

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales

Submission on behalf of the Welsh Local Government Association

Introduction and Background

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities and three fire and rescue authorities are associate members. The Association seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh local government and the communities they serve.
2. The current humanitarian crisis, and the displacement of millions of people from their homes as a consequence of conflicts in Syria and the surrounding areas, has led to an increase of asylum seekers and refugees arriving in the UK, including Wales. This Inquiry is therefore timely to review on-going work across Wales to support the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into local communities and relevant plans that aim to guide this work.
3. The Syrian Resettlement Programme (SRP) and the settlement of 20,000 Syrian refugees is to be delivered over a 5-year period and it will be important to maintain the same level of commitment and coordination in continuing to successfully deliver the Programme in Wales. As such, there is a need to ensure we are developing a long-term approach to enabling integration and supporting refugees to rebuild their lives and ultimately to participate in and contribute to Welsh society.
4. It is important to recognise that the SRP is only one of a number of migration related schemes being addressed at this time. Delivery of the SRP is one of a number of Home Office schemes/objectives and local authorities are being asked for their involvement and support in other schemes, including:
 - Increasing the number of 'dispersal areas' to accommodate asylum seekers while their claims for asylum are determined
 - A National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum seeking children with the aim of sharing more equitably the care of UASC across the UK
 - The Vulnerable Children's Relocation Scheme which aims to resettle 3,000 children and families from the Middle East and North African region.
5. The focus that has been given to the SRP has led to some concerns being raised about the risk of developing a 'two tier' system of support available for refugees. Those refugees already in Wales that have or will receive refugee status following successful asylum claims while made in the UK do not in

general receive the same level of assistance to support their settlement and integration. It is important that any lessons learnt through the delivery of the SRP that leads to improved service delivery for refugees who arrived under this Programme also benefits all refugees in Wales.

The pace and effectiveness of the Welsh Government's approach to resettling refugees through the UK Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS)

6. Welsh local authorities have responded well to the request for help in accommodating refugees under the Syrian Resettlement Programme and all 22 authorities in Wales are committed to participation. It is expected that by the end of this year all authorities will have received refugee families into their local areas with over 300 refugees resettled in Wales in the first year of the Programme.
7. The majority of local authorities had limited, if any, previous experience of working with refugees and to ensure that the arrival of refugees would be well managed, effective planning was an important part of their approach. Each authority responded in a timescale that was appropriate for them and their partners and while some were able to move more quickly and contribute to the Prime Minister's commitment to resettle 1,000 refugees before the end of 2015, others have taken more time to put appropriate arrangements in place reflective of local context and circumstance.
8. Working in partnership has underpinned the approach to the SRP in Wales and while local authorities have led on this work locally, and regionally as appropriate, the active involvement of health, police, third sector and others has been critical in ensuring appropriate service delivery is provided on arrival or quickly after, e.g. registering with GPs, enrolling children in schools and registering for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.
9. While there has been some criticism of local authorities for not responding quickly enough, for those authorities with limited experience, making sure appropriate plans were in place to ensure a well-managed resettlement process was key. For example, this has required working and liaison with partners to ensure that any specific needs families proposed to be resettled may have could be met (e.g. any specific health or educational needs); identifying appropriate accommodation at the right cost close to schools; and engaging or commissioning third sector partners to provide wrap around services and support the settlement and integration of families. As such, we believe the criticism levelled has been unfair and in the main, the smooth way in which the arrival of refugees has been undertaken has borne out the benefit of effective planning.
10. Welsh Government has supported local authorities and partners in their response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and demonstrated leadership, through the First Minister, in bringing key stakeholders together in September 2015 to discuss and help coordinate the response from Wales. Since that time a Syrian Refugee Operations Board, facilitated by Welsh Government

has been meeting to oversee delivery of the Programme in Wales and more recently Welsh Government has established a Children's Sub Group to consider the National Transfer Scheme for UASC and the Vulnerable Children's Relocation Scheme. The Programme has been well managed by the Home Office, who worked in partnership with local authorities and devolved governments in developing the detail of the Programme. A good example of all stakeholders working well together is the agreement of a Health Framework for the SRP in Wales that sets out the role health services will provide in supporting local authorities' involvement in the SRP in ensuring access to appropriate healthcare services, as well as information on funding instructions to reclaim funding. The Wales Strategic Migration Partnership has also played a key coordination and supportive role in assisting authorities in developing their arrangements through the development of a SRP Toolkit and hosting a Local Authority Delivery Group to enable the sharing of information and good practice. The WSMP have also recently appointed a Refugee Resettlement Coordinator to act as a single point of contact for the SRP in Wales and to coordinate the arrival of families under the Programme.

The effectiveness of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan

11. It is believed Welsh Government's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan has limited profile or impact across local authorities. While those who work on relevant issues may be aware of its existence, and many of the issues included in the Plan are being addressed, there are no established mechanisms through which Welsh Government raises awareness of the Delivery Plan with authorities or specific departments, meaning that, to our knowledge, they may not be aware of actions required of them.
12. The WLGA responded to the consultation exercise on the draft Delivery Plan and we support the 'Outcomes' to be achieved as set out in each chapter. However, there is no detail on ownership of the actions or timescales for delivery, nor how it will identify if and how the priority areas and actions are achieved. Some of the actions identified are not SMART so it will not be easy to identify an outcome or whether the intended impact has been achieved. Also, some of the actions are very broad and it is questionable as to their relevance for inclusion in this Plan - while successful implementation will assist refugees, the ensuing actions should be mainstreamed as basic practice or standards (e.g. landlords providing accommodation for refugees must ensure that it is fit for human habitation and is maintained).
13. It should be acknowledged that since the Delivery Plan was originally developed, there have been significant changes to the numbers of refugees arriving in Wales through the Syrian Resettlement Programme. The number of asylum seekers has also increased over recent years and with the introduction of a National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum seeker children (UASC) by the Home Office, it is also likely that the number of UASC in Wales will increase over future years. These developments have changed the context of the current Delivery Plan and we would therefore suggest that there is a need to develop a more strategic and high level approach to the

integration of asylum seekers and refugees and to use the opportunity of the recent changes to influence its development.

14. Over the past few years, and as evidenced in both the General Election and EU Referendum this year, the issue of immigration was one of the priority concerns raised by a large number of voters. Fears have been heightened among some people about the number of people migrating to the UK, as well as concern about the impact on public services already under pressure, for example, the NHS and social housing. This has led in some areas to increased community tensions and reported hate crimes and demonstrations against the arrival of refugees in local areas. A revised Delivery Plan would enable its repositioning in the current context and challenges and could lead to a more integrated approach to the inclusion and integration of asylum seekers and refugees.
15. Building on and following the positive arrangements put in place for the arrival and settlement of refugees under the SRP, supporting refugees to rebuild their lives will be critical to supporting their settlement in local communities. Learning the language to be able to communicate and interact, registering children in schools and with GPs and health services, restarting adult education, refining skills or finding work are all key aspects of supporting and enabling integration. Any plan or strategy should acknowledge that responding to the need for integration, and the impact of increased numbers of people seeking asylum and refugees cannot be addressed in isolation but should also include the needs and impact of increased numbers of migrants. More emphasis should be placed on the 'assets' of refugees and migrants, e.g. (highly) skilled refugees and migrants who are eager to contribute to Welsh society, for example, the Certification and Qualification Framework Wales should be better promoted, coordinated and resourced to enable refugees to have their skills and qualifications recognised to Welsh/UK standards; this would have a significant impact on their level of employability and income, their health and sense of belonging. It would decrease the level of poverty experienced by many refugees. A revised strategic Delivery Plan could ensure these key issues are addressed across all parts of Wales, linked to Welsh Government's programme for government, *Taking Wales Forward* and identifying and maximising any opportunities over the course of this Assembly to support refugees to settle in Wales.

The support and advocacy available to UASC in Wales

16. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act underlines the importance of advocacy. Advocacy empowers entitled children and ensures their rights are respected and their views and wishes are fully reflected in decision making about what is happening in their lives. It is also an additional safeguard to protect from the risk of abuse and can ensure assistance and support is provided, enabling concerns to be listened to and dealt with effectively.
17. Every local authority across Wales has arrangements in place to provide statutory advocacy to children and young people and work is currently underway to implement a national approach to the provision of statutory

advocacy to help improve access and consistency. As with any other entitled child or young person an UASC should be entitled to advocacy. However, UASC often need specialist advocacy which takes account of their specific needs due to the complexities of their immigration status as well as specialist immigration legal advice and there is a need for advocates to have working knowledge of the asylum process in order to support children effectively. As such, it is likely that should there be increasing numbers of UASC arriving into Wales further demands will be placed on advocacy services, particularly as young people may wish to seek legal advice or challenge their immigration status and seek advocacy support to secure funding for legal representation. The question of whose responsibility it is to meet some of these additional requirements remains, as they may require specialist knowledge to be supported and in many circumstances the advocacy will be required in order to challenge what is essentially a Home Office decision.

The role and effectiveness of WG's Community Cohesion Delivery Plan in ensuring the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Welsh communities

18. Welsh Government's Community Cohesion Plan is highly ambitious in terms of its scope in supporting the development and sustainability of fair, resilient and cohesive communities across Wales. Supporting the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees is one of seven outcomes highlighted in the Delivery Plan but its significance over the recent period has increased as a consequence of the humanitarian crisis as more refugees have arrived in Europe in large numbers. This significance is not only in relation to supporting authorities prepare for the resettlement and integration of refugees in a way that maintain community cohesion, but also in responding to an increase in Hate Crimes following the EU Referendum. Many of the seven outcomes sought through the Delivery Plan are also complimentary of each other, for example, achieving successful integration will rely on people feeling safe and secure in their local communities, contributing to and participating in society, not living in poverty and being at risk of exploitation. Community Cohesion Coordinators are well placed to make these links across the specified outcomes. Reference to the links to be made between community cohesion and Wellbeing Plans, under the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act and Strategic Equality Plans as cross cutting issues is helpful in embedding cohesion issues across other relevant plans and strategies.
19. The Community Cohesion Coordinators have played a crucial role in supporting local authorities in their planning and preparations for the arrival and resettlement of refugees under the SRP. Coordinators have been able to ensure that local authorities and regions are kept updated and informed as the detail of the Programme developed, feeding back any queries, concerns or suggestions for improving delivery; they have shared information across the region as to the different approaches for planning and readiness for involvement, including briefings and documents to avoid duplication and help create more consistent approaches; and providing hands on support in the arrangements for the initial arrival of refugees into local areas. Coordinators

have continued to monitor any community tensions that may exist, informing those relevant if any tensions increase, offering advice and support on engaging with local communities to prepare areas for the arrival of refugees, a role highly valued by local authorities and partners. More broadly, Community Cohesion Officers have carried out a full range of activities expected of them in the Delivery Plan, reflective of local circumstances and relevant issues and priorities. As an extension to the ongoing participation with the SRP, Coordinators are also supporting local authorities with regards to their future participation in the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Programme. This has involved promoting the links between the two schemes (SRP/VCRP) and liaising with partner agencies in readiness of future arrivals.

20. With the critical role played by Community Cohesion Coordinators in supporting local authorities individually and regionally, not only in relation to asylum seekers and refugees but across all 7 outcomes identified, the WLGA welcomes the recent decision from Welsh Government of the continuation of the grant for these posts in 2017/18.