



Housing Community

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report for:	Housing Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Title of report:	Humanitarian Response
Date:	11 October 2023
Report on behalf of:	Councillor Simy Dhyani
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	N/A
Appendices:	<p>Appendix 1 LAHF 2 Project Plan</p> <p>Appendix 2 DLUHC letter Ukraine HPG announcement</p> <p>Appendix 3 Funding Instruction LAs - Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme and Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy FY 23-24</p> <p>Appendix 4 Asylum LA Funding Instruction Grant 3 2023-24</p> <p>Appendix 5 VPRP LA Funding Instruction - FINAL</p>
Background papers:	<p>Cabinet decision Syrian Resettlement Programme</p> <p>Afghan Locally Employed Staff briefing June 2021</p>
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	<p>Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (SVPRP)</p> <p>Afghan Locally Employed Scheme (ALES)</p> <p>Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)</p> <p>Hertfordshire County Council (HCC)</p> <p>East of England Local Government Association (EELGA)</p> <p>Local Authorities (LA's)</p> <p>Assistant Director (AD)</p> <p>Afghan Resettlement Accommodation Programme (ARAP)</p> <p>Home Office (HO)</p> <p>Voluntary Community Sector (VCS)</p> <p>Private Rented Sector (PRS)</p> <p>Initial asylum (IA)</p> <p>Dispersal Accommodation (DA)</p> <p>Overflow Asylum Accommodation (ODA)</p> <p>Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH)</p> <p>English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)</p>

Report Author / Responsible Officer

Author: Natasha Beresford, Assistant Director – Housing Operations & Safe Communities



Natasha.beresford@dacorum.gov.uk / 01442 228 840 (ext. 2840)

Corporate Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clean, safe and enjoyable environment • Providing good quality affordable homes, in particular for those most in need
Wards affected	All.
Purpose of the report:	Inform Members of the current position in relation to Humanitarian Response activity and the council's response in relation to resettlement and asylum cohorts.
Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide feedback regarding the approach to date and potential impacts for the council.
Period for post policy/project review:	Annually or upon material change in delivery

1 Introduction/Background:

The Housing Service leads the council's operational response to resettling refugees in Dacorum, which started following the Government's commitment that during 2015 and 2020 the UK would resettle 20,000 Syrian Refugees. On 30 September 2015, the Council carried a motion supporting the Syrian [Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme](#) (VPRP) scheme and along with 8 other Hertfordshire authorities, agreed to welcome refugee families over a 5 year period – with the first arriving in September 2016. The council recognised the importance of welcoming and integrating families to the UK to start a new life free of fear and oppression – in doing so it committed to resettling 10 households over a 5 year period. To date the council has resettled 9 households via the programme and is yet to finalise arrangements to resettle the tenth household, which was delayed due to the Covid19 pandemic and additional asks arising from the government in relation to support of those households fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine.

As indicated, more recently activity has been extended to our resettlement of Afghan's, via the [Afghan Locally Employed Scheme \(ALES\) and Citizens resettlement scheme \(ACRS\)](#) providing assistance to households who had provided support to the British government. The council's decision to support the scheme, along with other Hertfordshire authorities was confirmed following discussions with Portfolio Holder Chief Officer Group on 24 June 2021. Between September 2021 and May 2022 the council resettled 5 Afghan households, who had been accommodated on an interim basis in a hotel.

Russia's war on Ukraine has caused the worst refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. This has resulted in more than 130,000 refugees fleeing to the UK, of which over 1100 have settled within Hertfordshire, with around 280 households resettled in Dacorum.

The Housing Service has built on already excellent working relationships that are in place to support vulnerable households across the borough, by extending current working arrangements and developing new with the voluntary, faith and statutory sector – to support the collaborative working with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) and Home Office to facilitate the needs of new households resettled or placed in the borough.

In response to national, regional and local pressures local authorities (LA's) responses in relation to resettlement and asylum activity has had to evolve significantly in recent years and for Dacorum this has become a more

permanent feature of activity delivered by the Housing services – ensuring that the growing demands and responsibilities of programmes are met. Using ring fenced grant funding allocations the service has increased resource to ensuring that responsibilities to our new residents are successfully fulfilled, critically also alleviating impacts upon existing resources and services to residents.

The Humanitarian Response team is led by Assistant Director (AD), Housing Operations & Safe Communities. The team have a range of experience, which is invaluable to effectively delivering the work of the team – including understanding of multiple disadvantages, trauma informed approaches, homelessness, domestic abuse and tenancy sustainment. Officers across the team also have broad cultural knowledge and experience, which includes additional languages spoken including Twi, Fanti, Arabic, Urdu and German. The AD supports the council's Chief Executive in representing Hertfordshire LA's in collaborative work across the region with EELGA, Home Office and contracted accommodation providers to ensure a strategic, cohesive approach to asylum dispersal, which makes sure that local and regional pressures are taken into consideration when addressing asylum requirements and dispersal arrangements.

The main body of the report, will provide further context into the activity within this remit, links to other aspects of organisational service delivery and wider impacts or considerations.

2 Key Issues/proposals/main body of the report:

Ukraine

The UK has three schemes in place to support households who wish to come to or remain in the UK:

- [Ukraine family scheme](#) – For family members of British nationals, UK settled persons and certain others to come or stay in the UK under the scheme.
- [Homes for Ukraine](#) – For those in the UK to offer a home to people fleeing Ukraine, by becoming a sponsor.
- [Ukraine Extension scheme](#) – open to some Ukrainian nationals and their family members who have, or previously had permission to be in the UK.

Primarily the council's involvement in relation to households fleeing Ukraine relate to the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. Where Hertfordshire residents register interest and progress through vetting processes to enable them to sponsor a household, HCC lead the matching process in liaison with the HO – this process includes safeguarding checks and liaison with the district and borough councils who complete accommodation checks. To date the council's Private Sector Housing Team has undertaken over 250 accommodation checks to determine property suitability and fitness, enabling sponsorship to progress. Weekly dashboard reporting is provided to the LA's to enable tracking of applications pending and of households that are settled in the borough, which are time of writing via the scheme is 222 households.

Households accommodated via the above schemes have settled status in the UK, giving right work, live and welfare assistance in the UK.

Due to factors such as cost of living crisis, unrealistic expectations and cultural misunderstanding this has resulted in some placements via the Homes for Ukraine scheme to breakdown – in such situations HCC proactively seek to identify an alternative placement via the re-matching process. In the event that re-matching cannot be achieved, this may result in a household approaching LA's for housing assistance – since April 2023, 10 households have approached the council for housing assistance.

Afghan Bridging hotels

In August 2021 over 3million households were displaced from their homes, following events in Kabul. As a direct result 15,000 Afghans were evacuated under Operation Pitting. Upon arrival in the UK many were transferred

onto the ALES or ACRS schemes. Households entering the UK via one of the identified schemes have been granted immediate Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Whilst many LA's nationally pledged assistance to Afghans displaced, with support and resettlement, this led to a significant number of households remaining living for some time in hotel (bridging accommodation). 'Bridging accommodation' includes all accommodation that is procured by the Home Office for the purpose of providing temporary accommodation for households evacuated to the UK.

In March 2023, the Government [announced](#) a staggered closure process for bridging sites. The council was one of a number of LA's nationally that have had such hotels in operation and as a result of the notification were informed early May 2023 that the Dacorum bridging hotel would close on 4 August 2023. The Humanitarian Response team worked proactively with stakeholders including Home Office (HO), HCC and Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) to lead the successful exit and placement of the remaining 84 residents (across 20 households) into accommodation. The Humanitarian Response – Housing Solutions, Lead Officer was successful in securing resettlement accommodation placements for the households into the private rented sector (PRS) for 15 households, sheltered housing for 2 households and registered provider accommodation for 3 households. A further 2 households are being supported to access PRS with properties identified.

Support Provision

For households being directly resettled by the council into accommodation in the borough through the aforementioned schemes, prior to arrival, the team undertake activity to prepare the accommodation once handed over as completed from our Empty Homes team (if within Dacorum's own stock) or from the landlord – this will include ensuring that the property is furnished, cleaned and readied for in. Close attention is paid by the team to household composition to ensure appropriate decisions when furnishing the property – for example type of bedding and furniture used for children.

Prior to arrival the team liaise directly with HCC to submit requests for education placements for children of school age, this ensures that school uniforms can be obtained for children and introductory meetings are scheduled on behalf of the family.

The Humanitarian Response team have developed extensive relationships within the community over the life of the schemes. On the date of arrival for the new household, the team make arrangements for a meal to be prepared (typically native to the country of origin) for the evening of arrival, this is usually provided by the community or volunteers. Food provision is obtained in advance of arrival for initial days and is stored appropriately within the property – care and attention is given to ensuring that food is culturally appropriate and sourced from local providers. A cash allowance is also provided to cover essentials until welfare benefit claims are processed.

Travel cards are purchased to cover the first 3 months following arrival, enabling exploration of the local area, orientate themselves, attend appointments and seek employment opportunities – with the translated information packs issued by the team.

The assigned support officer will assist with the household in submitting applications for their Biometric Residency Permit - which is needed to confirm their resident status, usually this will be a period of limited leave to remain, before applying for indefinite leave to remain (in the case of Syrian refugees only). This is needed to apply for all welfare benefits and to set up bank accounts.

Support is given to undertake registrations for local health provision and to attend initial health screenings, with interpreter support as identified.

In the first days following arrival support is often intensive, with lots of new information – the team ensure that they take time to enable households to settle at their own pace before meeting to assess the individual needs of the household and registering children in school.

With the support of an interpreter, visits to new schools are undertaken. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is a priority, it is co-ordinated by the service and currently facilitated by West Herts College, Community Action Dacorum and for our own local provision, we are able to also provide volunteer led topic based ESOL, this could be around conversational English, shopping, communicating with schools etc.

Following initial arrival and settling in period, a tailored support plan is developed for the household in collaboration with the resettlement case officer – this plan seeks to identify activities that are specific to the households needs to enable effective community integration and resettlement. In addition to this the service works closely to identify a programme of activities, initiatives and projects that support wider integration in partnership with VCS and other stakeholders including statutory providers.

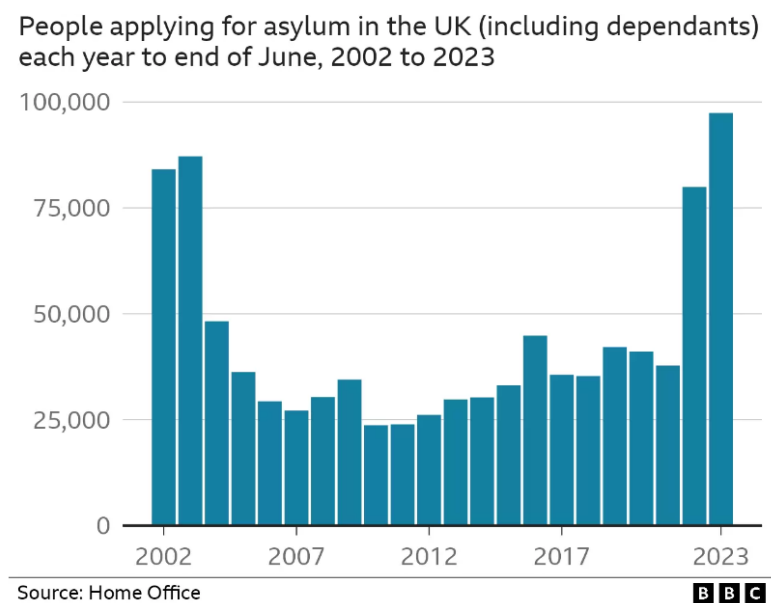
For the households supported via the VPRP programme resettlement and integration support is provided for a 5-year period, and for households supported via the ALES/ACRS schemes a 3-year period (this includes households accommodated by the council from bridging accommodation) this is in line with scheme requirements.

It is important to note that each cohort of refugees and asylum seekers are different, support before and post arrival may differ. For example Afghan households accommodated in bridging accommodation, have needed limited levels of support in respect of education and health needs, with support being focussed around activity such as access to further education and employment.

Asylum Seekers with a positive decision approaching Dacorum Borough Council will be assisted in line with homelessness legislation and will be supported into accommodation appropriate for their need, as is the case with households applying for housing assistance in the usual way.

Asylum

In recent times the UK has faced overwhelming asylum pressures, with government, rising small boat arrivals in the UK has seen unprecedented demands for interim housing pending determination of asylum claims. The below image, demonstrates the growth in asylum applications to the UK.



As a result of increasing pressures this has led to a lack of bed spaces within the HO accommodation portfolio, which has resulted in the increase use of hotels and procurement of accommodation within the PRS.

Accommodation types for the asylum cohort are outlined below:

- Initial Asylum (IA) is short-term housing that can be full-board, half-board or self-catering. It is usually in a hostel-type environment – however in recent times, due to increasing pressures this has also included hotel accommodation. It is for asylum seekers who need accommodation urgently, before their support applications have been fully assessed and longer-term accommodation can be arranged.

- Dispersal Accommodation (DA) is long term dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers pending full determination of claim.
- Overflow Asylum Accommodation (ODA) is accommodation that is stood up when asylum centres are at capacity providing overflow relief.
- Spot booking accommodation is asylum accommodation that is stood up in the event of an emergency and sites are 'spot booked' by Home Office accommodation providers.

There are 3 IA sites being stood up across Hertfordshire, 3 of which are in Dacorum – currently at the time of writing are accommodating 586 residents across multiple nationalities. In April 2022, it was announced that to alleviate pressures all LA's nationally would become asylum dispersal areas, meaning that as households are granted asylum in the UK they will be dispersed through using an agreed allocation by each region, proportionate to the population size, which for the East Region is 5,200 bed spaces – the impact for Hertfordshire is illustrated below:

Hertfordshire	1,198,800	69	870	801	801
Broxbourne	99,000	24	72	48	48
Dacorum	155,100	0	113	113	113
East Hertfordshire	150,100	0	109	109	109
Hertsmere	107,800	2	78	76	76
North Hertfordshire	133,200	0	97	97	97
St Albans	148,200	6	108	102	102
Stevenage	89,500	12	65	53	53
Three Rivers	93,800	0	68	68	68
Watford	102,300	5	74	69	69
Welwyn Hatfield	119,900	20	87	67	67

The HO is aiming to achieve procurement of the above bed spaces by December 2023 through its accommodation provider Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH). Where accommodation is identified in a LA area CRH are required to consult the district prior to recruitment, this process enables the authority to provide local intelligence to inform the procurement process. At the time of writing no progress has been made in achieving the allocation for Dacorum.

It is important to note that 113 bed spaces, is the maximum intended number of spaces to be procured in the borough at any one time. This means that as households receive their asylum determination and move out of dispersal accommodation a new household will replace them. Meaning the overall population numbers that move through the bed spaces in the borough will not be capped at 113. The service is liaising with Finance, HO and EELGA colleagues to help inform forecasting projections on the percentage of households likely to receive positive determinations, who may then go on to apply for housing assistance.

Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF)

LA's were notified by Government of this [fund](#), which is intended to help council's fund housing provision for refugees who are unable to find settled accommodation through resettlement schemes. LA's were informed of indicative allocations made for their borough, based on a ranking of the number of individuals occupying bridging hotels in their area as at 31 March 2023 – in addition the ranking considered other factors in relation to housing pressures, which included:

- Private Rented Sector (PRS) rents in relation to income
- Unemployment rate
- The number of households in Temporary Accommodation (TA) per 1,000 households

- The number of families in nightly-paid and B&B TA
- The number of households on local authority waiting lists for social housing per 1,000 households.

This approach was used to ensure that the areas facing the greatest current and future housing pressures were prioritised in the funding allocation mechanism and their overall capacity to respond to specific pressures – which would be more limited in areas of high pressure or issues such as high cost and/or shortage of housing.

The council were invited to submit a validation form, confirming our agreement to deliver a minimum of 4 homes for resettlement and 1 home for temporary accommodation element, based on an indicative total grant allocation of £950,000. Homes must be delivered by March 2024 and match funded by the council. Of the homes being progressed through the project, three properties are long term void properties within our retained stock – which the council had been considering for disposal due to the costs associated with bringing homes back into use.

A project lead has been appointed to ensure delivery in line with requirements and the council will leverage the funding to acquire and refurbish suitable properties. It is projected that funding will cover 40% of property costs with the council funding the remaining amount via existing capital budget and Afghan grant funding allocation.

Funding

The resettlement scheme and asylum programme, carry different tranches of funding – which relate to:

- Overarching scheme delivery
- integration support
- Flexible funding
- Homeless prevention top up
- and numbers of households accommodated in asylum bed spaces.

LA's are required to submit claims and validation forms for each tranche of funding, in addition separate forms must be submitted via a dedicated portal for individual household funding. Monitoring of claims is a lengthy process, the team work collaboratively with Finance colleagues to ensure that claims are paid in a timely manner and in the event of discrepancies submit appropriate queries with HO claims teams.

Funding allocation is utilised to deliver scheme elements outlined, procurement and furnishing of property, preparation for household arrival and other associated costs – including funding of staffing resource, which has been forecast to March 2027.

The council's balance b/f from all schemes for 2022/23 was £562,405 and income for 2023/24 £1,311,325 (excluding LAHF).

Success

Due to the nature of the circumstances that many of our households have experienced, family dynamics and needs can often be extremely challenging – which as a result means that support provided is much more intensive. In such circumstances transitioning a household from arrival to integration has in some cases resulted in extensive support for a 3-5 year period, identifying interventions to address matters such as serious mental health, household domestic abuse and lack of confidence or poor self-esteem. Seeing households, gain invaluable support, gradual integration and increase independence over time is a huge success.

The delivery of the scheme activity is hugely rewarding and resettlement support provided is unique to each household. As a result the successes of the scheme are varied and include outcomes that many would take for granted, such as passing ESOL levels bringing households in line with UK students GCSE standard qualification, passing of a driving test and integration of children into new education settings.

Examples of recent scheme success include individuals achieving first choice university placement to pursue their chosen career, prevention of homelessness and gaining of accommodation in preferred area of choice or private sector, developing a new skill and taking part in volunteering.

In September 2023 the service has seen one resettled individual accepted onto an accountancy course with a local education provider, another individual has been successful in gaining employment with the council and will be working to support the work of the Humanitarian Response team.

Challenges

Aside from the complexities that arise from providing support to households with multiple disadvantages and have had to flee fear of persecution, war and terror in their home country, there are a number of other challenges that arise for the local authority linked to the delivery of activity – some of which are outlined below:

- Infrastructure demands – local voluntary and statutory services are directly impacted by increasing population flow from resettlement and asylum cohorts, as activity is often stood up in reactive response new population has not been forecast into local infrastructure planning for access to services such as health, education placement and delivery/funding of local services;
- PRS impacts – HO accommodation providers are procuring property in direct competition with LA's who often look to the PRS to prevent homelessness, which results in reduced availability and can inflate the market;
- Increased LA housing and homelessness pressures – diminished PRS access can drive up numbers of households that require housing assistance from LA's, which in turn could impact on the numbers and length of time that households spend in temporary accommodation. Households receiving positive asylum determinations following process are highly likely to seek assistance with housing from LA's, which could lengthen waiting times for new and existing households in need;
- Safeguarding concerns – vulnerable households and those with a history of persecution, or challenges integrating into a community are more likely to be subject to exploitation and modern slavery;
- Community cohesion – Factors such as cost of living crisis, difficulties for existing local residents to access services and media, can exacerbate frustrations and challenges within local communities – which could contribute to anti-social behaviour, race hate crime, resentment and rising complaints.

It is therefore important that LA's work on a place based approach to delivery of local services, including the integration of resettled and asylum seeking populations. LA's need to ensure collaborative working with key stakeholders, developing policies that meet the needs of different cohorts and that broader community impacts are well considered.

3 Options and alternatives considered

Alternative options have not been considered. It is necessary for the council to ensure it delivers upon its commitments in line with defined frameworks.

4 Consultation

Due to the nature of the activity and stakeholders impacted, the service works collaboratively to ensure effective community integration and delivery of the scheme requirements for relevant cohorts.

5 Financial and value for money implications:

Activity must be delivered in line with grant funding requirements, monitoring of grant funding allocations is undertaken by the budget holder in collaboration with Finance colleagues, ensuring that memorandum of understanding's, grant expenditure determination's and other verification documentation or data is submitted in accordance with guidance. The service proactively identifies opportunities to minimise impact on council and stakeholder resources, through effective use of funding allocated and efficiency of service delivery.

6 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications outlined within this report.

7 Risk implications:

Safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children is pivotal to the delivery of humanitarian response activity. As many households seeking asylum or being resettled into the UK are likely to be vulnerable as a result of their circumstances and persecution in their home country, this could give heightened risk to exploitation, modern slavery, and race or hate crime and radicalisation.

The service is proactive in ensuring that staff and stakeholders are supported to respond effectively to issues as outlined as above, undertaking regular training, awareness and information sessions to ensure they are able to detect issues arising and reporting, or undertaking other key actions as appropriate.

8 Equalities, Community Impact and Human Rights:

A Community Impact assessment has been completed with regard to the Civil Penalty and Enforcement policies.

9 Sustainability implications (including climate change, health and wellbeing, community safety)

There are no sustainability issues arising from the development of this policy.

10 Council infrastructure (including Health and Safety, HR/OD, assets and other resources)

Increasing refugee and asylum seeking population has direct impacts for council and key stakeholder infrastructure including (not limited to) housing, health, education, emergency services and other resources such as VCS. It is crucial therefore that the service continues to work in partnership to alleviate and limit impacts on resources, through effective use of funding – in addition to engagement in local, regional and national forums and strategic groups to influence decision making and responses to asylum and resettlement activity.

11 Conclusions:

This report provides members with insight into the work led by the Humanitarian Response Team within the Housing & Property directorate and the associated challenges, or activity that may arise as a result.