

Committee: **Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee**
 Date of meeting: **22nd October 2021**
 Report Subject: **Update on UK Resettlement and Asylum Seeker Dispersal Schemes**
 Portfolio Holder: **Leader of the Council, Councillor Nigel Daniels**
 Report Submitted by: **Bernadette Elias, Chief Officer Commercial and Customer**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
w/c 27/9/21	30 /9/21	12.10.21			22/10/21	10.11.21		

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 To provide an update on participation supporting the UK Resettlement scheme (which recently has included supporting the resettlement of Afghan nationals), and seek support for the participation in the Home Office Widening Asylum Seeker Dispersal Scheme prior to being presented to Executive.

2. Scope and Background

Overview and update on UK Resettlement Schemes

2.1 In response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, in 2015 the UK Government made a national commitment to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees throughout the course of 5 years. During that time, and in recognising of the vital role in helping refugees resettle into the UK, local authorities and community partners were encouraged to support the national resettlement programme. In 2016, Blaenau Gwent welcomed the first Syrian family and since that time has successfully resettled 4 refugee families comprising 20 individuals.

2.2 Based on the success in delivering the refugee programme and the ongoing national commitment to resettling people who are at most risk of harm, the UK government has encouraged authorities to continue to support refugee resettlement. In 2019, Blaenau Gwent demonstrated a continued commitment to support this national effort by agreeing to continue participating in the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS).

2.3 In the lead up to the withdrawal of UK and NATO forces from Afghanistan the UK Government established a standalone scheme to relocate Afghan Interpreters/former Locally Employed Staff (LES) who had assisted UK forces throughout the conflict. Those who qualified for the scheme and who chose to relocate to the UK with their families are not expected to return to Afghanistan.

2.4 In May 2021, given the acceleration of the Afghan scheme, the Home Office in collaboration with the Wales' Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP) wrote to all local authorities requesting potential support. Following these

discussions, and in recognition of the existing pledge made by the Council to continue to support the UKRS, support for the Afghan Scheme was prioritised.

- 2.5 Working with lead officers and partners - as part of the resettlement approach – has ensured that all appropriate support arrangements have been established and the first Afghan family were welcomed into the borough on 9th September.
- 2.6 The capacity of local services is a key element that has underpinned the authority's engagement in the resettlement scheme(s) thus far and to ensure a proportionate level of participation is considered, with regards to future engagement, we have consulted with local partners. Following these discussions, it is proposed that a commitment be made to resettle a total of four Afghan families, this will largely be governed by the availability of suitable accommodation.
- 2.7 **Widening Asylum Seeker Dispersal**
- 2.8 The Home Office is responsible for fulfilling the United Kingdom's obligation under the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the status of Refugees (The Geneva Convention) and ensuring that those genuinely fleeing persecution are given the protection they need.
- 2.9 To achieve this, the UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI) provides support services for Asylum Seekers, failed Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Statutory provision is in accordance with Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and the Asylum Support Regulation 2000.
- 2.10 The UK has a proud history of granting asylum to those who need it. The number of asylum applications to the UK peaked in 2002 at 84,132. After that the number fell sharply to reach a twenty-year low point of 17,916 in 2010, before rising again to reach 35,737 in 2019.
- 2.11 Due to a shortage of known and suitable accommodation in existing dispersal areas, to assist with future planning and the requirement to create equitable distribution of people seeking asylum amongst Local Authorities in the UK, the Home Office have requested that every Local Authority participates in the Widening Dispersal Scheme to increase opportunities throughout the UK where Asylum Seekers can reside.
- 2.12 On 5th March 2021, a meeting was convened with WLGA, inviting Chief Executives of all Wales Local Authorities to discuss assisting with Widening Dispersal. The Home Office is looking for an 'In Principal Agreement' that permits an accommodation provider contracted by the Home Office to source accommodation for people seeking asylum.
- 2.13 The Home Office has not predetermined the number of people to be placed in each area but want to establish a dialogue that identifies the capacity of each Local Authority and to agree a way forward that works to enable participation.

- 2.14 In March 2021, the Home Office advised there were approximately 10,000 asylum seekers in contingency accommodation (hotels) in England, largely in the Kent and London areas. Significant backlogs in the system to process applications have been caused by the pandemic and there is an urgent need for all areas of the UK to contribute to supporting asylum seekers to move into more suitable, temporary accommodation while their applications for asylum are processed.
- 2.15 Cardiff, Swansea, Wrexham and Newport are the four areas of Wales that are currently designated as Asylum Seeker Dispersal areas. All four local authorities remain committed to the programme, however additional support from all Wales Local Authorities is required in order to contribute to the Home Office target of supporting a further 800 individuals to be accommodated in Wales. More recently Caerphilly, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Conwy have also made progress in their initial phased participation in the scheme.
- 2.16 Further to the all Wales discussions held in March 2021, a follow up meeting with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, Home Office and Torfaen County Borough Council has taken place. These preliminary officer discussions explored the potential role Blaenau Gwent could play, recognising the potential benefits of a regional approach to widening asylum dispersal.
- 2.17 As part of the developing regional approach it is proposed that the Council participate in a pilot with two properties focussed at families. This is comparable with the level of participation that has been offered in other areas and considered proportionate for Blaenau Gwent. The pilot would include a full review at a 12-month stage to determine whether the Councils continue with the arrangements of 2 properties, reduces participation, or has the scope to increase participation.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

That Corporate Overview Committee:

3.1 **Option 1:**

- i. Notes the progress made in participation with the UK resettlement, including most recently the Afghan resettlement programme; and
- ii. Supports the proposal to participate in the Widening Asylum Seeker Dispersal Scheme as a pilot, prior to being presented to Executive.

3.2 **Option 2:**

- i. Notes the progress made in participation with the UK resettlement including most recently the Afghan resettlement programme; and
- ii. Does not support the proposal to participate in the Widening Asylum Seeker Dispersal Scheme as a pilot, prior to being presented to Executive.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

4.1 The UK Resettlement Schemes continues to operate sustainably, with excellent partnership work taking place between third sector organisations, the University Health Board and the Local Authority. There are also very strong links with Education establishments within the Authority and the coordinated approach to Blaenau Gwent's work has received widespread recognition. Participation in the Wider Dispersal Scheme would build on this partnership approach and contribute to the Welsh Governments stated ambition that Wales is a Nation of Sanctuary.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

5.1.1 **Asylum Dispersal**

Asylum Seeker accommodation and support are funded by the Home Office directly, therefore no funding will be given to the Local Authority. Any additional costs associated with Education or Social Care needs of individuals or families arriving into Blaenau Gwent as part of this scheme will need to be met by the Council through existing budgets.

5.1.2 Whilst a decision on an Asylum Seeker's 'Right to Remain' as a refugee is made, all living costs are covered by the Home Office through their delivery partner Clearsprings Ready Homes.

5.1.3 Should an individual be granted Leave to Remain, there may be on-going welfare benefit costs until the person secures employment and becomes financially independent. Eligibility to claim Housing Benefit is determined by the status awarded when someone enters the UK. If granted the right to reside, then the entitlement to claim housing benefit would be at Local Housing Allowance rates for properties.

5.1.4 **UK Resettlement Scheme**

The resettlement programmes are different, these schemes are government funded, and this funding is tapered over 5 years. The grant the LA receives allows the authority to support each arriving family – this support is wide ranging and consists of anything from furnishing their accommodation to helping families adjust to life in the UK. We commission Displaced People in Action (a third sector organisation procured on a regional contract across the 3 West Gwent authorities) to work with each family in supporting them to orientate to their new communities. Each family has an assigned case worker who will assist the family throughout their initial 3-5 years, this support focuses on building independence – supporting families with befriending, volunteering opportunities and, at a later stage, assisting families access employment.

5.1.5 To establish a strong sense of belonging to their new communities, we also promote the value in learning English language and have commissioned and ESOL provider (People Plus) to provide home tuition for all adult refugees. Support has also been extended to schools who have welcomed refugee children and has funded additional language needs provision – all supported by the Home Office funding.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

5.2.1 **ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORT FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS**

Participating authorities in the Asylum Dispersal scheme do not need to source or maintain properties as this is done by Clearsprings Ready Homes in Wales. Clearsprings Ready Homes accommodate and support Asylum Seekers in the private rented sector and equip accommodation (including rent, licensing, furnishing property maintenance and payment of utility bills). They work closely with the Authority to identify suitable locations to source accommodation that is economically viable and with access to public transport routes and in proximity to community services.

5.2.2 They provide full support for individuals and families into a community whilst their asylum application is being assessed. The length of stay in asylum accommodation can be anywhere between 6 months and 2 years, depending on the complexity of the case.

5.2.3 Migrant Help will work in tandem with ClearSprings Ready Homes across potential new areas in Wales.

5.2.5 **CEASING SUPPORT FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS**

For those who are granted protection, their access to cash support and accommodation will cease within 28 days of receiving the decision in relation to their application.

5.2.6 Those individuals who have been refused asylum can appeal and will continue to receive support whilst they have an appeal outstanding. When they exhaust their appeal rights, cash support and accommodation will cease 21 days after the final decision.

5.2.7 At present people without children whose appeal has not been upheld are expected to return their country of origin. However, Section 4 support may on occasions continue to be provided if there is a short-term barrier to them leaving. If they refuse to leave, removal can be enforced (but not to all countries).

5.2.8 At present, for families with children under 18, accommodation and cash support only ceases if someone is granted asylum. Families who are refused asylum at present remain supported by UKVI if they have children under 18 and until their youngest child is 18.

5.3 ***Legal***

5.3.1 **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS/LEGISLATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS**

The power to enforce a Local Authority to participate in widening dispersal exists under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The Minister has made it clear to UKVI that engagement with all Local Authorities will be undertaken and will ensure that all options are exhausted before use of these powers will be considered.

5.3.2 The Council has neither the statutory duty nor the power to provide financial support or accommodation to Asylum Seekers. Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 provides that the Secretary of State may provide or arrange for the provision of support for Asylum Seekers and their dependents who appear to be destitute. Section 95 support is paid via an Aspen Card, which can be used to withdraw cash as well as used in shops to buy provisions

5.3.3 If an Asylum Seeker is granted Refugee Status, Humanitarian Protection, Discretionary Leave (unless a 'No Recourse to Public Funds' condition is attached); or Indefinite Leave to Remain, they are then able to access mainstream benefits on the same basis as a British National. Where an Asylum Seeker is granted one of these statuses the Council may have a statutory obligation to prevent homelessness.

5.3.4 Failed Asylum Seekers may remain in the UK with no recourse to public funds until they are served with removal directions by the Home Office. Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have 'no recourse to public funds' if they are subject to Immigration control. Public funds include welfare benefit and public housing.

5.3.5 **DEFINITIONS**

Asylum is protection given by a country to someone fleeing from persecution in their own country. An **Asylum Seeker is someone who has applied for asylum and is awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted Refugee status.** An asylum applicant who does not qualify for refugee status may still be granted leave to remain in the UK for Humanitarian or other reasons. An Asylum Seeker whose application is refused at initial decision may appeal the decision through an appeals process and, if successful, may be granted leave to remain.

5.3.6 If the application is accepted, an Asylum Seeker will generally be granted 5 years refugee status. Successful applicants can work, live and study in the UK and access public funds.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

5.4.1 There are limited Human Resources implications to supporting asylum seekers during the application process, ClearSprings Ready Homes provide the management and support for asylum seekers.

5.4.2 In the likelihood of asylum seeker families arriving into the borough, there will however be education implications. The authority will be required to provide education for all *accompanied* children, this has implications for any schools within the catchment area of the procured accommodation.

5.4.3 From the learning experiences gained in delivering the UKRS (which has supported the resettlement within the borough of refugees from several countries from the Middle East and North Africa region), the degree of mental health complexities may also be a draw on local services. Whilst the psychological trauma of children has been a common presentation in several

cases (although not in all), adult mental health (influenced by previous experiences of torture, sexual violence and bereavement) have provided significant challenges, confounded by lengthy waiting lists and in some areas a lack or limited mental health care services.

- 5.4.4 In recognition of the possible resource implications – we are proposing a proportionate yet cautious approach to the authority’s participation in the Asylum Dispersal Scheme. This would include the offer of two properties within the borough, with a full review on the delivery of the scheme and an assessment of future engagement within the scheme.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

6.1.2 **ASYLUM DISPERSAL**

Should the local authority agree to participate in the asylum dispersal scheme we will be dialogue with ClearSprings Ready Homes on a monthly basis, and are proposing a full review at a 12-month stage to determine future involvement in the scheme.

6.1.3 **UK RESETTLEMENT SCHEME**

In the case of the resettlement schemes, the authority is fair more involved in the support and delivery.

- 6.1.4 Whilst this support is tailored to the needs of each family it is essential that new arrivals becoming connected to their new community, as such we (via our commissioned service provider DPIA) support families in accessing services such as GPs, schools, dentists, Job centre and also orientate families to the local community - supporting them with transport links to and from town centres and neighbouring authorities. We also support families to orientate to wider communities within South Wales and signpost new arrivals to religious establishments (where appropriate).

- 6.1.5 To establish a strong sense of belonging to their new communities, we also promote the value of learning English language, as such Blaenau Gwent provide 4 hours of home tuition to each family relocated within the borough - this compliments the existing community based ESOL services which are also available but removes any barriers in accessing language learning.

- 6.1.6 The lead officer for ongoing management is the Regional Community Cohesion Coordinator, who also manages the Resettlement programme across Torfaen – this provides greater consistency across the region in the delivery of the programme. The Coordinator manages the contracts of DPIA and Peopleplus (ESOL provider), holding bi weekly meetings with the case workers to discuss the progress of each family, this includes evaluating the delivery of all resettlement action plans to ensure there is consistent approaches adopted for each resettled family and that the support is tapered at the appropriate juncture to ensure we nurture independence.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

6.2.1 Should the local authority agree to participate in asylum dispersal we will be working with partners in a similar way to how we deliver the UK Resettlement Programme. In the first instance this includes; mapping any community tensions and working with partners such as; Gwent Police and community safety leads, housing and health (alongside ClearSprings Ready Homes)- to determine the most appropriate areas within the borough to procure properties.

6.2.2 Learning from the successes in resettling refugee families, it is recommended that a proactive approach to supporting community conversations is also considered, this may include engaging elected members and communities to ensure we dispel any myths regarding asylum dispersal.

6.2.3 There are no expected negative outcomes for the general public in authority's participation in the Asylum Dispersal scheme, we will however, be creating a safe haven within the area for those most in need.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

Should the local authority agree to engage in the Asylum Dispersal Scheme, we will be working with our partners from ABUHB, Gwent Police, Housing and Education to determine the most appropriate level of participation. We will also be working with local elected members to ensure that the community - where appropriate – are best informed.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

This report recognises the long-term implications of participation in the Asylum Dispersal Scheme, highlighting key impacts on services such as education and mental health provision. It is also important to consider the implications on housing and how participating in the scheme may somewhat compete with the wider homelessness policies which the local authorities are currently prioritising. However this is mitigated by the cautious and proportionate degree of proposed participation (2 properties).

6.4.1 The participation of Blaenau Gwent in asylum dispersal will also provide future families who have experienced considerable hardship with the route to a long-term safe haven.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

Should Blaenau Gwent engage with the Asylum Dispersal Scheme we would be working to help prevent vulnerable children and their families from further trauma and suffering in areas of significant conflict and, further, discharging both our moral and humanitarian obligations.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

Following Blaenau Gwent's successful approach to refugee resettlement, we will be consulting all relevant partners in the lead up to any future involvement in asylum dispersal, this includes establishing dialogue with Gwent police

and community safety colleagues - with regards to the community cohesion concerns in procuring accommodation. Collaboration with health and primary and secondary care services - to ensure the best support is available to asylum seekers located within the area. Engagement with education services to ensure that schools are best supported in the likelihood of receiving asylum seeker children.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

Supporting this scheme is an extension to existing commitments across the well-being objectives to support vulnerable people, we will build on the learning we have gained in the participation of resettling Refugees via Vulnerable Persons/ Childrens Resettlement Scheme and we will continue to work with a range of services to ensure partners contribute to a successful approach to Asylum Dispersal.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

There are no positive or negative impacts of the proposal. The proposal at this time is primarily concerned in the first instance in starting discussions with the Home Office, WSMP and ClearSprings Ready Homes.

6.9a ***Socio Economic Duty Impact Assessment***

In order to comply with the statutory duties contained with the Equality Act 2010 and meet our Socio-economic duty in providing services which can improve inequality of outcome for people who face socio-economic disadvantage.

6.9b. ***Equality Impact Assessment***

A full Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken to assess the impact of taking forward the widening the Asylum Seeker Dispersal Scheme within the County Borough.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 Progress reporting forms part of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

Monitoring of the support provided to resettled families is part of the contract management in place.

ClearSprings Ready Homes provide the management and support for asylum seekers as directed by the Home Office.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- *None*