



From mountain to sea

Syrian New Scots

Delivering Better Outcomes

MJ Awards 2017



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In the Beginning

In September 2015, the UK Government announced that safe passage would be granted to 20,000 Syrian refugees and supported by the Scottish Government welcoming 200 refugees. Aberdeenshire Council responded by committing to resettling 50 refugee families as part of the UK's Syrian Vulnerable Person's Relocation Scheme. The speed of the commitment pledged to the resettlement programme from central, devolved and local governments was unprecedented. The *Syrian Vulnerable Person's Relocation (VPR) Scheme* was launched by the Home Office in October 2015 and dictated the criteria for refugee resettlement.

"The Syrian VPR scheme is based on need. It prioritises those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin: women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence amongst others".

Aberdeenshire was new to refugee resettlement so had no prior resources, knowledge or skills to draw upon. We also had an underdeveloped third sector in relation to refugee support. A Coordinator was appointed to coordinate the resettlement programme and begin the process of planning, identifying suitable properties and resources for support. This included the formation of a *Public Sector Strategic Group and Partner Refugee Group (PRG)*. In September 2015 the decision was taken to utilise private sector housing and RSL's to ensure no additional pressures were placed on the social housing waiting list.

Understanding and Delivering Positive Outcomes for New Scots

Dedicated bilingual Housing Officers were appointed with a range of housing, social work and international development skills and experiences. Partners agreed that building individual and group capacities with the Syrians would be an essential element of the resettlement programme complementing the more traditional building blocks based on housing, health, and benefits support. Partners with a resettlement offer were invited to contribute outcomes and actions to the '*Syrian new Scots Integration Plan*'.

The first Syrian families arrived in February 2016. Over the next ten months, eighteen families were resettled in central Aberdeenshire (70 people). The Resettlement Team worked with schools, GP Practices, Hospitals, Social Work Teams, ESOL providers, Jobcentre and a wide range of other services to ensure individuals' needs would be met. Confident that our partnership approach would sustain us post resettlement we were unprepared for the level of crisis families would experience. Staff had to quickly adapt to balancing the complex mix of building capacities and managing individual traumatic needs and behaviours. Almost all families had at least one member with a serious or terminal medical condition, disability or urgent emotional need. There were no, or low levels of English which created barriers to accessing services and resources. The Team quickly developed a Syrian New Scots 'What's App' group that allowed families, volunteers and Housing Officers to communicate in written English, Arabic or verbally. This was invaluable in the early days of resettlement when urgent information could be shared and translated with the help of Arabic speaking volunteers. People were capable, skilled and willing to take control of their own lives but were completely

incapacitated by language and cultural shift. Early client evaluations reflected this imbalance, with families feeling safe and supported but frustrated by their lack of progression and integration. Focusing on social connectedness, a Syrian new Scots Drop-in was established. A safe space was created where families could meet and exchange newly acquired knowledge and skills. Cultural awareness was explored in a supportive environment and families could ask direct and difficult questions. Partners and neighbours were invited to share Syrian food and develop friendships beyond the parameters of the project. Aberdeen Mosque & Islamic Centre (AMIC) provided much needed spiritual and community support. Details of the families arriving had been kept to a minimum due to security fears, so the wider community now had the opportunity to engage and build social and community connections. Using donations and fundraising monies, social and cultural visits were organised including a trip to Edinburgh which allowed the families to place Inverurie within the wider context of Scotland and the UK.

The 'Amal Project' (Hope)

Keen to build individual and community capacities, the Resettlement Team worked with the families on the concept of collective good and not for profit community action. The 'Amal Project' (Hope) was constituted and a committee of four men and four women elected to lead on the following outcomes;

- ✚ Resettlement experiences in Aberdeenshire will be improved by enabling Syrian families to contribute to the planning, operational and evaluative process
- ✚ Isolation, low mental health, boredom and frustration will be tackled by active community participation
- ✚ Resettlement stories and experiences will be shared to increase public understanding
- ✚ Funds for cultural trips and experiences will be raised
- ✚ Social Media will be utilised to aid communication and share information
- ✚ Dependency on the resettlement team will be moved to interdependency, resilience and being part of the solution
- ✚ Advocate for the unmet needs of refugees

The Amal Project has given families control, responsibility and the opportunity to contribute to their new community and they have grasped it with both hands. They appointed a quiet but quite exceptional young man to lead them into the next stage of their resettlement journey.

Refugee resettlement is brutal. All of the families in Aberdeenshire have displaced children worldwide. People are living with serious and terminal medical conditions and managing the impact of losing friends and families still in Syria. They live in poverty and struggle to progress to employment because of language levels but their strength, humanity, courage and love for life is enduring. The Syrian New Scots Resettlement team is like no other. They nurture newly arrived families through many stages from vulnerable victims to empowered citizens. They have knowledge and skills that

encompass housing, education, benefits, legalities, employability, safety and relationships. They balance sadness with joy and constantly strive to empower and excel.

Partnership Working for New Scots

We discovered quickly that existing housing and tenancy frameworks and processes didn't fit, so we set about creating new approaches and resources. This included working with 20 partners to produce the ***Aberdeenshire Syrian new Scots' Integration Plan*** and appointing Housing Officers (Syrian new Scots) to work holistically with the Syrian tenants on a range of integration outcomes, in addition to traditional tenancy support. Outcome areas included participation in learning (ESOL, school and College), accessing NHS services, independent travel, community involvement, cultural awareness, community safety, rights & responsibilities, Benefits and money advice, volunteering and employability. We learned that a community development approach to resettlement alongside good practice in tenancy support was the way forward

Flooding in Inverurie



A few months before the first phase of families were due to arrive, Inverurie was hit by serious flooding with residents facing significant damage to property and personal displacement. There were concerns that the community would respond negatively to the Syrian families arriving as short term temporary housing was at a premium, so Housing Officers worked closely with elected members, community groups and neighbours to explain the process and smooth the transition. This innovative and direct intervention ensured that when the Syrian families arrived they were immediately welcomed by neighbours and made to feel safe and secure – an absolute priority for people fleeing war and conflict.

Preparing properties for arrival was challenging as Housing Officers were managing Home Office criteria, expectations and resources available. They harnessed the energy of partners and the local community to ensure the properties were equipped for the needs of each individual family. This included halal food parcels from the Mosque, donations from the foodbank, churches coordinating clothing and equipment, Aberdeen University donating computers to encourage learning, donations for babies and children, Inverurie Academy providing fully equipped school bags and uniforms and Police Scotland and SF&RS ensuring all properties were as safe and secure as possible. This outpouring of support was a challenge to manage at times but Housing Officers ensured time, resources and people were utilised to maximum efficiency.

All of the Aberdeenshire Syrian families had been resettled by UNHCR and the Home Office due to a disability, serious or terminal medical condition, torture or vulnerability so Housing Officers had a number of complex challenges and layers to deal with in addition to language and cultural barriers. The nine families (35 people) resettled in Phase 1 had no English and in some cases were illiterate in Arabic, so the team worked with Aberdeen Mosque to produce Welcome Packs in Arabic and recorded essential information on What's App. Communication was key to effective interaction so Housing Officers overcame language barriers by using smart phones to communicate. The families arrived with phones as all have dispersed children and families around the world so we used this commonality to develop the innovative Syrian new Scots' What's App Group. The App allowed Housing Officers to communicate directly with families individually or collectively, using Google Translate or with the help of Arabic volunteers added to the group. Robert Gordon University and currently researching experiences and impacts, and the use of the App in refugee displacement and resettlement.

Housing officers found facilitating hospital visits resource heavy and the experience for families was often frightening and confusing. In response to this, the Housing Officers worked closely with NHS colleagues to develop translated resources, create a Health Passport, agree processes for transportation and interpreters and enable able bodied clients to manage their appointments independently.

A priority throughout the resettlement process was to ensure families were empowered and enabled to be as self-efficient as possible. Housing Officers worked with individual families to establish targets and constantly encouraging them to strive and achieve goals – however small. This has required close working with Social Work services to ensure clients with learning and physical disabilities are able to fully participate in community life. Housing Officers and social work staff worked hard to develop innovative individual plans tailored for the clients and families' needs. Housing Officers helped families overcome this transition and help families understand about the importance of disability rights in the Scotland. This was a dramatic shift from what families had been used to in Syria and in the refugee camps bordering Syria. Colleagues have evidenced significant personal, emotional, psychological and physical growth and achievements.

Increasingly, Housing Officers realised that all of the families' wider needs could not be met by Housing Officers and services alone. A weekly Drop-in was established in the local Community Centre allowing the families to come together, share experiences, knowledge and develop friendships. The Drop-in has been successfully used as a main meeting point, a place for partners, neighbours and volunteers to come to and a safe place to explore cultural awareness issues and problems. It has also hosted regular Syrian food events where families, volunteers and staff meet and eat and build relationships beyond daily professional interventions. To enhance the Drop-in, Arabic speaking volunteers were invited to come along and befriend families. This was essential because it created friendships similar to extended family relationships and allowed families to seek information, support and cultural support. One man (Mohammed) has now learned enough English to become the Volunteer Family Coordinator and is now an extended member of the support team. With more families due to arrive, the plan is to work with Mohammed to establish a new Drop-in managed completely by the families with them in control of content, learning and social events.

Money advice and benefits have been a major issue for families and Housing Officers have developed creative ways of helping them understand and manage their finances. Visual monthly calendar sheets were developed to show families how payments work, and they have been encouraged to fully utilise online banking and new technologies. Housing Officers overcame initial barriers to banking by working with North East Scotland Credit Union to set up accounts for families on arrival. This was a first in Scotland and an innovative approach to combating financial exclusion.

Housing, education, health and employment are critical to a successful resettlement package but equally essential is the need for families to feel ownership, integrated and valued. Housing Officers achieved this by involving families in community events, trips and projects including the White Wood peace Festival in Huntly, a trip to Edinburgh, Syrian Supper Club event, welcome event at Aberdeen Mosque and Islamic Centre and participating in local community projects i.e. Garioch Community kitchen, Men's Shed etc.

Bassel Aldaya from Damascus: 'I could not believe the people's beautiful smiles (Resettlement Team). The care and support received from all was far beyond my expectations - we thought we knew Islam in our country, but this is where true Islam is practiced with the way you treat us and each other. We feel as though Aberdeenshire is home and although the older people hope to return to Syrian we hope our kids will stay, go to University in the UK and live the British life'

'Abadalla Mohamed, AMIC Chairman: 'It is the result of your dedication and the hard work you have done. AMIC (Aberdeen Mosque and Islamic Centre) has been from the start proud of this partnership which has given its best to ease the suffering of these refugees who were hopeless. We have been proud to continue working together'

Delivering Innovation to Achieve Positive Outcomes

So why do we think we have applied innovative approaches and achieved successful outcomes? Every day of resettlement planning has been new and innovative. Syrian new Scots Housing Officers with backgrounds in housing, social work, finance and education have had to dig deep to learn and adapt daily, creating new approaches and solutions to challenging and unpredictable situations. Aberdeenshire has recently been recognised as an example of good practice by the Home office and team members have been invited to contribute and share practice at the North Alliance and COSLA Conferences. The families are progressing and achieving outcomes despite momentous barriers and challenges and we will continue to commit to their progressions by routinely self-evaluating and continuously improving.

Syrian New Scots' Case Study

Dured's Story – 23.01.17

The Alhalabe family flew into Aberdeen Airport on 23 February 2016, on the final leg of a long and brutal journey that began in Homs Syria in 2011. The family arrived as Syrian Refugees with five years' Humanitarian Protection as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Relocation (VPR) Scheme. They were warmly met at the airport by the Aberdeenshire Syrian Resettlement Team and Arabic speaking volunteers from the local Mosque and immediately resettled into their new home in Inverurie.

Five years previously the family were living relatively peacefully in Homs. Dad owned and ran his own local supermarket despite a physical disability that impacted on his mobility, mum looked after the family and their four children were at school. The oldest boy Dured, was looking forward to going to Al Baath University to study Computing Science and his sister Aber was considering a career in pharmacy and football was the favourite subject of the two youngest boys.

Conditions in Homs rapidly deteriorated and the family were forced to flee, first to other parts of Syria and then illegally over the border to Jordan. From that moment their lives changed irreversibly as they became refugees and part of the 46 million displaced people worldwide.

Dured made little impact when he arrived, quiet and unassuming and focused on helping his family, pushing dad's wheelchair and keeping the younger children occupied. Gradually along with the other Syrian families, Dured began community based ESOL classes, progressing to an accredited ESOL course at North East Scotland College within six months – a significant achievement for a young man who arrived with very little English. More English, brought more confidence and Dured and the other young men started to improve their health and wellbeing by cycling on donated bikes, swimming and football training courtesy of Aberdeen Football Club and the Scottish Football Association. Constantly in search of work, Dured participated in all volunteering opportunities available including packing boxes at the local foodbank, stewarding at the Inverurie Christmas Lights' switch on and organising events for all the families in conjunction with the Church of Scotland.

In October 2016, the Syrian families decided to form a community development project to help them with community involvement, wellbeing and integration. After much discussion, everyone voted, a committee was formed and Dured was unanimously elected Chairperson of the Amal Project (Hope). Dured was thrust into the limelight and overnight transformed into a natural, humble and skilful leader. As Chairperson, he has spoken at Scottish Government conferences, contributed to COSLA resettlement sessions, presented at Rotary Club and now represents the Syrian families on the Aberdeenshire Strategic Partnership Group. Dured has also led on developing volunteering opportunities for the families, worked closely with local community groups and ensured the unmet needs of families are gently but firmly recognised and responded to.

Preparations are being made for the third phase of Syrian families arriving in the spring. Dured and representatives from the Amal Project will prepare their housing, welcome them at the airport, settle them into their new homes, interpret for them and guide them through their first exhausting and challenging year of being a Syrian new Scot refugee in Aberdeenshire.

In December 2016, Dured was nominated and successfully shortlisted for a national Young Scot 2017 Unsung Hero Award.

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