

REPORT OF Public Health and Housing Manager
To: Community & Resources Committee
Subject: Refugee Resettlement and Afghan Relocation Scheme.
Date: 9th August 2021 **Reference:**

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

1. To seek an extension in our participation in the UK Government Refugee Resettlement Scheme.
2. To advise member of the Afghan Relocation Scheme and determine whether we extend our offer to this additional scheme.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015 the government launched the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) with the aspiration of accepting 20,000 Syrian refugees into the UK. The government looked to local authorities to provide housing and integration support for families accepted for resettlement.

In addition, and in response from individuals and communities wishing to support the relocation of refugees, the government also introduced `Community Sponsorship`. This ran in parallel with the local authority managed schemes and provided a mechanism for community groups to provide accommodation and support for a minimum period of 2 years subject to meeting the requirements set by central government.

Since 2016 refugee resettlement within Devon has been delivered through a partnership of District and City councils coordinated by Devon County Council. To date, 48 families (211 individuals) have been resettled in Devon via direct offers of accommodation from partners and community sponsorship.

This includes two families which have been successfully relocated within Torridge by TARKA Community sponsorship.

In addition to these schemes, the Government have recently written to all local authorities asking for urgent support to the Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) relocation scheme. It is recognised that Afghan former LES are at increased risk of intimidation, having worked side by side with UK armed forces and officials in roles such as military interpreters. This scheme has been in operation since 2013 however, following the announcement that NATO military forces were to withdraw from Afghanistan and the subsequent deterioration of the political and civil landscape in the country, the Government is looking to accelerate the pace of relocations under the scheme. It is again looking to local authorities to provide housing and a short-term package of integration support. The financial support available for this scheme is still under development and is not identical to the SVPRS due to a number of factors such as at least one member of the relocated family likely having a good standard of English. The support offered for the Afghan scheme is for a period of 12 months, compared with the 2 years offered under the SVPRS.



2. REPORT

On the 16th March 2020 the Community and Resources Committee approved TDC's participation in the SVP Relocation scheme by providing support through the allocation of one property in each of the two years of the Scheme to house a refugee family.

The Coronavirus pandemic arrived shortly after so this scheme was suspended by the UK Government. We have not been able to progress this commitment. The scheme has only just reopened. Therefore it is requested that members extend this commitment a further year – that the allocation of one property be made in 2021 and 2022.

Should this be approved, it is requested that members consider whether this commitment should be extended to the Afghan LES relocation scheme.

To date, the coordination of the SVPR scheme across Devon has been through Devon County Council working with community organisations across the county. DCC are currently looking to formally procure the reception and support service provided to participants in the SVPRS in Northern Devon and have approached a charitable organisation active in North Devon and already managing community sponsorship placements. The County Council are seeking clarification from TDC whether we wish to extend this procurement to cover both schemes across Northern Devon. Due to differences in the schemes it will be necessary to carry out a separate and parallel procurement process.

It should be noted that through these arrangements, the procured service will source suitable accommodation through existing private sector landlords in the area and have a proven track record in establishing arrangements through socially minded landlords.

The funding available under the Afghan relocation scheme is still being formulated by the home office but has recently been extended from 4 to 12 months, as opposed to the 2-year support package available under the SVPRS. This means that there is a financial burden risk to the Council and partners, as once the financial assistance from the government ends after 12 months, any further additional costs will need to be met through existing funded services. It should be noted that Afghan households relocated are not eligible for benefits until they can satisfy the Habitual Residency Test set by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), which is stated can take up to 3 months however cases have arisen of this taking longer which has caused additional funding burdens on the host authority. There is an option that longer term funding from the existing resettlement programme could be drawn down as this is a non ring-fenced grant, however this would require consensus from DCC and the district councils participating in the resettlement programme. These matters are currently under consideration by DCC and the resettlement group.

Should there be no issues with the habitual residency test, once approved, those being accommodated will be able to access mainstream benefits, including Universal Credit and support with housing costs.



3. IMPLICATIONS

Legal Implications

Participation in the Schemes are on a voluntary basis and is not a statutory requirement.

Financial Implications

Devon County Council draws down funding support for both schemes, through the Home Office grant funding arrangements. The exact amount of funding support provided to each participating family is dependent on its size and make-up but involves rent, integration and cash support during the resettlement period, with participants supported through the benefits system and into education and/or work placements with a view to becoming self sufficient and settled citizens.

The issues with the Habitual Residency Test set by the Department of Work and Pensions should be noted. This risk arises from the Governments design of the scheme and actions to mitigate this are being progressed through the Devon Group.

Human Resources Implications

All can be met within existing resources.

Sustainability/Biodiversity Implications

None

Equality/Diversity

The Afghan LES Relocation Scheme seeks to protect individuals and their families who have worked side by side with UK armed forces. They are now at increased risk of intimidation as forces return to the UK.

Risk Management

There is a risk that adopting the recommendations places more pressure on available accommodation in Northern Devon. However, this is a modest commitment overall and will not make a visible impact on wider housing provision. Rejecting these proposals may negatively impact on the reputation of TDC and will impact on the UK Governments commitments to fulfil their stated obligations to refugee and Afghan resettlement.

Compliance with Policies and Strategies

None

Data Protection (GDPR) Implications

None



Climate Change

None

Ward Member and Lead Member Views

Cllr Clarke is fully supportive of both of these recommendations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

TDC have already made a commitment to supporting the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme however the coronavirus pandemic has thwarted our ability to progress this over the previous year. Through our involvement in the Devon County Council's resettlement group, we will benefit from a locally based charity who will source suitable accommodation and will coordinate the reception and support services required for placed families.

The Afghan relocation scheme acknowledges the debt of gratitude and moral obligation to the interpreters and other locally employed staff who risked their lives working alongside UK forces in Afghanistan.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That members approve an extension in our previously stated commitment to participate in the UK Government Refugee Resettlement Scheme; that we support the allocation of one property to be made in 2021 and 2022.
2. That the above commitment be extended to participants of the Afghan Relocation Scheme, subject to the necessary risk mitigation measures being put in place and agreed through the Devon Resettlement Group (in agreement with our s151 Officer)

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Consultations: Lead Member for Housing

Contact Officer: Jan Williams Public Health and Housing Manager

Background Papers: None

