
Resettlement of Syrian Refugees in West Dunbartonshire

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What Works Scotland (WWS) aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform. We are working with Community Planning Partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) to:

- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
- encourage collaborative learning with a range of local authority, business, public sector and community partners
- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations get the skills and knowledge they need to use and interpret evidence
- create case studies for wider sharing and sustainability

A further nine areas are working with us to enhance learning, comparison and sharing. We also link with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere. WWS brings together the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, other academics across Scotland, with partners from a range of local authorities and:

- Glasgow Centre for Population Health
- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- NHS Education for Scotland
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Health Improvement for Scotland
- Scottish Community Development Centre
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform.

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What Works Scotland is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Government www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

- all the Syrian families who participated in this research and shared their experiences of re-settlement
- the staff in public services who were interviewed and who provided feedback in the producing this report
- the Syrian Resettlement Team for their willingness to participate in the review and co-ordinating access to participants.

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1. Executive summary

This report reviews the Syrian Resettlement Programme put in place by West Dunbartonshire Community Planning Partnership (CPP). It looks at the experiences of the refugees themselves and the processes and structures implemented by the CPP and its agencies.

It focuses on three key elements: The initial arrival and settlement of the refugees, social connections across communities and social links to public services. The report is based on interviews with refugees and employees from health, school and adult education, local authority and housing.

Findings

- In general, the resettlement programme was very successful. The refugees felt welcomed and appreciated the efforts of all those who contributed towards ensuring that their experience of arrival was positive. The early convening of a multi-agency group; the use of evidence to identify suitable locations; and early engagement with established communities, along with the creation of a Resettlement Team, all contributed to the success of this programme.
- Employees involved in the resettlement programme showed very high levels of commitment and professionalism and were justifiably proud of their work. Individual officers played a key role in the success of the resettlement experience. Whilst Syrians perceived this support to be positive and beneficial, the dependence on a small team placed significant pressure on individual workloads.
- The work of staff to engage residents in resettlement areas at an early stage of the resettlement process helped to promote positive community relations. However, a gap for Syrians was the lack of opportunities to build and extend social connections across communities.
- A key challenge for reforming public services to meet the needs of equalities groups is how to strike the right balance between providing support targeted directly at a population with specific needs whilst fostering independence and reforming mainstream services to promote inclusive and responsive practices.
- Across all services there was a need for greater attention to equality in access to public services.
- English language development has not progressed as well as many service providers had expected and the provision of interpretation was not consistent across all services.
- Syrian women were less likely to be comfortable interacting in public spaces than men and tended to carry more childcare responsibilities. Services need to be aware of these gender differences and consider ways that activities can be designed to ensure that women can participate.

- Schools play an important part in the resettlement process and offer a potential hub through which new arrivals can build social connections and engage in the education of their children.
- In the provision of health services, specialist expertise in trauma and trauma-informed practice was an area of concern that requires greater attention.

Recommendations

- Provide greater opportunities for new arrivals to build social connections across communities. The potential for a befriending scheme should be fully explored with the aim of facilitating language acquisition.
- Promote active citizenship and community development through participation in local community projects and seek peer support from Glasgow's Integration Networks.
- Continue to encourage Syrian involvement in co-designing service provision. This could make services more person-centred and ensure that integration is central to service design.
- Improve collaboration between local services to enable services to respond more effectively to the needs of Syrians and to meet public sector equality duties.
- Services should pay attention to the issue of gender, making sure opportunities to build social connections with members of other communities are promoted for both men and women.
- Widen the provision of interpretation services across the community planning partnership, especially in relation to housing repairs and GP services. This would enable Syrians to engage with services on an equal basis and reduce dependence on bilingual members of staff.
- Review the provision of specialist expertise in trauma and the potential to access additional funding to meet complex health needs.
- Review the impact of refugee resettlement on ESOL provision, adult education and crèche availability.
- Agree a long-term plan to secure bilingual teachers for local schools.
- Explore the potential for schools to perform a role as community hubs and centres for social interaction. Consider ways of involving Syrian parents more directly in their children's education, including opportunities for parents to learn about the Scottish education system.

Effective partnership requires a clear purpose and rationale. The need to resettle the Syrian families quickly led to a sense of urgency to act and this galvanised cross-agency collaboration between services at a local level. The resettlement programme met its short-term goals but making the shift to mainstreaming support for Syrians has proved more challenging. This case highlights the importance of collaborative leadership across public services focussed on the long-term goal of designing public services for more diverse populations¹.

¹ For more on how public services can support transition towards more diverse communities see What Works Scotland blog http://whatworksscotland.blogspot.com/2015/11/scotland-welcomes-refugees-how-do_63.html

2. Introduction

West Dunbartonshire was one of the first local authorities in the UK to agree to participate in a programme for resettlement of refugees from Syria launched in autumn 2015. In response to what was an emerging humanitarian crisis, the timeframe for planning and preparation was extremely short with just eight weeks between the decision to accept the refugees and the first group of Syrian refugees arriving. The Council had no previous experience of hosting refugee populations and had a very small established ethnic minority population, which in 2011 made up just 1.5% of the overall population.

What Works Scotland was asked by West Dunbartonshire Community Planning Partnership to review this resettlement programme. In this report we present the experiences of both the refugees and the public services most directly involved in their resettlement. In writing this review we draw on Ager and Strang's Indicators of Integration Framework (2004)² to examine:

- social connections as social bonds (connections within a community defined by, for example, ethnic, national or religious identity)
- social bridges (with members of other communities)
- social links (with institutions, including local and central government services).

The review is mostly based on qualitative data drawn from interviews with the refugees and the service providers. The report aims to provide an overview of the programme to help inform the West Dunbartonshire Community Planning Partnership as to how local services have responded to the challenge and how they could improve in the future.

The report opens with an overview of the background to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). It moves on to examine how this was implemented in West Dunbartonshire. We then describe the methodology and present the findings. These are organised into two sections; Arrival and Resettlement and Community Planning and Service Provision. The first section focusses mainly on arrival and orientation, social bonds and social bridges; while the second section explores partnership working and social links to local services, particularly housing, health and wellbeing, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and school education.

Notes on the quotations in the report

Quotes from interviews with Syrians have been coded with SY = Syrian, M(ale) or F(emale), and a number for the order in which the interview was done.

To preserve anonymity, no service providers are directly quoted.

²Ager, A. and Strang, A. (2004) Indicators of Integration: Final Report. Home Office Development and Practice Report 28. London: Home Office, available at <http://www.migrationscotland.org.uk/ager-and-strang-2004-indicators-integration-final-report>

Background – The national picture

The UK Government first announced the Syrian Resettlement Programme in January 2014. The scheme was originally small in scale, prioritising the most vulnerable Syrian refugees, and received only 239 people in the first 20 months of its operation (NAO 2016)³. It was not until autumn 2015 following concerted public and political pressure that Syrian refugees began to arrive in the UK in greater numbers as part of what became known as the Syrian Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). The Government set a new target of 20,000 over five years, with 1,000 arrivals before Christmas 2015 (NAO 2016). By the end of March 2017, 7,307 Syrian nationals had been resettled in the UK, half of whom were children.

The Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities were among the first to commit to welcoming refugees in response to this unfolding humanitarian crisis. The First Minister held a Refugee Summit in Edinburgh and convened a Refugee Taskforce in early September 2015.⁴ All 32 of Scotland's local authorities agreed to participate. Of the first 1,000 arrivals to the UK, 40% were resettled in Scotland (COSLA 2015) and by June 2017, 1,601 Syrians had been resettled across 31 of the 32 Scottish local authorities.

Syrian nationals resettled under the VPRS are identified by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in refugee settings in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) according to eligibility criteria⁵ agreed with the UK Government. The UK Government took a specific decision to only resettle the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in camps adjacent to Syria, meaning those arriving in the UK were specifically 'selected' based on their needs and vulnerability. The process is as follows:

- Following initial assessment, refugees are referred to the UK Government for further screening and to the International Organisation for Migration for a health assessment.
- Pending clearance, the Home Office then refers them to local authorities across the UK that have indicated a willingness and capacity to participate.
- These local authorities are then responsible for delivering the programme in line with the Home Office Statement of Requirements (SoR).
- Local authorities receive funding for everyone they agree to resettle, and they may choose to deliver core services in-house, or commission other providers in line with the SoR.
- Additional funding can be requested from the Home Office where there are complex health or social care needs.

Until July 2017, Syrians on the VPRS arrived with Humanitarian Protection Status. This provided the Government with a quick means of resettling Syrians in the UK. All Syrians

³ National Audit Office (2016) The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme, Home Office, available at <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-syrian-vulnerable-persons-resettlement-programme/>

⁴ <https://firstminister.gov.scot/first-minister-nicola-sturgeon-hosts-summit-on-humanitarian-crisis/>

⁵ Syrian vulnerable person resettlement programme fact sheet <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syrian-vulnerable-person-resettlement-programme-fact-sheet>

resettled under the scheme since March 2017 will be granted refugee status. Syrians who arrived under Humanitarian Protection can also apply for refugee status. Legal status as a refugee includes the right to family reunion and the right to a travel document, which is restricted under Humanitarian Protection Status. According to Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention, as modified by the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as a person who:

“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”

The diversity of refugees resettled as a result of the Syrian conflict is also set to increase. Since July 2017, the Syrian Vulnerable Person’s Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) has been extended by the Home Office to include non-Syrian Nationals who were previously resident in Syria but have been displaced by the conflict to other countries in the region.

The UK National Audit Office and the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts carried out an inquiry into the operation of the first year of the VPRS. In its report from September 2016, the NAO commended the UK Government and local authorities for the speed at which they had responded to the need to upscale, highlighting broadly positive feedback from the refugees (NAO 2016). It did, however, identify some uncertainty among local authorities as to what funding from the UK Government would cover beyond the first year of the programme, and the right to family reunion and certain social security entitlements (NAO 2016). In January 2017, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts⁶ noted continued confusion among some local authorities about the allocation of central government funding, and pinpointed a concern about whether access to specialist services for torture, trauma, and violence survivors among those resettled was being facilitated (CPA 2017). Both reports identified the lack of clear evaluation indicators as one of the key issues urgently needing addressed by the UK Government in its management of the VPRS (NAO 2016; CPA 2017).

Although immigration and asylum policy is reserved to Westminster, the social policy areas related to refugee integration are devolved to Scotland. Many of the local areas participating in refugee resettlement in Scotland post-2015 were new to hosting refugee populations. Local authorities were supported by the Confederation of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA), which convenes the Strategic Migration Partnership Group, a national coordination group for resettlement of refugees.

The Scottish Government, CoSLA and the Scottish Refugee Council have recently developed and launched the second New Scots Strategy 2018-2022⁷. Drawing on the experiences of

⁶ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2017) *The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme*, House of Commons, available at <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/syrian-resettlement-programme-16-17/>

⁷ The New Scots Strategy, available at <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/01/7281>

Glasgow as the only asylum dispersal area in Scotland to date, the New Scots Strategy provides a Scotland-wide framework for resettlement and integration. The strategy is based on a vision of “a welcoming Scotland where refugees and asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives from the day they arrive” (New Scots Strategy 2018, p.6). And an understanding of integration as “a long-term, two-way process, involving positive change in both individuals and host communities, which leads to cohesive, diverse communities” (New Scots Strategy, 2018, p.6)

The VPRS in West Dunbartonshire

By the end of 2016 West Dunbartonshire Council hosted 87 Syrian refugees resettled under the VPRS. They arrived in two tranches, Group One in November 2015 and Group Two in August 2016.

	Families	Individuals (including children)
Group One	10	50
Group Two	8	37

The local Council designated a resettlement coordinator from the Policy, Planning and Performance Team and established a multi-agency planning group, bringing together representatives from Housing, Health and Social Care Partnership, Police Scotland, Department for Work and Pensions, Education and the third sector.

Apart from some initial input from the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) and one youth organisation in the area, third sector involvement in the delivery of the VPRS in West Dunbartonshire was limited. Most of the support and services provided to the refugees has been met through mainstream provision, although initial frontline service delivery was contracted to the SRC. Two workers from the SRC were seconded to the Council for an initial period of three months, later extended to six months. After this, the Council brought these services in-house, hiring one permanent full-time bilingual housing support worker in the first half of 2016, followed by a second bilingual support worker recruited at the end of 2016. Following the restructuring of services within the Council, the newly formed Resettlement Team was moved from Policy, Planning and Performance to Homelessness Prevention within the Housing Department.

3. Methodology

The overall aim of this research project was to examine how the Council prepared for and delivered the VPRS and the experiences of Syrian refugees. We adopted a collaborative approach between What Works Scotland, West Dunbartonshire Council and the Scottish Refugee Council. Our project set out to explore what had worked well and what could have been done better. We wanted to explore the role of partnership working, community engagement and more broadly public service reform in the resettlement process. The College of Social Sciences' Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow, gave ethical approval for the research.

Data collection

To frame our research, we reviewed documentary evidence from the Council including 47 papers from planning and coordination meetings, action plans, briefings, local crime and housing profiles, correspondence with the Home Office, checklists, work plans, risk registers, standard operating procedures and the SoR.

We interviewed nine people from those services involved in the resettlement programme. These included people from the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) (including Children's Services), Community Planning, Housing, Education, and the third sector. Eight worked for statutory agencies and one for a voluntary organisation; six were in frontline roles and three in strategic roles. Interviews were carried out at the participant's place of work and were audio recorded with the participant's consent.

We also interviewed 11 refugees, three from the first tranche and eight from the second, six men and five women. We employed an Arabic interpreter. In two instances, husband and wife elected to be interviewed together. In all other cases, men and women were interviewed separately. Interviews were carried out at participants' homes and were audio recorded with the participants' consent. We conducted all the interviews ~~were carried out~~ between November 2016 and February 2017.

All interview records were transcribed independently, then reviewed and coded by the research team. Identifying information was removed to provide anonymity as far as possible, and each participant was assigned an anonymous ID.

The following findings are divided into two sections: Arrival and Resettlement; Community Planning and Service Provision. After comment on pre-arrival community preparation, the first section seeks to provide the broad context in which resettlement occurs. Five main themes emerge from this section: community preparation, welcome and information, orientation support, family reunion, and bridging interactions between Syrians and the wider community. The second section considers the multi-agency partnership response to the needs of Syrian refugees and examines four areas of direct service provision: housing, followed by health and wellbeing, language learning/ESOL, and school education.

4. Arrival and Resettlement

Community preparation

From the outset it is important to highlight the commitment and professionalism shown by all those involved in the resettlement programme in West Dunbartonshire. The frontline officers we spoke to were proud of their involvement and what they had achieved. Several interviewees mentioned that this was one of the most rewarding projects they had ever undertaken.

Officers gave careful consideration to the process of preparing established tenants in neighbourhoods where social housing had been allocated for Syrian refugees. Social housing tenants are not usually informed about the arrival of new tenants. While the properties for Syrians were being renovated, the initial policy was not to say anything to local tenants. However, some housing officers felt that there was a need to deal with the rumours that were beginning to circulate and that maintaining trust with existing tenants would help and support Syrian resettlement. Other officers expressed concern that a break from normal practice could breach the confidentiality of new arrivals and that special treatment was not justified. After being presented with evidence on the experience of community preparation for resettlement in other areas, these initial concerns were addressed.

Housing officers who had relationships with existing tenants conducted community engagement. Officers engaged directly through door-to-door communication and community meetings. These provided opportunities to inform established tenants of the imminent arrival of Syrian refugees and to discuss any issues raised. Indeed, this went as far as explaining the Syrian conflict and why their soon-to-be neighbours had fled Syria.

Community preparation and guidance came from the newly formed Resettlement Team. In general, housing officers felt that the factsheets provided were useful. Broadly, they felt that this approach had headed off some potentially negative responses from the settled community. Some officers criticised the initial literature for being “*condescending*” as it contained advice such as “*smile*” and “*be friendly*”, although in general ‘community preparation’ came to be seen as a positive approach.

This suggests that an important aspect of resettlement planning is to ensure that frontline housing and resettlement staff engage early with local communities and build on existing relationships to encourage a positive response to the arrival of refugees.

Welcome and information

From the first days of arrival to organising service provision, the Resettlement Team put a great deal of thought into the VPRS. It is also clear that they lacked information during their planning. Pre-arrival information on the needs of the resettled Syrians (for example, health needs and levels of trauma) was scant, deriving mainly from local authorities in England with experience of resettlement work.

The Syrians themselves were very positive about the welcome they received on arrival and during their first few days in Scotland. The following provides a flavour of the responses:

“The welcoming was perfect, it couldn’t have been any better. From the airport, to the hotel, to this apartment, to the Council, the treatment was perfect.”

(SYM10)

“The Scottish people, they are very kind and... compassionate with [us]. Everything when [we] first arrived was prepared... Accommodation, the school, everything for the kids...”

(SYF08)

Feedback on the information and support provided on arrival for the first group from Syria was generally positive. Although one participant noted the lack of internet access in the accommodation provided by the Council and a feeling that the information provided was not enough. Participants from the second group were unanimously positive about the information and help provided on arrival, saying it was *“just about right”* (SYM09), *“very useful and appreciated”* (SYF06), and *“equivalent to [our] needs”* (SYM05). This might have been an indication of problems identified by the first group being addressed by the time the second group arrived seven months later. It also demonstrates the reflexive practice of the Resettlement Team as lessons were learnt from the experiences with Group One.

Orientation

Most refugee participants spoke positively about the orientation support provided. A woman from Group Two spoke about staff:

“accompanying to the roads and how to use the [transport] routes and... [being] accompanied a couple of times to the shopping centre, to the Asda as well... and... doing shopping with [us]”

(SYF06)

Others said the support was *“just about right”*. They were directed to the local community and accompanied to local shops, the community centre, GP, dentist, and Job Centre, all within the first few days (SYF08; SYM09; SYF02). Children were introduced to their new school promptly. Participants from both groups mentioned the *“excellent support and help”* provided by individual members of the Resettlement Team (SYM03):

“God loves us that he brought us to [Resettlement Team member] ... She’s a kind person, she loves us, she tries to help us as much as she can... in general the Council has stood with us from the beginning until now.”

(SYM10)

Both Syrians and service providers talked about differences between Group One, who arrived in November 2015, and Group Two, who arrived in August 2016. Service providers noted the higher level of “*vulnerability*” in families in the second group, compared to the first. A participant from Group One noted the benefits to the second group of the presence of Syrians who were already settled in the area. A participant from Group Two spoke positively about the culturally specific knowledge and facilitation role played by members of Group One:

“... [we] have actually been accompanied by previous people from Syria... they [took us] down to the city centre and... [showed us] where this meat is being sold. So, they... facilitate... yeah.”

(SYM03)

Another participant did not necessarily see this reliance on the first group as positive, suggesting Group Two would have been “*lost*” without them. He would have liked the Resettlement Team to “*lead [us] throughout the city... the main roads... the transportation... maybe twice... so [we] know exactly where to go*” (SYM01).

Although participants did not articulate this explicitly, there could be disadvantages to relying on other refugees to facilitate orientation, for example, a risk that this might create a barrier for anyone who did not want to rely on other Syrians for support, perhaps due to cultural or political differences,.

Family reunion

Several of the Syrians raised the issue of family reunion and the difficult situation for family members in the Middle East. The sense that settlement can be very difficult when family members are still living precarious lives came across strongly in some interviews:

“[I’m] very worried about [my] brother... he’s at risk... in Lebanon... I’m very settled with my family, but it’s family members... they are back in Syria and Lebanon, very much in risky situations... so you’re being distracted completely, you’ll not be able to keep focussed on the learning [in English classes] ... I mean [we are] shattered, [we] keep thinking about family.”

(SYM09)

“[I’m] worried about the health of... [my] parents... there is nobody to support them... the type of support provided by the UN in Jordan is really average... they are suffering.”

(SYM01)

Some respondents said that they had raised questions about family reunion with the Council, but they hadn’t received clear information on the process (SYM01; SYF02), or that the barrier was the situation in the region (i.e. in Lebanon, SYF11). The recent move to refugee status away from humanitarian protection has created a significant diminution of the ‘right’ to family reunion. This limits application for reunion to husbands and wives and their children under 18, while Humanitarian Protection status allows for the right of wider family reunification including brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles and cousins, although in both cases successfully using the right to family reunion remains difficult.

One family did report that they had been successful in securing family members’ resettlement to the same area through the Council:

“... [An]other sister will come over in a month’s time...the approval from [West] Dunbartonshire Council is being processed so they are just waiting for the flight and then they come over.”

(SYM05)

This is a complex and legalistic process and at the time of this research, Syrians did not know who to ask for advice about reunion. The Home Office-recently updated its guidance and has handed responsibility for this issue over to resettlement case workers within local authorities. In West Dunbartonshire, the Resettlement Team is now responsible for family reunion applications. Families can also make applications through a lawyer.

Social bridges

Social bonds are connections within a community defined by, for example, ethnic, national or religious identity, whereas social bridges are social connections with members of other communities (Ager & Strang 2004). Syrians were generally very positive about the communities in which they were resettled. Some noted the absence of any issues or harassment, but many had little interaction with members of other communities:

“we didn’t face anything, any issue, or any problem with anyone”

(SYM10)

“the local area is very social and very friendly. There is no... sort of harassment or antisocial behaviour”

(SYM03)

“[it] is a very decent area, there is no problem whatsoever, [but we don't have any] big contact or communication with the neighbours”

(SYM09)

Others gave examples of individual and collective acts of welcome and friendliness:

“...they are very supportive. And they keep smiling [at me] ... when [I go] out, [I] greet them and [they] greet back again... one of the neighbours... upstairs paid [us a] visit.”

(SYF08)

“The women have been welcoming... they all say good morning... smiling at [me]... so [I] don't feel alone... one of the nice ladies recognised that [child] didn't have a pram. So, she... found two prams... one from this other lady... [I was] really impressed about the... kindness of the neighbourhood here, particularly the women.”

(SYF06)

Children played a clear role in facilitating social bridges. Several participants mentioned that their children played with the neighbours' children, leading to interactions between adults. All respondents were very positive about how their children had adapted and suggested that it was easier for them:

“...both boys are picking up the language very quick... the kids can build up this friendship and ... be part of society because they grow [up here] ... with the parents... you know, sometimes it's a bit harder.”

(SYF04)

An issue that ostensibly concerns education but goes beyond that to wider issues of social connections was the decision to taxi new Syrian school students in Group One to school rather than using public transport. This decision was taken with the immediate interests of the families at heart; however, this curtailed opportunities for parents to meet other parents, while walking or waiting at the school gate or on public transport, and this practice was not repeated for Group Two.

Most Syrians said that they socialised primarily with other Syrians and struggled to integrate into the local neighbourhood and build connections outside their own community. Although

interviewees from Group One, who had been in the area for over a year, did identify some tentative social connections with ‘friends’ outside the group:

“I have neighbours who are really nice people... [we] have some friends... Come on Friday afternoon... the house is full.”

(SYM07)

Respondents also identified barriers to more meaningful interaction in the community. The most significant barriers for adults was language:

“... a couple of times one of the dads... came up to collect his kids, so [I] invite him to a cup of coffee and then he accepted and [came] in. But [when] he was talking we couldn’t understand him, of course this is the barrier.”

(SYM05)

Wider societal perceptions of Islam were also identified as creating some unease or sense of not being welcome, particularly in the early stages soon after arrival, or, in one case, when moving outside the local area:

“At the beginning, when we greet [the neighbours], or say something to them, they didn’t reply to us, because they were timid. But then, when they realised that we are peaceful people, and we are good people, they started to talk to us more.”

(SYM10)

“... there is not any sort of harassment [towards] the family, but within... like... inside... there is some sort of... maybe because of Islamophobia... [I] feel like a sort of hatred... this is about [my own] feelings... nothing concrete that has happened on the ground... when we walk down the street... maybe down to the city centre and the buses... some people might stare, so [we] feel not very much welcome.”

(SYM03)

The use of public space by Syrians has a gendered dimension, which may mean that social interaction becomes more difficult for women. While male Syrians socialise in public spaces, women appear to primarily socialise in their own home. Women seem less likely to either have any leisure time or to spend it out of the home:

“... [I] would like to communicate but you can imagine... how a full-time mum... how busy it can be so [I] need to arrange all the flat for the kids and the meals and things, so sometimes when [I have] free time, usually [I go] downstairs [to see my] sister-in-law... I exchange visits with them.”

(SYF06)

“[I’m] a full-time mum... [I] take the children to school and then as soon as [I’m] back again, [I try] to prepare lunch for them and then to look after [toddler]. And then [I have] plenty of jobs to do like laundry and cleaning the flat... and so many things... [I have been] trying to communicate with other mums, but [I’m] still feeling like there is some sort of barrier... [I] feel isolated sometimes.”

(SYF04)

Activities outside of the home where women can feel comfortable and interact with non-Syrians are important for building social connections. Since the research was done the Resettlement Team has recently conducted some work in this regard, organising a weekly cooking session competition between Syrian women and ‘local’ women. These sessions are based in the local primary school kitchen and appear to have been well received by both Syrian and local families. The Resettlement Team have also contracted Outside the Box (OTB) an organisation that works to create inclusive communities. Outside the Box has worked with some of the Syrian women and helped them define short and medium term goals to make links with the wider community. Planned activities include communal gardening projects with a local housing association, visiting and volunteering to work with elderly people, and forming a five-a-side football team. The Resettlement Team has also been working with the Leisure Trust to establish women-only swimming and fitness sessions.

Male respondents talked about getting out to:

“visit the gym... meet friends, down to the town...”

(SYM03)

“taking the train... to the central mosque... [going] to the town, doing some shopping... [I take] the kids [to the park] and have an enjoyable time”

(SYM05)

“I attend the gym, like, weight lifting... [play] some football”

(SYM09)

Several male respondents expressed a desire to interact more with the wider community. One participant spoke of how much they had enjoyed one community event organised on

Christmas Eve, *'a gathering with the people... [we had] a very, very nice time... mixing with... local families... this [kind of event is] like a driver... to make people mix with each other.'* This respondent provided an example of a befriending initiative in Finland connecting locals with newcomers, which he saw as very positive and would assist with language acquisition (SYM03).

In terms of involvement in decisions on local services and facilities, Syrians are represented on their local Tenants and Residents Association, where most consultation around housing issues takes place. The Syrian population is included in an Equalities Impact Assessment for the Local Housing Strategy 2017–2022. Syrian residents have also been consulted on the design of the gardens to be developed on the site of a former primary school.

Despite the general sense of welcome and involvement at the neighbourhood level, and notwithstanding children's experiences, adults Syrians identified a lack of opportunities to socialise and interact with members of other communities. Routine activities such as going to school could also help to build familiarity and friendly encounters – the spaces within and around schools providing potential opportunities for everyday informal interaction. Greater thought could be given to community activities that can facilitate social bridges including befriending schemes, building on the good work already begun within local schools and through Out of the Box.

5. Community Planning and Service Provision

A partnership response?

Several interviewees involved in organising the services for the Syrians pointed out that the resettlement programme was a community planning partnership response. The partnership involved numerous individuals and a core comprising of Health and Social Care Partnership, Police Scotland, Department of Work and Pensions, Housing, Education, Community and Volunteering Services, and Council's Policy, Performance and Planning.

To prepare, there were regular multi-agency meetings in the months leading up to arrival and these were generally well attended. Multi-agency meetings stopped shortly after the arrival of each group, meaning that the links established between local services have kept going since on a more ad hoc basis.

There was a great deal of commitment by many frontline services involved in the resettlement process. Some services recognised the need to tailor their services in preparation for the arrival of Syrian refugees. Staff did their own research as they sought not just to inform themselves of some of the issues they might encounter but also of the best ways to tackle them. Others took a 'business as usual approach' and were less prepared when the additional needs of Syrian refugees had to be met. Those that were less prepared usually directed enquiries from Syrians to the two or three staff members in the Syrian Resettlement Team.

In terms of improvements, independent advocacy seemed to be a gap. Although this was only an issue for a small number of interviewees, some were a little concerned that problems with the Council could only be reported to the Council (via the Resettlement Team). The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) has since introduced language support and is able to offer advice to people who do not speak English, providing an alternative service for advice and support.

One interviewee suggested that services should simply respond to any issues as they arose. Rather than adopt this laissez-faire approach, the Resettlement Team sought a positive balance between providing support to vulnerable individuals and fostering independence. Some interviewees felt that the initial partnership focus on dealing with the 'big issues' such as access to services, decent housing and mental health problems, had prevented sufficient attention to other aspects of resettlement that might help to foster greater independence such as the social bridges and connections that could help to facilitate language learning.

Housing

Housing Officers, employed by the Council, had a key role in dealing with housing-related problems and in the preparation of the established community, as detailed above. Decisions on the location of housing for Group One, and in different ways for Group Two, were clearly thought through in some detail. The Council has significant social housing stock which gave plenty of options regarding the location of the refugees' accommodation. The decision on

where to house the first group appears to have been taken after significant consultation with all key agencies. There were, for example, reports on the safety of the local area that helped to guide decision-making. Proximity to Glasgow and a pre-existing Syrian community, alongside access to a mosque and shops selling halal food played a part, as did more general access to the shopping centre and bus and rail links.

There was a change of approach to housing allocation between Group One and Group Two. The first group were all housed within a couple of streets of each other and the second were a little more spread out. With Group One, encouraging social bonds between new arrivals may have been pushed too much. There was an assumption that Syrians would be friends and confidants with one another, which is not necessarily the case. As well as normal clashes of personality within a group of families, there are also diverse cultural beliefs and behaviours. With Group Two, housing allocation has been organised to ensure that other Syrians live nearby, but not too nearby.

A significant proportion of the Home Office VPRS funding was spent getting houses to a suitable condition for the new arrivals – from ‘hard to let’ status to the ‘advanced homeless package’. New carpets, curtains and kitchens were installed, although it was recognised that the stairwells in many of the buildings remain poor. For the first group a major concern was wifi access – crucial for keeping in touch with friends and family members resettled elsewhere. The Resettlement Team learnt from this and prioritised wifi access for the second group.

Syrians themselves identified very few issues with their housing during the interviews. Generally, the sense was that they had been provided with everything they needed in their accommodation on arrival. A few mentioned the lack of a television, and one man from Group One highlighted the lack of internet.

“Of course, we didn’t have TV, but that wasn’t important, I only wanted to have internet access to call my family”

(SYM10)

Comments on the fixtures and furnishings ranged from *“in general things... in the flat [were] okay”* (SYM03) and *“everything was in order; everything was good”* (SYM09), to *“[I] was over the moon because the first time [we] came in the flat, [we] found everything available and... sorted out”* (SYF06). This participant noted that finding *“a big pile of clothes’ for all the family and ‘plenty of toys for the kids”* on arrival in their accommodation had made her feel *“valued”* and *“very happy”*. (SYF06).

Several people said they had requested additional items, such as another sofa, storage cabinet and an extractor fan. One mentioned that Council workers had visited soon after arrival to make sure they had everything they needed and provided the opportunity to request other items, which they seem to have been able to meet in most instances (SYM05).

In theory, a Syrian refugee is supposed to be able to phone the repair line, say 'Arabic please' and then get an interpreter over the phone. This does not happen, and it seems somewhat unclear why, although a couple of interviewees suggested that this was simply a lack of Arabic interpreters. This has meant repairs not being done, and in some cases not even being reported. In one case, it led to no central heating over the weekend during the winter in a house with a baby. Although some did refer to the housing contact information provided on arrival, those who had experienced problems with their housing had contacted the Council officers at the Resettlement Team for assistance. Problems with the housing repair process meant that Syrian families fall back on the Resettlement Team. Despite having arrived more than a year ago, a Group One Syrian still relied on support from the Resettlement Team to facilitate housing repairs: "... we can call her, and, for example, if the heater gets broken, she will call someone who can come and fix it" (SYM10). He identified the language barrier as a key problem for communication with housing maintenance staff and he did not appear to be clear about whether he had a right to an interpreter.

What emerges from discussions on housing is a reliance on the few staff in the Resettlement Team to facilitate refugees' access to mainstream services as the main point of contact when issues arise, not only in the initial orientation stage but also more than a year after arrival. This lack of direct access to the repairs service is both unsustainable and not good for the independence of the population or their integration into mainstream service provision.

Health and wellbeing

Initial planning appears to have been good for ensuring access to health services. All refugees had appointments with a GP in the first few days after arrival and most reported having had some contact with other services, including dentists and secondary health care providers. Primary health care and acute services did not put in place any specific services for the Syrian refugees, instead trying to meet their needs within current service provision.

Whilst generally good, the response by GP surgeries was occasionally variable. The lack of availability of interpreters for GP appointments occasionally led to cancellation of appointments.

"... sometimes when I attend the surgery, there is no interpreter available... Sometimes... interpreting over the phone... is available... but... sometimes there wasn't any, which leads to the appointment being cancelled... particularly with the children." (SYF02)

Some of the research participants reported good practice but others described some GPs as reluctant to use face-to-face or telephone interpreting services to communicate. When available, the refugees themselves appeared to be comfortable with the use of interpreters. However, one refugee described how their local GP practice was unable to support

telephone interpretation because the GP did not have a desk phone. Some of the refugees also described how these communication difficulties had meant that they had been referred to hospital care or to another service without knowing why they had been referred.

This 'business as usual' approach may, in part, be due to the nature of GPs as independent contractors working within a predefined national contract. This contracted relationship may have limited the ability of the Health and Social Care Partnership to ensure that Syrians received full access to GP services through the use of interpreting services. Interpretation is a fully-funded service provided by the Health Board and a GP practice should not incur any financial cost for using this service, so perhaps more clarity would have been helpful.

There was occasional misunderstanding and miscommunication as to the role of GPs. When this happened, Council staff in the Resettlement Team explained the nature of the GP service and, when appropriate, would intercede on their behalf. One woman for example, who had recently found out that she was pregnant felt that the GP had not provided her with all the information she needed and had approached Council workers for help (SYF09). This miscommunication might result in refugees feeling reluctant to attend their GP practice which could lead to low uptake of services.

In relation to access to Out of Hours GP services and Accident and Emergency services, most of those we spoke to were confident about what to do. When the need had arisen, they reported a positive experience:

"An emergency case happened. I was with [a Syrian man who fell ill] ... I asked for the ambulance to come, and they came in five minutes... I called three nines. I was able to tell them what I mean and in two minutes they connected me with an interpreter, and I explained it to them."

(SYM10)

Occasionally the availability of interpreters had been a problem when Syrians sought an emergency GP appointment.

Issues around language and access to health services were not limited to primary care. Accident and Emergency, for example, does not provide face-to-face interpreters and this has created some problems for adults and children, especially in relation to informed consent.

Some of the Syrians articulated frustration with other aspects of health services, particularly the length of waiting times for appointments or referrals to secondary care. These issues were usually attributed, with some level of acceptance, to 'the system' rather than to their status as refugees or Syrians:

“It’s a long process, you know. You have to make an appointment and you have to get on to the waiting list and sometimes it takes time...this is not just for the refugees... it’s for everybody... this is the system...” (SYM03)

However, psychological trauma was a major issue. Health services have struggled to deal with the level of trauma within this population. It is a recognised gap in service provision and is beyond the skills and capacity of local services. Given the nature of this population this service demand should have been anticipated by the UK Government before the arrival of Syrian refugees. In working with the complex needs of a vulnerable and traumatised population there is also a risk that staff themselves will experience health problems such as burnout and vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma (VT) can result from empathic engagement with traumatised clients and their reports of such experiences. This can be psychologically damaging, and requires counselling and stress management. In response to this issue, the Resettlement Team has received training in self-care provided by the organisation Freedom from Torture.

There is an urgent need for provision of specialist services to be reviewed at a national level and for appropriate support to be provided in line with the New Scots Strategy which seeks to ensure that *“trauma informed practice is embedded into health services and other service provision”* (New Scots Strategy 2018, p.29). The issue of interpreting and access to GP services is an area that merits further research, so that health services can meet their public sector equality duty.

Language and ESOL

In many instances, children, and sometimes very young children, were taking on a language facilitation or interpreting role for their parents in adult contexts, such as at the pharmacy (SYF04) or discussions with teachers (SYM09). All the Syrians interviewed perceived English language acquisition to be extremely important.

The adults were aware of the challenges and obstacles to integration caused by language barriers:

“The biggest obstacle here is the language. If you want to go to the doctor’s, to go and ask about your children’s school, everything is the language... That’s the biggest obstacle, to learn the language, and then everything will be okay.”

(SYM10)

“As soon as we get the language to a certain level where we can understand and get understood by others, we will feel... involved in society.”

(SYM03)

The VPRS funded up to 500 hours of ESOL in the first year. The aim of the provision was to provide the refugees with enough basic English to be able to take advantage of college courses in the future. All the adult respondents, with one exception, were accessing ESOL classes, and the majority were positive about their improvement through the classes. Classes were community-based to be accessible to the refugees and to ensure that crèche facilities were available for children. Bespoke provision for ESOL was organised in response to the needs of Syrians.

Many of the refugees had low levels of literacy on entering the programme and this made the task harder for teachers. Also, as there was very little pre-existing ethnic and migrant diversity in West Dunbartonshire it was not possible to mix the Syrian refugees with language learners from other backgrounds. Teaching Syrians as a single language grouping meant that it was tempting for learners to revert to Arabic.

The community-based form of provision also created some challenges. The informality of the community provision was, for some, difficult. The classes were used as a means through which other information could be provided to the refugees and this interrupted the flow of classes and led to breaks in teaching. Continuity was also not helped by the noise coming from the children who were often audible in the building. There was also some misunderstanding about entitlement to funding for non-language based courses in the college in the future. These concerns appear to have been addressed; however, a more challenging issue is likely to be the availability of crèche provision for parents seeking to take a college course after ESOL.

Learning English and picking up the local dialect and accent requires ongoing contact and this is something that proved difficult for adult Syrians. There were some positive examples of informal language learning, although in many cases this relied on either luck or goodwill such as one young Syrian whose language skills had improved through friendship with a neighbour. The lack of capacity within the Council and third sector to manage a volunteer programme meant that this potential has not yet been developed.

School education

There were a range of views on educational planning for children. Local schools were involved in the early resettlement planning meetings and some staff felt that education planning had been good. For others, the lead-in time was too tight and the lack of opportunity to ensure bilingual staff for schools, in common with other local authorities in Scotland, meant that they were only capable of being prepared in a relatively superficial way. The secondary school had a piece of luck in accessing a temporary bilingual teacher and the primary school appears to have been partly chosen due to the existence of such a worker. This puts a lot of pressure on individuals. One of the bilingual teachers could only work for a short period before taking up a pre-arranged position elsewhere and there was an absence of a longer-term plan to replace the bilingual teacher. Acknowledging that the pool of Arabic-speaking teachers in Scotland was very small, the decision to advertise for a one-year post was perhaps short-sighted. Part of the issue here could be the very temporary

nature of Home Office funding and how this filters down to services. Funding per school child is available from the Council for just one year, after which schools must find their own resources to maintain staffing levels.

Educational professionals pointed out that there was a large discrepancy among the school age children in terms of educational level and background. A proportion of children have had their education interrupted and some younger children have had no formal education. There is also a need for different approaches to educational support for primary age children compared to young adults in secondary school. For those not literate in their first language (Arabic for this population) this variation provided additional challenges and raised questions as to where secondary-age children with no education should be placed.

For some parents, adjusting to a new teaching approach left them feeling distant from their children's education. Most schoolwork is left at school and alongside language issues it often leaves parents struggling to engage with their children's education. One female respondent, who had worked as a teacher in Syria, was positive about her children's experiences but noted this feeling of disengagement (SYF04).

Nevertheless, overall, Syrian respondents from both groups were very positive about their children's access to and experiences of education. Children were perceived to have adapted quickly and to be enjoying school:

"The three of them love school, and thank god, they are improving... especially in the English language... The school has been really, really good for all the children."

(SYM10)

"They enjoy school very much... they keep talking about their futures here, they are very much connected... it's a very high standard of support."

(SYM09)

School-level planning, beyond the ability to source bilingual staff, appears to have been good and at times innovative. For example, one school conducted sessions with staff and school pupils linking pictures of bombed Syrian cities to pictures of Clydebank during the blitz as a way of helping the schoolchildren to understand the context that their new classmates had come from. However, the issue of bilingual teachers remained.

6. Conclusions

Whilst this study was small in scale and represents the views of a limited number of participants at an early stage of the resettlement process, it does raise some important issues. For the clear majority of Syrians interviewed, the role of key individuals in the Council as the social links and conduits to other services was perceived to be positive and beneficial. However, this places significant pressure on individuals. Staff in the Resettlement Team suggested that the model of bringing in relatively large groups should be re-thought, with an alternative being smaller numbers resettled more often. The view is that this would help to reduce the sense of crisis management in service provision.

A key challenge for resettlement is how to strike the right balance between providing support to a vulnerable population and fostering independence and access to mainstream service provision. The Resettlement Team seems to be learning and adapting delivery in an iterative way. Recognising that they had perhaps been too paternalistic in providing taxis to school, they are now attempting to promote greater independence. As the findings illustrate, this refugee population remain overly reliant on a small number of key staff members. This can partly be explained by the way service delivery has been organised but it is also due to a lack of preparation on the part of some providers to meet the specific needs of the refugees.

The relatively high levels of trauma among this population and the inability to access support to manage that trauma almost inevitably led to greater support needs than perhaps originally anticipated. Syrian refugees have a variety of complex needs that cannot be met within existing service delivery. This remains one of the key gaps identified across the community planning partnership. Given that the resettlement scheme was designed to only accept those defined as '*most vulnerable*', the UK Government should have anticipated and planned for such provision.

An ongoing challenge is the readiness of all community planning partners to respond to the needs of the new population. In general, Council officers continue to direct queries from Syrians to the Resettlement Team, even if these are queries that are not related to issues of resettlement. This is not helped by some community planning partners appearing unable to adapt to the systems put in place. Obvious examples of this include the housing repair service, which as yet has not been able to provide telephone interpretation, meaning that Syrian refugees are dependent upon a bilingual Council staff member to report repairs on their behalf, and GP practices which appear in some cases to be reluctant to use interpretation services.

An ongoing issue is one of language development, which has not progressed as well as many service providers expected. Syrians greatly valued opportunities for language learning and felt that progress was being made through ESOL classes; however, there was a feeling that for some, the informal style of community learning meant that progress was slower than it should have been. A major gap for Syrians is the lack of interaction with the local community. Indeed, part of the initial planning for resettlement involved peer mentoring

which might have helped build social bridges. This gave way to more urgent resettlement issues. Syrians talked of the potential benefits of a befriending programme with the local community and more organised opportunities to interact with members of other communities. Indeed, the one young Syrian who has been spontaneously befriended by a neighbour appears to have made progress in language acquisition. A potential way forward is for community planning partners to seek to establish a volunteer befriending service.

A finding that emerges strongly from interviews with both service providers and Syrians is that individuals and teams that are innovative and forward-thinking can make an enormous difference to the resettlement experience. In recognition of their efforts, the Resettlement Team has received the gratitude of the Syrians who expressed their deep appreciation of the efforts of council officers. The Resettlement Team has also received the West Dunbartonshire Chief Executive Award for Excellence and in 2017 were shortlisted for the Chartered Institute of Housing's Team of the Year.

Summary of key issues in need of attention

- More attention should be paid to developing cross-cultural social connections. The potential for a befriending scheme or similar volunteering project should be fully explored with the aim of facilitating language acquisition.
- The lack of community projects in some neighbourhoods suggests the need to encourage active citizenship and community development through the work of organisations such as Out of the Box. There might be opportunities for peer support and shared learning with Glasgow's Integration Networks.
- Services should pay attention to the issue of gender, ensuring that opportunities to build social connections with members of other communities are promoted for both men and women.
- There is scope for continuing to encourage Syrian involvement in co-designing service provision. This could have made services more person-centred and ensure that integration is central to service design.
- The potential for better collaboration between local services needs to be explored so to ensure that local services are able to respond appropriately to the needs of new populations, such as Syrian refugees, and meet their public sector equality duties.
- There needs to be far greater attention to the provision of interpretation services for Syrians across the community planning partnership, especially in relation to housing repairs and GP services. This would allow Syrians to engage more fully with services on an equal basis and reduce the dependence on bilingual members of staff in the Resettlement Team.
- Provision of specialist expertise in trauma-informed practice needs to be explored including the potential to access funding from the Home Office to meet complex health needs.
- Language provision and the impact of relatively large numbers of refugees on ESOL provision and crèche availability needs to be examined.
- There is a need for a long-term plan to secure bilingual teachers for local schools.