

CHURCH TIMES

At Lambeth Palace, Amber Rudd pledges more help to settle Syrian refugees

by MADELEINE DAVIES
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THE Home Secretary has announced £1 million of extra funding to increase the number of community groups who sponsor a Syrian refugee.

To date, 53 refugees have been welcomed by groups participating in the community-sponsorship scheme, launched a year ago this week at Lambeth Palace ([News, 22 July](#)). Speaking at the Palace on Monday, Amber Rudd thanked three sponsors — Lambeth Palace, Caritas Diocese of Salford, and the Salvation Army — for having been among the first, “blazing a trail for others to follow”.

“I know that some feel the process to sponsor a refugee family is not as quick or as easy as it should be,” she said. “But let me make this point: supporting a vulnerable resettled family is a significant responsibility. These families have faced traumas most families will never have to face.” It was “essential that the Home Office carefully assess every sponsoring organisation”.

The Home Office declined to provide information on how many groups have applied to be sponsors. The scheme had “got off to an excellent start”, Mrs Rudd said, but she wanted to enable more communities to take part. The £1 million would go to organisations who could provide “expert advice and guidance” to potential sponsors.

She described how the Syrian family settled at Lambeth Palace, who “had a look of permanent surprise about them” a year ago, now appeared “much calmer”, had begun to speak English, and

had children “bubbling with life”. It was “a fabulous story of real integration which must to a large part be to do with the community around them”. The daughters of another family, settled by the Salvation Army in Merton, had been dressed in their uniforms by 4:30 a.m. for their first day at primary school, a week after arriving. She was pleased to note that one hoped to be a Maths teacher. The father now had a job, supported by the Salvation Army.

The Archbishop of Canterbury said that it had been “an absolute privilege and joy” to get to know the family at Lambeth Palace. “They have been a blessing to us in so many ways.”

The sponsorship scheme is part of the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme which, to date, has granted 7307 Syrians humanitarian protection in the UK. The Government covers costs for the first year and gradually reduces support over the following four years, to £1000 per person in the last year. Community groups who sponsor a family must provide £9000 and accommodation for two years.

Tania Bright, executive director of Church Response For Refugees, said that the biggest challenge for sponsors was finding appropriate accommodation, particularly in London. In some cases, local authorities did not understand the scheme. A “fairly well-equipped group” could complete the process in three to six months, she said. The charity is currently working with a number of potential sponsors ([News, 17 March](#)).

The British scheme was inspired by the Canadian model, developed in the 1970s in response to the large numbers fleeing South-East Asia in the wake of the Vietnam War.

On Monday, the Canadian minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship, Ahmed Hussen, who arrived in Canada as a young Somali refugee, said that his country had learned that “Government cannot do it alone. It requires a whole of society approach.” Canada has resettled more than 40,000 Syrian refugees.

“We recognise that due to our geography we have a bit of a luxury,” he said, citing the oceans on its coasts and a “relatively well-managed southern border”.

“We may not have the experience of hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers at our borders, like Germany did in 2015. That being said, Canada believes in collaboration and responsibility sharing the resettling of refugees as one way of managing the greatest migration and refugee movement since the Second World War.”

The scheme had produced “great social inclusion”, but also “amazing public confidence in how Canada manages overall migration. . . Those who sponsor refugees and welcome them become

the greatest advocates and champions of diversity and the welcoming and understanding of others.”

Yosief Araya, director of the Refugee Sponsorship Training Programme for Catholic Crosscultural Services in Canada, spoke of the positive impact of the scheme, but said that it was important to “manage expectations”. There were some “helicopter sponsors” who “want to watch everything. . . We try to get them to know the boundaries, the rights of refugees.”

To date, almost 288,000 global refugees have been welcomed into Canada through the programme. This year the number of privately sponsored refugees will exceed the number sponsored by the government, constituting two-thirds of the total.

Private sponsors in Canada agree to cover the refugees’ costs for the first year. Government-sponsored refugees lose their allowance after the first year and must either find work or enroll in the benefits system, which may be less generous than the allowance. Statistics suggest that more than half of the privately-sponsored Syrians who arrived in 2016 found employment compared to 12 per cent of those sponsored by the government.

While many at the reception on Monday paid tribute to the Canadian example, Stephen Hale, the CEO of Refugee Action, cautioned that there were “some quite profound differences” between the resettlement schemes in the UK and Canada, and urged people to draw on the years of experience gained by local refugee charities in the UK, who had already faced the challenges facing sponsors.

“There is this enormous reservoir of goodwill out there,” he said.

Social Finance and the Good Faith Partnership are currently running roadshows around the country to promote the programme.

Jessica Wyatt, community-sponsorship-programme officer at Lambeth Palace, described the transformation that had taken place since she first met the resident Syrian family at Heathrow.

“A year ago we were communicating via Google translate and emojis; now we can have full conversations with them,” she said. “It’s been an amazing year.” She described how staff in meetings heard the children cycling around the courtyard, how they laughed at the same YouTube videos, and how the overwhelming impression was that “we are all just the same”.

The additional funding was welcomed on Thursday by Maurice Wren, chief executive of the Refugee Council.

“The fact that people up and down the country are working together to bring Syrians into their communities conveys a powerful message that refugees are welcome here in the UK,” he said. “Taking responsibility for supporting a vulnerable Syrian family can be very rewarding, but it’s also a huge responsibility and community groups need to be properly equipped to do so.”

Syrians now constitute the largest refugee population in the world. The UN estimates that there are more than five million in the Middle East, and categorises about ten per cent as particularly vulnerable and in need of resettlement. By October last year, other countries had pledged to resettle 22,694: half of the recommended number. The UK Government has committed itself to resettling 20,000 by 2020.

Film: Introducing Community Sponsorship -

