



WSMP Local Authority Delivery Group: report of a Housing Task and Finish Group – June 2018

Introduction

This Report summarises the discussions, suggestions and recommendations made by a Housing Task and Finish Group, established by the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership Local Authority Delivery Group, to understand housing-related issues in relation to refugee resettlement, and potentially increase the availability of suitable housing in Wales.

Background

Welsh local authorities have been resettling beneficiaries under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) since 20015 and to date, 720 refugees have been resettled in Wales. While the Scheme has been operating well, more recently, some local authorities have experienced difficulties in sourcing and securing appropriate accommodation at the right price and in the right place. This led to a slight slowdown in the number of beneficiaries able to be resettled in Wales and may affect the plans of authorities and the pace at which beneficiaries can continue to be resettled in Wales. To identify the barriers and challenges local authorities were experiencing in securing accommodation, and to identify potential solutions, a Task and Finish Group of the LA Delivery Group was established with the following objectives:

- a) To more clearly identify the key barriers and challenges being experienced by local authorities across Wales in sourcing appropriate accommodation for resettled refugees
- b) To consider options for increasing housing availability, both in short to medium-terms, e.g. use of empty homes; links with Housing Associations; engagement with Private Rented Sector/social letting agencies; Clearsprings (asylum accommodation provider); Community Sponsorship Organisations
- c) To consider medium and longer-term housing needs of beneficiaries (following initial resettlement support) and supporting/identifying options for 'move on' housing/sustainable accommodation arrangements
- d) To provide a suite of options for local authorities to consider acting upon to increase their availability of housing to support the resettlement of refugees
- e) The Task & Finish Group was chaired by Phillip Howells, Head of Community Housing at Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, with the secretariat provide by WSMP. Three meetings of the Group were held (in Wrexham, Carmarthen and Llandrindod Wells) and a copy of the Terms of Reference for their remit and membership of the Group is attached at Appendix 1.

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Summary of Issues and Challenges

Housing - related

Some local authorities and Community Sponsorship Groups are experiencing difficulties in securing properties which they can offer to the Scheme to resettle beneficiaries, the first crucial step in being able to plan for their arrival. While this is not an issue in every local area, some authorities struggle more than others, with challenges often linked to broader issues with their local housing market. Via the Task and Finish Group discussions, a number of barriers and difficulties have been identified:

- a) **Rental top-up:** some authorities top up rent from the funding received from the Home Office where housing benefit does not fully cover the rental charge for the property. There are problems in identifying appropriate accommodation within the Local Housing Allowance (rates do not cover rental costs in most areas), particularly if adapted properties are required. There is not a consistent approach across authorities to topping up of rents and while use of top-up of rents may bring more potential properties into the mix, some authorities are concerned about the risk of 'skewing the market' if they top-up rents, or the future affordability for the families when they move on. There is also concern about the sustainability of accommodation in the longer-term when specific rent levels may have been negotiated with the landlord while the beneficiaries are on the resettlement scheme.
- b) **Use of Private Rented Sector v Social Housing:** based on local decisions, some authorities have used social housing to accommodate beneficiaries, while others are only using properties from the private rented sector (PRS). Authorities have identified a lack of supply of social housing, long waiting lists and concern as to the potential impact on local communities/cohesion if beneficiaries were seen to be 'jumping the queue' in accessing social housing
- c) **Mortgage lenders:** some issues with mortgage lenders have been reported, with lenders apparently being uncomfortable with properties being let to people on benefits, although Finance Wales view is that this is not a problem with lenders. Some authorities are overcoming the problem, where it exists, by renting the property themselves, who then sub-let to refugee families that they are resettling. Sub-letting also avoids management costs by letting agents.
- d) **Vooids:** some local authorities and Community Sponsorship Organisations are experiencing void costs (sometimes for CSOs this can be a number of months) in between approval and a family arriving
- e) **Common Housing Register:** there is not a consistent approach across local authorities as to whether newly arrived refugee families are encouraged to put

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their names on the Common Housing Register (CHR) on arrival. The benefits in doing this for applicants include simple and fair access to a number of social landlords, affordable and quality accommodation, and a greater choice of social landlords/housing types/locations

- f) **Location:** there is a need to ensure access to additional essential services and support near the property to be used for beneficiaries' resettlement. Access to school places is becoming an issue for some families, with some needing to take bus journeys and long walks with young children to reach their school as there may have been no places available in closer schools. Access to ESOL provision and GP surgeries may also be problematic in some localities. Reasonable access to hospitals and other specialist treatment, such as occupational therapist, can also reflect the best location of housing for families – this is a particular issue given the medical needs of some of the families being resettled in Wales (and the vulnerability of those who meet the criteria for resettlement)
- g) **Location:** the importance of the location of housing was identified, and in some instances concern over potential community tensions can prevent use of a particular property, restricting availability of properties for resettlement
- h) **Rurality:** there are some specific challenges facing rural areas where often services and support are located further away from where people are accommodated, in addition to a sparsity of appropriate accommodation
- i) **Quality and standards of housing:** while properties are inspected prior to offering them to the scheme, some examples were given where standards had not been maintained and properties were affected by damp, condensation, etc. Some authorities have installed condensation devises in attics, waterproof membranes in bathrooms to ensure bathrooms are appropriate, and other mechanisms to prevent issues. However not all landlords make these considerations, even though they may save money in the long run. One LA had to pay £2,000 to 'make good' a property prior to returning it to the landlord, due to issues with water damage.
- j) **Inspections:** the importance of inspecting properties, ensuring that they are adequate for families and agreeing and completing repairs, prior to securing the property for the scheme was seen as essential in aiding the settlement of beneficiaries (where this has not occurred, problems with the quality of housing has been raised by some beneficiaries)

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Non-Housing Related

During discussions, a number of other issues and barriers were also identified that while not directly related to the provision of housing, are impacting and adding additional challenges to either securing appropriate accommodation or the resettlement and successful integration of beneficiaries more generally:

- a) **Impact of Universal Credit:** Universal Credit is the new benefit system that is being rolled out to low income families. UC includes a child element for those young people who resides in the household; there is a higher element for a first or only child, followed by a reduced element for a second child. There are no payments for a third child onwards, unless they are disabled. This will therefore impact upon larger families, note that the average family size of beneficiaries in Wales is 5-6 members, which is slightly higher than those resettled in the rest of the UK.
- b) There is also a concern about the **benefit cap** (families are now limited to an annual income of benefits at £20,000 per year) and the impact this can have on larger families resettled under the Scheme which is leading to a reluctance by some authorities to resettle larger families due to the difficulties they will experience financially, within the limited financial support available.
- c) **Management of expectations:** variations were reported in the pre-departure information given to beneficiaries (by the International Organisation for Migration) about the country or area in which they were to be resettled. Authorities may not always receive all the information they need to provide accommodation appropriate to the needs of families arriving (e.g. meeting mobility needs) which can add to difficulties in resettling families
- d) **Language Skills:** lack of progress in English language acquisition is a barrier to employment: while beneficiaries may possess a range of skills, experience and qualifications, there are a number of barriers to accessing the labour market, including at a basic level, lack of sufficient English to facilitate an understanding of health and safety legislation. This is essential in many manual jobs
- e) **Employment Support Services:** Some beneficiaries have been informed that they are not eligible for employment support services as they are classed as full-time students due to 16 hours of ESOL per week. This has resulted in beneficiaries having to decide whether they reduce their ESOL hours to be eligible for support or continue with their ESOL and delay access to employment
- f) **Travel:** the provision of bus passes for beneficiaries is inconsistent across Wales. Some areas give bus passes to families for up to 12 months to assist with orientation, attendance at ESOL and encouraging independence, and

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sometimes these are also provided into the second year. Other areas do not provide these, or if they do only for an initial period of 3 months

- g) **Driving licences:** Syrian beneficiaries can only drive in the UK, using their Syrian driving licence, for 12 months and after this they have to pass their theory and practical test. The theory test is no longer available in Arabic for those living in Wales and beneficiaries with limited English are struggling to pass their tests so that they are able to continue to drive – this has been especially problematic in one rural area. This issue has been raised with Stephen Crabb MP, with a suggestion of allowing Syrian beneficiaries to be able to drive for 2 years whilst they attain English language skills, but there is no resolution to date
- h) **Inconsistency of integration and other support:** there is some inconsistency in terms of what goods and services authorities provide to beneficiaries to aid their settlement and integration, e.g. some LAs provide mobile phones and credit for 12 months while others do not; some provide leisure passes, others do not. There is limited Home Office guidance on what authorities should provide to beneficiaries on their arrival. However, families talk about the support they receive on WhatsApp groups which causes confusion bad feelings for some beneficiaries, if some people are seen to be receiving more support than others

Some examples of good practice

Local authority officers have been innovative in how they are attempting to secure properties for the scheme to utilise, for example, **social media** has been used with Facebook and twitter messages being posted asking for any potential properties for the scheme to be identified; **internal emails** to Council staff, also extended to key partners, such as health and police, community groups and Churches; contact made with **local known landlords** with portfolios and landlord forums; using local **shop windows and community centres** advertising properties to rent, local media property pages, estate agents, and letting agents etc.

There was a general view that while there are properties out there, the key is about finding out about them and **engaging with the landlords**. It helps to provide a background and context of the conflict in Syria, inform potential landlords that the family will receive support, negotiate on rent and conditions, reassure the landlord that there is an opportunity for guaranteed rental income on the property for 5 years.

Other suggestions to overcome challenges included:

- a) LAs taking out rental agreements and then **sub-letting** to beneficiaries
- b) **Development of hybrid models of resettlement**, where Community Sponsorship Groups work alongside LAs to identify suitable properties and pool efforts; in one area of Wales, the community sponsorship group were

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instrumental in finding the property for the resettled family. Note the CSO and the LA cautioned that it needs to be very clear to refugees who has responsibility for which element of resettlement and integration support

- c) Maximising potential benefits through **joint tenancies**, especially for larger/extended families where there are a number of adult tenants. This enables adult LHA allowances to be combined to assist with full rental payments
- d) While outside the gift of local authorities or Welsh Government, there was a view that **Local Housing Allowance rates should be reviewed**, or at least suspended for a period of time in relation to the those arriving under the Scheme
- e) Those local authorities that run and operate their own **landlord forums** are seen as best practice as they have been useful opportunities to discuss the housing needs under the VPRS.

Moving-On

The current 'model' about the initial resettlement and integration support needs for beneficiaries under VPRS is based on 12 months in accommodation to acquire basic skills and to begin to live more independently, explore housing options. Hopefully beneficiaries are in a position to move-on after the initial 12 months. However, there are a range of challenges being experienced that means move-on does not happen as quickly as expected: affordability of other housing locally and areas where people would like to live; links to or opportunities for employment; the aspirations of the beneficiaries after many years being displaced, e.g. accessing and continuing further education. Obviously access to ESOL and gaining a certain level of skill in terms of language skills is also a significant barrier to successful move on for beneficiaries.

There was a reported lack of clarity on whether refugee families are aware of RSLs and PRS or the difference and whether this is explained. The move-on experience is different for each family and there are success stories with families in the PRS signing their own tenancy agreement with landlord after 12 months and paying their own top-up. There is a need to ensure beneficiaries can make informed choices, based on the advice and information provided to them, in terms of finding the most suitable property for their needs, taking into account affordability (and accessibility).

Recommendations and Areas for Further Consideration/Action

It is proposed the following issues and recommendations are discussed by the WSMP LA Delivery Group/Resettlement Forum, Housing Leadership Cymru and local Partnership Groups overseeing delivery of refugee resettlement, and are also used as the basis for further discussion with Community Housing Cymru, Registered Social Landlords and other housing fora. There is a need to reflect current processes and practices and consider whether there is room for developing their approach to identifying and securing appropriate accommodation, enabling authorities to deliver on their ongoing commitments to resettle beneficiaries locally:

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- a) Continue to highlight non-devolved factors which impact on the success of the scheme to the Home Office so they are aware of the impact of UK Government policies, e.g. LHA rates, benefit cap. Note that officials in the Home Office are aware of the issue that other Government department policies can have on resettlement, and there are ongoing cross-departmental discussions at Ministerial level to discuss this issue.
- b) Use of social rented sector – is there scope to engage with local RSLs to assess what support or assistance they could provide in providing appropriate housing?
- c) Local Authorities could give further consideration to placing newly arrived beneficiaries on the Common Housing Register for longer term access to social housing – with the aim of a consistent approach across Wales.
- d) In addition to use of funding from the Home Office, is there potential for increased use of DHP for top up of rent levels?
- e) Is there any opportunity to achieve more consistency in terms of support and good provided to beneficiaries for the first 12 months? This would ease feelings of lack of parity across support providers and LAs, and between CSOs and LA provision.
- f) LAs should consider delivering (or engaging support provider to do so) the **Cultural Orientation Toolkit** developed by the WSMP, at an early stage of beneficiaries' arrival, as this contains sessions on what to expect from resettlement schemes, moving on, sustaining tenancies, etc., and facilitates a deeper understanding and engagement of beneficiaries in their own integration. Note the WSMP is in discussions with a provider around delivering this course across Wales.
- g) Further consideration and planning is needed around the 'move-on' process and whether any additional support needs to be provided - what advice and support is provided to families in terms of housing options and is there anything more than could be done to ensure they can make informed decisions?
- h) Review different approaches for supporting the move-on of beneficiaries and whether there is best practice that can be shared and implemented, both from across Wales and the UK. There is published guidance on supporting refugee families who may have to move house during their years 2-5 here:

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https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/1.67%20Resettlement%20Guide_05_6.pdf

- i) Community Sponsorship Groups should be clear at an early stage about the potential timescale in terms of approval of an application and family arrivals, and factor this into their planning around securing a property, to minimize the need to potentially pay void costs for properties.
- j) Joint working between LAs and Community Sponsorship groups could be effective in addressing common challenges, rather than each taking a separate approach to resettlement.
- k) **The key to identifying and securing housing for the scheme is a proactive approach by the local authority and a Housing lead,** who will work with landlords and maintain relationships and ideally, to work across a wider area/region, to increase procurement options.
- l) It should be noted that while issues around schools' capacity were not raised during these discussions, if there are concerns around welcoming refugee children, the Education Toolkit will support teachers integrating children into the school curriculum.

<http://www.wlga.gov.uk/resources-to-support-syrian-beneficiaries-in-wales>

For further information, contact

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June 2018

Appendix 1

Syrian Resettlement Programme Wales Housing Task and Finish Group

Terms of Reference

Purpose

Some Welsh local authorities are experiencing difficulties in sourcing and securing appropriate accommodation, at the right price and in the right place for refugees to be resettled under the Syrian Resettlement Programme. This has resulted in a slight slowdown on the number of refugees able to be resettled in parts of Wales, affecting both the plans and 'targets' of local authorities for resettling refugees.

The Task and Finish Group will encourage strategic planning and take a solution-focused approach to identifying options for increasing availability of suitable housing that can support the SRP, balanced against the need for asylum accommodation and wider housing demand.

Objectives

- To clearly identify the key barriers and challenges being experienced by local authorities in sourcing appropriate accommodation for resettled refugees
- To consider options for increasing housing availability, both in short to medium terms, e.g. use of empty homes; links with Housing Associations; engagement with PRS/social letting agencies; Clearsprings (asylum accommodation provider); and links with Community Sponsorship Organisations
- To consider medium and longer terms housing needs of refugees (following initial resettlement support) and supporting/identifying options for 'move on' and sustainable accommodation arrangements
- To provide a suite of options for local authorities to consider acting upon to increase their local availability of housing to support the resettlement of refugees

Operational Arrangements

The Group will be chaired by Phillip Howells, Head of Community Housing at RCT and Housing Leadership Cymru Lead Officer on Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Secretariat support will be provided by Emma Louise Maher, Refugee Resettlement Coordinator at WSMP. 3 meetings to be held monthly commencing in January 2018.

The First meeting will take place in Wrexham and enable a discussion with the Local Authorities in the area, with a Second meeting taking place in Carmarthenshire with Local Authorities from South, Mid and West Wales. A third and final meeting will bring together these discussions in Llandrindod Wells.

Other members to include:

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- WLGA
- Community Housing Cymru
- WG Housing Policy Division
- Residential Landlords Association
- Local authority lead resettlement officers
- Local authority housing representatives

Discussions will be fed back to the SRP LA Delivery Group (28th June 2018), Housing Leadership Cymru and other relevant forums within Welsh Government and Home Office.