

Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy

Final Decision-Maker	COMMUNITIES, HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
Lead Head of Service	William Cornall Director of Regeneration & Place
Lead Officer and Report Author	John Littlemore Head of Housing & Community Services
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

This report sets out the context in which the UK government has asked local authorities to assist them with evacuating persons from Afghanistan who were formally employed by the British Armed Forces stationed in Afghanistan; and to consider how Maidstone Borough Council can assist the government in this task.

Purpose of Report

Decision

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That the Committee adopts the approach outlined in Paragraphs 3.2 and 3.3 to assist in the acquisition of private rented accommodation to support Afghan Locally Employed Staff under the government's Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy.
2. That the Committee approves the total number of units to be acquired by Maidstone Borough Council to assist with the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Communities, Housing & Environment Committee	05-10-2021

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1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place • We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities and is a response to the humanitarian crisis and request for assistance by the UK government. 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Risk Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already covered in the risk section of the report. 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation. 	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing. 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting on the recommendations is 	Legal Team

	within the Council's general powers of well-being as set out Localism Act.	
Privacy and Data Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accepting the recommendations will increase the volume of data held by the Council. We will hold that data in line with our retention schedules. 	Policy and Information Team
Equalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment 	Policy & Information Manager
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We recognise that the recommendations will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals. 	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The recommendation will have a neutral impact on Crime and Disorder. The Community Protection Team have been consulted and mitigation has been proposed 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not applicable 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Biodiversity and Climate Change	The implications of this report on biodiversity and climate change have been considered and no direct implications have been sighted.	Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Maidstone Borough Council has previously assisted the UK government when they have intervened in relieving humanitarian crisis. In late 2015 the Council agreed to assist with the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme (VPS); and since 2016 to the present day has aided families under that initiative.
- 2.2 In a similar way, following the rapid collapse of the Afghanistan government in the face of the Taliban insurgency, the UK government initiated a response to assist those families who had close ties with the British Armed Forces during the previous 20 years. Under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) the UK government has invited Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) to the UK in order to provide a safe haven for those now at risk. The government estimates this is around 3,000 people or 600 households.

- 2.3 The Home Office provides a funding package to resource local authorities to assist with the resettlement of Afghan LES and their families. This funding also helps with the delivery of support for families to enable integration; including support to obtain employment, welfare benefits, access to health, education and other local services. In two tier areas such as Kent, this financial support is administered and paid directly to Kent County Council. KCC in turn works with the district councils to identify suitable housing and commissions the support service from third party organisations.
- 2.4 The current initiative differs from the Syrian VPS in a number of ways. The Afghan LES are not coming to the UK having been processed through a United Nations Refugee Camp and therefore their status is not technically that of a refugee. This means that whilst they have been invited into the UK by the UK government, their immigration status is not as straight forward. The government has confirmed that Afghan LES will be given a visa that entitles the holder to 5 years leave to enter the UK and after that period to be able to apply for indefinite leave to remain.
- 2.5 Applicants under the Afghan LES scheme will have access to public services and will be eligible for benefits after they satisfy the Habitual Residency Test (set by the Department of Work and Pensions). As this can take up to 3 months or longer, the applicants will be supported by the local authority in the intervening period. This inability to satisfy the Habitual Residence Test also affects a person's ability to access the Council's Housing Register and to make an application under the homelessness legislation.
- 2.6 As a result, we are seeking to assist the Afghan LES by securing accommodation in the private rented sector (PRS), utilising the support that is available through the ARAP.
- 2.7 Two issues make the provision of accommodation challenging. Firstly, the period that the support payments will operate for is limited and for a shorter period than the Syrian VPS. The support element lasts for up to 12 months, or until the applicant is in suitable employment or receipt of benefits. This means that we have to acquire accommodation within the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) ceiling, as at the point when the Afghan LES becomes eligible for benefits their rental element will be capped at the LHA maximum.
- 2.8 This aspect may not be immediately attractive to private landlords and draw them to participating in the scheme, as the gap between market rents and the LHA is significant and is a barrier to a proportion of our existing residents from obtaining private rented accommodation.
- 2.9 With the imminent arrival of large numbers of Afghan LES, the UK government has moved to secure hotels as an interim step and has provided additional grant for the first 4 months of each tenancy to help with meeting the difference between the market rent and the LHA allowance. This may help in securing private rented accommodation for the first 6 months but it remains to be seen how sustainable this approach will be as the families integrate into society and move off the support funding.

2.10 The situation is dynamic, with the Chief Executive receiving regular updates and amendments from the Home Office to the ARAP scheme on a weekly basis. The Housing Service remains in close liaison with the Resettlement Team Manager at KCC and their support provider Clarion Homes.

2.11 The expertise gained from our Syrian VPS involvement has enabled us to rapidly identify the most suitable officers to be engaged in the acquisition and then on-going support to the families. Maidstone is in a good position to assist with an initial provision of 5 units of accommodation within the PRS. However, how quickly Afghan LES are assisted is largely dependent on the Home Office and the situation in terms of demand can change at a moment's notice.

2.12 The financial support is currently set at £10,500 per person within the household, per annum. This provides for the support services to be delivered and excludes their housing payments. An additional grant has recently been made available by government to act as a top up to rent shortfall but at this point in time the detail of the new scheme has not been released.

2.13 The current rental and LHA rates for Maidstone are set out in the table below.

Size	LHA Rate PCM (rounded)	Market Rent PCM (Mean)	6 Months Difference	12 Months Difference
Room	£385	£472	£522	£1,044
One Bed	£650	£693	£258	£516
Two Bed	£815	£858	£258	£516
Three Bed	£975	£1085	£660	£1,320
Four + Bed	£1250	£1444	£1,164	£2,328

2.14 Acquiring a small number of studio flats for couples would result in KCC receiving £21,000 per household to cover their support and set up needs. In terms of housing, it is proposed that the tenancy agreements would be between the landlord and the Afghan LES household directly, to be let at the LHA rate. An incentive payment would be made that equates to the same amount as the shortfall.

2.15 Maidstone Council could cover the initial set up payment by way of an incentive sum paid to the landlord. An indicative amount for a 6 month and

12 month tenancy are shown in the table above. This would cover the difference between the amount received under a full housing benefit claim and the market rent. We will endeavour to claim this amount back under the new government grant. There is a risk that this sum may not be recoverable in its entirety from government and that would constitute a direct cost to the Council.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 The Council could choose not to participate in the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy, as there is not a statutory duty to cooperate and some local authorities have already excluded themselves from the scheme. However, this is not recommended as there is a moral and humanitarian reason to help the Afghan people who served with the British Armed Forces over the past 20 years and who are now under a threat of mistreatment and death. Maidstone Council has a proud tradition of supporting our Armed Services and this can be extended to those who helped our Forces in Afghanistan.
 - 3.2 The Council can opt to secure through negotiation a number of private rented properties through our Accommodation Team, in a similar way we provide PRS accommodation for those assisted through the homelessness legislation. This may involve negotiating an inducement that takes account of the difference between the LHA rate and market rent that would normally be attainable.
 - 3.3 The Council could decide to acquire either 5 or up to 10 units of accommodation of PRS to provide housing for up to 5 or 10 Afghan LES households. This accommodation will provide a range of housing for different sizes of households, including couples and families with children. The Accommodation Team will explore a range of housing providers including the PRS and faith groups, which have proved to be beneficial in the past.
 - 3.4 The Council could also explore the option of purchasing housing from the open market akin to the initiative that has enabled the Council to grow its portfolio of temporary accommodation. However, this is unlikely to provide a solution within the short to medium term. Experience gained from the Syrian VPS is that demand for accommodation spiked and then rapidly declined and the time taken to identify, acquire and refurbish accommodation is unlikely to coincide with the needs of the ARAP.
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4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 The preferred option is set out in Paragraph 3.3 above. This will enable the Council to provide relatively swift support to the ARAP initiative and assist those evacuating Afghanistan. This route also reduces the risk and exposure for the Council, whilst bringing to bear our own expertise in the area to support KCC and the UK government.

5. RISK

- 5.1 The risk to the Council at this stage is a financial one in terms of how far the Council wants to go in underwriting the leases and providing incentives to landlords. The potential exposure of this is linked to the figures set out in the paragraph 2.14 above. For example, if the Council were to acquire 5x four bedroom houses the incentive payment for 12 months would be in the region of £11,640. This assumes the ARAP scheme will operate for 12 months only rather than the 5 years that the Syrian VPS was intended to run.
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6. REPORT APPENDICES

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7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

"Maidstone's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis" report to CHE Committee 8th December 2015