

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 26 May 2023

Subject: Closure of Bridging Hotels for Afghan refugees and the impact of wider asylum-migration policymaking on homelessness in Greater Manchester

Report of: Paul Dennett, Portfolio Lead for Housing, Homelessness and Infrastructure

Purpose of Report

To update on Government plans to close Afghan bridging hotels and Greater Manchester plans for a coordinated city-regional approach to the minimisation of homelessness impact, in addition to recommendations to Government for tackling the links between asylum and immigration policy and homelessness.

Recommendations:

The GMCA is requested to:

1. Acknowledge agreed measures to facilitate a coordinated and consistent approach across Greater Manchester's boroughs, in order to minimise the homelessness impact of Afghan Bridging hotel closures.
2. Support representations to Government aimed at minimising the impact of the Bridging hotel closures, restating our commitment to welcoming people seeking asylum and refugees and addressing the role of wider asylum and immigration policies in driving homelessness.

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Report authors must identify which paragraph relating to the following issues:

BOLTON
BURY

MANCHESTER
OLDHAM

ROCHDALE
SALFORD

STOCKPORT
TAMESIDE

TRAFFORD
WIGAN

Equalities Impact, Carbon and Sustainability Assessment:

None. The report proposes a series of policy and legislative changes that if enacted will form part of a future decision report.

Risk Management

Risks associated with hotel closures and recommended actions are laid out in the report alongside recommended mitigations.

Legal Considerations

The Housing Authorities within GM have a duty under the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) to prevent and provide relief from homelessness

Financial Consequences – Revenue

N/A

Financial Consequences – Capital

N/A

Number of attachments to the report: 0

Comments/recommendations from Overview & Scrutiny Committee

N/A

Background Papers

N/A

Tracking/ Process

Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution

No

Exemption from call in

Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency?

No

GM Transport Committee

N/A

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

N/A

Background: Bridging hotel closures

1. On 28th March 2023 the Government announced the end of temporary bridging accommodation for people who had arrived into the UK on ARAP/ACRS (Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy/Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme) programmes, as well as the end of the Enhanced Matching Process, the two-offer process through which households in bridging hotels were being offered move-on accommodation across the country.
2. Residents will receive letters giving them 90 days' notice of hotel closure and informing them that they must secure alternative accommodation within this time period or risk homelessness. Those that do not secure accommodation and move on before the closure of hotels will have to make their own arrangements, including presenting as homeless to a Local Authority. As there is no Local Connection conferred by the bridging hotels, households may present at any Local authority.
3. Under the Find Your Own accommodation (FYO) pathway, Afghan households are encouraged to source their own accommodation in their location of choice nationally, with the support of local authority teams if they desire. No permission or support is needed from the receiving authority to make the move under FYO.
4. Government has also announced a new £35 million funding package for local authorities to support move-ons and cover the cost of homelessness pressures. With this new package, funding available to Local authorities that support moves into their areas includes a lump sum per-person payment for positive move-on, funding for property adaptations and three years' funding for integration support.

1. Greater Manchester Bridging hotels

1. Approximately 8,000 people are still living in Bridging hotels nationally, and approximately 880 of these are in hotels in Stockport and Manchester.
2. All Afghan Bridging hotels nationally are expected to close by the end of 2023, but the Home Office has provisionally indicated that GM's hotels will close by the end of August 2023.
3. A number of Greater Manchester local authorities are delivering properties under the Local Authority Housing Fund in 2023-24, some of which will be available to households in Bridging hotels, and several boroughs are already participating in the

resettlement of Afghan households under ARAP/ACRS, it is likely that only a small number of these properties, if any, will be ready by August.

4. Stockport and Manchester teams have been working intensively with residents since the opening of the hotels and have supported significant numbers into suitable, long-term properties. This individualised, targeted support work has been stepped up since the March announcement, in an effort to ensure that households in GM hotels will not face homelessness.
5. Progress with moves into the Private Rented Sector has faced a number of barriers, including inadequate Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates; large household sizes and the effect of the benefit cap on affordability; adaptation needs for families with access needs related to disability or illness; landlord discrimination related to visa status, lack of credit history, employment status, language skills or other and; overall shortages of affordable accommodation, especially in the areas that families would like to settle.

2. Risks and issues

1. The Government's hotel closure policy and the speed with which it is being implemented presents a significant homelessness risk in Greater Manchester and nationally, which is likely to have negative impacts on vulnerable individuals, families and services.
2. As noted, households in hotels across the country may be supported to move to any other location nationally, with or without the support of the receiving local authority. While a choice-based approach is welcome, this presents a homelessness risk when households move into unaffordable properties, especially when funding available is used by the Bridging authority to subsidise rents in the short-term. GM local authorities have already begun to see these unaffordable moves taking place, including with the support of Bridging authorities from outside the region.
3. The challenge of finding suitable properties is exacerbated by inadequate Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and for larger households, the benefit cap. The obstacle presented by the benefit cap is shared by many other larger households in Greater Manchester, and is in addition to the other barriers to move-on outlined above.
4. In GM, these risks are being managed through a coordinated, city-regional approach to property offers and moves from Bridging hotels, facilitated by Stockport and

Manchester councils and via the North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership (RSMP).

Intersection with wider asylum and homelessness pressures

1. The announcement of Bridging hotel closures comes at a time of severe and growing strain on local housing and homelessness provision. In addition, these pressures are already exacerbated by a range of asylum and immigration policies that drive vulnerability and homelessness and reduce local authorities' ability to tackle it.
2. Key amongst these are the continued inequitable increase in our region's share of asylum accommodation, the inadequate funding settlement provided for asylum contingency hotels, the inadequate notice periods provided to people required to leave Home Office accommodation, cuts to Legal Aid for immigration matters and the vulnerability created by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy.
3. The impact of these policies are visible in our homelessness services. At 3.2%, we have the highest share of people owed a homelessness duty due to being required to leave Home Office accommodation of any region nationally and almost double the national rate of 1.7%. In addition, approximately a quarter of people sleeping on our streets and in off-the-street accommodation month-on-month are non-UK nationals – 181 individuals in February 2023. This is highly disproportionate given that only approximately 10% of Greater Manchester's population reported a non-UK national identity in the last Census.
4. As with any housing intervention on a significant scale, the accommodation of Afghan households poses a risk to local housing markets. This is particularly concerning given current pressures on Temporary Accommodation (TA), with placements increasing year on year and 5,134 households living in TA at the end of October-December 2022.

Next steps and representations to Government

In order to minimise the homelessness impact from Bridging hotel closures, Greater Manchester local authorities have agreed to take the following approach:

1. Local authorities will take a coordinated and consistent city-regional approach, working with Bridging Local authorities and RSMP to facilitate and support appropriate moves of Afghan households into their boroughs, as needed.
2. Local authorities will utilise funding made available to invest in staffing and appropriate targeted interventions in order to reinforce their local offer to refugees

and support the delivery of expert and culturally competent integration support over the coming years.

In recognition of Greater Manchester's proud history of welcome to people seeking asylum and refugees and growing concerns in relation to national policymaking that looks set to undermine essential protections, the GMCA is asked to support representations to Government related to the following:

1. We are proud to welcome people seeking asylum and refugees to our city region, to celebrate our diverse communities and to work together to ensure that they can thrive.
2. We condemn divisive rhetoric which misrepresents international obligations to people seeking asylum and mischaracterises people seeking sanctuary on our shores because of the way they arrive.
3. We are deeply concerned about the direction of travel in asylum policymaking over the last number of years, in particular the Illegal Migration Bill which looks set to extinguish the right to seek refugee protection in the UK for those who arrive irregularly. In reducing central Government support and responsibility, it leaves local government and the voluntary sector to fill the gap after over a decade of successive cuts to public services. This too, in the context of ever-increasing demand as a result of the Cost of Living crisis and the continued long-term impact of COVID-19.

In order to address the unsustainable and urgent pressures being placed on local services by current Government asylum and immigration policy, the GMCA is also asked to support the following recommendations to Government:

1. Commission an urgent independent review of the role that asylum and immigration policies play in driving homelessness among residents of England.
2. Suspend the benefit cap for Afghan families in bridging hotels, which is creating insurmountable barriers to finding affordable accommodation for larger households.
3. Provide local authorities with a cross-Departmental and long-term funding package for asylum and refugee provision that can be spent flexibly to reflect response needs, including across homelessness, ESOL, schools and integration and employment support. As a minimum, provide funding for bedspaces in asylum contingency hotels in line with what is offered for dispersed accommodation.

4. End NRPF in order to end rough sleeping. Provide at least a minimum safety net so that all non-UK nationals facing homelessness with unknown or restricted eligibility for public funds can be accommodated and supported.
5. Step back from the Illegal Migration Bill, which in its current form promises to create further vulnerability by denying asylum-seekers and victims of Modern Slavery routes to support and protection.
6. Allow 56-day notice periods for cessations of Home Office asylum support, in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act and to facilitate homelessness prevention work.
7. Extend the 90-day notice periods offered to Afghan Bridging hotel residents, in order to enable local authorities to avail of the new funding and deliver enhanced intensive move-on support.
8. Allow people seeking asylum and their adult dependents to be given the right to work unconstrained by the Shortage Occupation List and from six months after their initial asylum claim or further submission, in line with the national Lift the Ban campaign.
9. Restore legal aid for early legal advice to pre-Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 levels for immigration, welfare benefits and housing law.
10. Urgently increase the supply of Truly Affordable homes at net zero carbon standards, to support our Greater Manchester ambition to deliver 30,000 Truly Affordable Net Zero Homes by 2038 and tackle the housing and homelessness crisis. This is especially important in light of the devastating impacts of Right to Buy and the linked loss of social rented housing stock.