

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILCABINET7-April 2022Report by Director of EnvironmentAFGHAN RELOCATION AND RESETTLEMENT SCHEMES**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Cabinet in relation to the UK Government Afghan relocation and resettlement schemes following the emergency situation in Afghanistan and to seek approval for the Council to be involved in the resettlement of Afghan refugees in East Renfrewshire.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

2. The Cabinet is asked to:
- a) Note the situation resulting in the need for Afghan families to be resettled; and
  - b) Approve the Council's involvement in the UK Government's Afghan relocation and resettlement schemes.

**BACKGROUND**

3. In Summer 2021, UK and US troops withdrew from Afghanistan, culminating in an emergency situation as the Taliban took over control of most of Afghanistan. At that time, the UK Government wrote to all Local Authorities initially requesting support with relocating locally-employed staff but, as the emergency situation escalated, this was extended to other citizens seeking refuge. Those who have not yet been settled are living in holding hotel accommodation and it is vital that more permanent solutions are found in order for the individuals to start a new life in the UK.

**REPORT**

4. The Home Office has created two mechanisms of support:
- Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) – current or former locally-employed staff who have supported British efforts during the conflict, and who are assessed to be under serious threat to life. They are offered priority relocation to the UK. This scheme has recently been reviewed by the Home Office to address particular challenges.
  - Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) – developed as a result of the evacuation programme during the emergency situation to help those who were already brought to the UK under the emergency evacuation programme. The UK Government has committed to resettling up to 20,000 Afghans over the longer term with 5,000 in the first year. The ACRS will provide protection for people at

risk from the Taliban e.g. because of their stand for democracy and human rights, or because of their gender, sexuality or religion.

5. The UK Government has confirmed that the same funding package will be available under both of these schemes to ensure comparable support and the funding will be for **three years**. The Home Office will match families appropriately to the placements offered by local authorities, taking account of the size of the family and the accommodation offered to ensure appropriate space. In terms of security, all applications are subject to security checks carried out across government departments, including the police.

6. The Environment Department has considered various options in terms of accommodation in response to requests from the Home Office and COSLA. This has been challenging. Owing to the demand on the Council's housing stock the most suitable proposal is using private rented accommodation. Given current resources and demand for services across the Council and from HSCP it is proposed the Council accepts four families and use private sector accommodation to accommodate the families.

7. Barrhead Housing Association (BHA) have advised that they are currently working in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council to re-house between two to four refugee families per year. Therefore, the Council has included two properties from BHA in the modeling process.

8. This would mean that the Council's offer would be to support six families in total through private rented accommodation and BHA properties. The matching of families will be determined by the size of properties available so it is unclear exactly how many individuals this would help support. As it is common for families to have two or more children, estimates are around 24-30 individuals.

9. Officers have been involved in Home Office and COSLA meetings in order to keep up-to-date on key information and take a lessons-learned approach to ensuring a welcome for those families urgently requiring accommodation. Some councils particularly those with larger numbers of available Council house stock have already received families. However, the matching process has been slow and the Home Office are continuing to work through a backlog.

10. East Renfrewshire Council has an excellent track record in welcoming refugees. In 2016, eleven Syrian families were resettled in the area, and nine families (42 individuals) still live here. Afghan families would be supported by a dedicated officer to help them navigate, access and register with mainstream services (including school registration, GP registration, Job Centre Plus appointments and utility registration). Targeted training and employability support will also be available for all adults.

11. All other Scottish Local Authorities have committed to accommodating refugees. If it is agreed that the Council is to be involved, it is hoped plans would be in place as soon as possible bearing in mind the need to allow time to secure properties and ensure they meet the standards required. Also, much depends upon how quickly the Home Office can identify families. Until appropriate families are identified with associated timescales it would be inappropriate to sign up to potentially costly private sector rented leases.

## **FINANCE AND EFFICIENCY**

12. There are no finance and efficiency implications associated with this report as funding will be provided by the UK government to cover the entire cost of the proposal over the three-year period.

## CONSULTATION AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

13. The Environment department will work with other Council services and key partner agencies in order to support refugees. This will include liaising with third sector organisations which offer vital support. Discussion are ongoing with colleagues from Education and HSCP.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSALS

14. There are no equality, sustainability or other implications associated with this report. Home Office funding will be used to support the families and this includes, for example, interpretation support, English classes and childcare. Dedicated officer support is available in order to help families integrate.

## CONCLUSIONS

15. The Council has been considering how it can best offer support following the emergency situation in Afghanistan and the subsequent request from the Home Office for involvement in accommodating Afghan refugees through the ACRS and ARAP schemes. While it is recognised there is strain on all of our Council and HSPC services, particularly post-covid, the Council is keen to contribute.

16. Acknowledging the pressure on the Council's housing stock, the use of private rented accommodation is the most suitable solution. It is proposed the Council offers up to six families refuge (which includes supporting two families in BHA accommodation). It is difficult to estimate actual numbers as this will depend on the matching process, available private rents and numbers of children, but this could mean around 24-30 individuals.

17. The Council has a good track record in integrating refugee families into the area and has well-established support mechanisms in place. A working group has been formed and discussions are taking place between key Council services and partner agencies. Officers have been involved in Home Office and COSLA discussions/meetings in order to keep up-to-date on key information and best practice in order to welcome those families urgently requiring accommodation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

18. The Cabinet is asked to:

- a) Note the situation resulting in the need for Afghan families to be resettled; and
- b) Approve the Council's involvement in the UK Government's Afghan relocation and resettlement schemes.

Director of Environment

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