

Report to the Leader 09 September 2021

Report Title	Afghan refugees and resettlement
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Lead Member	Cllr Helen Harrison, Executive Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing

Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there public sector equality duty implications?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information (whether in appendices or not)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Applicable paragraph number for exemption from publication under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1974	

List of Appendices

There are no appendices, however a series of web-links have been provided to relevant parts of government guidance for the Afghan Resettlement Scheme

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To provide the Leader with an update on the progress made in developing the Council's response to the Afghan resettlement situation and to seek agreement for the council's pledge to support the longer-term resettlement of several families within North Northamptonshire communities.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The urgent requirement to support refugees from Afghanistan is well documented nationally.
- 2.2 There were three likely requests on local authorities to supporting the efforts in relation to Afghan refugees:
- 1) Managed Quarantine Service (MQS)
 - 2) Bridging Hotels
 - 3) Longer term resettlement of Afghan families

- 2.3 At this point no MQS have been set up in North Northamptonshire. It is important to note that whilst airlifts of refugees directly from Kabul airport ended on 31 August 2021, there is still an ongoing commitment to support refugees that leave Afghanistan over land borders. As time progresses the requirement for MQS should reduce although this will depend on the volumes of people continuing to exit Afghanistan through other bordering countries.
- 2.4 In addition, to date there have been no bridging hotels identified in North Northamptonshire, however two have been identified and mobilised in West Northamptonshire.
- 2.5 Sourcing of suitable bridging hotels is being undertaken directly by the Home Office and the council has no influence over whether local hotels are used. This is causing some negative press around the councils' response, despite being out of the council's control and as an area the Leader has stated we are here to help and support Afghan Refugees.
- 2.6 A North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) Tactical Coordination Group (TCG) has been stood up to coordinate the council response. The Senior Responsible Officer for this response is the Executive Director for Adults, Communities and Wellbeing.
- 2.7 Appropriate governance systems are in place to manage delivery of this activity however further consideration of reporting routes needs to be agreed to ensure the Executive and Corporate Leadership Team are appropriately sighted on this activity.
- 2.8 It is important that a council pledge around how many families it will support is forthcoming for a number of reasons including the moral obligation to support refugees fleeing Afghanistan and with bridging hotels, despite best intentions, not being the best environments for families for anything more than a few days or weeks.
- 2.9 External communications will be an important part of ensuring a wide range of stakeholders understand the council's response into this crisis.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Leader:
 - a) Consider and agree, through delegated powers, the council's response to Afghan resettlement requests and a firm commitment pledge to supporting a number of families to resettle in North Northamptonshire Communities.
 - b) Note the work to date in mobilising the North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) Afghan Resettlement Tactical Coordination Group (TCG) and preparatory work undertaken in anticipation of both a bridging hotel and longer-term resettlement requests.

- c) Agree the council's "pledge":

“A commitment is made to support a minimum of 10 Afghan families to resettle in the North Northamptonshire area with associated support from the council, working closely with our partners.

Furthermore, following resettlement of 10 families, the council commits to continue to identify opportunities to extend our pledge and explore how the council can support a greater number of families.”

- 3.2 The reasons for the recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- a) To ensure urgent consideration and agreement of the council's approach to Afghan resettlement.

4. Report Background

- 4.4 The background to this report has been well reported nationally. This report will provide an update on key activity including preparation for the likelihood of a bridging hotel in North Northamptonshire and longer-term resettlement matters including a firm council pledge.

5 Progress to date

5.1 Requests that have come forward to all local authorities

- 5.1.1 In summary, there are likely to be three types of requests that will continue to come forward from central government to all local authorities:

- 4) Managed Quarantine Service (MQS)
- 5) Bridging Hotels
- 6) Longer term resettlement of Afghan families

- 5.1.2 At this point no MQS or Bridging hotels have been set up in North Northamptonshire. It is important to note that whilst airlifts of refugees directly from Kabul airport ended on 31 August 2021, there is still an ongoing commitment to support refugees that leave Afghanistan over land borders. As time progresses the requirement for MQS and bridging hotels should reduce although this will depend on the volumes of people continuing to exit Afghanistan through other bordering countries.

5.2 North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) Afghan Resettlement Tactical Coordination Group (TCG)

- 5.2.1 In order to coordinate the council's response a task and finish group was mobilised, and governance arrangements put in place to coordinate the council's response.

- 5.2.2 The Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) for the TCG is the Executive Director for Adults, Communities and Wellbeing. The following departments are represented on the TCG:

- Housing
- Communities
- Revenue and Benefits
- Finance
- Emergency Planning
- Education
- Children's Services (Northamptonshire Children's Trust)
- Adult Social Care

5.2.3 Where necessary, and as required, additional staff from across council departments will be co-opted on to the TCG in order to ensure the right skills are available to develop and deliver activities efficiently on behalf of the council.

5.2.4 Detailed action, risk, issues and lessons learned logs are in place and a repository of guidance notes and documents has been developed.

5.3 Support provided to the Bridging Hotel activity in West Northamptonshire

5.3.1 As a bridging hotel has not yet been identified and mobilised by the Home Office in the North Northamptonshire area, mutual aid has been offered to support the activity being led by West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) in relation to the two bridging hotels in West Northamptonshire.

5.3.2 A pool of 17 members of staff have been identified, up to 12 from Housing and Communities and up to 5 from Adult Services. The purpose of this pool of staff is three-fold:

- 1) to ensure we have adequate resources able to mobilise at short notice to support a bridging hotel in North Northamptonshire
- 2) whilst there is not a bridging hotel in the area, we have offered access to this pool of staff as mutual aid to support WNC in delivering activity in the two bridging hotels in West Northamptonshire
- 3) To enable learning that will support NNC in its ongoing preparation for both prospective bridging hotels and longer-term resettlement

5.4 Preparing for a Bridging Hotel & longer-term resettlement in North Northamptonshire

5.4.1 Whilst to date there has not been a suitable hotel identified by the government in the North Northamptonshire geographic footprint, the TCG continues to prepare for the eventuality that a hotel in North Northamptonshire may be mobilised.

5.4.2 The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), have fielded representatives at the Northamptonshire Tactical Coordination Group (TCG). They have reported that those airlifted from Afghanistan were unable to bring large amounts of belongings and will require support with basic needs such as clothing, toiletries, baby food and nappies.

5.4.3 Activities for families with children in the bridging hotels will be required, this could include toys and colouring books, but other resources could be required as we get to know more about the families coming into the bridging hotels.

- 5.4.4 Initial contact has been made with a number of voluntary sector partners with regards to their potential help and support with both the initial short-term issues, such as advice, activity packs for families and children, and longer-term support for example to help with furniture for housing. A local Muslim Community Leader in Corby has been contacted for cultural and religious advice, as well as a local Inter-Faith leader from the Kettering area.
- 5.4.5 A webpage has been developed that enables people to submit details of their donations and enables us to clearly communicate the items that we are in need of, this will enable us to manage and target donations. In addition, we are liaising with a local charity who have significant capacity in Kettering to manage, sort and prepare donations to partner on donation management. Once confirmed these arrangements will be publicised.
- 5.4.6 Options for cultural awareness training are being explored with East Midlands Councils, to brief and support those council and hotel staff members who will be working with the refugees.
- 5.4.7 Work has been done in engaging with several external organisations, to support refugees in making benefit claims and potentially to offer a whole package of support, which would also include Immigration status proof, national insurance applications which then enables access/support to welfare benefits and services.
- 5.4.8 We have connected with Leicester and Coventry City Councils, who have well-established programmes through their ongoing support to Syrian resettlement and their Afghan response.

5.5 The council pledge – longer term resettlement

- 5.5.1 A number of councils have already made specific pledges regarding the numbers of families they will offer to support. NNC has previously indicated to government that it would make a more specific pledge.
- 5.5.2 In making a pledge the council needs to consider availability of appropriate housing, places in primary and secondary education, how it will support refugees to find and be successful in gaining employment to further support independence and the work it will need to undertake with local communities to support integration.
- 5.5.3 The proposed pledge by North Northamptonshire Council to be made by the Leader is:

“A commitment is made to support a minimum of 10 Afghan families to resettle in the North Northamptonshire area with associated support from the council working closely with our partners.

Furthermore, following resettlement of 10 families, the council commits to continue to identify opportunities to extend our pledge and explore how the council can support a greater number of families.”

6 Implications (including financial implications)

6.1 Resources and Financial

- 6.1.1 The government has put in place funds that can be accessed to support people both in bridging hotels and for longer term resettlement. This includes bridging the gap between housing benefit and higher costs associated with leasing larger properties for larger family units from the private rental sector.
- 6.1.2 At this point it is not clear what the longer-term costs of supporting resettled families will be.
- 6.1.3 Human resources will play an important part in supporting the integration of resettled families into the local area, this will include time of benefits, housing and communities' staff, work with community groups, community safety partnerships and strategic partners.
- 6.1.4 At present the officers identified come primarily from the Adults, Communities and Wellbeing directorate, however it may be necessary to free up additional staff from across other directorates to support this programme.

6.2 Legal

- 6.2.1 There are no direct legal implications as a result of the matters raised in this report.

6.3 Risk

- 6.3.1 Skills gaps could be a risk to the success of this work both in relation to having to support a bridging hotel within the North Northamptonshire area and longer-term resettlement approaches. Mitigations put in place have included working with East Midlands Councils to explore training and learning opportunities for key staff that will be supporting with this programme.
- 6.3.2 Contact has been made with both Coventry and Leicester City Councils who have established refugee resettlement programmes in place and both councils have confirmed they are happy for their leads to liaise with NNC officers in developing our own responses, informed by their approaches and lessons learned.
- 6.3.3 There is potential risk around community tensions towards refugees temporarily accommodated in hotel accommodation and with those settling more permanently in local areas.
- 6.3.4 The council's communications will need to focus on supporting people to positively settle and integrate, how people can appropriately help/donate, and myth bust where it appears that assumptions are being made/may be made that are wrong or could lead to negative attitudes towards families settling.
- 6.3.5 The contribution of members of these families supported the UK role in Afghanistan. It is important that there is recognition of their efforts that, under intimidation in Afghanistan, have been heroic, and the reasons why these

families are being resettled in the UK is also due to the very likely event of persecution if they were to remain in Afghanistan.

6.4 Consultation

6.4.1 No specific local consultation has been undertaken. This activity has been initiated and undertaken following events unfolding in Afghanistan over the previous month to six weeks.

6.5 Consideration by Scrutiny

6.5.1 This matter has not been considered by the Scrutiny Commission; however, the SRO has offered to provide the Health, Wellbeing and Vulnerable People Executive Advisory Panel with an update briefing on the approaches taken.

6.6 Climate Impact

6.6.1 There are no direct climate impacts as a result of the matters discussed in this report.

6.7 Community Impact

6.7.1 Community impacts have been highlighted in main body and the risk section of this report.

7 Background Papers & Reading

7.1 Background Papers, web links and reading

7.1.1 [Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: further information on eligibility criteria and offer details - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

7.1.2 [Afghan locally employed staff relocation schemes.docx \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](http://publishing.service.gov.uk)

7.1.3 [Additional guidance on the eligibility of additional family members under the Afghan locally employed staff relocation schemes \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](http://publishing.service.gov.uk)