

# **Cherwell District Council**

## **Executive**

**6 September 2021**

### **Notification of Urgent Action: Afghan Resettlement Programme - Afghan Locally Employed Staff (ALES)**

#### **Report of the Chief Executive**

This report is public

#### **Purpose of report**

To update the Executive on an urgent decision made by Chief Executive in relation to the short-term leasing of homes from the Ministry of Defence to assist the Council's response to the government's request for support in relation to the Afghan resettlement programme.

#### **1.0 Recommendations**

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To endorse the action taken by the Chief Executive under urgent powers to:
  - i) Enter into 12-month full repairing leases for 10 homes from the Ministry of Defence: and
  - ii) Delegate responsibility for agreeing the terms of those leases to the Corporate Director, Commercial Development, Assets and Investment.

Such action being taken in support of the programme for acquisition of accommodation to facilitate housing need in relation to the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) for Afghan Locally Employed Staff (ALES).

#### **2.0 Introduction**

- 2.1 On the 3rd June councils were advised of the Government's Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) requesting support to welcome Afghan Locally Employed Staff (ALES) – who have worked for the UK and risked their lives alongside British forces in Afghanistan over the past twenty years and are now relocating to the UK with their families. This follows NATO's decision to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan.
- 2.2 The ARAP scheme acknowledges and reflects that the situation in Afghanistan has changed, and with it the potential risk to the local staff who have worked for the UK

Government. As a result, government are working at pace to relocate around 3,000 people (or approximately 600 families) during September 2021.

- 2.3 In July 2021 councils were asked for more offers of support to resettle those who have served the UK in Afghanistan especially offers of support from areas who can provide or source larger homes of four bedrooms or more, to suit the needs of those ALES arriving in large family groups.
- 2.4 On 20 August 2021 councils were advised of a new ALES Housing Costs Fund of £5m to support councils who are finding it difficult in sourcing larger properties for families. The funding package guarantees rental payments until benefits are in place and a new fund will enable LA's to top up rent shortfalls above local housing allowance levels.
- 2.5 On 1 September government issued a news release 'operation warm welcome', supporting Afghan arrivals in the UK under the ARAP scheme by providing immediate indefinite leave to remain, alongside funding for school places and healthcare.

### **3.0 Report Details**

- 3.1 The council approached the South East Strategic Migration Partnership and MoD with a proposal to make use of vacant housing stock and lease 10 homes for a period of 12 months for the purposes of housing Afghan families through the Government's Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy for Locally Employed Staff. They will settle with 'immediate leave to remain' status and have recourse to public funds.
- 3.2 The Home Office is providing a funding package to resource local authorities who come forward with offers to resettle Afghan Locally Employed Staff (ALES) and their families, enabling delivery of integrated support for families with further support on employment, welfare benefits, and access to health, education and other local services. This financial support for all participating local authorities is being enhanced through additional central government integration support.
- 3.3 Integration funding of £10,500 per person is paid to provide 12 months of integration and support assistance. Additional funding (such as a cash fund, travel, or other incurred costs) to cover any potential short-term period before access to benefits and services becomes available to the new arrivals, will also be provided.
- 3.4 The funding package also supports rental payments, for example for a 3-bed house for a couple with 4 children, their ARAP funding will cover accommodation rental at £15 per person, per night for up to 4 months, or until benefits are in place. Therefore, to house a family of 6 people, the LA have a nominal 'budget' of £630 per week / £2,730 per month to secure rental accommodation for up to 4 months. After which, benefits will need to cover the rent and Council Tax costs if the family remain unemployed.
- 3.5 The DWP will support efforts to assist the family into employment, but if the family have not found employment and are affected by their benefit cap of £1666.67 (as a

family living outside of greater London) per month, a new fund will enable LAs with ALES to be awarded a 'top up' grant to cover the rent shortfall.

- 3.6 Extra funding is available to local authorities for the provision of English language training for adults.
- 3.7 The payment structure has been simplified to reduce the administrative burden on local authorities.
- 3.8 Council officers hold frequent conversations with the South East Strategic Migration Partnership and attend Local Authority ALES Network meetings – regular sessions organised by MHCLG for local authorities from across the whole of the UK, attended by partners from across Government, both to generate new welcome and accommodation offers, but to also support and learn from those places who have agreed to host ALES and their families.

### 3.9 Accommodation

- 3.9.1 A mobilisation of the council's housing and property teams has concluded the MoD properties are suitable for letting and are in good decorative standard. Several properties have planned maintenance works such as redecoration, re-carpeting, and garden clearance.
- 3.9.2 The council does not have a housing revenue account; it is not a stock holding housing authority and has a limited range of tenancies it can offer. The MoD properties would be leased to the council for 12 months for families and those properties will need to be handed back with vacant possession.
- 3.9.3 A council letting would first need to be processed through the provision of an emergency licence under homeless legislation (if the criteria in sections 188 and/or 193 of the Housing Act 1996 are satisfied), which is not favoured as this escalates the family into priority statutory homeless services. Assured shorthold tenancies, however, would provide security of tenure for the families for the 12-month duration of the MoD leases, and this type of tenancy can be provided by registered housing providers. Officers are therefore exploring the possibility of sub-letting the MoD properties to a local registered provider for the purpose of their offering this type of tenancy to the families.
- 3.9.4 At the end of the council's liability the families will require accommodation. It will be essential that during this period the families are supported to find move on accommodation in the private rented sector or through the council's housing register for social housing. Finding housing solutions in advance of when this accommodation ceases to be available will be critical to avoid homelessness. The Cherwell guarantee bond scheme will be used to help secure larger properties in the private rented sector as well as any funding should it be made available by the Home Office. It is unlikely that social housing stock will be available due to existing high levels of demand and the Afghan need for larger accommodation.

### 3.10 Leases

- 3.10.1 The council would enter into a 12-month full repairing lease with the MoD. Insurances will be required to be taken out by the council to cover the full reinstatement value of each property leased. The leases are expected to require that any residential letting be granted on a temporary basis to enable their return to the MoD with vacant possession. A formal condition agreement on each property

will be required prior to acquisition. In the event that the council awards a sub-lease, this will set out any transfer of liabilities.

### 3.11 Wrap around support

- 3.11.1 The full wraparound support offer is being developed with existing migration specialist partners in Oxfordshire. There will be a managed welcome of families in conjunction with South East Strategic Migration Partnership. Support will include language skills, access to healthcare and education, voluntary sector support and advice, purposeful activities such as ESOL and job market.
- 3.11.2 There is an opportunity to replicate the tried and tested approach adopted in Cherwell to deliver the Syrian and UK Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. This approach involves commissioning of external support providers to deliver intense wrap-around support to the families in the first two weeks of arrival and then weekly support for a further 50 weeks.
- 3.11.3 A temporary resettlement project coordinator hosted by Cherwell District Council and funded by the Afghan Resettlement Scheme funding would ensure that the project is coordinated making sure funding bids and claims are being made. The officer will be the single point of contact for Afghan families, support providers, County Council, Home Office, and other stakeholders. This approach also enables the families to access support and engage with local Cherwell services and charitable, voluntary and community sector groups, thereby helping the Afghan families to quickly settle and integrate into the Cherwell community.

## **4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1 To provide a positive response to the emerging Afghanistan crisis and central Government's call for help by securing suitable family accommodation for affected families within the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) for Afghan Locally Employed Staff (ALES).
- 4.2 There is a need to act quickly and get leases in place so that families can begin to settle and receive the necessary wrap around support due to the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan and to ensure suitable accommodation is provided and affected families are settled as quickly as possible.

## **5.0 Consultation**

Cllr Lucinda Wing, Lead Member for Housing  
Cllr Douglas Webb, Vice Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Urgent Decision

## **6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

- 6.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: To withdraw from the scheme - the Council could decide not to participate in the scheme and decide not to proceed with acquisition of properties.

Option 1 has been rejected due to the urgent need, by the end of September 2021 to provide emergency housing and support to Afghans who have worked for the UK in Afghanistan, and who have been relocated to the UK for safety following the withdrawal of NATO (including UK) forces from Afghanistan.

## 7.0 Implications

### Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 The anticipated home office funding package is set out at appendix 1. A full cost analysis has been undertaken by finance officers and the extent of our financial risk is forecast to be nil based on a typical family of six (i.e. two adults and four children under 18) with accommodation provided by the MoD.

Comments checked by:

Michael Furness, Assistant Director of Finance

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### Legal Implications

- 7.2 The legal service is in discussion with MoD lawyers on the terms of the leases, and will keep the Corporate Director, Commercial Development, Assets and Investment (who has been delegated the power to agree such terms) apprised of these negotiations as they progress in conjunction with the parallel discussions on sub-letting to a provider able to grant the type of short-term tenancy best suited to a temporary 12-month leasing arrangement.

Comments checked by:

Richard Hawtin, Team Leader Non-contentious

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### Risk Implications

- 7.3 There are risks associated with the types of tenancy given to the families which are discussed as set out at para 3.9. The option to provide assured shorthold tenancies seeks to minimise the council's risk and provides security of tenure for the families. The ALES scheme is not mandatory, but the council's assistance and offer meets an urgent accommodation need and government request for support.

At the end of the 12-month period it is important that the council has worked with its partners to find suitable accommodation in order to avoid costs related to homelessness provision. The appointment of a temporary project officer within the Council alongside the commissioned support service will ensure a proactive approach is taken to use all opportunities and funding available to minimise the risk.

These risks will be managed by the services operational risk register and escalated to the leadership risk register as and when necessary.

Comments checked by:

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## **Equalities and Inclusion Implications**

- 7.4 An Equality Impact Assessment (Appendix 2 - ECIA) has been completed and is appended. This is a thorough assessment of the current situation with consideration of actions to mitigate and monitor impact.

Comments checked by:

Lauren Rushden, Policy Officer.

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## **Sustainability Implications**

- 7.5 A Climate Impact Assessment is appended (Appendix 2 - ECIA). This highlights that the properties will have Energy Performance Certificates and how support will be provided to tenants to help reduce energy and carbon use where possible.

Comments checked by:

Sandra Fisher-Martins, Climate Action Programme Manager

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## **8.0 Decision Information**

**Key Decision** **No**

**Financial Threshold Met:** **No**

**Community Impact Threshold Met:** **No**

### **Wards Affected**

All

### **Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework**

Business Plan Priorities 2021-2022:

Housing that meets your needs

Healthy, resilient, and engaged communities

### **Lead Councillor**

Cllr Lucinda Wing, Lead Member for Housing

## **Document Information**

### **Appendices**

- Appendix 1: Home Office Funding Package
- Appendix 2: Equality and Climate Impact Assessment

**Background papers**

Urgent Executive Decision taken by Chief Executive: The acquisition of accommodation to facilitate housing need in relation to the *Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) for Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES)* ('the Programme')

**Report Author and contact details**

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