

Brixham Town Council

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Title:	Refugee Working Group		
To:	Full Council	Date:	18.02.16
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1. Purpose of the Report

The refugee working group was set up following the full council meeting on Thursday 14th January where, at the request of a member of the public, it was discussed whether the Town Council should instigate housing Syrian refugee families in Brixham.

2. Background Information

The working group discussed the extent of the humanitarian crisis facing Syria and the international community, commitments already made by David Cameron and his Government, actions taken by other local communities, and the challenges that might be involved for Brixham in working out an appropriate response.

Close attention was given to the range of views that have been expressed by the Brixham community, both at the meeting on 14th January and since through face-to-face conversations, letters, phone calls, emails and on social media.

Local opinion is clearly divided on the issue: valid concerns have been raised, and there have also been many offers of support. It was felt that some of these communications were influenced by misinformation that has been distributed by various sources, compounding the concerns that some people were expressing, and the working group are very keen to ensure that they are dealing in facts rather than opinions.

3. Refugee resettlement: what you need to know

Where are the refugees coming from?

There are currently more than 16 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance, half of whom are children. Around 4 million of these have left the country as refugees. Our government has pledged to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next few years in communities across the UK. These refugees will be referred to the UK from United Nations refugee camps in countries bordering Syria: there is very strict criteria for the eligibility of people to be considered for resettlement, and several layers of security and vetting processes that all individuals will be subjected to before they are eligible to be rehomed in the UK.

Why have people needed to leave their homes?

The war in Syria has been going on for almost five years now, with battles between internal factions as well as bombing from Western forces. The infrastructure of the country has completely broken down, and normal life has become impossible.

Why can't the refugees just go to neighbouring countries?

The reality is that the vast majority of refugees are in neighbouring countries, with only about 10 percent fleeing to Europe, but the resources there are running out. 1.7 million Syrian refugees are currently in Turkey, for example, but conditions for them there are unsustainable. It is for this reason that European governments, including the UK, is stepping in to help some of the most vulnerable of these refugees.

How many refugees would we be looking to welcome to Brixham?

If the Town Council decided to instigate housing Syrian refugee families in Brixham, it would be on a case-by-case basis. We would likely start with one family, progressing to maybe two or three families over time. The possibility may also arise for unaccompanied refugee children to be housed in Brixham, but that would depend on local families to come forward to participate in any resettlement scheme.

Who would these refugees be?

At this stage, the national resettlement scheme is prioritising people who cannot be supported effectively in their region or origin, including women, children and young people at risk. The Home Office passes the cases to local authorities who have asked to participate in the scheme, giving details of family make up, ages and particular needs. The local authority can choose to accept or reject cases at this stage. It is also possible for authorities to request a particular make up of family that will best suit its community.

How long would refugees be allowed to stay?

Refugees will be granted a five-year humanitarian protection visa. After that time they would either return home or apply to be permitted to stay in the UK for a longer period.

What support would refugees get?

This refugee resettlement programme is supported by £460 million funding from central government which has been diverted from the foreign aid budget. Once local authorities have agreed to take in a particular family, they would receive funding on the basis of the individual needs of that family. That funding would pay for housing, and also contribute to the services the family would require on settling in the community.

It is important to note that no funding would be diverted from local budgets but rather would work within an existing finance programme which would support the resettlement process. There would also be the opportunity for local charities and individuals to offer support if they so wished in providing basic clothing, furniture etc.

How would refugees integrate into our community?

If Brixham Town Council decides to instigate housing Syrian refugee families in our community, it would be with the support of Torbay Council and the Local Government Association. We would work closely with neighbouring communities to access specific services the families may require, and we would also consult with local people about what they might be able to offer in terms of building a support network. With the spontaneous offers of help we have already received, we are confident that we would be able to help refugee families integrate into our community without negatively impacting on local people or causing the refugees themselves any undue distress.

4. Questions raised by Members of the Public

How will the refugees be funded?

There is central Government funding available but we are looking at the specifics of how this will apply locally.

How will refugees be housed?

It is vital that the Town Council do not further diminish social housing stocks in Brixham. Looking at how other Local Authorities have dealt with this a suggested option would be through private landlords. We are encouraged by members of the public who have stepped forward with potential solutions to this question.

What support structure will refugees have?

The Council has written to a number of local groups within Brixham and some of their responses are outlined in item 5.

Assumption that refugees cannot speak English

UK programmes already exist to assist multinational non English speakers to learn the language. We are again encouraged that local teachers come forward and offer their services.

Our Health Service is already overstretched

As we are only considering one to three families it is likely to have a minimal impact on our local health service.

How do we know that the refugees are who they say they are and are not operating on false passports?

Refugees eligible for this scheme are already in UNHCR's camps. Whilst there is never a guarantee of 100% certainty, from UNHCR's work in the camps to the UK's security services vetting capabilities the selection is carried out in the safest manner possible.

The Syrian Refugees need have to meet all sorts of dietary and other requirements including allowing places for them to pray and provide special facilities in the work place to meet religious requirements

As far as dietary requirements are concerned, we are living in a time when many, many people have different dietary requirements that need to be accommodated. The major chains already stock culturally acceptable alternatives (eg halal meat) and there would be no reason for local shops to change their provision unless they wanted to.

We will include the Islamic Community with our consultations (see recommendations) to get a clearer picture of what other requirements there may be.

We could be importing mental health problems associated with people who have lived with and witnessed extreme violence in their lives

Medical information is important as part of any deliberations, especially if we choose to participate in the scheme. As part of this scheme a full medical health assessment report with details of any medical needs is part of the information sent to local authorities to help them decide whether they are able to accommodate a particular family.

Where will we find the jobs for those that need them?

Based on a maximum of three families, the impact on our labour market for workers is likely to be minimal. We will work with partners to match up the requirements of our job market with the skills that the refugees will bring with them.

Charity begins at home, let's look after our own homeless or poor, or those using Food Banks before we consider taking anyone else's displaced persons

Rightly or wrongly, there is no offer of additional funding for those people struggling in our own community. The funding offered is to support people fleeing for their lives in an international humanitarian crisis. With the numbers proposed, there will be a minimal impact on the local community. Extensive research shows that over time refugees have a positive financial impact on the communities they settle in, and in the short term there are many examples of refugees showing their gratitude to their host community by getting involved in volunteering efforts. There is a robust volunteering network in Brixham, and this could in fact prove to be an important aspect of the integration of refugees to the community.

5. Positive responses received from the public and local groups

"We were impressed that the Council is taking a pro-active role" "Like you, our concern is that there needs to be appropriate support for anyone coming here so they do not feel totally isolated."

"We would like to support the resettlement scheme for Syrian refugees in Brixham providing the infrastructure is in place and it would have a positive impact on the community."

"I am very much in favour of Syrian refugees coming to Brixham and as a qualified teacher I can offer some English lessons."

"Positive immigration can enlighten and enliven a community"

"Now that I know a little bit more about the subject I will make sure that I ask people to listen to the arguments before rushing to judgement."

"We have a strong support group of friends, including whole families, that will be there from the offset to interact with the refugee families on different levels such as socialising, day to day interaction, (such as meeting for coffee and/or lunch etc, inviting round for dinner, taking out to recreational areas such as Berry Head, Dartmoor, etc), guidance and help with settling, (form filling, getting registered with doctors, library, schools etc), and introducing the adults and children to social groups in Brixham and Torbay. Our group would also be only too happy to assist with clothing, bedding, toiletries and any other items the Syrian refugees families may need while settling and establishing themselves. Collectively, we are sure all of the above will serve to be a strong and effective network of help and support, as well as friendship and kindness, to the Syrian refugee families who are settled here."

6. Recommendations

Europe is facing its worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. Like many of the people in our local community, Brixham Councillors are shocked and dismayed at the plight of the many hundreds of thousands of people who have been forced to flee their homes. However

we cannot stand by and do nothing, and with that in mind we recommend this Council resolves to do the following:

- (a) Continue to explore, in association with other agencies in Torbay and beyond, the possibility of the town of Brixham offering sanctuary to a small number of refugee families as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.
- (b) Work with the local community and local agencies to ascertain whether we can fulfill the published Statement of Requirements without compromising our responsibilities to our local community. This would establish for ourselves and the Home Office whether we have a strong enough infrastructure to participate in the scheme.
- (c) Carry out a local consultation process to establish the degree of support we have for these proposals amongst the people of Brixham, and compile a database of offers of assistance from our community.
- (d) Maintain the international humanitarian crisis as an item on our Full Council agenda to enable regular communication about the situation as it develops and ensure that no further action is taken without the agreement of Full Council.