



Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees: Questions for Parliamentary candidates

To help draw out their attitudes towards Britain's response to the refugee crisis, Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees wrote to each candidate in the Cheltenham Parliamentary Constituency posing a series of four questions.

Alex Chalk, the Conservative candidate, and Martin Horwood, the Liberal Democrat candidate, responded by return. This was followed by a response from Adam Van Coevorden for the Green Party and finally Keith White for the Labour Party.

The questions, and the responses (exactly as received from each candidate, in their own words), are set out below.

The questionnaire opened:

*You will already know, I think, that **Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees group (CWR)** is a local membership organisation that works to raise awareness about the refugee crisis and to build an inclusive community.*

In partnership with GARAS and the local council, we take direct action to help the refugee families coming to Cheltenham become settled and to feel welcome and supported.

In responding to our email, **Alex Chalk** made the following opening comment:

May I take this opportunity to commend the work that you and so many others do under the auspices of the Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees Group. Building the 'inclusive community' that you refer to is vitally important; I have long believed that we should do more as a society to welcome and integrate refugees in those vital early weeks and months. Taking time and effort early on I believe encourages a sense of belonging, challenges isolation, and fosters community. It's incredibly important.

May I thank you too for circulating these questions. I really do welcome the opportunity to set out some thoughts on these vital issues.

Martin Horwood (who responded to the questions set out in our newsletter rather as a reply to our email) did not make any opening comments. Neither did **Keith White**.

Adam Van Coevorden noted that the answers he had given were personal. The Green Party's policy on refugees is set out at <https://policy.greenparty.org.uk/ra.html>

Question 1:

The UK Government is committed to resettling up to 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020 together with a further 350 unaccompanied children already in Europe under the Dubs amendment.

- A. Given the scale of the refugee crisis, do you believe this response to be adequate?*
- B. What more, if anything, should the UK be doing?*

Alex Chalk replied:

A. When it comes to measuring the appropriateness or adequacy of the UK's response, I would make the following observations:

The UK's effort to tackle the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East is the largest single aid effort in our history. The UK has already pledged £2.3 billion – more than any other nation in the world except the United States – to bring food, shelter and support to some of the most vulnerable people displaced by the fighting. Some £105 million of the funding will help Syrians who are still in Syria. To put that in context, £2.3 billion is more than the entire legal aid budget for the UK. It is more than is being requested by local authorities to plug the social care gap. France is contributing around £100 million.

And unlike France, Germany, Italy or the United States, the UK is meeting its commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of our GDP on overseas aid – over £10 billion each and every year. In addition, the Royal Navy has been deployed to the Mediterranean, saving thousands of lives.

What is the net effect of that? Put simply, children are alive in the Middle East – in refugee camps in Jordan and elsewhere – who would not be were it not for the British effort. Last year, 800,000 children in and around Syria were helped by British aid.

In Europe itself, the UK is offering expert personnel to:

- (i) help with processing and administration of migrants in Greek reception centres,
- (ii) act as interpreters,
- (iii) provide medical support; and
- (iv) bolster our existing team assisting the Commission to ensure effective and efficient co-ordination.

We are also providing vital equipment and medical supplies. The teams we send to Greece include experts in supporting vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those trained to tackle people trafficking. This helps ensure that vulnerable people, including children, are identified and can access asylum procedures as quickly as possible.

On the issue of family reunification in Europe, the Department for International Development (DFID) has committed £46m to help support refugees and a £10m fund focused specifically on the needs of children in Europe. This includes how we can support reunification with family they may have been separated from and who are in other EU countries including the UK. This fund is administered by three specialist organisations including Save the Children and UNHCR. We have also seconded additional resource into the European Asylum Support

Office totalling over 1,000 days of expert support to Italy and Greece to implement and streamline the process under the Dublin Regulations, including to quickly identify children who qualify for family reunion.

On the issue of the 20,000 Syrian refugees and 350 child refugees which you refer to, you will be aware that the Vulnerable Persons Relocations scheme (VPRS) is up and running, and is welcoming Syrians to the UK. This scheme is making a real difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable Syrians by giving them protection and support in the UK. It is really important to note (contrary to some media reports) that this is not the only route by which refugees and children are coming to the UK. In the year ending September 2016, the UK had granted asylum or another form of leave to over 8,000 children.

Second, last year the UK launched a new resettlement scheme to resettle 'Children at Risk' from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. On the UNHCR's recommendation the scheme does not target unaccompanied children alone, but is extended to all 'Children at Risk' as defined by the UNHCR and extends to at risk groups and nationalities within the region, not limited to Syrians. **Through this category the UK is resettling 3,000 of the most vulnerable children accompanied by their families where the UNHCR deems resettlement is in the best interests of the child.** This unique initiative is the largest resettlement effort that focuses on children at risk from the MENA region. The UNHCR are fully supportive of this measure.

It is worth noting that **far, far more unaccompanied children are in the refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon et al than in Europe.** And yet it is only the UK that will be resettling 3,000 of these children. Not France, not Germany, not Italy.

Overall, I think the unprecedented scope and scale of our country's response has been positive and has saved a great many lives.

B. What more, if anything, should the UK be doing? I would like to see community groups like CWRG given more official support, so that they can carry on the important work referred to above of helping to settle, reassure and integrate refugees/asylum seekers particularly in those early weeks and months. Simply leaving people to their own devices is ill-advised.

Martin Horwood replied:

A. No and B. the Liberal Democrats have committed to taking 50,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years. Our manifesto commitment is to offer "safe and legal routes to the UK for refugees, expanding the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme to offer sanctuary to 50,000 people over the lifetime of the next parliament and reopening the Dubs scheme to take 3,000 unaccompanied refugee children from Europe". In addition, the manifesto commits us to:

- Reform family reunion rules to make it easier for refugees to join relatives
- Offer children settled under the Dubs scheme indefinite leave to remain, meaning they will not be deported once they turn 18.
- End indefinite immigration detention by introducing a 28-day limit.
- Speed up the processing of asylum claims, reducing the time genuine refugees must wait before they can settle into life in the UK.
- Expect working-age asylum seekers who have waited more than six months for their

claim to be processed to seek work like other benefit claimants, and only to receive benefits if they are unable to do so.

- Offer asylum to people fleeing countries where their sexual orientation or gender identification means that they risk imprisonment, torture or execution, and stop deporting people at risk to such countries.

You can see media coverage of our stance on refugees at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/11/tim-farron-lib-dems-pledge-uk-take-50000-more-syrian-refugees>

Adam Van Coevorden replied:

A. Not at all, I wouldn't even trust the present government to keep even this promise.

B. I have been appalled by the UK government's lack of action and callous attitude to the refugee crisis. The Green Party has repeatedly called for more refugees to be accepted – particularly child refugees, who are extremely vulnerable to violence and trafficking.

Keith White replied:

A. "According to the latest Immigration Statistics, 5,454 Syrians were resettled to the UK under the VPRP between October 2015 and December 2016."

(<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06805>)

More than half of the world's refugees (60 per cent) came from just five countries: Numbers of people per country - **Syria**: 4.2 million.

Taking those two factors together and the numbers of Syrian refugees received by other European countries, it is apparent that the UK is not taking its "fair share" according to the normal meaning of that word. However, to specify an actual figure requires consultation and consideration and this is why in the Labour manifesto it is stated:

*The Conservatives have completely failed to show any leadership on this issue. In the first 100 days of government, **we will produce a cross-departmental strategy to meet our international obligations on the refugee crisis ...***

*... Refugees are not migrants. They have been forced from their homes, by war, famine or other disasters. Unlike the Tories, we will uphold the proud British tradition of honouring the spirit of international law and our moral obligations **by taking our fair share of refugees**. The current arrangements for housing and dispersing refugees are not fit for purpose. They are not fair to refugees or to our communities. We will review these arrangements.*

B. An actual decision on the numbers and timescale for receiving Syrian refugees, and refugees from other countries, will be made by the cross-departmental strategy specified above.

Question 2:

Have you ever visited a refugee camps, either in the channel ports or further afield (e.g. Greece, Lebanon or Turkey)?

Alex Chalk replied:

No. But I have discussed the situation at length with a colleague (Anna Soubry MP) who visited the Middle East camps earlier this year.

Martin Horwood replied:

No but I'm very familiar with the issues facing refugees in camps and the scale of the problem, having worked for Help the Aged (now Age UK), Oxfam and, most recently, Development Initiatives who analyse data on humanitarian aid and assistance amongst other issues (see a snapshot of their work on humanitarian finance <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/report/gha2016/> - you may recognise the voiceover!).

Adam Van Coevorden replied:

No, not personally (the opportunity tends not to arise in my current role), but I have supported friends who have done this recently. If elected, I would definitely welcome the opportunity to visit and report back.

Keith White replied:

I haven't visited a refugee camp in the channel ports or further afield. I have visited a township in South Africa and as you may know, the conditions in such places can be harsh.

Question 3:

The UK Government's approach is focussed primarily on helping refugees in the camps close to their countries of origin (e.g. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey). It takes the view that helping those who have already reached Europe acts as a magnet to others and will encourage the people smugglers.

- A. Do you agree or disagree with this approach?*
- B. What changes, if any, would you like to see being made?*

Alex Chalk replied:

A: I broadly agree with focusing our efforts in the Middle East, for the following reasons (this is a non-exhaustive list):

- (i) It is vitally important that we do not do anything which encourages people into the hands of people traffickers who do not care whether they live or die. Caring for people in the region reduces the perverse incentive to undertake perilous sea crossings
- (ii) We must care for all people – the old, the weak, the cold, the infirm – not just those who are strong enough to contemplate a journey
- (iii) Money spent in the region helps far more people than money spent in Europe (the cost of taking in 3,500 refugees is broadly equivalent to the cost of caring for 800,000 in the region)
- (iv) Syria is a proud country – the cradle of civilization on one view. Many Syrians want the opportunity, when peace is restored, to rebuild their shattered country. We should help them to do that.

B. For the reasons set out above, I believe the broad thrust of the policy is correct.

Martin Horwood replied:

A. I understand the good intention behind this approach - it isn't ideal to remove refugees too far from home, the best plan is always to make a return home to their own communities and homes as easy as possible and life for refugees in more foreign environments is often far from a bed of roses. But we have to be realistic about the extent to which contexts like Syria at the moment offer any realistic prospect of refugees returning home in the near future, about the burden that keeping all refugees in the region places on neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon who face significant challenges of their own and about how good the developmental support, for instance for school age children, older people and other vulnerable groups, can be in an artificial setting like a refugee camp. What is good practice in a natural humanitarian disaster situation like an earthquake or even a famine just may not work in protracted conflicts which could last a generation.

B. All the policies outlined in answer to Q1 will offer safer, legal routes to countries like the UK for more people and we hope this will cut demand for the people traffickers in itself - and also ensure that it is the more vulnerable who benefit not those physically stronger and more able to undertake dangerous journeys.

Adam Van Coevorden replied:

A. No, this approach is clearly callous.

B. Something based on humanity and need, rather than the idea of trying to 'disincentivise' certain groups. It is the government's dereliction of moral duty that has driven people into the arms of smugglers in the first place, rather than this perverse supply and demand model.

Keith White replied:

A: We do not want to encourage people smuggling. However, a situation where countries in South and SE Europe (e.g. Greece, Italy) are more or less forced to take more than their "fair share" simply because of their geographical location is unsatisfactory and it is very disappointing that Europe, and the EU in particular, has not made a more organised response to this issue. The EU is considering this problem e.g.

Ensure fair sharing of responsibility between MS (member states) by complementing the current system with a corrective allocation mechanism in cases of disproportionate pressure. (From https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-of-applicants_en)

B. Many refugees are not able to (or do not want to) travel to Europe. The UK and other countries should help refugees who are both near and far in the manner that is most effective.

The root of the problem is to end the conflict in Syria through concerted and coordinated diplomatic efforts in which the key countries may need to lay aside their own priorities in order to achieve the overriding objective of a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Question 4:

Do you believe that the parallel debate over the levels of immigration, especially in the context of Brexit, has affected our response to the refugee crisis? How would you explain the differences to members of the public?

Alex Chalk replied:

4. What an interesting question! It's difficult to answer conclusively, but it has been interesting (and welcome) to hear Govt ministers' post-referendum talk up the benefits of immigration to the UK. Now that the UK will (we understand) be able to control its borders, politicians and businesses are speaking far more vocally about the need to ensure that we have a pipeline of immigrants to the UK to sustain our economy. If the result of the referendum had gone the other way, it may well be that such positivity would have been drowned out. Very difficult to know of course.

As for explaining the differences between immigration and asylum, this can be a challenge sometimes: a bit like explaining the difference between the EU and the ECHR. They are different concepts, but frequently elided publicly. I think it's important to set out the UK's proud history of granting asylum to those who need our protection, and to set out our obligations under the UN Refugee Convention 1951. That Convention requires, for example, that a State should not penalise refugees for having to cross borders in breach of immigration laws in order to seek asylum; that was an issue I had to raise once in the Court of Appeal, as a barrister, in the context of the interpretation of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004. Immigration which is not based on the need for protection is of course an entirely different matter. That would be the key distinction I would seek to highlight.

Martin Horwood replied:

4. Yes. The poisonous rhetoric of some of our national media has been very sad and has skewed the whole debate not just on immigration itself but on refugee policy too. The imposition of artificial targets for immigrations plays to an agenda that sees foreigners as somehow inherently 'bad' and Liberal Democrats have always rejected them. To the public I would say that I think immigration brings many benefits too but that in the case of refugees and those seeking asylum we are simply expressing the simple human instinct to help other human beings in need. Asylum and refuge are what we would want anyone to offer us if our family was at risk of death or injury or arbitrary oppression. Some people definitely felt that the Brexit vote gave them 'permission' to express xenophobic views about immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers and I have unfortunately heard first hand accounts of this even in Cheltenham which we love to believe is a most civilised place. Those of us in public life have to speak out and campaign for those traditional British values of tolerance, understanding and openness, locally and nationally, now as never before, and I commit myself to doing so if elected on 8 June.

Adam Van Coevorden replied:

4. Absolutely, although I see the UK accepting migrants and refugees as both being positive. On an optimistic note your group exists and there are many people out there reaching out to asylum seekers and refugees. On top of this, the Green Party is proud to stand up for refugees. We believe the government's inaction, and the hostility from sections of the press, must be challenged at every opportunity. Whether we win elections or not, we won't stop doing this (it's just that we're given more airtime when we do get elected!).

Keith White replied:

4. Yes I think the difference in definition between "refugee" and "migrant" has not been made sufficiently clear in the public debate.

This definition from Migration Watch explains the differences well:

"Asylum seeker" means a person who has applied for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees on the ground that if he is returned to his country of origin he has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political belief or membership of a particular social group. He remains an asylum seeker for so long as his application or an appeal against refusal of his application is pending.

"Refugee" in this context means an asylum seeker whose application has been successful. In its broader context it means a person fleeing e.g. civil war or natural disaster but not necessarily fearing persecution as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention.

"Economic migrant" means a person who has left his own country and seeks by lawful or unlawful means to find employment in another country. As will be explained later, many asylum seekers are in fact economic migrants who hope to secure entry into the United Kingdom by claiming asylum.

Of course, there is no shame in being an economic migrant. There are many UK citizens who have moved abroad as economic migrants.

Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees is grateful to each of the four candidates for responding to our questionnaire - and for taking the time to do so in such detail – especially at what must be an incredibly busy time for them.

Members and supporters of CWR will find their responses invaluable in helping them to decide who to vote for on 8 June.

Roy Hickey

Media Coordinator for Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees

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