

Leaders' Report

Afghan Evacuation, Asylum Support and UASC Pressures

Item no: 5

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Summary: This report updates Leaders' Committee on current pressures being placed on boroughs, resulting from the Afghan evacuation, UASC and Asylum support, and this report highlights key developments since Leaders' Committee in October

Recommendations: Leaders Committee is asked to: Comment on the issues being raised and endorse the next steps.

Afghan Evacuation, Asylum Support and UASC Pressures

1. Afghan Evacuation: Policy and Funding developments

15,000 Afghans were evacuated to the UK in August 2021, over 1500 have been helped to enter the UK since the evacuation and more evacuees continue to arrive. London boroughs have been providing essential wraparound support to over 4000 Afghan evacuees in bridging hotels since August. There are currently 12 bridging hotels in 7 London boroughs, and a number of London boroughs have also resettled Afghan families in settled, long-term housing. Most Afghans in bridging hotels are eligible for the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) or Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).

London Councils has continued to work closely with government colleagues to address issues concerning Afghan support and resettlement. The Bridging Hotels Task and Finish Group, and Education Sub-Group, attended by borough representatives and government colleagues, has provided a helpful platform for sharing best practice and identifying issues and solutions; There have been key policy and funding developments over the last few months.

Policy Update:

- In December, the government announced the decision to align resettlement support for British nationals and their dependents with ARAP and ACRS, which was welcomed by London Councils.
- This greatly reduces the risk of increased homelessness applications; before this announcement, there had been well over 200 homelessness applications from Afghan evacuees across London, mostly British nationals, who at that point did not know if a better housing/support offer would become available.
- ACRS update:
 - The ACRS formally opened on the 6th of January 2022. The government has committed to receiving 20,000 ACRS over the next 5 years, and initially the aim was to welcome 5000 in the first year, but now this figure will be exceeded.
 - ACRS 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 LGBTQ+). The dependents of British nationals will also be included under ACRS.

Funding Update:

- Local authorities now have certainty about receiving funding for providing wraparound support in bridging hotels; the funding is £28 per person per day and this applies to all hotel residents, including British nationals.
- The DFE have sent grant offers to local authorities for the first 3 months of education-related provision that they have provided to children in bridging hotels, and boroughs are now seeking reassurance around the DFE grant for the next 3 months.
- We now have more clarity around the 3-year funding available to families resettled in long-term, settled accommodation under ARAP or ACRS.
 - This funding instruction also applies to British nationals.
 - Councils will receive £20,520 per person provided over 3 years, with additional funding for children entering education, English language provision, and healthcare.
 - £25.5 million is available as part of a housing fund, which is to cover settled accommodation costs, including the shortfall in rent arising due to the benefit cap and LHA rates

Next Steps

- London Councils will seek up-to-date information on the number of ARAP and ACRS arrivals in the UK, and the estimated timeframe for arrivals over the coming years
- London Councils will continue to escalate feedback from boroughs on the funding instructions, including limitations of the housing fund and the lack of clarity on healthcare costs.

2. Moves from bridging hotels to settled accommodation

There have been delays in the government's matching process (where a local authority offers a property and the government matches an Afghan family to the property). There are also increasingly issues caused by families being matched

to properties but refusing their property offer; this has resulted in some local authorities losing property offers.

We continue to escalate these issues with government colleagues; the government has recently made changes to the matching process and has started processing cases involving British nationals and ACRS which has helped to speed-up matching. Also, the government are currently developing a 'refusals policy' as well as exploring other approaches to matching to further improve this process.

The government have closed some bridging hotels, including hotels in Croydon and Camden, although with new Afghan arrivals and delays in resettlement, the hotel estate is not currently being reduced. The Home Office have completed a RAG rating for each bridging hotel; according to their draft plan, they will be looking to move guests from 'red' hotels into 'green' hotels, alongside moving families to permanent, settled accommodation. More clarity on this process would be welcomed. Also, London Councils has requested that the government works closely with councils to ensure families are supported throughout this process and has highlighted that the move of households out of bridging hotels should be to long-stay, settled accommodation.

The government has said that there will be a 'jobs first' approach to Afghan resettlement, but we are currently also seeking clarity on what that means in practice for hotel moves.

Resettlement in London:

- Currently, boroughs have pledged to support around 200 families, with several boroughs exceeding their indicative fair share (please see fair share information below)
- To date, according to government data, London boroughs have made 72 property offers; 44 families have been resettled in London, 27 properties have been matched to a family and 1 property is still unmatched.
- The average size of properties being offered by boroughs and used to resettle families so far is 3-bedroom (which house families of around 5 people on average).

- However, currently we do not have confidence that this data from the government is fully comprehensive, and thus the numbers of property offers from boroughs and families resettled in London could be higher.

Next Steps

- London Councils will provide further feedback on any refusals policy, alternative approaches to matching and any policy concerning the consolidation of the bridging hotel estate
- London Councils will monitor any changes in the bridging hotel estate, hotel moves and homelessness presentations

3. Afghan 'Fair Shares'

London Councils has developed a 'fair share' proposal to sharing responsibility for Afghan evacuees, so that councils across London and the UK can play an equal part in responding to this national emergency. The sooner families are moved into settled housing, the sooner they can integrate and better access local support; a fair share approach will speed up this process.

London boroughs agreed to the fair share proposal in October;

- It was agreed that London's overall fair share of Afghan evacuees would be determined by population size and that this London fair share total be divided equally amongst boroughs, (so each borough will support the same amount of Afghan evacuees, excluding those boroughs that have pledged to support more than their fair share).
- Sub-regional groups will share mutual aid, to support boroughs facing significant financial challenges, as well as housing and asylum pressures.
- Afghan families that have been housed directly by local authorities through the homelessness route, should be counted as part of that borough's fair share allocation. Some boroughs may nonetheless still choose to pledge above their fair share.
- Leaders also highlighted the importance of boroughs fulfilling their pledges by resettling the Afghan evacuees in borough.
- The London fair share offer was made conditional upon the government resolving the status of British nationals, so now that the government has decided to align support for British nationals and their dependents with the

ACRS/ARAP offer (thus resolving their status), we are able to progress with the London fair share offer.

- However, the government has yet to progress a national fair share plan which is one of the other conditions of the London fair share agreement. There are also conditions concerning the procurement and dispersal of asylum accommodation (some of which is covered in the asylum section below)

The indicative allocations in October were 50-51 individuals per borough (7-8 households) for the first year, however, the updated data shows how the total number of Afghan arrivals is considerably higher than previous government estimations, and therefore, the updated indicative allocation per borough for the first year will be higher. London Chief Executives will be sent the updated allocation once the government provides us with the data on the number of Afghan arrivals.

The Asylum and Afghan Evacuees Working Group:

- The London Councils Leaders' Committee agreed to establish this working group
- This group provides a forum for cross-party political dialogue and leadership on a range of asylum and Afghan evacuee strategic policy issues, including the implementation and oversight of London fair shares, (including pledge delivery).
- The group is chaired by Cllr Muhammed Butt and will report to London Councils' Leaders' Committee as appropriate.
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Next Steps

- Circulate the updated fair share allocation once the data has been shared and convene the Asylum and Afghan Evacuees Working group to discuss the monitoring of Afghan resettlement and fair shares
- Continue to progress the conditions of the London fair share agreement

4. UASC Pressures

The national transfer scheme (NTS) was relaunched in July 2021, and the London rota has, in general, held up well since then. In November, the government announced its decision to temporarily mandate the NTS - Local

Authorities do not need to accept UASC where this cohort already makes up 0.07% or more of their general child population. The decision was made against a backdrop of 150+ unaccompanied children in asylum hotels across the country, with no local authority taking legal responsibility for them. This decision was welcomed by London Councils, particularly as many London boroughs face growing UASC pressures.

Despite the NTS being mandated, the ability of London boroughs over their 0.07% threshold to access the NTS continues to be limited, and the number of London boroughs over 0.07% has risen from 7 at 31st March, to 17 at 31st December (with other boroughs close to the threshold). In particular, boroughs are noticing a high number of UASC cases being identified from contingency hotels, which raises a number of safeguarding concerns. Also, the 28-day period to complete a Merton age assessment is simply not enough time for boroughs that are receiving multiple referrals (funding is stopped after that cut off point).

On Friday the 21st January, there was a meeting with the Association of London Directors of Children's Services to discuss UASC pressures. Directors agreed upon a number of measures, from clarifying key parts of the NTS referral process, ensuring more timely initial registration interviews and introducing escalation measures to manage NTS transfer delays, to extending the Merton age assessment time period from 28 days to 84 days.

Alongside mandation of the NTS, a £3 million emergency fund was published in December; councils have been invited to bid for the fund which can be used to help cover legal costs as a result of challenges to age assessments, and other activities to support UASC and UASC care leavers.

Next Steps:

- London Councils will support the London Strategic Migration Partnership in escalating issues and recommendations agreed by London Directors of Children's Services
- London Councils will continue to consult boroughs on UASC costs, particularly as the £3 million fund is likely to fall short of covering key UASC costs for most local authorities and local authorities also continue to face the considerable long-term costs of providing UASC care leaver support.

- London Councils, working with London Directors of Children's Services and the London Strategic Migration Partnership will continue to monitor the implementation of the NTS and sustainability of London rota arrangements.

5. Wider Asylum Pressures

The asylum system isn't fit for purpose, and the Home Office has agreed to work with local government to find solutions:

- Just as a fair share approach is being discussed for Afghan evacuees, London Councils has been progressing discussions with the LGA and the government around a fair share approach within London and nationally to asylum dispersal. Ensuring equitable asylum dispersal is one of the conditions attached to the London fair share offer.
- One of the other conditions attached to the London fair share offer, is for the Home Office and Clearsprings to have meaningful consultation with London boroughs on procuring contingency hotels, dispersal accommodation and other asylum accommodation. There is an expectation for the principles in the London Asylum Procurement Framework to be upheld to prevent pressures building within certain boroughs.
- London Councils has also been in discussion with the LGA and government about the possibility of local government taking greater responsibility for finding dispersed asylum accommodation and providing asylum support, (the Home Office used to directly contract local authorities to provide this support).
- Boroughs continue to raise the disparity of funding between bridging hotels and contingency hotels, particularly around education-related costs for children which are covered in bridging hotels but not contingency
- Also, the considerable delays in the Home Office's asylum decision making process need addressing and there is a need for the government to work with local authorities to plan ahead for the continued increase of asylum seekers.

Next Steps

- London Councils will address and progress all the points listed above. Issues concerning asylum dispersal and support, as well as UASC pressures, will be a key area of focus in the years ahead.

