

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Equality and the UK asylum process, HC 93

Wednesday 15 June 2022

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Jackie Doyle-Price; Carolyn Harris; Kim Johnson and Kate Osborne.

Questions 182 - 241

Witnesses

I: Andy Hewett, Head of Advocacy at Refugee Council; Jennifer Blair, Barrister at No5 Chambers and Co-founder Ukraine Advice Project UK; Esther Baleh, Lived experience witness and Zahra Shaheer, Lived experience witness.

[EAP0004](#) Refugee Council



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andy Hewett, Jennifer Blair, Esther Baleh and Zahra Shaheer.

Q182 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this afternoon's evidence session of the Women and Equalities Committee as part of our inquiry into equality and the UK asylum process. Can I start by thanking all our witnesses, both those here and Jennifer, who is online, for joining us this afternoon?

We are particularly grateful to Esther and Zahra, who are coming to talk to us about their recent lived experience of leaving their home countries in extremely difficult circumstances. Today, we want to be positive and empowering for you, but we understand that some of your experiences may have been incredibly difficult and traumatic and you may find it hard to talk about them. If at any stage you wish to take a break or leave the room, please let us know and we will be very happy for you to do so.

Committee members will ask you questions in turn. Are you all happy that Committee members refer to you by your first names? Nods from everyone, thank you very much. They will make it clear which witness they are asking their question to. However, if at any point any of you wish to come in and add anything to a question, please just indicate either to the Committee member who is asking the question or to me, and we will endeavour to bring you in at an appropriate moment. That is, perhaps, particularly relevant for Jennifer, who I am conscious is providing her evidence by Zoom where it is slightly different, but if you just raise your hand, I will notice and bring you in. Do not feel the need to sit there with your hand up for 10 minutes or so. Thank you very much.

Can I start by turning to Esther, and then I will come to Zahra? Can I ask you to introduce yourselves and explain a little about the circumstances that forced you to leave your home countries and come to the UK?

Esther Baleh: Thank you. I am from Syria and came to the UK under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. We have been in the UK for six years now. I am 20 years old and a second-year fashion student. We had to leave my country due to the war and due to my dad's medical condition and looking for safety.

Chair: Thank you very much. Zahra?

Zahra Shaheer: I would like to thank you all for having us here. I am from Afghanistan. I was a journalist for more than 10 years in Afghanistan. I am a single mum of two children. I was in danger because of my job in Afghanistan and recently I evacuated to the UK. I had presented the news and various programmes, especially one programme called Peace and Security, which put me at a lot of risk.

Q183 **Chair:** We are very conscious of the risks that were particularly posed to journalists. We have two very different experiences. Esther, you have been here for quite some time. Zahra, yours is a very new experience; you have been in the UK less than a year. It will be very interesting for us this



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afternoon to hear how resettlement programmes have perhaps improved, changed, advanced over that period of time.

Andy, you are here from the Refugee Council. Can you tell us why you co-founded the Ukraine Advice Project, and briefly explain the work that is being done?

Andy Hewett: Thank you, Chair. It is actually Jennifer that co-founded the Ukraine Advice Project.

Q184 **Chair:** Apologies. Can you outline the work of the Refugee Council, perhaps with particular reference to the timespan that we have referred to and how you see that resettlement programme working?

Andy Hewett: I am the head of advocacy at the Refugee Council. The Refugee Council has been involved in supporting people seeking asylum and we have settled refugees for many years. We have been involved in the Gateway resettlement programme, the Syrian resettlement programmes, the Afghan schemes and, more recently, the Ukrainian visa scheme. We support people who arrive through all those schemes, and we are here to share our evidence of what is working well and what has not been working so well across some of those schemes.

Q185 **Chair:** Thank you. Jennifer, the Ukraine Advice Project is very new and had to be established very quickly. Can you tell us a little bit about the work that has been done to date?

Jennifer Blair: The Ukraine Advice Project is a pro bono project set up by immigration lawyers in the UK. Some colleagues and I co-founded it, and it is now overseen by commercial law firms who provide initial advice and then refer people to immigration lawyers for pro bono advice.

We have advised on 2,635 cases since 28 February. I also work on Ukraine Advice Scotland, the Scottish Government funded advice line run by the charity JustRight Scotland, which has dealt with over 700 inquiries from Ukrainians so far. At the moment, the majority of them are around the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but we have dealt with inquiries from people across a very broad spectrum of situations and about legal issues.

Chair: Thank you. The first set of questions are going to come from Kim Johnson.

Q186 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Panel. My first question is to Andy. Do you agree with previous witnesses to our inquiry that increasing global access to UK resettlement schemes can balance out the tougher asylum system laid down in the Nationality and Borders Act?

Andy Hewett: I am afraid I do not agree with that assumption. Our position at the Refugee Council is that the global refugee protection system needs to reflect and address the needs of people displaced by conflict. There is no single solution or scheme that is appropriate to do that. People do not have a binary choice between joining a supposed queue for a resettlement programme and/or making a decision to make their own



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journey. A properly functioning refugee protection programme needs to include well-funded, well-resourced ambitious resettlement programmes, needs to include a well-functioning, efficient and effective asylum system and needs to include other safe routes, including family reunion—what we sometimes term as complementary pathways—so other ways that people in need of protection might be able to come to the UK perhaps under labour mobility schemes, educational scholarships, those types of programmes.

All those things must, absolutely, be rooted in the principle of protection and those schemes must be focused on the protection needs of those people. Increasing resettlement should not offset the numbers of people making it to the UK, or the numbers of people that the UK might accept under any asylum system. Both systems need to exist. There will always only be a fraction of people who would ever be eligible for resettlement, and of those that are eligible only a fraction would be able to come because the numbers of people in need of resettlement far outweigh the number of places available.

The idea that you join a queue for resettlement or you make a conscious decision to claim asylum is inaccurate and is in no way based on real life experiences or decisions that people are faced with.

Q187 **Kim Johnson:** Jennifer, do you have anything you would like to add on that question?

Jennifer Blair: I wholeheartedly agree with Andy. The other thing to say about the difference between resettlement schemes and dealing with people who are seeking protection from the United Kingdom and are on British soil is that relocation schemes often substantially lag behind developing international crises and people's arrival.

For example, I have recently been dealing with an increased number of Nigerians from the territory of Biafra, where there is a sectarian and independence conflict. The UK Home Office's country information team is not really aware of that yet. They would only become aware of it once they start receiving a substantial number of inquiries from their own caseworkers about the increased number of arrivals. Then, if you had a resettlement programme that was relevant—which does not exist—they might start to look at that group. It would lag substantially behind, leaving people in danger, at risk of death and serious harm who are arriving here now from a conflict that we are not yet aware of in other channels.

Kim Johnson: Thanks, Jennifer. Do Zahra and Esther want to contribute to the question? Do you want me to repeat it?

Zahra Shaheer: Yes, please.

Q188 **Kim Johnson:** I will ask a different question. Given the Government's current commitment to help Afghans and Ukrainians come to the UK safely, is it reasonable to expect that the UK will also welcome more refugees from other places? That is something that Jennifer mentioned.



Andy Hewett: Yes, absolutely. The UK needs to put in place a well-funded, long-term ambitious commitment for a resettlement programme. Currently, the UK resettlement scheme would be the model to do that. We welcome the commitment the Government have made to people evacuated from Afghanistan and those who will come in the future under the new pathways, and we welcome the commitment the Government have made to welcoming people fleeing Ukraine.

Notwithstanding that, there are many conflicts across the world where there is no available safe route for people to come to the UK to have their protection needs addressed. If you are a woman from Yemen, for example, it is not possible for you to apply to the UK resettlement scheme, and there are many other conflicts like that, which leave people with the choice of either staying in the region, potentially at risk of their own security, or making a decision to make a journey further afield, which is often quite a dangerous journey. Alongside resettlement, there always needs to be a well-resourced, functioning, effective asylum system.

Q189 **Kim Johnson:** Zahra and Esther, do you want to talk about your experiences of the resettlement schemes?

Zahra Shaheer: Alongside my job as a journalist in Afghanistan, I was also a woman activist, and it was very difficult for a single mum in Afghanistan to stay. Before the Taliban arrived in Kabul, there were some speeches about the Taliban saying that when they arrived they would have forced marriage with single mums, widows or single girls, which is very difficult for a woman to accept. Also, they do not allow girls to go to school now.

My experience was very bad because at that time we thought everything was normal. I went to my office and we did not know that President Ashraf Ghani was preparing to flee Afghanistan, from Kabul. My son was already in school. When I went to the office, I saw there was a crowd and a very bad situation, so I asked some people, "What will happen? What is happening now?" They said the Taliban is near Kabul and they will arrive soon. I remember it was 11 o'clock because I went to the office and presented the nine o'clock news. After that, at 11 o'clock, I had to leave my office to go home because the Taliban was already in Kabul.

On the first night of the Taliban arriving in Kabul, I had a very bad experience; someone unknown came to my house. I was unable to stay in my own house anymore and I went to my friend's house where I stayed for four days. With help from the UK Government, and from my British journalist friend who helped me a lot, I was able to come to the UK. The Taliban arrived on 15 August. On 19 August I went to the airport, and I arrived in Birmingham on 20 August. In Afghanistan, in Kabul, the situation was very bad at that time. There were many checkpoints operated by the Taliban and international forces. They checked our documents and then allowed us to go inside the airport.

Kim Johnson: Thanks for sharing that, Zahra. Thanks for being frank.



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Esther?

Esther Baleh: My experience with the resettlement scheme for me and my family was great, because when we applied we only had to wait for one year and one month. That wait is very quick for someone who is waiting for resettlement. People there wait for years. It can take as much as five to 10 years, but we were very fortunate to come quicker. Since coming here, there has been really good support from the Refugee Council and many other organisations, so it has been positive.

Q190 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks. Jennifer, what do you think needs to happen to improve the broken immigration system?

Jennifer Blair: There is chronic underfunding for the asylum system. I know that a number of asylum caseworkers are being recruited at the moment, but the delays in decision making, and to some extent the quality of decision making, is still very poor, so the right people are not being granted asylum at the right time. During that delay of years, people's welfare deteriorates substantially.

In terms of public confidence in the discourse around uncontrolled migration, largely, that is about presentation of the asylum system, bluntly speaking, by politicians and others to the media and by the media to the public. The numbers of asylum seekers are not very high. They are not that high compared with the numbers dealt with by other countries and by the United Kingdom in the past. Public confidence would probably be greater if people had more exposure to the stories of individuals affected, like the two ladies we have here today.

What has been so transformative about the Ukraine crisis is that we have repeatedly seen in the news the detailed lived experiences and the blow-by-blow choices that people have had to make when they flee conflict. We can all understand that. We can all understand that we would do the same things ourselves for our children—that it is not fun, that it is not an underhand economic decision, that it is people genuinely trying to seek safety. That sort of information and education is vital.

To the immigration system itself, there seems to be a huge waste of public money on performative enforcement actions that could be spent on casework decisions and integration and that kind of portfolio. There are integration leads at the Home Office, but it is not a well-funded sector of their work compared with enforcement.

Kim Johnson: Thank you for your responses, Jennifer. They are all my questions, thank you, Chair.

Q191 **Chair:** Andy, can I ask you a follow-up question? Back in 2019, I remember the Government announcing a commitment to 20,000 resettlement places. What have you seen happen with that?



Andy Hewett: That commitment was fulfilled. That was one of the most positive steps that the Government made in terms of an ambitious resettlement target that was spread over a number of years.

Q192 **Chair:** Hang on. After the closure of VPRS in 2019 we saw the successful VPRS scheme and 20,000 met. In 2019, they committed to do more. What has happened to that?

Andy Hewett: The 2019 commitment was to bring up to 5,000 people in the first year of the UK resettlement scheme. Shortly after that announcement, of course, covid hit, so the Government were not able to meet that commitment because of the restrictions on international travel.

We have seen around 1,500 people arriving over the course of the last year under the UK resettlement scheme. We are concerned that that scheme may have been, in a sense, overtaken by the Afghan schemes and the Ukrainian schemes, and that there is less focus now on the UK resettlement scheme.

The model of the UK resettlement scheme is absolutely the right kind of model that the UK Government need to be expanding upon, because it was built on decades of best practice from previous resettlement schemes, including the Syrian scheme and the Gateway scheme. We would like to see more people coming under the UK resettlement scheme and the Government commit to an ambitious target for that scheme.

The lack of a target makes it very difficult for local authorities to plan over the longer term because they have no idea how many people to expect on a year-by-year basis. They are having to scale up and scale down their resettlement teams. We end up losing skills and expertise because of that. If we could mirror what the Government have committed to under the Syrian scheme in terms of a target that was to be met over a number of years; if we could achieve that for the UK resettlement scheme, that would go a long way in terms of ensuring that the UK would have the capacity to bring some of the world's most vulnerable refugees to the UK under resettlement.

Q193 **Chair:** What should that target be? Five thousand a year?

Andy Hewett: The Refugee Council and many organisations in the refugee sector think that under all the UK resettlement schemes that offer refugee protection, the target should be in the region of 10,000 a year.

Q194 **Chair:** Would it be better if all the schemes, as you describe it, were rolled into one overarching scheme? When you have Gateway, Mandate, the successor to VPRS, bespoke schemes for Ukraine, for Afghanistan, for Hong Kong, would it be better if there was one scheme? Would that give greater clarity?

Andy Hewett: Certainly, it would make sense for there to be one resettlement scheme, where the UNHCR make the referrals and it follows that traditional resettlement model where people who arrive get a



consistent level of rights and entitlements and, ideally, indefinite leave to remain so they have that certainty of being able to rebuild their lives in the UK.

One of the challenges we have seen over the last year is the plethora of different schemes that the Government have come up with to address different scenarios and different conflict scenarios. If I can paint a picture for you, obviously I have Zahra and Esther here, but if there were other witnesses, perhaps a woman from Sudan and a woman from Yemen, all those may have had exactly or very similar experiences in terms of the risk that they were presented with and the need to flee their country.

For Zahra, the UK Government opened up a bespoke scheme for Afghans with a particular set of rights and entitlements. For Esther, there was the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement programme, with completely different rights and entitlements. For the lady from South Sudan, she would have no access to a resettlement scheme; there is no way for her to access any safe route. Her only choice would be to make a dangerous journey to the UK. Similarly, from the lady from Yemen. If we had a lady from Ukraine, of course, they would have access to Ukrainian schemes.

There is no difference in those women's experiences. The only difference is the way that the UK Government have responded and the schemes that they set up to respond to them. The options for those women are starkly different and are entirely dependent on their nationality and what conflict they have fled from.

What we would want to see is a UK resettlement scheme that is agile enough to flex and be responsive to new and emerging conflicts, notwithstanding that there will always be a challenge, as Jennifer has said, around when a conflict emerges with such rapidity, as happened in Afghanistan and Ukraine. UNHCR, perhaps, would not always have the capacity in the region to immediately start the resettlement process, so you may have to look at some form of emergency evacuation process as well, but that should be consistently applied. There should be a consistent resettlement scheme and some kind of emergency relocation scheme to respond to those more emergency issues.

What we are seeing is almost reinventing the wheel every time with very little incorporation of some of the best practice that has been built up over many years. My point is the only difference is the way the UK Government has responded to each of those scenarios.

Q195 **Chair:** Do you think the Government have learnt the lessons, the best practice, from VPRS and have managed to apply that to schemes like the Ukrainian scheme?

Andy Hewett: Speaking candidly, there is not an awful lot of evidence of that. The two Ukrainian schemes are very different in respect to what degree local authorities are involved, to what degree there is funding available to local authorities or to the family member or the UK sponsor.



The experiences and the outcomes of the people arriving through those schemes will be very different depending on which scheme they arrive under. Those experiences will be very different to the experiences of people like Zahra and Esther who arrived under, again, very different schemes with very different rights and entitlements.

It makes no sense that people arriving have completely different rights and entitlements, entirely dependent on the scheme that the Government set up.

Q196 Chair: I think you said indefinite leave to remain is the “gold standard” of what should be offered. Should every scheme offer that? Is there sense in offering indefinite leave to refugees arriving from Ukraine—and Jennifer might want to come in on this point—when the hope that we all have is that this is a temporary conflict and that people will be able to return to their homes?

Andy Hewett: I would have to say most refugees that I have met in my 20 years of working in the sector would all welcome the opportunity to go home to their home country as and when it ever felt safe to do so. By granting people indefinite leave to remain you remove the anxiety, the uncertainty that comes with that, and you remove a lot of the barriers that people have with regards to accessing employment and further integration opportunities because there will always be this cloud under, “Well, I’ve only got three years leave to remain and then I have to reapply,” or, “I’ve only got five years leave to remain.”

It is better for the UK Government to offer indefinite leave to remain because people can start to rebuild their lives, they can maximise their integration potential and, of course, they will always have the opportunity, if they want, to return home as and when it is safe to do so. I do not think imposing temporary leave encourages people to think more about the possibility of returning home; there is no evidence of that.

Chair: Thank you for that. Jennifer, do you have any comment on that?

Jennifer Blair: It is useful to think about the purpose of resettlement schemes. Resettlement schemes are only traditionally available where someone has crossed a border and left their country of origin. For example, the Gateway scheme was about finding the best durable solution for people, often who had additional vulnerabilities and were struggling in a situation of mass displacement. In that situation, indefinite leave to remain makes sense because by the time you have brought a family of six with an autistic child and an elderly grandma here, it is very unreasonable to expect them to go back to the country where their home is destroyed and start again. They are going to be in school; they are going to have started to rebuild their lives and temporary protection is not relevant for them. You have flown them across the world to rebuild their lives here as the durable solution for them.



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The Ukrainian scheme is different. It is a bit more like an asylum scheme with this safe and legal route. It is not perfect by any means, but the idea of it is that it is a humanitarian visa where people can apply directly from the conflict zone and then travel as safely as is feasible to the United Kingdom, and that may be temporary. We have people on the Ukraine scheme visas who are going to and fro from Ukraine. They might have a grandma there who is not well enough to travel. If the Russian forces are pushed out of their village, they might go back and collect their belongings.

We had a teacher who was granted leave under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, who has now gone back to finish the school term for her students because they had not all been able to escape, and then she is going to come back again. Some people are very much retaining a connection to their country, with the hope they will go back. Some people are much less likely to be able to go back in the future. There are people who were displaced in 2014 who have been displaced again and had their homes destroyed twice; and people, as I say, with disabled children in school for whom return is much less feasible.

The Ukraine scheme is being used by the Government as an alternative to that cohort of people making asylum claims and to offer a route to the UK. It is not really being used as a resettlement scheme; it is being used as a humanitarian evacuation pathway, which I think is quite a different thing. They have retrospectively tried to build in some of the good things from resettlement schemes linking in with local authorities and things and I would agree with Andy that it does not show good learning or that it has taken forward the best bits of previous resettlement schemes.

There is a difference between having a humanitarian visa pathway where someone can say, "I am in danger, let me come to the UK and claim asylum," to whether it is for temporary protection or full Refugee Convention protection, and having a resettlement scheme where you can pick vulnerable people and bring them to the UK to live here. Those are different and the Ukraine scheme is really the first of that kind of safe and legal route where people who should be asylum seekers are being brought here because their lives are currently in danger.

Apart from some of the evacuations from Afghanistan over the summer, there are a few cases in the UK's past where some high-profile Iraqis were flown here by the British consulates abroad. There are some examples, but nothing on such a scale. There are problems with it, but it is doing a different thing, which is why you might have a different kind of leave to remain.

Chair: Thank you. Jackie.

Q197 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Esther, could you describe what it was like in Lebanon and how you came to be referred to the UK?

Esther Baleh: To begin with, Lebanon, as you know, is a small country. It is where all the Syrians flee to because it is the closest to my country.



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Sadly, it became overpopulated, and I understand their frustration with us and being unwelcome because also their economy is not at its best.

I did face some racism; we did feel unwelcome. We felt it is like a point in our life where we are just here for a bit because we cannot stay here. Education-wise and everything, there were no rights for us, basically. For us, it was not the easiest, but we did have church support, which made it a bit easier, but we were not settled. We had to move eight times in one year from one house to another. Others were less fortunate and had been in campsites.

It was not the best, but then we heard about the United Nations and how you could apply and get support and can travel, so we applied there. We mentioned that my uncle lived in the UK; there was also my dad's medical condition, that kind of emergency case, and we did have some threats from ISIS in Lebanon, so this sped things up, especially as the UK takes some emergency cases, and we were invited to come to the UK after one year and one month.

Q198 Jackie Doyle-Price: Again, you just described your specific circumstances in terms of health issues. You mentioned earlier that most people would wait a lot longer than that. Could you give us an indication of how long people wait?

Esther Baleh: Sadly, when you apply, they do not even tell you that you will be travelling. There is nothing, no promise. Basically, you are applying for support from food vouchers and some benefits you can have for a while to live on. When you apply there is no minimum and there is no maximum. You could stay for your whole life, and you still would not get there. When you do the interview inside the UNICEF and other places, the way the people were sat was really sad. You see them coming from campsites where they have been hungry and they had no clothing, nothing. You see them with a lot of kids, and it is very populated in that interview. When I look at it I am like, wow, even if we were chosen I would feel so upset that these people did not get the same chance that I got. When I asked them, they had been waiting 10 years, five years and they were just looking for that hope and a lot of them are still there.

Q199 Jackie Doyle-Price: You mentioned that you had help from your church. Is that an important factor in being referred to the UK? Do refugees need someone to advocate for them in navigating through that process?

Esther Baleh: Not particularly, but there are rare cases where, if you are a Christian or if you are a Muslim, it is more likely. In our case, we are from a Muslim background; my parents converted 20 years ago. Before the war in my country, we used to live peacefully with different religions. However, after the war some kind of extremism arose and people started to say, "You are Christian, and you are a Muslim" and that we should separate and have conflict about that. People started to question us way more and made a lot of accusations about us. That is also why we fled. It does not particularly affect things if you are a Christian because of all the



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Syrians we have met here, only one family is Christian and the rest are from a Muslim background.

Q200 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** On arrival here, you mentioned that you had had support from the Refugee Council, but also other ways. Could you tell us some of the support you received when you arrived here?

Esther Baleh: Actually, coming through the resettlement scheme is a blessing. Coming here, you have someone waiting for you in the airport with an interpreter. You are welcomed with a big smile, and you know you are safe. They assured us that everything was going to be fine; from this moment your life is starting.

For me, when we left Syria, I would describe it as hitting the pause button. In Lebanon it was still paused, but the minute we arrived in the UK it was continued for me. It was the new beginning where you feel you are safe and you had the support for housing and education and healthcare. They specifically took care of my dad for his condition, and he was immediately booked in for consultations and all sorts. It has been a great support that I wish everyone could access, not just for me and my family, because you have already fled from a hard situation, and you do not want to face any more difficulties here.

Q201 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Zahra, you obviously have had specific challenges coming with your children. What was the experience that you had in terms of being referred to the UK for resettlement?

Zahra Shaheer: When we arrived in the UK, we were in quarantine for the first 10 days and after that we went to a relative's house. I asked the Government, Wycombe refugee partnership and Bucks County Council to help us find a house as we wanted our own place to stay. They were very kind, and they gave us a temporary house and after three days we went to a holding hotel. We stayed in the hotel for nearly six months while processing our case, getting prepared for a bank account, resettlement, education. It was good. Also, as everything happened very fast in Afghanistan, we came alone and we were not allowed even a change of clothes. We received help and support from the Government, from Red Cross organisations and some charities that help refugees when they first arrive.

Q202 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** You came to the UK because you had some family connection, did you? Was there any suggestion in terms of when people were being evacuated and deciding which country was going to take them? Did I hear you say you had a relative here?

Zahra Shaheer: My ex-husband's relative is here. I am alone; I do not have any relatives here. When Kabul fell to the Taliban, I asked for help from my international journalist friends. She helped me with the help of journalists protect community. They applied for me everywhere and finally I was able to come to the UK.

Q203 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Andy, do you have any data on how accessible the



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Afghan schemes have been to people from minorities—specifically in Zahra’s case as a woman—but also other groups which, frankly, would face discrimination from the Taliban?

Andy Hewett: Sadly, we do not. There is little or no data available. Obviously, in the chaos of Operation Pitting and evacuation, in many cases people who were able to access the airport were just put on flights, so there is not an awful lot of data around to what degree those people have protected characteristics or if they are from particularly vulnerable groups.

Going forward, of course, with pathway 2 and pathway 3 of the ACRS, it may be possible that more particular vulnerable groups will be either selected for resettlement under pathway 2 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, but at the moment, there is very little data. We are concerned that under pathway 3 of ACRS, because it is restricted in the first year to particular groups of people, including British council workers, GardaWorld contractors and Chevening Scholars for women at risk in Afghanistan there is no opportunity for them to access that scheme potentially until some point in 2023 when it opens up more widely. It is great that Zahra was able to get on the plane during the evacuation, but we are concerned that if she had not been able to do that, even though pathway 2 and pathway 3 are now opening up, she would still not be eligible.

Q204 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** It feels like a lottery, doesn’t it, in terms of the connections that you have or the circumstances? Esther talked about how you could get out in a year or you could be waiting forever and you just do not know. How do we deal with this tension between having criteria in order that we can manage it and ensuring that we really are getting to the people that are at most risk?

Andy Hewett: That is why the role of the UNHCR is so critical in terms of registering people, assessing whether they would be eligible for resettlement and then, I guess, assessing their criteria against whatever criteria the UK Government are using, whether they are focusing on women at risk or people with disabilities. That is a really important function of a resettlement programme.

It is more difficult to do that in the sense of an emergency evacuation scenario and, of course, with the asylum system, people just arrive and you have to make that assessment as and when they arrive. Notwithstanding that, there are ways to do that. A well-functioning asylum system would have robust screening to pick up on some of those vulnerabilities and to ensure that people with protected characteristics were identified and their needs were then properly met.

Q205 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Thank you. Turning to Ukraine, Jennifer, the Government have pledged to address the bureaucratic delays in Ukrainian visas—I think everyone around this table has been handling a number of those—and the intention is to move the process online. From your perspective, has this happened and has the experience improved?



Jennifer Blair: As an immigration barrister I look at the Ukraine scheme in comparison with other visa routes and compared with other visa routes it is quicker and more straightforward. Most people are applying without a lawyer. Most people are managing the online application. The online application is still only available if you have an international travel passport and a lot of children and older people do not. That then affects the whole family who have to get that person to a visa application centre and are unlikely to travel until all the family have their visas. I am sure you are very much aware of it, as I am, but we are still seeing some family members granted visas and others not and then no-one is able to travel as a result because they are not going to leave their seven-year-old behind who has not yet got their visa.

The lack of any way to track pending applications means people do not know if that is because that visa has been lost or because that visa is just delayed. I know the Home Office have been making efforts to link up family applications, but any stage in the process which requires them to contact the person and the person get back in touch with them makes it much more complicated than the application where people are basically putting in their details and pressing "submit". When the Home Office come back saying, "This is an email address, tell us your family members' reference numbers," it is at that point that we are getting inquiries from people who cannot manage that bit of the process. There is not really any legal aid for the Ukraine scheme, so there is no real legal representation available for it.

If it needs to be a quick and easy scheme, then anything that makes it less quick and easy for the applicant makes it unworkable. It is still very clunky. The problem is they modelled a lot of it on the EU settlement scheme when it went online, which was for people who were not fleeing conflict, who were in a very different situation. That was then modelled for an online application process needing a biometric passport.

From what Andy was saying before, rather than saying we have this gold star resettlement process, let us take that forward and tweak it, each of these schemes feels like it is its own random crisis situation being developed by whichever senior person who has been stuck with it at the time. It has got better to some degree. The accessibility of an online scheme is not universal, though. We have had some really distressing cases of older people struggling to do the online application form. We have had lawyers sitting there where people's hands are shaking so much they cannot scan things, and it feels really unpleasant that there is no help for them, or people who are illiterate or that kind of thing. It is a significant educational barrier.

Q206 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** As with all things invented by Governments, they tend to work very well for the articulate middle classes, but they are not the most vulnerable people in these circumstances. From your perspective, are there any particular groups of Ukrainians who are really struggling to access these schemes, and what could we do to make them more



accessible for them?

Jennifer Blair: There is a significant stateless population in Ukraine. Some are Roma and some are stateless because of the geographical situation with the old USSR, etc. I have not heard of any of them being able to access this application process. I suspect they are a more socioeconomically deprived group who have lower educational attainment on average and, if they hear about the scheme, think they are not eligible for it because they do not have a Ukrainian passport. I think they would have very strong applications to the scheme, but at the moment I have not heard of anyone being able to make an application in that situation.

If you are going to have an evacuation humanitarian pathway, you need to have some way for people who cannot understand or access the form to get help with it. It does not necessarily have to be a lawyer; it could be a civil servant. If you say, "There's a thing you need to press saying I do not understand, I can't do it," and then someone will help you do it—like a benefits claim where you make it on the phone and the person fills it in for you as you go and tells you what to send afterwards. People have to travel to the UK; they are going to get the Eurostar, or they are going to fly. There could be hubs locally where they can get help rather than making them travel to whichever visa application centre we want them to go to, which tend to be in cities that are not necessarily convenient to people.

There are things about it that do not feel worked out as an evacuation pathway. The people who have come first are the more educated. We are concerned that the second wave of applicants we are starting to get now are more vulnerable people. We have started to get a lot more emails from people asking us to buy them plane tickets to the UK, which we were not getting before. I suspect that is because it was more professional people applying before. There is no scheme to welcome people on arrival who apply under the Homes for Ukraine scheme so a lot of people just email me telling me their flight plan and I am not going to do anything with that information, but I think people would feel much safer knowing they would be met. If they are a single mum with a child, they do not want to be on the streets of Glasgow overnight.

Q207 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** It does feel that if you are taking a state like Ukraine, you mentioned there is a lot of people who are stateless, but also if you look at the socioeconomic structure of that society, it feels, from what you have described, as if there will be whole swathes of the population that are excluded from accessing this scheme. You are nodding furiously, as is Andy. Do you want to say something, Andy?

Andy Hewett: The nature of the Homes for Ukraine scheme by design excludes people, for example, with disabilities because it is very unlikely that a UK host will have their home set up to be able to welcome someone with a particular disability and all the wraparound support that that person may require. The scheme is not really set up to deal with that kind of scenario, so by design it excludes particular groups of people.



Q208 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Jennifer, do you have anything to add?

Jennifer Blair: The Scottish and Welsh Governments super-sponsor stage does add a useful screening stage, particularly for parents with a disabled child, because we have heard that people have struggled to find a host, for example, if you have an autistic child who needs their own room and needs a lot of space and hosts are alarmed at the idea that they will not be able to cope with that situation, but the Scottish Government is then linking them up with social services in the area where they arrive and they are arranging accommodation that is suitable.

Basically, hosting seems like it can work really well in some situations because some of the Ukrainians really like it, and if it is supervised and set up well, it seems like a good option, but it needs to be one of many tools in a toolkit for people.

I agree that the scheme is not accessible to disabled people. We, as lawyers with the Ukraine Advisory Project, have been looking at whether there would be any way to go out to find some of the people who need the scheme most and target it at them, but at the moment that does not exist.

Q209 **Chair:** Jennifer, you made a comment about people who do not have an international travel document. Were you suggesting that that requirement should be waived?

Jennifer Blair: When the Russian invasion first took place, generally the immigration lawyer proposal for the most elegant solution to the visa situation would be to remove Ukraine from the visa nationals list. There are many countries that are not on that list who do not need a visa to come to the UK; their biometrics are checked on arrival, and that would have allowed people to be processed in a situation of safety.

The Government said they did not want to do that because they would be able to do fewer security checks before people arrived and they might not be able to get rid of people who they did not want if they came in and they did not pass the security checks, so they wanted to do biometrics internationally. It is not for me as an immigration lawyer to set up what would be the most workable scheme, but there must have been some way to get boots on the ground to process people quickly as a relocation mechanism rather than having a visa process that takes months. People were having to go to visa application centres, sometimes in three different countries, taking weeks and thousands of pounds, or sleeping in cars with children for days as they travelled between Germany and Poland. That has been something that does not sound unreasonable in a normal visa scheme, but in a process where people have literally just fled conflict it has added a disproportionate amount of distress to already very distressed people.

Q210 **Chair:** Can I ask a question around accommodation? One of the upsides of the Ukrainian scheme was that it enabled host families to take in people with readymade accommodation, which is in stark contrast to the Afghan



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scheme, which saw people like Zahra in a hotel, some of them for many months, pushing 12 months in some cases now. Is that a solution that you are advocating that there should have been hotel placements as part of a suite of solutions?

Jennifer Blair: I have been, until recently, co-convening the Home Office stakeholder equality group, so I am familiar with the situation with the Afghan arrivals. It is my view that one of the reasons they went for a hosting scheme was because the Home Office was starkly unable to cope with a sudden massive arrival of Ukrainians. It was partly learning from the horrible experience of the Afghan arrivals left in hotels for a very long time with very little information that they tried to think of any other way that people could have orientation and information and support on arrival that did not come through the Home Office. That is why it is focused around local authorities. The family scheme launched first because it was easy enough to imagine family members providing that orientation and bridging support to people.

There was a quite a gap between the Homes for Ukraine scheme being announced and launched. There were lots of complicated problems with it, but then where things go wrong it falls on local authorities. Local authorities screen hosts etc., but the host will provide that orientation. I have been doing a lot of work around the impact on mental health and welfare of Napier barracks and Penally barracks and that kind of institutional accommodation, and on the hotels in my work with the Helen Bamber Foundation. I think that hosting, done well, can be a really good way to get people into communities and to feel welcome and for their own welfare and mental health, but it is only one tool, and it will not work for everyone.

Personally, if I had to flee conflict in the UK and go abroad, I think I would find hosting quite uncomfortable because you are in such close confines with another family; you are under their control quite a lot; you are subject to their rules. I would want my room with a view, my own room, my own desk, etc. For some people I think it is an excellent option and I would like to see it taken forward as an option, not necessarily for resettlement where people are living here forever, but more in the context of asylum and temporary protection.

Q211 **Carolyn Harris:** Thank you very much for coming and sharing your stories. It is really important that we hear your experiences of this. I am interested to know whether the information you received on arrival—on your rights, what is expected of you, what you can expect from the Home Office, etc.—was clear, concise and understandable. Esther, were you able to comply or did you have any confusion around what they were telling you?

We have all had people come into our offices with pieces of casework anticipating that we have answers we do not have, asking us to make inquiries or even give them letters to support their applications.



Esther Baleh: I guess every individual situation is different. In our case, we had some legal advice. They used to support us and tell us what we had to do and then how you apply. We had the support for five years because I was under the Syrian resettlement scheme. After the five years, you will not be able to ask that much, but you can find help from some organisations. We are now in the process of applying for citizenship as we have completed the five years. We were able to contact an organisation for legal aid and they are helping us with the process at the moment. We found that in some ways it was great and helpful, but for other individuals it was harder and it depends.

Q212 **Carolyn Harris:** Do you have examples of other people's experiences and how difficult it is for them?

Esther Baleh: Some people could not understand it, they could not understand some terms, and they had some problems accessing the right interpreters. Sometimes things get lost in translation and the wrong information goes around our community. For example, in the Syrian community we sometimes misunderstand some stuff and we just carry on thinking that is right, but without it being factual and checked.

Q213 **Carolyn Harris:** One of the most notable things that I get through my door is people who suddenly receive a letter asking them to go and sign, and they have never been asked to go and sign before and it sets off a whole train of panic that they are about to be deported. Are you given information about how your applications may need further support, more evidence as it goes through this process, or are you not given this information originally?

Esther Baleh: Under the resettlement scheme there is not much requirement as such. We are always very informed, and it is quite set. However, I understand for the other schemes it might be harder and it might not be very clear, but in my terms it has been quite clear.

Carolyn Harris: I am glad to hear that.

Esther Baleh: Thank you.

Q214 **Carolyn Harris:** Zahra, have you, your family and your children been given good information as to what you can expect and how your application is going and what information you need to provide, what will happen, and your rights? Have you been given all this information?

Zahra Shaheer: When we first arrived in the UK and we went to the holding hotel they wanted to process our case and they said they would give us a BRP card for three years, indefinite leave, and we got it a few weeks ago. They said that we have education rights, that my children can go to school and I can go to university if I like, which I asked about when I first arrived. I applied in Afghanistan for my master's degree, but when the Taliban came I could not continue and they said, "After taking some English courses and improving your English, you'll have the right for education."



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It is also good that they said we could choose a house in any location, as I said I wanted to go to High Wycombe, and they accepted my request. When they explained about other rights that we have in the UK, they had some information about living in the UK that I did not know before. Just a few seconds ago they explained to me that I have permanent residency here.

Also, we were told that we have this BRP card for three years. After three years they will extend it, or after five or six years maybe we will be eligible to apply for UK citizenship. As we left some family, for example, I lived with my mum and two children in Afghanistan. As she had no passport at that time, I left her in Afghanistan and we do not know about our situation. They do not explain to us how we could apply to have her here soon because she, as a mother of a female journalist, is in danger now and the Taliban will threaten her. When I asked the Home Office, they said there is an application form for the ARAP system for Afghan families that arrived in UK, but not an ACRS.

Q215 Carolyn Harris: Do you have enough information? Are you happy to plan for your long-term future?

Zahra Shaheer: Yes, it is good that I have plans to go for Warm Welcome Scholarships, which is for Afghan people, and also my children are going to school, and we can make our future plan at least for three years and after that maybe we can continue.

Andy Hewett: Can I just add one point? It is really important for the Committee to understand that under a standard resettlement programme, Esther's family would have had some degree of predeparture cultural orientation. They would have some information provided before they arrived in the UK and then the moment they arrive they are matched to a local authority or to an organisation like us and we would support the family over the course of five years.

In the case of the Afghan evacuation, often people were arriving and sent to bridging hotels. It was much more difficult for us to find out where people were being sent. Very often we were not informed of the location of the hotels for some weeks. In some cases, the local authorities were not even consulted as to the location, so we had to work quite rapidly to put similar levels of support in place for people in bridging hotels, but it was not done in a planned systematic way that Esther experienced. It was done in a very "Let's try to fix this after the event" way, and so I think different people would have received different levels of support and advice depending on which bridging hotel they were in at what period. There has not been that consistent level of information and support available to people.

Q216 Carolyn Harris: Have all those people now had support? Have they reached out to every single person who was put in a bridging hotel?



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Andy Hewett: They should have had some degree of interaction from officials from the Home Office and DLUHC, and again from organisations like ourselves but it is a bit of a patchwork. I cannot sit here today and guarantee you that everybody in every bridging hotel would have had the appropriate level of support from the local authority or from an NGO like the Refugee Council because that was only put in place after the event and different NGOs were doing different things. I would hope so, but I cannot provide that concrete certainty.

Carolyn Harris: Thank you for your honesty.

Q217 **Kate Osborne:** Jennifer, thank you very much for coming along today. I want to pick up on something that Zahra said around the visas under the Ukraine Family Scheme and the sponsorship scheme being for three years. Do Ukrainians have adequate options to remain here for longer or for as long as they may need to?

Jennifer Blair: Some Ukrainians have claimed asylum. It is unclear how their claims will be treated, whether they will be criticised for travelling through another European country on the way to the UK and the asylum claims will be decided based on the country situation in Ukraine at the time of decision and it may be that the delays in the asylum system are significant, so in a year or two we do not know what the situation will be in Ukraine.

If they get refugee status through that process, then they will be on a route to settlement. Most Ukrainians have not claimed asylum and the Government have effectively asked them not to by repeatedly saying that the way they want to deal with the Ukrainian cases is through the Ukraine schemes and those people just have three years' leave to remain. There is no information available about whether there will be a settlement or a renewal route. Initially, we were not getting many questions about that, but now people are arriving there are more questions about it.

For more educated and able people there are other options. People have asked us what they should be planning now. I have, effectively, been advising people to wait and see, but if they want to have a back-up plan, they can. Some people are looking at whether they would be able to move into a tier 2 work visa. For example, the visas are for three years but student finance regulations are being amended so people can be treated as home students in the UK. Scottish degrees are mostly four years long, so people are going to be two and a half years through their degree and find their visas running out. Some people will be looking at whether they can switch into student visas, which is messier.

I had an inquiry from a woman who is a full-time carer of her disabled adult son and she said, "I've been told I need to switch into a work visa, but I can't work full time, I'm a full-time carer for my disabled son. What should I do?" For her, she just has to wait and see and get some advice later on. The concern is if the UK Government leave it too late to announce what they want people to do, maybe waiting to see what is going on in Ukraine



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and also maybe what the political climate is later on, it takes away people's independence and autonomy to plan ahead. If people knew for certain it was three years and then they were out, I think it would be very difficult, because these are going to be quite compassionate sets of circumstances for the people who are not in a position to leave in three years' time and the idea of them all being shipped off to bombed out buildings is very unpleasant to envisage. If that was the case people would at least plan for it.

The concern is that if it is left to the last minute—as it was with Afghans in hotels this year in February, where their initial entry clearance was running out, but they were not being given sufficient information about whether they would be given indefinite leave to remain or when that decision would be made—that is very distressing for people and stops them making other plans.

Q218 **Kate Osborne:** Thank you. Could or should the complexities around their status be simplified or clarified, and how do you think that could happen?

Jennifer Blair: I suspect the easiest thing would be—because a lot of people have applied and received their biometric residence permit—to amend the immigration rules to include a path to settlement. As it is three years leave to remain, probably at the end of those three years people could apply to settle if they want to. If the UK Government want to introduce some criteria around that, so if they did not want everyone settling, they could introduce some criteria. Any criteria will make it much more complicated than just, “I have been here three years, I would like to settle.”

I think it has been very impressive that just by having an uncapped scheme you have seen people making sensible life decisions. People have come here often because they speak English or because they have friends or family here or because they have worked here before. My recommendation would be to let people make the decision. If they need to stay, let them stay. If they want to go back, let them go back. Otherwise, putting in place some criteria and then if there are criteria, significant support to help people navigate those criteria.

Q219 **Kate Osborne:** Thank you. My next question is to you, Jennifer, and then I will come to you, Andy. There are differences between how Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians have been treated in relation to their legal status and rights to remain in the UK. Do these differences affect some groups of people with protected characteristics, including women and children, unfairly, and do you think the schemes should be aligned?

Jennifer Blair: I think there is something different between having a temporary humanitarian protection scheme, an asylum scheme and a resettlement scheme. A resettlement scheme is going out to some of the most vulnerable people in the world and offering them a home here. It would be outrageous to then say, “And in a few years we are going to send you back,” because of the way that you selected them. That is why with



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the Dubs scheme, for example, when they brought the most vulnerable children in Europe to the UK, there initially was no route to settlement. They got five years leave to remain and then it was aligned so that they would have a route to settlement because there was no ethical way to suggest they could leave again.

With the Ukraine scheme, it is a temporary protection scheme, but what it should not be doing, in my professional opinion, is replacing the asylum mainstream scheme for people who are eligible for refugee status. There are, particularly LGBT, people who may already have been at risk in Ukraine. I have been giving advice to people who have experienced a substantial amount of domestic violence and other abuse and hate crime because of their sexual orientation. People who are in occupied territories or have a political claim would have been at risk. People should not be directed away from the asylum system and there will be some people where they would benefit from indefinite leave to remain earlier. For example, like the Dnipro children who have been brought over or people who have been deliberately targeted as being particularly vulnerable, then it makes less sense to say that they should go back. A lot of the women and children from Ukraine, unlike other conflicts where we have people arriving, are separated from their husbands, who are still in Ukraine and fighting because they are not allowed to leave. It is more complicated than saying that they would need indefinite leave to remain across the board. Some will need to stay, but some will want to go straight back again.

I think the Afghan comparison with the Syrian scheme is more clearcut in those cases. The situation with the Taliban will not be resolved any time soon, and it is getting worse every day. There are fewer routes out of Afghanistan, and it is particularly lacking in support that would get women and children here safely and then give them equivalent rights.

Kate Osborne: Thank you. Andy?

Andy Hewett: I would echo everything that Jennifer has just said, but I think it is also important to look at the family reunion rights of people that arrive, people who are awarded protection-based grants if they are awarded refugee status or humanitarian protection. For example, in Esther's case she came through the Syrian scheme. Her family would have had the right to bring other family members who may have been separated to the UK under the refugee family reunion immigration rules.

Afghans and Ukrainians have not been given that same protection-based status, so they have not been recognised as refugees or been granted humanitarian protection, so they would not have that right to bring their family members and 90% of all family reunion visas that are granted are granted to women and children. A Ukrainian who claims asylum and is granted refugee status would then be able to bring their partner and their minor children. The Ukrainian who arrived under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, if for some reason they were separated, would not be able to.



Similarly, an Afghan who claims asylum and is granted refugee protection or humanitarian protection would have the right to bring their family members. Somebody arriving through the ACRS—unless they were able under pathway 2 if they are all together to travel together under the new resettlement part of ACRS—would not have that, but certainly when they arrive in UK they would not have that priority status unless they came through pathway 2. That is a critical point in terms of offering a safe legal route, particularly to women and children, is that effectively you are closing that if you are limiting particular cohorts of people to not being able to recognise them as refugees.

Kate Osborne: Thank you. That is all my questions.

Q220 **Chair:** Can I just unpick some of that? I am going to turn to Jennifer first and then probably go back to Andy. While I entirely understand the point you are making, would you agree that the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which gives people the immediate right to work—and I am going to use the phrase so that you do not have to—is preferable to them claiming asylum and then falling into the black hole that is the asylum system, potentially waiting two years to have their claim processed? That is for Jennifer first.

Jennifer Blair: When I get inquiries from the Ukrainians in the UK who would have an asylum claim, I am always advising them to also put in a Ukraine scheme application because it is unbelievably different to go through the asylum system when you have leave to remain, access to public funds, the right to work and can live a normal life, compared with falling into the black hole of the asylum system. I am happy to use that phrase because I work with people in that process every day and see the toll it takes on their mental health and welfare. The comparison with asylum seekers is where people are given trafficking leave to remain, so they have discretion and leave to remain while they go through the asylum process. The comparison and the benefits to their welfare and mental health are well documented and well understood.

It is so much more preferable to be able to front load that access to the mainstream world and then let the asylum system and go through in the background. It will also improve the dignity that they are recorded in the asylum system because they will be regarded as more credible as they have leave to remain when they apply for asylum, so the instinct to disbelieve people and say, “Well, you would say that, you need leave to remain,” is taken away because they already have leave to remain. They are just claiming asylum because they are at risk.

Andy Hewett: I agree. It is preferable people are given right to work, and there is no reason why people entering the asylum system could not be given the right to work while they are waiting. My point was the final outcome of what rights and entitlements you have is entirely dependent on what scheme you have been able to access.

Q221 **Chair:** Can I just unpick some of the comment that you made about refugee family reunion rights? Would you not agree that, for the Ukrainian



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scheme, and when it comes to family members for those on the Afghan citizens scheme there is a huge problem, but for the Ukrainians, would the family member left back in Ukraine not be better applying under the Homes for Ukraine scheme which will enable them to come here, be reunited with their family and have the right to work granted for a period of three years.

Andy Hewett: That would potentially be an avenue, but they would be coming to the UK hosted with somebody else who may not be their family, and the assumption is that their family would be the UK sponsor. That might not always be possible for some people, but I do take the point. Also, the cohort of people arriving is slightly different, in that it tends to be more women and children arriving through that scheme because of their needs.

Q222 **Chair:** Yes, because men cannot leave.

Andy Hewett: But there will certainly be some Ukrainians who are separated from their family members, who, under the two schemes, would find it very difficult to come to the UK for the purposes of reuniting. Whereas a Ukrainian who entered the asylum system, if they were granted refugee status, would have that right.

Q223 **Chair:** "If". But you would agree with me it is a better scheme. It is a better route to use than to try to go through the asylum process.

Andy Hewett: At the moment, the asylum process is obviously fraught with historic backlog. But I think if you had a well-functioning, efficient, effective asylum system then—

Q224 **Chair:** That would be better than the Homes for Ukraine scheme that gives you immediate right to work?

Andy Hewett: Again, my point is that you could incorporate that into an asylum system with immediate right to work.

Q225 **Chair:** But it does not exist at the moment.

Andy Hewett: It does not.

Q226 **Chair:** You would agree that at the current moment in time, someone would be far better coming on the Homes for Ukraine scheme than claiming asylum and ending up in a process that takes a long time. There is no right to work at the moment, unless it is on the shortage occupation list, and you have been here more than a year.

Andy Hewett: It would depend on that individual's circumstances. For many people the Homes for Ukraine scheme might be the more appropriate route. But there will be some people where, I think, they would want to enter the asylum system to have the certainty of refugee protection.

Q227 **Chair:** But there is no certainty. It is a process where you apply, and the Homes for Ukraine is much faster.

Andy Hewett: There is certainty if they were successful in their asylum application.



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Chair: Okay, it is a big if, isn't it? Elliot.

Q228 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you very much. Zahra, could I ask you a little bit about your experience when you arrived in the UK about the support you were or were not given in terms of integration into the UK. Were you provided with anything that would help you do that? If so, where did that come from?

Zahra Shaheer: As I said before, when we arrived in the UK, we received some basic help and support. I mentioned that some organisations helped us—the Refugee Council helped us with our education. But I think something we had wished to have, for example, the processing of the cases was very long. You can imagine six months staying in a hotel. It is very difficult with different families, different cultures. It was slow. It could be very fast for some families because, of course, each case is different. After having our house, my children could go to school, and I was able to go to English class but the first six or seven months after we arrived in the UK was a waste of time.

Q229 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you very much for that, Zahra. Esther, you have written before about the importance of learning English when arriving in the UK. Could you tell us about the support you and your family were given through the resettlement scheme?

Ester Baleh: Learning the language of the country you are in is the most important factor to protect yourself and to know your rights, to be able to express yourself and to integrate. Integrating is the most important thing you need to do when you first arrive. It could be in many ways; we were lucky to be in school, and so that taught me a lot. But also, volunteering has helped us a lot, as you get to see many of the community and then you get to know them, you get to learn, you get to speak the language with them specifically and so that has been a great help for us—to look for the community. You do have to look for it and you have to put effort to learn and when you learn it you are more protected, and you are in a better place.

Q230 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you very much. I suppose this is both to Esther and Zahra. Was there anything you were not provided with by way of support that you would have found very helpful if it had been there? Was there anything glaringly obvious that was missing that, if it had been in place, would have made the process more straightforward or easier to go through?

Zahra Shaheer: Education is very important for everyone. When we arrived, as I said before, my children went to school after six months but, for myself, it was not clear that I could go to any job which I was doing before, as a journalist in my field, or I can find any other job, or not. Also, there are some English courses, which is not proper for families, especially people who want to improve their English as soon as possible to start a job. It is twice a week. It would be very helpful for people to improve their



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English because language is the basic equipment that we need to integrate with people in a society.

Ester Baleh: It is really good that you came and you went to school but in terms of my mum, there is a long waiting list for ESOL classes, and it has been quite hard to find them immediately. You have to wait, but because of our case, my dad's condition and my mom, the Refugee Council decided to send someone to our house to teach them the language, so that was very good. She used to travel a long way just to come and teach them for an hour in the week. But in general, there are not enough ESOL classes.

Q231 **Elliot Colburn:** Andy, I could see you nodding your head to quite a lot of that. Perhaps I could ask you, in terms of the integration support offered throughout the successful resettlement schemes such as the Syrian VPRS, should that be replicated for all schemes and also for people seeking asylum in the UK or do different bespoke models work?

Andy Hewett: Absolutely. Our position in the Refugee Council is that people should be afforded the same level of integration support irrespective of what scheme they arrived with but based on their individual needs. That level of funding should be there, irrespective of whether they get refugee status through the asylum system or come through a resettlement scheme. The UK did, at one point, have a scheme called the refugee integration and employment service—or REIS—for refugees that ran from 2008 to 2011, where dedicated integration caseworkers were allocated to newly granted refugees who came from the asylum system, principally to help them integrate and to look at their employment prospects. A lot of that mirrored some of the successful integration work that was taken from resettlement schemes. What we see with resettlement is, even though the UK select some of the most vulnerable refugees to come for the resettlement scheme, by providing a good level of wraparound support, people are able to successfully rebuild their lives, to integrate and to lead fulfilling lives and maximise their own integration potential.

We do not see anything like that for people who are granted status from the asylum system, where they have perhaps been waiting months or years in the asylum backlog entirely dependent on the Home Office, and, suddenly within 28 days, they are told to be completely independent and to understand how to navigate all the systems which the UK Government have put in place in terms of accessing universal credit or employment. It is just too much for anybody to absorb.

When we do it in resettlement, it is done in a planned way over a period of months and that kind of model works well but sadly, it is only available to resettled refugees.

Q232 **Elliot Colburn:** There was no like-for-like replacement for the start of 2011?

Andy Hewett: That is right.

Q233 **Elliot Colburn:** Would it be your contention that something like that should



come back? Were there problems with that system that, if it were to return, you would want to see addressed, or was it fairly good and just bringing it back as it was would be massively beneficial?

Andy Hewett: I do not think we would want to bring it back because it was a decade ago. What I would want to do is take on board the continual learning from the resettlement scheme to look at what might be an appropriate integration support package for newly granted refugees. Of course, it would be optional; people could opt in or out of receiving it. What might that look like? What would be the outcomes and what would be the level of support put in place to achieve those outcomes? There is a lot that could be taken from the resettlement model to feed into the design of an appropriate scheme.

Q234 **Elliot Colburn:** I apologise if you are unable to answer this question right now, in which case please feel free not to, but is there any country around the world that does integration particularly well that the UK could take lessons from?

Andy Hewett: Good question. I am not aware of any country in the UK that does post-asylum integration particularly well. Hats off to the UK Government, they have looked at other resettlement programmes around the world to inform the VPRS programme and the UKRS programme. Those efforts have been made. There will absolutely be pockets of good practice around the world and there are opportunities to feed that in. But from my perspective, there is already quite a lot of identified good practice in the resettlement sphere that we could seek to replicate.

Q235 **Elliot Colburn:** Fantastic, so replicating what the UK itself has done?

Andy Hewett: Sure. One difference between Esther and Zahra's experience is Esther arrived and was supported by a local authority and was put into housing which remained a permanent housing. Zahra's experience was some time in a bridging hotel and then moved elsewhere. Of course, that move often disrupts things. For example, a child might have to re-register in a new school or if anybody was undertaking any specialist medical treatment, it disrupts that as they have to re-register and join a new waiting list. Therefore, we also need to be mindful where possible of not having that disruptive element in people's integration journeys.

Q236 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you. Jennifer, do you have anything to add to that? But also, does that come back to the point that what would be better would be an almost universal resettlement programme rather than developing bespoke schemes in responses to individual situations?

Jennifer Blair: In terms of the first part about adding anything, when looking at international comparisons through integration work, it is relevant that each country also has its own asylum process and asylum housing context and things like that, so integration works slightly differently. But integration often involves some kind of community and peer orientation and support basis, regular drop-ins, etc., and a one-to-one support worker support providing welfare advice. That might be one support worker or



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different support workers, some doing employability, some doing housing or just one person who can navigate the process with people and then activities around education or foundational things like ESOL or classes for parents to understand how the UK does that aspect of things.

There are good examples, and the EU has collated information on them which they talk about as being local initiatives because, for example, Germany has some really good programmes, but it is run by state and region, so it is very variable. But actually, as Andy was saying about building on what the UK is doing already, we know the context that people are left in when they exit the asylum system or when they arrive in an integration programme. We could build from there, along those points about having peer or community orientation, drop-in spaces, support workers and then educational and similar activities.

The second part of your question was about having one resettlement programme. What is undesirable is waiting until after a crisis and then, on the hoof, trying to run a programme, because that is poor. It will lead to individual civil servants on the ground or public officials over-working in a heroic way but delivering something fraught with problems even when they do that, and people being left behind, etc. Obviously, different countries will have different needs and different types of vulnerable people and their protected characteristics will have particular issues and would depend on the country. For Afghanistan, it is very hard for LGBT people to come forward for a resettlement programme, because they have to out themselves to do that, which puts their lives in danger. Another way must be found to get to those people to resettle them.

The UNHCR's resettlement criteria are good and well-proven, and are dynamic in the sense that they look at the cohorts of people they are actually seeing and select from those. It is problematic if the UK Government say, "We will run one scheme for scholars, one scheme for women," but actually the people that they are seeing on the ground are not those people who are at the most risk. It works well for caseworkers with guidance and training and general criteria to select those people, but it is not a refugee arrival system. It is not a protection system. It is a resettlement scheme, and they are not the same thing and they do not do the same job. One is selecting, rather arbitrarily because there are always more people than you can take, a random group of people to rehome in the UK, and one is a recognising people at risk and offering a humanitarian pathway to safety which they select. They choose to apply for it, whether they have to apply abroad safely and travel without going through people smugglers or whether they apply once they arrive in the UK.

Q237 Chair: I am going to try to ask this question as sensitively as I can, Zahra. You were in a bridging hotel when you came to the UK. Did you feel safe there?

Zahra Shaheer: Yes, when I first arrived in UK, I felt safe for myself and my children, but the bridging hotel was very crowded, and the situation was not good. There were a lot of Afghan families with different opinions



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and different cultures, and I was not safe because I was the only lady who did not wear a veil and it was very difficult. The Afghan men all looked at me and they said something that I had to accept everything; living with them in a corridor was very difficult.

Q238 Chair: Thank you for that. There was a bridging hotel in my own constituency, and I am conscious that the gender split was very heavily dominated by men. It was very unusual for a single mother to be in a hotel. Did you feel the authorities at the Home Office and the local council sufficiently supported you? One of the concerns I heard was that it was only the voices of men that were listened to.

Zahra Shaheer: Unfortunately, it is true, because the men were always staying in the lobby, and they knew about everything that happened and they processed their cases quickly. Also, being given a house was optional because they said to the Home Office, "I do not want to have this house, we want it in London and other good locations," and the Home Office accepted it. As I was a single mother, it was difficult for me to hear everything, you are alone with your problems that you have in your personal life because it is Afghan culture. Then when they told me they have a house for me and would I like to go and start my life there, I accepted, as I wanted to have a house near London because I am doing a journalism course now and I want to join, as I said, for my master's degree or my second bachelor. But I accepted that house far from London because of that culture. I was stuck all the time in my room, and I could not go out. There were some English courses for basic English learners. I was not able to go to that class because the men started to say something about a woman who is alone here in the UK, and they were always gossiping with each other about me.

Q239 Chair: Thank you. I think there are some real lessons to be learned, certainly in the support for single women coming here. Esther, a question for you, I appreciate you were very young, but do you remember the orientation programme for VPRS that took place before you came to the UK and how helpful was it?

Ester Baleh: As you said, I was young, and they did not have a separate session for kids and were not mindful that I was younger, and I would not understand the same thing they say to my parents and family. They had someone who had the experience of living in the UK for a bit. They explained to us and showed us examples of the houses we can expect and what we might see, the way it looks, basically just an overall image of it. It was as we expected. In some cases, it was better than expected. But, as something for me, there was nothing mentioned about the children and what they could have or that was mindful to their opinions. But when we came to the UK with the organisation that does the cultural orientation, they did reach out to me and we spoke and I actually recorded a video for the people who will be coming soon to the UK, so now they will be seeing me giving them advice about the UK for the children and teenagers and about how schools are here and some kind of insight from a person who has lived here not long ago. That, to me, was an achievement to be able



to tell them that you will be safe, you might face some challenges but at the end you have to do it right and you are safe here.

Q240 **Chair:** Thank you for taking part in that. I was very conscious some years ago of the importance of improving those orientation programmes. Jennifer, can I just turn to you? We have heard about Zahra's experience in a bridging hotel. We have also read too many examples in the media of people on the Ukrainian scheme not feeling safe immediately prior to travel here, on the journey here and when they get here. What more should be done, could be done, as we are conscious with the Ukrainian scheme it is predominantly women, to make sure that they are safe?

Jennifer Blair: It is women, and it is also children and some of the children are travelling to join relatives here, so they are travelling on their own. I may not have an answer about what should be done for the journeys here, although it is very concerning to see people travelling known trafficking routes in order to arrive in the UK. For what is happening on arrival here, the hosting scheme, a kind of unregulated hosting scheme has been very problematic. For example, the Ukraine Advice Project UK do not match people with hosts, but we were getting a lot of inquiries from people saying they wanted to house a child and some inquiries from men saying they would like two Ukrainian women, that kind of thing. I have seen, for example, there is a very large Facebook group called help for Ukraine Scotland with thousands of members, where it is like people picking up personal ads with their photograph and their families, saying they have no bad habits and they are nice, there are the most beautiful photographs of people looking for a host. It is just fraught with problems. I think when the scheme launched it was a family scheme and perhaps the initial idea was people would join their friends in the UK, people they knew, their colleagues.

In fact, what has happened is thousands and thousands of people have self-matched with random strangers and some of those people are lovely, but even if they are lovely, it does not mean their hosting scheme will work well because offering somebody a spare room is one thing, being responsible for driving them to all their appointments is another. For example, I am working with a pregnant woman who has been sexually exploited in Belgium after she left Ukraine and she will have multiple medical appointments when she arrives in the UK because she is very far along in her pregnancy. That is a lot for a host to take on as well as offering a spare room and the intensity around all that.

The unregulated hosting, where local authority checks are sometimes being done after people have arrived because of the speed of the process, and then if the local authority say the family failed the check, is very distressing for families. We had a family which had a grandma, a mother and children and they were living with a family. They were registered with a GP and the children were in school and then the local authority told them they had to leave because they were not safe there. They left, and the local authority put them in a hotel and then said, "Well, we are only putting you in this



hotel for a few weeks and then you have to leave,” because it was temporary accommodation. They had access to public funds and the right to rent so they said, “Off you go.” The family said they had nowhere to go, so the local authority said they would separate them. They would not house grandma with the rest of the family, but they would never have come to the UK if that was a risk. They only came because they knew they could arrive as a family unit to all be together with a host and a host that they thought they had spoken to in advance and seemed nice. They were not told, or at least it was not clear from our communication with them, what the problem was with the host and why the local authority had vetoed it. That kind of process is very chaotic. Although I said hosting can work well, not all hosting—not any hosting where it could be very inappropriate, or people are left to hold too much for a family.

Q241 **Chair:** What are you seeing when hosting breaks down, in terms of numbers? Is that already a significant problem?

Jennifer Blair: One of the factors that makes a big difference is how economically independent the families are, because there are no financial requirements to hosting. Some of the people who are coming are still working remotely. They may have been working as a computer programmer for a company in America and are still able to do so. Therefore, if their hosting breaks down, they just go and rent somewhere. Some people are not in that position and are much more vulnerable. There is a real information gap about what hosts are. Some people think they are the visa sponsor because they are called the sponsor on the application. Their details are put in the application form. They do not realise they can leave even if the hosting becomes very toxic. They think their visa is linked with that person, and it is not being clearly communicated to them that that is not the case, and they can live anywhere and be anywhere in the UK that they want.

Some people are presenting to the local authority as homeless. There is a lack of consistency about how that is dealt with. Some local authorities have really embraced the idea of doing all they can for the Ukraine war effort by helping the people in their area, some local authorities will do what they do when any of us present as homeless to the local authority and might just give them a list of hostels to call in the first instance, which is more than people can manage. There is a real concern about risk factors for exploitation, particularly for some people who were seasonal workers and now have three years leave to remain but are staying on the seasonal work farms as they had been under the Host Ukraine scheme, with the farms as sponsors, and they do not realise they can leave to look for work elsewhere. Again, there is a lack of information given to people so they know what their rights are.

Chair: Thank you. Do any members of the Committee have any additional questions they wanted to ask? Can I take this opportunity to thank all our witnesses for their evidence this afternoon? It has been hugely useful and appreciated, and I hope you have also found it useful.