

Summary

Devon's County and District Councils are participating voluntarily in the government's two main refugee resettlement programmes, pledging to receive and house 46 refugee families by December 2019. At October 2018, 30 families have arrived in Devon. Devon's Councils have one year to meet their housing pledges. Progress relies on finding affordable private rented housing for families who are dependent on benefit income. There is an acute shortage of such housing across the county.

The experiences of some families resettled in smaller towns have exposed some risks of social isolation which are difficult to mitigate and should be avoided in future. **This may further reduce the supply of potential resettlement properties and increase the risk that some Councils may not meet their pledges by the government's deadline.**

Most families have settled in well and feel comfortable in their local community. However most have arrived with little or no English and many of the adults have low levels of formal education. Learning English is a great challenge and progress towards employment and self-reliance will be slow for many. Various options to boost employability are being explored, in partnership with the DWP locally and Devon's community and voluntary sector.

Background

The government has committed to resettling 23,000 refugees in the UK by December 2019, under two main resettlement programmes. Refugees eligible for these programmes are mainly Syrian families who have fled the conflict in their country and registered with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in one of the countries bordering Syria. The UNHCR prioritises a very small minority of families for resettlement according to specific criteria for vulnerability and refers those families to national governments including the UK. The UK government looks to local authorities to provide housing and integration support for families who are accepted for resettlement. The government provides local authorities with a 5-year funding package for every family housed in their area.

Devon has formed a partnership to coordinate the programme. This brings together the city, district and county councils, the NHS, Devon and Cornwall Police and partners in the voluntary and community sector. Devon County Council coordinates this partnership and manages the government funding.

Pledges and Progress

The resettlement process starts with a local authority offering suitable housing for a refugee family to the government's Resettlement Unit. Devon's City and District Councils made independent, public decisions on the number of properties they aimed to offer to the government over the course of the programme, as shown in the table below.

City/district council	Resettlement pledge (families)	Properties found	Community Sponsored (families)	Families (people) arrived
East Devon	8	3	1	4 (18)
Exeter	12	8		7 (28)
Mid Devon	5	2		2 (9)
North Devon*	4		1	1 (5)
South Hams	6	6		6 (23)
Teignbridge	7	5		5 (22)
Torrige*	Not specified		1	1 (6)
West Devon	4	4		4 (18)
Total 5 years	46	28	3	30 (129)

*North Devon Council and Torrige District Council are participating in resettlement through Community Sponsorship only.

The Councils that have made resettlement pledges are looking to the private rented sector to ensure that refugee families are not given priority over local residents with housing needs. When sourcing accommodation, Councils must assume that resettled families will initially be dependent on benefit income while they learn sufficient English to look for work. This has proved to be the case for all families who have arrived in Devon so far. Councils have therefore chosen to source rented accommodation that is affordable within the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). There is an acute shortage of such accommodation across the county. A significant proportion of the properties that have been brought into the resettlement scheme have been provided by landlords who are moved by the plight of refugees and who want to help this group. Despite ongoing publicity campaigns by all Councils through their normal channels and networks, the supply of suitable properties has been slow.

The government provides a 5-year funding package to local authorities for every family resettled. The funding regime is light touch and there would be no barrier to using this funding to top up rents from the LHA level towards a market rent if that would attract more landlords. However, the funding package for each family steps down each year, which creates a risk that the rent would become unaffordable, putting the family's housing at risk. Councils have therefore taken a low-risk approach in sourcing property that is affordable within the LHA.

The resettlement pledges are public knowledge. Progress is published on Devon County Council's website. Pro-refugee groups in Devon show interest in the rate of resettlement and periodically raise questions with individual councils.

Locations and social isolation

The experiences of families resettled in Devon so far have exposed some risk of social isolation where families are housed in smaller towns at some distance from other resettled families or Arabic-speaking acquaintances and from the main providers of English classes. While integration is the aim for all families, the rate at which families

gain confidence and local connections varies considerably according to personal background, temperament, level of education and many other factors. A great deal depends on the extent of support and friendship within the local community. While all families have access to a dedicated support worker assisted by local volunteers, some families lack the confidence to make their own connections and report feelings of isolation and depression. Councils and support organisations can mitigate some of these effects if they arise but prevention is a better approach. This involves systematically assessing all potential resettlement locations against a checklist of local facilities, public transport options and English language provision. This will tend to focus resettlement in a smaller number of the larger towns with good transport links.

Community Sponsorship

The Community Sponsorship strand operates alongside the main resettlement programmes and is based on a model developed in Canada over many years. A charitable organisation may apply to the government to take on full responsibility for housing and supporting a refugee family for two years, under a formal contract. The group requires the consent of both the County and District Council before making their application to the government. This is in part because the local authority must agree to “step in” to provide support if for any reason the Community Sponsor is unable to fulfil its obligations. The government is strongly promoting Community Sponsorship and has established a national support network for sponsors and potential sponsors.

Devon has three active Community Sponsorship groups; this is unusually high for a single area. The families sponsored by these groups are now at or around the first anniversary of their arrival. Without exception, all have received excellent support from their sponsors. The rigorous planning, fundraising and local commitment required to become a Community Sponsor appears to be very successful in overcoming the potential drawbacks of more remote locations, because the support for the family is rooted in the local community. Five other potential Community Sponsor groups in Devon are developing plans to apply for government approval.

Resettlement from 2020

The government expects local authorities to deliver their resettlement pledges so that all families arrive in the UK by December 2019. It is understood that the government is reviewing its policy on resettlement from 2020 onward. Informal consultations on the elements of a future policy have taken place with local authorities participating in the current programme. Senior civil servants have made comments in public suggesting that resettlement will continue in some form. Policy recommendations are with Ministers and an announcement may be made before the end of the year.

Simon Milner
Devon County Council