

REPORT TO: Cabinet

MEETING DATE: 9 November 2021

BY: Executive Director of Place

SUBJECT: Afghan Locally Engaged Staff (LES) Scheme and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To update Cabinet on the Afghan Locally Engaged Staff (LES) Scheme, also known as the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme for the resettlement of 20,000 refugees from Afghanistan and East Lothian Council's plans to respond to this humanitarian crisis and support Afghan families.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to note the updated position and details shared by the UK Government in relation to the Afghan Relocation Schemes (LES / ARAP) and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme for the resettlement of 20,000 refugees from Afghanistan over the coming years.
- 2.3 Cabinet is asked to note East Lothian Council's plans to support Afghan families as part of these schemes.

3 BACKGROUND

Afghan Locally Engaged Staff (LES) Scheme / ARAP

- 3.1 Information has been provided to Council Leaders and Chief Executives throughout the summer of 2021 outlining the UK Government run schemes (LES / ARAP). These assist locally engaged staff in Afghanistan to relocate to the UK with their dependants, in recognition of the commitment and bravery they have shown in supporting UK forces. Due to the withdrawal of NATO forces in recent months, there has been a need to accelerate the relocation process and the UK Government has asked local authorities to urgently offer up accommodation to support the scheme. Local authorities accordingly agreed to consider their participation in the scheme and offer properties via COSLA to the Home Office.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

- 3.2 In August 2021, the UK Government announced a new refugee resettlement scheme that will see 20,000 Afghan refugees being relocated to the UK over the coming years. Local authorities require to consider the role that they can play in supporting this new scheme. While a Scottish figure has not been formally discussed, a 5% share would broadly equate to Scotland assisting 1000 refugees and East Lothian taking 2%, which would equate to 20 refugees. The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme anticipates resettling 5,000 refugees in year 1 of the Scheme. Further clarity is being sought with regard to how the Scheme will operate in practice and how this dovetails with the existing UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS).

Housing Requirements

- 3.3 While the Home Office are currently gathering and analysing data, information to date indicates that larger properties are required. Given local challenges and constraints with regard to availability of properties, homelessness pressures and other priorities in relation to other vulnerable groups we have determined that our focus should be on families requiring 2 and 3 bedded properties. A range of housing options are currently being assessed across our Housing Partnership to determine our contribution towards this scheme.
- 3.4 After recent discussions with COSLA, we are aware that all families are now accommodated in bridging hotels awaiting relocation by the accepting local authority. 5,500 Afghans have relocated to the UK to date since June 2021 via LES / ARAP, including 62 families (237 individuals) placed in tenancies in twelve authorities across Scotland. 42 families are in the process of being matched to properties via the Home Office referral process and the arrival of a further 14 families (63 individuals) is anticipated over the coming weeks.

The transition to move these families into East Lothian should be less pressured, given the use of bridging hotels and will require us to identify suitable secure accommodation rather than further emergency accommodation. The Council have identified two properties and are assessing their suitability with another property in the pipeline. Discussions are also taking place with wider Housing partners to identify accommodation.

- 3.5 In the initial stages, we plan to commit to supporting three families. This will enable careful planning and ongoing review prior to accepting additional refugees.

Wider Integration and Support Requirements

- 3.6 Families may arrive in a phased approach, i.e. head male followed by remaining family members at a later date. This may affect benefit claims / enrolment in schools / health services etc. Discussions are ongoing across housing / health / education re the co-ordination of the arrivals process.
- 3.7 We will review ongoing capacity for service provision i.e. to accommodate children in schools and any additional learning support or health requirements, although participating authorities have flagged no significant concerns to date. There is no requirement in most cases for interpretation as males have a good standard of English. Reports are noted regarding lack of engagement with ESOL provision for women, with the culture not permitting married women to take lessons. There is also a requirement for families to have access to prayer rooms / mosques. Discussions are underway with regard to the role of DWP.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The rehousing of refugees on a proportionate basis can be established under the existing Council Allocations Policy. It should be noted that accommodating Afghan households could potentially impact upon the ability of the Council to meet its statutory homelessness duties from 01 October 2021 with regard to the Unsuitable Accommodation Order.
- 4.2 The Council participated in, and accommodated displaced Syrian refugee families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) from 2015 to 2020. This Scheme concluded in March 2020 and was replaced by the Global UK Resettlement Scheme, with the VPRS Scheme incorporated into the new Global Resettlement Scheme from April 2020. The Council's commitment to Syrian households in ongoing and the approach to rehousing Afghan households will reflect processes in place for VPRS, where appropriate.

5 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 Participation in Schemes will be subject to the Integrated Impact Assessment (IAA) process, and where negative impacts are identified, mitigating actions will be put in place. It should be noted that an IIA was undertaken at the commencement of the VPRS scheme and also incorporated as part of the IIA for the new Allocations Policy approved by Cabinet in March 2019. It is proposed that existing IIAs are reviewed and updated for the purposes of accommodating Afghan refugees.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Home Office provides a funding package to resource local authorities who come forward with offers to resettle Afghan LES and their families,

enabling delivery of integration support for families and further support on employment, welfare benefits, and access to health, education and other local services. This initially comprised four months' funding from arrival, as opposed to five years' funding for the existing VPRS Scheme, although this was extended from four to twelve months' funding and more recently extended further to funding over three years as part of a wider set of changes. A new Afghan LES Housing Costs Fund, of £5 million was announced in August 2021 to further enhance the existing package, offering security to those local authorities who may have previously had concerns around the impact of the benefit cap, in the form of a 'top up' grant to cover any identified rent shortfall.

The funding package comprises a local authority tariff (per person) of £20,520 (£10,500 in year 1, £6,000 in year 2 and £4,020 in year 3); up to £4,500 for education (per child); £850 for English language (per adult) and £2,600 to access mainstream health and mental health services (per person). All adults will have indefinite leave to remain, recourse to public funds and the immediate right to work. Exceptional costs can be applied for in respect of void costs, property adaptations, support for children with identified educational needs and social care provision. Housing is to be provided and furnished appropriately, including white goods. Individuals are required to pay rent costs themselves, using Universal Credit, Housing Benefit or other income. Where necessary, new arrivals will receive weekly cash and rent support up to the day prior to the first payment of Universal Credit due, to maintain continuity of support. The cash payment assistance sum varies depending on household composition.

The funding package will sit within / be administered from the Council's Homelessness budget and any shortfall in funding absorbed by the Homelessness budget. There may be a requirement to seek financial assistance from HRA funding where necessary and appropriate in respect of household goods and / or tenancy support. Spend will be closely monitored and reviewed on a monthly basis.

6.2 Personnel – No additional resources are required, with requirements being met from existing staff / services. The relocation of Afghan families will be co-ordinated by Community Housing and Homelessness.

6.3 Other – None

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

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