

Southend-on-Sea City Council

Report of Executive Director (Growth & Housing)

To

Cabinet

On

8th November 2022

Report prepared by: Glyn Halksworth, Director of Housing

Agenda
Item No.

Refugee Resettlement and Asylum Work

Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee(s)

Cabinet Member: Councillor Gilbert

Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)

1. Purpose of Report

To advise Cabinet of work underway to support the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers in Southend-on-Sea, and to seek agreement to proposals outlined below to continue and further advance this work.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To note progress on the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)/ Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) programmes (section **3.1-3.3** below)
- 2.2 Agree to the renewed pledge for accommodating families under the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) (section **3.4-3.5** below)
- 2.3 To note progress on the Homes for Ukraine (H4U) Scheme, (section **3.6-3.8** below)
- 2.4 To approve the subsidising of housing costs from the wrap around / support funds we receive, to meet the pledge levels identified in 2.2 (above) and to effectively respond to other housing pressure described (section **3.9-3.10**)
- 2.5 That the Director of Housing, in conjunction with the Executive Director (Growth & Housing) and the Cabinet Member for Economic Recovery, Regeneration and Housing is authorised to:
 - Reach agreement with the East of England Local Government Association Strategic Migration Partnership (SMP) and the Home Office regarding resettlement targets, asylum dispersal arrangements and local responses to national policy (section **3.11**)
 - To review the internal structures and external services to deliver this, to be fit for legacy, current and future challenges, including service commissioning as required (Section **3.12**)
- 2.6 To note intentions to support partners across the city to pursue City of Sanctuary status (section **3.13**)

3. Background

3.1 Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)

On 29 December 2020, the Defence Secretary and Home Secretary announced the ARAP scheme, to offer relocation or other assistance to former Locally Employed Staff (LES) in Afghanistan. The scheme formally launched on 1 April 2021 and was a central pillar of the cross-government programme to offer sanctuary to those fleeing from Afghanistan following Operation Pitting and the fall of Kabul on 15th August 2021.

The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) commenced on 6 January 2022, prioritising resettlement for those who have assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for values such as democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech, and rule of law, and vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBTQ+).

Afghans resettled under either scheme will receive indefinite leave to remain in the UK and will be able to apply for British citizenship after 5 years in the UK under existing rules.

3.2 There are currently around 9,700 Afghans still living in temporary accommodation nationally, almost exclusively in 'Bridging Hotels' commissioned by the Home Office. Almost all still need suitable accommodation finding for them so they can resettle into communities around the UK. There continue to be new Afghan arrivals at a rate of around 500 per month, with significant additional arrivals anticipated via United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) referrals. As of August 2022, only around 50 properties were available for matching nationally. This is largely related to the government policy that accommodation should be at Local Housing Allowance rates (LHA) and a paucity of available affordable housing in most housing markets. Whilst a 'top-up' fund is available for local authorities to bid against to secure additional support towards accommodation costs, this is not guaranteed, and is set at a level which is still significantly below that required to find suitable properties in the city, especially larger family homes.

3.3 In Southend, the Park Inn Palace Hotel was directly commissioned by the Home Office in September 2021 to operate as a Bridging Hotel. Southend-on-Sea City Council (SCC) was not involved in the decision to provide this facility within the city, although is required to provide support to the refugees residing there. This provision is currently contracted until December 2023, with capacity for up to 118 people. Some guests have been at the hotel for over 12 months. SCC receives funding to provide support in the hotel, including helping guests to navigate their welfare needs, provision of health screening, facilitate schooling and adult education, and support people to try and find suitable accommodation in Southend or other parts of the country. To date, 77 people have moved out of the hotel, either into accommodation elsewhere in the country or into settled housing locally. In total SCC has supported 193 Afghans in bridging accommodation to date. In addition to the hotel, SCC has settled 4 families (22 individuals) in Southend to date on the 3-year ARAP scheme.

3.4 United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS)

The UKRS commenced in March 2021 with the purpose of resettling vulnerable refugees in need of protection from a range of regions of conflict and instability across the globe. The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) which was launched in January 2014 and closed to new arrivals on 25 February 2021, has now been replaced by UKRS, and refugees from Syria are now eligible alongside a broader array of nationalities. To date under VPRS and UKRS SCC has resettled 7 families, 2 of whom now live independently in our city, their 5 years on the scheme having now ended. In all, 34 individuals have been supported through this programme. Councils receive funding for each member of households supported under the UKRS, ARAP and ACRS resettlement schemes to provide or facilitate the levels of support required to help families to integrate and achieve independence.

3.5 Government is now asking all UK councils to re-pledge support to the UKRS programme, including to ARAP and ACRS refugees for 2022-23. It is proposed that, given the difficulties sourcing suitable, affordable housing within Southend, that a modest pledge of resettling a further 2 families is made as a higher number is unlikely to be achieved without significant changes to national policy, or significant local investment to supplement housing costs.

3.6 Homes for Ukraine (H4U) and the Ukraine Family Visa Scheme (UFVS)

The UK Government set up the Homes for Ukraine scheme in March 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February. This scheme is predicated on UK residents directly offering rooms in their homes to host Ukrainian guests for 6-12 months. Following a matching process whereby prospective hosts are connected with guests in need, local authorities across the country were then required by the Home Office to check the suitability of placements to enable these to progress. Once everything is agreed and in place and guests have arrived, hosts receive a £350 per month 'thank you payment', and local authorities receive funding to commission and deliver support for Ukrainians arriving under this scheme, similar to those support requirements described in paragraph 3.3 (above). Central Government policy has been developing quickly in this area, and an "Autumn Plan" is due soon. Concerns relate to the ending of hosted placements, particularly given indications nationally that a quarter of households currently accommodating Ukrainian refugees under H4U wish to end their involvement at the six months point. According to the findings of a study by the Office of National Statistics in July 2022, the biggest reason for sponsors wanting to pull out after six months is that they only intended this to be the period for which they would help, and similar numbers say they now want their house to themselves. However, over 70% go on to say that they might change their mind if they received more support or more money. In Southend, similar research we have conducted locally broadly indicates the same findings. Some local authorities are now providing additional payments to hosts in order that their guests are accommodated that way for a longer period. Home Office officials have confirmed that such arrangements are to be funded by local authorities directly from their support grants and that additional payments made to hosts would not be subject to taxation. We are currently investigating the potential benefits of this approach in Southend.

3.7 Under H4U there have been 135 Ukrainian arrivals, with 91 guests in hosted accommodation as of 14th October. Of these, 9 families to date have required temporary accommodation, a new host or alternative arrangements due to a placement breakdown. There have also been some families returning to Ukraine. We anticipate that there may be further breakdowns when placements reach their 6-month or 12-month end. As indicated in 3.6, we are investigating measures to reduce the likelihood of these occurrences.

3.8 Under the UFVS, Ukrainian guests are permitted to come to the UK, and live with their families already resident in the UK. Local authorities do not receive any funding in relation to UFVS, nor do they have any role in administering this scheme. Hosts do not receive any ‘thank you payments’. Due to our lack of direct involvement, we do not have precise data relating to UFVS, but are aware of 24 Ukrainians currently living in Southend through this mechanism. In a small number of cases (3 that we are currently aware of) relations have already broken down, and where this is the case alternative housing has been provided for the affected families by SCC and some local charity partners.

3.9 Housing challenges.

As indicated above, a lack of affordable, suitable housing is the greatest impediment to progress across all the resettlement schemes operated by the Council. This is not unique to Southend and is the experience of almost all councils across the country, especially in the southeast. In Southend this challenge is exemplified by research undertaken locally into affordable housing availability, whereby there were no available 3- or 4-bedroom properties at either the LHA rate or at the LHA rate plus the maximum amount of top-up grant that could potentially be secured under the current arrangements with the Home Office and DLUHC, and only small numbers of available property at higher rates.

	LHA rates	Number of properties available to rent at LHA	Number of properties available to rent at LHA + £125pcm	Number of properties available to rent at LHA + 30%	Number of properties available to rent at LHA + 50%	Mean rent	Median rent
3 beds	£1000.01	Nil	Nil	7	29	£1465	£2025
4 beds	£1300.01	Nil	Nil	2	4	£2130	£2000

(Source data: Rightmove, 26 July 2022)

Southend, in common with many other councils, is exploring all available mechanisms to secure additional suitable, affordable housing. This includes potentially use of some of support funding received to assist families to source housing in the private rented sector, with the potential for entering into suitable leasing arrangements with landlords. Mechanisms for the provision of rent guarantors are being explored to encourage private sector landlords to let their housing to refugees, particularly those outside of UKRS. Negotiations are also ongoing with government about piloting alternative approaches to the top-up grant for Afghan refugees, to see if this could assist in securing more homes for people and allow them to move into settled accommodation, and out of hotels.

3.10 In addition to the pressures finding housing for refugees to move out of hotels or into accommodation following the end of hosted arrangements, there are homelessness duties which fall to SCC to meet. For Afghan guests in Bridging Accommodation these are made two offers of accommodation, and if both these offers are refused (and both were deemed “appropriate” per Home Office and DLUHC determination), guests will be given notice to leave the accommodation and find their own accommodation. A new “homelessness referral form has been produced by the Home Office (HO) and the HO have asked that if a household is likely to be at risk of homelessness, council staff should encourage guests to consent to a referral being made to assess them for a homeless duty. For Ukrainian refugees under both schemes, where placements breakdown and they find themselves homeless, the council may need to provide temporary accommodation. In common with other areas, this has already happened on several occasions in Southend. All homelessness presentations will be considered on a case-by-case basis, but it is important to note the additional burden this is likely to place upon SCC, and to note the additional emphasis this gives to the need for a pipeline of suitable, affordable accommodation to militate against these pressures.

3.11 The Asylum Dispersal programme.

Since 13 April 2022, all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales have been dispersal areas and are required to participate in full asylum dispersal. This Full Dispersal model allows accommodation providers, working on behalf of and directly commissioned by the Home Office, to identify private rental sector properties that can be procured for asylum dispersal accommodation in these local authority areas. In Southend, Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH) is the contracted provider.

Currently, a formula exists whereby local councils are required to take asylum seekers into their areas equivalent to 0.07% of the population. For Southend, using calculations provided by the Strategic Migration Partnership (SMP), which coordinates this programme regionally, this equates to 131 people. To date there have been 174 asylum seekers into Southend. At the start of the financial year, only around half of local authorities were participating in the programme, understandably limiting the amount of available accommodation, and placing additional pressure on those areas who were participating.

Due to the unprecedented levels of small boat crossings this summer, there are ever greater needs to source accommodation for asylum seekers as part of this programme. Figures released by the Home Office in February showed that 28,526 migrants crossed the Channel in 2021, up from 299 in 2018, and that almost all claim asylum. Home Office officials have recently indicated that the number of migrants crossing the channel this year is even higher. As a result of this there has been a consultation underway to develop regional plans to respond to the growing needs, and this will likely lead to an increase in the formula being used, with a proposal that an allocation equivalent to 0.5% of the population is introduced. This would see a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers expected to be housed locally by CRH, to more than 800 people. An additional pressure in this regard is the difficulty being experienced by CRH in sourcing the requisite levels of accommodation in all local authority areas, particularly as they are expected to provide accommodation at LHA levels, and

consequently they are often needing to access additional units in other areas, particularly urban settings such as Southend. This results in additional pressure in an already difficult housing market. There is an ongoing liaison and negotiation regionally between local authority chief officers, the SMP and Home Office to identify a suitable regional plan which will fairly distribute the response to this challenge.

The increases in demand regarding asylum seekers has also led to increases in the formula used by the National Transfer System for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC), from 0.07% of the child population to 0.1%, a rise of 12 young people, from 27 to 39. This aspect of provision is led by SCC children's services.

3.12 Service capacity and community support

It is imperative given the breadth of work above that we continuously review the capacity of SCC and the broader support systems to provide the appropriate welcoming environment for refugees through all routes. This will include the need to commission services external to SCC, and to make sure that the services we rely upon are appropriately funded from the grants which SCC receives for this work. Additionally, it will require a flexible resourcing response from across SCC to scale up the work as required by fluctuations in demand across the system. It is proposed that authority for any related commissioning activity be delegated, as indicated in paragraph 2.6, for this purpose.

3.13 City of Sanctuary

City of Sanctuary UK was established in 2005 in Sheffield by two community activists intent on bringing people together to providing more welcoming and inclusive communities. In 2007, with the support of Sheffield City Council and over 70 local community organisations, the city became the UK's first ever City of Sanctuary. Since this time, hundreds of local councils, schools, universities, libraries, theatres and more have been awarded with Sanctuary status, pledging to create a culture of solidarity, inclusivity and welcome.

Some community and faith organisations in Southend have expressed a desire to pursue City of Sanctuary status and it is proposed that SCC contributes to and supports this work, which is it is believed will bring new ideas and learning, the benefits of wider networks and communities of practice, and further impetus to the work already underway to support new communities in our city.

4. Other Options

- 4.1 That SCC does not pledge to support any further families to resettle in the city and continues to work only with those families currently here as part of the UKRS or in temporary arrangements such as bridging accommodation or the Homes for Ukraine scheme.
- 4.2 That SCC does not seek to identify ways to increase the viability of private sector housing options for refugees through potential use of support grants for this purpose, or to supplement hosts to extend arrangements for Ukrainian guests under H4U.
- 4.3 That SCC does not support community and faith organisations to pursue City of Sanctuary accreditation.

5. Reasons for Recommendations

5.1 The proposal for a Pledge.

The Council, as part of the EELGA and the SMP, needs to make a pledge level, and Lord Harrington (before he resigned) had urged each council to make a significant pledge, as part of our commitment to this process. To date there has been no further appointment to the role of Minister of State for Refugees, but as part of his portfolio as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Andrew Stevenson MP has responsibility for Refugee Housing (Ukraine and Afghanistan) amongst other housing priorities. The request for renewed pledges remains in place.

5.2 The proposal to subsidise housing costs.

As outlined in 3.9 and 3.10 it is understood that current requirements for resettlement properties to be sourced at LHA rates is impracticable and that without adoption or alternative local practice or revised national policy, SCC is unlikely to be successful in finding suitable property for refugees. Deployment of a proportion of the support grant for some families will assist in securing houses for them. This would be undertaken on a case-by-case basis and would take account of future affordability by the family to avoid placing them in unsustainable housing.

5.4 The proposal to review the current support arrangements.

It is important to continuously monitor system capacity to be able to respond effectively to the fluctuating demands of such a programme of work. This applies both to service directly provided by SCC, as well as support, education and other services which are supplied by other organisations. It is therefore important to establish dynamic service configurations and commissioning approaches to enable this.

5.3 The proposal to support City of Sanctuary status

There is much to celebrate about the way the city of Southend has responded to the refugee agenda in recent years, and in particular since September 2021 and the work undertaken to support Afghan and Ukrainians forcefully displaced by the political and military situations in their home states. The council is a key contributor to this success, but is reliant on the considerable and varied offers of the local faith and community organisations - and public sector partners – in this work. The benefits of becoming a City of Sanctuary would also include access to a considerable network of other leading cities across the country and the many organisations active in those communities who provide inclusive and welcoming environments for refugees and asylum seekers. This will be of significant benefit to SCC, as well as community groups and organisations.

6. Corporate Implications

6.1 Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map

Safe and Well

- residents feel safe and secure in their homes, neighbourhoods and across the city
- everyone has a good quality, sustainable home that meets their needs

- we protect and improve the quality of life for everyone in our community, including the vulnerable

Active and Involved

- enable inclusive community projects which provide opportunities for people of all ages to participate, grow skills, confidence and social connection and make a positive contribution to tackling inequalities
- more Southenders agree that people from different backgrounds are valued and get on well together

6.2 Financial Implications

SCC receives grants for all aspects of the refugee and asylum work described above, and any activity undertaken in the delivery of these programmes is wholly funded from within these grants.

- The ARAP scheme provides a grant of £28 per person per day whilst they remain in a Bridging Hotel. There is also a grant available from the Home Office to support the first 6 months of temporary accommodation should it be necessary if 2 appropriate housing offers are refused.
- The £350 Thank You payments to sponsors under the Homes for Ukraine are fully reimbursed quarterly from the Home Office on receipt of the appropriate management information returns.
- For every person received in Southend under the Homes for Ukraine scheme the Council receives £10,500 to support the services which may be required by them and highlighted earlier in this report. This is a one off payment and is for 12 months after the person has arrived. If they relocate to another authority then part of this funding moves over to that authority with them.

These grants also allow for full cost recovery across council departments such that officer contributions from a range of services are reimbursed. The grants have been and are further proposed to be, used for external commissioning, creating jobs, and enhancing sustainability in local third sector organisations and other partners.

6.3 Legal Implications

None arising from this report.

6.4 People Implications

None arising from this report.

6.5 Property Implications

None arising from this report.

6.6 Consultation

Most of the above originated from central government policy and actions, with only the UKRS programme being optional, along with the proposal to City of Sanctuary status. UKRS pledges are also now being requested from all councils across the country. All other programmes are requirements of government policy. There have been no consultations undertaken regarding any of the foregoing.

6.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications

An ongoing, dynamic EA is being prepared for this work and will be kept under regular review. Many refugees will have protected characteristics, and this infers the need to work within an equality and diversity framework and putting measures in place to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees receive a fair and just response. It is important that decision-making that is timely and transparent and involves people, or their advocates, as fully as possible, in the process.

6.8 Risk Assessment

A full risk log is kept as part of the oversight and governance of the Ukraine and Afghan programmes and is kept under regular review.

6.9 Value for Money

Any external commissioning would be subject to the principles of SCC's Commissioning Framework and procurement oversight. This work will continue to optimise the use of internal resources by redeployment and cross-service working where feasible.

6.10 Community Safety Implications

None arising from this report.

6.11 Environmental Impact

None arising from this report.

7. Background Papers

None

8. Appendices

None