



Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Title	Refugee Resettlement and Asylum Progress
Date of meeting	5 March 2024
Report of	Deputy Chief Executive
Wards	All
Status	Public
Urgent	No
Appendices	Appendix A: Refugee Resettlement Schemes and Asylum Funding Overview (Jan 2024)
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Summary

This paper provides an update on the status of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme and the Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme, as well as updates relating to the accommodation of asylum seekers in contingency hotel accommodation by the Home Office. This paper outlines the successes of these schemes in the resettlement of vulnerable people in line with the values upheld as a future Borough of Sanctuary as well as the ongoing and potential challenges with respect to housing and community cohesion.

Recommendations

1. That the Committee consider the contents of this report
2. The Committee review the information provided and identify areas which they wish to ask questions and/or make comments or recommendations to the Cabinet, relevant Cabinet Member, or Barnet Homes.

1. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 1.1 Barnet Council is currently responsible for overseeing the delivery of two refugee resettlement schemes, the Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme and the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. In addition

to that, the council is responsible for delivering support for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children who make up a significant cohort of the local authority's looked after children. Over recent years the Home Office has made use of five hotel sites in Barnet to provide contingency accommodation for asylum seekers and, although this is not a resettlement scheme and asylum seekers are in the care of the Home Office while awaiting a decision on their claim, the council has delivered a range of targeted initiatives to support asylum seekers whilst they are accommodated in hotel accommodation. As such, Barnet is home to a wide range of diverse communities, including longer term settled migrants and new-comers through various pathways. This includes the Hong Kong BN(O) scheme which has seen a high number of Hong Kongers resettling in Barnet. Although not a refugee scheme, the council has worked to ensure ESOL provision for Hong Kongers and access GLA grant funding to support the resettlement of Hong Kongers in Barnet.

1.2 Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme

The Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) is a Home Office funded resettlement scheme aimed at facilitating the re-location and resettlement of Afghani individuals and families who assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan or are otherwise vulnerable (e.g. women and LGBTQ+ people). Each person resettled through this scheme is eligible for £20,500 to support their resettlement, as well as an additional £7,100 Flexible Housing Fund per person for those arrived since April 2023 (capped at £35,000 per household) to provide housing assistance. Since 2021, Barnet Council has commissioned Barnet Homes to deliver this scheme and has resettled 76 individuals from 15 families. There are three routes through which Afghans have been, and continue to be, resettled in Barnet:

1. 'Find Your Own Accommodation' Pathway – through this scheme, Afghans who sourced their own private rented accommodation were able to move into the borough and receive resettlement support from the council. Since 2021, Barnet has resettled 76 individuals through this pathway from 15 families, surpassing an initial target of 50 individuals.
2. Hotel exit – since the closure of Afghan bridging hotels, Barnet Homes accepted a duty to house 15 families who applied for housing support, none of these are yet resettled in Barnet, either due to medical needs or having been placed in temporary accommodation.
3. MOD properties – since January 2024, the MOD has been commissioned by the Home Office to procure Mears to identify properties that are suitable for Afghans leaving bridging. As of 28 January, four properties have been identified which will accommodate four families. These will all receive wrap-around integration support once they have moved into the borough.

1.3 In November 2023, the government asked local authorities to respond to a consultation on safe and legal routes. This consultation asked local authorities to provide the number of people they would be able to resettle in 2025 through the two safe and legal routes currently in place, the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme and the Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme. Taking into account housing and integration support capacity, through engaging with partners, Barnet council responded to the consultation with a proposal to resettle between 30-45 individuals or small families. The council submitted this response but there has been no indication as to whether this number is agreed.

1.4 Homes for Ukraine

Barnet has welcomed over 1,700 Ukrainians into the borough via the Homes for Ukraine scheme, Barnet has had the largest numbers of Ukrainians in London and the second highest in UK. 1,082 of Ukrainians have now left the scheme. The majority of those that have left the scheme have successfully moved into Private Rented Sector (PRS) or have returned to Ukraine or other neighbouring countries. 50% of those who have left the scheme reported that they have stayed

within Barnet and 75% of these reported having not required support from housing after leaving their sponsorship.

1.5 There are currently 618 guests being sponsored by 208 residents in Barnet. Engagement with sponsors and guests shows that 69% of guests feel that they are in a secure arrangement with their sponsor and are not currently looking to move into PRS. 14% expressed a wish to move into the PRS in the future. In 2023, the council secured 54 affordable properties at Colindale Gardens that are currently rented at around half of market rate and there are available to Ukrainians, however take up has been low due to guests security with their sponsors. There is also some uncertainty for guests around visa extensions as the visas issues on the scheme run for three years which means that they will begin to expire in 2025. This uncertainty can cause issues for renting where landlords require over 12-month contracts and a reluctance to look at permanent settling options. In addition to that, the council procured a refugee service called Beam to support Ukrainians with rent, guarantors, and furniture when they do move into PRS. There is support within this contract for up to 80 Ukrainian households.

1.6 **Asylum Seekers**

There are currently five hotels being used by the Home Office as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers in Barnet who are awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. As of February 2024, there were 1,436 individuals in Home Office hotel accommodation in Barnet down from a peak of 1,648. 457 of those accommodated in hotel accommodation are children. The decrease in the number of asylum seekers in Barnet is due to an increase in the number of people being served a decision on their asylum claim and subsequently leaving hotel accommodation having been served a Notice to Quit (NTQ). The Home Office are responsible for the day-to-day management of the hotels, as well as catering at four of the five sites. Clear Springs, who the Home Office procure to oversee the management of the hotels, are responsible for safeguarding hotel residents and responding to issues. The local authority has no decision-making role in the placement of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation or the management of the hotels. However, the council has played an active role in influencing partners where issues have arisen. For example, the quality of food provision in the catered hotels is a consistent complaint and the council now convenes a bimonthly working group alongside Clear Springs and partners to address issues of food quality.

1.7 Since the Home Office began to use hotel accommodation in Barnet for asylum seekers, the council has gone above statutory responsibilities to provide support to those accommodated in the hotels. This has included vital health visiting and Early Help provision provided by Children's Services, as well as mobilisation from schools to secure school places for children and young people in Barnet. Public Health have also mobilised to provide support to those accommodated in hotels, through improving immunisation rates, widening access to health services, developing welcome packs to provide asylum seekers with the information they need when in hotel accommodation and working with partners to provide cooking sessions. In addition to this, the council has commissioned two local VCFS organisations to provide outreach support in all five hotels which includes ESOL classes, legal advice and support with GP and school registrations, as well as opportunities to socialise and mark cultural events.

1.8 The hotels were initially stood up by the Home Office during the pandemic as a temporary measure to accommodate asylum seekers, however all hotels are still in operation and there are ongoing plans by the Home Office to maximise the space within the hotels by implementing room sharing. When the council received notification of hotel maximisation, officers arranged a visit to one of the hotels in Barnet with the Home Office Director of Asylum to raise concerns around room sharing. At this site, the concerns were around overcrowding within the hotel and concerns

around community cohesion should there be a high number of individuals moved into the borough and the impact of this on wider infrastructure (e.g. GP places). Following this visit, hotel maximisation has not taken place at this site but in June 2023, the council did receive notification that hotel maximisation would begin in another site in the borough, but this has not yet been implemented or completed.

- 1.9 In 2023, the Home Office also began to implement the ‘Streamlined Asylum Process’ (SAP) which sought to clear the backlog of asylum claims. This process resulted in a high number of asylum seekers being given refugee status while resident in hotel accommodation. Once an individual is given refugee status, they are then served an NTQ which gives them 28 days to vacate hotel accommodation. A change in Home Office Policy in September 2023, meant that in some cases individuals were given only 7 days to vacate hotel accommodation. When served a positive decision and granted refugee status, individuals have all the rights of a refugee and are therefore able to apply for housing, universal credit, gain employment and enrol in education. This means that they can access support not previously available to them with asylum status, however the short period of time given to leave hotel accommodation can make this time period challenging to navigate. m
- 1.10 Following the implementation of SAP, there was a marked increase in the number of refugees leaving hotel accommodation and approaching Barnet Homes for housing assistance. Over the last three quarters the number of applications for housing support from former asylum seekers has more than quadrupled:

Applications from NASS asylum seekers (excluding Ukraine & Afghanistan)			
Period	Q1 23/24	Q2 23/24	Q3 23/24
No. applications	23	49	163

- 1.11 Where there are a high number of approaches for assistance, there are two primary risks to manage. For clients who are vulnerable or have children, there is a financial cost of providing Temporary Accommodation (TA). The local authority receives no funding from the Home Office to cover the costs associated with support for those leaving hotel accommodation. As of January 2023, the TA forecast projected £24,963,000 income and £28,873,000 expenditure which amounts to a shortfall of £3,909,000 for the year 23/24. So far there has been 802 approaches from former asylum seekers for housing support and as of January 2024, there were 221 former asylum seekers in Temporary Accommodation and approximately 50% of these are accommodated outside of Barnet.
- 1.12 For single clients, who have accounted for 419 of the 802 approaches, there is an increased risk of homelessness and rough sleeping. It is not clear on the exact number of former asylum seekers rough sleeping in Barnet, but the data from the last Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) shows that of the 38 clients accommodated, 10 of these were former asylum seekers. Across London, 1282 were accommodated, of which 242 were former asylum seekers. To support those single clients, Barnet Homes has a single homelessness team who work to support single people to find accommodation in the PRS, this includes providing a rent deposit.
- 1.13 In order to alleviate the pressure that an increased number of approaches placed on front line Barnet Homes staff, the council utilised the Home Office asylum grant to put in place a dedicated housing needs officer. This has enabled staff to process housing applications more efficiently and to ensure relevant support is in place for applicants. Barnet Homes are also working proactively

to give more information to clients leaving the hotel, this includes distributing leaflets with advice information about housing that has been translated into key languages and has been distributed to the five hotels. By increasing the distribution of information to clients in hotels at the earliest point, this has enabled people to access relevant support and has reduced some of the confusion experienced by clients in the hotels and VCFS partners supporting them.

- 1.14 The SAP has also resulted in increased pressure on VCFS hotel outreach providers as the need in the hotels has shifted from support at arrival, to support with gaining refugee status and making applications for support such as housing and universal credit. Barnet Homes are working with New Citizens Gateway to adapt and update these leaflets and will receive training on housing and homelessness to enable them to support and signpost clients in hotels when they receive a decision on their claim.
- 1.15 On 24 October, the Home Office announced that it would begin the closures of the first tranche of temporary asylum hotels which would be a total of 50 hotel closures across the UK. None of the Barnet hotels were part of this first tranche of hotel closures and there has been no indication to date that any of the five asylum hotels in Barnet are due to be closed in the near future. On 6 February 2024, officers met with a Home Office official who confirmed that there are no immediate plans to close any of the five hotels in Barnet. The Home Office also confirmed that the council will receive notice of hotel closures. In the event of hotel closure, the Home Office will still be responsible for the accommodation of those asylum seekers resident in the hotel and will re-accommodate asylum seekers into Dispersal Accommodation, this could be in Barnet or outside of the borough. In 2022, the Home Office carried out a New Burdens Assessment which allocated 238 Dispersal Accommodation bedspace in Barnet which would be the total number of asylum seekers in Barnet if plans to close contingency hotel accommodation go ahead.
- 1.16 The impact of the closure of asylum hotels would relate to children's schooling, safeguarding and health, for example GP registration and officers are looking at contingency planning for this in the event of hotel closure. The closure of asylum hotels will require a re-model of the VCFS outreach support as that currently takes place within the hotels. In the instance that asylum seekers are moved out the borough, this would remove the needs for commissioned hotel outreach support. However, should the Home Office move asylum seekers from contingency accommodation into Dispersal Accommodation this would require a community-based model of support and the council would work with relevant partners to implement this.

1.17 **Community Cohesion**

Barnet's communities have played an integral part in supporting those seeking sanctuary in Barnet over the years, this has included donating food and clothes to new arrivals in hotels and sharing their homes with Ukrainians as part of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. The welcome of Barnet communities has fostered an environment of understanding and compassion that has facilitated strong community cohesion. To further enhance community cohesion, the council in partnership with the met police carried out visits to hotels where asylum seekers were given information on where to report any crime and where they can go for support if they need it. These sessions enabled officers to build trust with asylum seekers. In addition to this, by providing volunteering opportunities in partnership with Volunteer Barnet and ESOL classes through the hotel outreach service, asylum seekers are able to integrate themselves into Barnet and to have access to the tools they will need to join the community following a decision on their asylum claim.

- 1.18 To date there have been no incidents of concern with respect to community cohesion as a result of the accommodation of asylum seekers in Barnet, however the council acknowledges that an

increased number of new arrivals could cause concern for the community. In the past there have been issues with foodbanks being overrun and a lack of GP places in localities where there is contingency asylum accommodation. Further pressure on local services could cause concerns for the community and could result in a breakdown of cohesion or contribute to an increase in discrimination. The council has in the past raised such concerns with the Home Office, most recently when hotel maximisation was approved at a site that officers believed could cause issues for the local community. The council will continue to monitor community relations and escalate concerns to relevant partners as they arise.

1.19 Borough of Sanctuary

The Borough of Sanctuary programme is one way in which the council can seek to minimise a negative impact on community cohesion. A key element of this work is to promote relationship building opportunities between sanctuary seekers and receiving communities. The delivery of Barnet's first Refugee Week event in 2023 was a way in which this work began, and which brought together local communities and sanctuary seekers. Through awareness raising of issues related to sanctuary, the council will look to further promote opportunities for relationship building and to promote community cohesion across different groups.

2. Alternative Options Considered and Not Recommended

- 2.1 The council could end the support of new arrivals through the Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme, having now exceeded the original quota of 50 individuals to be resettled through this scheme. This option is not recommended. As a borough with Borough of Sanctuary ambitions, a well-funded and resourced scheme such as this should continue to run.
- 2.2 The council does not have any decision-making role with respect to the placement of asylum seekers in Barnet. As such, it is under no statutory duty to provide dedicated outreach support in the asylum hotels. However, having received Asylum Grant Funding in 2023, the council has utilised this to keep outreach support in place in hotels.

3. Post Decision Implementation

- 3.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee may decide to make recommendations or refer issues to the Council, Cabinet, relevant Cabinet Member or other body for response in accordance with the scrutiny arrangements set out in sections 31 to 43 of the Committee Procedure. Officers will ensure any recommendations or decisions, along with relevant information to support decision making, are presented to Cabinet.

4. Corporate Priorities, Performance and Other Considerations

Corporate Plan

- 4.1 The delivery of resettlement schemes by the local authority, as well as the outreach support in hotels and corporate parenting of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children all form part of the council's vision to tackle inequalities and to be a 'Family Friendly' borough.

Corporate Performance / Outcome Measures

- 4.2 Performance related to the delivery of services for refugees and asylum seekers is monitored within directorates according to specific internal controls. Other measures include regular reporting through the Tackling the Gaps group and the Borough of Sanctuary Steering Group.

Sustainability

4.3 There is no direct impact on the council's sustainability strategy.

Corporate Parenting

4.4 In line with the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the council has a duty to consider Corporate Parenting Principles in decision-making across the council. The outcomes and priorities in the refreshed Corporate Plan, 'Our Plan for Barnet', reflect the council's commitment to the Corporate Parenting duty to ensure the most vulnerable are protected and the needs of children are considered in everything that the council does. This includes the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children who are looked after by the council.

4.5 There are currently 53 separated children in care and 69 former relevant young people being supported. This is a combination of care experienced young people who have been granted refugee status and those who are still waiting for a decision on their asylum claim. There is also a cohort of 12 young people (21+) who are still waiting for their immigration decision. Family services have put in place a range of interventions to support Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and care leavers, such as vital emotional wellbeing support and interventions around employment and skills.

Risk Management

4.6 The new Streamlined Asylum Process and acceptance of claims, along with the disbanding of Bridging hotels, the Home Office's hotel maximisation policy refresh and the shortened length of notification of the cessation of home Office support could lead to an increased flow/number of places in Barnet resulting in an increased pressure on council services (e.g. housing, social care) and increased budget pressures. In addition to this, the ongoing resettlement of Ukrainians and Afghans could lead to increased pressure on housing services.

4.7 As noted at 1.11 above as of January 2024, there were 221 former asylum seekers in Temporary Accommodation; the temporary accommodation funding deficit means there is financial pressure from due to increased demand for temporary accommodation. There is greater focus on managing temporary accommodation well, and moving residents into longer term, less costly accommodation options. The recent purchase of 249 homes in Colindale Gardens has helped in managing accommodation pathways for households living in temporary accommodation.

4.8 For single non-vulnerable clients leaving NASS accommodation at risk of rough sleeping, support is in place to help this group to access private rented accommodation including making a rent deposit available. The outreach service works proactively to identify and support new rough sleepers quickly and to refer them to appropriate support.

4.9 Given the numbers of people currently accommodated in the five NASS hotels the sudden closure of the hotels would have a big impact on the wider cohort of households who are homeless and in temporary accommodation. Currently around 50% of all households accommodated in temporary accommodation are placed out of borough and there are 12 households with children who have been accommodated in hotel accommodation for more than 6 weeks; additional pressure on temporary accommodation would impact negatively on both.

4.10 To date, there has been no evidence of increased pressure on housing services or wider public service infrastructure because of the resettlement of Ukrainians or Afghans in Barnet. These schemes are funded, and officers have been able to support their resettlement into both short- and long-term accommodation which has prevented homelessness within these cohorts.

4.11 The following treatments have been put in place to manage these risks

- Supporting work with GLA and London Councils on long term approaches and funding

- Homes for Ukraine, Afghan and Syrian resettlement schemes are funded and currently monitored closely
- Commissioned BEAM to support Ukrainians into privately rented housing by crowdfunding initial deposit / housing payments

Insight

- 4.12 The council receives weekly data from Clear Springs on the number of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation. This is broken down into ages, languages spoken, gender and nationality. However, in many instances the languages spoken, and nationality of clients are unknown so there is no reliable data that the council has with respect to this. However, the data shows that the most spoken languages across the hotels are Farsi, Kurdish and Albanian. The data also shows that a high number of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation are single males. These individuals are most likely to not have a homelessness duty and therefore are at increased risk of rough sleeping once served a decision on their asylum claim.
- 4.13 The data received also shows that since August 2023, the number of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation in Barnet has decreased. The data compiled by Barnet Homes shows that alongside this decrease, there has been an increase in the number of approached by former asylum seekers for housing support.
- 4.14 The council holds data related to each of the resettlement schemes and uses this to inform resourcing. Regular consultation with service users has also enabled the council to gain deeper insight into the needs and experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. Extensive consultation with Ukrainians on the Homes for Ukraine Scheme has enabled the council to understand their needs and to develop initiatives to support them.
- 4.15 The council regularly engages with pan-London refugee and asylum forums which provides data related to London-wider refugee resettlement and asylum.

4.16 Social Value

- 4.17 The proposals within this report have no direct implications on social value but should any further procurement of services occur, social value will be considered within those contracts in line with the new social value policy.

5. Resource Implications (Finance and Value for Money, Procurement, Staffing, IT and Property)

- 5.1 The Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme and HfU schemes are funded by government grant funding which has enabled adequate resourcing and staffing to oversee the delivery of the schemes. The funding includes provision for education, ESOL and social care. In addition to this, the council receives funding to support Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.
- 5.2 In 2023, the council received an asylum grant of £1.194m, calculated at £750 per person in contingency hotel accommodation as of 1 April 2023. This grant was used to fund hotel outreach support, as well as public health initiatives and staff to support asylum co-ordination. There has been no guarantee of further funding for 2024. In the instance that the council does not receive the asylum grant, then this would put the hotel outreach support and other initiatives at risk.
- 5.3 The high number of asylum seekers leaving hotel accommodation and approaching for housing support is putting financial pressure on Barnet Homes. There is no additional funding to alleviate

this pressure or to support the local authority to find long-term housing solutions for former asylum seekers.

6. Legal Implications and Constitution References

- 6.1 Council Constitution, Part 2B and 2C, Terms of Reference of Committees, Section 9 (Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Sub-Committees: 9.2 Within their terms of reference, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Sub-Committees will have the following roles
- 6.2 9.2.2 Policy Development and Review – by supporting the Council and Executive in developing the policy framework and budget for the Council, working with partner organisations on issues that may be outside the remit of the Council and reviewing and/or scrutinising decisions made or actions taken in connection with the discharge of any of the Council’s functions;
- 6.3 9.2.3 Service Reviews - by making reports and/or recommendations to the full Council, Executive, Portfolio Holders and any Joint or Area Committees on any of their functions;
- 6.4 9.4.1.1 review and scrutinise the decisions made by, and performance of, the Executive, Portfolio Holders and/or Committees and Council officers both in relation to individual decisions and over longer periods of time;
- 6.5 9.4.1.2 review and scrutinise the performance of the Council in relation to its policy objectives, performance targets and/or particular service areas;
- 6.6 9.4.1.3 require the attendance of and question Members and chief officers about their decisions and performance, or in relation to particular decisions, initiatives or projects;
- 6.7 9.4.1.4 make recommendations to the Executive and/or appropriate Committee and/or Council arising from the outcome of the scrutiny process.
- 6.8 10.1.3 To offer challenge and critical support to the Executive’s policy development function and the long-term strategic direction of the borough;
- 6.9 10.1.4 To anticipate policy changes and determine their potential impact on residents and to recommend changes where these are appropriate.
- 6.10 The Council’s Constitution, Committee Procedure Rules, Part 3C (Committee Procedure Rules), paragraph 39.2 includes the powers and responsibility to ‘Review or scrutinise decisions made, or other action taken, in connection with the discharge of any functions which are the responsibility of the executive’ and ‘Review or scrutinise the performance of anybody carrying out any function on behalf of or in partnership with the Council.’

7. Consultation

- 7.1 None

8. Equalities and Diversity

- 8.1 Decision makers should have due regard to the public sector equality duty in making their decisions. The 2010 Equality Act outlines the provisions of the Public-Sector Equalities Duty which Page 11 of 12 requires Public Bodies to have due regard to the need to:
- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
 - Advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups

- Foster good relations between people from different backgrounds

8.2 The work across the council to support sanctuary seekers is an important part of our commitment to Equality and Diversity. The council acknowledges the unique challenges faced by sanctuary seekers and the way in which our approach must be sensitive to the protected characteristics of those seeking sanctuary in Barnet, including age, disability, race and ethnicity, faith or believe, sex, gender reassignment, language, maternity / parental status, and sexual orientation.

9. Background Papers

9.1 None