

DIOCESAN SYNOD

Title: **DIOCESAN REFUGEE GROUP UPDATE**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The group was set up in September 2015 and an annual review was part of its terms of reference. This review was produced in August 2016.

2. WORKING GROUP

A working and/or reference group was set up and membership agreed based on skills, geography and interests. For a number of reasons the group has only physically met once and continues operating as a remote entity. This arrangement will continue. The principle of the group is sound; membership has changed and this may continue due to personnel circumstances.

3. APPEAL

Bishop Stephen launched an appeal in September 2015 and this ran until December, raising almost £100,000. As a result of the Government's generously funded scheme, this fund is largely intact although plans are emerging to use the money for, among other things, language classes and possibly additional personal support.

4. GOVERNMENT SCHEME

The Government launched the Syrian Vulnerable Person's Relocation Scheme (VPR programme) in conjunction with the United Nation's Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in September 2015 with an aim to resettle 20,000 refugees during the life of this Parliament (May 2020). The scheme is dependent upon local authority buy-in and the response across the Diocese was mixed, as it has been across the UK.

Colchester District was the first to receive refugees and the 'Delivery Partner' (the agency responsible for liaising with various authorities to ensure that refugees have housing, education, health and benefit provision) has been part of one of the Diocese's Fresh Expression churches.

Arrivals are now planned for Newham, Southend and a consortium of West Essex districts.

5. COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP

The Government launched the Community Sponsorship scheme in July 2016 and the Archbishop of Canterbury attracted positive press coverage by welcoming a refugee family to live in a building at Lambeth Palace.

The Diocese has had conversations with the Home Office about becoming a sponsor using one of our vacant houses. Further work will continue on this scheme.

6. LOCAL AUTHORITY RESPONSE

Essex County Council have been proactive in leading a response across the county and have set up an effective project team who have been keen to involve partners, including the Diocese. Southend Council have also been responsive and helpful and they're dealing primarily with a local faith / voluntary sector consortium.

The London Borough of Newham have also been active, although their working practices have become more inward facing and less involving of either the faith or voluntary communities.

A consortium of Harlow, Epping Forest and Uttlesford districts has welcomed refugees.

There is outline approval of suggestions to receive Syrian refugees in some of the other local authorities across the Diocese. A minority are more hostile and have stated that they won't co-operate with the scheme.

7. NATIONAL CHURCH

The situation is mixed across the country. The Church of England have appointed a liaison officer to work with the Government Policy teams and a consortium of Bishops is developing work.

8. VOLUNTARY SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

Citizens UK are leading responses on a number of levels and the Bishops of the Diocese are variously well placed on their strategy groups. There are local groups established in Redbridge, Waltham Forest and Newham with emerging set ups in Colchester and Southend. Local faith and voluntary groups are engaged with the refugee crisis in Southend, Epping, Harlow, Colchester, Newham, Redbridge and Waltham Forest.

9. DIOCESAN HOUSING

The Diocese has reserved three vacant curate's houses for allocation to Syrian refugee families. There are advanced plans to let the houses in Southend and Epping through the Government's Syrian VPR programme and it's hoped that the one in Dagenham may be used under the Community Sponsorship scheme¹.

An issue to be overcome is the financial gap between the market rate for renting the property and the financial rates paid under the Government schemes. Other areas have also identified this, particularly in those regions where housing is particularly expensive. Decisions have been made to manage the gap in the short term while recognising that this wouldn't be sustainable in the future.

One Diocesan church have started discussions about one of the houses they own being used under the VPR scheme.

¹ The families moved in to the houses in Epping and Southend in September.

10. THE FUTURE

Work will continue under the VPR and Community Sponsorship schemes. Diocesan Synod passed a motion in June 2016 to further embrace partnerships with Citizens UK.

The issue of unaccompanied minors is one that is expected to be more widely publicised in coming months and work in this area will develop.

The Group will continue for at least a further 12 months.

11. RECOMMENDATION

That Synod NOTE this report.