

Cabinet – 8th September 2021

Assistance with the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)

Portfolio: Councillor Andrew – Deputy Leader, Regeneration

Related portfolios: Councillor Craddock – Health and Wellbeing
Councillor Martin – Adult Social Care
Councillor Perry – Deputy Leader, Resilient Communities
Councillor Wilson – Children's

Service: Money Home Job (MHJ)

Wards: All

Key decision: Yes

Forward plan: No – late item confirmed to Scrutiny Overview Chairman⁹

1. Aim

To increase assistance to the national Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), which is the same as the Acceleration of the UK Afghan Locally Employed Staff scheme (referred to in 7 July 2021 report to this Cabinet), to safely relocate Afghan nationals who have supported the armed forces.

2. Summary

- 2.1 Assistance is being sought from local authorities by central government to support the ARAP scheme as a matter of urgency. Involvement in the Scheme is on a voluntary basis. ARAP's aim is to safely relocate Afghan nationals (and their families) who have assisted our armed forces to the United Kingdom. The scale of the humanitarian crisis has escalated since this Cabinet (on 7 July 2021) approved the relocation of 80 individuals in families to Walsall. It should be noted that as the situation is fast changing, the recommendations in this report may need to be altered to reflect the updated position at the time of this Cabinet meeting.
- 2.2 Many local authorities, particularly in the West Midlands, have recently pledged support to the Scheme. The requirement of the scheme is for the local authority to source properties, make them ready, and support the Afghan families on arrival. Government offer a financial package of support for up to the first 12 months following arrival of the families, to include locating and furnishing properties, rental payments, and integration support. Following this time, any further financial requirements will need to be met from mainstream funding.
- 2.3 Walsall has so far housed 15 families consisting of 69 individuals through this ARAP scheme, all during August 2021. This report recommends increasing the

number of individuals helped through the ARAP up to a total of 120, from the previous pledge of 80. The integration support is being provided under the Council's existing contract by the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC), these requirements for these additional numbers means that the total value of the existing contract including this variation will now exceed £500,000.

- 2.4 This Council has a history of warmly welcoming a range of people from many different countries. This increased pledge will not only build on our existing work with Afghan families, but also our contribution to the Syrian and UK resettlement schemes, our support to community sponsorship, and our help to unaccompanied asylum seeker children (UASC).

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet pledges to assist with the relocation of an additional up to 40 Afghan individuals (which includes immediate family), taking Walsall's total pledge to up to 120 individuals, through the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy
- 3.2 That Cabinet approve the variation of the contract for the Provision of Resettlement and Support for Syrian Refugees with the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) to support the relocation of additional Afghan Refugees and to include the option to extend the RMC contract until 30 November 2022. The estimated value of the variation is £130,000 taking the estimated total contract value including this variation and extension to £604,744.
- 3.3 That Cabinet delegate authority to the Executive Director for Children's Services, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, to authorise these and any further variations to the contractual arrangements for the services identified above, should this be required at any time during the term, in line with Public Contract Regulations 2015 and the Council's Contract Rules.
- 3.4 That Cabinet approve in principle to support the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme subject to proper processes being followed.

4. Report detail - know

Context

- 4.1 The ARAP scheme enables interpreters and those who have assisted the armed forces to apply for relocation to the UK. Assistance with the scheme became critical when plans were announced for the withdrawal of UK troops from Afghanistan by September 2021. Walsall Cabinet on 7 July 2021 responded by approving the relocation of 80 Afghan individuals (in families) to Walsall.
- 4.2 Locally Employed Staff (LES) who meet the eligibility criteria for relocation under the ARAP scheme will have the opportunity to apply for immediate indefinite leave to remain under the government's New Plan for Immigration. Eligible LES will be able to bring certain family members with them to the UK.
- 4.3 The project has two strands – integration support and property sourcing. Due to the urgency of the situation, the existing Syrian support contract with the Refugee

and Migrant Centre (RMC) has been varied to include integration support to the ARAP scheme. The additional numbers proposed to be supported in this report means that the value of the contract with RMC will now exceed £500,000 and therefore require approval from this Cabinet. The property sourcing has included a number of our own temporary accommodation (TA) units, with subsequent move on to private rented homes identified and managed by RMC. There have been further homes provided by our housing association (HA) partners, thus offering a blended social and private rented sector approach to property sourcing. We continue to work with both private sector landlords and our housing association partners to source more properties.

- 4.4 Walsall has housed 15 families consisting of 69 individuals, and has offered a further five properties awaiting family matches. Families appear to have settled in well and all are in receipt of regular support from RMC. All flats were fully furnished prior to occupancy. RMC provide a range of services including but not limited to regular contact with school admissions team, families are registered with GPs, links have been made with health services, referral pathways for mental health, assistance with second COVID vaccinations. The work of RMC is being supported through a multi-agency working group comprising representatives from a range of agencies (statutory and voluntary including community groups). There have also been many donations, and offers of donations, of toys, food and household products, from Walsall people and organisations.
- 4.5 The recent urgency of the situation in Afghanistan has been well documented in the national news. At the time of writing this report, it is anticipated that several thousand Afghan individuals will have been flown into the UK. When individuals land, they are taken to quarantine hotels for 10 days (or longer if test positive). They are then subsequently moved to their identified properties, or to 'holding' hotels if the properties are not ready. There has been an approach to have a holding hotel within Walsall, but there are no further details at present.
- 4.6 In addition to the ARAP scheme, which as above is aimed at individuals who worked with the armed forces, the government announced a new Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) on 18 August 2021. This scheme will help up to 5,000 vulnerable Afghans to the UK, who have been forced to flee the country, in its first year, with up to a total of 20,000 in the long-term. The scheme is not yet open. Further details will be announced in due course.
- 4.7 The ARAP scheme is in addition to Walsall already supporting a number of asylum seeker and resettlement schemes:
- Syrian Resettlement Scheme: since 2017, Walsall has aided 20 individuals through the Syrian resettlement scheme (SVPRS). These families have settled very well and appear fully integrated into the community. The Council contracted RMC to provide Syrian resettlement support from 2017 to 2022 following the government's five year funding programme, and are confident that the families are now near full independence.
 - United Kingdom resettlement Scheme (UKRS): Walsall committed to assist a further 20 individuals through the successor scheme UKRS, open to refugees in more countries,

- Community Sponsorship: in 2021, a Cabinet approved process for Community Sponsorship was introduced, where the community provide a property and support to help resettle refugees. The Council has agreed the first property, and a refugee family has been successfully matched and are due to arrive soon,
- Voluntary asylum seeker dispersal area; Walsall has been a voluntary asylum seeker dispersal area for many years, with approximately 579 individuals housed in Walsall. It should be noted that our involvement in accepting further procurement of properties is currently suspended across the participating West Midlands authorities whilst government are asked to respond to a number of concerns including impact on infrastructure. However, the Home Office, via its contractor Serco, are still procuring properties in Walsall for this purpose. Legal services are currently exploring what action can be taken in light of this.
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASC): young people who either self-represent or come through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) from an entry local authority to another local authority to provide care and accommodation. Children's services manage this pathway through placements. At the end of July there were 12 UASC aged between 15 and 17 years and 38 former UASC care Leavers. The revised national UASC model launched in July 2021, and Walsall's contribution is anticipated to be a further 3 children. The model is based on the arrivals into the UK in 2019/20 and the allocation is therefore indicative and subject to variations in actual number of children arriving in the UK.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

4.8 The Scheme will contribute to the Council's priorities as follows:

- Economic growth for all people, communities and businesses – the support provider will work with incoming service users in particular working to increase employment prospects and to provide access to education opportunities.
- People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities – the support provider will be required to ensure prevention of homelessness, support in maintaining a tenancy, promoting independence and can improve mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- Communities are prospering and resilient with all housing needs met in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion – the support provider will be responsible for ensuring the families are integrated into communities and therefore will enhance community cohesion.

Risk Management

4.9 There is a financial burden risk to the Council and partners, as the package of financial assistance from the government is limited to up to 12 months only, after which any further additional costs will need to be met through the usual central government or Council funded services. However it should be noted that this risk has recently been reduced by central government increasing the tariffs from the original four month to up to 12 month period.

- 4.10 There is an impact on available school places and healthcare services. We are closely monitoring this impact, and the risk on health services will potentially be minimised with the recent government announcement (20 August 2021) of additional healthcare and housing support for the ARAP scheme.
- 4.11 There is a risk of not being able to source enough properties. We are working closely with housing association partners and private rented sector landlords, some of which have made direct approaches to the Council to see if they can provide properties. The specific challenge in this instance is trying to ensure that private rented sector rents are at local housing allowance (LHA) rates, thus remaining affordable for incoming families.

Financial Implications

- 4.12 The Council will claim a number of tariffs, which will be used to help support the resettlement of the household in line with the Home Office Funding Grant. These tariffs are in place for up to 12 months only as shown in Figure 1, and don't currently include any health or education tariffs. The government announced on 20 August 2021 that there would be additional healthcare and housing support for the ARAP scheme, but awaiting further details to follow. After the 12 month tariff period, any further additional costs will need to be met through the usual central government or Council funded services as appropriate.
- 4.13 The tariff funding rates (Figure 1 below) include:
- integration support – a lump sum claimed by the Council in instalments to assist with property set up costs and integration support. This will include fully funding the RMC contract, fit out of properties, and void rent loss whilst properties are held
 - Cash support and rent payments – available for up to four months until universal credit is in place or employment secured. These are paid by the Council and reclaimed at the end of the four month period

Figure 1: ARAP funding tariffs

Descriptor	Tariff (£)
Integration Support Package (per person for 12 months following arrival)	10,500
ESOL (single payment per adult who requires it)	850
Cash Support ** (per person per week up to a maximum of 4 months – if required)	Variable Tariffs *
Rent/Accommodation ** (per person per day, up to a maximum of 4 months – if required)	£15

Legal Implications

- 4.14 Participation in the Scheme is on a voluntary basis, and is not a statutory requirement. MHJ will engage officers from Legal Services and/or Procurement to assist with the formalities of contract variation.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.15 Any contracting activity will be undertaken in compliance with Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (PCR) and the Council's Contract Rules. Where appropriate Local Sourcing will be used to support this Scheme.
- 4.16 The total contract value including the variation is estimated to be up to £604,744. The PCR include a specific set of rules for certain social, health and education services, known as the Light Touch Regime (LTR). The services currently provided under the Resettlement and Support for Syrian Refugees contract and the variation are covered by the LTR, as the services are under the LTR threshold of £663,540 they are not subject to the PCR. However, the general procurement principles of acting in an open, fair and transparent manner when selecting providers must still be observed, as well as the Council's Contract Rules (CR) and any other appropriate internal governance that may apply. As the total value of the contract will now exceed £500,000 it becomes a Strategic contract and requires authority from Cabinet to award a contract of this value.

Property Implications

- 4.17 The Council has used some of its existing temporary accommodation assets to house families, with a move on plan into private rented units to be sourced by RMC. The ARAP scheme requires the sourcing of suitable properties from the social or private rented sector, based on property availability and standard. On arrival, the families will enter into a tenancy directly with the landlord, in that the

council would not be involved in any long term leasing arrangement. However there may be a requirement for the council, or contracted property sourcing agent, to sign short term suitable legal agreements with housing providers, to secure empty properties in advance, to be held pending families being matched to properties by the home office and arriving in Walsall. At that point the landlord would offer the tenancy direct to the family.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

- 4.18 The health and wellbeing prospects for these families and their children will potentially be much improved by relocation to Walsall. National research has demonstrated many refugees have been faced with health inequalities and can often be subjected to mental health issues. Therefore the support for these households will need to ensure pathways are in place into health services and appropriate outcomes are achieved.

Staffing Implications

- 4.19 MHJ officers will project manage the Walsall response to the Scheme.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.20 An updated Equality impact Assessment (EQIA) is attached at **Appendix A** and shows the need to ensure the support element of the service meets the needs of the community and is culturally appropriate. The support element encompasses the support provider forging close links with local community groups who will help support the family and provide cultural intelligence and will also work with relevant faith groups to support integration. The EQIA will ensure regular support plan monitoring and service user feedback by the council to ensure all service user requirements relevant protected characteristics are met suitably.

Consultation

- 4.21 The Council has consulted with, and been consulted by WMSMP. The Council has also consulted with the Refugee and Migrant Centre, who deliver the existing Syrian Refugee Support contract, as the support provider for this project. The Council have put together a multi agency (statutory and voluntary) working group, chaired by RMC, to progress the ARAP scheme.

5. Decide

- 5.1 The following options below need consideration:
- There is a 'do nothing' option. The scheme is voluntary, and the Council can decide not to increase its pledge. This would reduce any financial risk, however this course of action would mean the Council were not assisting potentially vulnerable families.
 - The Council could increase its pledge. Possible options could include to support:

- Up to total of 120 individuals (in families), increasing its existing pledge by 50%
- More than 120 individuals
- Any other number

5.2 It is recommended that up to 120 individuals are supported. The greater the number of families helped, the bigger contribution that the Council would make to this national scheme. However, any greater number pledged will run the risk of not being achieved, and not to an acceptable standard, due to being able to source enough properties of suitable quality and location, and also potentially creating an additional demand on school places and healthcare services.

6. Respond

6.1 Subject to approval, officers would proceed to notify the Home Office of our increased pledge, carry out relevant procurement processes to increase the RMC contract variation, continue engagement with the support provider and partners, and ensure more properties are sourced

7. Review

7.1 The project will be monitored by a dedicated MHJ project lead. The support will be reviewed weekly throughout the contract period ensuring robust outcomes are achieved and the family units are able to integrate.

Background papers

- Walsall Cabinet – 7th July 2021 - Assistance with the Acceleration of the UK Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Relocation scheme

Author

Neil Hollyhead
 Senior Housing Strategy Officer
 ☎ 07943 500394
 ✉ neil.hollyhead@walsall.gov.uk



Sally Rowe
 Executive Director Children's & Customer

Councillor Andrew
 Portfolio holder Regeneration

8th September 2021