

Community Wellbeing and Housing Committee

20th September 2022



Title	Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report Author	Steph Green, Housing Strategy & Policy Officer
Ward(s) Affected	All Wards
Exempt	No
Exemption Reason	N/A
Corporate Priority	Community and service delivery
Recommendations	Committee is asked to: Decide if Spelthorne Borough Council should participate in ACRS. The recommendation is to make a small pledge.
Reason for Recommendation	The Council's Refugee Scheme policy requires us to investigate and consider all schemes that are brought forward by the Home Office. Making a pledge enables us to have the flexibility in accessing funding to support Afghan refugees moving-on from the Spelthorne bridging hotel.

1. Summary of the report

1.1 In February 2022, Spelthorne Borough Council approved a Refugee Scheme policy. The policy requests the Council to assess and examine the details of Refugee Schemes brought forward by the Home Office, for its impact on the local community, the Council's resources to support the scheme, and deliverability. This report seeks to inform decision making on the Council's participation in ACRS.

2. Key issues

2.1 ACRS aims to provide up to 20,000 women, children and others at risk, with a safe and legal route to settle in the UK. It prioritises those who have assisted UK efforts in Afghanistan or 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 LGBTQ+).

2.2 Families who relocate through the ACRS will receive indefinite leave to remain in the UK, with an opportunity to apply for British citizenship after 5 years in the UK under existing rules.

2.3 The scheme is not application-based. Instead, eligible individuals are prioritised onto the scheme through one of three referral pathways:

- (a) Pathway 1: Some of those evacuated under Op PITTING, including women's rights activities, journalists, prosecutors, and Afghan family members of British nationals, will be granted a place on the ACRS. Those eligible who were called forward or specifically authorised for evacuation but were not able to board flights can also be resettled.
 - (b) Pathway 2: Vulnerable refugees who have fled Afghanistan will be referred for resettlement to the UK by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Referrals are based on assessments of protection needs and vulnerabilities. The Home Office anticipate receiving up to 2,000 referrals during the first year.
 - (c) Pathway 3: In the first year, places will only be offered to eligible at-risk British Council and GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni. The Home Office anticipate receiving up to 1,500 people under this pathway.
- 2.4 The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) launched an online system 20th June 2022 for 8 weeks for eligible individuals to express an interest to be resettled to the UK. Any offer of resettlement under ACRS is contingent on security screening and provision of biometric information.
- 2.5 Alongside the approval of the Council's Refugee Scheme policy, several refugee schemes have been brought forward by the Home Office:
- (a) Afghan Relocation Assistance Policy (ARAP) – This scheme offers relocation to former Locally Employed Staff in Afghanistan. In September 2021, the Community Wellbeing and Housing Committee approved to welcome up to 5 households under this scheme. So far, 3 families have been assisted into privately rented accommodation via the Council's Spelthorne Rent Assure scheme.
 - (b) Homes for Ukraine – The Government set-up this scheme to allow Ukrainian nationals and their immediate family to be sponsored to come to the UK as 'guests' for up to 3 years. Local authorities are expected to facilitate the delivery of this scheme by carrying out safeguarding checks on sponsors and providing community integration support to guests. As of 22nd July 2022, over 90 guests have arrived with 3 sponsor/guest relationships sadly breaking down and the Council owing a homelessness duty to help.
 - (c) Ukraine Family Scheme – Family members of British nationals, UK settled persons and certain others are permitted to come to or stay in the UK for up to 3 years under the Ukraine Family Scheme. Councils have not been instructed to provide support so there is little oversight on the number of applicants accessing this scheme. However, applicants arriving are also eligible for the Council's homelessness assistance.
- 2.6 Several challenges have been noted in delivering the ARAP scheme. It has been difficult to source suitable properties due to the larger-sized homes required and frequent landlord apprehensions despite reassurances from our staff. When a property has been successfully sourced, there have been delays by the Home Office to match a suitable family due to the household refusing a property; families are able to make up to 2 refusals. These placements are resource intensive due to the work required to source and furnish the properties, run financial administration of the scheme, and support the new arrivals with settling into the community and maintaining their

tenancy. These difficulties must be considered before deciding to participate in ACRS as it operates almost identically to ARAP.

- 2.7 The North East Surrey Family Support team are providing the majority of the wrap-around support needed by Afghan refugees to access education, employment and welfare benefits. There are currently 2 dedicated Afghan Support workers. One has a caseload of 10 households for the ARAP scheme (split evenly between Spelthorne and Elmbridge) and the other works with up to 90 residents at the bridging hotel within Spelthorne. Of these 90, 12 are currently under the ACRS scheme. In addition, the Council has been recently notified by the Home Office, of their intention to expand the capacity of the current Bridging Hotel in Spelthorne from 46 to 88 rooms. The expansion will add additional pressure on the resources at the hotel, as well as may lead to increased demand on housing in the form of increase of homelessness applications from the Afghan families residing at the hotel. It is worth noting that Elmbridge Borough Council are considering an increase in their pledge from 5 to 8 households. The North East Surrey Family Support team are looking to increase resource to support hotel guests in finding alternative accommodation and to provide wrap around support.

3. Options analysis and proposal

To make a pledge (recommended)

- 3.1 We would need to commit to a particular number of households under the ACRS scheme that we would help rehouse and resettle into the community. Opting in to ACRS would support the government's efforts to help with the current refugee crisis in Afghanistan. However, there is no guarantee that we would be able to quickly source suitable properties due to the challenges we have faced accommodating those under the ARAP scheme. Therefore, the target would likely need to be a small number to ensure it is deliverable. It is recommended that this figure mirror the increased target set by Elmbridge Borough Council. A pledge of 3 households would create an overall total of 8 across both ARAP and ACRS. So far, 3 properties have been found for ARAP households so the recommendation would be for the remaining 5 placements to be shared across both ACRS and ARAP. This will allow flexibility in accessing funding from the Home Office and maximise chances of deliverability. Furthermore, the North East Surrey Family Support Team resources could be overstretched based on current resource. However, the team are looking to expand in the near future and have confirmed that they could cope with this small pledge increase.

To not make a pledge

- 3.2 We would not participate in ACRS despite a request from the Home Office to make a pledge. If ACRS households currently in the Spelthorne bridging hotel decide to move to a property within the borough, the Council will not be able to claim funding to support these families if it has not made a pledge. If these families require further housing or homelessness advice in the future and an interim accommodation is owed, it will be costly to place these families into emergency accommodation due to the large size of the household. Subsequently, it will be difficult to find further settled accommodation for these households due to the size required and lack of larger properties available to let. However, the Council must consider whether it can reasonably source

suitable properties to meet the needs of ACRS refugees given the difficulties noted with sourcing properties for the ARAP scheme.

- 3.3 The Council will continue to actively participate in other refugee schemes implemented by the Home Office including ARAP and Homes for Ukraine whilst maintaining a balance to support existing and future homelessness pressures faced by residents. The current Family Support Team will also be able to continue maintaining an ample service to support refugees without overstretching resources.

4. Financial implications

- 4.1 As like the funding for ARAP, local authorities will receive the same level of grant funding for supporting ACRS. The local authority may claim funding for the first year following the commencement of the provision of support under the scheme, and for subsequent years until the end of the third year. On the day that the Council commences the provision of support, 40% grant funding can be claimed with the remainder to be paid in equal instalments in months four and eight.

The funding instructions released for 2022/23 as are follows:

- £10,500 per person for the first year (with separate additional funding for children's education).
- £6,000 per person for the second year.
- £4,020 per person for the third year.

- 4.2 As the level of funding remains the same for ACRS as it is ARAP, a copy of the financial considerations for the previous ARAP report is included as Appendix C. The Council's Finance team considered the cost of the support provision as well as the grant funding offered by the Government and confirmed that the grant funding will cover the cost of the management of the scheme and support required.

- 4.3 As more families find their own accommodation and move out of bridging hotels, local authorities who can provide integration support for these families can use funding flexibly to help assist families with move-on. ARAP and ACRS integration support funding can be used to help with start-up costs to procure accommodation in the private rented sector. This may include deposits, landlord incentives, letting fees and necessary furnishings. Councils can flexibly allocate funding within the tariff for move-on options but will be expected to provide full integration support for 36 months. If the local authority chooses to provide only the deposit and initial rent without further support, this must come from other monies outside the funding.

5. Risk considerations

- 5.1 The main risks associated with this report is competing demand for local affordable housing and tenancy sustainment support. The Council will need to balance the demands of existing pressures as well anticipate future demand. There are increased risks of homelessness approaches due to the cost-of-living crisis and several refugee schemes operating in parallel. To minimise risk, the Council would only be able to pledge a small number towards the ACRS efforts. Furthermore, the North East Surrey Family Support team are working with the families into the hotel to educate the guests on affordability to avoid future tenancy failure and prevent homelessness. If the Council make

a pledge, funding can be used flexibly to support the bridging hotel residents into the private rented sector.

6. Legal considerations

- 6.1 As with the ARAP and the Ukrainian refugee schemes, those accessing ACRS will also be eligible for the Council's statutory homelessness assistance service. Where families struggle to find suitable accommodation or tenancies breakdown, the Council's homelessness prevention or relief duty will kick-in meaning interim accommodation may need to be sought.

7. Other considerations

- 7.1 It is worth noting that Spelthorne has two hotels within the borough operating to support refugees. The first is a bridging hotel for Afghan refugees, there are approximately 90 people there at any one time waiting to be moved on to settled accommodation. This hotel is expected to remain in place until at least December 2023 (subject to further extension if needed). The second hotel in Spelthorne is being used as asylum accommodation to comply with the Home Office's statutory duty to accommodate people seeking asylum who are at risk of destitution by utilising contingency accommodation. Residents await the outcome of their asylum application. Whilst waiting for their decision, residents do not have recourse to public funds meaning they are ineligible for homelessness assistance.

8. Equality and Diversity

- 8.1 An Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment has been carried out and is provided in Appendix D. This assessment has not identified any significant impact on equalities.

9. Sustainability/Climate Change Implications

- 9.1 The proposed scheme itself does not have any impact on the Council's sustainability / climate change position.

10. Timetable for implementation

- 10.1 If the Council wishes to participate in ACRS, we will liaise with the Home Office to support the scheme as early as practical to do so.

11. Contact

- 11.1 Housing Strategy and Policy Team: HousingStrategy@spelthorne.gov.uk

Background papers: See the council's Refugee Scheme policy

Appendices:

Appendix A: CEX Letter for Resettlement Pledges for 2022-23

Appendix B: CEX Letter Annex - Resettlement Pledges

Appendix C: Afghan ARAP & ACRS Support Budget

Appendix D: Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment