

**Health and Wellbeing Task Group**  
**November 2017**

**Annual Report on the Syrian Resettlement Programme**

**1. Purpose of Report**

1.1 This report is to inform and update the Health and Wellbeing Task Group on progress made with the Vulnerable Person's Relocation Scheme in Woking. It provides a background and overview to the scheme, local delivery and progress in significant areas.

**2. Background**

2.2 The Vulnerable Person's Relocation Scheme (VPRS) is the UK Government's response to the international Syrian Refugee crises. The scheme operates in collaboration with the Home Office, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Local Authorities. Families who have fled Syria are identified as suitable for the scheme under the following vulnerability criteria (Appendix A p30):

- Legal and Physical Protection Needs
- Survivors of Torture and/or Violence
- Medical Needs
- Women and Girls at Risk
- Family Reunification
- Child and Adolescents at Risk
- Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions

2.3 In September 2015, Woking Borough Council agreed to provide housing of up to four bedrooms, through Thamesway Housing Limited, for the resettlement of up to 12 families per annum, subject to annual review, until the end of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in 2020. The first families arrived in Woking in December 2015.

**3. Governance**

3.1 The Family Support Team, within Woking Borough Council People Services directorate, manages the resettlement of the Syrian Refugee families and the portfolio holder is Councillor Hunwicks. The scheme is overseen by the Woking Borough Council Health and Wellbeing Task Group and is ultimately accountable to the Home Office to meet the designated Statement of Requirements provided within the Funding Instructions (Appendix A p17).

3.2 Evaluation data is provided to the Home Office biannually, reporting on family composition, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), employment, benefits and health. Additionally, the scheme will be annually audited, commencing January 2018, as part of the wider Family Support Quality Assurance Framework.

3.3 A Woking Refugee Focus Group (Appendix B) meets quarterly to share feedback and support collaborative working. Attendees include representatives from Housing, Education, Early Years, Job Centre, Police, Citizen's Advice, Adult Social Care and local faith groups.

A Countywide Syrian Refugee District and Boroughs (D&Bs) Group meets quarterly enabling Surrey D&Bs to share best practice and oversee operational and strategic needs.

#### **4. Infrastructure**

- 4.1 Nationally, Local Authorities vary in how they manage the scheme; some choosing to commission external services or Community Sponsorship (Appendix A p23), whilst others have included the scheme within their existing teams.
- 4.2 In Woking, two staff members have been employed to directly support the Syrian families with the oversight of a Senior Family coordinator. Frontline staff speak Arabic and have experience supporting whole families both in the UK and abroad.
- 4.3 Woking Borough Council liaises directly with the Home Office for funding claims and evaluation returns; whereas general support and guidance is provided through the regional South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM).
- 4.4 The scheme is driven by the need for suitable accommodation and when properties are secured, the Council informs the SESPM who liaise with the UNHCR to match a suitable family which is then agreed by the Council. Once confirmed, families should arrive between six and eight weeks.

#### **5. Finance**

- 5.1 The Home Office tariff covers Woking staff costs and general costs incurred in order to meet the Statement of Requirements. The Council is funded for the programme on a per capita basis, as per the tariffs provided by the Home Office (Appendix A p24). Funding is claimed three times for each family in Year 1; 40% received upon arrival and two instalments of 30% of the tariff subsequently in months 4 and 8. In Years 2-5, the full tariff is claimed annually and the amounts diminish each year to reflect an anticipated reduction in need. Wider funding for additional needs, including social care and education, can be claimed from the Home Office on an individual basis.
- 5.2 In terms of financial risk to the scheme, the benefit cap provides a challenge, as many families are 'capped' and take time to settle and find work. Housing Benefit therefore does not cover the full rent payments and some families have a shortfall for a period until they start work. In some cases, where needed, Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) have been used to help bridge the gap temporarily. To date, DHPs have been awarded to four out of the fourteen families.

### **Progress to Date (December 2015 – October 2017)**

#### **5.1 Arrivals**

- 5.2 At the time of writing, Woking has received 14 families which consist of 53 individuals; 27 children (<18) and 26 adults. The youngest arrival was just two months old and the oldest 50.

5.3A 15th family was scheduled to arrive in October 2017, however this has been cancelled due to visa complications. Another family is currently being sourced and a further property is currently being assessed for suitability. Therefore, it is likely that by Christmas 2017 we will have received a total of 16 families. We are working closely with Thamesway to secure more suitable properties which are affordable within Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and hope to increase arrivals in 2018.

5.4 The below charts show the sizes of families received, their location per Ward and an overview of which UNHCR criteria they met:

Fig. 1

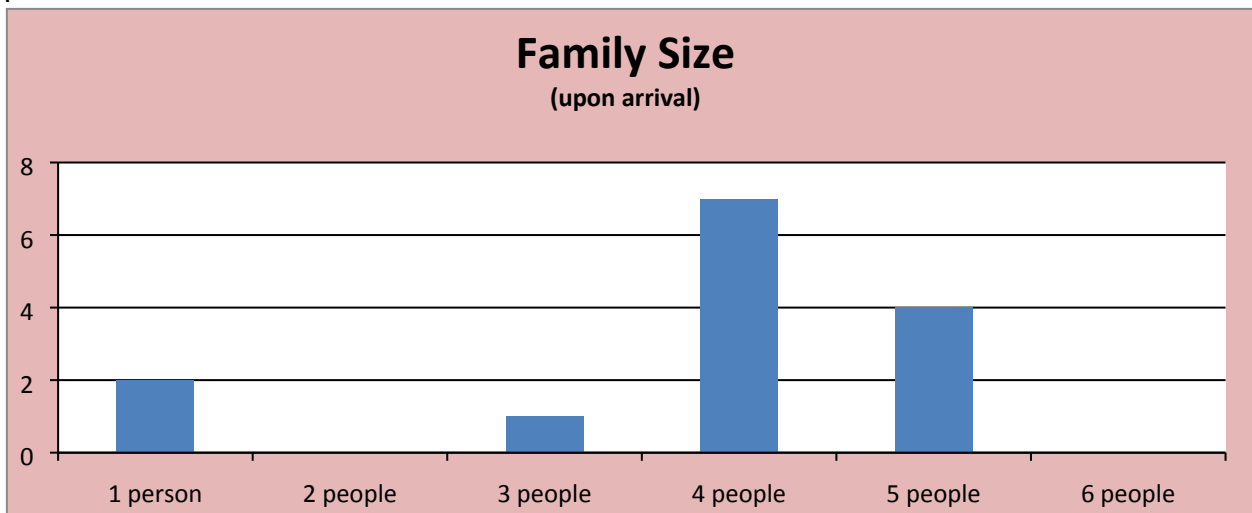


Fig. 2

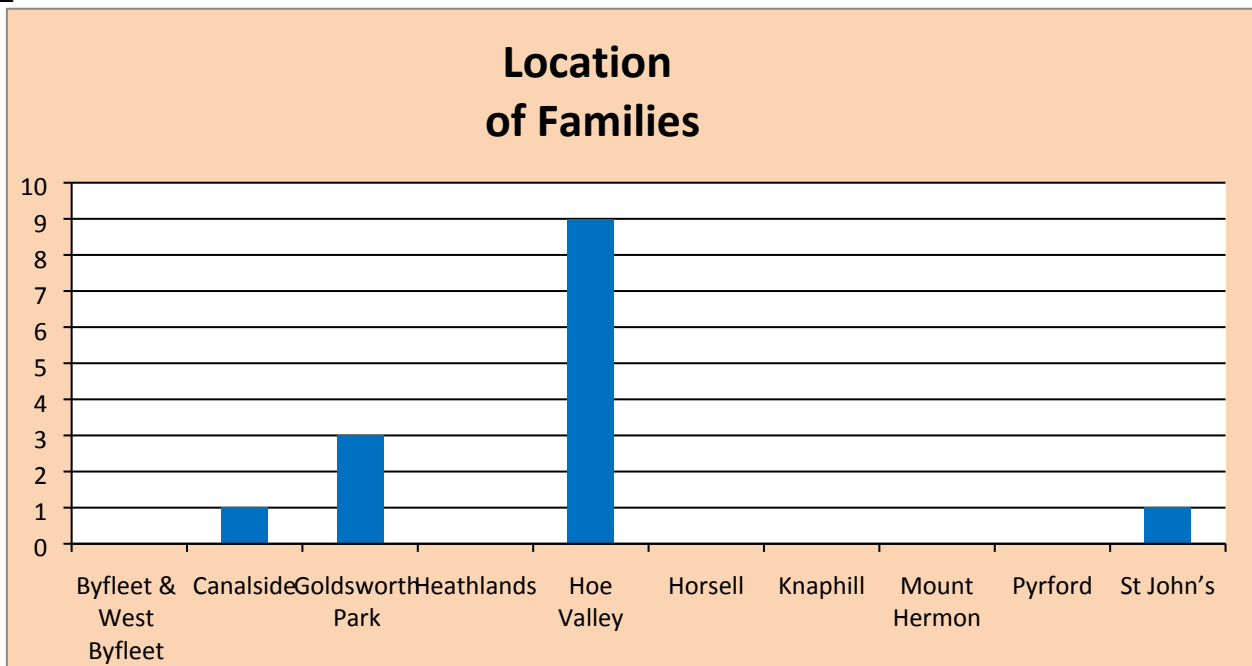
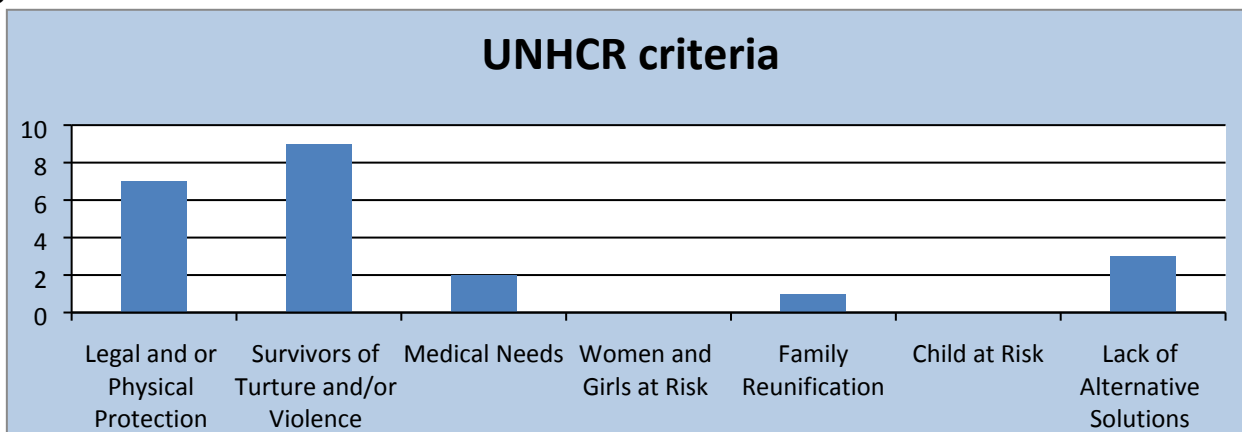


Fig.3



### 5.5 Health

5.6 Many of the refugee families have moderate to severe health needs and require frequent visits to the GP, walk-in centre and hospital. Woking staff accompany families to the hospital for significant appointments and track progress, chasing referrals where needed and encourage families to travel independently when able.

5.7 Health services in the UK are notably different to Syria and families take time to learn how the NHS works; particularly that they need to wait for specialist appointments. The team constantly reassure families they are not being neglected or forgotten; that they will receive appointment letters to see specialists in the usual time. Some families initially panic when they become unwell, for example if their children have a cold or temperature. The team support and reassure as much as possible and teach families how to use services such as NHS 111 who have Arabic translators for advice and guidance.

5.8 We have three families in receipt of Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Enhanced Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) due to health needs, including visual impairment, mobility and sickle cell anaemia. These families require a considerable amount of support. We have also received one family this year on an urgent request from the Home Office due to the daughter needing frequent blood transfusions and she was taken to A&E upon arrival; her condition is now under control and she is attending school.

5.9 As shown above in Fig. 3, many of the families have experienced torture and/or violence and have fled Syria and resided for in another Country without stability. When they arrive in Woking, families often initially feel a sense of euphoria but can be overwhelmed, managing both culture shock and memories from past experiences. Some show symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They also encounter further grief as they continue to receive news of friends and family being killed in the ongoing conflict.

5.10 We are advised by local mental health practitioners not to refer families to mental health services upon arrival but later if symptoms manifest once the family have started to settle. The team refer to the Community Mental Health Recovery Service (CMHRS) when possible, however, many families decline this support. Currently, we have only referred one adult for a mental health assessment and another adult has recently agreed, one year after arrival. If families decline specialist support then we endeavour to support families by encouraging them and helping them to make positive relationships and integrate in social

activities and to volunteer, seek employment and learn English. Most are making great progress and coping remarkably well.

5.11 Ensuring that Syrian children are supported and cared for is a priority. We know that one child witnessed a family member being shot in Syria and another would wet the bed when hearing explosions in Syria before they fled. Referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) will be made when issues arise. Currently, one child in primary school is displaying mental health needs and a referral to CAMHS has been offered, however, parents need to give permission and they have declined. These instances are handled sensitively and the school and the Woking team work hard to support the parents to understand the needs and a referral to the Multi-Agency-Safeguarding-Hub (MASH) is a final option and one that we would try and avoid wherever possible.

#### 5.12 **ESOL**

5.13 Formal language training is provided to all families with the goal of achieving Entry Level 3 (Appendix A p19). ESOL training is provided by Woking College and students progress into mainstream ESOL classes as soon as they reach Entry Level 1.

5.14 Upon arrival, families undertake a formal ESOL assessment by the College. Some arrive with a basic grasp of English and start in mainstream Entry classes. Others have no prior knowledge of English and some are illiterate in Arabic which makes learning English a challenge. To support learners who are assessed as pre Entry Level 1, we have invested in a foundation ESOL class run twice a week by Woking College and a premises is provided free of charge by a local church. These classes focus on practical needs as well as general language and students enjoy visits from guests and apply the ESOL learning in the town centre, for example purchasing train tickets, learning about local banks and where to purchase medication. There is also a supporting crèche managed by Sythwood Children's Centre at the premises to allow parents with young children to attend and learn.

5.15 Informal ESOL provision is important and 'conversation cafes' in churches and other ESOL-related groups around the Borough are utilised for additional learning and language application. We have utilised ESOL-trained volunteers to work in families' homes and are currently working to expand this provision so all families can access an ESOL volunteer to accelerate formal learning.

5.16 This year, many students attended the Woking College Annual ESOL Presentation and received certificates for their achievements. Two of the Syrian students received a 'Learner of the Year' award which was presented by the Mayor. Woking College have provided testimonies from some of the students for reference (Appendix C).

#### 5.17 **Employment and Volunteering**

5.18 Accessing employment is a priority for integration and wellbeing. Woking's current families have previous experience in nursing, teaching, cooking, tailoring and farming.

5.19 The benefit cap is now in force across the UK and to be exempt from this, families need to receive Working Tax Credits (WTC) or be exempt on medical grounds. This means that most will need to work a minimum of 24 hours per week (per family) otherwise their Housing

Benefit will not cover the rent. The priority is therefore to support families to secure employment as soon as they are able and to support families to progress towards their longer-term employment goals at the same time.

5.20 Local Woking employment services met together in September 2017 to identify what they can offer to support this work and creative ideas were shared. Representatives included members from the Job Centre, Skills Max, the Lighthouse, Mascot Hub and the Shah Jahan Mosque. The meeting was productive and it transpired that work had been duplicated when families had accessed more than one service. Therefore, we are developing ‘employment packs’ for each adult to store all of their employment-related documents together and these can be taken to the various appointments. This will help professionals to track progress and see where the gaps in need are.

5.21 Syrian residents have secured employment in restaurants as a Kitchen Porter and Chef, serving in a café, retail, teaching Arabic and designing and making handbags self-employed.

5.22 Individuals are volunteering at the Lighthouse, a Children’s Centre, Youth Club, Woking Furniture Project, Mascot Hub and Oxfam. Families are engaging with community activities and events such as Eid parties, sporting events, Woking Refugee Week and one man is enjoying playing drums for a local orchestra and various other musical groups.

5.23 The below information provides a further breakdown of employment and volunteering progress:

Fig 4

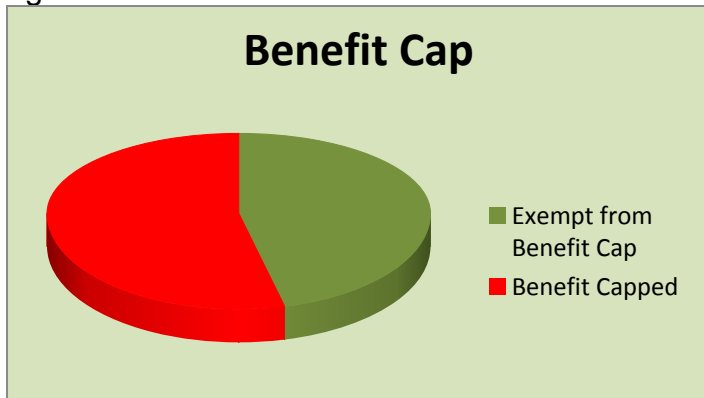


Fig 5

Adults exempt from benefit cap	12
Adults affected by benefit cap	14
Employed adults receiving WTC	3
Employed adults not receiving WTC	4

Fig 6

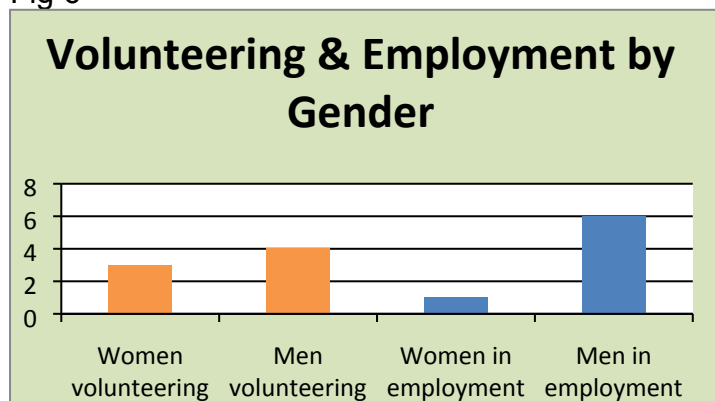


Fig 7

Total employed adults (any hours)	7
Total adults volunteering	7
Total adults only volunteering	5

#### 5.24 **Housing**

5.25 The Syrian families reside in 13 properties; 4 from private landlords and 9 Thamesway properties. Homes are well cared for and families are notably house-proud. As some families grow and children increase in age, some will become overcrowded and families who have a housing need will join the local housing register where appropriate as Woking residents.

#### 5.26 **Community Response**

5.27 The response from local community groups has been exceptional. Upon arrival of the first families, many household items were donated and we received donations from schools and faith groups including shopping vouchers. The Liaise Women's Centre hosted a welcome party, The Lighthouse a coffee morning and the Shah Jahan Mosque an Eid party all of which were a great success.

5.28 Local churches have sourced private-rented properties and volunteers from various congregations have volunteered to support with integration. Cafes, craft mornings, free use of rooms and voluntary support to practice English language have made a significant impact on the success of the scheme so far, and many people offer to sponsor a room by donating household items pre-arrival. The Catholic Diocese has recently developed a grant scheme for support for Woking families. The Shah Jahan Mosque has set up a committee to support the families and are hosting monthly gatherings, social events and supporting with hospital visits and they feed into the focus group.

5.29 Sythwood Children's Centre have supported the scheme by allocating an outreach worker one afternoon a week to focus specifically on the needs of the Syrian families. This has been a considerable help in securing nursery placements and including the families in local trips and 'play and learn' sessions.

5.30 Partners have collaborated very effectively and the quarterly focus group has helped professionals to share, review and respond to need in a targeted and creative way. For example, Neighbourhood Police Officers are in regular contact with the College and have attended ESOL classes and visited school assemblies to teach families about the Police and how to keep themselves safe.



5.31 There have been no reports of public backlash locally directed towards the Syrian families and it is a common sight to see members of the families walking to and from school with their neighbours.

## 6. **Review**

### 6.1 **Successes:**

- Progress with employment, volunteering and general community integration;
- Health needs are being managed;
- Positive collaboration with partners and community groups;
- Families connecting with other Woking residents;
- Children are progressing at school;
- Properties are well equipped and well looked after;

### 6.2 **Challenges:**

- Some families do not get along with each other and the Police and Children's Services have been involved in some accusations of harassment. This has been dealt with using Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABC) which are non-legally binding contracts of behaviour. The learning is that we cannot assume that Syrian families will be friends with each other and the differences of culture, politics and religion in Syria means that families may well disagree with each other and this needs to be managed sensitively and wisely;
- Securing employment quickly to avoid the benefit cap and support integration. Some families face barriers to employment due to low ESOL levels, managing expectations of what is realistic in the short-term, confidence and culture;
- Managing expectations of families- regarding the health service and the general offer of support from the Council;

## 7. **Future Developments**

7.1 The Woking team regularly reviews its practice and shares learning with other Local Authorities. Next year, we will be developing the following:

- The Outcomes Star (Appendix D) as an assessment tool to track a family's independence, with a view of reducing support in years 2-5 as appropriate. This model will incorporate learning from other Local Authorities working with similar numbers of families, for example Oxford and Ashford;
- The use of volunteers to provide 1-1 ESOL provision for all families, targeting those who are struggling to progress into mainstream ESOL classes;
- A Volunteer Coordinator role with a clear process for recruiting, training, supporting and managing volunteers;
- Exploring the commissioning of further vocational training opportunities for families, jointly funded through the Home office tariff with neighbouring D&Bs;
- Working closely with Thameswey Housing to provide more properties for the scheme. This responsibility has now been passed from Housing Options to the Family Support Team so that housing and community integration is overseen together.