

Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy Scheme - confirmation of decision taken under urgency powers (Standing Order 35)

Housing Committee Tuesday, 28 September 2021

Report of: Executive Head of Communities

Purpose: For decision

Publication status: Open

Wards affected: All

Executive summary:

The Government has been running an Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) Scheme, to relocate Afghan former locally employed staff (LES) to the UK, since 2013. This is in recognition of the fact that, as NATO forces withdraw, they are at increased risk of intimidation, having worked side by side with UK armed forces and officials. The Government have stated that "As a nation, it is morally imperative that we help these people settle into their new lives here in the UK."

A funding package is available to support local authorities that come forward to assist welcome, accommodate and support the families through the ARAP Scheme.

This report supports the Council's priority of: Building a better Council, Creating the homes, infrastructure and environment we need and Supporting economic recovery in Tandridge

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Recommendations to Committee:

That:

- A. the decision taken under urgency powers under Standing Order 35 of the Constitution to support the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) Scheme be ratified; and
- B. the Committee agrees that eligible households that qualify for assistance under either the ARAP Scheme or the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) will be considered for support.

Reason for recommendation:

In view of the heightened risk due to the Taliban's rapid progress and the consequential escalation of the evacuation process, the Government are urgently requesting that further local authorities come forward with immediate offers of accommodation and support for Afghan families.

Introduction and background

- 1 The ARAP Scheme offers eligible current or former locally employed staff, who are assessed to be under serious threat to life, relocation to the UK. At the beginning of April, the Home Office assessed that around 1000 Afghan LES and their families may be eligible to apply and would receive 5 years' 'Leave to enter the UK' with a pathway to resettlement thereafter. However, following recent events in Afghanistan, over 7,000 LES and their families were, actually evacuated to the UK.
- 2 As previously detailed, A funding package is available to support local authorities that come forward to assist welcome, accommodate and support the families through the ARAP Scheme. A number of councils across the Country including at least four other Surrey Councils, have already offered to provide support through the Scheme. However, it is likely that in Tandridge, the Council would need to top up the Government funding, due to the high costs of market rented housing in the District.
- 3 In the interests of efficiency, the Council has discussed the potential for shared working with other Surrey Districts and Boroughs. Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) have offered to extend the service that they propose to provide through the Global Resettlement Team to the other East Surrey Councils, who already work with this Team to support families through the Global Resettlement Scheme.
- 4 In recent weeks, the Council has been receiving an increased number of enquiries in this regard and there appears to be a clear expectation from the public that we should also be assisting.

- 5 Under the circumstances it was not considered appropriate to delay a decision in this regard until this Committee. A decision was therefore taken under Urgency Powers to commit to the scheme by the Chief Executive and Group Leaders on 7 September 2021, pending review and ratification by the Housing Committee.
- 6 Colleagues at RBBC have outlined their proposals for participating in the Afghan LES Relocation Scheme and have publicised their commitment. Their proposal, which has been shared with us, details the maximum costs anticipated to be incurred in assisting households through the scheme. In reality, as the households are expected to require less support than households assisted through similar schemes, costs are likely to be lower and those provided should be considered as a worst-case scenario.
- 7 RBBC have now committed to assisting three Afghan families through the scheme. Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) have obtained authority to assist two households. If the Council were to commit to assisting two households through the scheme, this would enable a total of 7 households to be assisted. It is also hoped that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council may elect to join the partnership on a similar basis.
- 8 As it is expected that a full-time support worker should be able to support up to 8 households, the cost per household would decrease significantly as the number of households supported increases. This is because the apportioned costs of support would decrease. It is anticipated that the costs per family will decrease significantly. In a scenario where 9 households are assisted through the scheme, the maximum cost to the Council (net of income) of assisting two households would be anticipated to be between £1,500 and £35,000, over the 5-year period, depending on whether one or two support workers are required.
- 9 It is not possible to forecast how much revenue the Council will need to provide each year for the project as the grant from the Home Office is dependent on when families arrive. However, the bulk of revenue will be required in years 3-5.
- 10 On 13 September, the Government announced details of the ACRS, which aims to welcome up to 5,000 people in the first year, up to a total of 20,000 over the coming years. 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); and
 - vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT+).
- 11 It has been confirmed that councils that participate in the ACRS scheme will receive funding on the same basis as for the ARAP Scheme.
- 12 Consideration has been given to committing to supporting more than two families. However, due to anticipated cost and availability of properties, this was not deemed a viable option.

Risks of Participating

- 13 The Home Office are suggesting that many of the families are large families with at least six household members. Although this increases the level of grant the costs significantly increase as most families with more than two children will be benefit capped so they will receive far less rent element of Universal Credit and have a more expensive rent due to the larger property.
- 14 It is possible in the the District that some households with just two children will be affected by the benefit cap until the adults are working, this could further draw on finances in-order to meet the rent payments.
- 15 It might be difficult to find private landlords that are willing to offer their properties to this cohort and agree to a tenancy before they have met the tenants.
- 16 This may have the potential for the Council to need to act as a rent guarantor, a role that it has not previously undertaken.
- 17 Most families will require and be eligible for an allocation of social housing at some stage, most likely after the initial 5 years. In the last year we have seen an increase in the waiting list and a reduction in the number of void social rented properties. The result being that the waiting time for family sized social housing is increasing and the wait for larger properties (3 & 4 beds) is significant and can be up to 4 and a half years.

Other options considered

- 18 It should be noted that initial accommodation provided under this scheme, will be sought from the private rented sector and will therefore not impact or impede those currently on the Council's Housing Register.

Consultation

- 19 TDC and RBBC already share several services in the delivery of similar schemes. It was therefore decided that working in partnership with RBBC, MVDC and, potentially, EEBC was the most viable option.

Key implications

Comments of the Chief Finance Officer

As noted in the report the costs to the Council will be dependent on how many other Council join into the joint initiative but it is expected to be in the range of £1,500 to £35,000 over a 5 year period.

Comments of the Head of Legal Services

The urgency decision is identified under Standing Order 35 in the Council's Constitution. The reason the decision was urgent was because of the changing situation in Afghanistan.

Standing Order 35 provides for the Chief Executive to take decisions that Committee or Full council would normally take, in emergency situations subject to consultation with Group Leaders. As reported, the Acting Chief Executive exercised this power in September 2021.

Equality

An equalities impact assessment has been completed while preparing this report. Although the Council have committed supporting two households this will not be at a detriment to those current awaiting accommodation via the Housing Register.

Climate change

There are no significant environmental / sustainability implications associated with this report.

Appendices

Appendix A – Surrey FAQ - Afghan Scheme

Background papers

None

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