



London boroughs' support for Afghan Evacuees

Local government has been at the forefront of the emergency response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. London boroughs are resolute in their determination to provide the best possible welcome to Afghans families. This briefing updates members on boroughs' work to support evacuees and highlights London boroughs' key asks of government.

Background

More than 15,000 Afghans were evacuated to the UK before the 31 August, and many were placed in MQS (Managed Quarantine Service) hotels in London. London boroughs and voluntary and community sector (VCS) partners helped arrivals in MQS hotels access immediate welfare support such as food and clothing. The majority of these individuals have since been placed in bridging hotels, where London boroughs have been increasingly integral to providing wraparound support. London boroughs also continue to pledge to house and resettle families through the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).

This briefing details the vital contribution of local authorities to date and highlights London boroughs' key asks of government, including:

- To finalise the funding for the wraparound support in bridging hotels, and ensure that local authorities are paid for supporting all bridging hotel residents, including British nationals.
- Provide British nationals with resettlement support aligned with ARAP and ACRS, and address concerns around homelessness applications.
- Resolve delays in the matching process (where the government allocates Afghan families to accommodation identified by local authorities).
- Ensure that boroughs are consulted on the processes involved in standing down bridging hotels.
- Listen to boroughs comments on the draft funding instruction for the ACRS and ARAP 3-year tariff.
- Work with local authorities to achieve a more equitable asylum system.

Bridging Hotels

30 per cent of all Afghans evacuated to the UK have been placed in London hotels. There are 14 Bridging Hotels in eight London boroughs, mainly in central London, for use as accommodation pending long term housing offers. All London

boroughs with bridging hotels have stepped up to the Home Office's request to provide key wraparound support (local authorities were offered £28 per person per day to fund this).

However, local authorities are still awaiting the finalised funding instruction for this wraparound support, which we understand has still not been agreed by the Treasury. The absence of agreed funding leaves boroughs carrying a large financial risk on behalf of government. Furthermore, boroughs need reassurance that the funding will cover the costs of all hotel residents, as was initially indicated, because the recent draft funding instruction excludes British nationals from the offer, which is unacceptable. Furthermore, as Afghan families could be in hotels for a considerable length of time, the government must commit to funding additional costs associated with longer-term wraparound support.

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Despite the funding instruction not being finalised, London boroughs, in partnership with the VCS, health partners, government officials and other partners, have been working tirelessly to make sure that we understand and meet the needs of the families in bridging hotels. For example, we have been supporting mothers and babies, including with translating resources and guidance; finding school places for hundreds of children and paying for school uniforms; developing mental health resources for arrivals to help them deal with the trauma they experienced prior to the evacuation; and working with our health partners to put in place the right health and public health advice for people and ensuring other key health arrangements, from TB screening to Covid-19 vaccinations.

Without the work of local government, thousands of Afghans would have not had their basic needs met, would not be accessing play and education and, still, in many cases, would be without any means of living beyond that available from the hotel. It is equally clear that without local government, resettlement will be impossible.

Homelessness Presentations

As of 22 October, boroughs have now informed us of 221 homelessness applications received from families evacuated from Afghanistan; almost every London borough has received homelessness applications, with concentrations in West London. Most the Afghan cohort are able to present as homeless because they are British nationals or have indefinite leave to remain under the ARAP/ACRS resettlement offer, and the hotel accommodation is not suitable for families with children, especially beyond 6 weeks. 88 per cent of the homelessness presentations have been made where at least one family member is a British national. British nationals and their dependents are not eligible for support under ARAP or ACRS. It is vital that the government gives British nationals resettlement support aligned with ARAP and ACRS, or at least includes them in the housing end of the programme, even if other support is subject to a needs assessment. Otherwise, homeless presentations will escalate. London boroughs are working with DLUHC and the Home Office and for now, are encouraging families to stay in Bridging hotels, because the accommodation and support through a resettlement route (if it is afforded to British nationals) will be better than via a statutory homelessness application.

There have been major delays from the government in the matching of families eligible for ARAP with available properties provided by local authorities, this has even resulted in local authorities losing property offers for Afghan families because landlords have found other tenants due to the time being taken. Due to the large numbers of families in hotels, and the desire among many evacuees to live in London alongside existing Afghan communities, there is a risk that the longer families are in hotels, the more homeless presentations there will be; thus it is vital that the government prioritises resolving delays in the matching process.

Finally, as Afghan families are increasingly placed in settled long-term accommodation, bridging hotels will increasingly be stood down. Recently the government has started moving Afghan families from two bridging hotels in London under considerable pressure, to other bridging hotels in London. While we support an approach that prioritises standing down hotels where the hotel conditions are poor and the boroughs are under considerable pressure, it is important

that the government consults local authorities on this process, and in particular, ensures that families are not moved to bridging hotels in local authorities that are also under considerable pressure, and ensures that families are consulted and supported throughout the process. Otherwise the government risks exacerbating the homelessness issue, particularly if Afghan families end up in a bridging hotel in a new, unfamiliar area without any support.

ARAP and ACRS Resettlement

So far, a number of London boroughs have already resettled Afghan families, and the vast majority of London boroughs have pledged to support around 200 Afghan households. London Councils, the LGA, the government and other local areas, have been discussing how councils nationally and within London can take a 'fair share' of Afghan evacuees. However, a London 'fair share' offer is contingent on the government resolving the British nationals issue and adhering to agreements on broader asylum pressures.

We welcomed the government's decision to align ARAP and ACRS, and to increase the resettlement support through ARAP and ACRS from one year to three years. However, it is important that the government provides local authorities with clarity on the ACRS and ARAP three-year funding offer as soon as possible, and listens to boroughs about additional funding needs, such as for Health provision, ESOL, and the housing fund in particular, because the lack of affordable family-sized housing in London is a key barrier to London boroughs housing and resettling families.

The Wider Asylum Context

Twenty two London boroughs are supporting thousands of asylum seekers in contingency hotels – the number of asylum seekers in hotels has risen dramatically since June 2020, disproportionately impacting London. London also provides accommodation and support to roughly one third of all unaccompanied asylum seeker-children. Looking beyond the immediate policy and funding obstacles outlined in this briefing, it is crucial that the government and boroughs continue working together towards achieving an equitable asylum system.

Boroughs need reassuring that the principles in the London Asylum Procurement Framework will be upheld and built upon; in particular, Clearsprings should have meaningful consultation with boroughs on procuring contingency hotels and other asylum accommodation, and the procurement of new dispersed accommodation should be distributed across the capital in an equitable way, which takes into consideration existing local pressures.

We also ask that the government focus on addressing the cause of the backlog in contingency hotels by reviewing and improving the whole asylum system. The use of bridging hotels and contingency hotels presents many issues for the Afghan cohort and asylum seekers, particularly around their welfare, their safety and safeguarding. For example, there is overcrowding in some hotels, limited access to facilities (such as cooking facilities), and there are barriers to effectively integrating families and arranging appropriate support for people while they are in hotels.

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