

Safe routes: the need for an ambitious approach

There is widespread consensus that too many people are risking their lives taking dangerous journeys to reach the UK to apply for asylum. But while the UK Government has focused on increasingly regressive measures to try and deter people from taking those journeys, including by effectively banning asylum through the Illegal Migration Act, there has been far less energy put into creating safe alternatives that would give people another option.

During the debates on the Illegal Migration Act, there were numerous calls for there to be new safe routes created and for existing ones to be expanded. The Government didn't take the opportunity to do either of those, instead bringing forward their own amendment to require them to publish a review of safe routes.

This review was published on 11 January 2024.ⁱ It contains no firm commitments to expand existing schemes or to introduce new schemes. There was no consultation process of any description in relation to that review. The vast majority of the report simply provides the history and detail of existing schemes. The review was an opportunity to provide more people with a safe alternative to taking dangerous journeys. It is an opportunity that has been missed.

Analysis by the Refugee Council has found that three quarters of those people who cross the Channel in small boats would be expected to be granted refugee status if their asylum claims were processed in the UK.ⁱⁱ People are arriving having fled the Taliban in Afghanistan, the wars in Syria and Sudan, and persecution in Iran and Eritrea. There are many reasons why some refugees will want to find safety in the UK, but the options for travelling safely through a formal immigration route are extremely limited.

There is no one policy that will significantly reduce the number of Channel crossings, but providing safe alternatives to dangerous journeys must be part of the strategy. Yet since the increase in people travelling by small boats the provision of safe routes for refugees has reduced. Three quarters of the world's refugees are hosted by low- and middle- income countries, and 70% of refugees live in the countries neighbouring the one they have fled. The UK can and should be doing more to support those countries and take greater responsibility, and expanding safe routes to protection in the UK is a vital component of that.ⁱⁱⁱ

Total safe route places versus small boat arrivals

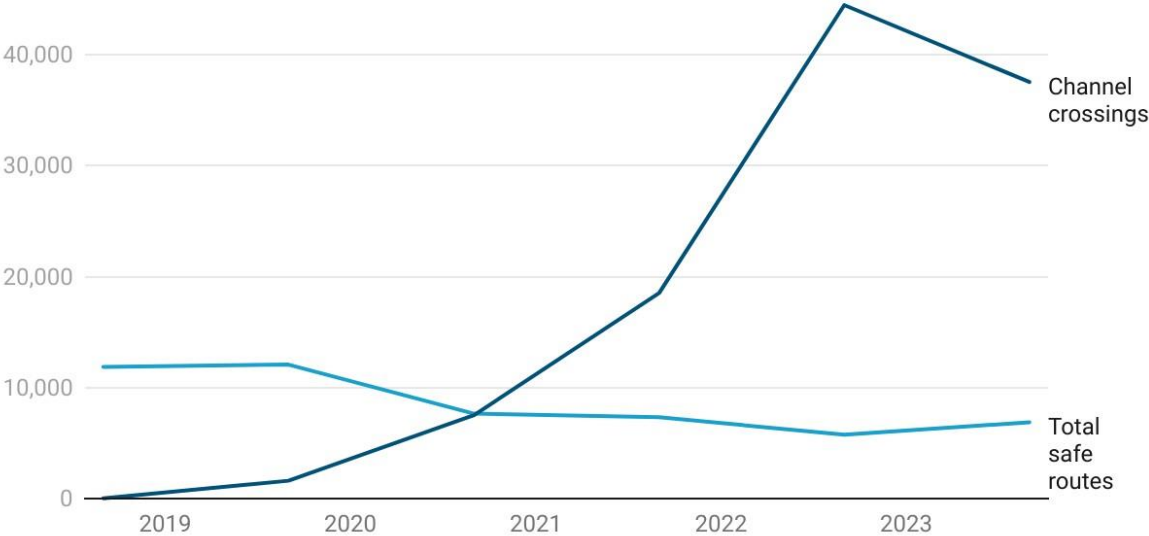


Chart: Refugee Council • Source: Refugee family reunion visa grants from Home Office Immigration System Statistics year ending September 2023, Asylum and Resettlement - Family Reunion visa grants; Resettlement number from Home Office Immigration System Statistics year ending September 2023, Asylum and Resettlement - Applications, Initial Decisions, and Resettlement; Channel crossings from Home Office Irregular Migration Statistics, year ending September 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

The UK operates two main safe routes for refugees and their families – resettlement and refugee family reunion.^{iv} Both routes have shrunk in recent years. Resettlement numbers have not returned to their pre-Covid levels, with only 766 refugees resettled to the UK in the year ending September 2023. While refugee family reunion visa grants are starting to return to previous levels, the process is beset with delays and continues to be restrictive.

Safe routes since 2015, years ending September



Chart: Refugee Council • Source: Refugee family reunion visa grants from Home Office Immigration System Statistics year ending September 2023, Asylum and Resettlement - Family Reunion visa grants; Resettlement number from Home Office Immigration System Statistics year ending September 2023, Asylum and Resettlement - Applications, Initial Decisions, and Resettlement • Created with Datawrapper

Introducing the amendment regarding the safe routes review at report stage in the House of Commons, the then Immigration Minister, Robert Jenrick, said it would:

“require the Home Secretary to lay before Parliament, within six months of Royal Assent, a report detailing existing and proposed additional safe and legal routes for those in need of protection. We will aim to implement the proposed new routes as soon as practicable and in any event by the end of 2024.”^v

And later in the same debate he added:

“Within six months, ... and as soon as possible over the course of next year, we will set up or expand the existing safe and legal routes so that the UK can be an even greater force for good in the world.”^{vi}

Neither of these two commitments have been fulfilled in the Government’s report.

This paper sets out three key safe routes that the Refugee Council believes should be covered by the Government’s report and that should form part of any government’s future plans. It argues for an expansion of resettlement, including community sponsorship, refugee family reunion, and the piloting of a new refugee visa that would allow people with a high likelihood of success to travel to the UK to submit an asylum claim.

Recommendations

The UK Government should increase the number of refugees being resettled in the UK by:

- Setting an ambitious multi-year commitment to resettlement, with an initial aim of returning to pre-Covid levels at a minimum. This would give local authorities and support organisations the security to develop expertise and capacity. The commitment should be developed in partnership with local authorities, devolved governments and the voluntary sector.
- Utilising the UK Resettlement Scheme as a global scheme, rather than creating new ad hoc programmes in response to crises.
- Creating a National Refugee Strategy and delivering a place-based approach so that the UK Resettlement Scheme operates in conjunction with the asylum system.
- Unlocking the potential of community sponsorship, including by increasing funding, support and resources and providing financial incentives such as thank you payments to the sponsorship groups who are facilitating it.

The Government should allow more refugees to be reunited with their family members in the UK. It should amend the immigration rules to widen eligibility by:

- Allowing children to join wider family members in the UK and removing the financial and other barriers that prevent that from happening.
- Simplifying the existing rules to make it unambiguous that refugees in the UK are able to sponsor their dependent adult children to join them.
- Allowing refugee children in the UK to sponsor their parents and siblings to join them.

The Government should also ensure the family reunion decision-making team has the capacity to decide cases within the 60-working-day service standard.

The UK Government should introduce a “refugee visa” scheme, with a pilot of at least 10,000 visas per year focused on people who have fled Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan and Syria, which all have high asylum grant rates. The visa would:

- Allow people to travel to the UK to apply for asylum.
- Require security and identity checks as part of the application process, but not involve an asylum decision.

Resettlement

Resettlement schemes provide a safe way for refugees to be relocated to a country that is able to provide permanent residency and protection. They focus on refugees who face difficulties in the country they have fled to who then need to move somewhere else. Resettlement schemes are run in partnership between states and the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR. Refugees who are found to be in need of resettlement (usually those meeting at least two of the seven resettlement categories) are referred by UNHCR to governments who have committed to resettle refugees, who then determine whether or not to accept that referral.

The seven resettlement submission categories are:

- Legal and/or physical protection needs
- Women and girls who are survivors, or at risk of, gender-based violence
- Children and young people at risk where resettlement is in their best interests
- Survivors of violence and/or torture
- Medical needs, especially those that cannot be met in the country the person is currently in
- Restoring family unity where there are no other mechanisms to reunite
- Lack of alternative durable solutions.^{vii}

Each year, less than 1% of the world's refugees are submitted by UNHCR to be resettled.^{viii} This is not due to a lack of need – UNHCR has estimated that 2.4 million refugees will be in need of resettlement in 2024^{ix} – but a lack of resettlement places being offered by governments.

In the UK, the number of refugees being resettled is at the lowest level for over a decade. In the year to September 2023, only 766 refugees were resettled to the UK. That represents a level at 12 per cent of the recent peak in the year to September 2017 when 6,348 refugees were resettled, including 4,980 through the Syrian resettlement scheme (officially known as the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)).

Until 2020, the majority of the UK's resettlement schemes had a clear annual target. The Gateway Protection Programme, which started in 2004, aimed to provide places for 750 refugees each year, with nationalities changing depending on need. This was added to in 2015 when the VPRS was expanded in response to the growing number of refugees as a result of the Syrian civil war, with a commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees over five years.

In June 2019, the Government announced it would combine the existing resettlement schemes into one consolidated global programme, and that they would work with UNHCR to identify refugees from around the world. The stated intention was to resettle 5,000 refugees through the global scheme – known as the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) – during its first year.^x

The first year of the scheme was disrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but four and a half years on from that announcement the Government isn't even halfway to meeting that first year's pledge.^{xi}

During that time other international crises have resulted in the Government creating bespoke schemes, in particular the Ukraine schemes and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). However, the Ukraine schemes are not resettlement schemes (and do not confer refugee status) while the ACRS is divided into three different pathways, each with their own target cohort and only one of which is a refugee resettlement programme. While there was a

commitment to resettle 20,000 people through the ACRS, there was no timeline attached and it was later decided that a significant proportion of those “resettled” through the scheme would be those people evacuated under Operation Pitting in August 2021 – over four months before the ACRS was opened in January 2022.

The lack of a clear annual or multi-year target has created significant challenges for local authorities and other support organisations to successfully resettle refugees. The lack of certainty makes planning very difficult, and the fall in resettlement numbers following the Covid-19 pandemic and the failure to build on the Gateway Protection Programme and the VPRS meant a lot of the expertise and learning that had been built up was lost.

The failure to follow through with the commitment to one global resettlement scheme has also meant that for those refugees who haven’t fled whichever global conflict happens to be in the news, there has often been significant delay and disruption to their arrival in the UK. Families have found themselves stuck in limbo and are often told the good news that they have housing in the UK after waiting years, only to be notified that it has fallen through. This can be hugely disruptive as people prepare to move to the UK by leaving their jobs, taking children out of school, selling their possessions, only to be told at the last minute they must continue to wait longer. This is a result of the Government’s mismanagement of housing back in the UK with slow progress and last-minute changes.

Khalid* (name changed) left Syria after the civil war started and faced a nine year wait in Jordan before being resettled after a number of false starts:

“I’m one of these people whose travel had to be rescheduled 3 times, the first time I was going to go to Birmingham but the travel had to be cancelled because the house wasn’t ready...They (UK Government) said to me, ‘you will travel to the UK in one month, but a month later they called me and said ‘you need to wait longer’. Then they gave me another appointment the year after.

“When they told me I was leaving, I resigned from my job, when I went back to my job asking for it back, they said ‘no’ because you resigned. I had to then borrow money from other people, I still owe people this money. My children left their school in Jordan and then had to go back.

“Because of all the delays it made my life so difficult and gave me depression and stress because of the delays. I left everything, I didn’t have anything, it affected my wife and children very badly. Luckily someone lent me money which I still haven’t paid back. I thank the UK Government for bringing me to the UK but they could have been clearer about giving me a timeline of resettlement that they stuck to”

The safe and legal routes cap consultation

Section 60 of the Illegal Migration Act introduces an annual cap on the number of people who can arrive in the UK through certain safe and legal routes. The routes covered by the cap aren’t specified in the Illegal Migration Act, but will instead be set out in regulations alongside the level of the cap.

Section 60 requires the UK Government to consult with local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales and the Executive Office in Northern Ireland prior to setting the cap. A further requirement was that the consultation on the first regulations had to begin within three months

of the Illegal Migration Act becoming law, which meant the consultation had to begin by 20 October 2023.

On 20 October 2023, local authorities were contacted and asked to provide the Home Office with a figure for how many people they could support in their area in 2025. They were told that the cap would cover the UKRS, the ACRS and the Community Sponsorship Scheme and were given a deadline to respond of 15 December 2023. The consultation was not opened up to other parties, including UNHCR, and instead local authorities were asked to engage with local stakeholders as part of the process for developing a response.

The consultation process risks the UK continuing to fail to make an ambitious resettlement commitment, or even returning to the resettlement levels prior to Covid-19. This is for several reasons:

- **Lack of central Government commitment and leadership:** the Government has given no indication of how many people it would like to try and resettle or provided any encouragement to local authorities to take part in resettlement.
- **Lack of a “place-based approach”:** the consultation is separate to other conversations about the placement of people in the asylum system who are being accommodated by the Home Office while they wait for a decision on their application.
- **No additional funding to meet housing challenges:** while it has been confirmed that the funding for resettlement will continue at the current levels, there has been no additional funding announced to address housing supply issues.
- **A short timeline:** local authorities were given less than two months to respond to the consultation, during which time they were expected to engage with local stakeholders and secure political agreement on the response. While the consultation has subsequently been extended to 8 January, given this includes the Christmas break it is still a very short timeframe.

Housing is often cited by the Government as a key reason why resettlement numbers cannot be increased. Yet as well as not providing extra funding, the consultation also doesn't create an opportunity to explore ways of increasing the supply of housing. For example, the consultation could have explored:

- Utilising local authority funding in creative ways to take housing intended for private sale back into council housing stock dedicated for refugees. This stock becomes additional therefore is not adding pressure on wider housing.
- Renovation of derelict buildings.
- The potential for partnerships with faith groups, churches, groups/individuals who hold housing stock.
- Facilitating access to the private housing market by developing partnerships with private sector providers to address the issues they see as barriers, such as guarantors and deposits.

Resettlement has the potential to provide a safe way to reach the UK for particularly vulnerable refugees. But the cap and the consultation process will prevent the UK from maximising the opportunity.

Recommendations:

The UK Government must provide leadership to increase the number of refugees being resettled in the UK by:

- Setting an ambitious multi-year commitment to resettlement to give local authorities and support organisations the security to develop expertise and capacity. The commitment should be developed in partnership with local authorities, devolved governments and the voluntary sector.
- Utilise the UK Resettlement Scheme as a global scheme, rather than creating new ad hoc programmes in response to crises.
- Creating a National Refugee Strategy and delivering a place-based approach so that the UK Resettlement Scheme operates in conjunction with the asylum system.

Community Sponsorship Scheme

The Community Sponsorship Scheme developed during the delivery of the VPRS. Civil society called on the Home Office to emulate Canada’s Private Refugee Sponsorship programme to aid resettlement efforts. The UK government responded by launching the Community Sponsorship Scheme in 2016, which was opened to all nationalities.

Community sponsorship allows local communities, voluntary and community organisations and faith groups to be directly involved in welcoming and helping refugees to settle in the UK. Through this programme, local groups can apply to the Home Office to become sponsors and help refugees who have been referred to the UK by UNHCR for resettlement to integrate and rebuild their lives. The groups cannot choose the refugees they wish to sponsor. Once the refugee family arrives in the UK, the community sponsors have the primary responsibility for supporting the refugee family through their first year in the UK to live independent lives, learn English, access schools, welfare benefits, healthcare and employment and participate fully in the community.

Extensive eligibility criteria and a cumbersome application process result in relatively low engagement and retention of sponsors. In the current community sponsorship scheme, groups must secure accommodation for two years and raise £9,000 before a refugee family arrives in the UK.^{xiii} This covers initial expenses and supports the family during benefit claim processing. Local authorities must also give their consent before a group is able to sponsor a refugee. For these reasons, the number of people being sponsored has been relatively low - in August 2023, the Home Office announced that 1,000 refugees had been resettled to the UK through the community sponsorship scheme, seven years after its launch.^{xiii}

While the Community Sponsorship Scheme has had stringent criteria to be met by prospective groups, the “Homes for Ukraine” scheme also allowed individuals to sponsor people who had been forcibly displaced. However, it has very few criteria other than having at least six months’ leave to be in the UK and being able to provide suitable accommodation. Sponsors also receive thank you payments of £350 a month, or £500 a month if the person being hosted has been in the UK for longer than a year.^{xiv}

While these low entry costs and criteria have meant that 139,200 people have arrived in the UK on the Ukrainian scheme,^{xv} it has led to significant concerns about safeguarding, the length of time accommodation is available for and the availability of integration support, as well as growing numbers of people who came here on the scheme approaching local authorities for homelessness assistance.

Moving forwards, there are opportunities to learn from the existing community sponsorship scheme and the Ukrainian scheme, taking the best elements forward so more people can be welcomed to the UK without being put at risk. The potential pilot of a community sponsorship

programme for people arriving through the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, as mentioned by Johnny Mercer, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, in the House of Commons on 13 December 2023 offers an opportunity to test a new approach.^{xvi}

Lowering participation barriers and offering financial incentives, like thank you payments, could significantly increase involvement and prevent sponsor groups from feeling they are replacing a service the Government should be responsible for. While local authorities will play a key role in commissioning services for all refugee populations in their areas, this doesn't mean they should continue to have a veto over a community group being able to welcome and support refugees.

Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) have the potential to play a huge role in the delivery of community sponsorship across the country. Led by people with lived experience of the asylum system and of integration pathways, RCOs have the experience of supporting vulnerable people within their communities, including refugees and people seeking asylum.

The Refugee Council's report from March 2023, in collaboration with Reset, explored the barriers RCOs face to become involved with Community Sponsorship.^{xvii} It found that although RCO's have the capacity and are often best placed to support, there are extensive barriers to their involvement in community sponsorship. If RCOs are going to be able to play a leading role in community sponsorship, they need to be given better access and support. There must be a change in approach with the development of engagement mechanisms tailored to the way RCOs work and the establishment of a sustainable financial investment to enable them to build their capacity, facilitate peer learning support and establish networks between existing community sponsors and RCO-based prospective sponsors.

Recommendations

Community sponsorship has the potential to result in many more refugees being welcomed to the UK, operating alongside an ambitious Government resettlement commitment. To continue to unlock the potential of community sponsorship, the Government should:

- Increase its funding, support and resources for the community sponsorship scheme.
- Ensure there is one central body for referral that captures resettlement and community sponsorship, such as the UNHCR. From one central pool the UNHCR would refer the most vulnerable people to resettlement and those less vulnerable can be considered for community sponsorship.
- Provide financial incentives such as thank you payments to the sponsorship groups who are facilitating it.
- Remove the £9,000 financial requirement for becoming a sponsorship group
- Work with Refugee Community Organisations to give them better access and support to lead in community sponsorship.
- Ensure that refugees with lower levels of vulnerability are referred to community sponsorship groups, rather than more complex cases.

Refugee Family Reunion

There are many reasons why families become separated because of forced displacement. For those families, the moment of reunion cannot come soon enough.

In the UK, once an adult has been recognised as a refugee by the Government, they become eligible to sponsor their closest family members. There is no application fee and applications can be made online, but the family members overseas are required to travel to a Visa Application Centre to provide their biometrics before the Home Office can start consideration of the claim.

Family Reunion Eligibility

An adult with refugee status in the UK can sponsor close family members to join them. They must be:

- a spouse/partner
- a child under the age of 18 who was part of the sponsor's family unit before they fled to find safety
- a child over the age of 18 who is dependent on their parent(s)^{xviii}

The definition of family is overly strict and often fails to reflect the realities of family make-ups around the world, particularly those who have been impacted by forced displacement. Among the most egregious of the exclusions in the definition is that a child refugee is unable to be joined by even the closest of their family members. This means that a child who arrives on their own in the UK and is then found to be a refugee – meaning the Government has accepted it is not safe for that child to return home – has to remain on their own without their parents or siblings to support them in rebuilding their life.

The UK's policy on refugee children sponsoring family members is unusually harsh. In the European Economic Area, every country other than Switzerland and Liechtenstein allows refugee children to sponsor family members.^{xix}

The Government's position is that allowing refugee children to sponsor family would act as a pull factor, encouraging more children to make the dangerous journey across the Channel and thereby posing a safeguarding risk. But there is no evidence to support this claim.

In 2016, a report by the European Committee of the House of Lords categorically concluded that there was no evidence provided by other EU Member States – where children are allowed to sponsor family members – that children had been exploited by being sent ahead for other family members to join them.^{xx} The UNHCR has also conducted research to better understand how children end up unaccompanied and what influences where they claim asylum. They did not find any evidence that children were aware of, let alone influenced by, the family reunion policies of different countries.^{xxi}

There are separate provisions within the immigration rules that allow children to join wider family members in the UK. The relevant part of the rules is known as Appendix Child Staying With or Joining a Non-Parent Relative – it's commonly referred to as Appendix CNP. The types of situation that may be covered by Appendix CNP include where a child has a sibling living in the UK, or they want to join an aunt or uncle. However, there are a number of barriers to be able to successfully apply under Appendix CNP, including the £404 application

fee and the requirement to pay the Immigration Health Surcharge of £470 per year. The Home Office doesn't publish statistics on the number of applications made under Appendix CNP or the number of grants.

There have also been increasing delays and a growing backlog of family reunion applications. In February 2023, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration found that "the backlog of decisions stood at almost 8,000" and applicants were "consistently waiting over double the 60-working-day service standard for a decision".^{xxii} This was in part down to the decision to redeploy the vast majority of Home Office staff who had been working on family reunion applications to process applications made through the Ukraine schemes when they were opened.

The Home Office does not include the number of outstanding family reunion applications as part of the regular immigration statistics or report on the length of decision making. But with growing numbers of potential sponsors resulting from the work to reduce the asylum backlog, without intervention the delays will continue to deepen. In the three months between July and September 2023, 22,613 people were granted refugee status or humanitarian protection – more than in any full year on record – and the high number of grants will continue. A significant proportion of them will want to reunite with their loved ones. Given many of those sponsors will have been waiting for several years for a decision on their claim, those families should not now face further delays in being able to safely reunite.

Recommendations

The Government should allow more refugees to be reunited with their family members in the UK. It should amend the immigration rules to widen eligibility by:

- Allowing children to join wider family members in the UK and removing the financial and other barriers that prevent that from happening.
- Simplifying the existing rules to make it unambiguous that refugees in the UK are able to sponsor their dependent adult children to join them.
- Allowing refugee children in the UK to sponsor their parents and siblings to join them.

The Government should also ensure the family reunion decision-making team has the capacity to decide cases within the 60-working-day service standard.

Refugee Visa

The only way to apply for asylum in the UK is to be physically present in the country. There is no way to apply for asylum from outside the UK. As a result, the only ways to apply for asylum in the UK are to have entered on another type of visa, be a national of a country that doesn't require a visa to travel to the UK or enter the UK irregularly. For most refugees, only the last of those options will be possible.

Some countries, such as Brazil and Switzerland, have used visas to enable refugees to travel safely. These visas are often referred to as humanitarian visas but there is no set framework for their design, including the type of status given to successful applicants and whether there is any asylum determination as part of the visa process. As part of the UK's Government's response to the war in Ukraine, people displaced by the conflict have been able to apply for visas either online or at Visa Application Centres to come to the UK under the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

A humanitarian visa – or a refugee visa – would have the potential to offer a safe route to the UK for refugees who wouldn't qualify for either resettlement or refugee family reunion. Such a scheme could allow people to travel to the UK in order to apply for asylum after having applied for a visa from a country neighbouring the one they have fled. People who are granted a visa would then have their asylum application processed once they are in the UK – the asylum process would not be “offshored”.

Recommendations

The UK Government should introduce a “refugee visa” scheme, similar to the visa schemes for Ukrainians, which would involve:

- Introducing a year-long pilot visa process that allows people to apply for permission to travel to the UK in order to claim asylum.
- The pilot should focus on those nationalities most likely to cross the Channel and also with high grant rates – Afghans, Iranians, Syrians, Eritreans and Sudanese.
- The pilot should aim to issue 10,000 visas for the first year while the process is worked through.
- Individuals would need to have left the country they are seeking protection from prior to making an application. This is for two reasons. Firstly, if the individual was in their own country at the time of application, then they are not a refugee at that point. Secondly, there are significant risks relating to an individual seeking international protection while still in the territory of the country from which they are seeking protection.
- People would be able to apply for a visa either online or at specific Visa Application Centres in the region of those countries. Allowing people to apply for the visa close to the country they have left instead of making them available closer to the UK reduces the potential risk of travelling to the Visa Application Centre.
- Basic security and nationality checks would be undertaken. This would not require individuals to be in possession of a biometric passport. As is the case with refugee family reunion applications, identity can be established through documents including passports, travel documents, national identity cards or other official documents such as school ID cards. It could additionally include UNHCR documentation where available. Biometrics required would be the same as for a refugee family reunion application and consist of fingerprints and a digital photograph.

- Decisions on whether to grant, or not, a visa should take no more than 3 days, due to the limited checks involved. Anyone who is refused at this stage would be able to re-submit an application.
- Once a visa is issued, their travel would be paid for and facilitated to the UK as is the case with the UK Resettlement Scheme and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme.
- On arrival in the UK, their asylum claim would be registered and processed through a shortened asylum process to provide a fast grant of refugee status avoiding the bottle neck in decision making that has contributed to the backlog of claims over recent years.^{xxiii}
- Access to legal advice and appeals, if required, would be the same as for any other asylum applicant.
- The vast majority, if not all, of those who arrive on a refugee visa would be successful in their asylum claim. In the rare cases that someone is refused asylum, including after any appeal, then they should be removed to their country of nationality where safe to do so.
- The pilot would be subject to an independent evaluation. The evaluation should include an equality and diversity audit to assess access to the scheme for different social groups.
- Anyone from these countries who enters the UK outside of this scheme would not be penalised for doing so and would have their asylum claim processed.

Complementary pathways

Alongside these routes, there are other schemes — referred to as “complementary pathways” — that enable refugees to safely travel to other countries. These can include focused work and study visas. In October 2021, the UK launched the Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot, which aims at matching up to 200 people with employment opportunities via the organisation Talent Beyond Boundaries. The pilot initially focused on people in Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Afghan nationals, and has since been expanded to any nationality or location.^{xxiv}

Any schemes such as these are welcome and provide some people from particular groups with a safe route to reach the UK. However, they should not and cannot replace other routes such as resettlement.

Conclusion

Currently, safe routes aren’t working. Too few people are able to access safe ways to reach the UK, while too many people feel they have no other option than to take dangerous journeys. But rather than expanding safe routes, the number of people arriving through these schemes is instead decreasing.

Giving more people the opportunity to come to the UK safely should be both a priority now and in the future for any Government. Working alongside an asylum system that gives people a fair hearing in the UK, safe routes could and should play a key role in providing men, women and children with the protection they need.

The safe routes review the Government published on 11 January 2024 does nothing to provide more safe routes. It is a missed opportunity to set out a bold and ambitious plan to

provide refugees with more ways to reach the UK without needing to resort to dangerous journeys. It should have been an opportunity to address the shortcomings of the existing resettlement and refugee family reunion schemes, while also creating new routes such as a refugee visa. Instead, it simply restates the current failing schemes.

If this, or any future Government, is serious about reducing the number of people taking dangerous journeys to reach the UK, then a change of direction, as set out in this paper, is urgently needed.

ⁱ Report on safe and legal routes (section 61 Illegal Migration Act 2023), published 11 January 2024

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-and-legal-routes>

ⁱⁱ Refugee Council, Truth about Channel Crossings and the Impact of the Illegal Migration Act

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/the-truth-about-channel-crossings-and-the-impact-of-the-illegal-migration-act/>

ⁱⁱⁱ UNHCR, Global Trends Report 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>

^{iv} The Hong Kong (BNO) route and the Ukrainian visas schemes do not confer refugee status or require people to have refugee status, so are not included in this analysis.

^v HC Deb 26 April 2023, vol 731, col 774

^{vi} HC Deb 26 April 2023, vol 731, col 838

^{vii} See UNHCR Resettlement handbook, Chapter 3.2 <https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement-handbook/3-resettlement-submission-categories/3-2-the-resettlement-submission-categories/>

^{viii} [Resettlement - UNHCR United Kingdom https://help.unhcr.org/uk/resettlement/](https://help.unhcr.org/uk/resettlement/)

^{ix} UN refugee agency predicts spike in resettlement needs next year, 26 June 2023,

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1138092#:~:text=The%20UN%20refugee%20agency%2C%20UNHCR%2C%20is%20anticipating%20a,%2020%20per%20cent%20increase%20compared%20to%202023.>

^x New global resettlement scheme for the most vulnerable refugees announced

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-global-resettlement-scheme-for-the-most-vulnerable-refugees-announced>

^{xi} Up to the end of September 2023 2,407 refugees had been resettled through the UKRS.

^{xii} See Community sponsorship: guidance for prospective sponsors, updated 16 August 2023

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-for-full-community-sponsorship/community-sponsorship-guidance-for-prospective-sponsors#what-criteria-must-a-community-sponsor-meet>

^{xiii} Local communities welcome hundreds of refugee families, 16 August 2023,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/local-communities-welcome-hundreds-of-refugee-families>

^{xiv} See Becoming a sponsor: Homes for Ukraine <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/becoming-a-sponsor-homes-for-ukraine#becoming-a-sponsor>

^{xv} Ukraine Visa Scheme data, number as of 11 December 2023

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukraine-family-scheme-application-data/ukraine-family-scheme-and-ukraine-sponsorship-scheme-homes-for-ukraine-visa-data--2>

^{xvi} HC Deb, 13 December 2023, vol 742, col 912

^{xvii} Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) – Barriers to

involvement in Community Sponsorship Schemes <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Barriers-to-involvement-in-Community-Sponsorship-Schemes-for-Refugee-Community-Organisations-1.pdf>

^{xviii} See Appendix Family Reunion (Protection) to the Immigration Rules

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-family-reunion-protection>

^{xix} S. Borelli et al, *Refugee Family Reunification in the UK* (2021)

^{xx} See paragraph 62, House of Lords European Union Committee, ‘Children in Crisis: unaccompanied migrant children in the EU’, published 26 July 2016

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldcom/34/34.pdf>

^{xxi} UNHCR, *Destination anywhere* (2019)

^{xxii} Inspection report published: A reinspection of family reunion applications September – October 2022
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/inspection-report-published-a-reinspection-of-family-reunion-applications-september-october-2022>

^{xxiii} A shortened asylum process would allow for a quick grant of refugee status without needing to undertake a full substantive interview. Paragraph 339NA of the Immigration Rules allows the Home Secretary to make such a positive decision on an asylum claim on the basis of evidence that has already been provided. For the purposes of a refugee visa process, this would be information provided when applying for the visa and any additional information submitted when the individual's asylum claim was registered upon arrival in the UK. This would allow for the individual's identity and profile to be established. Given the focus of these visas on countries with very high grant rates, that profile would enable the claim to be considered manifestly founded and able to be granted quickly.

^{xxiv} Skilled refugees contributing £1m to UK economy each year, 17 November 2023
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/skilled-refugees-contributing-1m-to-uk-economy-each-year>