

During 2015 over 1,000,000 people sought refuge in Europe in the biggest movement of displaced people since the Second World War. We were told that the influx would stop with the onset of winter but still it continues. Seeing the horrific pictures of Syrian refugees trying to escape into Europe, it is natural to want to help. The compassionate response is to ask when these people are going to arrive in the UK and how will we help when some of them reach the North West. The shocking fact is that they are arriving but they are not being welcomed.

The reason for this is that the UK government's "20,000 over five years" Syrian Resettlement Scheme (SRP) is only available to people who are in the refugee camps on the borders of Syria. Any of those who have fled the conflict and have got as far as Europe are not even eligible for consideration. The government has refused to discuss taking responsibility for any part of a quota system that would share the humanitarian response across the countries of Europe. According to our government, anyone who has fled the war in Syria and got as far as Europe is not a refugee but an asylum seeker. Are we really penalising people for showing too much initiative? Are we really saying that they should have stayed in the camps in Jordan and Lebanon along with the 5 million others? Are we really saying that we have no moral responsibility to help suffering humanity? Are we already saying that we are not part of Europe?

Part of the problem is that there is no safe way to enter the UK: just think of the Jungle at Calais and the armed guards at the Channel tunnel. Desperate people try to bribe drivers. They try to hide on trucks and under trucks. They walk along the tunnel. They even cling to the top of trains. And the government does everything in its power to stop them. If people are able to get into the UK, they have to take their chances in an asylum application process that is designed to be off-putting. 50% of asylum applications are refused, many because of inconsistencies in the stories they tell at interview. Inconsistencies are often caused by panic and the desire to make a good impression.

So what are we doing?

We have to recognise the place of the church in the national response to the refugee situation. The line of communication is: national government, local government, voluntary sector. Church is included in the voluntary sector and no particular denomination is given preference. The government's working assumption is that the churches are one entity.

In summary:

1. The terms 'Asylum Seekers and Refugees' cover a range of different groups. (The Syrian refugee programme is separate from the asylum seeker programme)
 - 1.1. The numbers of Asylum Seekers and Refugees is going to increase across the North West of England
 - 1.2. Only Syrians in the camps on the borders of Syria are eligible for the SRP (This scheme was previously known as VPRS, the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme)
 - 1.3. SRP refugees are a special case with privileges that are not given to asylum seekers
 - 1.4. SRP refugees are not likely to arrive in the North West in the immediate future
 - 1.5. SRP refugees are the direct responsibility of local authorities
 - 1.6. Increased numbers of dispersed asylum seekers are beginning to arrive in most of the local authorities in the North West
- 1.6 The agency SERCO has responsibility for asylum seekers in the North West, including housing
 - 1.6.1 SERCO needs more properties to avoid asylum seekers being housed in hotels
 - 1.6.2 SERCO has a procedure for vetting private houses for use by asylum seekers
 - 1.6.3 Parishes and /or individuals could offer properties to be used by SERCO

2. National government is working through Local Authorities
 - 2.1. Local authorities are looking for partnerships with groups from civil society
 - 2.2. Local authorities see churches as part of civil society
 - 2.3. Local Authorities don't differentiate among churches
3. The RC church has to work with Local Authorities
 - 3.1. We will be more helpful if we work ecumenically
 - 3.2. We will be more helpful if we work with secular as well as church groups
4. The archdiocesan Trustees are keen to respond generously to the crisis. To this effect they will:
 - 4.1. Consider applications for change of use of diocesan properties
 - 4.2. The proposals for change of use of properties could be for either refugees or asylum seekers
 - 4.3. Certain conditions must be met:
 - 4.3.1. The property is not in parish use and the people responsible for the property have been consulted
 - 4.3.2. Risks are identified
 - 4.3.3. A strategy in place to deal with risks should they become active (mitigation strategy)
 - 4.3.4. Safeguarding procedures in place
 - 4.3.5. A competent management structure put in place (Professional advice needed)
 - 4.3.6. A contract to allow for tenancy to be ended (Professional advice needed)
5. There is no clarity yet about how SRP refugees will be allocated housing. SRP has its own procedure for matching arrivals and hosts. There are three models but the most likely one that the government will choose is:
 - 5.1. It begins with UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)
 - 5.2. UNHCR selects Syrians from those registered in the camps,
 - 5.3. UNHCR makes a decision about relative need,
 - 5.4. UNHCR conducts security and health checks,
 - 5.5. UNHCR offers places in other countries to people in the camps,
 - 5.6. UNHCR advises HM Government of those on the list,
 - 5.7. government chooses from the list,
 - 5.8. local authorities are given the lists,
 - 5.9. etc, etc
 - 5.10. finally, a family arrives in the UK.
6. The Justice and Peace Commission has set up an ecumenical sub group that has been working to produce resources for the parishes. Resources will include:
 - 6.1. A booklet to provide some clarity over terms, causes and possible responses
 - 6.2. Suggestion for ways in which parishes can organise
 - 6.3. Identification of new arrivals needs
 - 6.4. Gathering of a group to support new arrivals
 - 6.5. Co-ordination and oversight of projects
 - 6.6. Role descriptions
 - 6.7. Assistance with safeguarding procedures
 - 6.8. Advice from schools on how to help integration
 - 6.9. Fund-raising
 - 6.10 Suggestions for ways in which parishes can join forces with other organisations locally
7. A series of information evenings across the diocese to encourage discussion and planning around the issues.
 - 7.1. It is hoped that these may lead to setting up local groups with boundaries based around local authorities. These groups will:

- 7.1.1. Have a strong presence in RC parishes
- 7.1.2. Liaise with Local Authorities
- 7.1.3. Liaise with other churches
- 7.1.4. Identify properties
- 7.1.5. Raise money
- 7.1.6. Set up local projects. Projects will include:
 - 7.1.6.1. Welcome groups
 - 7.1.6.2. Help with integration into community
 - 7.1.6.3. Help with doctors, schools, etc
 - 7.1.6.4. Befriending
 - 7.1.6.5. Conversation groups
 - 7.1.6.6. Regular opening of parish facilities for low key social events
 - 7.1.6.7. Etc
- 7.2. These local groups need to be in places that are convenient for the guests/users
 - 7.2.1. Initial contact with asylum seekers in a place where dispersal has begun only recently may be best done offering a welcoming event
- 8. This process is ongoing and in continual need of review
 - 8.1. Comments and suggestion are welcomed
 - 8.2. Contact s.atherton@rcaol.co.uk 0151 522 1080