in order to provide a durable solution the applicant's situation is not secure in the long term (they may not have immediate protection concerns).

The VPR scheme identifies a number of groups as being particularly vulnerable and who will be given priority for settlement in the UK. Although these might change in the future, the current priority groups are refugees who:

- have medical needs;
- have survived violence and torture;
- are women at risk;
- are children in a situation that makes them particularly vulnerable;
- have legal or physical protection needs;
- do not have local integration prospects; or
- are elderly in a situation that makes them particularly vulnerable

The UNHCR refers potential cases for resettlement in the United Kingdom to the Home Office. The Home Office then checks cases against the eligibility criteria for the VPR scheme and carries out medical and security checks. If the cases are accepted, the Home Office then arranges exit visas from the host country and entry visas into the UK.

Refugees arriving in the UK in the first months of the scheme are not expected to include unaccompanied children.

Cases which have been accepted by the Home Office as being suitable for resettlement in the UK are then referred to the devolved administrations and local authorities in England which have asked to participate in the scheme. As part of this process, cases will be referred to the Northern Ireland Executive for consideration.

For each group of referred cases, Northern Ireland will be asked to accept or reject the cases based on information contained in referral forms. The referral forms give details on: family make up, age and any specific needs which the refugees may have. Further detail on medical needs is provided a full medical health assessment report.

All cases will differ and it is very difficult to generalise on the profile of the refugees who may arrive in Northern Ireland. Since this is the first time that Northern Ireland has participated in a refugee resettlement programme, the Home Office has agreed with that the first group will be mainly made of straightforward family groups without complex needs.

When Northern Ireland has accepted a batch of cases, the Home Office will agree an arrival date for the group. The refugees are expected to arrive on charter flights directly from one of the countries neighbouring Syria (i.e., Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey).

It is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland authorities to make the necessary arrangements to receive and settle the refugees when they arrive here.

The status of the refugees when they arrive in Northern Ireland

Those admitted under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme are granted five years' Humanitarian Protection with full access to employment and public funds and rights to family reunion comparable to refugees.

The rights and benefits that go with Humanitarian Protection include:

- Access to public funds. Public funds include a range of benefits that are given to people on a low income, as well as housing support. This includes child benefit and income-based jobseeker's allowance.
- Entitlement to work.
- They will also be eligible to claim housing, be admitted to schools and receive healthcare.
- Access to an integration loan. This is an interest free loan that covers a rent deposit or rent, essential household items and education and training for work.
- Family Reunion. On application certain family members can apply to resettle with the person granted humanitarian protection. These are: a husband, wife, civil partner or the person they've been in a genuine relationship with for 2 years / any children under 18 who is not leading an independent life, is unmarried / not in a civil partnership and has not formed an independent family unit.
- They will have the same status as their sponsor, but cannot themselves sponsor family reunion cases.
- If refugees and those under Humanitarian protection can't return home after five years, they can seek permanent settlement in the UK – this is again a Home Office responsibility.
- Those under Humanitarian Protection can move around and resettle freely in the UK.

- They can apply for a Home Office travel document, which is not a UK passport, so would not benefit from the Common Travel Area or EEA membership. They may hold a valid previous passport.
- They must still apply for a visa to travel outside the UK. Where they go and how long they stay out of UK may affect their status, particularly if they are seeking settlement after five years.

Definition of terms

There is much confusion about the different terms used in relation to refugees and asylum seekers. The following definitions have been provided by the British Red Cross.

Refugee

- has proven to the authorities that they would be at risk if returned to their home country
- has had their claim for asylum accepted by the government
- can now stay here either long-term or indefinitely.

Asylum seeker

- flees their homeland
- arrives in another country, whichever way they can
- makes themselves known to the authorities
- submits an asylum application
- has a legal right to stay in the country while awaiting a decision.

Refused asylum seeker

- has been unable to prove that they would face persecution back home
- has been denied protection by the authorities
- must now leave the country, unless they wish to appeal the decision or there are legitimate reasons why they cannot yet return home.

Economic migrant

- has moved to another country to work
- could be legally or illegally resident, depending on how they entered the country
- may or may not have a legal work permit.

Section 3

Northern Ireland's preparations for the arrival of Syrian refugees

In response to the Prime Minister's commitment Ministers asked officials to start preparatory work and two groups have been established to take this forward.

- A Strategic Planning Group led by OFMDFM to coordinate the response of the Executive Departments and agencies and consider the strategic issues and local implications; and
- An Operational Planning Group led by DSD to consider and address the practical steps that will be needed to meet the immediate and longer term needs of those who may arrive.

The Operational Planning Group has a wide membership including all public agencies who may be required to provide services to refugees, local government and organisations in the voluntary sector who have expertise in this field. These include:

- DSD
- Social Security Agency
- NIHE
- OFMDFM
- Department of Education
- Education Authority
- Department of Employment and Learning
- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- Public Health Agency
- Business Services Organisation
- Health and Social Care Board
- Department of Justice
- PSNI
- Local Government (Belfast City Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Newry and Mourne and Down District Council (on behalf of other councils) and NILGA's Strategic Migration Partnership)
- Refugee and Asylum Forum
- British Red Cross

- NI Council for Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- Law Centre NI
- NI Council for the Homeless

The group has met on a weekly basis to plan the arrival and resettlement of the first tranche of Syrian refugees before Christmas.

Process for receiving the refugees into Northern Ireland

In very broad terms, the process for receiving Syrian refugees into Northern Ireland and assisting their settlement and integration into the community is as follows.

- The Home Office will make the necessary arrangements to transport the refugees to Northern Ireland. They will be brought on charter flights from the Lebanon direct to Northern Ireland.
- A small reception party (approximately 8 people, including interpreters) will meet the refugees at the airport and assist them through the arrivals process.
- The refugees will be taken to a welcome centre for a short period during which time they will be taken through the various immigration and benefits application processes that need to be addressed quickly. During this time, the refugees will also receive some basic information on life in Northern Ireland.
- After a short period (less than one week), the refugees will be moved to temporary accommodation secured for them by the NIHE under the standard homeless procedures.
- While in the temporary accommodation, housing options will be explored and the refugees will be assisted with any health and education requirements.
- After a period of up to 6 months, the refugees will move into permanent accommodation

Supporting the refugees with integration

The Department for Social Development will appoint a voluntary sector organisation to assist with the resettlement and integration of the refugees.

The Department has started discussions with a consortium of local voluntary sector organisations which have relevant experience in working with refugees and new entrants to Northern Ireland. The organisations involved include Bryson Intercultural,

Barnardos, the British Red Cross, Save the Children, Extern, Law Centre NI and South Belfast Roundtable. Bryson House will be the lead organisation and will take the lead on co-ordinating the other organisations, facilitating the planning for the arrival of each group and reporting to DSD. The other members will concentrate on the direct delivery of services to the refugees.

For the groups to be settled outside Belfast, the consortium will also work closely with district councils and the local action groups which have been set up in some areas to help them prepare for the arrival of refugees in their areas.

The Department will have a contract in place with the consortium before the arrival of the first group of refugees.

Financial implications

The Home Office will provide funding of at least £10,000 per refugee to cover the first year's costs. Additional funding will be made available to cover the education costs for school age children and the Home Office may agree to make additional money available to cover medical costs for any complex need cases. At this stage, the Department is confident that the funding from the Home Office will be sufficient to cover the costs of managing the arrival of the first group.

Can the community offer any support for the refugees?

There has been a very substantial display of goodwill by members of the public. People are eager to help. This is something the Executive wants to encourage and harness. The many offers of support from the public are a credit to our community.

There are many other ways that people can help, for example through donations to charities and volunteering with local refugee support groups. We would encourage that to continue. We will also be considering whether there are other ways that people might help.

Information is available at <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/syrian-refugee-crisis>

Section 4

Housing

The first group will be settled in the Belfast area. The plan is to settle the second group in the North West. Later groups will be settled in locations across Northern Ireland.

The Department and the Housing Executive are working on an analysis of the possible settlement locations in Northern Ireland for later groups of refugees. All areas are still being considered at this time. The analysis is looking at factors which are related to the homes themselves and the communities they are located in.

In relation to the homes, the relevant factors include the housing waiting list, the supply of private rented accommodation and housing conditions.

In relation to the communities, the relevant factors include capacity in the education, health and social care sectors, proximity to employment opportunities, levels of crime and the strength of the community infrastructure.

As soon as the likely settlement locations are identified, DSD will engage with the district councils to plan for arrival of groups of refugees in their areas.

The resettlement strategy will be to settle the refugees in groups of between 10 and 15 households in a location. This will create a group large enough to allow the refugees to form their own informal support networks with other people who share a language and cultural background, but not so large that a resident community feels that it is being overwhelmed.

Given the pressures on social housing waiting lists, it is expected that housing solutions will mainly make use of the private rented sector.

Section 5

Vetting and security

The Syrian refugees who will be resettling here will be coming through the UK Government's Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme. They are some of the most vulnerable people fleeing the conflict in Syria. The refugees will be brought to Northern Ireland directly from countries bordering Syria – Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey – and they will not include any of those who have made their own way to other parts of Europe.

The Home Office takes security extremely seriously in cases referred to them for resettlement through the VPR scheme. As a result, any refugee coming to Northern Ireland will have been through a rigorous two stage security screening process and considered carefully by the Home Office before being accepted for entry to the United Kingdom.

The Home Office works closely with the UNHCR, who have their own robust identification processes in place. This includes the taking of biometrics (photographs and fingerprints), documentary evidence and interviews with the refugees.

When cases are submitted by the UNHCR to the Home Office for consideration for resettlement in the UK, they are screened by the Home Office to determine whether they are suitable for entry into the country. This includes the taking of further biometric data. The Home Office has the right to reject individuals on security, war crimes or other grounds or if there is insufficient information to allow them to undertake effective screening.

Section 6

Current migrant population facts / statistics for Northern Ireland

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Asylum data is collected nationally by the Home Office; however, the Home Office does not publish Northern Ireland data. In the absence of any official data, the Law Centre provided estimates based on information compiled from different sources including Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership, Home Office Official Immigration Statistics (UK wide), the Home Office NI Asylum Stakeholders Forum and the Refugee & Asylum Forum.

Existing Asylum Seekers

Estimates suggest there were approximately 600 asylum seekers living in asylum support accommodation in August 2015. However, because some asylum seekers are not entitled to any support they are not reflected in these figures and the total number is higher. The majority of asylum seekers live in Belfast.

Existing Refugees

Estimates suggest there are 200 – 300 new refugees arrive in Northern Ireland each year, including family members. Not all refugees stay here – they may know family or friends elsewhere in the UK and join them or return to their country of origin when they are safe.

Syrian Population in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has a small existing population of Syrians. In the 2011 census, we had 31 usual residents whose country of birth was Syria. This would not include family members born here. ONS figures suggest around 11,000 people in England and Wales were born in Syria.

Refugees will continue to arrive here irregularly and claim asylum through the existing process. The UK as a group has taken around 5,000 Syrian refugees this way since 2011. We are reliant on observations from groups that work with refugees to work out how many have arrived here. From these we estimate there are around a dozen Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland.

Non-UK National population in Northern Ireland

At July 2015 there were 145,050 Non-UK Nationals recorded as living in Northern Ireland, who have been registered with a National Insurance Number (NINO).

Of these non-UK Nationals, 97.4% are of working age, compared with 63.6% of the Northern Ireland population.

Table 1:

Age	Number of Non-UK Nationals Resident in Northern Ireland	Percentage of Total Non-UK Nationals Resident in Northern Ireland
16-34	57,400	39.6%
35-49	58,970	40.7%
50-64	24,820	17.1%
65+	3,870	2.7%
Total	145,050	100.0%

77% of those registered with a NINO are from within the European Union.

Outside of Europe, Asia and the Middle East account for the highest proportion of registered Non-UK Nationals (10.1%).

Table 2:

Region of Origin	Number of Non-UK Nationals Resident in Northern Ireland	Percentage of All Non-UK Nationals
European Union Accession	62,620	43.2%
European Union (Excluding Accession)	48,960	33.8%
Asia and Middle East	14,590	10.1%
The Americas	5,090	3.5%
Africa	3,680	2.5%
Australasia and Oceania	3,200	2.2%
Other European (Europe non EU)	1,950	1.3%
Others and Unknown	4,920	3.4%
Total	145,050	100.0%

A breakdown of the Top 20 European Union Countries shows that Poland, the Republic of Ireland and the Republic of Lithuania constitute the top three countries of origin.

Table 3:

Nationality	Number of Non-UK Nationals Resident in Northern Ireland	Percentage of European Union Non-UK Nationals
Poland	30,830	26.0%
Rep of Ireland	29,620	25.0%
Rep of Lithuania	12,280	10.4%
Portugal	6,860	5.8%
Slovak Rep	5,500	4.7%
Romania	3,950	3.3%
Rep of Latvia	3,590	3.0%
France	3,320	2.8%
Spain	2,990	2.5%
Hungary	2,800	2.4%
Germany	2,140	1.8%
Bulgaria	2,010	1.7%
Italy	1,560	1.3%
Czech Rep	1,350	1.1%
Netherlands	850	0.7%
Ukraine	650	0.5%
Turkey	480	0.4%
Sweden	430	0.4%
Greece	390	0.3%
Denmark	250	0.2%

A breakdown of the Top 20 Non-European Union Countries shows that India, China and USA are the top three countries of origin.

Table 4:

Nationality	Number of Non-UK Nationals Resident in Northern Ireland	Percentage of Non-European Union Non-UK Nationals
India	4,760	17.9%
China Peoples Rep	3,020	11.4%
USA	2,510	9.5%
Philippines	2,480	9.3%
Australia	2,210	8.3%
Canada	1,530	5.7%
South Africa	1,050	4.0%
Malaysia	1,000	3.8%
New Zealand	910	3.4%
Pakistan	630	2.4%
Nigeria	540	2.0%
Bangladesh	410	1.5%
Brazil	400	1.5%
Thailand	370	1.4%
Zimbabwe	320	1.2%
Iran	290	1.1%
Sudan	230	0.9%
Egypt	200	0.8%
Somalia	180	0.7%
South Korea	180	0.7%

The number of Non-UK Nationals recorded from Syria is 50, with 0.2% of Non-European Union, Non-UK Nationals.

In total 14,720 Non-UK Nationals are currently in receipt of a benefit administered by the Social Security Agency and/or Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

This represents just over a tenth (10.1%) of all Non-UK Nationals registered with a NINO and resident in Northern Ireland at July 2015.

Of those Non-UK Nationals in receipt of a benefit, just over half receive Housing Benefit, followed by just over a fifth in receipt of Employment Support Allowance.

Table 5:

Benefit Type	Number of Non-UK Nationals Claiming the Benefit	Claimants as a percentage of Non-UK Nationals resident in NI and claiming benefits at July 2015 (14,720)	Claimants as a percentage of All Non-UK Nationals resident in NI at July 2015 (145,050)
Housing Benefit (HB)	7,710	52.4%	5.32%
Employment Support Allowance (ESA)	3,480	23.7%	2.40%
Disability Living Allowance (DLA)	3,250	22.1%	2.24%
Retirement Pension (RP)	2,320	15.8%	1.60%
Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA)	2,210	15.0%	1.52%
Invalid Carer's Allowance (ICA)	1,550	10.6%	1.07%
Income Support (IS)	1,170	8.0%	0.81%
Pension Credit (PC)	1,030	7.0%	0.71%
Attendance Allowance (AA)	240	1.7%	0.17%
Maternity Allowance (MA)	220	1.5%	0.15%
Incapacity Benefit (IB)	140	0.9%	0.10%
Bereavement Benefit (BB)	120	0.8%	0.08%
Industrial Injuries Benefit (IIB)	110	0.7%	0.08%
Widow's Benefit (WB)	30	0.2%	0.02%
Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA)	10	0.1%	0.01%

The table below compares the proportion of Non-UK Nationals claiming key working age and disability benefits, with the proportion of UK nationals claiming for each benefit.

Table 6:

Benefit Type	Eligible Northern Ireland Population	Number in receipt of Benefit	%	Eligible Non-UK Nationals resident in Northern Ireland	Number in receipt of Benefit	%
DLA	1,829,500	205,610	11.2	145,050	3,250	2.2
ESA	1,120,690	118,140	10.5	141,180	3,480	2.5
JSA	1,120,690	41,150	3.7	141,180	2,210	1.6

For each benefit the proportion of Non-UK Nationals claiming is substantially less than the equivalent proportion of the Northern Ireland eligible population.