

## **AFGAN LOCALLY EMPLOYED STAFF (LES) RELOCATION SCHEME**

<b>Head of Service:</b>	Rod Brown, Head of Housing & Community
<b>Wards affected:</b>	(All Wards);
<b>Urgent Decision?(yes/no)</b>	No
<b>If yes, reason urgent decision required:</b>	
<b>Appendices (attached):</b>	<b>Appendix 1 : Table of participation in the LES relation scheme across Surrey</b> <b>Appendix2: Financial model for accommodation costs</b> <b>Appendix 3: Home Office and MHCLG letter</b>

### **Summary**

The report sets out the issues associated with the Government's Afghan refugee Locally Employed Staff (LES) relocation scheme with a recommendation that the Council agrees to accommodate up to 2 Afghan households, using accommodation specifically made available for those arriving under this scheme.

### **Recommendation (s)**

#### **The Council is asked to:**

- (1) Agree that the Council will offer to participate in the Afghan Locally Employed Staff resettlement scheme as detailed in this report.**
- (2) Agree to offer to assist up to 2 Afghan households under that resettlement scheme by making use of the accommodation currently available to the Council.**

### **1 Reason for Recommendation**

- 1.1 To be able to formally respond to the Home Office request to accommodate Afghan refugees under the LES relocation scheme.

## 2 Background to the Afghan LES Scheme

- 2.1 On 29 December 2020, a cross-government operation announced the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) which was subsequently launched in April 2021. This is a new scheme that offers relocation and assistance to current and former LES in Afghanistan.
- 2.2 On 30<sup>th</sup> July 2021 a Ministerial letter was sent to all council leaders and chief executives in England, Scotland and Wales regarding the ARAP and urgently requested their support to welcome and assist LES to the UK.
- 2.3 During the 20-year UK military presence in Afghanistan, LES provided help in various roles such as interpreters, security guards and cultural advisors. In these roles Afghans may have exposed their identities and placed themselves and their families at significant risk of reprisal by working with the UK Government. The ARAP and other policies are designed to honour the service and reflect their work and the risks involved.
- 2.4 When the ARAP was announced it was envisaged Afghan LES would be relocated to the UK at their request. In reality, following NATO's decision to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan and the UK's evacuation flights from Afghanistan in August 2021, the ARAP is now being used to assist claimants who have already been relocated to the UK and are eligible to and want to remain in the UK.
- 2.5 Those who are being resettled in the UK are considered to be "under serious threat to life" if they remain in Afghanistan.
- 2.6 Those who are eligible for relocation in the UK and choose not to return to Afghanistan will be offered the indefinite right to remain in the UK, which enables such households to stay and work in the UK and access welfare benefits.
- 2.7 This Committee is familiar with considerations relevant to refugee and vulnerable person resettlement. For example, the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) was supported by this Committee in 2016. The VPRS was specifically aimed at households fleeing Syria who presented with defined vulnerabilities, often disabilities or serious health conditions. In light of their vulnerabilities, the funding support was spread over five years.
- 2.8 The LES scheme is substantially different from the VPRS. In contrast the LES scheme is restricted to those previously employed by the UK government and are expected to find it easier to adjust to living in the UK. As such it is anticipated an appropriate level of support will need to last for the duration of the scheme.

- 2.9 Many of those Afghan refugees seeking resettlement through the LES scheme are already in quarantine hotels or other hotel accommodation in the UK. It is anticipated the demand for properties and Council support will be immediate and not spaced out over several months.

### **3 Acceleration of the Afghan LES Relocation Scheme**

- 3.1 Following the announcement that NATO military forces would withdraw from Afghanistan, the UK Government has accelerated the pace of relocations. This included a mass military airlift of thousands of eligible Afghan households during 'Operation PITTING' which concluded on 28 August with the departure of the final UK military and diplomatic personnel from the country.
- 3.2 Relocated Afghan households have been accommodated in temporary quarantine and bridging hotels pending resettlement in council provided accommodation.
- 3.3 The Surrey Councils have been considering their response from the arrival of Afghan refugees. The table in Appendix 1 summarises the current known offers from the 11 Districts and Boroughs in Surrey as of early September 2021.

### **4 Afghan citizens resettlement scheme (ACRS)**

- 4.1 On 13<sup>th</sup> September 2021 the government announced the launch of a separate Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). The ACRS is intended to assist vulnerable Afghans and those put at risk by recent events in Afghanistan and as such is likely to be a cohort of refugees with different needs to those considered under the ARAP.
- 4.2 Given the short notice the Council has of ACRS it is proposed that a decision on whether to participate in this scheme will be subject to a separate report to a subsequent meeting.

## 5 Proposed integration offer

- 5.1 The Government has proposed an “integration offer” that is broken down into six categories as follows:
- 5.1.1 **Status** – All those resettled will benefit from full rights and entitlements through Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK, providing them with certainty and stability needed to rebuild their lives in the UK
  - 5.1.2 **Caseworker support** – All households will have access to a caseworker to help navigate, access and register with mainstream services (including schools, GPs, Job Centres, banks and utility companies)
  - 5.1.3 **Accommodation** – For those evacuated, immediate quarantine accommodation was provided together with follow-on temporary accommodation (Bridging Hotels) until resettlement is effected by local authorities. The costs associated with the temporary accommodation has been met by the Government.
  - 5.1.4 **Education** – School places will be provided and nursery places for children aged 2 – 4 will be facilitated. Those over 19 years’ old will be eligible for funding to access further education.
  - 5.1.5 **Health services** – Mainstream health and mental health services will be provided for new arrivals settled with local authorities. We understand health care professionals have been supporting individuals in temporary accommodation.
  - 5.1.6 **Benefits and Employment support** – All adults have recourse to public funds and immediate rights to work. This will include access to the full range of benefits including Universal Credit.

## 6 The local proposed Housing Offer

- 6.1 The availability of suitably sized accommodation is expected to be the most significant limiting factor on whether Afghan households can be resettled locally.
- 6.2 Given the current levels of homelessness within the borough it is not proposed that accommodation identified for relieving current local homelessness would be used to accommodate refugee households under this scheme.
- 6.3 Property that would be utilised under this scheme would be through the use of the private rented sector property that is offered to the Council expressly for the purpose of helping Afghan households qualifying under the LES or similar schemes. This would minimise any detrimental impact on those households already on the Council’s Housing Needs Register.

- 6.4 The Council has already appealed to local landlords for any suitable accommodation. So far only smaller properties have been offered including 1- and 2-bedroom properties. However, discussions have been initiated with Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network to establish whether there are other suitable properties which would be offered to accommodate Afghan refugee households.
- 6.5 The South East Strategic Migration Partnership (SESMP) which is assisting the Home Office in the implementation of Afghan resettlement, has indicated typically Afghan households are large in comparison to those in the UK with 3 and 4 bedroom properties being in much higher demand than 2 bedroom properties. There is thought to be very little demand for 1 bed properties amongst the refugees already in the UK.
- 6.6 Suitable accommodation would have to be identified before any Afghan refugee family was accepted and the Council would be able to stipulate the size of the household so that the family can be accommodated in the identified property.
- 6.7 It is a pre-requisite for participation in the LES scheme that the accommodation is available for at least the first 12 months and ideally for a period of 2 years from the date of arrival of the refugee household. This accommodation must be a self-contained (i.e., not a spare room) furnished home.
- 6.8 Given the current shortage of suitable properties, it is suggested the Council's commitment to support the scheme is limited to 2 households. In the event that there are more properties identified and sufficient funding and resources available, there is a possibility that the Council could extend its commitment. This would be subject to a subsequent report to this Committee or the full Council.

## **7 Support offered by the Council**

- 7.1 As noted, the provision of a dedicated caseworker will be part of the *integration support* expected from the local authority accepting the Afghan household. The Council can also rely on its experience of supporting refugee families that was obtained when the Council used the Family Support Service (FSS) to support the two Syrian refugee households successfully resettled under the VPRS.
- 7.2 Currently there are several options for how the Council can provide this support for Afghan households. We could operate under a partnership approach with Reigate and Banstead Borough Council who will be employing an Afghan support caseworker, or through the FSS as previously used or possibly through an agreement with the local charitable sector, such as Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network. Discussions are continuing. The anticipated costs associated with providing this support are outlined in the financial implications section of this report and included in the finance model outlined in Appendix 2.

## 8 Risk Assessment

### 8.1 Legal or other duties

8.1.1 The Council is not required to determine eligibility of ARAP claimants. If any offer of support by the Council is accepted, the Council will be required to participate in the scheme and comply with the conditions of participation and follow government guidance to local authorities regarding the scheme.

8.1.2 These conditions set out the specific requirements that participating Councils must comply with in the provision of accommodation and support and how funding from the scheme is managed.

### 8.2 Impact Assessment

8.2.1 The impact on existing local communities and infrastructure, such as schools, medical and dental practices from the recommendation contained in this report has been considered.

8.2.2 As the composition and identities of any refugee families accepted is unknown it is difficult to predict the eventual impact of participating in the LES scheme.

8.2.3 Although there is inevitably some uncertainty, the process by which the Council works with the SEMSP to match a refugee family closely to the accommodation and local facilities available will minimise such a risk.

8.2.4 The impact of the recommendation on the borough's existing homelessness requirement will be mitigated by restricting properties involved in the LES scheme to those not available for use to offer to other homelessness households.

8.2.5 Under the LES scheme the typical level of proficiency in speaking English Language, even if only one family member, will mitigate the risks of long term unemployment.

8.2.6 Should the household fail to integrate and become self-sufficient after year 3, there is a risk that they will continue to need council support without any additional government funding. This could include being eligible for assistance under the Homelessness Reduction Act including the use of temporary accommodation.

8.2.7 Should households with indefinite leave to remain present to the Council outside the LES scheme the Council would need to assess and meet any statutory duties that may be owed to the household under Homelessness Reduction Act.

8.2.8 As a result of recent changes made to the Habitual Residence Test (HRT) these households are able to approach council's directly from 16 September 2021 onwards.

8.2.9 A decision not to participate in the Afghan LES resettlement scheme might be open to criticism from the public, other participating councils and the Home Office and MHCLG. In contrast a decision to participate in any refugee settlement may generate some criticism although this is likely to be less than that from not participating.

### 8.3 Crime & Disorder

8.3.1 The emphasis on funded resettlement of Afghan refugees through an identified Government scheme ensures the best opportunities for successful integration and a positive future contribution to the UK.

8.3.2 The recommendation to accommodate up to 2 refugee households would minimise the risk of community anxiety or increased vulnerability of the refugee household to unwanted attention or anti-social behaviour.

8.3.3 Should the decision be to support the LES scheme, the Council will work closely with the police in identifying suitable property and would ensure risks to the refugee family were identified and minimised and any community concerns addressed promptly.

### 8.4 Safeguarding

8.4.1 Any refugee household accommodated through the LES scheme would benefit from close integration support by a case worker. This would include safeguarding considerations. Any support workers employed by the Council would be appropriately DBS checked.

### 8.5 Dependencies

8.5.1 The most significant dependency is obtaining the use of sufficient suitable accommodation at an affordable rent.

## 9 Financial Implications

9.1 In a joint announcement on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2021, the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have announced a revised financial support package to those local authorities agreeing to take in households under the Locally Employed Staff (LES) scheme. This is attached as Annex 3.

- 9.2 The improved financial support offered has been extended from year 1 into years 2 and 3. The support includes funding for welcoming, integration and support services, plus additional funding for children's education, English language training and costs associated with health services.
- 9.3 The table below sets out the improved integration package for ARAP claimants.

	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>LA Tariff (per person)</b>	<b>£10,500</b>	<b>£6,000</b>	<b>£4,020</b>	<b>£20,520</b>
<b>Education (per child)</b>	<b>Up to £4,500</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>Up to £4,500</b>
<b>English Language (per adult)</b>	<b>£850</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>£850</b>
<b>Health (per person)</b>	<b>£2,600</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>£2,600</b>

- 9.4 The funding provided by the LES scheme is operated through a Home Office Funding Instruction where the Council is allocated a specific amount for each person in each household accommodated.
- 9.5 The Council claims an initial payment on arrival and further payments staged over the 3 year period.
- 9.6 The three-year funding offer is intended to taper with increasing independence and integration of the family. It is expected that support required under the LES scheme will be significantly less than the Council provided under the previous VPRS as most LES households will lack the vulnerabilities inherent in VPRS households and have significantly more developed English language skills.
- 9.7 It is clear that the Government's LES scheme is intended to meet the Council's costs associated with participation. However there is a risk that costs incurred outside the scheme may fall to the Council, National Health Service or the Education Authority.



- 9.8 For example, there is no provision for costs arising after year 1 for education, English Language or Health and limited TA Tariff in years 2 and 3 of £6,000 and £4,020 per person respectively.
- 9.9 The Council's most significant costs will be associated with securing appropriate accommodation and meeting any rental shortfall. As the funding available under LES/ARAP is calculated on a per person basis, the household size will determine the total amount of funding available to the Council. In turn the household size that the Council is able to consider will be determined by the size of any properties available.
- 9.10 In Appendix 2 the finance model illustrates the anticipated costs and funding income associated with accepting households of various sizes financed under the LES resettlement scheme, ranging from 1 adult household to a family with 2 adults 4 children.
- 9.11 It is a reasonable assumption there may be a shortfall between the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) payable through either Universal Credit or Housing Benefit and the rent demanded by the landlord. In these circumstances the LA Tariff would be expected to provide rent subsidy for up to three years as well as provide for a case worker to support the family which would also be scaled down across the three years.
- 9.12 The offer of the rent subsidy would assist in securing properties in a very competitive rental market as well as help sustain the tenancy, making it affordable, whilst the family establish themselves and gain employment.
- 9.13 The finance model set out in Appendix 2 includes an assumption that the rent subsidy will reduce over the 3 years. The model shows that for families of 1 to 6 members, the scheme should be fully funded. Should the Council be allocated a single person household, the model shows there would be a shortfall in funding of up to £8k per year which would need to be met from existing housing service budgets. The Council would however be able to stipulate the size of the household they would be willing to accept.
- 9.14 The cost of providing the Afghan support worker will be met from the LA Tariff outlined in the table in 9.3 above. The eventual cost of this support will be dependent on which provider is chosen. Negotiations are on-going but it is anticipated this support would cost approximately £6,000 per household per year and this cost is included in the financial model set out in Appendix 2. Any subsidy required that is not funded through the LES scheme would need to be funded from existing Council budgets.
- 9.15 Whilst the LES appears to be a sufficiently funded scheme, financial risks are inherent in any refugee scheme where the precise household composition and their specific needs and health needs are not known. Any decision to participate will need to accept an obligation to provide reasonable support to the household and the individuals within it.

- 9.16 **Section 151 Officer's comments:** It is expected that the LES scheme will be fully funded for the three year period. However, should any unforeseen costs in excess of the funding arise, these will need to be met from existing budgets within the housing service.
- 9.17 Should support be required beyond the funded three year period, a report should be brought back to update the appropriate Committee to inform members and to identify a funding option.

## 10 Legal Implications

- 10.1 There is no legal obligation on the Council to participate in the Government's LES resettlement scheme. Should the Council agree to participate in the LES resettlement scheme, to be eligible for the funding the Council will be required to abide by the Government's requirements for the scheme.
- 10.2 **Legal Officer's comments:** None arising from the content of this report.

## 11 Policies, Plans & Partnerships

- 11.1 **Council's Key Priorities:** The following Key Priorities are engaged:
- 11.2 **Service Plans:** The matter is not included within the current Service Delivery Plan.
- 11.3 **Climate & Environmental Impact of recommendations -There are no known climate change implications**
- 11.4 **Sustainability Policy & Community Safety Implications:** - Successful integration of refugee families is identified as being a significant factor in ensuring community safety issues are minimised. The LES scheme is funded over three years offering reasonable assurance that accommodated families will integrate successfully.
- 11.5 **Partnerships:-** The Council is working effectively with Surrey County Council, Surrey Police, NHS organisations, neighbouring Councils and various voluntary groups, in particular Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network in providing support to Afghan refugees.

## 12 Background papers

- 12.1 The documents referred to in compiling this report are as follows:

### **Previous reports:**

- Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) S&R Committee 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2016

**Other papers:**

- Home Office and MHCLG letter 13<sup>th</sup> September 2021
- Home Office Afghan Locally Employed Staff – relocation scheme (published 1 September 2021)
- Funding instruction for local authorities in support of the United Kingdom's resettlement schemes: 2021 to 2022

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