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Transcript for: The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme

Description: Audio interview by NAO Press Office representative Sam Roach with Louise Bladen, NAO Director of Home Affairs value for money

Related NAO study: HC 626, 2016-17: The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme

Released: September 2016

[ Sam Roach: ] Today the National Audit Office has published its report on The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme. We are joined today by Louise Bladen, a VFM Director at the National Audit Office. So thank you very much for joining us today, Louise.

[ Louise Bladen: ] Thank you.

[ Sam Roach: ] So what is this report about?

[ Louise Bladen: ] So since the civil war began in Syria in 2011 over half the population have left their homes to escape the conflict. And as part of the UK’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis the former Prime Minister David Cameron back in 2014 announced the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme. This was ramped up considerably in September 2015 and David Cameron pledged at that point to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees by May 2020, including 1,000 by Christmas 2015. So our report examines how the programme was expanded, the achievements of the programme to date, and we look ahead at the risks that will need to be managed to deliver successfully on the UK’s commitment.

[ Sam Roach: ] OK, and so these Syrian refugees, can they come over from anywhere or are there any sort of limitations on who is eligible for this scheme?

[ Louise Bladen: ] Yeah, sure, the scheme is open to Syrian refugees who have fled Syria and are currently located in five of the neighbouring countries, so Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey. It doesn’t cover Syrians who are still in the country or who have already come to Europe, and it also doesn’t cover our other commitments from the UK to vulnerable children and unaccompanied children. Syrians chosen for the scheme must be registered by the UNHCR or the Government (in Turkey’s case), and they must also meet vulnerability criteria. So for example, 55% of the refugees resettled to date in the UK are survivors of torture or violence or both.

[ Sam Roach: ] OK. So we’ve had this commitment made last year, and your team’s been looking into the work done so far. What have you found out?

[ Louise Bladen: ] So the organisations and partners who’d been involved in delivering the programme, they’ve achieved a tremendous amount in a short amount of time. They met the target to resettle 1,000 refugees by Christmas, and as at June 2016, 2,659 refugees have been resettled, and that represents about 13% of the total target of 20,000. And the programme team responsible for this, they believe they are on track to meet this by 2020 because they’ve had enough pledges from local authorities to all of this commitment. I think another thing that was important that we had was when we spoke to refugees about their experiences, they had been largely positive, but there was some uncertainty about their status in the UK, and that was causing them a bit of an anxiety, particularly whether they would be able to stay in the UK after the five years on the programme has ended.

[ Sam Roach: ] So we’ve had 13% of the target resettled already. Where have they been resettled? Where have they been moved to?

[ Louise Bladen: ] So from only three local authorities participating when this started because it is a voluntary scheme for local authorities, there are now 118 local authorities who are taking part and where refugees have been resettled. And this varies quite a lot in terms of the numbers, so for some local authorities it could be a handful of refugees, for others – for example, we visited Nottinghamshire on our case study visit – there were, you know, almost 100 refugees even before Christmas.

[ Sam Roach: ] OK. And are the local councils coping with this at the moment?

[ Louise Bladen: ] They coped really well in the period before Christmas but there was, it was an “all hands on deck” approach, everyone involved, everyone doing their best, but that meant that the processes that were involved really were unsustainable in the longer term so they had to be redesigned in the light of the experience to date. I think the key challenge we identify in our report for local authorities will be about finding appropriate and sufficient housing and school and childcare places for refugees. So they need to find nearly 5,000 houses or flats, over 10,000 childcare or school places. So the future of the programme could be put at risk if these can’t be secured.

[ Sam Roach: ] How much will this programme cost overall?

[ Louise Bladen: ] Well, the funding arrangements for the programme are complex. So for the first year that refugees are in the UK, overall £421 million has been allocated to fund this, and then there’s an additional £126 million which was a contribution that the Home Office will make to local authorities for the costs of the years 2-5 on the programme, and that’s up to 2020. What isn’t known is the overall cost of the programme, and in part this will depend on who comes, the characteristics of the refugees involved. But we at the NAO have done an estimate of this, bringing in all government costs, and we think it will be in the region of £1,112 million to the UK government to the end of 2019-2020.

[ Sam Roach: ] OK. So would it be right to say that some things need to change to make sure the 2020 target is met?

[ Louise Bladen: ] Yeah, because the achievements in the early part of the programme really were about the goodwill involved and everyone participating and being really key to make it work. The programme is now resettling an average of 348 refugees a month and has secured enough offers from local authorities to resettle the 20,000 refugees but these pledges need to be turned into actual commitments to find, you know, the accommodation, the school places. And to do that, the programme will need to resettle more refugees per quarter than it has done so far, so it is a scaling up of the programme.

[ Sam Roach: ] And does the NAO have any specific recommendations on what should be done next?

[ Louise Bladen: ] Yeah, the NAO’s report, we make a number of recommendations. So for example, it is really important that local authorities understand there are no set requirements for what they need to provide after the first year. And in terms of costs, we recommend that refugees’ characteristics are collected and monitored, so that the programme budget can adapt as new cohorts come through. It’s really important that no organisation participating struggles due to those cost pressures. In terms of refugees themselves, it’s important that they get some clarity on their status in the UK, particularly what happens to them after the five years on the programme. So we recommend that this information is disseminated to them, and also that their opinions and experiences are factored into future developments on the programme. In terms of the future risks, important that these are well understood by people participating. So for example, local authorities not participating could be encouraged to join. And finally, we think it’s really important that a full monitoring and evaluation framework is put in place as soon as possible because we need to know how the refugees are getting on, what impact the programme is having, and above all else whether the 20,000 target will be met.

[ Sam Roach: ] Well, thank you very much for coming in today for us and for answering our questions.

[ Louise Bladen: ] Thank you.

[ Sam Roach: ] Thank you very much, Louise. If you like to know more about this subject and you would like to see some more of the details, both the summary and the full NAO report are available on our website. Just go to [www.nao.org.uk](http://www.nao.org.uk). Thank you very much and I hope to listen in soon.