Dear Meg,

Community sponsorship update

I write to update you on the community sponsorship scheme, in response to the recommendation of the Committee’s report on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme (HC 768).

In July, the Home Secretary announced that 53 refugees are being supported by ten community sponsor groups across the UK. She recognised the excellent work of community sponsors to date, such as the Salvation Army, and announced £1m of funding over the next two years to provide training and support for community groups that want to welcome refugees through community sponsorship. We will launch an open competition in the Autumn and invite bids from interested organisations with the necessary expertise to advise and support community groups wanting to become community sponsors. We also hope to see philanthropic money supplementing Government money in this endeavour.

The Committee’s report observed: (a) the need for community sponsorship to be complementary to the local authority resettlement route; and (b) that there are differences between the two resettlement models. I touch on these observations below.

Community sponsorship enables community groups to directly welcome and support resettled refugees in the UK. Refugees are resettled under community sponsorship from within the existing vulnerable persons and children’s resettlement schemes and receive a similar package of support on arrival. Community sponsorship complements the traditional local authority resettlement model by creating an avenue for local community groups to become more intimately involved in welcoming and supporting refugees, and giving local authorities an alternative community-led option for resettling refugees. Some local authorities, who have, for various reasons, been unable to resettle refugees themselves, have welcomed the opportunity to support local community groups to resettle refugees through community sponsorship.

Community sponsorship differs from the traditional local authority resettlement model in two key ways.
Local community groups take responsibility for welcoming and resettling vulnerable refugees in their communities, rather than the local authority. Anecdotal evidence from the UK and Canada suggests that this community-led approach to resettlement can bring integration benefits for both the refugees and the local community. Community groups are vetted and must seek approval from the Home Office to become community sponsors. The local authority is also closely involved, consenting to any community sponsorship arrangement in their area and often providing valuable advice and support to community groups.

The length of time that support is required of community sponsors is different to the five years of funding to provide support that local authorities sign up to. Community sponsors agree to provide wrap-around support (welcome, local orientation, English language tuition, etc) for a period of one year, and housing for a period of two years. Towards the end of the first year following a conversation between the community sponsor and local authority, and in consultation with the refugee family, a decision will be taken about the ongoing support to be provided, and who will provide that support. We anticipate that some community sponsors will wish to continue to provide support beyond their initial one-year commitment. In other cases, the local authority may provide some support, and there is the option of providing funding to local authorities for this up to Year 5, consistent with the funding for the wider resettlement scheme. In other cases, the refugee family may not require further support. Decisions will be taken on a case-by-case basis.

Community sponsorship is a small but growing part of the resettlement landscape. We will continue to work in partnership with civil society and local government to deliver the best possible outcomes for resettled refugees through this scheme.

I hope you find this update useful.

Patsy Wilkinson
PATSY WILKINSON