

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL

23 September 2021

**Portfolio Holder for Community Safety & Engagement and Regulatory Services -
Councillor David Smith**

Report Title **Update on Afghan Resettlement and Relocation in West Northamptonshire**

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List of Appendices

None

1. Purpose of Report

1.1. To update Full Council on Afghan resettlement and relocation in West Northamptonshire.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 This report sets out the different elements of the Government’s Afghanistan relocation programme, how West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) is supporting families currently accommodated in interim hotel accommodation and the council’s ‘offer’ regarding the permanent resettlement of Afghan families in our area.

3. Recommendations

3.1 It is recommended that the Council:

- a) Note the use of existing powers and delegation to;
- b) Support central Government's Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and welcome Afghan Locally Employed Staff (ALES) who have worked for UK and risked their lives alongside British forces in Afghanistan and are now relocating to the UK with their families following NATO's decision to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan.
- c) Support Central Government's Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) which will provide vulnerable refugees from Afghanistan and those put at risk by recent events in Afghanistan with a route to safety.
- d) Support officers to work collaboratively with Police, Fire, Northamptonshire Children's Trust, North Northamptonshire Council, Public Health Northamptonshire, other health partners and the local community and voluntary sector to provide a co-ordinated response to the Government's appeal to provide support to affected adults and children under ARAP and ACRS currently being provided with short-term "holding accommodation" in West Northamptonshire.
- e) Support the assessment of the likely long term support needs of this group of people alongside the availability of local services to inform the scale of the Councils offer to permanently resettle households in West Northamptonshire under the ARAP scheme.

4. Reason for Recommendations

- 4.1 To support central Government to respond to this humanitarian situation.
- 4.2 The Home Office has had to look at a range of options across the UK to provide short-term "holding accommodation" for families who have cleared quarantine but have not yet been allocated more permanent accommodation. The Home Office is using hotels in West Northamptonshire as they had availability. Funding is available from central Government to help meet the costs of providing support to these vulnerable families. Therefore, the council would like to assist and provide wrap-around support to these vulnerable families otherwise their needs may not be met.
- 4.3 To respond to central Government's national resettlement programme designed to provide a safe haven to Afghan families who have assisted the British Government or our armed forces in Afghanistan.

5. Report Background

- 5.1 With the decision to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan and subsequent overthrowing of the Afghan Government by the Taliban, there was considered to be a real threat to the safety of Afghan nationals who had assisted the British Government and armed forces over the past two decades. The British Government recognised this threat

of violent retaliation against people who we have a moral duty to safeguard and therefore committed to airlift these Afghans and their immediate families to safety in the UK.

- 5.2 The Government has established two schemes to support Afghan citizens and their families who are seeking to rebuild their lives in the UK: The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme; and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).
- 5.3 Funding has been put in place to implement these schemes and central Government is seeking offers of support from all UK councils to resettle people who have fled Afghanistan.

6. Issues and Choices

Current Position – National Level

Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)

- 6.1 Since the first flight landed on 22 June, around 7,000 locally employed staff and their families have been welcomed to the UK under the ARAP scheme, including around 5,000 people who were evacuated during August.
- 6.2 ARAP was launched in April 2021 and supplements an existing scheme that had operated since 2013. ARAP offers eligible current or former locally employed staff who were assessed to be under serious threat to life priority relocation to the UK regardless of their employment status, rank or role, or length of time served.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)

- 6.3 On 18 August 2021, the Prime Minister announced the ACRS. This scheme will resettle up to 20,000 people at risk, with 5,000 in the first year. This is in addition to those brought to the UK under ARAP.
- 6.4 On 13 September 2021, the Government announced further details of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). The scheme will provide vulnerable refugees from Afghanistan and those put at risk by recent events in Afghanistan with a route to safety. The scheme will prioritise:
 - Those who have assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for values such as democracy, women’s rights and freedom of speech, rule of law (for example, judges, women’s rights activists, journalists)
 - Vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT+).
- 6.5 Some of those who arrived in the UK under the evacuation programme, which included individuals who were considered to be at particular risk – including women’s rights activists, prosecutors and journalists – will be the first to be resettled under the ACRS. People who were notified by the UK government that they had been called forward or specifically authorised for evacuation, but were not able to board flights, will also be offered a place under the scheme if they subsequently come to the UK.

6.6 Although the Government has announced further details of the ACRS, the scheme is not yet open.

Integration Support for ARAP and ACRS

6.7 Those arriving through either ARAP or ACRS will be granted immediate indefinite leave to remain allowing them to benefit from full rights and entitlements and providing them with the certainty and stability they need to build their lives here.

6.8 The integration packages for the ACRS and ARAP will be aligned, providing one comprehensive offer to individuals, local authorities and mainstream services. The resettlement package that has been developed is designed to support ARAP/ACRS arrivals to acclimatise to the UK, learn the language (where appropriate), and find work, thus enabling rapid self-sufficiency and social integration in UK communities. The Government package will cover health, education and integration support costs.

6.9 Up to £20,520 per person will be provided to local authorities to support Afghans to resettle and integrate into British Society and become self-sufficient as quickly as possible. The funding is paid over a 12 to 36 months period, depending on the circumstances.

6.10 Central Government has also agreed a further £20m fund of flexible funding in the current financial year (2021/22) to support local authorities with higher cost bases with any additional costs in the provision of services.

Current Position – Local Level

6.11 As outlined above, The Home Office is using hotels in West Northamptonshire as short term 'holding accommodation' as they had sufficient availability at the right time. As at 13 September there were a total of 212 people being accommodated in two hotels in West Northamptonshire. There are a small number of single people, but the majority are family groups with children ranging from 0 to 17 years old.

6.12 Those councils where the Home Office is providing short term 'holding accommodation' for families in their area are being requested to provide general welfare support at the hotels and lead and coordinate a multi-agency approach to assist the families including access to education, healthcare, banking facilities, applying for a National Insurance number and provision of childcare support. Central Government will provide funding to assist local authorities provide this wraparound support.

6.13 The wraparound support provided by West Northamptonshire Council to date at the 'holding accommodation' has included:

- Visits by local GPs to meet urgent medical needs
- Psychosocial support on-site from British Red Cross and Salvation Army volunteers
- Healthcare pathway set up to enable access to a mental health helpline, mental health crisis staff and a local psychologist originally from Afghanistan
- Midwife team have attended site, pregnancy tests available and pregnant women have attended an obstetrics clinic
- Calling 111 to address health needs out of office hours
- Securing urgent prescriptions and medication

- Fortnightly visits from mobile lateral flow test (LFT) unit plus LFT kits also available at hotels
- Transport provided to local mosques for Friday Prayer
- Community cohesion activities, for example guided walks and football matches
- Youth activators delivering organised physical activities in the grounds of the accommodation several times a week
- Walking buses to local parks
- Provision of donated clothes, shoes, toys, cots, pushchairs and other essential items

6.14 The British Red Cross (who are providing voluntary sector support across numerous holding accommodation sites) and the Home Office Resettlement Team have commented on the comprehensive offer that WNC is providing to people in holding accommodation within its area.

Offers of support for Afghan families

6.15 Central Government is seeking a commitment from every local authority in the UK to make a firm offer of support to resettle a set number of families under the different resettlement schemes.

6.16 The following factors should be taken into consideration by the council when making offers under the resettlement schemes:

- Capacity within local services to meet the needs of those being resettled, for example health and education
- Availability of suitable and affordable accommodation. Individuals will cover rental costs themselves using Universal Credit, Housing Benefit or other income. Therefore, properties will need to be secured at or as close as possible to the relevant area's Local Housing Allowance rates. There are also high levels of need for social housing in many parts of West Northamptonshire. Taking this into account in the first instance the local authority will consider the offers of accommodation that have been made by local private landlords/individuals (so far about ten individual offers have been made directly to the council) before considering the use of social/affordable housing. If social housing did need to be in scope, then areas with lower housing need could be considered before areas of higher housing need.
- Previous experience of resettling individuals/families through similar schemes, for example asylum seeker dispersal areas and the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS). Resettlement of individual/families in these circumstances is a complex work area and the regional strategic migration partnerships recommend local authorities have previous experience and specialist expertise in this area before committing to the resettlement of considerable numbers of people under the schemes.
- Other local authorities making commitments under other schemes, for example SVPRS, have agreed an initial offer and once this has been achieved, they have completed a review. Where the resettlement of the first cohort of individuals/families has been achievable, viable and successful, local authorities have committed to resettle more households. WNC could adopt a similar approach.
- Local authorities can make an additional pledge at a later date and/or make separate pledges for each of the different resettlement schemes.

- f) Officers are gathering information from a number of other larger/unitary councils (similar to WNC) to understand their pledges to resettle people fleeing Afghanistan under the ARAP scheme alongside availability of local services to inform the scale of the Councils offer to permanently resettle households in West Northamptonshire under the ARAP scheme.

7 Implications (including financial implications)

7.7 Resources and Financial

The ARAP and ACRS schemes both have a Funding Instruction issued by the Home Office. The bridging hotel funding arrangements have been provisionally agreed but the Funding Instruction is still to be published. The Council has been advised by the Home Office to work on the funding basis as per the ARAP Guidance for the Integration Support Package of £10,500 per person, on a standard per capita per annum. Data is being captured to ensure that appropriate expenditure is recorded to enable it to be easily used to claim against schemes guidance when it is published by Government.

7.8 Legal

- 7.8.1 The relocation scheme will be governed by regulations and guidance to be published by the Home Office.
- 7.8.2 Participation in the Home Office Schemes is on a voluntary basis and is not a statutory requirement.
- 7.8.3 As a local housing authority, the Council is limited in the type of tenancy it can offer direct to the applicants. It is likely that the tenancies granted by the Council will be secure tenancies after the first year's occupation, if not before, unless the tenancies are excluded because they fall within the categories set out in Schedule 1 to the Housing Act 1985. These include tenancies granted in pursuance of the Council's homelessness duties, or granted to provide accommodation to asylum seekers (assuming in each case the applicants meet the relevant criteria). The Council will have limited rights to obtain possession of the properties (especially after the first year), and the tenants will enjoy the usual benefits of being secure tenants, including the Right to Buy. If the Council has to enter into any legal arrangements with private landlords, further decisions in accordance with the Council's constitution may be required.

7.9 Risk

- 7.9.1 The council and the previous councils that were amalgamated to form WNC do not have extensive experience of resettlement schemes. Also, there could be some level of financial risk in terms of the council not claiming eligible expenditure costs back from Home Office. However, the finance team is already involved in the workstream, inputting into the financial management of the project and completing financial modelling to inform project expenditure/financial planning.

7.10 Consultation

Members of the local Afghan community have been volunteering alongside WNC officers and helping them to:

- Understand Afghanistan, its culture and religious beliefs
- Design the wraparound support provision
- Engage with people in the 'holding accommodation'

7.10.2 Local community and voluntary sector organisations are being consulted to establish how they can support the resettlement of people in 'holding accommodation' and provide the wraparound support.

7.10.3 Local residents and organisations have been consulted and asked if they would like to support the resettlement efforts by completing a form on the council's website where they can outline what they can offer and/or how they can help.

7.10.4 Local ward members have been informed on a strictly confidential basis if they have 'holding accommodation' in their ward.

7.11 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny

- This report has not been presented to Overview and Scrutiny.

7.12 Climate Impact

- There is no climate/environmental impact arising from the report.

7.13 Community Impact

7.13.1 There could be the potential for community tension related to these resettlement schemes. However, to date most residents and local businesses have been very supportive. Many local people have donated required items or services, the local community/voluntary sector are positively supporting the project and many residents and local businesses are keen to help meet the needs of these families and support their resettlement and integration.

7.14 Communications

- Report reviewed for accessibility and amendments suggested.

8 Background Papers

8.1 The following background papers may be useful:

- ARAP: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-relocations-and-assistance-policy>
- ACRS: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/afghan-citizens-resettlement-scheme>