

**WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL****Report by the Chief Officer, Housing and Employability****Council: 29 September 2021**

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**Subject: Crisis in Afghanistan – West Dunbartonshire Council response****1. Purpose**

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to provide update members on the progress of the Afghan Locally Employed Staff (ALES) scheme within the West Dunbartonshire Council area and to seek approval to extend the Council's participation in the scheme in the light of recent developments.

**2. Recommendations**

- 2.1** It is recommended that Council:

- i) Notes the update on the ALES scheme and related issues.
- ii) Authorises the Chief Officer Housing and Employability to engage with the UK Home Office through COSLA to progress implementation of the Council's proposed offer of ongoing assistance outlined in 4.5 of this report.

**3. Background**

- 3.1** The council has significant experience in the resettlement of refugees and has established a specialist refugee support team which leads on various refugee programmes. In November 2015, Council agreed that they would participate in the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme and would accommodate a proportionate share of refugees. To date 135 refugees have been accommodated in West Dunbartonshire through these programmes.
- 3.2** A wide range of support has been provided to Syrian families over the last six years covering the following areas:
- Interpretation and translation – to ensure that the families will have the interpretation and translation services they require to access essential services and resources.
  - Housing – to provide safe, secure and suitable housing for the families to allow them to settle and progress with family life.

- Employment, Benefits and Financial Inclusion – to support the families to access benefits, entitlements, financial, training and employment opportunities to enable them to progress with family and working life.
- Health & Social Care – to ensure that the families receive the health and social care services that they may need.
- Early Years, Schools and Further/Higher Education – to ensure that children and young people are fully integrated into West Dunbartonshire early years, schools, and colleges and receive the support and learning required.
- Social and Community – to ensure that the families receive the required social and community support they need to integrate and participate fully in community life.
- Culture and Faith – to ensure that families have the opportunity to participate in a range of cultural and faith activities to suit their needs.
- Safety and Stability – for the families to feel and be safe in their homes and communities.

- 3.3** In June the United Kingdom Home Office announced the introduction of the ALES programme as part of the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP). The purpose of the scheme was to honour the service of the Afghan locally employed staff and to reflect the danger and risk that their work entailed. Commonly locally employed staff would have worked as military interpreters. As a group they have become extremely vulnerable to retribution from the Taliban as international troops have now left Afghanistan.
- 3.4** The UK Government scheme originally anticipated relocating 3,000 Afghans to the UK over a few months, but the ensuing crisis has seen this number increase as the British Armed Forces have evacuated as many families as they could before the last flights left. It is estimated around 7,000 families have been evacuated and are now in the United Kingdom.
- 3.5** In June, West Dunbartonshire Council agreed at COSLA Leaders that it, along with all other Scottish local authorities would participate in the ALES scheme and would offer housing and resettlement support in West Dunbartonshire, and this was conveyed to the Home Office through COSLA.
- 3.6** West Dunbartonshire have since then received three families, who each have received appropriate accommodation, a furniture package, and support services from the Council. To date, the families have been registered for GP services, signed up for benefits, opened bank accounts, and the children have started school. Housing Support workers are also exploring employment and retraining opportunities with the new adult arrivals and ensuring the limited language gaps are addressed through English for Speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes. The families have also met and made contact

with other Afghan families living in the area who have been very welcoming and supportive and have helped them become familiar with their local area.

- 3.7** In a recent developments as part of the 'New Plan for Immigration', the government announced that those coming to the UK through resettlement routes would receive immediate indefinite leave to remain. The Home Secretary has announced that this will apply to Afghans who worked closely with the British military and UK Government in Afghanistan, and risked their lives in doing so, meaning they can now stay in the UK without any time restrictions.
- 3.8** People already relocated to the UK under the wider ARAP Policy will be able to apply free of charge to convert their temporary leave into indefinite leave. This will give Afghans the certainty and stability to rebuild their lives with unrestricted rights to work and the option to apply for British citizenship in the future.
- 3.9** In response to this crisis the UK Government has announced a new scheme on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2021 to resettle 20,000 Afghan refugees over the coming years. This is being referred to as the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and interacts with the existing ARAP/ALES initiatives. The ACRS has an aspiration to resettle 5,000 people in the first year of the scheme and will provide vulnerable refugees from Afghanistan and those put at risk by recent and 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); and
  - vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT+). Have an aspiration to resettle 5,000 people in the first year of the scheme;

#### **4. Main Issues**

- 4.1** The UK Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government announced on the 13th September that those arriving through either ARAP or ACRS schemes would 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 new life's within the United Kingdom.
- 4.2** It was also confirmed that the integration packages for the ACRS and ARAP will be aligned, providing one comprehensive offer to individuals, local authorities and mainstream services, and the financial packages would match those currently available through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) with the one key difference that it would be provided over a three year period unlike the five year provision within the VPRS. The core

funding to local authorities participating in the Afghan resettlement schemes would be £20,520 per person.

- 4.3** In terms of re-housing, bringing people to safety remains the main and critical focus. No decisions have been made on any specific area of West Dunbartonshire for resettlement but rather officers will consider all options at their disposal and will as far as possible match families to appropriate house stock, bearing in mind the capacity of other services in each area to provide support.
- 4.4** Officers have been looking across all housing tenures and providers in order to maximise the options at their disposal and currently are asking for the participation of local Housing Associations in offering properties for resettlement purposes. Utilising all housing options offers the widest range of house sizes, types and locations to match with families needs.
- 4.5** It is proposed that the Council extends its support for the ALES programme, from its original offer to resettle three households, to offering resettlement to four families every twelve week period on a rolling basis until service capacity is reached. This proposed new level of support reflects the scale and urgency of the crisis since our original offer of support was made. This would mean annually would welcome 16 additional households into West Dunbartonshire over the next year.
- 4.6** Offering resettlement on a rolling programme basis will allow us to manage the intake of families, ensure coordination and collaboration across services and partner organisations, in order to maximise benefits while also having the flexibility to pause, reduce or increase the pace depending on the availability of resources. We also intend to maintain the proposed level of response inclusive of the ACRS when this becomes operational. It is expected that those who have 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.
- 4.7** Current staffing to deliver the refugee resettlement programme consists of two full time Housing Support workers and a Team Leader. Currently one Housing Support Worker post is filled by a maternity cover post. However, this post would be extended for a further 18 month period to provide additional support to the team, resulting in three full time support workers.

## **5 People Implications**

- 5.1** There are a number of senior officers involved in this initiative across services of the Council and as part of the project board.
- 5.2** As highlighted, in 4.7 of this report to meet the proposed levels of assistance provided the dedicated staffing team would increase by extending the current maternity leave cover post by an 18 month period to June 2023, this would be funded through the financial package that will be

provided by the Home Office.

## **6. Financial and Procurement Implications**

- 6.1** The Home Office are providing core funding of £20,520 per person. this will cover the local authority welcome, integration offer and provision of services. This will allow officers to provide the Afghan families an appropriate and dignified resettlement process and will meet all Council costs including additional staffing as referenced in section 5.2 of this report.
- 6.2** There are no procurement implications in terms of this report.

## **7. Risk Analysis**

- 7.1** There is a reputational risk if West Dunbartonshire Council offers only minimal support to Afghan resettlement schemes, during this humanitarian crisis.

## **8 Equalities Impact Assessment**

- 8.1** The Afghan relocation schemes are a UK Government Home Office initiative which seeks to protect individuals and their families who have worked alongside UK armed forces. These individuals are now at risk of harm as forces return to the UK and this report reflects that the Council is working to ensure that the needs of those affected will be protected.

## **9. Consultation**

- 9.1** Consultation with all key stakeholders is progressing as we continue to work as part of a Scotland wide response through COSLA. The accelerated schedule of arrivals over a few months in the face of this unfolding tragedy has meant that our focus has almost solely been on mobilising the resources available to resettlement purposes and community engagement.

## **10 Strategic Assessment**

- 10.1** This reports supports the following strategic priority:-
- Supported individuals, families and carers living independently and with dignity

**Peter Barry**  
**Chief Officer Housing and Employability**  
**15 September 2021**

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**Appendices:** None

**Background Papers:** Funding Instruction for local authorities in the support of the United Kingdom's Afghan Locally Engaged Staff Ex Gratia & Afghan Relocation and Assistance Schemes

**Wards Affected:** All