

## **Cabinet**

**12 October 2022**

**Humanitarian Support in County  
Durham**



## **Ordinary Decision**

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### **Report of Corporate Management Team**

**Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and  
Climate Change**

**Councillor Alan Shield, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Equality and  
Inclusion**

### **Electoral division(s) affected:**

Countywide.

### **Purpose of the Report**

- 1 To provide an update on County Durham's support for vulnerable individuals and families under Government schemes to assist refugee resettlement, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, Afghan resettlement and relocation programmes and the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme and to confirm the Council's future approach.
- 2 To inform Cabinet of changes to mandate all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales to participate in a new system of full asylum accommodation dispersal, the development of a regional plan of anticipated asylum dispersal into local authority areas and the implications for County Durham.

### **Executive summary**

- 3 The scale of the global humanitarian challenge has resulted in the UK facing significant demands for humanitarian support and Government requests for local authority pledges to assist the UK's effort.
- 4 Following significant developments globally and nationally, the county is now engaged in five different programmes delivering refugee and asylum support, some developed at speed in response to global emergencies.

- 5 The Council's support structure has developed to provide capacity to deliver the increasing number of Government schemes, including two new programmes to assist individuals arriving from Afghanistan, the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme, as well as the UK's global resettlement scheme which provides aid to the world's most vulnerable refugees and a national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).
- 6 The UK's asylum system is also under significant pressure, with thousands of asylum seekers in contingency accommodation, including hotels. As a result, earlier this year, the Government confirmed that all local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales will be expected to participate in a new system of full dispersal to enable a move from hotels to less expensive, more suitable dispersed accommodation.
- 7 The scale and global challenge of providing appropriate humanitarian support to those in need is recognised and has recently been emphasised by the compassionate response of County Durham residents in offering refuge to individuals and families fleeing the war in Ukraine. The UK's response significantly increases pressures on local authorities and partners and work is ongoing within Government to assess the burdens being placed on areas.
- 8 As migration and asylum programmes develop further in response to Government pressures and expectations, key decisions are required to confirm the Council's approach.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 9 Cabinet is recommended to:
  - (a) agree the establishment of two partnership working groups; County Durham Migration and Cohesion Multi Agency Group, to act as the forum for asylum support in the county; and a Refugee and Resettlement Working Group, to focus on relevant programmes;
  - (b) note the challenges in providing placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, particularly given the increased threshold that the county could be requested to accommodate, and a reduction in the transfer deadline for unaccompanied children accommodated in hotels;
  - (c) agree expansion of the county's resettlement programme to accommodate three phases each year when capacity allows;

- (d) agree that future phases of resettlement support should, where possible, continue to focus on working with social landlords and aim to resettle refugees in main towns;
- (e) agree that the Council should not opt into the Afghan Find Your Own Accommodation pathway at this time;
- (f) agree the introduction of a private sector incentive scheme for Homes for Ukraine arrivals, to reduce the impact on the Council's homeless service and overcome barriers in offering accommodation;
- (g) to note the update on Hong Kong British National (Overseas) status holders;
- (h) to note that Mears has commenced efforts to secure properties in County Durham to accommodate asylum seekers as part of the Government's efforts to disperse asylum seekers in a more proportionate way across the country;
- (i) agree that the first priority for utilisation of the funding allocated to support the asylum accommodation programme should be targeted at developing the community and voluntary sector infrastructure to assist asylum seekers dispersed to accommodation in County Durham.

## **Background**

- 10 When County Durham's contribution to the Government's humanitarian support effort was agreed in 2015, the Council and its partners were focused on delivering a single scheme providing resettlement support to the world's most vulnerable families, initially concentrating on refugees arriving from the Syrian conflict. As a result of significant developments in the migration and asylum landscape globally and nationally, the county is now engaged in five different programmes delivering refugee and asylum support, some developed at speed in response to a global emergency.
- 11 As extensively reported in the media, the scale of global challenges has resulted in the UK facing increased requests for humanitarian support. In trying to deal with these pressures, the Government is seeking increased support from local authorities.
- 12 The Council's humanitarian support offer is co-ordinated within the Partnerships and Community Engagement Service in Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and also includes a dedicated staffing resource supporting the programme within the Council's Housing Solutions, Employability and Education (EAL) teams. The support structure has developed to provide capacity to deliver Government programmes, including the time-limited workload associated with the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme.
- 13 As migration and asylum programmes develop further in response to Government pressures and expectations, a number of key decisions are required to confirm the Council's approach.

## **Governance of the programme**

- 14 In 2015 County Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership was established to ensure a joined-up approach which promoted cross-service and agency working, social cohesion and engagement with communities. It was agreed that the Partnership would be part of the wider County Durham Partnership framework. The Partnership set the strategic direction for the county's participation in humanitarian support schemes, whilst a partnership working group was established to plan effective delivery.
- 15 The Partnership last met in 2017, where it agreed principles for the delivery of a preferred approach to humanitarian support in the county via resettlement programmes, including:
  - (a) resettling arrivals in the county's main towns/areas, avoiding isolation in smaller villages and settlements. The first year review of resettlement agreed that some larger villages and areas with

good access and transport links to the City centre should also be considered, in consultation with partners to confirm suitability;

- (b) assisting family groups, who are more likely to support one another and settle within County Durham's communities;
  - (c) resettling arrivals in clusters of small family groups, offering a self-supporting mechanism within communities.
- 16 Since establishing these principles, decisions on the approach have been delegated to the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, as agreed by Cabinet. Although the Partnership has not met since 2017, the Council has continuously engaged with partners to seek their views and involvement in the delivery of support through a humanitarian support working group.
- 17 As the programme expands, and the need to engage with and consult partners continues, it is proposed that two separate working groups be established through which to channel key information and make recommendations for delegated decisions to the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, or by Cabinet where key decisions are considered.
- 18 As part of the Council's engagement in the asylum accommodation programme, County Durham Migration and Cohesion Multi Agency Group will be established, in line with the recommendations for good practice established by the North East Migration Partnership (NEMP). This group should be the forum for information sharing and to help steer local strategies, policies and plans in County Durham, to help co-ordinate the county's response to supporting asylum seekers. Details of this programme are provided in the final section of this report.
- 19 The issues and challenges for those with an immigration decision/status are different to those experienced by the asylum cohort. It is therefore proposed that a separate partnership working group should focus on refugee and resettlement programmes. A working group is already established to consider the county's response to the Homes for Ukraine scheme and it is suggested that the remit of the group be expanded to include all refugee and resettlement programmes.

### **Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)**

- 20 The Council's Children and Young People's Service continues to receive requests for placements under the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC).

- 21 The NTS was introduced in July 2016 to try to achieve a more balanced distribution of UASC across the UK. Following consultation, on 23 November 2021 local authorities were mandated to participate in the NTS, since which time, and in common with other councils, Durham has received children to accommodate. The allocation to areas is calculated based on the number of Looked after Children, the child population and the number of dispersed asylum seekers within an area. On the basis that at the time of writing the County has received no dispersed asylum cases, our proportion of the regional allocation is relatively high and is resulting in some challenges to find suitable placements.
- 22 With more than 3,700 unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK in 2021, a significant increase on the previous year, pressures on the NTS are increasing, with some children remaining in hotels. On 24 August 2022, the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration wrote to local authorities confirming changes to the NTS, with immediate effect.
- 23 The 10 working day transfer deadline, as set out in the NTS Protocol, has been reduced to five working days for all transfers of UASC not currently in the care of a local authority, i.e. those children temporarily accommodated in hotels. The target of 10 working days for NTS transfers between local authorities will remain.
- 24 Local authorities will be provided with an additional £2,000 per month for each child who is transferred from a hotel within five working days to local authority care. This funding will be provided for three months.
- 25 The operating threshold above which a local authority is no longer expected to receive UASC via the NTS and may refer new arrivals for transfer elsewhere has been increased from 0.07% to 0.1% of a local authority's general child population. Updated allocations taking account of this change are awaited. For County Durham, the threshold will be 101 children/young people, an increase from 71 children under the 0.07% threshold.
- 26 A local authority is allocated £114 per child per night for an eligible UASC in its care who has not transferred under the NTS. A higher rate of £143 per child per day is payable to those authorities that are above their threshold and also applies to children who have transferred under the National Transfer Scheme.
- 27 Concerns about the pace of referrals have been raised with the Home Office by NEMP and other strategic migration partnerships and feedback provided on the difficulties local authorities face in sourcing placements for children under 16 and young people who are age

disputed. Around 20% of all mandated referrals were for children under 16 and 35% were age disputed.

- 28 Commissioning Officers from County Durham, Newcastle and Redcar and Cleveland have worked jointly on options to increase capacity to support UASC, looking to identify prioritised and costed actions.
- 29 NEMP recently successfully bid for Home Office Exceptional Costs Funding to deliver a region-wide marketing and communications plan, with the aim of increasing the number of UASC foster carers in the region.
- 30 In addition to children distributed to Council areas through the NTS, in July 2022 local authorities were advised that the Home Office Ukraine Taskforce was implementing a scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Ukraine. There were approximately 1,000 unaccompanied children from Ukraine requiring care and support in the system at that time.
- 31 The scheme is open to children and young people under 18 years who are unaccompanied or with relatives. Hosts should be known to the families and parents of the children must provide written consent. In exceptional circumstances, e.g. where the child/young person is travelling with a relative who is not their legal guardian, there may be no prior relationship with a host.
- 32 The Home Office expectation is for children's social care to treat the sponsorship as a private fostering arrangement. The humanitarian support team and CYPS are working together on a process to consider applications and support the arrival of eligible children under the Homes for Ukraine scheme.
- 33 The Minister's letter on 24 August confirmed that unaccompanied minors arriving under Homes for Ukraine will not be included in the county's UASC threshold.

### **United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS)**

- 34 The Council has been supporting vulnerable families under Government resettlement schemes since May 2016, when the county welcomed its first refugee arrivals. The resettlement scheme initially focused on supporting those fleeing conflict in Syria; but was later expanded to the Middle East and North Africa.
- 35 A model for resettling refugee arrivals in County Durham was developed by services and partners, recognising the county's distinctive characteristics, including the challenges presented by smaller and rural

communities, the lack of diversity in many areas and communities and the lack of established infrastructure and support mechanisms.

- 36 The partnership-focused approach to resettlement, recommended by County Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership and agreed by the Council, agreed some key principles:
- (a) resettling arrivals in the county's main towns/areas, avoiding isolation in smaller villages and settlements (a scheme review recommended larger villages/areas with good access and transport links to the city centre should also be considered, in consultation with partners to confirm suitability);
  - (b) assisting family groups, who are more likely to support one another and settle within County Durham's communities;
  - (c) resettling arrivals in clusters of small family groups, offering self-support within communities.
- 37 A phased approach has been adopted, welcoming arrivals to the county in two main phases each year. Each phase comprises of 5-6 families, approximately 25-30 individuals. This allows effective programme planning, enabling the Council to arrange accommodation in appropriate areas and provide the full range of resettlement support services during the first year, including education, English language, employability and resettlement support, and ensures best value from allocated funding.
- 38 Cabinet's commitment to support between 250 and 300 vulnerable refugees by 2020/21 has been delivered, with the county resettling 60 families, comprising 280 individuals, from Syria, Iraq and Sudan. Families resettled in 2016 and 2017 have been resident in the county for five years and have been supported to access legal advice and gain leave to remain in the UK.
- 39 In 2020 the UK consolidated the resettlement programmes into a global United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS). The scheme was delayed because of the pandemic, with the first refugees arriving in 2021. The UKRS broadens the geographical focus beyond the Middle East and North Africa region, offering a swift response to international crises in coordination with global partners. The continued priority is to resettle the world's most vulnerable refugees and target those greatest in need of assistance, identified and referred by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR has the global mandate to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees.



- 40 UKRS is a fully funded scheme, with a tariff of £20,520 per person over a five year period, with separate funding available for education and health and to meet exceptional costs. The funding has been used to establish a support team to deliver a full integration and support programme, including bilingual support, and to meet the costs of other associated provision.
- 41 In January 2020 Cabinet agreed County Durham's participation in the UKRS over four years following the conclusion of current resettlement schemes, proportionate with the county's share of the national population, which at the time was estimated to be in the region of 200 people over four years. In March 2021, the county welcomed its first UKRS family, with a further phase of six families resettled in the county during January-March 2022. The global pandemic, travelling restrictions and the emergency response to the Afghanistan evacuation have restricted the county's aim to support refugees in two phases each year in 2020 and 2021, a situation repeated in other council areas.
- 42 In June 2022 the Minister for Refugees wrote to local authority Chief Executives to request local government pledges of support for the UK resettlement scheme, as well as Afghans in bridging hotels and Afghans expected to arrive this year. The North East Migration Partnership has been asked to explore interest with individual local authorities for the forthcoming year, accepting that the Ukraine crisis has created increased capacity challenges around housing, inspection and support provision.

### **Afghan schemes - Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)**

- 43 In June 2021 local authorities were asked to help with the resettlement of people fleeing Afghanistan following the British military evacuation. The initial request was to support the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) to relocate former locally employed staff working with the British military or Government throughout July and August 2021. A smaller number of arrivals have continued to arrive since then, with the Home Office supporting approximately 150-200 people arriving each week on military flights in 2022.
- 44 The ACRS scheme will provide up to 20,000 women, children and others at risk with a safe and legal route to settle in the UK. It will prioritise those who have assisted UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for UK values such as democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech and rule of law; and vulnerable people such as women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups (including ethnic/religious minorities and LGBT).

- 45 There are approximately 12,000 Afghans in bridging hotels, with approximately 10,500 requiring accommodation. There are no bridging hotels in the North East currently, but different hotels may be needed as the Home Office closes hotels at the end of contracts and reconfigures the accommodation estate.
- 46 County Durham welcomed six families, comprising 36 individuals, between August and November 2021. A further family arrived in the county, to join family members, in April 2022.
- 47 Both Afghan schemes are funded, with a tariff of £20,520 per person over a three year period, with separate funding available for education and health and to meet exceptional costs. The Council's support team has delivered a full integration and support programme, including bilingual support, as part of its resettlement offer.
- 48 There have been challenges regionally and nationally as a result of families declining properties offered to them, with a preference to be located in major cities. In response, over the summer the Home Office introduced a new matching process to move arrivals from hotels. This includes consultation with families prior to allocation, followed by a maximum of two accommodation offers, after which the family will be given 56 days' notice to leave the hotel.
- 49 Families who refuse two offers will be part of a regional allocation to homeless services. Based on present numbers, it is anticipated that County Durham will receive approximately four families as part of this allocation.
- 50 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has recently developed a Find Your Own Accommodation pathway. The pathway formalises a process for Afghan families to find their own private rented accommodation without losing support from the Council via integration tariff funding.
- 51 Councils have been asked to consider opting into the pathway and agree, in principle, to allow Afghan families to make enquiries about finding accommodation, with the Council supporting them once they move to the area.
- 52 The Find Your Own Accommodation pathway does not fit with the Council's operational approach to concentrate a complete refugee support service, including integration and bilingual assistance, ESOL and English as an Additional Language (EAL) support to schools, within a specific area. It may present difficulties in ensuring appropriate support, given the size and rural nature of the county and is not considered appropriate at this time although this will be kept under review.

53 In addition to the pathway request, in June 2022 the Minister for Refugees wrote to local authority Chief Executives to request local government pledges of support for Afghans in bridging hotels and for Afghans expected to arrive this year. This request would enable the Council to co-ordinate the arrivals in terms of timing and locations and would fit with the Council's operational approach to supporting refugees.

## **Government support for Ukraine**

54 In response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, in March 2022 the Government announced two schemes to support Ukrainians to come to the UK. Each scheme has different eligibility criteria, conditions and associated support.

55 The Ukraine Family Scheme allows family members of British nationals, UK settled persons and certain others to come to or stay in the UK. It is a free scheme which allows individuals to live, work and study in the UK and access public funds. It is anticipated that arrivals will be supported by family members in the UK and there is no formal role or funding for local authorities to undertake checks or to support arriving guests. At 30 August 2022, 50,600 visas had been issued across the UK through this scheme.

56 Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme offers a route to Ukrainian citizens who are 18 or older (under 18 with a parent or legal guardian joining them in the UK) to move to the UK when matched with a named sponsor who can provide accommodation. The scheme relies on members of the public hosting individuals and families and the Government encouraged the general public to take part by offering a spare room or property to accommodate Ukrainian citizens for at least six months. At 30 August, 130,200 visas have been issued throughout the UK on this scheme. In County Durham, there are 248 sponsors matched with 517 guests and 431 guests have arrived to 186 sponsors/households.

57 It is a unique sponsorship arrangement under which local authorities are responsible for undertaking DBS checks on sponsors and accommodation inspections and providing support to arrivals, for which the Council receives funding of £10,500 per arrival to cover local authority costs. Separate funding is also provided to education to support arriving children and young people. A safeguarding panel has been established, with representatives from the Council's Partnerships Service, Adult and Children's social care and Durham Police and meets twice weekly to monitor all checks and safeguarding issues.

58 The Homes for Ukraine scheme is co-ordinated by the Partnerships and Community Engagement Service in Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the dedicated staffing resource supporting refugee arrivals

within the Council's Housing Solutions Service has been expanded to deliver the Council's responsibilities under the scheme, including wrap-around support to guests.

- 59 A Homes for Ukraine partnership working group has been established with key partners and services, chaired by the Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement. Representation includes health, education, housing, police, adult services, children's services, DWP and employability, social housing providers, Durham University and the voluntary and community sector.
- 60 A challenge in supporting some guests is the impact of changes in circumstances which result in situations where a sponsorship arrangement ends, for a range of reasons, and the subsequent difficulties of assisting guests to identify a rematch sponsor.
- 61 The support team has contacted all potential sponsors who registered an interest in the scheme but who have not progressed to match with a guest. The response has been relatively low, with 33 potential sponsors progressing through DBS and property checks.
- 62 The scheme was based on a commitment to provide accommodation for guests for a minimum of six months. As the six month anniversary approaches, it is anticipated that a significant number of requests for assistance with move-on accommodation, where individuals are unable to remain with their current host, will present.
- 63 The support team has contacted sponsors to clarify intentions, and support staff are being trained to deliver housing and move-on advice. However, it is recognised that other options will be needed to alleviate potentially significant pressure on the Council's homeless service.
- 64 Work is ongoing with Durham University, a key partner on the working group, and it is hoped to secure a small number of self-contained apartments to assist with sponsorship breakdowns and avoid use of temporary homeless accommodation.
- 65 The homelessness prevention route allows anyone applying as homeless to be offered a priority banding 56 days before the household would be asked to leave, potentially providing time to secure alternative accommodation. However, there may be insufficient supply of accommodation in the area of choice, e.g. where arrivals have established links and children are attending school. For individuals where the sponsor placement fails and who are not afforded 56 days to source alternative accommodation, providing temporary accommodation would be the only option.

- 66 Social accommodation is limited and there are large numbers already in priority bands. The private sector may therefore be a feasible option. The challenges are replicated nationally, with a DLUHC task and finish group specifically focused on this area and discussions ongoing to explore private sector options and initiatives.
- 67 The Housing Solutions service operates a private landlord incentive scheme to encourage tenancies in County Durham for former criminal justice clients. This scheme has been successful in securing 50 private rented sector tenancies in the past 9 months. A similar model is being considered for the county's homeless cohort. An early intervention scheme for guests arriving under the Homes for Ukraine scheme would offer an option to prevent a homeless individual/family. The scheme could include funding for:
- One off financial incentives;
  - Funding for rent in advance;
  - Cash bonds;
  - Guaranteed rent for agreed period;
  - Funding for minor upgrades to make accommodation available, e.g. minor repairs;
  - Personalisation pot to help with access to travel to viewings, new school uniforms etc.;
  - Further support offer (this may be in addition to support staff working on Homes for Ukraine scheme).
- 68 Homes for Ukraine funding could be utilised to provide a per household contribution to an incentive scheme, enabling support to be tailored to the needs of the household and to address individual landlord concerns. It is proposed that a maximum contribution of £1,000 per household be allocated to overcome difficulties and barriers in accessing the private rented sector for arrivals.

## **Hong Kong British National Overseas**

- 69 British National Overseas BN(O) is an immigration status created for Hong Kong nationals who were able to apply for the status for a period of 10 years prior to the handover of Hong Kong to China. In response to unrest in Hong Kong, the Government relaxed immigration restrictions for those with BN(O) status, effective from 1 February 2021, to allow individuals to come to the UK to work, live and study on a pathway to citizenship.

- 70 The grant of the BN(O) visa comes with the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition attached and it is expected that BN(O) status holders should be able to demonstrate self-sufficiency for a period of six months as a prerequisite to the visa being granted.
- 71 The immigration rules allow status holders and their family members who become destitute, or are at risk of destitution, to apply to have the NRPF condition lifted, allowing the household to access income-related benefits and public services.
- 72 Funds have been made available to local authorities for 2022/23 to provide English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training for adults, funding up to £850 per learner, and to provide a safety net for those who are destitute or at risk of destitution, up to a limit of £2,720 per household.
- 73 No cases of destitution have yet presented to the Council. A number of individuals have made enquiries about support to access ESOL via Durham Learn.

### **Asylum Accommodation - Full Dispersal and Regional Plan**

- 74 For several years, the Home Office has encouraged County Durham, and other non-participating local authorities, to engage in UK asylum accommodation arrangements. This scheme is distinct from refugee resettlement programmes and is delivered via a private contract, with a Home Office appointed contractor securing accommodation and providing support services for asylum seekers. Following consultation with partners, the Council agreed County Durham would not engage in the scheme and instead focused on a funded, co-ordinated resettlement programme.
- 75 The asylum system is under significant pressure, with over 25,000 asylum seekers in contingency accommodation, including hotels. In April 2022, the Government confirmed that all local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales will be expected to participate in a new system of full dispersal to enable a move from hotels to less expensive, more suitable dispersed accommodation.
- 76 The announcement confirmed the allocation of funding of £250 per asylum seeker per occupied bed space to existing dispersal local authorities for 2021/22 only and £3,500 for all local authorities per new occupied bed space (not person) provided in an area for 2022/23 only. This is the first time that resources of this nature have been made available to local authorities engaged in the programme. It is significantly less than the support provided for UKRS, Afghan and Ukraine schemes, and reflects the nature of the programme, whereby

the Government is procuring, via its contractors, the provision of support and signposting to those arriving in asylum dispersal accommodation.

- 77 Mears is the Government's accommodation contractor in the North East and Yorkshire and Humber and has already commenced efforts to secure properties in the county to accommodate asylum seekers.
- 78 An eight week consultation took place, ending 1 July 2022. The consultation did not consult on the principle of full asylum dispersal, but on how to deliver full dispersal and the considerations local authorities felt important in making the asylum dispersal system work; including types of support services needed, as well as views on costs and impacts of asylum. This will form part of initial feedback for a New Burdens assessment being developed to consider the need for sustainable future funding for the asylum system.
- 79 A series of regional workshops across the UK solicited views on factors used to determine the allocation of asylum seekers to regions to form the basis of a regional plan. Home Office feedback suggested:
- (a) greater equity and an ability to influence allocations at a local level has been welcomed;
  - (b) housing and infrastructure was raised as a challenge across most regions/nations;
  - (c) ongoing funding is key to delivering a sustainable system;
  - (d) longer term, there is significant appetite for consideration of a place-based approach that streamlines the system and balances demands on a local authority across all migration programmes.
- 80 NEMP has been asked to work jointly with local authorities and the North East's asylum accommodation contractor to develop a regional plan of anticipated asylum dispersal into local authority areas. The regional allocation includes individuals and families moving out of contingency hotels and initial accommodation into dispersed accommodation, as well as an estimation of likely asylum seeker arrivals across the ensuing period.
- 81 If the region cannot agree its plan, a plan will be provided by the Home Office. The plan is not a statutory document, but it is hoped it will assist the Home Office in discharging its statutory duty to house asylum seekers more appropriately. The aim is to develop a planned, transparent approach to where dispersal will progress and to help address current hotel populations.

- 82 The North East, along with other regions, indicated that the deadline for submission to the Home Office by 7 September, for approval at the National Chief Executive Group on 13 September, was not feasible. In response to these concerns, NEMP submitted an interim plan, on the basis a final plan will be submitted in mid-October, to allow the next regional meeting of Chief Executives and Leaders and Elected Mayors to consider.
- 83 As part of the regional dispersal policy for asylum seekers established in 2000, the advisory cluster limit is one asylum seeker for every 200 of the settled population at a local authority area level only, i.e. across the local authority area rather than each ward. In County Durham, this results in an upper threshold of 2,610 individuals.
- 84 The Local Level Plan developed by NEMP has been based on proportionate population size and share as the basis for allocating to local authorities and developing options. A threshold is proposed (lower than the advisory cluster limit set out above), to be agreed by local authorities, where procurement in existing areas at or above the agreed threshold will be for replacement only.
- 85 The Home Office has advised that plans must be agreed with Mears, themselves and local councils
- 86 In preparation for the Council's engagement in the asylum accommodation programme, County Durham Migration and Cohesion Multi Agency Group has been established and met for the first time in September 2022. The group includes key partners and services and will be the forum for information sharing and to help steer local strategies, policies and plans in County Durham.
- 87 A session has been held for the county's main voluntary and community sector partners in the resettlement programme - Durham City of Sanctuary, North East Churches Acting Together and Durham Christian Partnership - to learn from experiences in other local authority areas. The session also provided an insight into the New Arrivals Pathway, an approach which links new arrivals in a local authority area with a key voluntary/community sector partner to provide a welcome and enhance at a local level the signposting and support provided by Mears.
- 88 The British Red Cross, which has provided a triage and referral service under the New Arrivals Pathway in other areas, including Darlington, Northumberland and Stockton, has agreed to provide this service for new arrivals in County Durham, initially for a period of six months. It is envisaged that this will allow local voluntary and community sector partners to develop an infrastructure and support provision to take over the service in the future.



- 89 Durham City of Sanctuary and North East Churches Acting Together are working with the Council to develop proposals to ensure the county is able to support those arriving into dispersed asylum accommodation.

## **Conclusion**

- 90 The global humanitarian challenge has placed significant demands on the UK, with local authorities urged to make pledges to assist the national effort.
- 91 County Durham has endeavoured to play its part, engaging in five separate refugee and asylum support programmes, including significant efforts to deliver a swift and effective response to global emergencies in Afghanistan and Ukraine, as well as a recent mandate to participate in asylum accommodation full dispersal.
- 92 The UK's response to the global challenge has significantly increased pressures on the Council and its partners, including safeguarding checks, demands on the homeless service, education, English language support, and police resources in undertaking safeguarding checks for Homes for Ukraine arrivals. Experience from other areas engaged in asylum dispersal accommodation has highlighted a significant and additional impact on the voluntary and community sector and local authority services. Work is ongoing between local and central government to ensure these pressures are recognised through New Burdens funding.
- 93 As migration and asylum programmes develop further in response to pressures on Government and expectations of local authorities, delivering a successful humanitarian support programme can be challenging, but there are a number of significant positive elements linked to the programme, not least the genuine contribution the county is making to the lives of vulnerable individuals.
- 94 It is therefore recommended that, in addition to the area's mandated engagement in the asylum accommodation programme, and subject to continued funding arrangements, the council expands support for resettlement schemes to accommodate three phases each year when capacity allows. A continuation of the county's successful approach to resettle a small cluster of families in each phase, working with social landlords to resettle refugees in main towns where possible, will be adopted.
- 95 It is proposed that the resettlement programme will support one phase of Afghan arrivals through the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and two phases under the UK Resettlement Programme (UKRS). This may change based on demand.

## **Background papers**

- None.

## **Other useful documents**

- Cabinet Report: Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership, 16 December 2015
- Cabinet Report: Review of Humanitarian Support in County Durham, 15 November 2017
- Cabinet Report: Humanitarian Support in County Durham, 15 January 2020

## **Author(s)**

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

None.

### **Finance**

The Government provides funding for local authorities which participate in the various resettlement support and relocation schemes (UK resettlement, Afghan schemes and Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme) and a refugee's resettlement costs should be fully funded by Central Government during the first 12 months. Resources are allocated on a tariff basis, with additional costs covered under an exceptional costs fund. Local authorities are also provided with tapering tariff funding to meet support costs in years 2-5 (UKRS) and years 2-3 (Afghan schemes). Funding is also provided to local authorities supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

For 2022/23, local authorities will be provided with £3,500 per new bed space under the asylum accommodation dispersal contract. Work is presently ongoing to assess potential contributions beyond March 2023.

### **Consultation**

Consultation with partners is a key element of the approach set out in this report. The establishment of two partnership working groups will advise the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, who has been delegated to make operational decisions on the delivery of humanitarian support programmes in County Durham, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder. County Durham Migration and Cohesion Multi Agency Group will act as the forum for asylum support in the county; and a refugee and resettlement working group will focus on relevant programmes.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

There is a significant requirement for language support for resettled refugees. The vulnerable nature of refugees assisted under the schemes will include support to individuals with complex needs, including physical and mental health issues. Government funding is intended to meet these costs.

The resettlement programmes prioritise those in the greatest need who cannot be supported in the region and prioritises people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of torture and violence, and women and children at risk. There is a need to ensure that accommodation meets the needs of the individuals resettled and links are made with health services.

The full dispersal programme for asylum accommodation requires the provision of support services and signposting by the Home Office's accommodation provider, Mears.

## **Climate Change**

None.

## **Human Rights**

Human Rights is a key driver for the Government's implementation of a global resettlement scheme for the UK, and the operation of the Afghan relocation and resettlement schemes, the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme, support for Hong Kong British National (Overseas) status holders and the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children.

## **Crime and Disorder**

The county's resettlement support model involves input from the police. The police continue to be engaged in the implementation of each phase of the resettlement programme and have designated a senior officer to co-ordinate liaison.

The police are also consulted and involved in planning and preparation for asylum accommodation and the Force is a key partner in the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme.

## **Staffing**

A proportion of the resources provided by Government to support the resettlement schemes (UKRS and Afghan) and the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme is being used to employ a team to assist refugees to settle in the county. Additional asylum funding will also support a staffing resource to co-ordinate other humanitarian support programmes.

## **Accommodation**

Close liaison with housing providers is central to successful implementation of the resettlement support scheme. The use of the Council's local lettings agency would also support the provision of accommodation for families supported under the scheme.

Accommodation for the asylum dispersal scheme is being provided, under a private contract, by the Home Office's contractor, Mears. The contractor is required to consult with the local authority, which also liaises with the police, on the general suitability of properties being secured.

The refugee resettlement support team is accommodated within the Council's estate.

## **Risk**

Although resettlement programmes are intended to be fully funded, there is a risk that resettlement costs incurred in subsequent years may not be fully covered by the tariff funding provided. However, the Council's experience of the schemes over previous years suggests the funding provided meets all resettlement costs.

There is a risk associated with the provision of appropriate services to those seeking asylum, under the full programme of asylum accommodation dispersal. The numbers expected to arrive, over a relatively short-time, and without an established voluntary and community sector infrastructure and support provision, increases the challenges.

There is also a risk of community cohesion issues, with a perceived influx of arrivals, particularly into areas with less diverse and more established communities.

## **Procurement**

None.