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# Safe and Legal Routes Inquiry Report

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Report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees

FEBRUARY 2025

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## Foreword from APPG on Refugees Co-Chairs

*2024 was another sombre year for our cause on the APPG on Refugees. The year saw a record number of people dying attempting to cross the channel. No matter your political persuasion, it is incumbent on all of us to seek to limit this tragic loss of life. To do this, we must be open to explore the role of safe and legal routes which has been the focus of our inquiry over the past year.*

*It has been a privilege to hear directly from so many experts on both the failings of the current system and the options for new approaches. An even greater privilege was hearing first hand from refugees about their experiences. We were touched by the stories of Mohanad, Waeed and Amir who powerfully expressed the circumstances with which they came to seek protection here. Their voices have been instrumental in informing this report.*

*We have taken a sweeping look at our existing routes. The current processes are overly complex, restrictive, and slow, causing, among many other things, prolonged separation of families at a time when they most need to be together.*

*Our inquiry has also brought to light the international context. At a time when anti-refugee sentiment surges seemingly everywhere, it was heartening to hear of strong work being done by the former US administration and the Swiss government. The evidence is clear: offering safe and legal routes can help to reduce irregular migration and limit loss of life. Unlike other European nations like Greece and Italy (experiencing a similar maritime migration situation), the UK lacks a government agency equipped with statutory responsibility and resources for sea-based Search and Rescue (SAR). It is a complex situation, and the APPG recognises safe and legal routes are not a silver bullet. They should be combined with the current Government's enforcement measures and efforts to increase our SAR capabilities.*

*As we move forward, the APPG's commitment to rigorously interrogating the Government's approach and advocating for a more compassionate approach to refugee protection remains steadfast.*

*2024 was a year of significant progress, but there is much more to be done. We hope this inquiry and its findings will be the first step in achieving lasting change for refugees.*

*Thank you for engaging with the work of the APPG on Refugees and this inquiry.*



## Introduction

The UNHCR's Global Trends Report estimates that 117.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced at the end of 2023, with projections showing further increases in 2024, continuing a trend of year-on-year rises since 2012.<sup>1</sup> Conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza, the ongoing instability as a result of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the protracted Syrian Revolution have seen the number of refugees globally triple in the last decade. **Despite less than 1% of these refugees seeking protection in the UK**, the issue has gained increasing political salience here since 2018 with the emergence of a new, highly visible phenomenon of people attempting to cross the English Channel in small boats to claim asylum.

Successive Governments over this period have initiated legislative and operational responses to try to address the problem. Firstly, the previous Conservative Government introduced **three pieces of legislation in quick succession**, namely the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA), Illegal Migration Act 2023 (IMA) and Safety of Rwanda Act 2024. Each one curtailed the ability of people arriving irregularly to seek protection here more than the last. Paradoxically, the UK offered over 150,000 Ukrainians protection during this same period and introduced two other limited, nationality-specific schemes for Afghans and Hong-Kong nationals whilst proposing to cap the number of arrivals by safe routes in the future through Section 60 of the IMA (as of January 2025 this has not been implemented by the new Labour Government). Secondly, **spending on surveillance and border enforcement measures has increased** since 2014 with no comparable spend on Search and Rescue Operations.

Yet neither the legislative nor economic responses have disrupted the model of people smugglers exploiting vulnerable individuals or deterred arrivals. Crossings in the first half of 2024 were 19% higher than the same period in 2023 and over 50% higher than 2021. Whilst the Labour Government cancelled the Rwanda Scheme after entering office in July 2024 and effectively reversed the core components of the IMA by processing asylum claims, **they have yet to develop policies on safe routes to offer an alternative to dangerous small boat journeys**. This is despite evidence of public support for including safe routes as part of the solution and evidence of their effectiveness. 60% of the British public support taking in "genuine" refugees (More in Common).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the accessibility and effectiveness of safe routes for Ukrainians has meant just two Ukrainians are known to have crossed the Channel in small boats since 2021.<sup>3</sup> As we enter 2025, global instability persists. Whether it be in Ukraine, Sudan or the Middle East, many innocent civilians are caught up in conflicts forcing them to leave their homes. In Syria and Afghanistan, new Governments have taken hold with uncertain implications for stability and peace.

### **Figure 1 - Currently operational safe routes available as of December 2024**

1. **Nationality Specific Schemes** (c. 52,516 arrivals year ending September 2024)

*Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS); Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP); Homes for Ukraine Scheme; Ukraine Family Scheme; BN(O) Route for Hong Kong Nationals*

2. **Other non-nationality specific schemes** (c. 506 arrivals in the year ending September 2024)

*Mandate Scheme for refugees with close family in the UK; UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS); Community Sponsorship Scheme*

3. **Refugee Family Reunion** (19,154 visas granted in the year ending September 2024)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/global-trends>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/iffhmob2/britons-and-refugees-what-do-the-public-really-think-v2.pdf> p.10

<sup>3</sup> [https://freemovement.org.uk/what-safe-and-legal-routes-are-available-for-refugees-to-come-to-the-united-kingdom/#:~:text=Only%20two%20Ukrainians%20are%20recorded,\(source%3A%20table%20Irr\\_D01\).](https://freemovement.org.uk/what-safe-and-legal-routes-are-available-for-refugees-to-come-to-the-united-kingdom/#:~:text=Only%20two%20Ukrainians%20are%20recorded,(source%3A%20table%20Irr_D01).)

Global flows of refugees are likely to continue to increase this year. However, this presents a vital opportunity for the UK to work with our international allies and show leadership in the same way we have done through the decades.

**It is within this context that the APPG on Refugees initiated this inquiry to look at the current state of safe and legal routes and new routes the Government could adopt.**

## Section 1 – Overview of inquiry evidence sessions

The APPG held three oral evidence sessions as part of this inquiry, with a diverse range of panellists:

- **Session 1, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2024 – APPG on Refugees members heard from refugee and humanitarian sector experts:** Woodren Brade from the Refugee Council, Emily Graham from Safe Passage International, Sohini Tanna from British Red Cross, Georgina Sword-Daniels from the International Rescue Committee UK and Sasha Ali from the UK Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR).
- **Session 2, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2024 – APPG on Refugees members heard from refugees with lived experience of accessing a safe route and navigating the UK’s asylum system,** including those from Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan, independent expert Zoe Gardner and Director of Asylum Matters Lou Calvey.
- **Session 3, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2024 – APPG on Refugees held a joint session with the APPG on Migration on international examples of safe routes** with representatives from the US and Swiss Governments, British Red Cross and the International Rescue Committee.

### Session 1 – Refugee sector experts

In the first session, APPG members questioned expert panellists on **the current safe and legal routes in operation and their shortcomings, as well as potential new routes the UK could adopt.** The APPG heard from Emily Graham from Safe Passage International about the **challenges for refugees to access refugee family reunion.** Family reunion was described as restrictive and beset by delays and process issues. Refugee children in the UK are not able to sponsor their family members to join them, and the UK is an outlier in Europe in this regard. A separated child seeking to come to the UK to reunite with adult family members with refugee status in the UK is often prevented from doing so due to the stringent financial and accommodation requirements placed on the UK based family. More detail on this is provided in Sections 2 and 3 of the report. Sasha Ali from the UNHCR outlined the UK’s **failure to effectively utilise resettlement schemes in recent years.** The APPG heard how the 2019 commitment to utilise the UK Resettlement Scheme as a global resettlement route with a target of 5,000 to be resettled has never been met, five years on. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic caused delays, panellists outlined how the creation of bespoke nationality schemes in the years since is creating an unnecessarily complex system whilst providing no options to come to the UK safely for people from outside these nationalities.

Finally, Sohini Tanna from British Red Cross, Woodren Brade from the Refugee Council and Georgina Sword-Daniels from the International Rescue Committee also highlighted **the proposal of a pilot humanitarian or refugee visa.** They discussed how this visa could build on international examples of a humanitarian visa offered by the Swiss and Brazilian Governments. This would provide a much needed safe and legal route for people to travel to the UK for the purposes of claiming asylum, and could be offered initially on a pilot basis to those nationalities with highest asylum grant rates before being rolled out with more flexible criteria in subsequent years. More detail is provided in Section 5.

## **Session 2 - Lived experience panellists and other experts**

In this session, APPG members questioned refugees on their experiences of navigating the UK's safe and legal routes and seeking asylum and two other policy experts. **Amir from Afghanistan** and **Waeed from Syria** arrived to the UK on the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) respectively whilst another panellist, **Mohanad from Sudan** arrived irregularly in the back of a lorry. Amir and Waeed both highlighted how grateful they were to be given the chance to rebuild their lives here but **noted that too few people had such opportunity**. Amir arrived during Operation Pitting from Afghanistan in August 2021 and spoke of the 'pain of family separation' for the thousands of Afghans who were forced to leave their homeland when the Taliban took over. Originally a primary school teacher in Syria, Waeed lived in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan for seven years. She spoke of the harsh conditions in the camp and the pain of being separated from her mother for 12 years and for her son to never have known a life outside the camp. Mohanad arrived in the UK in a lorry in 2021 after fleeing his native Sudan due to facing political persecution. He told the APPG members that he had been training as a doctor prior to being forced to flee and endured a difficult situation in France with hostility from the French authorities, and was advised to come to the UK.

Independent expert Zoe Gardner and Lou Calvey of Asylum Matters corroborated this evidence and highlighted that safe routes cannot be a substitute for the right of people to seek asylum. Zoe stressed to APPG members that the international refugee protection system would topple if people had to seek asylum in the first safe country they reached, and the UK would fail to take any refugees due to being an island nation separated geographically from the rest of Europe should such a principle be adopted. Zoe highlighted how Mohanad's case is not unique and people often seek safety in the UK due to large diaspora communities here and cultural and linguistic ties, and there is currently no way for the vast majority of refugees not from one of the countries with nationality-specific schemes to reach the UK.

## **Session 3 – International examples of safe routes**

The final oral evidence session was held jointly between the APPG Refugees and the APPG on Migration to hear further details about the safe routes adopted by the US and Swiss Governments. Georgina Sword Daniels and Dan Berlin from the International Rescue Committee and Angela Flores, Former Director of Border Management on the National Security Council in the US, **outlined the Biden administration's recent expansion of safe routes in 2023** which had begun to reduce irregular crossings between the US-Mexico border. These included the introduction of a new route for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans called CHNV Parole; a new mobile app called CBP One App to increase asylum applications at official ports of entry; and the opening of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) where US officials conduct screenings in countries with high numbers of arrivals which have begun to reduce irregular journeys. Similarly, the APPG heard further evidence about the prospect of the UK introducing a refugee or humanitarian visa for the purposes of applying for asylum from outside the UK as a tool to reduce irregular arrivals if successful. APPG members heard from Marisa Wicki, Deputy Head of Multilateral Affairs in the Swiss Government Department for Migration about the operationalisation of the humanitarian visa in Switzerland since 2012.





APPG on Refugees



Above Left (L-R): Sohini Tanna (British Red Cross), Woodren Brade (Refugee Council), Emily Graham (Safe Passage), Georgina Sword-Daniels (International Rescue Committee) and Sasha Ali (UNHCR) give evidence to APPG members on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2024.

Above Right: Mohanad, Amir and Waeed, lived experience advocates, independent expert Zoe Gardner and Director of Asylum Matters Lou Calvey with APPG Refugees Co-Chair Lord Alf Dubs and former Co-Chair Anne McLaughlin at the evidence session on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2024



Left: APPG on Refugees and APPG on Migration members hear from Marisa Wicki, Deputy Head of Multilateral Affairs, Swiss Government Department for Migration and Andrea Flores, former Director of Border Management on the National Security Council in the Biden Administration on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2024.



*"I felt a sense of jubilation when I was selected by the UNHCR to be resettled in the UK. I was so scared when I was in the refugee camp in Jordan of being returned to war-torn Syria, and we only had a few hours of electricity in the camp each day. More people should be given the chance to rebuild their lives in the UK like I am. I am now working as an interpreter, my son is starting his life here, and I look forward to being granted citizenship"*

**-Waeed**



*"I came to the UK in 2021, one of the 16,000 or so people who fled Afghanistan when the Taliban took over. Nobody likes to leave their motherland but in Afghanistan people can't even do simple things like fly a kite or listen to music without fear. My mother and sister have no freedom. I long to be reunited with them"*

**-Amir**



*"I was training to be a doctor in Sudan, but I was targeted because of my tribe. I had no choice but to flee. I travelled to Europe, but couldn't stay in France, the camps were so hostile and police treatment was bad. There are no routes to safety for Sudanese people who are persecuted like me."*

**-Mohanad**

## Section 2- Key lessons emerging from the evidence and summary of recommendations

The following three lessons can be drawn from evidence received across all sessions:

### **1. Current safe and legal routes are inaccessible and inadequate, driving irregular journeys**

All panellists highlighted the inaccessibility of existing safe and legal routes and the inadequate number of routes and arrivals. A frequent recurring theme was the **discrepancy between the Homes for Ukraine and Ukraine Family Schemes, on which over 150,000 people have arrived since the beginning of the conflict in 2022, and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) on which as of June 2024 only 2,436 individuals have arrived (excluding those relocated in Operating Pitting in August 2021)**. This stark difference also evidences that the availability of safe routes means people will choose them, as aforementioned - there were just two Ukrainians recorded crossing the Channel since 2022, whereas Afghans continued to constitute the top nationality of those arriving in small boats throughout the first nine months of 2024. Panellists highlighted that the **majority of those arriving under ACRS have not been granted refugee status**. This meant they were not conferred refugee family reunion rights, and many have been waiting more than three years to be reunited with family in Afghanistan, Pakistan or elsewhere. Whilst it is welcome that the Government initiated a process to begin family reunification for these Afghans in July 2024, the scheme overall is beset by failings and missed targets in comparison to the Ukraine schemes.

This variation demonstrates the **scattergun approach to safe and legal routes adopted by UK Governments since 2019**. They have failed to effectively utilise the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) and cooperate with the UNHCR to provide quotas for arrivals on this scheme. Instead, nationality-specific schemes, each conferring differing entitlements, have been adopted, meaning that access to family reunion, immigration status and integration prospects are dependent on the scheme you arrived on which is unfair and inefficient. **Moreover, anyone facing persecution or war and wanting to seek asylum in the UK who is not from one of the countries with nationality-specific schemes has very limited ways to get here.**

**The refugee family reunion route was also highlighted by panellists as not operating effectively.** Despite the number of visas issued increasing significantly in 2024, two-thirds of cases are failing to meet the Home Office's own service standard of processing within 60 days. A backlog of family reunion cases has risen to at least 11,000 cases, with panellists identifying the delays as one of the reasons people are turning to people smugglers and taking dangerous journeys. The UK also operates one of the most **restrictive refugee family reunion policies in Europe**. The APPG inquiry heard how refugee children in the UK are unable to sponsor their family members to join them, one of just three nations in the European Economic Area to restrict this entitlement. Moreover, there are harsh financial and accommodation requirements on refugee family members in the UK trying to bring child relatives outside the UK to join them. All of these factors are contributing to an increase in irregular arrivals, as outlined by the panellists. More detail on this is set out in Section 3 on family reunion.



## **2. New safe and legal routes can be part of the solution to build a controlled migration system and can help to reduce irregular arrivals**

Panellists highlighted that Governments of all stripes in the UK in recent years have been focusing solely on enforcement measures which, although necessary, are only part of the solution. Border security and a desire to create a controlled system are rightly priorities for all Governments. However, the £700 million spent on the Rwanda scheme and successive pieces of legislation since 2022 have failed to curb small boat arrivals. Alongside enforcement measures, the Government should recognise the role of safe routes in reducing the demands on our asylum system and the need for dangerous journeys.

Panellists highlighted the evidence of schemes from the United States to demonstrate that **when safe routes are available, people will choose them over taking irregular journeys**. 2.5 million people crossed the Southwest US Border in 2023 without a visa or prior authorization. Recognising increasing influxes from countries such as Venezuela, the US Government introduced a new safe and legal route called CHNV Parole (for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans). Biden announced that in January 2023 the US Government would be providing 30,000 monthly slots for these nationals to come to the country on 2-year visas initially provided they had a sponsor. The APPG heard compelling evidence highlighting that before the introduction of the CHNV Parole route, 95% of nationals sought entry irregularly, but by 2024, this had dropped to 22%.

## **3. There is an opportunity for the UK Government to recover our position as a global leader on refugee protection and border security by restoring safe and legal routes**

Over the past two decades, the UK has failed to consistently provide global leadership on refugee protection. On too many occasions, Governments have sought to demonise refugees and attempted to walk away from our commitments under the Refugee Convention, most recently through the passing of the Illegal Migration Act which barred people from claiming asylum in the UK. However, at the same time, we have shown our willingness to lead the world through the Ukraine and Hong Kong Schemes, and the APPG heard how now is the time to seize this moment for global leadership on refugee protection. Under the last Labour Government the UK Gateway Protection Scheme was launched in 2004, resettling around 750 refugees annually until 2021. Under the Conservative Government, over 150,000 Ukrainians have been welcomed into our communities.

**Similarly, the new Labour Government have made real progress in cracking down on people smuggling gangs facilitating the dangerous journeys across the channel through launching the Border Security Command. They have signed ambitious agreements with the Iraqi Government and are demonstrating world leadership on dismantling smuggling gangs. It is in this spirit that the new Government must approach our response to the global migration challenge and refugee protection. The APPG believes that vital work to tackle smuggling gangs does not preclude the Government from also improving safe and legal routes for refugees.** Whilst this inquiry is focused on the latter, the APPG recognises the need for a dual approach in supporting genuine refugees and securing our borders in order to save lives and end the trade in human suffering all Governments wish to see. This report highlights that improvements to existing safe and legal routes should not be viewed as antithetical to the UK's global leadership on dismantling cross-border smuggling gangs.

**The APPG has three main recommendations for Government building on these lessons:**

- Recommendation 1: ***Improve refugee family reunion*** by:
  - Delivering the Home Office’s Service Standard of processing family reunion cases in 60 days
  - Amending the Immigration Rules to allow refugee children in the UK to sponsor their close family to join them
  - Remove financial restrictions on UK-based sponsors so children outside the UK can join their close family here
  
- Recommendation 2: ***Restore the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) as the primary resettlement route to the UK and fix issues with existing nationality specific schemes:***
  - Commit to a multi-year pledge for the UK Resettlement Scheme, returning to at least the pre-COVID commitment of 5,000 refugees resettled annually
  - Reaffirm the Government’s commitment to resettle 20,000 Afghans under the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme and ensure family reunion access for those arriving
  
- Recommendation 3: ***Introduce a Pilot Refugee Visa Scheme by the end of this Parliament:***
  - The APPG proposes the UK Government consult on the workings of a refugee visa targeted at high grant rate countries such as Sudan and Eritrea. This should be capped to issue no more than 10,000 visas during the period of the pilot.
  
  - At the same time, whilst the Pilot is running, the Government should consult with European partners to explore the potential for the visa to be a European wide initiative based on the learnings from the UK pilot in the same way that the Ukraine scheme was an EU wide initiative.

## Section 3 – Family Reunion recommendations

### The current situation

The APPG inquiry heard in detail about the failings of refugee family reunion in two key areas:

- The scope and accessibility of refugee family reunion
- Home Office decision making and process failings

Panellists unanimously agreed that refugee family reunion is too restrictive, for example by not allowing refugee children to sponsor family members to come here, and is taking too long, with two-thirds of family reunion cases waiting longer than the Home Office Service Standard of 60 days. Emily Graham highlighted that Safe Passage caseworkers have increasingly been unable to compete with people smugglers promising a swift transition to the UK when applications have been beset by delays and restrictions.

APPG members heard how the UK's exit from the European Union has negatively impacted refugee family reunion prospects. The UK is no longer party to the Dublin III regulation, which had provided for a child seeking asylum in the EU with family in the UK to be transferred here for reunification purposes. Between 2016 and 2020 an average of 335 children per year were transferred to the UK under the Dublin III regulations. Since the UK left the EU, refugees in the UK seeking to reunite with a child outside the UK are restricted by our own Immigration Rules. The APPG heard how these place high financial burdens on the UK-based sponsor, including a £1,035 per year Immigration Health Surcharge, restricting the ability of many refugees to sponsor children.

**Significantly, the APPG heard how since 2018 just under a fifth of small boat arrivals have been children aged 17 and under. Restrictive family reunion policies are likely a contributory factor to this figure.**

### What should be done?

The APPG is recommending the Government:

- **Deliver the Home Office's Service Standard of processing family reunion cases in 60 days**  
This would go some way to replicating the legally enforceable deadlines for family reunion applications the UK had under the Dublin III regulations. It would improve integration and weaken the model of people smugglers benefitting from flawed systems.
- **Amend the Immigration Rules to allow refugee children in the UK to sponsor their family to join them.** The UK is an outlier in the European Economic Area in not allowing refugee children to sponsor family members, with only Liechtenstein and Switzerland restricting this right. By lifting this, the Government will help to alleviate the numbers of people risking their lives in the Channel because they cannot reunite with their child in the UK.
- **Remove financial restrictions on UK-based sponsors so children can reunite with their non-parent relatives under Appendix CNP of the Immigration Rules.**

*“It is hard for us to compete with smugglers. They can offer family reunion within days, we can offer nothing in comparison”*

- Emily Graham, Safe Passage International, panellist in APPG evidence session

## Section 4: Resettlement and ACRS scheme recommendations

### **The current situation**

The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), launched in 2014, brought 20,000 Syrians to the UK and through this clear 5-year commitment enabled Local Authorities to develop a housing model and support integration effectively. The APPG heard how although this scheme did not meet the entire need it worked well as a model, demonstrating the UK successfully establishing schemes to the benefit of people such as lived experience panellist Waeed.

However, Sasha Ali from the UNHCR highlighted to the APPG how the UK Government then intended to consolidate schemes previously in operation 'into a single programme that is flexible and addresses evolving resettlement priorities globally', through the creation of the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), announced in June 2019. This had a target of resettling 5,000 refugees in its first year, **but it has never met this target, and just 435 people were resettled through the UKRS in the year to September 2024.** Panellists highlighted how during this time the UK has operated the three nationality-specific schemes for Ukrainians, Afghans and Hong-Kong nationals with varying levels of effectiveness and with different entitlements, as previously discussed. This has created an unnecessarily complex patchwork of schemes, to the detriment of the UKRS and cooperation with the UNHCR on meeting global needs. **If the Government were to reinstate a multi-year quota for the UKRS, it could also build capacity for community sponsorship groups to support refugees, which commands support in the public and relieves burdens on the Government.**

95% of refugees resettled to the UK in the year to September 2024 were through the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme. Whilst it is welcome that numbers resettled under Stage 2 of the Afghan Pathway are increasing, Amir highlighted to the APPG how the over 16,000 Afghans who came to the UK under Operation Pitting were waiting for over 3 years for a process to reunite with family members. Whilst the UK Government opened the process for family reunion applications in August 2024, they must report to Parliament on the numbers supported. In addition, the Government must recommit to the 20,000 target for Afghan resettlement and ensure the Pathway for vulnerable Afghans is opened to begin resettlement.

### **What should be done?**

The APPG is recommending the Government:

- **Commit to a multi-year pledge for the UK Resettlement Scheme, returning to the pre-COVID commitment as a minimum (5,000 refugees resettled annually).**
- **Reaffirm the Government's commitment to resettle 20,000 Afghans under the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme and ensure family reunion access for those arriving**

*“Resettlement depends on states giving us a quota. The UK Government was right to commit to a flexible, global route but we now need them to work with us”*

- Sasha Ali, UNHCR

## Section 5: Pilot refugee visa recommendations

### The current situation

**There is currently no way to apply for asylum to the UK unless you are *physically present in the country*.** This means that people fleeing war and persecution are reliant on the limited and inadequate schemes available, otherwise they have to pay people smugglers and risk their lives in search of safety in the UK. Given the failings of the UK's currently available schemes outlined throughout this report and which emerged so clearly during the inquiry evidence sessions, the APPG heard evidence from Swiss Government officials on the prospect of a pilot refugee visa. **Crucially, this is not presented as a silver bullet to reduce irregular arrivals in their entirety, but a novel proposal the UK Government should consider adopting alongside other routes.**

In Switzerland, the current Humanitarian visa scheme was operationalised after the abolishment of the 2012 Embassy Asylum Law, which previously provided for applications for asylum at Swiss Embassies in different countries. Marisa Wicki, Deputy Head of Multi Lateral Cooperation at the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, informed the APPG that the Swiss Government were the only country in Europe to do this, but they wished to have a more resource-efficient scheme. **The Swiss visa is aimed at a narrowly defined target group, with substantiated evidence that the individual is in immediate, serious and complete danger to life and limb necessary to be considered.** The Swiss Government also consider the individual's connection to Switzerland and prospects for integration before issuing a humanitarian visa. If granted, it allows entry to Switzerland for 90 days for the purposes of inputting an asylum application.

The APPG members questioned other expert panellists on the lessons from the Swiss scheme, in particular around **eligibility criteria**. Sohini Tanna from the British Red Cross and Woodren Brade from the Refugee Council highlighted that *a nationality-based criteria for the pilot of this scheme would be preferable to test the implementation before opening out to be non-nationality prescriptive*. They suggested that this could initially be open to the highest grant-rate nationalities for asylum claims in the UK, which would include **Sudanese, Syrians, Eritreans, Afghans and Iraqi nationals** who have fled their country and more likely to be granted asylum due to their nationality. This would help to mitigate the number of failed and rejected applicants, as in the Swiss Humanitarian visa only around 5-15% are granted a visa due to failing to substantiate evidence of meeting the criteria outlined above.

Sohini Tanna highlighted to APPG members how appropriate resourcing of visa application centres, consulates and embassies would be required to ensure that security checks could be carried and the scheme could run effectively. **She stressed to members that it was vital that decisions on asylum claims were taken by UK officials when the person had been granted the visa and arrived here rather than overseas, to reduce the risk of abuse and poor operational oversight of the process. The visa is therefore not a form of offshore processing, but rather provides a travel permit for the purposes of travelling to the UK legally to put in an application for asylum, reducing dangerous journeys.** Any applicants who do not have a valid claim for asylum would be returned to their home country as is the case with small boat arrivals travelling irregularly.

Panellists were also keen to **dispel myths that by introducing a refugee visa, the UK would simply be inundated with applications comparative to other countries**. In the Swiss example, the APPG heard that they have not been overwhelmed by applications, with around 1,200 annually compared to 30,000 asylum applications in total. Similarly, the Ukraine scheme was uncapped but the APPG



heard how only 4% of Ukrainian refugees have sought protection in the UK. The APPG heard that such a visa scheme could be capped in the initial pilot to test how well it is reducing irregular migration and ensure resources are managed effectively before scaling up if successful in subsequent years.

There is also existing evidence that such a scheme would have public backing. British Future polling conducted by Focal Data shortly after the 2024 election found that 50% of people backed the introduction of a visa scheme to allow people with strong asylum claims to travel here to claim asylum, with only 16% opposing<sup>4</sup>.

### **Key recommendations**

The APPG is recommending the UK Government:

- **Build on the evidence and workings of the Swiss visa scheme and consult on the introduction of a pilot refugee visa, capped with nationality specific criteria initially**  
The APPG proposes the UK Government consult on the workings of a refugee visa targeted at high grant rate countries such as Sudan and Eritrea. This should be capped to issue no more than 10,000 visas during the period of the pilot. The APPG recognises the strong need initially to define criteria and set a cap to test implementation before rolling out more widely in subsequent iterations.
- **At the same time, whilst the Pilot is running, the Government should consult with European partners to explore the potential for the visa to be a European wide initiative based on the learnings from the UK pilot in the same way that the Ukraine scheme was an EU wide initiative.**

*“The key purpose of the visa is targeting people who would not be captured by resettlement and family reunion, reducing the need to travel irregularly ”*

- Sohini Tanna, British Red Cross

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britishfuture.org/public-gives-new-government-a-chance-on-immigration-reforms/>

## Conclusion

It is undoubtedly the case that the challenge of irregular migration is one all Governments are grappling with.

The APPG on Refugees has been keen through this inquiry to interrogate the failings with the UK's existing safe and legal routes and in doing so has harnessed the insights and expertise of a wide range of stakeholders, policy experts and most importantly refugees themselves to inform our recommendations.

The three key lessons and key recommendations outlined in this report are ones that we sincerely hope the UK Government will heed. **That current safe and legal routes are inaccessible and inadequate, driving up irregular arrivals** should provide immediate cause for concern but also focus efforts in the early stages of this Parliament on quick fixes such as improving the family reunion process to reduce the need for irregular journeys. Similarly, the evidence from overseas in the US and Switzerland on the **effectiveness of safe routes in reducing irregular migration** should be considered carefully. Finally, the APPG hopes the Government does not dismiss **the opportunities for the UK again to be a global leader in safe and legal routes**, and carefully considers the recommendations on family reunion, resettlement and piloting a refugee visa.

## Appendix – endorsements

*The following members of the APPG on Refugees have endorsed this report and the recommendations:*

Laura Kyrke Smith MP, Labour, Co-Chair

Lord Alf Dubs, Labour, Co-Chair

Zoe Franklin, MP, Liberal Democrat, Officer

Bishop of Sheffield, Peter Wilcox

*“The report on Safe and Legal Routes published by the APPG for Refugees is very significant in highlighting discrepancies and issues of concern in the UK’s approach to refugee protection. I welcome this report and believe its recommendations provide an opportunity for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the current routes and I very much look forward to its publication.”*

- Bishop of Chelmsford, The Rt Revd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani

Abtislam Mohamed MP, Labour

Lord Mike German, Liberal Democrat

Ellie Chowns MP, Green

Bell Ribeiro Addy MP, Labour

Baroness Ruth Lister, Labour

Tony Vaughan MP, Labour

Baroness Sally Hamwee, Liberal Democrat

Carla Denyer MP, Green

Uma Kumaran MP, Labour

Siân Berry MP, Green

Lord John Kerr of Kinlochard, Crossbench

