

Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Relocation Scheme**Report by Kevin Anderson, Executive Director Place****Report for Decision****1 Recommendations**

Council is recommended to note the content of this report and consider Midlothian Council participation in the UK Government Afghan relocation scheme for locally employed staff (LES) who have worked for British Forces.

If it is agreed to participate;

- i. Advise the Home Office of the Council's willingness to participate
- ii. Approve delegated authority for officers to relocate households into Midlothian, subject to;
- iii. Agreement on the acceptability of financial risk; and
- iv. There being robust arrangements in place to provide support for the families wellbeing and integration over the short and medium term.

2 Report purpose/Summary

The scheme honours the service of the Afghan locally employed staff and reflects their work and the risks involved. Commonly, these people will have acted as military interpreters. There is now a greater fear for their safety as international troops leave the country.

The UK Government has operated a refugee relocation scheme but now anticipates helping a further 3,000 Afghans settle in the UK, and local housing authorities have been asked to support this effort and advise the Home Office of their decision as soon as possible.

Those who qualify and choose to relocate to the UK with their families are not expected to return to Afghanistan. After completing five years' limited leave, they can apply for permanent residence in the UK, free of charge, ensuring that they can settle here permanently and continue to build their lives and future here.

People coming to the UK under this scheme, may arrive either as a whole family unit or with the lead person arriving first and their dependents joining them at a later point, depending on their individual circumstances.

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3 Background

3.1 The Government has written to all local authorities most recently on 30 July, 2021 asking for support to the Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) relocation scheme. The Government has been running this scheme to relocate Afghan former LES to the UK since 2013, in recognition of the fact that they are at increased risk of intimidation, having worked side by side with UK armed forces and officials. For example, many of those who are eligible under the scheme have worked as military interpreters. Following the announcement that NATO military forces will withdraw from Afghanistan, the Government intends to accelerate the pace of relocations under the scheme and is looking to local authorities to provide housing and a short-term package of integration support.

3.2 The Afghan relocation scheme is substantially different from the refugee resettlement scheme already in place (now called UK Resettlement Scheme UKRS). Officers believe that the differences between the Afghan relocation and UK resettlement schemes are such that from our experience in the Syrian VPR Resettlement scheme the previous infrastructure cannot simply be adapted to include the Afghan scheme. Additional capacity and some different expertise would be needed to respond to the Afghan scheme. Officers can look at use of other existing resources (e.g. CAB and community-based organisations), but these would need to be brought into a co-ordinated support package/ arrangement which would need capacity to design and commission.

3.3 The accelerated schedule of arrivals over a few months means that recruiting private sector landlords over a period of months will not be a viable response. This is further complicated by the differences in the immigration and initial benefits' eligibility of people arriving under the Afghan scheme. It has been suggested that councils should only consider offering property for Afghan relocation if they can do so from their own stock or other social housing. Even under these circumstances, there are likely to be greater demands on council service teams to manage rents and support benefits' applications due to the different immigration and benefit eligibility of people arriving under the relocation scheme.

3.4 The funding available under the Afghan relocation scheme is short-term, originally four months and now extended to 12 months, but it is certain that relocated families will continue to need support after this timescale. Contact points for ongoing support will need to be established and funded. There needs to be clear separation between the contact points for relocation and resettlement because of the significant disparity between the schemes.

3.5 Notwithstanding, the challenges associated with this scheme, elected members may understandably feel there is a moral obligation to support those who have served our country. For this initiative to be successful the Council would need to secure affordable accommodation, and have the assurance there would be ongoing support for the family after the Government funding ends.

4 Accommodation

4.1 In terms of re-housing, bringing people to safety is the main focus and no decision has yet been made on any specific areas of Midlothian but it is anticipated that in any relocation the Council provides the opportunity for some element of mutual support in locating refugees.

4.2 The re-housing of refugees can be established within existing housing allocation arrangements, and within the Council's responsibilities under the homelessness legislation.

4.3 COSLA are coordinating the Afghan Relocation scheme for Scotland but note this scheme is quite different from the Syrian VPRS in the speed to which we are needing to respond and the level of information is different.

In relation to the expectation on numbers of families to relocate this is entirely up to each local authority as they feel able to in terms of the number of properties they can offer. In Scotland there is a real spread of responses dependant on housing availability mainly. There are a few councils who are unable to participate, but some councils are offering 2 properties right through to City Councils which are offering a larger number of properties.

5. Support and the Care for People Group

5.1 The Care for People Group was established to comply with the Council's responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The group specifically support Scottish Government guidance, "Preparing Scotland, Care of People Affected by Emergencies". This multi-agency group includes representatives from NHS Lothian, Police Scotland, utilities, voluntary sector and faith groups..

5.2 Clearly, the traumatic experiences in the loss of homes, livelihoods, communities and families will have an impact on individuals and result in considerable anxiety, concern and emotional distress. Having recognised the continued uncertainty that refugees are experiencing and the inevitable disruption that has occurred in their lives, the Care for People Group will be focusing on the physical and mental wellbeing of those potential resettlement refugees as residents of Midlothian.

5.3 Support requirements will include access to cultural, dietary, religious facilities as well as translation and interpretation services. Some households will be particularly vulnerable and require particular additional support through the relocation process.

5.4 Integration into Midlothian communities will involve school provision requests, registering with doctors, obtaining National Insurance numbers and biometrics to be eligible to access services and benefits.

Report Implications (Resource, Digital and Risk)

6.1 Resource

The funding available to participating authorities is £10,500 per person with potential short term additional assistance (rent, travel, etc.) before access to benefits and services is available to the arrivals.

6.2 Digital

There are no issues arising from this report

6.3 Risk

There is a reputational risk if Midlothian Council does not participate in the Relocation Programme as this is considered to be humanitarian aid.

Some households will be particularly vulnerable and require particular additional support through the relocation process. Matters under review are:

- Tracking the progress with regards to the move to suitable alternative permanent homes for refugees, ensuring that this is undertaken at a pace to minimise disruption.
- Monitoring the effects of the disruption as a result of the moves.
- Ensuring the needs of children and families are met, particularly in terms of education.
- Medical matters and the proximity to health care settings.
- Ensure identified needs of each individual are fully considered.
- The maintenance of community and cultural connections.
- The provision of agreed information and support.
- Stress related issues
- Perceived impact on existing waiting list applicants

6.4 Ensuring Equalities (if required a separate IIA must be completed)

The Afghan LES Relocation Scheme is UK Government Home Office initiative which seeks to protect individuals and their families who have worked alongside UK armed forces. They are now at risk of intimidation as forces return to the UK and this report has been carried out to ensure that the needs of those affected will be protected.

6.5 Additional Report Implications

Background Papers

1. UK Government Afghan LES Relocation Acceleration letter
2. Home Office Fact Sheet for Local Authorities

Appendices

APPENDIX A – Report Implications

A.1 Key Priorities within the Single Midlothian Plan

There are no issues arising from this report

A.2 Key Drivers for Change

Key drivers addressed in this report:

- ☐ Holistic Working
- ☐ Hub and Spoke
- ☐ Modern
- ☒ **Sustainable**
- ☒ **Transformational**
- ☒ **Preventative**
- ☐ Asset-based
- ☐ Continuous Improvement
- ☐ One size fits one
- ☐ None of the above

A.3 Key Delivery Streams

Key delivery streams addressed in this report:

- ☐ One Council Working with you, for you
- ☒ **Preventative and Sustainable**
- ☐ Efficient and Modern
- ☐ Innovative and Ambitious
- ☐ None of the above

A.4 Delivering Best Value

There are no issues arising from this report

A.5 Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders

Community engagement to ascertain and address key issues will be a core part of this work, which will be addressed through the work of the Care for People Group supported by members of the Joint Health Improvement Partnership.

Continuing effective communication and transparency is vital in providing reassurance and countering perceptions of any unfairness through consistency in the advice, information and services offered to refugees:

A.6 Impact on Performance and Outcomes

There are no issues arising from this report

A.7 Adopting a Preventative Approach

Addressing the needs refugees will assist in moving the balance of services and resources into preventing the need for longer term or crisis support. Early intervention and tackling inequalities are key priorities for Midlothian Council and the Community Planning Partnership.

A.8 Supporting Sustainable Development

There are no issues arising from this report