

Year 5 Evaluation of the Argyll and Bute Refugee Resettlement Programme

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Argyll and Bute Council agreed to resettle Syrian refugee families through the Home Office's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme in 2015. We support refugee families to rebuild their lives on the island of Bute. This year we have repeated the self-evaluation exercise carried out previously to seek the views of the families who have been resettled on the island on the support they receive. This year's evaluation has been set in the context of the Covid-19 crisis and the lockdown restrictions.
- 1.2 The model of care we deliver is constantly reviewed to ensure that it best meets the needs of the families as they integrate into the community. Both learning and support is now being delivered remotely and this has provided challenges for the refugees and those who support them.
- 1.3 The strength of the partnership working, support from the local community and the commitment to improve the lives of our Syrian families by everyone involved, continues to drive the success of the programme.

It is recommended that the Council:

- a) Notes the continued good work of the Refugee Resettlement Group and the local community in resettling Syrian refugees on the island of Bute.
- b) Notes the Council continues to resettle refugees, on the Island of Bute, through the Home Office's rebranded Refugee Resettlement Scheme.

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Refugee Resettlement Programme in Argyll and Bute was established in December 2015 when our first Syrian refugee families were resettled on the Island of Bute. We have continued to resettle families and this report is the fifth annual evaluation of the programme, informed by the feedback of the families rebuilding their lives in Argyll and Bute.
- 2.2 The refugees arriving in Argyll and Bute are resettled through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (SVPR) Scheme. This scheme is managed and funded by the Home Office.
- 2.3 Argyll and Bute's Refugee Resettlement Group was formed under the banner of the Community Planning Partnership with membership from both Council services and partner agencies. Members include Resettlement team, Education, Community Learning, Health and Social Work, Business Gateway, ACHA, Fyne Homes, Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Bute Advice Centre.
- 2.4 Inviting refugee families to evaluate their support enables us to review the resettlement programme in relation to the support and advice provided under the following headings: learning English, welfare support, employability and entrepreneurialism, education, housing, health, understanding the law, cultural, social and leisure activities and feeling safe. We are also able to compare scores from previous year and ensure we develop policies and strategies informed by our families to meet their needs as they become less dependent on support and more integrated into their new communities.
- 2.5 This year the refugee's lives have been dominated by Covid-19 and their experiences of lockdown. The spread of the pandemic has resulted in a significant change in the way support is provided to families and the refugees spoke about the impact of the virus and fear they had for their families both here in Argyll and Bute and for those living in other parts of the world.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 It is recommended that the Council:

- a) Notes the continued good work of the Refugee Resettlement Group and the local community in resettling Syrian refugees on the Island of Bute.
- b) Notes the Council continues to resettle refugees, on the Island of Bute, through the Home Office's rebranded Refugee Resettlement Scheme.

4.0 DETAIL

4.1 Refugees arriving in the UK under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (SVPR) Scheme are entitled to a 5 year refugee visa which allows them access to benefits and the ability to work in the UK. Refugee resettlement is currently on pause worldwide due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There are currently 14 families living in Rothesay, 3 new families arrived in January 2020 and this is their first time participating in the evaluation exercise

4.2 The families are supported by a range of agencies who work with them. Bute Advice Centre are commissioned to provide a support worker for each family who provides welfare and budgeting advice. The Council has a Resettlement Team of Arabic speaking Support Workers and an ESOL coordinator who provide support for day to day living and to coordinate the work of all of the agencies. These services and staff costs are all funded by the grant provided by the Home Office.

5.0 Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:

5.1 *"Covid-19 has affected us mentally more than anything else. We were scared of the virus and we could not socialise like before. Once a person is alone, they would start to remember things and feel down."*

5.2 The resettlement team had to adapt its support very quickly when we introduced lockdown back in March. The support team began working from home and appointments with Bute Advice were held using conference call with the family, advisor and interpreter. The ESOL classes moved on to a virtual learning platform. Whilst the schools were closed the Syrian pupils made good use of the iPads and dongles provide to them, though Home Schooling was quite a challenge. Parents benefited from the IT skills their children had learnt at school and online English classes were occasionally interrupted by children who decided to join in and show off their language skills.

5.3 The biggest impact of Covid has been on the mental health of families, they spoke openly about the detrimental effect lockdown had on their health and worsening of conditions such as depression. They were very frightened of the virus and frustrated with the restrictions. There was relief when school re-opened and restrictions eased. Lockdown was frequently referred to as being in

prison and the children spoke about missing friends. The families frequently travel to the mainland for shopping and missed this.

6.0 Learning English:

6.1 *“Our English is very limited. Covid-19 didn’t help as classes became virtual. Face to face classes are easier. We used to go out to the Café and to the park and talk to people.”*

6.2 English classes moved from face to face classes to online learning in March. The Home Office require a minimum of 8 hours per week accredited English for Speaker of Other Languages (ESOL) to be delivered to newly resettled refugees. In Rothesay this is delivered by the Education Service’s Community Learning team. Online learning continues and is very challenging due to the poor IT and literacy skills of many of the refugees. Devices including laptops, tablet and dongles were provided but delivering classes to a virtual audience is challenging for the tutors and a much less enjoyable experience for their students.

6.3 When lockdown restrictions eased in the summer activities were organised with trips to the beach and cycling. These were enjoyed by everyone who took part. The Resettlement project had benefitted from additional funding to deliver a peer to peer language project and although this is still on hold the refugees spoke about enjoying the activities they took part in with others in the community. Sports classes for both men and women have proven very successful.

6.4 In the evaluation, support to achieve English language skills scored an average of 5.93, higher than last year’s score of 4.17. Everyone was appreciative of the efforts that had been made to continue with classes during such a challenging time.

6.5 We also asked families if they felt they were able to use the English they had learnt in the community. We would usually ask this to get a sense of independence and identify any barriers which could lead to a lack of confidence. Scores were lower than last year with the average being 4.14 with Covid restrictions preventing people going out and meeting up with friends and neighbours as they would previously have done.

7.0 Welfare Support:

7.1 *“Bute Advice Centre has been very good, they have helped me with my family a lot especially during Covid-19. I stopped work and they helped apply for welfare support for housing and everything for me. The support was both financial and mental.”*

7.2 On arrival in Rothesay the families are supported to make benefits claims by Bute Advice Centre and the Job Centre Plus. It is important that families understand the benefits process and support is now delivered over the phone rather than face to face. When asked if they have been supported to understand their rights to welfare support and the benefits they receive the

average score given this year was 5.93, the average score last year was 5.19. Families really appreciate the time taken to explain the benefits system to them and the efforts taken to maximise the benefits they receive.

8.0 Moving into Employment:

8.1 *“Volunteering is good, it helps with language, to learn skills, to do something good and prepare for work. Our language doesn’t allow us to do more at the moment.”*

8.2 Regrettably the employability programme has been a casualty of Covid and it wasn’t possible to replicate that support online. However the resourceful resettlement team managed to identify and secure volunteering opportunities with Oxfam and Fyne Futures. Two refugees have also remained in full time employment, many have tried out work experience and two of the business start-ups have expanded their operations and are now trading on the mainland as well.

8.3 Families were asked if they have been supported to participate in volunteering opportunities or work experience should they wish to. The average score given was 6.55, an increase on last year’s score of 5.47 and appreciative that the failure to identify and secure opportunities was out with everyone’s control.

8.4 We next asked families to evaluate the support we have provided to allow them to access employment, asking have you been supported to apply for jobs or are you aware of the support that is available for this locally. The average score here was 6.38 a slight increase on the past years’ scores. This shows continued optimism in the opportunities available, the employability strategy and the approach taken by the partnership.

8.5 Business Gateway continue to offer ongoing support to the start-up businesses however no new business plans have been progressed this year. Families were asked if they were aware of the support available to develop entrepreneurial skills and set up business in Argyll and Bute. Not all families have asked for or received this support and the average score for entrepreneurial support was 4.44 with a range of scores given.

9.0 Education:

9.1 *“The education is good here, all aspects of it. They care. The children can become something. You can see your child can do something in society. Every father dreams his child will do better, this is not impossible here”*

9.2 The Syrian children attend Rothesay Joint Campus and Rothesay Playgroup. The involvement of both establishments has very much been at the heart of the support to the families, reflecting their role in the community and acknowledging that the decisions the families made to come to the UK were to afford their children a safer and better life. The closure of schools and the introduction of home schooling back in March was challenging for pupils and their parents.

- 9.3 Additional resources have been put in place to support learning at the joint campus funded by the Home Office grant. These include additional staffing and the purchase of appropriate materials. Educational Psychology continue to provide additional support as and when required. The scale of work undertaken to support pupils arriving with English as an Additional Language (EAL) has strengthened the overall provision. It has enabled the school to develop a focused strategy and to implement effective systematic processes to engage and support children and young people with EAL. Not only the Syrian pupils but those who speak other languages too. Progress of all new pupils is continually monitored to ensure that each child is working to their full potential.
- 9.4 We continue to work with Rothesay Playgroup after successfully receiving additional ESOL childcare funding from the Home Office for a further year. Having Rothesay Playgroup included in the overall support programme and introducing younger children to their peers through play has been very beneficial to all and is supporting language development for both children and parents.
- 9.5 The education opportunities and support at Rothesay Joint Campus and Rothesay Playgroup scored an average of 6.15 a slight increase in the previous year's scores 5.83. Eight families did score the support the highest possible score of 7.
- 9.6 This year we asked parents if their children had had the opportunity to participate in the extra-curricular activities with their school. Families scored this an average of 5.29. Families regretted that the variety of school trips that their children had previously been on both on and off the island hadn't been able to happen this year. Pupils said they missed playing football in the playground with friends the most.
- 10.0 Housing:
- 10.1 We continue to work closely with the Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) on Bute, ACHA and Fyne Homes who have been able to provide appropriate housing for all of our families. As families' needs change so do their housing requirements and we support the family with their housing application form, ensuring that we can maximise the number of points available to them.
- 10.2 We asked families if they had been supported to develop an understanding of the housing options available to them in the UK. Managing the expectations of those looking to move is sometimes a challenge and an appreciation of timescales and process which can otherwise lead to frustration. The average housing options score this year is 5.23 and this score has increased year on year as families gain experience and develop a greater understanding of options for housing.
- 11.0 Healthcare:
- 11.1 *"It is wonderful but slow sometimes"*

- 11.2 The model of health care in the UK is very different to that experienced by our families in Syria, where private health care was prevalent. Whilst families were living in the countries surrounding Syria as refugees it was very difficult to access any health treatment. Developing an understanding and managing the expectations of the health service in the UK has been a key issue for health colleagues working with the Syrian families. This coupled with a need for an interpreter at appointments has meant that responding to health needs can be both challenging and resource intensive.
- 11.3 Families were asked if they have been supported to develop an understanding of the model of health care in Scotland. The average score was 5.75 a slight increase on last year's score of 5.53.
- 11.4 Many of the families are in poor health when they arrive with us. All members of the family were given a full medical assessment by the International Organisation of Migration prior to leaving for the UK and this information is shared with us and passed on in turn to the relevant health professionals. This allows for a degree of preparation to be made in advance. Primary care is delivered on island and the majority of secondary care is provided off island in the Greater Glasgow and Clyde area.
- 11.5 Families were also asked if their health needs had been met. The average score for last year was 5.81. This year's score is slightly lower 5.39, though seven families awarded this maximum points. Families are seeing an improvement in their health though distance to travel to hospital and telephone interpreters can still cause frustration. Several families commented on increased waiting times and delays to planned procedures due to Covid.
- 12.0 Understanding the Law:
- 12.1 Families were asked if they have you been supported to understand UK / Scottish Law and social responsibilities in the UK. The planned sessions on law in Scotland, especially around families, child protection and domestic assault that would normally take place haven't happened this year due to Covid. The support team have however ensured that they have explained the zero tolerance approach that we have in Scotland. Information on these topic is also provided in the families welcome packs.
- 12.2 There was much appreciation of the information provided on the Coronavirus restrictions and families appeared to have a very good understanding of this. In answering this question families were keen to ask about their own rights and spoke positively about the support from the police. The average score for having been supported to understand UK /Scottish Law and social responsibilities in the UK was 6.21 a significant increase on last year's score of 4.69.
- 13.0 Leisure Activities and Culture and Social Activities:
- 13.1 *"In Syria my father, may he rest in peace, used to take us to the sea to walk beside it. I like to be by the sea and remember these things."*

13.2 The pace and tranquillity of Bute is much appreciated. However leisure, cultural and social activities have been hugely impacted by Covid and the families are saddened but are accepting of this. They are looking forward to a time when they can celebrate in the community and partake in Middle Eastern and Scottish events. Leisure Activities scored 5.67 and cultural and social activities scored 5.21. Both scores up on last year and the sports centre and activities in the Moat Centre much enjoyed.

14.0 Safe and welcomed:

14.1 *The safety we have here I haven't felt anywhere else that I've lived. There is respect for you as a human being, not just like an animal. Not like other countries. I don't give 7, I give 100%!"*

14.2 In our final question we asked families to score how safe and welcoming the community was and for the fifth consecutive year this question scored highest of all with an average of 6.79, last year's score was 6.72. Those interviewed said the island was their home now and they are very grateful for all the support the local community gives them. Twelve families scored this question the highest possible 7.

15.0 CONCLUSION

15.1 In conclusion, feedback of the support provides us with an opportunity to evaluate the programme and to ensure the support we provide moving forward meets both the needs and aspirations of our families. We operate a person centred model of care acknowledging that no two families' needs are the same. This year has thrown up new challenges and the refugee families and those that support them have had to adapt to new ways of working.

15.2 The success of the refugee programme on Bute should be built on and as needs change, the partners and services working with the families will change. It is very important when providing such a comprehensive programme of support that we do not create dependency and all of our families are encouraged and supported to be as independent as possible as ultimately the support will be time limited.

15.3 Across all of the interviews scores have generally been higher than in previous years and this optimism bias has most likely been a result of Covid and appreciation of the enormous efforts that everyone has made to continue to provide support whilst we all have experienced the same fears and challenges.

15.4 The strength of partnership working in Argyll and Bute has been integral to the success of this programme which would never have achieved what it has without the support of the community on Bute and the commitment of the Syrian families to rebuild their lives on the island.

15.5 *"Thank you so much for standing by us. I am very happy to be with Argyll and Bute Council."*

16.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 16.1 Policy – No implications
- 16.2 Financial – Funding is received from the Home Office and the budget is fully committed with a contingency in place to deal with unexpected costs
- 16.3 Legal – No implications
- 16.4 HR – A number of posts have been created on a temporary basis to support the refugee programme and funded by the Home Office grant
- 16.5 Fairer Scotland Duty
 - 16.5.1 Equalities – protected characteristics
All staff working with refugee families have received Equalities training.
 - 16.5.2 Socio-economic duty
No implications
 - 16.5.3 Islands
No implications
- 16.6 Risk – No implications
- 16.7 Customer Service – Translating material into Arabic has been an important consideration to ensure refugees can access information and use local services.

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October 2020

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Evaluation interview scores