



National Audit Office

Report

by the Comptroller
and Auditor General

Home Office

The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme

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The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Sir Amyas Morse KCB
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

8 September 2016

This report examines the achievements of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme (the programme) to date, the processes in place to deliver the programme, progress against the targets set, and the risks to future delivery of the programme and whether these are being addressed.

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This report can be found on the National Audit Office website at www.nao.org.uk

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Key facts

20,000

government's target of the number of Syrian refugees to resettle in the UK by May 2020

2,659

number of refugees resettled in the UK through the programme to the end of June 2016: 13% of the 20,000 target

£1,112m

our estimate of the total cost of the programme to the UK government to the end of 2019-20

September 2015	month the then-Prime Minister made a commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees through the programme by 2020
248	average number of Syrian refugees resettled in the UK each month between September 2015 and the end of March 2016
348	average number of Syrian refugees resettled in the UK each month since the programme's relaunch in April 2016
55%	percentage of people resettled in the UK through the programme who are survivors of torture or violence, or both, up to the end of June 2016
£421 million	total allocated from the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget to fund all refugees' costs for their first year in the UK, up to 2021 (up from the initial budget of £404 million announced in the 2015 Spending Review)
£126 million	total amount the Home Office expects to give to local authorities up to 2020 as a contribution to their costs for refugees' second to fifth years in the UK (down from the initial budget of £129 million announced in the 2015 Spending Review)

Summary

1 Since it began in 2011, the civil war in Syria has caused mass movement of Syrians, both within Syria and to neighbouring countries. Syrians now make up the largest refugee population in the world, with almost five million having fled to neighbouring countries to escape the conflict. Many countries currently hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees are developing countries and cannot afford to support such large numbers. As a result, the United Nations estimates that one in ten Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa region needs to be resettled elsewhere.

2 In January 2014, the UK government announced that it would establish a Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme (the programme) to allow selected refugees to resettle in the UK. The Home Office was responsible for the initial programme. It prioritised people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk. The programme was small in scale, resettling 239 refugees up to the end of September 2015. In September 2015, the then-Prime Minister announced that the programme would be expanded to resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in the UK by May 2020. The government later added a milestone to resettle 1,000 Syrian refugees before Christmas 2015.

3 The programme's eligibility criteria were extended to include all those recognised as vulnerable by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It became the joint responsibility of the Home Office, the Department for International Development and the Department for Communities and Local Government, who established a joint team to manage the programme located in the Home Office (the programme team). Other bodies involved in the programme include international organisations, other central government departments, local authorities and third sector delivery partners.

4 The programme team and its partners achieved the target to resettle 1,000 Syrian refugees in the UK by Christmas 2015. They have resettled a further 1,561 Syrian refugees since then, taking the total number to 2,659 by the end of June 2016, 13% of the overall target.

Our report

5 This report examines the achievements of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme to date, the processes in place to deliver the programme, progress against the targets set, and the risks to future delivery of the programme and whether these are being addressed. This is a progress review of a live programme. We have not reached a judgement on whether the programme has achieved value for money as it is too early to assess this. The report has four parts:

- Part One provides an overview of the Syrian conflict and the need to resettle Syrian refugees;
- Part Two focuses on the establishment and delivery of the programme, the processes in place and the organisations involved;
- Part Three analyses the achievements of the programme to date, the experiences of delivery partners and refugees, and the scale of the remaining challenge; and
- Part Four identifies the risks to successful delivery of the programme and the extent to which these are being managed.

6 The programme is only open to Syrian refugees registered in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey. This report does not cover the UK's support to Syrians still inside the country, Syrian refugees within Europe, or refugees from other countries. The report also does not cover the government's commitment to resettle vulnerable children from the Middle East and North Africa region, or unaccompanied refugee children in Europe.

7 We invited written submissions from a sample of local authorities involved in the programme, and visited two further local authorities to understand their experiences in more detail. We also undertook research on the approaches taken by Canada and Germany to resettling Syrian refugees (available on the National Audit Office website). Full details of our approach and evidence base are in the appendices.

Key findings

Progress to date

8 The programme team successfully expanded the original programme at speed to achieve a new target. The target to resettle 1,000 Syrian refugees by Christmas 2015 was achieved. There was good partnership working across central and local government, strong working relationships with international partners and a concerted effort by all involved. There was a general consensus among those we spoke to that the programme had been delivered quickly between September and December 2015 using unsustainable labour-intensive processes. The programme team recognised that delivery had relied on processes designed for a smaller-scale programme. It deliberately scaled back the programme between January and April 2016 to redesign it in light of experiences so far. The target number of refugees to resettle in the UK over this period reduced in line with this (paragraphs 3.2, 3.3 and 3.7).

9 Local authorities have worked hard to provide resettlement places, but have not always understood central government's expectations of them after the first year of the programme. Participation of local authorities in the programme is voluntary. The number involved has increased considerably from three to 118 since the programme expanded in September 2015. The programme team has specified what local authorities are responsible for providing during refugees' first year in the UK. They have not done so for refugees' second to fifth years to allow local authorities to tailor services according to local circumstances. Some local authorities we spoke to were concerned about this, and said they were unclear about what they needed to provide (paragraphs 2.12, 2.13, 3.5, 3.10 and 3.11).

10 The programme team are confident they are on track to meet the 20,000 target. An average of 248 Syrian refugees were resettled per month between September 2015 and the end of March 2016. If this rate had continued, the overall target would have been missed by 6,160 people. This period, however, factored in a slowing down of the number of refugees resettled between January and April 2016 to allow space to redesign the programme. Between April 2016 and the end of June 2016, 1,044 refugees were resettled against an internal target of 1,030, which has increased the average to 348 refugees per month. The programme team have secured enough indicative pledges from local authorities to resettle 20,000 refugees by 2020. It is essential that these pledges materialise into firm offers of support as more refugees will need to be resettled each quarter during the remainder of the programme than have been so far (paragraphs 3.21, 3.22 and 4.2 to 4.5).

11 Refugees we met told us that their experience of the programme has been largely positive, but uncertainty about their status in the UK has caused some anxiety. Refugees told us that the process of being resettled to the UK had gone well and they had received a warm welcome from their new communities. However, information provided to them about where they were being resettled can be patchy. Many are unsure of their rights in the UK and what they are eligible for, including their ability to travel abroad, whether they can apply for family reunion, or what will happen to them at the end of the five-year programme. We also heard that refugees selected for the programme were unable to claim some benefits, such as Carer's Allowance or Personal Independence Payments, because they do not meet the required residency test. Given that the programme selects refugees based on vulnerability criteria, such as disability, this mismatch may cause difficulties for some participants (paragraphs 3.15 to 3.20).

Managing risks to delivery

12 The future of the programme could be put at risk by local authorities' lack of suitable accommodation and school places. Local authorities told us that this was the main reason they may not be able to participate in the programme in future. The programme will need an estimated 4,930 houses or flats over its lifetime. Local authorities will need to secure an estimated 10,664 childcare and school places over the same period. The programme team have asked Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships to manage these issues in consultation with local authorities, but they remain risks to meeting the 20,000 target (paragraphs 4.6 to 4.8).

13 The programme provides funding to local authorities to support refugees beyond their first year in the UK, unlike other resettlement programmes, but it is not clear what this will cover. Some of the programme budget will be used to pay local authorities a total of £20,520 per refugee over their five years on the programme: £8,520 for the first year and diminishing amounts each additional year the refugee is in the UK. Local authorities are free to spend the tariff as they see fit. Some local authorities we spoke to were unsure whether the tariff was expected to cover all costs for refugees' second to fifth years, or how much they would be expected to contribute from their own budgets. Local authorities also told us they were concerned that refugees would need substantial support after their first five years in the UK, particularly those with specific physical or mental health needs. Support for these needs is not covered by existing programme funding, but would come out of normal departmental budgets (paragraphs 2.10 to 2.13 and 4.9).

14 There is no estimate of the total cost of the programme to the UK. Costs fall to different central government departments and participating local authorities. Most of the costs of each refugee's first year in the UK are covered by the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget. This changes in year two, after which costs for health and education fall to the relevant department, as they do for all citizens. The cost of the programme to the UK is uncertain as it depends in large part on the characteristics of those entering the country. The local authority tariff is the only major fixed cost. Departments told us that analysing all costs would be time-consuming. Using the departments' assumptions, we estimate the indicative total cost of the programme to the UK could be up to £1,112 million to the end of 2019-20 (paragraphs 2.14 to 2.17).

15 While some elements of the programme's redesign are not yet operational, overall the programme team has made progress in redesigning the programme to improve refugees' experiences. The programme team has made plans to monitor and evaluate the programme. It also plans to gather formal feedback from local authorities, but has yet to do so. This means it does not know how well the programme is operating at a local level. Plans for adding new features to the programme are further advanced but are not yet operational. It has piloted a scheme to collate information on refugees before they arrive. It has also introduced a community sponsorship initiative (individuals, charities, faith groups and businesses directly resettling refugees in addition to local authorities). It told us these developments were not essential to achieving the 20,000 target, but should contribute to improving the experience of refugees and their ability to integrate quickly into the UK. Addressing refugees' concerns about limited English language provision would also help them to integrate more quickly (paragraphs 3.12 to 3.14 and 4.10 to 4.18).

Concluding remarks

16 The programme team, other central government departments, local authorities and delivery partners performed well in the pre-Christmas 2015 period in meeting the commitment to resettle 1,000 Syrian refugees. They achieved a great deal in a short amount of time, resettling much larger numbers of refugees than previous programmes. Success was due in large part to the dedication and goodwill of those involved.

17 The programme team sensibly reduced internal targets and expectations of the programme in the first quarter of 2016 to allow time to redesign it in the light of lessons learned. This redesign considered crucial aspects of the programme, such as improving process efficiency and communication and designing a monitoring and evaluation framework. While progress has been made, not all developments are operational yet.

18 The programme team has identified and considered the main risks to delivering the programme in future. As the programme develops, the organisations involved need to ensure the goodwill of all involved is turned into actions to mitigate the risks to meeting the 20,000 target, such as finding suitable accommodation and school places. The characteristics of the refugees arriving in the UK will become clearer over time and with this new information, the programme team will need to ensure that budget assumptions are revised accordingly and that local authorities are not faced with costs that they struggle to meet. Local authorities continue to face budget cuts and if higher than predicted costs impact local authorities' ability to deliver quality services, the chances of refugees integrating successfully into the UK will be at risk.

Recommendations

- 19 The programme team needs to:
- a **Make it clear to local authorities that there are no set requirements for what local authorities need to provide during refugees' second to fifth years in the UK** so as to encourage local authorities to tailor services to refugees' needs.
 - b **Clarify what refugees are entitled to in respect of travelling within and outside the UK, family reunion and their status after the fifth year of the programme.** The departments should disseminate this information to all local authorities and providers involved in the programme.
 - c **Ensure other government departments and local authorities understand the risks to the wider success of the programme and have plans in place to manage these risks,** for example finding suitable housing and school places and capacity to meet longer-term, uncertain costs. This could include encouraging local authorities not yet participating in the programme to join.
 - d **Ensure refugees' characteristics are collected and used to adapt programme budgets in light of any changes to initial assumptions,** so no organisation taking part in the programme struggles to participate effectively due to cost pressures.
 - e **Ensure a full monitoring and evaluation framework is operational as soon as possible.** This includes defining what success looks like beyond meeting the 20,000 target.
 - f **Engage with international partners and local authorities and their service providers to ensure refugees' opinions are listened to and factored in to new developments,** such as community sponsorship, to enhance refugees' experiences of the programme and life in the UK.