

From: Roger Gough, Leader
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To: **Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee – 26 July 2023**

Subject: **Update on the Afghan Resettlement and the United Kingdom Resettlement Schemes**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Electoral Division: All

Summary: The report provides an overview of the following refugee resettlement schemes being managed by Kent County Council (in partnership with the district housing authorities) and an update on the work being undertaken to inform the future support service arrangements. The schemes in scope are:

- Families still supported under the now closed Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS – nearly all Syrian refugees)
- Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP)
- Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)
- United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS – global reach)

Recommendation(s): The Cabinet Committee is asked to:

- (a) NOTE the contents of this report and
- (b) NOTE that a paper on future service options will be presented to this Cabinet Committee before the end of the year.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The report contains an update on the operation in Kent of the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), its forerunner the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS – largely for Syrian refugees) and the resettlement schemes operating for Afghans evacuated from Afghanistan under Operation Pitting in the summer of 2021 and afterwards. All the different refugee schemes operate on a self-financing basis using ring-fenced funding received from Government which means that they do not rely on direct KCC financial support.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to keep Members informed of the work KCC is doing in this area (in partnership with the district housing authorities) and also to inform the Cabinet Committee of the review work in hand which will shape the future service arrangements.

2. Background and current position

- 2.1 Kent County Council first became involved in providing support to refugees brought here under the VPRS (almost all Syrian) in 2015. Since then, KCC and the Kent housing authorities have been working in partnership to resettle Syrian and other refugees under the VPRS and, more recently, the UKRS. The housing authorities are responsible for deciding on the number of families to be resettled in their areas and on the suitability of specific properties. In ten of the twelve districts, KCC then provides coordination and liaison with the Government resettlement team and also commissions and oversees the resettlement and integration support from three commissioned providers, that is Migrant Help, Clarion and Rethink. The two exceptions are Ashford and Canterbury who provide the support from within their own housing and community teams.
- 2.2 In early 2021 the number of individuals resettled under the VPRS nationally exceeded 20,000, the original target for 2020. Although the VPRS officially ended in 2021, it merged seamlessly into the UKRS, an almost identical scheme to the VPRS but which resettles refugees from anywhere in the world.
- 2.3 The schemes for supporting Afghans allowed to resettle in the UK as a result of the change of government in Afghanistan in August 2021 include:
 - 2.3.1 Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP): for those who have worked closely with the British military or Government.
 - 2.3.2 Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS): for a wider group of individuals such as those who have assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan, stood up for values such as democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech and the rule of law, and vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk and members of minority groups.
- 2.4 All the aforementioned schemes allow those eligible to bring their immediate family with them and also confer full rights to work, study, rent, claim benefits and other public funds. Funding is made available to local authorities for resettlement and integration support (over 5 years for the UKRS and over 3 years for the ARAP and ACRS schemes). In respect of the ten districts KCC coordinates the scheme in, this funding is received by KCC.
- 2.5 To date, 115 families (approximately 600 individuals) have been resettled in Kent under the VPRS and UKRS schemes, across all districts. Of these 71 families are supported by the KCC team and their commissioned providers (the others being supported by Ashford Borough Council and Canterbury City Council). The overwhelming majority are from Syria, but other nationalities are now starting to be resettled in Kent, including from Sudan and Iraq.
- 2.6 The UKRS is still in operation and there are very many families approved and waiting to be resettled in the UK. However, due to the crisis surrounding the need to find homes for the Afghans evacuated in the summer of 2021, most properties that become available are being offered to Afghan families currently in bridging hotels across the UK.

- 2.7 The number of Afghan families settled under ARAP or ACRS is increasing month by month as homes are found for the families currently in the bridging hotels across the UK. By the time this report is considered, there are likely to be approximately 50 households (if not more) settled across Kent. An up-to-date figure will be provided at the Committee meeting.
- 2.8 In addition to supporting Afghan families into settled accommodation, the KCC Resettlement Team is also providing the wraparound support in one of the three Afghan bridging hotels in Kent, using our own internal support staff (not commissioned providers). The bridging hotels were procured by the Home Office in August/September 2021 to temporarily house Afghans who had been evacuated from Afghanistan under Operation Pitting.
- 2.9 The team dealing with Syrian refugees brought here under the VPRS, the UKRS and the Afghan schemes (ARAP and ACRS) is separate from the team dealing with Ukrainians brought here under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Both teams however sit in the same division (SPRCA) within the Chief Executive's Department and discussions are ongoing about future arrangements between the two teams.

3. Closure of the Afghan bridging hotels

- 3.1 Members will be aware that in Summer 2021 Operation Pitting evacuated about 15,000 Afghans from Afghanistan. Since then, additional arrivals of households who qualify under the official ARAP and ACRS schemes have brought the current total to about 21,000 (as at end March 2023).¹ Several thousand more are still waiting to travel to the UK.
- 3.2 In March this year the Minister for Veterans' Affairs announced that those Afghan households still being accommodated in temporary bridging accommodation (mostly hotels) would be given three months' notice to leave starting from the end of April (on a phased basis). All families have now been given notice with the end of August as the final date they can remain in the hotels (some are closing earlier). Many of the families have been in the hotels for well over 18 months, coming up to two years. There are about 60 of these hotels across the UK, 14 in the South East and 3 in Kent. It is important to note that these bridging hotels are separate to the hotels being used by the Home Office for asylum seekers.
- 3.3 Whilst many families had already moved on to settled accommodation before the announcement, there were still approximately 8,000 individuals still in what was supposed to be temporary accommodation.² The vast majority of those had not received a suitable offer of accommodation.
- 3.4 Families in the three Kent hotels have until the end of August to find alternative accommodation via either of the following routes:
- Formal offers via the Home Office (HO) after properties are submitted by local authorities across the UK;

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data>

² Ibid

- “Find Your Own Property” (FYOP) route – the families, with the help of the local authority teams are encouraged to find their own properties; some will then move to areas of the UK where there is support for long-term resettlement (e.g. Kent) but others will choose to move to areas where the local authority does not participate in the resettlement scheme – they will then just access mainstream support.
- 3.5 Supporting families with the FYOP route and with understanding the HO formal offers is now the major focus of the local authority wraparound support in the hotels, including the three hotels in Kent. A lot of very hard work has gone on and significant progress made. At the beginning of the year there were around 70 families in the three Kent hotels. At the time of writing this report, there are 42 families left, 21 families have definite property offers and will be moving soon, 10 families have indicative offers which are still in the process of being confirmed, leaving 10 families with currently no offer.
- 3.6 The Local authority teams working in the hotels (working with partners in Education, Adult Education, Children’s Services, Health, Public Health, Social Care etc) ensure that the families’ basic needs are being met, that they are accessing the usual public services and are being prepared for life in the UK. They also ensure that the transition to new areas (especially regarding schools and healthcare) is as smooth as possible. Regarding education, the hotel teams (with schools and KCC Education) have always worked hard to facilitate children moving to new schools as long-term accommodation is found. However, the hotel closure programme has exacerbated the situation (with the scale involved and deadline of end of August) and caused significant distress to some children and their families, many of whom have been in their current schools for up to two years and therefore made significant relationships. To help with this, sessions have been organised with the children to help prepare them for this change and give them an opportunity to talk about how they feel about the situation. Close liaison is maintained with the schools involved (who will lose a significant number of pupils before the new term in September) and with the receiving school, whether that is in Kent or elsewhere. KCC Education will ensure that the children are registered with a school in their new area.
- 3.7 The Government’s position is that families without anywhere to move to at the end of the notice period should make a claim for homelessness at a local authority of their choosing. The families’ preferences in this regard are being discussed so that, if it becomes necessary, applications can be made in advance of the closure date. The Government has not yet informed councils of any other contingency plans following the end date for moving from the hotels.

4. Wider resettlement and asylum context

- 4.1 There are a number of current trends which strongly suggest that, for the foreseeable future, there will be a need for a team within KCC that deals with refugee resettlement and asylum issues in Kent. This will depend, of course, on the ability to fund such a team from Government or other funding and not draw on the KCC core budget. The trends are summarised below.
- 4.2 The UNHCR has estimated that in 2023 global resettlement needs will significantly increase to 2,003,982 persons, as compared to 1,473,156 in 2022.

This increase is reflected in all regions, with the largest increase noted in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. The UNHCR has anticipated a further rise in global refugee resettlement needs for next year. According to their 'Projected Global Resettlement Needs Assessment for 2024'³ over 2.4 million refugees will be in need of resettlement, marking a 20 per cent increase compared to 2023.

- 4.3 **Afghanistan:** There are several thousand Afghans that qualify for either the ARAP or ACRS schemes who are currently outside the UK waiting for suitable properties to be sourced by local authorities. The ARAP scheme is open-ended and there is no limit or quota on the number of people eligible. The ACRS scheme aims to resettle in the UK up to 20,000 people over the coming years. It is understood that Afghan refugees accepted under the ARAP and ACRS pathways will now only come to the UK when they are matched to a property (in a similar way UKRS refugees are resettled).
- 4.4 **Ukraine:** The conflict in Ukraine is ongoing, there are already 1,397 Ukrainians (690 households) in Kent under the Homes for Ukraine scheme (i.e. living with host families) and it is anticipated that over 900 individuals may still travel to Kent under the scheme. Under the scheme individuals have Leave to Remain for 3 years so support may still be needed up to 2026 and possibly beyond depending on the trajectory of the conflict. Whilst initially those here under the scheme live with host families, significant numbers have left the scheme to move into the private rented sector as host arrangements come to an end (2,317 have left the scheme in total with 1,254 of those moving into the private rented sector). The KCC team dealing with the scheme work with district housing authorities to facilitate this and provide support to hosts in an effort to sustain the arrangements over longer periods. Further details of the Homes for Ukraine scheme can be found in the separate paper submitted to this Cabinet Committee.
- 4.5 **Hong Kong:** The government's [impact assessment](#),⁴ central range analysis estimated between 123,000 and 153,700 BN(O) status holders and their dependants coming in the first year and between 258,000 and 322,400 over five years. It is understood that as at December 2023 about 160,700 individuals had arrived under this route and estimated that there are approximately 2,700 living in Kent.⁵ Local authorities are not notified of arrivals and therefore figures can only be estimates. Whilst the role of KCC and the housing authorities does not involve the same level of intensive resettlement support as with the UKRS and Afghan schemes, KCC does administer some funding from Government to support local charities and community groups that are assisting people in Kent under the scheme.
- 4.6 **Adult Asylum Seekers:** There are developments within the system for dealing with asylum seekers who have come to the UK via irregular/unofficial routes that do have an impact on Kent, and which need to be factored into the review outlined in section 5 below. These include the current Government's programme to increase (and spread more equitably across the UK) the use of dispersed accommodation (flats, houses, room in a House of Multiple Occupation)

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>

⁴ [impact assessment](#)

⁵ Information received from the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration

in order to reduce the use of hotels. The target for the South East is to increase the number of bed spaces to about 7,000 by the end of 2023, with an allocation of about 1,300 for Kent. Whilst the numbers of adult asylum seekers (or family groups) in dispersal accommodation in Kent and the South East are nowhere near the target figures, the calculations fail to take into account the significant numbers in hotels and other contingency accommodation, the disproportionately high numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children being looked after by KCC, the high numbers of Ukrainians being supported and the significant participation in the Syrian and Afghan resettlement schemes. Robust representations on this point have already been made to the Home Office by Kent Leaders.

5. Review of the KCC team, work areas and support provision

- 5.1 The current contract under which KCC commissions the bulk of the day-to-day resettlement and integration support (apart from the hotel support) from three area-based providers will come to an end in February 2024. A decision needs to be made on whether this should be extended for a further year, whether the service should be recommissioned on a different basis or whether all the support provision should be brought in-house. Linked to this, decisions are required on linkages (or mergers) with the Homes for Ukraine team and also, potentially, other teams/individuals within KCC that deal with other schemes/issues in this area of work.
- 5.2 To inform the above decisions a full review of the team, work areas and support provision is currently being undertaken (for the ten districts that the KCC team provide the coordination, management and support for). A core feature of the review will be to ensure that any work can be managed within the funding available from Government for the various schemes, so as not to call on KCC core funding. Additionally, the ability to deal with any residual liabilities as specific schemes come to an end will be carefully considered. The review has only been made possible this year since additional staff have been employed in the team.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 The Committee is asked to note the significant achievements thus far in settling refugees in Kent, the current difficult situation with the bridging hotel closures and the work underway to make the resettlement team fit for purpose and sustainable for the future.
- 6.2 Resettlement continues to be a critical tool for refugees who face specific or urgent risks. Given the national expectation that all regions will contribute, it is anticipated that activity to support refugees (and asylum seekers) will be a significant long-term area of work and focus for the Council going forward. This will require ongoing resources, expertise and knowledge in these areas and a clear and joined up strategic approach across Kent County Council and the District Housing Authorities in Kent.

Recommendation(s): The Cabinet Committee is asked to:

- (a) NOTE the contents of this report and
(b) NOTE that a paper on future service options will be presented to this Cabinet Committee before the end of the year.

10. Contact details

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