HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on the European Union

Home Affairs Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: Local Authorities and Refugee Resettlement

Wednesday 29 January 2020

10.35 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Jay of Ewelme (The Chair); Lord Best; Lord Lexden; Lord McNally; Baroness Scott of Bybrook; Lord Soley; Lord Watts.

Evidence Session No. 2 Heard in Public Questions 23 - 43

Witnesses

I: Councillor Jim Gifford, Leader of the Council, Aberdeenshire Council; Councillor Susan Elsmore, Cabinet Member for Social Care, Health and Well-being, Cardiff Council; Ian Snowden, Chief Executive of Land & Property Services, Department of Finance, Northern Ireland.

II: David Simmonds CBE MP, Chair of the Asylum, Refugee and Migration Task Group, Local Government Association.

Examination of witnesses

Councillor Jim Gifford, Councillor Susan Elsmore and Ian Snowden.

Q23 **The Chair:** Welcome to you all. We are extremely grateful to you for coming to give evidence to us today. This follows the Committee's genuine interest in the way local authorities are managing refugee resettlement. It has come up in a number of our other evidence sessions. A genuine spirit of inquiry, rather than any criticism, inspires our questioning, so thank you very much for coming.

It will be a public evidence session. We will let you have a transcript at the end of the session so that you have a chance to correct the evidence you have given, if there are factual corrections you would like to make. Perhaps, to get us going, each of you would introduce yourself very briefly so that we know exactly who you are and what you do. That would be a helpful start.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: I am cabinet member for social care, health and well-being for Cardiff Council. I have another interest to declare. I chair the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership.

The Chair: I did not know that. In that case, it is very interesting to have you here for that as well. I am sure that will come up during the questions.

Councillor Jim Gifford: I am the leader of Aberdeenshire Council. I also chair our Community Planning Partnership Board, which obviously has an interest in all of this work. Wearing a different hat, I am the Conservative group leader at CoSLA. As will probably come up in some of the questions, CoSLA has taken a national lead on the programme in Scotland.

Ian Snowden: I am a civil servant in the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland. I have been involved in organising arrangements for the reception and resettlement of Syrian refugees under the vulnerable persons relocation scheme since 2015. I have kept responsibility for that work as I have gone around a number of jobs, which is why I keep being asked why a person involved in land and property services is responsible for refugees. I have kept with me responsibility for that project.

The Chair: Thank you. The acoustics in this room are not brilliant and some of us are not as young as we were, so if you could speak up that would be very helpful. That is something I always say to everybody.

Thank you very much, Ian Snowden, for the note we had on Northern Ireland participation in the VPRS. I thought it extremely helpful and a very useful introduction.

Could you give an overview of how refugee resettlement is managed in your different parts of the United Kingdom? What has been the experience so far? We have quite a lot of questions to get through in a relatively limited time, and we certainly want to get to the questions at

the end about what is going to happen next, so we need to manage the time.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: In relation to Wales, migration is managed through the Welsh Local Government Association and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership. I am delighted to say that every one of the 22 local authorities in Wales participated in the scheme. We work through the WSMP. There are regional co-ordinators. Interestingly, although we in Cardiff—I am thinking of my colleagues—are very aware of this specifically, we have taken a regional approach with our neighbouring local authority, the Vale of Glamorgan, which has never resettled refugees before. Cardiff has a great history of migration resettlement.

Councillor Jim Gifford: It has become clear that there is a difference between the approach of the city and the approach in rural areas, which I represent. We had no experience whatsoever of refugee resettlement. We think there may be refugees and asylum seekers, in single figures, we do not know about in the whole of the north-east, which is more than just Aberdeenshire.

We started off using the experience of other councils, because now all 32 in Scotland have taken part, but when we got involved there were only a few, so we learned from their experience. Instead of looking at it as a housing issue, we put in place an education and community based officer to look after the programme. They took it forward with a view to greater engagement with the communities and greater integration with work, education and other things, as well as housing. We took a different approach from other local authorities, which served us very well. We now have five officers, working in a team, following a plan that is working very well. In Aberdeenshire, we are up to 207 residents, or new Scots as we call them, and I am glad to say they are settling in very well.

The Chair: I imagine there was what economists would call "learning by doing" involved in some of that.

Councillor Jim Gifford: Absolutely. We started off with one project co-ordinator with an education and community background. We thought she could deal with it and very rapidly realised she could not, so we now have that team in place. In November last year, we committed through the committee to continue the programme, as long as the funding is there to support us. No doubt we will talk about that as we go along.

The Chair: I am sure we will come to the question of funding later on. Ian Snowden, what about Northern Ireland?

Ian Snowden: Prior to the Syrian refugee resettlement programme, there were no structured arrangements for the reception of refugees in Northern Ireland. A relatively small number made their way to Northern Ireland each year and were simply absorbed into mainstream public services such as housing, health and education. A number of asylum seekers were housed in Belfast, but only Belfast. It was a bit like Jim

described in Aberdeen, a city-based thing. They did not really go anywhere outside the southern part of Belfast.

That changed substantially when the Syrian refugee resettlement programme started. We had no prior experience of involvement in any of the other resettlement schemes, such as Gateway, so we were starting with a blank piece of paper. Because of our rather different institutional structures, a lot of the functions are delivered by central government in the devolved Administration. Housing, social care, education and so forth are all centrally delivered, so it was a devolved Administration approach. We rely quite heavily on the voluntary sector, so support given directly to refugees on arrival is provided by a voluntary sector consortium as a delivery partner for us.

We have regular meetings of the statutory and voluntary partners to do the planning work around each arrival and deal with any issues that arise. For example, just yesterday there were a couple of meetings about integration planning for the groups who have arrived so far, and tomorrow there will be a meeting about the next cohort, which will come next Thursday, to make sure that all the arrangements are in place for them. It has become a regular routine or cycle.

The Chair: What determines how many refugees come to you? That is not entirely clear to us. Would any of you like to comment on that? I was very struck by what Councillor Elsmore said. I think she said that every local authority in Wales was taking them. How does it work? What is the system for determining how many refugees come to you and how they get dispersed among your different councils and regions?

Councillor Jim Gifford: We committed to taking between 12 and 15 families a year, and we started with that.

The Chair: Did you decide that, or was it decided for you?

Councillor Jim Gifford: There was a Scottish national target of 2,000 people, and we said we would take 58 over five years. For the 12 to 15 families, it is entirely to do with where we have the capacity to support them, whether it is housing, school places or other facilities. We think that is a manageable number, and so far it has been.

We have been helped on the housing side, coincidentally, by the economy in Aberdeenshire and the north-east of Scotland crashing when the oil price went through the floor, so we have quite a bit of private housing available. We have not used our own housing stock; we have come to arrangements with private sector landlords, which has taken a bit of the heat out of, "They're getting preferential treatment", and that kind of thing. We thought it was a manageable number.

As regards dispersal, we now have refugees in four of our larger towns, but the towns are closer to Aberdeen city. We thought that was a good thing because they would have better access to other communities in the city, but, as it turns out, they quite like staying where they are; they like

the feel of our small towns and villages. The integration part has worked well because they have quickly become part of the community in those towns and villages, and they are not looking to the bigger city for support.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: In a way, I suppose that in Wales it was evolutionary once the call went out. There has been great collaboration from the Welsh Government and from local government leadership, but it was based very much on what individual local authorities thought was going to be manageable. Similarly to Councillor Gifford's area, in Wales there are only four dispersal areas that have traditionally resettled refugees and asylum seekers. It was very new to 18 of the local authorities. They took their own decisions.

Talking personally about Cardiff and the Vale, we decided to take 10 families per year regionally over the course of the programme, and that continues. We entered a collaboration agreement with our Vale colleagues, and we re-signed that for another year, until March. We await anxiously what is coming next. What Councillor Gifford describes is interesting. There was anxiety in Wales, particularly in rural areas, about receiving refugees, but there are astonishing stories of hope, integration and a community sense of good will. One of the Syrian refugees is now teaching Welsh. We have seen all sorts of cultural benefits.

The Chair: Is he teaching Welsh successfully?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: Indeed.

The Chair: What about Northern Ireland?

Ian Snowden: No target numbers were set for the number of refugees coming into Northern Ireland when we began this programme in 2015. We took in 50 in the first group in December 2015, and we committed with the Home Office to take groups on a recurring basis thereafter. We have ended up taking about 85 per group, not by design in any way. Refugees are brought to Northern Ireland by the Home Office on a charter flight. To make the charter flight more cost effective, they have to get more people on to the flight. The plane holds about 100. The maximum we can take in at the welcome centre is about 90, so we have ended up with between 80 and 90 on each arrival by that sort of process. That is how we have ended up taking in the numbers we have. It has become a process whereby six times a year a flight arrives with perhaps 85 people on it.

The Chair: That was a very helpful start. Thank you.

Q24 **Lord Lexden:** This might be called the Alf Dubs question. Can you tell us whether your areas have accommodated unaccompanied minors? If so, how do you support those children? What kind of backing do you get from central government regarding their resettlement?

Ian Snowden: I am aware of six in Northern Ireland. They are looked after by the health and social care trusts locally. I am not familiar with

the precise funding arrangements, but I understand that they receive funding directly from the Home Office in respect of those children.

Councillor Jim Gifford: We committed to taking two unaccompanied children, but so far we have none. It is not for lack of trying. We have no available foster carers or places to put anyone. We are ready to do it. We have a social worker as part of the resettlement team who is tasked with that, as well as doing other work for the existing community. We are geared up to do it; we just have not.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: In Wales, under UASC, we had 97 children and young people.[1] Because of issues to do with the national transfer scheme, Wales is not currently involved in that. I gather the Home Office is perhaps considering a relaunch of that.

Three or four years ago there was huge appetite—and, indeed, a moral drive and endeavour—on the part of local authorities to receive these individuals. It is more problematic because, as Councillor Gifford described, there are issues relating to funding and foster parent placements. Those are some of the things we are struggling with across Wales. In relation to Cardiff Council, we have received individuals and will continue to receive them, but there are real issues about funding.

Lord Lexden: How effectively do you think the relevant agencies have co-operated in meeting the needs of unaccompanied children?

Ian Snowden: In Northern Ireland, it has largely been dealt with by health and social care trusts. Beyond that quite narrow field, there has not been much contact with any other public services. I understand that they have contracted with Barnardo's to assist them with the delivery of the service for a small number of children.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: In Wales, co-ordination is through the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, and calls go out to individual local authorities, particularly urban ones such as Cardiff, Swansea or Newport.

Councillor Jim Gifford: I do not know what the national system is in Scotland. We have not been involved in it at all up until now.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: Forgive me if I have already said this. Across Wales, we have received 97 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Q25 **Lord Soley:** We would like to get a feeling for how your local communities have responded to the resettlement of refugees. I am aware of differences between urban and rural areas, and we have picked up a number of very good examples that you have isolated. It would be useful to know what negative reactions there have been in both urban and rural areas. Has there been much negative reaction? If so, what is it focused on, and is it predominantly urban or rural?

[1] Note by the witness - 'some of whom are 'Dubs children'

Councillor Jim Gifford: We deliberately chose towns and villages in quite close proximity to Aberdeen city, but not in the north of Aberdeenshire—Peterhead and Fraserburgh—because those areas had a very large influx of economic migrants, especially eastern Europeans, working in fishing and farming. There has been a fair bit of conflict over the years in those areas, so we deliberately did not look at them.[2]

There have been no actual problems. Lots of anecdotal things have been going on. We have provided four reports to the Home Office about incidents, but when they were investigated there was no substance to them. They were just keyboard warriors on Facebook and Twitter saying this, that and the other, but when we investigated there was nothing behind them. In my home patch of Ellon, some folk said to my wife, "Oh, they're getting preferential treatment with council housing". They absolutely do not because we do not use council housing. That sort of misinformation has been a greater problem than the reality.

Stories about how the new Scots are settling in are great. They set up their own group called Al-Amal—I checked the name so I would not get it wrong—which works on projects in the towns where they are settled. They run coffee mornings or teach English; they are doing things for themselves. On the back of that, other community groups have set up Friends of Al-Amal to help with volunteering opportunities, and other church groups are getting involved.

It is happening almost by osmosis in the different villages, but I think it is because those villages are small, compact communities anyway. Strangely, the smaller they are, the more integration has happened. It has been absolutely tremendous and, touch wood, there have been no real problems. There have been a few anecdotes, but nothing substantial.

Lord Soley: Is there a difference where there is already an ethnic minority community? You have quite a few ethnic minorities in Aberdeen city itself, but would it be very different if you went west of Aberdeen?

Councillor Jim Gifford: Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen city are probably exactly the same. We have had such a history over the past 35 to 40 years of so many people coming from other parts of the world anyway, with oil and gas. People from all over the place have been doing three-year rotations. When my two girls were at school, they had an international book day, and there were 14 different nationalities in the assembly at their school. That is fantastic. I think that has helped a lot. People are used to people who do not look like them living next door.

Lord Soley: Is that the experience in Wales? Would you say it is the

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[2] Note by the witness – 'When deciding where to resettle families, we chose central Aberdeenshire due to its connectivity to Aberdeen City. These communities are fairly affluent and do not have some of the economic challenges of north Aberdeenshire. Aberdeenshire has a significant number of EU economic migrants linked to the fishing, farming and food processing industries but our communities are still quite traditional and other cultures haven't necessarily impacted on central Aberdeenshire.'

same picture?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: It has been largely a positive picture. In Cardiff and the Vale, there have been a small number of reports of hate crime, but, as Councillor Gifford said, when the police and others have explored them, they have largely been dissipated by good dialogue, whether in relation to neighbours or others.

I would say it has been largely positive, but one cannot underplay, or underscore enough, the anxiety of local authorities about receiving refugees. We are used to migration in Cardiff—it is Cardiff. We are used to it, but it has been carefully handled, which I think has helped across the partnership and organisations.

Lord McNally: But even with the careful handling and the optimism you describe, we know the reality is that it is not just with local authorities but with the general public that there is anxiety, and in some cases fear, about accepting immigrants and asylum seekers. Is it realistic to have such a rosy picture of what these programmes produce?

Councillor Jim Gifford: We had an update report to committee in November when we committed to keeping the programme going. I was quite surprised that there were no reported incidents. I have checked since and that is absolutely correct. It is not just rose-tinted spectacles; genuinely there have been no problems. I think that is because we have done things carefully and very low key. There was no big brouhaha about people being sent to this village or whatever; it happened slowly. We informed everyone in the area, through community councils or whatever, that it was happening.

One example involved a family who, probably quite rightly, came to the council concerned that Syrians had been moved in next door—"What about this? What about that?" When we went through the whole thing and explained it, they were not satisfied but placated to some extent. When the family moved in, there were deliberate moves by our officers to introduce people. I will find the quote in a second, but scones were exchanged. As a definition of the way things are working, perhaps the exchange of scones is a good example.

Lord Soley: If there are housing stress areas, particularly in Cardiff and Aberdeen, does it cause resentment?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: Councillor Gifford has already referred to questioning from the public on housing: "Oh, they are getting preferential treatment". In Cardiff, we took a very deliberate decision that refugees would be housed through the private rented sector, and that has worked well, but it has perhaps been one of the barriers to our receiving more under the resettlement scheme, because of availability.

Lord Soley: That is very helpful. Can I ask about Northern Ireland? Some time ago, there was resistance to a mosque. Given that many or all of these people will be Islamic in their approach, do you have any

problems on that score, or not?

Ian Snowden: To date, we have had 26 reported hate incidents involving Syrian families under the programme in Northern Ireland. Given the number of families we have had over roughly a five-year period—about 400 to 450—it is not a very large number, although I think there is a degree of underreporting.

Lord Soley: Is it hate crime about religion, especially given that experience in Northern Ireland related to Islam?

Ian Snowden: It is difficult to know precisely. In the three most severe incidents, the families involved had to move to alternative accommodation because their houses were attacked. There is no pattern to it, rural or urban. They are small numbers and you cannot really draw patterns, but they did not all happen in one of the two main communities. In one case, the assailant was identified by the police as an eastern European national. It is not a situation from which you can draw many easy conclusions.

A number of people have very strident anti-Muslim attitudes and occasionally they become quite vocal. The weekend before the first group arrived, we had an anti-refugee protest. The refugees outnumbered the protesters two to one. In the event, it was a very small turnout. Occasionally, people connected to Britain First publish inflammatory material in some areas, not always in areas where Syrians have yet been settled. One of our local authorities had a protest outside it by a number of individuals, but fewer than a dozen turned up to complain about refugees being settled. There are some people who have these attitudes and they are vocal, but they are very small in number.

Sometimes we get a flurry of activity. If there is something in the media about veterans or homeless people, there will be quite a flurry of activity around refugees being housed, yet veterans or others are sleeping rough in the street. Certain incidents spark it off, but, by and large, it has been extremely quiet. The most recent media coverage of Syrian refugees in Northern Ireland indicated that we were taking three times per head of the population proportionately to the rest of the UK. When we had the social media coverage on that analysed, the response was over 80% positive. The general reaction was that it was a very good thing.

Interestingly, occasionally tensions are caused by people who want to be seen to be helping or supporting refugees, such as an advocacy group in Belfast, which produced a report in which they decried the standard of accommodation in which Syrians were being housed. They reported a number of people complaining about being subjected to racist attacks. The local communities got quite agitated about being accused of being racists, believing in their own minds that they had been very supportive and welcoming to refugees. It sparked a bit of a counter-reaction, so we had to intervene a bit in that particular community, so it is a mixed picture.

Q26 **Lord Soley:** Can I move on to the vulnerable persons and vulnerable children's schemes and ask about your general experiences, in particular your view about the five-year funding regime?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: It is essential in the sense of longer-term funding. We are talking about cross-agency partners who will have to plan and want to plan well, whether in relation to community cohesion, integration or support, to make meaningful the sense of Wales being an open and welcoming country.

Lord Soley: Is it fair to say that a tick-box system is a good one? Is that what you are saying? Is it a good way of doing it? Is the five-year regime satisfactory, or not?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: Given where we are in political cycles, I think five years provides longevity of planning, but colleagues may say otherwise.

Councillor Jim Gifford: Five-year funding on many other streams would be absolutely fantastic. We struggle to get three for most things and one is the norm. As long as we knew it would be guaranteed for five years, that would be fine. A simpler system for applying for the money would be useful, and knowing whether it is a per head grant that goes with the person, so that if they move area it is not a big trauma for the money to be transferred.[3]

We had no involvement in the vulnerable persons schemes previously, so we are working with what we now have, and what we have is working well. As regards guaranteeing the funding, we have committed to keep the programme running, but that commitment is absolutely based on our having the funds to do it, because our budget is under extreme pressure, as is the budget of every council. Having to compete for funding against road maintenance, schools and all the rest of it can be much more challenging. I would say five years is a minimum commitment, but that would be better than what we have for a lot of schemes.

Ian Snowden: It has been for useful for us in breaking us free of the annual funding cycle, because we are dealing with central government and are tied to monitoring rounds and budget cycles. With a fairly extended period of political instability in Northern Ireland, budgets have been on an annual basis only for quite a long time, so the fact that the money is guaranteed and comes in outside the Northern Ireland block has allowed us to plan and work with delivery partners on a long-term basis and gives them some degree of certainty about the funding stream. That has been exceptionally useful for us and I would definitely like to see it continue.

Q27 **Lord Watts:** In your view, what are the key factors in the successful integration of resettled refugees? How do you support refugees towards financial independence, including through education and pathways to

[3] Note by the witness – 'With claims being annualised rather than linked to arrival dates.'

employment, and how can recognition of the existing skills of refugees be improved to help them use the skills they arrived with in your communities?

Councillor Jim Gifford: To start with education, language skills are the key to everything. We have an assessment process that determines where people can go for the support they need, from those with absolutely no English at all to various levels, whether through stand-alone support groups, schools, colleges or whatever. We do that centrally.

Going beyond that, the challenge on the education side is the process of assessing what people have with them. Although we have some tremendous youngsters going through our schools now, and doing very well in some cases, if teenagers want to go on to college and university, the UCAS system demands evidence of performance and experience. If people have no paperwork with them, they have no evidence whatsoever, so there is a challenge in helping youngsters coming through to go further forward. We have some great successes; we have youngsters at college and university doing tremendous things, and more will follow. Assessment of where people are and what they brought with them, when there is no evidence to back it up, is a challenge.

One thing that threw me, because I was not expecting it at all, is that some of the people who were not literate in English were not literate in their own country before they started. We think we are doing the right thing by getting everything translated into Arabic, but they cannot read Arabic. What do we do to get past that hurdle? It is almost trying to educate people in two different languages at the same time. That was something I never even thought would be an issue, because you have the feeling that people who come from other countries have an education and all the rest of it, but the people we have to deal with through this programme are here because they have nowhere else to go. In some cases, they brought nothing with them whatsoever, including no education. That was a real eye-opener for me. We have to deal with that underlying problem before we start to deal with what we are trying to do here.

Q28 **Lord Watts:** Obviously, people who do not arrive with basic skills are a particular problem and need support. What about those who come with a skill or expertise but do not have the paperwork? Is there a method for them to demonstrate they have the required skills, and for them to get the appropriate body to classify them as skilled?

Councillor Jim Gifford: There are different ways to do that. We have an assessment. We work with Skills Development Scotland to assess the skills they may have, with or without qualifications. We have the business gateway group that is organised through CoSLA but delivered locally through one of our enterprise companies. That gets involved with people who want to use their existing skills to start their own business, so we try to do that.

There was another interesting comment, which I had never thought about, from the lady who runs our settlement programme. She was originally from Glasgow. Particularly in the case of men, she equated them to those in Motherwell and places such as that who lost their job when the steel or mining industry collapsed. The men did not have a purpose any more. They had been miners for 35 years and then they could not do that. She thinks that some of the men coming through the resettlement programme are in the same position; they do not know what their role is any more. We are trying to get them to accept that they cannot do what they did before and that they may have to start further down and work back up again because there is no evidence of qualifications or skills. That is a real challenge they have to try to work through as well.

The Chair: We will have to move a bit more quickly. It is very interesting, but I am conscious of the clock and the number of questions still to be answered. We have not had a Northern Ireland response to that question. Do not feel that you all have to answer everything.

Ian Snowden: We have a lot of the same issues. One thing we are looking at is the possession of the Arabic language as an asset, as opposed to the absence of English being a deficit. There are a number of companies in Northern Ireland that export to the Middle East. Before our Syrians started to arrive, there were a small number of Arabic speakers in Northern Ireland. A large number of Arabic speakers is now a resource we can use to help expand the export markets to some of those kinds of countries. Instead of a deficit model, looking all the time at where people are falling short, with the Syrian cohort we want to think about what it has and how we can build on it.

Q29 **Baroness Scott of Bybrook:** I congratulate Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales on having all local authorities involved. That is not happening in England.

What were the main barriers to encouraging all your local authorities to do that? Were there any difficulties along the way that might have made them withdraw without you pushing them a bit?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: The Committee has already heard about some of the barriers. We are talking about access to affordable housing and to education places. For me, what was fascinating about this experience was that it was also about local government leadership. There is a snowball effect.

When colleagues from other local government areas see regional colleagues and their neighbouring city colleagues doing something, there is a real pull. That is a moral driver in itself. There is great leadership from the Welsh Government with Wales declaring itself a nation of sanctuary. There was determination, despite recognition of barriers—finance, housing, education and perhaps concerns about community cohesion—that local government would participate.

Councillor Jim Gifford: CoSLA taking a lead helped hugely, because they did a lot of the groundwork, which they could then pass out as information to all local authorities, so their strategic migration partnership, as they called it, was hugely beneficial. Our council officers use them regularly for feedback, so that has helped hugely in Scotland. There is also an element of guilting out the council next door: "If we've done it, why haven't you?"

Ian Snowden: Our structures are different in Northern Ireland, so local authorities do not make the decisions. Before the first group arrived, one of the local authorities had passed a motion saying they did not want any Syrian refugees resettled in their district. There has been an intervening reorganisation of local government and that local authority no longer exists, but at the time that happened Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive said they had made a decision for Northern Ireland, and local authorities were not being asked. It was a bit of a confrontational approach, but that is because housing, education and so forth are administered centrally and it was not necessary to seek the input of local authorities.

Q30 **Lord Best:** My question is about housing, and we have covered quite a bit of it. I note that all three countries together have housed and found accommodation for about six times as many people as London, which I think has the same population as the three of you put together. Although housing is a problem for you, I wonder whether the fact that it is not as great a problem as it is in London and other areas is the key to why you have done so well. But do not take the positive out of that; you still have negatives on the housing side.

What would make a big difference? Would it be very much more helpful if government paid the full rent to the private rented sector instead of housing benefit being only partially the full rent, as now, expecting people to find the money from I do not know where? There may be ways in which the housing situation, even though it is not so great for you, could still be made easier.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: In Wales and regionally for Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan, we put calls out to the PRS and other partners, including for example through the Muslim Council of Wales and our estate agent sectors to encourage landlords to come forward. We had some success. Officers tell me that it is always a struggle. We would not want to resettle families or individuals unless we are absolutely guaranteed that the accommodation is available. Sometimes there is a time lag. Certainly, private sector demand in Cardiff, for instance, outstrips supply and there are issues about payment of the local housing allowance. If supply was increased and central government made a determination on greater funding for local government in relation to the scheme, I am sure that more private sector landlords would come forward.

Councillor Jim Gifford: I do not think we have had a huge issue about this. By bad timing, we had a fairly decent supply of private rented properties because a lot of people left the area because of the oil

downturn. What we have done with all our new families is set them up with a local PSL (Private Sector Leasing agreement), and within 18 months we expect the lease to transfer from the council to the individual. We have a project team in place to help with that process. That seems to have worked pretty well. Most of the families are now doing their own thing directly with the landlord.

Whether or not it should be full funding I am not sure, because the last thing we need is to put up something that says they are being treated differently from everyone else. If we are expecting families in the existing community to pay their fair share of the rent, why not the new families? Given the impetus to help with their English language skills and their employment, I am not sure that giving them extra support would be necessarily the best thing to do.

Ian Snowden: Clearly, rents in Northern Ireland are a lot lower than they would be in London and the south-east of England. The first year's tariff is about £8,500, and for some local authorities that does not cover the cost of rent for a property, whereas it allows us to do quite a lot more. There is definitely a housing cost issue that will be a bit of a barrier in some parts of the UK.

Having said that, the supply of accommodation that is suitable to meet the complex needs of the families that arrive is our biggest problem, especially ground-floor accommodation and adapted bungalows. We have a fairly high proportion of complex needs cases and mobility problems. That is where we find the greatest difficulty in the housing field. It is not necessarily the cost per se.

Lord Best: And large properties for bigger families.

Ian Snowden: Yes. The average Syrian refugee family size in Northern Ireland is six, and the average family size for the Northern Ireland indigenous population is 2.5.

Q31 **Lord Soley:** It has been said that 72 local authorities have not resettled any vulnerable persons or vulnerable children. In your experience, what are the factors that prevent a local authority doing that? You touched on education, but on other aspects why are there some local authorities that take none?

Councillor Jim Gifford: We have a full house.

Lord Soley: In Scotland, they all do.

Councillor Jim Gifford: Absolutely. I would say that if there are local authorities in England not taking part—they are all in England—they should learn from the experience of councils that are doing it. If they do not think that the ones in England are doing it right, come and talk to us.

The Chair: What would have led you to come to a different conclusion from the one you came to about the importance of having refugees and settling them properly?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: Wales is renowned as a welcoming nation, open to all-comers. My own city of Cardiff has a historic migration experience over many decades. Like Councillor Gifford, I would encourage English local authorities that may be reluctant to come and visit.

We have not touched on community sponsorship for either scheme. In Wales, we are also resettling people in relation to community sponsorship, with communities themselves working in partnership with local government and others, whether through churches or mosques. We have examples in Cardiff.

Lord Soley: Are you saying that either Citizens UK's figures are wrong, and that there are not 72 local authorities that have not taken them, or that those local authorities are all in England?

Councillor Jim Gifford: They are all in England.

Councillor Susan Elsmore: They are all in England.

Lord Soley: You are confident of that. We could not find anyone anywhere in outer Aberdeenshire, Wales or Northern Ireland. Of course, there is the Housing Executive in Northern Ireland, so it is a bit different.

Ian Snowden: Yes. In 2017, in Northern Ireland there may not have been anybody settled in one of the local authority areas, but it is not that anybody declined to take them.

It was a bit like that in Northern Ireland. If you have never involved yourself in one of these resettlement schemes beforehand, it could be a bit of a daunting prospect; you may not know what is required or some of the issues may seem too complex and difficult, in which case we are happy to share our learning on that.

Councillor Jim Gifford: This came up with our co-ordinators the other day. I wonder whether there is confusion between refugees and asylum seekers, and whether councils not wanting to participate have problems with asylum seekers and, therefore, do not want to get involved in this because they think, rightly or wrongly, it is the same problem. I leave that as a thought.

Q32 **Lord McNally:** I agree that there is a lot of confusion. For time's sake, I shall ask my supplementary question. The Government's objectives for the global resettlement scheme are for it to be simpler to operate and to provide greater consistency in the way resettled refugees are treated. Based on what you have seen so far, and where you have consulted about the new scheme, to what extent do you think the Government can meet those objectives?

Councillor Susan Elsmore: It draws heavily on the previous questioning. It is perceived that we have a two-tier system for asylum seekers, who may be dispersed, and those who are resettled across the UK, and there is a greater funding package for individuals who are

resettled. For instance, in my city that has caused some tensions between individuals and groups. My plea to central government would be to look at parity in the systems, and look at bringing the two closer together and ensuring that the contributions to partners and local government are sufficient to meet the needs of individuals.

Councillor Jim Gifford: We have put feedback through CoSLA on the global scheme and look forward to seeing the details of that. It sounds fine in theory, but will it work in practice?

The broader question is about what we need in the future. From our point of view, we need three things that are still big outstanding issues. One is help with family reunion, because children over the age of 18 have no entitlement to come to join their families. That causes a lot of stress for families already here who have relatives still stuck, probably not in Syria but in various camps round about.

Immigration advice will become a big problem. We are approaching five years from the time when the first people came here, and they are going to start applying for settled status. There is limited immigration legal advice in Scotland outside Glasgow, so either we need somehow to train people locally, although there is probably not enough work for people locally to think that is a good thing to do, or we need help with travelling expenses to bring the assistance to us, or enable our people to go to Glasgow. That problem will get more and more challenging as the five-year cycle works through.

As we said earlier, we need some idea of permanency. Can we get this cast in stone, so that we know we can keep doing the work we are doing over many years with some degree of certainty that the funding will continue? Those are my three pleas for anything that comes through in whatever comes next.

The Chair: That is very helpful.

Ian Snowden: Similarly, the details are still a bit sketchy on some aspects of this. My understanding is that it will operate more or less on the same basis as the VPRS operates, in which case that will suit us very well. We definitely welcome that, if it is to come.

The issue about the five-year leave to remain and permanency thereafter is a constant source of concern for the refugees themselves. It is a possible barrier to proper integration because they always have in the back of their mind the problem of whether or not they will be allowed to stay after five years, even though the Home Office insists it is pretty much an automatic process.

If the Government could clarify a few things about exactly how the scheme will operate and what the process will be, I would like to turn what we do from being a kind of special project that is distinct into a mainstream response that does not have to be treated as if it is something unique or distinct.

The Chair: Thank you all very much indeed. It has been extremely helpful and interesting, and has placed various other questions in our minds. We are very grateful to you for having come to give evidence to us. We will send you a transcript shortly so that you can make certain we have quoted you correctly. We will move seamlessly to the next stage of our evidence session with Mr Simmonds, who I see is sitting behind. We thank all three of you very much indeed.

Examination of witness

David Simmonds MP.

Q33 **The Chair:** Welcome, Mr Simmonds, and thank you very much indeed for giving evidence to us. In particular, congratulations on your election as a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons. As you are a Member of Parliament, it is very good of you to come to give evidence to us, and we are very grateful to you. Your expertise is extremely valuable to us.

David Simmonds: My pleasure.

The Chair: Would you like to say a word about what you were doing before you became a Member of Parliament, so that we are fully in the picture about that, and then we will move on to the questions?

David Simmonds: Indeed. This is my swansong as the chair of the Asylum, Refugee and Migration Task Group of the Local Government Association. I chaired it for 10 years; before that, I was the vice-chairman, when Roger Lawrence, Labour leader of Wolverhampton Council, chaired it. It has led the national work from the days of the initial 2005 asylum resettlement arrangements, which were led by the then Minister, Andy Burnham, through to work to this date on everything from the vulnerable persons relocation scheme to the national transfer scheme, as well as previous work on refugee children.

My personal interest relates to having served as the lead member for children at the London Borough of Hillingdon, which is the port of entry for Heathrow airport. We were the subject of the 2003 Hillingdon judgment, which clarified the responsibilities of UK local authorities under the Children Act and the Children (Leaving Care) Act to refugee children in their care.

Q34 **The Chair:** Thank you very much. There is a lot in what you have just said, which I am sure we will want to come back to. Could you start us off by saying a little bit, as you look back on your time dealing with it, about how successfully refugee settlement has been managed in London over the last few years?

David Simmonds: Certainly. One of the crucial lessons for me was picked up in the earlier evidence session, and perhaps this might bring some clarity on a number of points. There are a lot of different refugee resettlement processes that work in different ways, and there is a lot of

coverage from charities and the media with interest in part of that scheme, which does not necessarily spell out the big picture.

On the point about 72 authorities not resettling, for example, I have had conversations with Citizens UK in the past in respect of refugee children, when it has said that there are 653 local authorities in the United Kingdom and that would mean, if they all took a number of children, it would only be six each. However, those 653 authorities are not all children's services authorities, so most of them do not have any legal capacity to look after unaccompanied children; only those that are children's authorities, of which there are 153, have that legal capacity.

Similarly, if we look at resettlement in two-tier areas, the county council is not a housing authority, as Baroness Scott will be very aware. For example, the district councils of Norfolk, which are the housing authorities, are all resettling adult refugees and families. The county council would be one of the 72 that is not participating, not because it has chosen not to but because the housing of refugees or of anybody is not something it does. However, it is participating in the national transfer scheme and resettling refugee children.

It is important, when we look at statistics, to understand how they operate. In the London context, that is relevant as well. We have Hillingdon, which is a port of entry authority. We have been a gateway authority under various government schemes. The crucial consideration is that any unaccompanied child who arrives at Heathrow, whether they are a refugee or unaccompanied for another reason—for example, they may have been the subject of trafficking—by operation of law goes into the care of the local authority where they arrive. The consequence for us is that between a half and a third of the looked-after children in Hillingdon are unaccompanied children arriving through Heathrow. That is a very unusual profile for a children's services authority.

The other most affected authority in London is Croydon, which has Lunar House, the asylum processing centre. For those who are sent to Lunar House to make their application, a decision is then made, and Croydon is responsible for looking after all the unaccompanied children from that process. They are part of something called the London rota; the London authorities take it in turns, in a cab rank system, to accommodate each additional child who comes out of Croydon, to make sure that the burden on one authority is not completely unsustainable.

The second aspect of what happens in London is move-on or initial accommodation for those coming into the UK through asylum dispersal. London is a dispersal area for the Home Office, it also has a significant amount of initial accommodation. Hillingdon again is an example of that, and a very large part of a village called Longford, near Heathrow airport, is temporary accommodation used by the Home Office for housing newly arrived asylum seekers and families for a short period, maybe a couple of weeks, while their onward move to another part of the UK is established, as part of the dispersal process. Other London boroughs are part of that process.

London is, as I mentioned, a dispersal area for the Home Office, when it comes to accommodating people while the asylum process is determined. That, very simply, is because price is the driver for where accommodation is found, and there is absolutely no accommodation in London that would fall into the price category, although I know that the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham has been keen to make offers and try to participate in that.

The other big part of the picture is what happens to refugees in the UK more generally. We know that around half the total of refugee children are in London and a very large number of refugees are in London, but they go to London after they have been dispersed to other parts of the UK, often because they wish to join other members of their community or extended family who they know are in the capital. London is a hotspot for refugee resettlement, in all sorts of ways, but, as I mentioned, it is not part of the Home Office dispersal programmes, simply because of the price of the accommodation.

The Chair: That is a very helpful and thoughtful introduction. Thank you very much indeed. Let us go on to some more specific questions.

Q35 **Lord Lexden:** Unaccompanied children have already featured quite a bit in your remarks. Could you tell us a little more about how they are supported, particularly for accommodation, and the backing and support that local authorities receive from central government?

David Simmonds: Certainly. You may have seen the front page of the *Big Issue* this week, which asks whether a Kindertransport would be welcome if it arrived today. At the moment, the equivalent of the Kindertransport arrives into the care of local authorities in the UK about every three to four months. That is a rough idea of the arrival rate. That is around a doubling of the consistent arrival rate before the European refugee crisis in 2015. The numbers coming into the UK and in the care authorities have risen and levelled off at between 4,000 and 5,000 per annum.

The care and support that those children access is exactly the same as they would be entitled to if they were a child born in the United Kingdom. For the purposes of UK law—this was the essence of the Hillingdon judgment—because there is no adult with parental responsibility they are treated as a child in need of care and support. If they are under 16, that would normally mean through the same process as would apply for an indigenous child: they would usually go into foster placement and, potentially, be considered for adoption, depending on their age and circumstances.

If they are 16-plus, depending, again, on their circumstances, they would be likely to go into a more independent type of placement, such as a children's home. That would then involve some planning for the future because, as a care leaver, they would be entitled to support up to the age of 25 from the local authority, which would include accessing university education, setting up a first home, and all the allowances, payments and

supports provided to all children who are care leavers. I recognise that that is of variable quality around the country, but the baseline in law is exactly the same.

An important consideration for that group is that there may be a number of different routes by which they arrive in the UK. We have heard, for example, about the Dubs amendment: the idea of a child who is unaccompanied being taken from the care system of another country in Europe and brought to the UK care system because there is a relative or family connection in the UK. Again, the experience of many local authorities, including my own, is that the critical issue in British law, or the law of England and Wales in the Children Act, is whether the person they have come to be with has parental responsibility. Consistently, we found that not to be the case, so when they arrive the person with the family connection is often a younger relative, perhaps a single person living in a single person's accommodation. Although they are connected by family, they do not have parental responsibility and never have had capacity to have parental responsibility. That means that, although the child has arrived through a family reunion route, they are in practice an unaccompanied child when they arrive in the UK and, therefore, they go into the care of the local authority.

You asked about what resourcing there is for that. A number of things have happened over the years with government, and I have spent a lot of my local government career debating this issue with Immigration Ministers under all political parties. There is a funding regime that meets around half the cost of supporting each of those children. A scheme called the national transfer scheme was originated to enable other local authorities than the port of entry that had that legal responsibility to take on caring responsibilities for the child. That enjoyed some initial success, but the bottom line is that it has never been funded anything like adequately. As a consequence, local authorities, which typically incur a liability of around £25,000 per annum per child that they take in, assuming that child has no additional needs, and liabilities of between £70,000 and £100,000 a year per child who has additional care and support needs, are saying that they simply cannot support that cost without additional funding.

Q36 **Lord Soley:** Could you give us an idea of how local communities are responding to refugees? I am out of date on the area by some years, but there were problems before. Have there been any particular negative reactions in areas? I am sure that housing stretch is still a major cause of some of those, but perhaps you could tell us what your view is.

David Simmonds: The Home Office has been cautious. This is one of the things that has been a challenge for those of us in local government during the period. We have seen many local authorities saying that they want government to put pressure on other local authorities—for example, in London and the south-east—to take more people through the asylum dispersal programme. The issue for the Home Office is that, if it was to go down that route, those asylum seekers would be competing for housing with other people from those communities who may have been

on waiting lists for a long period. Therefore, the Home Office has taken the view that it would seek accommodation in places where it was both inexpensive and more readily available.

The feedback from communities is on the whole good. We are all politicians of varying flavours, and I have been very struck, over the years, by the fact that a lot of people say to me on the doorstep that they are worried about immigration in general, but I have never had a single piece of correspondence saying, "I think someone in my road is an illegal immigrant. What are you doing about it?" I have had a lot of correspondence saying, "Somebody in my road is going to be deported. I want you to intervene to stop it happening". There is a paradox, in that people are concerned about it in general, but very positive about it specifically. There is a job for government and politics in telling that story a bit better.

When there are specific issues—the example of refugee children is a very striking one—we see a number of charities and politicians on the front pages of newspapers with small children, saying, "Give us the right to come to the UK". Decisions have then been made by government to bring people to the UK, and voters have opened their *Daily Mail* or *Guardian*, and seen tall young men with beards stepping off a bus, and they think, "Hang on a minute, this is not what I thought I was signing up to". Again, there is an issue about being really clear: three-quarters of refugee children are 16 to 17 year-old boys. It is vanishingly rare for children of either gender under the age of 14 to come to the UK as refugee children, unless they are already with their family.

Similarly, there are a lot of myths that we could do with busting. Family reunion is a good example. Provided that children are under the age of 18, they have a right to join their parents in the UK, but when we talk about family reunion, it is reunion with more distant family members. I was present in the Gallery in the Lords to listen to the debate last week. Clearly, the crucial difference between the United Kingdom and other European countries is that we have a sea border that represents a significant life and limb danger, which is not the case, particularly around the Schengen area of Europe, where you can simply walk across the border.

It is about spelling out those stories so that communities understand that the good will they are showing is fully merited. Thus far, by and large that has been the case. It is very striking; with the vulnerable persons relocation scheme, the so-called Syrian scheme, we have done a lot of survey work through the Local Government Association, and the scheme has been universally positively received. It is clear from the outset that people have a right to be in the United Kingdom, and they are here as genuine refugees, with a package of care and support that is in place from arrival, so the kinds of pressures on GP surgeries, schools, et cetera, which you might see under some of the other schemes, do not arise in the same way.

Q37 **Lord Soley:** That is very helpful. It has changed quite rapidly, I think, in

the London area, over the last 20 years or so. Can we move on to the vulnerable persons and vulnerable children scheme, and the funding of it? Is the five-year funding scheme working well? Is it the ideal model for you, or not? Are there any improvements or changes you wish to make?

David Simmonds: Yes, it works dramatically better. Reference was made earlier to certainty for people coming to the UK on that scheme. From a local authority perspective, it is much easier to manage. It avoids all the community pressures, such as the red doors story in Middlesbrough from a few years back, and the kind of issues that we are seeing, for example, in Glasgow, where there have been legal disputes about evictions taking place. In the operation of the VPRS, the local authority has already identified that there is capacity to provide housing before individuals even arrive, and UNHCR has identified any special needs those people may have, so you do not have the situation of a wheelchair user at a flat on the sixth floor where there is no lift, or something like that. It is a much better managed process from end to end.

Q38 **Lord Watts:** Can you give us your view on how best and successfully to integrate resettled refugees, and how that should happen? If it is happening now, that is fine, but if improvements can be made, can you set them out? How can you best support refugees to become more financially independent? Linking that to recognition of skills, how could we better use people's qualifications and skills, and how can we recognise those skills when people arrive?

David Simmonds: One thing that I would like to see and would press for around the forthcoming immigration Bill, when it hoves into view, is some consideration of that. We have had signals from the Prime Minister and the Government that they want to think a lot more about how people with the right skills come into the UK. I have a constituent who is a qualified dentist who has been in the UK for eight years and has been unable to work, because he has a pending asylum claim for permanence. That is a good example of skills that are going rusty that are in demand in the UK and could be used.

The consistent view of local authorities is that people who are here pending their asylum claim should be able to work. I appreciate that it is a complicated system, because there is the interplay of various benefit mechanisms, but from a community point of view it would by and large be a positive thing. Historically, there has been a bit of a, "Coming over here, taking our jobs", view about it, but there is recognition that it is better for people with skills to support themselves and contribute, rather than to be purely a charge on the taxpayer, when they could be using those skills. That is a clear, strong message from local government.

Q39 **The Chair:** We are talking about people coming to various local authorities, and we have been talking about them going to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Do people stay where they are originally sent? Do they move around afterwards? Do they get a job and go somewhere else? What sense do you have of whether people, when they

are sent somewhere, stay there, or whether they move around and families break up? Can we have a slightly more dynamic look at it?

David Simmonds: It is a mix. A lot of people move to London, because London is an incredibly diverse city, and there are very long-established communities here. If you arrive in the UK as an asylum seeker, you may be dispersed to Glasgow, but you might have distant relatives in the capital with whom you subsequently go and stay. For those who have no family in the UK, or where a family member moves because they want to find work to use their skills, but others stay settled closer to home, there may well be a more static population. It is pretty clear in different parts of the UK; Cardiff is a good example. Historically, it had a large Somali community, which was there from the days of the coaling stations and the Royal Navy in the Victorian period. Therefore, often people from that part of the world move to Cardiff, because they know that they will find extended family members, and so on, to link up with there. It is a perfectly reasonable human instinct. It will vary according to the circumstances of individuals.

Lord Watts: You will be aware of the Norway system, whereby people are given a funding package, including benefits, but receive it only if they stay where they are located. What is your view about that?

David Simmonds: The challenge is going to be the interplay between people's skills and the need for the United Kingdom to make use of those skills, and, frankly, the need, which is a big factor in the Home Office process, for the accommodation that those people are placed in to be freed up for the next group of asylum seekers coming in. Contractors have a property, and there will always be an asylum-seeking family in that property, but it will be a different one as and when the application is determined, and people are moved out.

Clearly, there were places where people were particularly keen to participate in the Syrian scheme, as they faced having to close local schools because there simply were not enough children. Coventry was a good example. From their perspective, the arrival of refugees with their children helped to create the finance that would maintain community facilities, so it was very warmly welcomed. In other areas, where there is already high pressure on housing, people might not view it so positively.

Q40 **Baroness Scott of Bybrook:** The LGA has done a lot of work on this. First of all, can I clear up what you said at the beginning about the numbers? Although you and I might agree that there are not 72 authorities in that category, there are a number of them. What barriers and difficulties are they hearing about from the rest of the local authorities that stop them getting involved in the scheme? To me, the Syrian refugee scheme seems to have been quite positive, yet there are still some saying no. What are those barriers? Has the LGA come to any conclusion?

David Simmonds: Because there are so many different schemes, there will be a number of reasons that apply to each of them. In respect of the

Syrian scheme, areas that already have very acute local pressure on housing are less likely to want to participate. One reason why London on the whole has been less keen to see people arriving under the Syrian scheme is that there are already very large numbers of refugees in London who have status and who will be on housing waiting lists. New arrivals under that scheme would be competing for that housing with existing, established refugees and other community folks who are already here.

In other parts of the country, such as Newport in south Wales, where one of the issues is depopulation, they are very keen to participate, because it helps to revitalise communities that otherwise are losing critical mass. It is very much down to the circumstances of individual places. In Hillingdon, for example, we are perhaps at capacity in what we can do in supporting refugees, with both our initial accommodation and our very large numbers of asylum-seeking children. Therefore, our spare capacity around Syrian adult families and their children is limited, whereas Devon, for example, has a different demographic profile and was much keener to participate and take people in under the programme, as were Hampshire and others.

Q41 **Baroness Scott of Bybrook:** That comes to my second question, which I think you have answered. There is a difference between the urban and the rural, but are there still some rural authorities that are not playing their part?

David Simmonds: And urban too; the statistics show a pretty even split between urban and rural, so there is no sense that people are overwhelmingly being sent to cities or towns. It is pretty much 50:50 between authorities that would be classified as rural and those that would be classified as urban. The essence of the Syrian scheme was that it is voluntary, so that councils would come forward and offer the capacity that they knew they had. If an authority had a significant number of flats available that would suit single people, couples or very small families, it would offer that. If it had houses that would accommodate larger families, it would offer that. Who goes to the different places is based on the existing capacity of the local authority, rather than determined by an outside agency.

Baroness Scott of Bybrook: I have one more question, which has been in my mind for a bit. As we move through the number of years that authorities have had refugee families, and they have been well integrated—I have seen some wonderful case studies, including in Wiltshire—what concerns me is that you have to take a step for these families to become self-sufficient, economically viable and full members of our UK society. What evidence is coming forward that that is happening, that they are not just being looked after by the community but being funded by the Government? Are they moving forward as we hoped they would?

David Simmonds: It is a mixed picture. Generally, with the Syrian scheme, the feedback has been very good; people often have skills and

put them to use pretty quickly. We have seen examples of people establishing restaurants and cafes and going to work using skills as teachers, medical professionals, or whatever it may be. I guess the big challenge for those who come as low-skilled workers often tends to be around the English language, and there is a national issue in making sure that that support is available where people need it. In most local authority areas, access to English as a second or other language is one of the core pieces of support that is pretty consistently provided.

Again, it is, in my view, for the immigration Bill to think about how refugee and asylum policy sits alongside the broader aspiration of the UK to be a more open country in that regard, perhaps moving away from having strict targets around numbers and thinking more about the skills and attributes that people bring. We can share some of the evidence from the research that has been done; particularly on the Syrian scheme, the evidence is good. For those who are here on dispersal, it is more challenging, because they are not allowed to work at the moment, but, anecdotally, there is a lot of evidence that people do and that there is a significant grey economy relating to that, which links to issues of trafficking, human slavery and other factors.

Q42 **Lord Best:** You have said, and everybody has said, that housing is a big factor in deciding how many people you can help. Do you think that we have to give up on this and not expect areas where we all know there are acute housing problems to do as much as places where housing is not a big issue? Do you think that, rather than trying to work systems that would enable people to go to areas of shortage, we ought to accept that it is never going to happen?

David Simmonds: Refugees are pretty evenly dispersed across the UK, but those who are there through the Home Office dispersal process while they are waiting for their asylum application to be determined are not evenly dispersed. It has not been particularly helpful to have people saying, "Why are there so many refugees in Manchester? Why can't London take more of them?" The reason is not that local authorities in London have said that they do not want to do it or will not do it; the reason is that the Home Office has specified contracts based on the lowest possible cost and considerations of availability. Where there is the most inexpensive and plentiful accommodation in the country is where people go, through those dispersal contracts, while their asylum application is determined.

Subsequently, and this goes back to the question of whether people are static or not, there is a mix in what happens. The reason why there are, for example, so many refugees in London is that, once people have their status and can work, they can hook up with their family and move wherever they want to go. Often people move out of Newport, for example, because they have a connection in London, and that is where they will come.

Part of the issue is about being clear. It is not the case that some places are doing nothing. They are doing a huge amount, but it is something

different from what you see if you only look through the window of the Home Office dispersal programme.

Lord Best: Do you think that, with the Home Office dispersal programme, one has to accept that, because the cost of housing people is so much greater in London, they are right to make that distinction and send people to Hull, or wherever it is? Is that sensible? Of course, the opposite policy could be pursued, which is that in London we want just as many people and we will pay more.

David Simmonds: Yes, and that would be a perfectly valid choice to make. There is a reason why, despite large numbers of local authorities in the south-east, for example, volunteering to become dispersal areas to help out and relieve the pressure, the Home Office has not been placing people in those areas. The specification of the contract means that, in areas where there is little or no accommodation around or below the local housing allowance limit, they will not send refugees under any circumstances.

In Hillingdon, we are by no means the worst-case scenario. There is generally no accommodation available at all, to anyone, at or below the local housing limit; it is almost invariably going to be above that level. The closer you get to the centre of London, the more acute the problem becomes, and for a lot of the satellite towns across the south-east the same is true. The Home Office and the contractors are not even thinking about that, because their contract says, "You will pay this figure per night", and therefore they look for where they might be able to achieve their target within that cost.

Lord Soley: Councillor Elsmore from Cardiff told us that they gave emphasis to using private sector housing. How common is that? Would it make it easier for some councils if they used that more than local authority housing?

David Simmonds: Most councils use private sector housing. It is important to be clear: Home Office dispersal operates with the consent of the council but is not done by the council. For the most part, what happens is that the contractor will in turn sign, in effect, a subcontract with a local private housing landlord. The Middlesbrough example is a bit historic, but it makes it clear. A landlord owned hundreds of properties and, as it happened, they painted all the doors red. Therefore, the contractor managing dispersal signed a contract with them to say, "I will rent all those properties from you", and they then cycled through people living there under Home Office asylum dispersal programmes. As to the input of the local authority, giving consent for asylum seekers to be dispersed to its area was, essentially, the end of its involvement.

Winding back historically to when Andy Burnham was the Minister, and this was first launched, I think he gave evidence to a previous Home Affairs Committee. At that stage, the aim was for the regional and strategic migration partnerships to manage the process. Therefore, local authorities that were part of managing it directly were in a position, if

they wished, to place people in local authority accommodation. The reality is that, for the most part, local authorities are placing their existing housing waiting list clients in private sector accommodation because of the shortage of local authority accommodation, as opposed to having surplus local authority accommodation that they would wish to offer up for this programme.

Q43 **Lord McNally:** The Government's objectives for the new global settlement scheme are for it to be simpler to operate and to provide greater consistency in the way settled refugees are treated. Based on what you have seen so far, to what extent do you think the Government can meet those objectives? Were you consulted before the scheme was announced?

David Simmonds: Yes, to the last question. The early signs are positive. In fact, it feels a little strange, having been involved in this for a long time, that the feedback the LGA has gathered from regional migration partnerships and local authorities consistently feels like a much more positive conversation than has been the case. My sense is that government has an ambition that it will have an equivalent of the existing vulnerable persons relocation scheme, but that is more global.

Strange as it may sound, there have sometimes been issues in that there are not enough refugees who could meet the requirements of the scheme to fulfil expectations that have been raised about numbers arriving in the UK. UNHCR has struggled from time to time to generate that pipeline. Although there are lots of refugees, for example, in the Middle East/north Africa area, the fact that the European Union has a contract with Turkey to provide support and resettlement for refugees, which has been paid for collectively through the EU, means that families who ideally want to return to Syria, but need a place of safety for the time being, may not be keen to avail themselves of resettlement in other countries, because they see the opportunity to go back to their business, their home and the rest of their family. Clearly, if that is what they want, from a humanitarian point of view it is a more desirable outcome than bringing them here and their needing to go through some other process to be resettled later.

The sense of that ambition is that it is positive, in particular the ambition that it will be run along the same lines as the VPRS, and local authorities will be asked to commit what they know they can provide, and that will then be matched with the need among the wider refugee community. That represents a sea change in those authorities' experience and will certainly be much more positive than anything we have seen in the recent past.

Lord McNally: You mentioned that we are waiting for the immigration Bill. Can you assure the Committee that you will play an active part in the other place, because I think that would be most welcome?

David Simmonds: I have told my Whip that I would like to be on the immigration Bill Committee. On whether that is a guarantee not to be on it, I bow to your superior experience.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I notice that Prime Minister's Questions are under way. We are very grateful indeed that you have spared a little bit of the time when you might have been there to come to talk to us. We have benefited hugely from that.

David Simmonds: My pleasure.

The Chair: On behalf of all of us, I wish you the very best of luck in your new career. Thank you very much indeed for talking to us. It has been very helpful.