

Hambleton District Council

Report To: Deputy Chief Executive

Date: 23 June 2021

Subject: **Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Relocation Scheme**

Portfolio Holder: Planning and Housing
Councillor D A Webster

Wards Affected: All Wards

1.0 Purpose and Background

- 1.1 To receive a report on the Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Re-location Scheme in response to an urgent call from the UK Government for local authorities to respond and accept Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) due to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.
- 1.2 To approve Hambleton District Council's participation in the Afghan LES Re-location Scheme which, as was the case with Syrian Refugee Resettlement scheme will be undertaken in partnership with Broadacres Housing Association who have agreed to provide the 2 x 3 bedroom houses which will be required to accommodate 2 families in our District.
- 1.3 To approve Hambleton District Council working in partnership, subject to a partnership agreement being put in place, with North Yorkshire County Council, Harrogate Borough Council and Selby District Council, and with Richmondshire District Council in the event that either Harrogate Borough Council or Selby District Council are not able to find sufficient numbers of properties by 31 July 2021 to accommodate a minimum of 30 people under the Afghan LES Relocation Scheme.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 Both elements of the scheme are intended to support current and former Afghan LES who have worked for the 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.

- 1.7 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.
- 1.8 People coming to the UK under this scheme may arrive either as a family unit or with the lead person arriving first and their dependants joining them at a later point, depending on their individual circumstances.
- 1.9 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. 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 a violation in principle and this raises the possibility of further attacks.
- 1.10 A Ministerial Letter was sent to Local Authority Leaders and Chief Executives on 3 June 2021 seeking support for 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.
- 1.11 The Ministerial Letter states that the precise number of people, and the timing of their relocation to the UK, will depend on a number of factors, including the wishes of the families themselves. For planning purposes, the UK government is preparing to relocate at least 600 families over the summer (a minimum of 3,000 people and possibly up to 5,000).
- 1.12 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.
- 1.13 The Afghan LES Relocation Scheme is wholly grant funded by the UK government.
- 1.14 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.
- 1.15 The Home Office requires an urgent response from local authorities. Migration Yorkshire (the regional partnership co-ordinating body) has asked for a response from local authorities by Thursday, 10 June 2021 regarding participation and numbers to be re-located within their local authority area. This report is therefore being considered under the Council's special urgency and call in exemption procedures.

Scheme proposals

- 1.16 People who are relocated under the scheme are supported for a four-month period by a local authority. The support will be very similar to the initial support provided under the Syrian refugee resettlement scheme.
- 1.17 For the Afghan LES Relocation Scheme, Migration Yorkshire is also proposing that participating local authorities in the Yorkshire and Humber region adopt the 'fair share' approach based upon their population levels. For practical reasons, the Afghan Re-location Scheme will be linked 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 three months, which would be very inefficient and likely to result in poorer outcomes for everyone concerned.

2.0 Link to Council Priorities

- 2.1 Participation in refugee settlement schemes contributes to the Council's priority of 'Providing a Special Place to Live' by supporting people to lead independent lives and responding to requests from Government.

3.0 Risk Assessment

- 3.1 The key risk is in not approving the recommendation as shown below:-

Risk	Implication	Gross Prob	Gross Imp	Gross Total	Preventative action	Net Prob	Net Imp	Net Total
Criticisms of the Council because of refusal to participate in the scheme	Negative impact on the image of Hambleton DC	3	4	12	Adopt a partnership response to any criticism as this group have served alongside British Armed Forces	1	3	3

Prob = Probability, Imp = Impact, Score range is Low = 1, High = 5

- 3.2 There are no strategic level risks in agreeing with the recommendation.
- 3.3 Overall, the risk of agreeing with the recommendation outweighs the risks of not agreeing with it and is considered acceptable.

4.0 Financial Implications

- 4.1 There are no financial implications relating to this report.

5.0 Legal Implications

- 5.1 Local authorities participating in the scheme will be required to meet the obligations set out in the Partnership Agreement (to be put in place and to utilise existing governance arrangements which are already in place for the Syrian refugee resettlement programme).

6.0 Equality/Diversity Issues

- 6.1 Equality and Diversity Issues have been considered however there are no issues associated with this report.

7.0 Recommendation

- 7.1 That in the absence of the Chief Executive, the Deputy Chief Executive under his delegated authority, approves the Council's participation in the Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Relocation Scheme subject to a partnership agreement being put in place and utilising existing governance arrangements in place for the refugee resettlement programme

Mick Jewitt
Deputy Chief Executive

Background Papers: Ministerial Letter sent to Local Authority Leaders and Chief Executives on 3 June 2021

Author ref: CD

Contact: Carl Doolan
Housing Services Manager
Tel: 01609 767176