



CABINET - 7TH JULY 2021

SUBJECT: CAERPHILLY COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL- PROPOSALS FOR ASYLUM DISPERSAL AND AFGHAN RELOCATION

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR- SOCIAL SERVICES AND HOUSING

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Of the twenty-two local authorities in Wales five are Asylum Dispersal Areas (ADA): Cardiff, Newport, Swansea, Wrexham and Conwy. A recent approach has been made by the Home Office, working with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, and through Welsh Government, for more local authorities to participate in the scheme to alleviate pressures in the asylum system and share the role across other local authorities in Wales.
- 1.2 This report considers the implications of the local authority becoming an ADA and makes a number of recommendations to manage the implementation of the scheme, proposing a gradual start and a review after 12 months.
- 1.3 In addition a more recent request has been made to consider the relocation of Afghan nationals employed by the UK government in Afghanistan, primarily due to the instability caused by the imminent withdrawal of US troops by September 2021 and risks to life. The report considers the implications of participation in this scheme also.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report summarises the positive experience of settling refugee families that the authority has been involved in since 2015, through the UK Resettlement Scheme. While the status of asylum seekers is different to refugees, there is a degree of similarity in the case management processes, albeit that, for asylum seekers, this is the responsibility of the commissioned provider, Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH). CRH are responsible for the provision of accommodation and support and signposting service users to third sector support.
- 2.2 An 'in principle' agreement has been given for the local authority to step forward as an ADA, the report examines the implications further and makes recommendations for a 'start small and evaluate' approach to participating in this Home Office scheme. Information is given on how the scheme operates and the experience of the five local authorities in Wales who are already involved.

- 2.3 The situation for Afghan nationals employed by the UK government is an immediate one, however the scheme is different again to the UK Resettlement Scheme and the Asylum Dispersal Scheme. The distinctions between each and the implications for the participation of the local authority are considered and drawn out in the recommendations. However, it should be noted that any further discussion on this scheme should not be the subject of public reports.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee's views were sought on the local authority's participation in the Home Office Asylum Dispersal Scheme and the relocation of Afghan nationals formerly employed by the UK Forces in Afghanistan. The comments of committee are reflected in the Consultation section of this report.

Asylum Dispersal

- 3.2 Two options are proposed:

1. Participate fully in the scheme once the decision is taken
2. Begin with a smaller number (5) family properties and evaluate the success after 12 months

- 3.3 The view of officers, based on discussions with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, the Home Office, Clearsprings Ready Homes, and the other Welsh local authorities who already participate is that **Option 2** is the preferred option.

Relocation of Afghan Nationals

- 3.4 The Home Office request is to relocate Afghan staff immediately, with the case management support being provided by the local authority on a funded basis for 4 months after arrival. Given that we are proposing to embark on asylum dispersal it may be too difficult to commit to Afghan relocation at the same time. Primarily because we will need to set up new systems and internal policies for asylum dispersal and it would place additional pressure on our private sector housing supply. However, it may be possible to look again at this request within a few months.

- 3.5 The officer recommendation is that Cabinet stay abreast of the situation for Afghan national relocation over the summer months and extend the support if the capacity of services and available housing supply can absorb this scheme. Any agreement to participate should not be the subject of public reports.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 The local authority has had a positive experience of assisting with the settlement of refugee families from Syria and Cabinet decided in September last year to continue with the successor UK Resettlement Scheme, which will settle refugee families from other regions in the world. The scheme, although not without its day to day case management difficulties, has allowed learning on the issues faced by displaced people that can be used in assisting with asylum dispersal.

- 4.2 There are significant pressures in the asylum system with a larger number of people waiting for accommodation due to the pandemic. In addition, the required capacity has been carried by a small number of local authorities in Wales until now. Across the UK, the Home Office, accommodation providers and local government have

committed to achieving the participation of more local authorities to alleviate the disparities in the system. For humanitarian and ethical reasons, the request to participate has been given an 'in principle' agreement at this time.

- 4.3 In relation to Afghan relocation, there is an imminent threat to the individuals involved and should be looked at again, before the end of the summer, if services are able to commit to providing the support and housing supply will be able to support an additional scheme.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 The authority has been involved in the resettlement of Syrian refugee families since late 2015 at the request of the Home Office and in response to the humanitarian crisis facing people displaced by the war in Syria. Since that time 7 families comprising 35 individuals have been settled in the county borough. The local authority receives direct funding, tapering over 5 years, from the Home Office to support integration in communities, with resettled families being granted Refugee Leave status giving them the right to work and claim benefits. Families have been resettled at a rate and volume which has been at the discretion of the local authority. The main hurdle to settling more families has been the lack of suitable accommodation in the private rented sector

In addition, Children's Services Social Services Teams are involved in a regional response to providing accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children under the National Transfer Scheme from arrival local authorities, mainly in the South East of England.

- 5.2 In February this year the Deputy Minister asked, at the behest of the Home Office, for a widening of asylum dispersal in Wales. Welsh Government declared 'Nation of Sanctuary' status for Wales to welcome people through safe and legal routes who need help on humanitarian grounds to rebuild their lives. Currently five of the twenty-two local authorities are asylum dispersal areas, with Newport, Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham having been working on asylum dispersal for many years. There are significant pressures in the asylum system and as of December last year 2996 asylum seekers were accommodated in Wales with the majority, 1441, in Cardiff. Limited movement through the system due to the pandemic and the location of asylum seekers in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation at the old Penally Barracks in Pembrokeshire had prompted discussion with local authority Leaders and Chief Executives on widening the support among more local authorities for reasons of fairness and equity, and to alleviate pressure in the system. A few local authorities have entered into the discussion positively and Caerphilly Council gave an 'in principle' agreement to becoming an ADA working in partnership with the Home Office, as a coordinated and proactive approach was felt to be preferable.
- 5.3 Since that time officers have been meeting with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP) - the Home Office funded support coordination team based at the WLGA, the Home Office and their commissioned provider Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH) to understand what the implications would be for the local authority and services in becoming an ADA. In addition, discussions have been held on an all-Wales basis and with the current areas directly to further understand the practicalities of the scheme. The recommendations in this report have been informed by those discussions.

5.4 **The Asylum Seeker Process and Support**

In widening dispersal, the Home Office preferred option is to work in partnership with local authorities to agree the number and location of properties on a voluntary basis, although there is a legal ability for the Home office to mandate dispersal in an area under immigration legislation. Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH) have a 10-year contract, from 2019, to source properties and provide the case management support for asylum seekers whilst they are awaiting a decision on their claim from the Home Office. Another contract, with Migrant Help, provides a 24-hour advice and assistance helpline and assists asylum seekers navigate the asylum process and helps them after decision whether positive or negative.

- 5.5 While asylum seekers are in the system, if they are destitute, they are provided with accommodation and sufficient money (£37.75 per week) to maintain themselves, although some are self-funded and may have their own accommodation or receive support from family and friends.
- 5.6 The process is that CRH will find suitable properties in the local authority but will do so by working with Housing services to understand the need in an area before approval. Only landlords registered with Rent Smart Wales are accepted. From the perspective of the local authority we are able to work with Gwent Police to discuss the proposed property and can refuse to accept a proposal if there are reasonable grounds. Although the Immigration Act does give UK Visas and Immigration powers to override this, in practice they prefer to work with a local authority to find solutions. The local authority is able to influence whether the property is used for single individuals or families, it can also be inspected by our staff at any time. If a property is found but is unsuitable it will be notified to our Housing services so that they may consider it as an option for homelessness prevention. There may be a need to use contingency accommodation if pressures in the system become too great, however, the local authority will receive early notification if this is ever the case.
- 5.7 There is a shortage of good quality private rented accommodation across the county borough. Currently the available social rented stock cannot accommodate all households in need of accommodation. Local authority homelessness duties can be discharged through private rented sector accommodation and there is competition from other agencies for properties. Negotiating the location of properties with Housing services, and the officer recommendation to start with five family properties only will allow a proper assessment after 12 months.
- 5.8 All people seeking asylum go through security screening checks. CRH are in regular contact with people in asylum accommodation and manage housing and address any issues at the property with support as appropriate from Migrant Help. People seeking asylum readily respect UK laws (note- not to do so will affect their application) and receive induction briefings on rights and responsibilities and UK laws at the initial accommodation in Cardiff. Most people will spend some time in initial accommodation, before being dispersed to the participating local authorities in Wales.
- 5.9 School age children have a right to education. Although a large proportion of people are over 18 and well educated and wish to study in the UK. Generally, asylum seekers are not allowed to work but can do so if they have been here for 12 months or more and possess skills on a shortage occupations list. They are allowed to volunteer and many do with support from third sector partners.
- 5.10 After assessment, for anyone granted asylum status/refugee protection, they then have the right to work and claim benefits, they are also able to ask for housing

support from the local authority if they meet the requirements. For any refusals there is an appeals process and they will be supported by the Home Office and remain in accommodation until that concludes. For families with children that support continues until the youngest child is 18 and therefore, they could remain in accommodation for some time. The UK government is, however, developing a New Plan for Immigration and there may be changes to the way in which support is given.

- 5.11 In relation to the numbers of people who may be housed in a local authority the maximum proportion is 1:200 residents. This equates to 889 for the county borough but UK Visas and Immigration have stated that there is no intention to procure anywhere near that number of properties. Initially two flats, suitable for family occupation, have been identified but not yet progressed pending decision.
- 5.12 The location of properties will be negotiated with Housing staff as explained in 5.6 and there will be an option to notify local ward members. There may not be an option to make a refusal unless the grounds are reasonable i.e. based on the advice of Housing staff or Gwent Police. Notifying ward members will prepare them to answer any questions and provide any support required. Drawing a parallel with the current Syrian resettlement programme, ward members are not notified of addresses just arrivals in their constituency. The reason being to allow people to settle in the area as any other family or individual would and not to single them out or draw attention to their arrival in the country or the county borough. However, recognising that the asylum dispersal system is a different situation the address of selected properties will be made known to ward members. A member's seminar took place on the 28th of June to support the proposed decision to move ahead with becoming an ADA and provide a background awareness for all members.
- 5.13 **The experience of other Welsh local authorities**
In preparing the recommendations above information has been gathered from the other participating areas on how working on asylum dispersal operates in practice. In summary the responses were positive and reflect that good working relationships exist with the managed provider, Clearsprings Ready Homes. Some pressures on housing supply were noted but largely these can be absorbed. Many people leave the area once they are granted status, this was noted in the more rural authorities.
- 5.14 People in the asylum system are a mixture of families (approx.40%) and single individuals (approx.60%). The approach taken by Conwy, a relatively new ADA, is to begin with family properties. In discussion with CRH this would seem like a sensible option for Caerphilly also.

5.15 **Conclusion**

Participation in the Syrian Resettlement Programme/Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and its successor the UK Resettlement Scheme has been largely positive for the local authority and has supported 35 displaced people to make their homes in the county borough. Two parents have begun nursing degrees, another family have started a local launderette business, with the help of the provider commissioned by the local authority, Displaced People in Action.

Asylum Dispersal is also supported by managed contracts, with Clearsprings Ready Homes and Migrant Help, and while there will be additional pressure on housing supply the recommendation to start small and evaluate after 12 months will provide assurance that asylum seeking families can be absorbed within the capacity of services. Should the Asylum Dispersal Scheme go well consideration can be given to

working in partnership with the Home Office to bring more properties in the private rented sector online and the extension of the scheme to asylum seeking individuals.

The situation for Afghan employees of the UK government is acute and we understand the expectation is that 3000 individuals are due to arrive in the UK before the end of June. While the decision on asylum dispersal is pending any decision on Afghan Relocation should be held off for a very short period but looked at again before the end of the summer- note, not the subject of public reports for the safety of the people involved.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 The participation in the UK Resettlement Scheme and the Asylum Dispersal Scheme assumes that suitable properties will be available in the private rented sector. One of the main barriers to date to settling more refugee families, aside from the pandemic, has been the lack of suitable affordable properties, well located next to schools. Officers seek properties regularly and we understand that the Home Office provider for asylum dispersal, Clearsprings Ready Home will do the same. Five family homes are recommended for the first 12-month period. It may not be possible to achieve that number.

7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 The authority has a successful track record of settling refugee families under schemes that have been in existence since 2015. On humanitarian grounds the authority should provide support to asylum seekers by working in partnership with Home Office and its contracted provider. Participation the scheme has been by a few authorities in Wales and local government has been encouraged to come forward and assist for many years. Asylum seekers are one of the most vulnerable groups in society, who are likely to have suffered significant disadvantage in their home countries. The validity of claims is assessed by the Home Office and the system seeks to support people while their claim is being assessed.

Hyperlink to full IIA:

https://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/CaerphillyDocs/IIA/IIA_Asylum_Dispersal_June2021

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Unlike the UK Resettlement Scheme, which supports refugee families and is fully funded by the Home Office, there is no additional financial support for local authorities that are ADAs. Welsh Government continue to lobby on this issue on behalf of the ADAs in Wales. All accommodation and weekly cash support are provided by the Home Office and no funding passes through local authority hands.
- 8.2 There will inevitably be additional pressures on services in managing any case related work that will fall to the local authority, this is not easily quantified and the make-up of families and particular issues faced by asylum seekers will not be known prior to arrival in the county borough. To mitigate the effect on local authority services referral to CRH and Migrant Help would be the first port of call. Asylum seeking families who arrive with children are entitled to education and this will need to be managed within school capacity. English language acquisition has proved to be a hurdle for refugee parents. Children are supported in schools through the Gwent

Ethnic Minority Service (GEMS). For refugee families additional language teaching and GEMS support has been commissioned. For asylum seeking families there is no funding that will allow this and so these needs will have to be met within existing budgets, where possible.

- 8.3 Corporate Management Team, have given a commitment to fund a 12-month Policy Officer post, through reserves, working 3-days a week to set up the systems, policies, process and procedures to allow the local authority to become an asylum dispersal area. The total cost of the post is £27,296 per year.
- 8.4 The officer recommendation is to start with 5 family properties in the first year and reassess the scheme before working in partnership to bring more properties on-line. This should allow a managed consideration of the full implications on internal services i.e. Housing, Social Services and Education. It may be possible to refer some support needs to some of the funded programmes that already operate in the local authority, specifically; Supporting People, Families First and Flying Start. Other third sector support may be available. Welsh Government fund the Welsh Refugee Council to provide support and one of the first tasks of the Policy Officer will be to build up these networks of funded and third sector support to minimise any additional impacts on mainstream services.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 A part time fixed term post has been created in the Policy and Partnerships Team to provide additional capacity to set up the systems and processes to support participation as an Asylum Dispersal Area.

10. CONSULTATIONS

- 10.1 Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee met on the 23rd of June and received input from the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes, the commissioned provider. Council officers from Housing and Policy & Partnerships were also in attendance to answer questions.

The scrutiny committee were very supportive of and sympathetic to the plight of Asylum seekers and the importance of providing support to people who have suffered very difficult lives and experiences.

Members sought clarity on whether the Council will receive additional funding to support the families and were advised that the financial section of the report shows that the council will not receive any additional funding. However, the Home Office has contracts to manage the housing allocation issues and support for Asylum Seekers through providers such as Clearsprings Ready Homes. Welsh Government also provides Asylum Seeker Refuge Support Contracts which the Council can assist with referrals into.

The scrutiny committee were advised that there are regular meetings with Welsh Government with the Home Office and assurance is needed that the need for local authority funding to support asylum seekers is high on the agenda.

The availability of support for families was queried, whether there are any access barriers, it is important that the location of properties chosen takes into account this and are easily accessible for services. The benefit of starting small with a few families will allow this scheme to develop.

Members felt it was very important to ensure the public understand that refugees have experienced terrible situations and the need to counter misleading social media assertions. For example, asylum seekers will be provided with council housing, Members were assured that is not the case and housing will be sought through the private rented sector.

Members asked that the council emphasise that the arrangements, if approved, are clearly explained to the public. It was suggested that case studies showing the experiences of real families would make the needs of asylum seekers more easily understood to the public. The committee were advised that there are plans in place to develop a list of frequently asked questions for the website and a piece of work with Communications Team to explain the need for this support. An offer was received from the Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership to assist with this.

The scrutiny committee heard a personal account of one Member who has visited Afghanistan and saw first-hand the work carried out by Afghan interpreters supporting the British Armed Forces. Members asked that Cabinet closely monitor the situation for Afghans who need to relocate and wished to express their support as there is a debt owed to people who have provided support to our troops. Members were advised that although there is currently a 4-month financial support package for this scheme representations have been made to extend this further.

Members also heard from one Member of the work done in the Aber Valley to welcome and assist Vietnamese refugees following the Vietnam war and how important it was to provide that support.

Members supported the proposal to start with a small number of families and learn and develop the service going forward.

11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 Local Government Acts. Immigration Act 1999

Author: Kathryn Peters. Corporate Policy Manager, peterk@caerphilly.gov.uk

Consultees: Cllr Philippa Marsden, Leader of the Council
Cllr Lisa Phipps, Cabinet Member for Housing
Cllr James Pritchard, Chair of Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee
Cllr Gez Kirby, Vice-chair of Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee
Christina Harrhy, Chief Executive
Dave Street, Corporate Director, Social Services and Housing
Ed Edmunds, Corporate Director, Education and Corporate Services
Sue Richards, Head of Education Planning and Strategy
Rob Tranter, Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer
Steve Harris, Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer
Keri Cole, Chief Education Officer

Sarah Ellis, Lead for Inclusion and ALN
Gareth Jenkins, Assistant Director- Head of Children's Services
Jo Williams, Assistant Director- Head of Adult Services
Fiona Wilkins, Housing Services Manager
Kerry Denman, Housing Solutions Manager
Claire Davies, Private Sector Housing Manager
Paul Cooke, Senior Policy Officer, Policy and Partnerships
Sonya Foley, Policy Officer
Kath Thomas, Policy Officer
Chris Hunt, Regional Community Cohesion Officer
Anne Hubbard, Wales Strategic Migration Partnership