

Selby District Council

Leader Urgent Decision Paper

To: Leader of the Council
Date: 22 June 2021
Ward(s) Affected: All
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Services
Lead Executive Member: Councillor Mark Crane, Leader of the Council

Title – Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Relocation Scheme

Summary:

This report is seeking approval to support the governments accelerated relocation locally employed staff (LES) who have been supporting the UK in Afghanistan. The government have been running a scheme to relocate Afghan former LES to the UK since 2013 but following the announcement that NATO military forces will withdraw from Afghanistan, they intend to accelerate the pace of relocations under the scheme. North Yorkshire have agreed to participate in the scheme and this report seeks approval to enter into an agreement with North Yorkshire County Council to support this programme.

Recommendations:

- I. To agree to support the North Yorkshire Afghan Locally Employed Staff Relocation Scheme.**
- II. To agree that the Council's commitment to this scheme shall be in the region of 10 people (2 families).**
- III. To give authority to revise the Memorandum of Understanding with North Yorkshire County Council for the and the other relevant District Council's concerning this scheme.**
- IV. To note that the key role of the Council within this scheme shall be facilitating the sourcing of suitable accommodation. Costs associated with this shall be paid for by Central Government Grant funding. This is administered by North Yorkshire County Council. The Director of Corporate Services and Commissioning is authorised to apply for and receive the grant.**

Reasons for recommendation:

To allow Selby District Council to fully participate in the Afghan LES Scheme and support North Yorkshire County Council's commitment to the programme.

1. Introduction and background

- 1.1** On 10 January 2020 Executive approved Selby District Council's participation in the new 'Global Resettlement Scheme' and to commit to resettling a minimum of 29 persons between 2020/21 and 2023/24. The Council has entered into an agreement to participate in the programme. There has been a delay in arrivals due to Covid, however Selby is due to take refugees this year.
- 1.2** The UK Government has been running a scheme to support locally employed staff (LES) in Afghanistan (mainly interpreters) working in often dangerous and challenging situations, in recognition of their commitment and bravery shown supporting UK military forces since 2013.
- 1.3** The scheme currently consists of two elements:
 - the ex-gratia scheme which will close in November 2022 and;
 - the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy, launched in April 2021, reflecting the changing situation in Afghanistan and consequent risk to Afghan LES.
- 1.4** Both elements of the scheme are intended to support current and former Afghan LES who have worked for British Armed Forces and to provide appropriate support that honours their service and properly reflects their work and the risks involved. The scheme provides a range of in-country packages of assistance in Afghanistan and, for those who meet the criteria, relocation to the UK with their dependants.
- 1.5** Those arriving in the UK under the scheme will have been assessed as being 'under serious threat to life'. 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.
- 1.6** Following the announcement that NATO military forces would withdraw from Afghanistan, the UK government saw the need to accelerate the pace of relocations under the scheme. A more recent factor for the accelerated relocation has been prompted by the US military withdrawal being extended to 11 September 2021, amid escalating violence from a number of armed insurgent groups. Under a deal signed in 2020 between the militants and then-President Donald Trump, foreign forces were to have left by 1 May 2021 while the Taliban held off attacking international troops. US President Joe Biden pushed back the 1 May withdrawal to 11 September 2021. The Taliban have said that this is violation in principle and has opened the way for

[Taliban fighters] to take “counter-actions it deems appropriate against the occupying forces”¹.

- 1.7 A Ministerial Letter was sent to Local Authority Leaders and Chief Executives on 3 June 2021 seeking support the effective integration of all those LES who choose to come to the UK. The Ministerial letter is confusing in one regard in that it states that there is no cut-off date for the relocation of Afghan LES and their families. However, the clear intention from government is that all those qualifying for the scheme are to be relocated to the UK by September 2021. Indeed, the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan could mean that it is no longer feasible to retain a British Embassy there after September. Consequently, there will be no local means to process visas for those Afghan LES and their families who want to come to the UK.
- 1.8 There are similarities to the refugee resettlement schemes, but in many ways due to the pace and immediate risks, the Afghan LES Relocation Scheme is more similar to a humanitarian evacuation programme, such as was carried out for Kosovans in 1999.
- 1.9 The Afghan LES Relocation Scheme is wholly grant funded by the UK government.
- 1.10 The first flight to the UK will be in late June 2021. Those arriving will go into quarantine for 10 days at government-approved hotels, in view of the fact that Afghanistan is on ‘the red list’ of countries in respect of the COVID-19 virus. The first arrivals will come out of quarantine in early July to go to locations across the UK. Charter flights will be at frequent intervals throughout July and August.
- 1.11 North Yorkshire County Council have agreed to participate in the Scheme and have committed to resettling 40 refugees (10 families).
- 1.12 Those being resettled under the scheme won’t technically have refugee status but will effectively have the same rights. They will have a visa for 5 years (with the right to work etc) and then will have the option to apply for permanent residency in the UK.
- 1.13 Based upon previous arrivals in Leeds and Bradford, families are likely to be young and the husband will have very good English and keen to start work. Previous arrivals have not had complex medical issues. Consequently, the support provision is intended for four months only, as opposed to the 5-year support for refugee resettlement.

2. The rollout of the North Yorkshire Scheme

- 2.1 The proposal is to link the Afghan Re-location Scheme into managing the overall size of the refugee resettlement programme in the county, rather than seeking to resettle one family from Afghanistan in every district in the next

¹ ‘US and Nato start to formally withdraw troops from Afghanistan’ - BBC News, 1 May 2021
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-56955702>

three months', which would be very inefficient and likely to result in poorer outcomes for everyone concerned. Whilst some districts only took one family under the VCRS scheme, they were accommodated at broadly the same time as the SVP arrivals in that district.

- 2.2** The low numbers of Afghan LES families to be accommodated and the short time period that we would have to do so, means that it is not possible to do a phased rollout of numbers across the county. Instead, it is more practical for the following factors to be used (either in isolation or in combination) to determine which districts should participate:
- population size
 - recent or pending involvement in the UKRS refugee resettlement scheme
 - ready availability of affordable housing (including private rented sector).
- 2.3** Harrogate, Hambleton and Selby districts, as well as having the first, third and fourth highest resident populations respectively in North Yorkshire, have recently participated in the refugee resettlement programme (Hambleton) or are about to do so imminently (Harrogate and Selby). Consequently, resources - including integration support services provided by the Refugee Council - are focused on those areas to provide the more intensive Year 1 support to the new refugee arrivals. Having more than one scheme running in tandem within a district at the same time, worked well previously with the SVP and VCRS resettlement schemes.
- 2.4** Although Scarborough district has the second highest population area in the county, it is not due to start its resettlement until January 2023 and because the existing refugee families in the district are now in Year 5 and are relatively independent, Refugee Council staff are not regularly travelling there. There could also be a shortage of private rented property in Scarborough town as we move into the summer season due to landlords choosing to rent out their properties for holiday lets instead of providing assured shorthold tenancies.
- 2.5** Taking into account the factors above, the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Chief Housing Officers Group agreed at its meeting on 4 June 2021 to recommend that Harrogate, Hambleton and Selby districts take part in the scheme. It was also agreed at the meeting to recommend that Richmondshire district is a back-up area in the event that Harrogate or Hambleton or Selby districts are not able to find sufficient numbers of properties in the time available. Richmondshire has recently resettled refugees and is adjacent to Hambleton and Harrogate districts, reducing travelling time for those supporting the Afghan LES and their families.
- 2.6** On a pro-rata basis Harrogate, Hambleton and Selby districts would be looking at resettling the following maximum numbers:

District	2018 population mid-year estimate by district	Percentage of population as a total of the four districts	Afghan LES allocation across districts if using a pro-rata share
Hambleton	91,134	26.7%	11 people (two families)
Harrogate	160,533	47.1%	19 people (three to four families)
Selby	89,106	26.2%	10 people (two families)
Total	340,773	100	40

2.7 The local authorities will provide the following support:

- Reception arrangements upon arrival at the airport including handover from flight escorts and welcome briefing
- Accommodation
- A package of advice and assistance covering employment, welfare benefits, housing, health, education and utility supply
- Registration with GPs and local Job Centre Plus including receipt of a National Insurance Number
- Assistance in securing school places for school aged children
- Cash support.

Selby District Council will specifically be responsible for sourcing and furnishing the accommodation ready for their arrival.

2.8 Afghan LES and their families will not be eligible for benefits until they can satisfy the Habitual Residency Test set by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), which can take up to 3 months, so the local authority provides financial support to those who arrive under the relocation schemes for up to 4 months.

2.9 North Yorkshire County Council is provided with funding to support families through a Grant funding arrangement and Selby District Council can reclaim any costs incurred for setting up the property ready for arrival. Refurbishment and repairs carried out up to a maximum of £2,500 per property. This includes the cost of decoration and up to 8 weeks void costs can also be claimed before the property will be occupied. North Yorkshire will cover the rent costs until they satisfy the habitual residency test, and they also directly pay for the furniture costs. Once they have satisfied the test, they will be eligible to apply for welfare benefits and can take up employment.

3. Alternative Options Considered

The alternative option would be not to participate.

4. Implications

4.1 Legal Implications

A revised agreement broadly similar to the UK Resettlement Scheme agreement will be entered into if we agree to participate in the scheme there will be a requirement to meet the obligations set out in this Agreement.

4.2 Financial Implications

The Afghan LES Relocation Scheme is wholly grant funded by the UK government and so it is not anticipated that there will be any call on Selby District Council resources apart from staff time, which will be covered within existing resource.

As the scheme will be wholly grant funded and the value of the grant is less than £50,000 Director approval will be required to claim and receive the grant.

4.3 Policy and Risk Implications

On this occasion there is an intention to use Selby District Council owned properties and allocated in line with North Yorkshire Home Choice.

4.4 Corporate Plan Implications

None.

4.5 Resource Implications

The programme will be managed using existing staff and resources.

4.6 Other Implications

The first flight to the UK will be in late June 2021. Those arriving will go into quarantine for 10 days at government-approved hotels, in view of the fact that Afghanistan is on 'the red list' of countries in respect of the COVID-19 virus. The first arrivals will come out of quarantine in early July to go to locations across the UK. Charter flights will be at frequent intervals throughout July and August

5. Conclusion

- 5.1** This report seeks the approval to support the relocation of locally employed staff (LES) who have been supporting the UK in Afghanistan. Agreeing to participate in the scheme will allow two Afghan families to settle in the Selby District.

6. Background Documents

None.

7. Appendices

None.

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Decision Maker

Leader	Yes
Officer Delegated Decision	Yes for implementation of the scheme