

24th September 2021

UPDATE ON THE AFGHANISTAN RELOCATION AND ASSISTANCE POLICY AND WIDER MIGRATION ISSUES

Purpose

- 1** To update members on commitments made and arrivals completed under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) in Wales to date, and to provide information on the announcement on the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), including the support package available to support resettlement and integration. The Report will also update members on other pressures currently being experienced in the area of immigration and asylum where the active involvement of local authorities is requested.

Background

- 2** Over recent weeks, over 15,000 people were urgently evacuated from Afghanistan to the UK, including British nationals and those eligible under ARAP as part of Op Pitting. Since the first flight landed on 22 June, 7,000 Locally Employed Staff and their families have arrived in the UK under the ARAP scheme, including around 5,000 people who were evacuated during August. Those evacuated were all required to go into 10-day quarantine (as Afghanistan is a red list country) and the Home Office priority is now in finding permanent accommodation for those who arrived in the UK. In the meantime, people have been moved to bridging/temporary accommodation, mainly through the use of hotels across the UK, including in Wales.
- 3** As previously reported, there are a number of different schemes where the Home Office require the active involvement of local authorities. These include asylum dispersal; refugee resettlement; and the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Over the past months, pressure has been increasing in each of these areas with an increased number of people arriving in the UK in small boats in the Channel. Therefore, in addition to responding to the urgent situation relating to Afghanistan, there are more asks of local authorities to assist in accommodating asylum seekers or caring for UASC.
- 4** Members have previously discussed these pressures in the asylum system and there was general support for involvement (subject to local capacity and decision-making) and in taking a Wales wide approach in sharing responsibilities in ensuring the nation plays its part in supporting and enabling the UK to meet its international and humanitarian responsibilities.

Update on work with Afghan Refugees

- 5** *Facts and figures:* Welsh authorities have so far collectively offered 65 properties (with 15 more imminently expected) to support people arriving under the ARAP scheme (or others who were also evacuated from Afghanistan). Identification of appropriate properties remains the most significant challenge and successfully accommodating families or individuals relies on identifying suitable properties. There is also a need for larger properties (3 bed upwards) which makes it more difficult to find accommodation in the right place and at the appropriate price.
- 6** To date (15 September), a total of 65 people have been resettled in permanent accommodation across Wales, which represent 15 families and 2 individuals. There are further imminent arrivals expected: 8 individuals from 2 families. 10 local authorities have received refugees so far, but all 22 authorities have agreed to participate and matching of families to identified properties will continue.
- 7** In addition to those accommodated in Welsh local authority areas, 25 families and 5 singles (152 people) have been accommodated in bridging/temporary accommodation in Wales while more permanent accommodation is identified. This temporary accommodation includes accommodation provided by the Urdd and 2 hotels in Cardiff. This is still a fluid situation and numbers in Wales could increase or decrease as progress is made in matching families to property offers (in Wales and across the UK) or if further bridging accommodation is procured by the Home Office.
- 8** There have been significant implications for Cardiff Council in responding to the use of hotels as bridging accommodation in Cardiff, with having to stand up support arrangements at very short notice, using council staff, as well as staff from Taff Housing Association (their support agency on refugee resettlement) to ensure suitable arrangements were in place for refugees to arrive and settle, including appropriate security arrangements for the venues. The Urdd Centre likewise has worked hard to provide a warm welcome and to ensure the needs of the refugees, including the children, are met in the accommodation they are providing. Supported and facilitated by the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, and involving Welsh Government, the Army's 160 (Wales) Brigade, health, education and other partners, a 'Team Wales' approach is being taken to the coordination of an arrangement whereby families with a link to the 160 (Wales) Brigade have been transferred to Wales in order to maintain the links with Welsh Forces as the families settle. There will also be ongoing arrivals in Wales of other families from Afghanistan over the next few days, as well as longer-term arrivals under the ACRS.
- 9** *Operation Warm Welcome:* The Prime Minister announced Operation Warm Welcome on 1st September, a cross-government effort to ensure Afghans arriving in the UK receive the vital support they need to rebuild their lives, find work, pursue education and integrate into their local communities. Other announcements at that time included:

 - Arrivals under ARAP will be given immediate indefinite leave to remain

- £12 million to provide additional school places
- £3 million to support access to NHS

We await information on how this additional funding will be made available for Welsh public services.

10 *Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme:* On 13th September, the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government wrote to local authority leaders and Chief Executives setting out more detail on the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) which aims to support 5,000 refugees to resettle in the UK in the first year, with a total of 20,000 over the following years.

11 Those arriving through either ARAP or ACRS will be granted immediate Indefinite Leave to Remain allowing them to benefit from full rights and entitlements and providing them with the certainty and stability they need to build their life here. The ACRS will prioritise:

- those who have assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for values such as democracy, women's rights and freedom of speech, rule of law (for example, judges, women's rights activists, journalists); and
- vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT+).

12 The full support and integration package will cover:

- £20,520 to cover the local authority welcome, integration offer and provision of services - up to £4,500 per child to cover education provision, subject to their age (year one only)
- £850 to cover English language provision, for adults requiring this support (year one only)
- £2,600 to cover health provision (year one only).

13 The UKG have also agreed a further £20m fund of flexible funding in the current financial year (2021/22) to support local authorities with higher cost bases with any additional costs in the provision of services. Government has already announced an additional £5m housing fund (recently increased to £10m, with an additional £5m in the following year) to help local authorities provide the necessary housing to minimise their stays in short-term emergency accommodation. The Government hopes this will provide local authorities with longer-term certainty that there will be funding to draw on if needed and they anticipate that more local authority offers of accommodation will be forthcoming.

14 Work is on-going to match families to properties identified as suitable by local authorities, a role undertaken by WSMP, working with the Home Office and local authorities. It is proposed that those families that have been placed in bridging/temporary accommodation in Wales will be prioritised for move on to

Welsh local authority areas once more properties are matched, to help minimise the number of moves families need to make. The inclusion of all 22 authorities is to be commended, however, along with the current offers and commitments made, in addition to the urgency of the current situation there will be an on-going need to consider what commitments can be made in the longer-term, taking into account other housing needs and local capacity. WSMP continues to engage with local authorities on these issues.

Wider asylum and immigration pressures

- 15** Members have previously discussed the pressures in the asylum system and the majority of Welsh authorities have agreed to participate in asylum dispersal moving forward, with to what level to be determined by the authority. Since those discussions, one local authority has begun the process of having asylum seekers accommodated in their area and active discussions continue with four other areas.
- 16** However, so far this year, more than 14,000 people have arrived in the UK in small boats from France, the majority of whom have sought asylum. This has increased pressure on a system already under significant strain and the Home Office is needing to use hotels to accommodate people as there is not enough dispersal accommodation across the UK. This may lead to more focus on opening up new dispersal areas, so the pace of discussions with Welsh authorities may increase. There are also calls for more local authorities across the UK to agree to participate and we await news on whether some funding will be made available to support local authorities to manage local impacts which we understand will be considered as part of the CSR.
- 17** Over the recent period, there has also been an increase in the number of UASC arriving in the UK. The National Transfer Scheme was launched on 26 July and it is anticipated that Wales will receive 30 UASC per year, transferred from other areas such as Kent who are disproportionately affected by the arrival of UASC as a port authority (the NTS is a GB wide scheme and all regions/nations are expected to participate).
- 18** Following discussions among Heads of Children's Services and agreement by the councils involved, Cardiff and Newport have agreed to trial receiving and caring for the full allocated number of children for Wales on behalf of the other Welsh authorities, ensuring the best interests of the child remains the core of decision-making. However, the NTS runs on rota system and the rota has run much quicker than anyone anticipated, with the 3rd run of rota recently starting again. As such, since 26 July, 12 UASC have been accommodated under the NTS in Wales. However, given pressures on securing appropriate placements for children looked after, the support of other regions will likely need to be sought to provide placements for UASC to assist in meeting allocation for transfer to Wales, given the speed at which such transfers are required.

- 19** One council in Wales is also currently experiencing significant costs in finding and providing a suitable placement for an unaccompanied child in their care, who has extremely complex needs. While the Home Office has stated they will create a fund to assist with exceptional cases, there is no detail available and no guarantee as to whether the fund might meet these particular circumstances and very high costs.
- 20** In previous discussions, members and officers have mooted the idea of developing a Wales-wide approach to responding to Home Office asks around asylum and migration, sharing responsibility for meeting international obligations and ensuring Wales plays its part. Such an approach would need to be place-based, fully reflecting local-decision making about levels of involvement, taking into account local capacity and availability of services, including third sector support, identifying local assets and securing support from elected members, local communities and other public services for example, and would also potentially develop and reflect a 'fairer' way of responding to the migration agenda as a nation. It is likely Welsh Government would be supportive of a Wales-wide approach as part of their ambition for Wales to be a Nation of Sanctuary and we have received a commitment from a senior Home Office official to engage in a conversation about the wider asylum and migration landscape in Wales.

Recommendations

21 Members are asked to:

- 21.1 Note and comment on the contents of this report;**
- 21.2 Continue to support the existing ARAP scheme and if not already agreed, consider and agree what contribution can be made by each local authority to participate in the new ACRS;**
- 21.3 Support the proposal to prioritise and match those in bridging accommodation in Wales to property offers made by Welsh authorities; and**
- 21.4 Consider tasking officers to scope the potential for developing a place based approach to migration across Wales, with the aim of sharing responsibilities for meeting international obligations among all Welsh authorities.**

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