

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [Afghan Data Breach and Resettlement Schemes](#), HC 1304

Tuesday 4 November 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 November 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Alex Baker; Lincoln Jopp; Emma Lewell; Jesse Norman; Ian Roome; Fred Thomas; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1 - 90

Witnesses

I: Holly Bancroft, Home Affairs Correspondent, *The Independent*; Larisa Brown, Defence Editor, *The Times*; and Mr Sam Greenhill, Chief Reporter, *Daily Mail*.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[– \[Daily Mail, The Times, and The Independent\]](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Holly Bancroft, Larisa Brown and Sam Greenhill.

Q1 **Chair:** I call to order today's Defence Committee evidence session in our inquiry into the Afghan data breach and resettlement schemes. When we discovered that there had been a super-injunction in place for almost two years, many of us were shocked—especially parliamentarians, because we are often advised that Parliament is sovereign, and yet parliamentarians were kept in the dark and I know that individuals in the media were not able to report. That is why the Committee felt very strongly that we needed to conduct an inquiry to get into the nuts and bolts of what had happened, and what decisions had been made and by whom, in order to shed light on what transpired.

I am very pleased that we have with us today three witnesses from the media who have been heavily involved over the last couple of years in what happened with the Afghan data breach. We have with us Holly Bancroft, the home affairs correspondent for *The Independent*; Larisa Brown, the defence editor at *The Times*; and Sam Greenhill, chief reporter at the *Daily Mail*. A warm welcome to you all. Before we delve further, a note for Members: you should not ask or compel the witnesses to reveal any information that has been provided to them in confidence. That would potentially be an interference in court proceedings, as well as a breach of confidence.

On 15 July, the Defence Secretary made a statement to the House revealing that a significant breach of personal data of thousands of ARAP applicants and their families had occurred. The incident took place in February 2022 but was not discovered until August 2023, when the Government were alerted by a private citizen referred to as Person A. I commend journalists for their grit and determination in pursuing the truth and exposing what happened. Although he is not here today, David Williams of the *Daily Mail* was the first journalist to approach the Government about the incident, on 17 August 2023. I am glad that he will provide evidence to us at a later date. Subsequently, different journalists became aware of the data breach at different times, including Lewis Goodall of "The News Agents". I know that he, as well as the three of you, was invited by the judge to address him directly during the course of proceedings.

That is the wider context, but we all know that this has had a massive impact on the lives of so many people—not just those who served our country, but the Afghans who bravely supported our troops and our Government. We owe it to them and their families to shed light on this.

Ms Brown, I will start with you. In July, when the super-injunction was lifted, you all wrote about the experience of being involved in court proceedings. In the light of the passage of time, have you changed your opinions in any way? Can you talk about what you submitted and what

your reflections are now?

Larisa Brown: It was obviously a really frustrating period for all of us. It went on for 18 months, in some cases, if not two years. Looking back, one of the key moments was when we were heading into the general election. A small number of people knew about what had happened, and I personally felt that it could become an election issue. I raised that with the judge in court in 2024—I think it was January or February. We knew that the Government of the of the day had put at risk potentially 100,000 people; the MoD was saying that these people could be at risk of death or torture. We knew that they were making huge policy decisions behind the scenes and obviously the public did not know about that. This was at a time when there was a lot of discussion about immigration, yet they had decided to secretly bring Afghans here who had been affected. That was really concerning for us, because we believed that the public should know about that.

Q2 **Chair:** That was under the ARR scheme.

Larisa Brown: Yes—the Afghan response route. That was a scheme set up to bring in specifically the Afghans who had been affected by the data leak, but Afghans came in under different schemes as well. That was the first thing: we felt that the public should know.

For me, it was quite hard, because I had been campaigning for years to get more Afghans whose lives had been affected by the Afghan war and their service with British troops to the UK, and I was in contact with a lot of them. In fact, I had just published my book, “The Gardener of Lashkar Gah”, which was about the Afghans and their plight. I would be speaking to these people, and I knew that their names were potentially on a list of thousands of people and at any point the Taliban could get hold of their names and come knocking at their door. That was really difficult for me. I knew that I could not tell them about it, and they did not know for the whole of this time that their names were on the list. That was something else that concerned me.

As defence editor for *The Times*, I was writing about, “What is the MoD going to do with all this new money for defence?” and yet I knew that it was planning to spend billions of pounds on handling this fallout. When I was writing, “They could spend money on this,” I was actually thinking, “Well, actually, billions of pounds of this might be going on the data leak.” Those were the things that I found particularly challenging.

I also tried throughout this process to hold the Government to account for what was happening and to find a way of writing about it without breaching the terms of the super-injunction. The only way I was able to do that was to write about General Sir Gwyn Jenkins at one point, because he had been asked by a Minister if he was going to resign over the issue. I was able to write that the issue he was asked if he would resign over was a national security incident. That was all I could write at that point. I think we were all desperate to get something into the public domain so that

people could know what was going on in some way, but obviously we were really restricted.

- Q3 **Chair:** Mr Greenhill, given the passage of time since you set out your reflections in July, are there any other things that you would like to place on the record?

Sam Greenhill: I certainly echo everything that Larisa said. On 15 July, John Healey proclaimed himself to be deeply uncomfortable at the lack of transparency. I think he said to all the MPs that, after two years of secrecy, all that would change. I think we have all found that, in the period since then, it has been something of an uphill struggle to get answers to basic questions out of the MoD. Several of the emails questioning things that I have sent to the MoD have simply been ignored. On one occasion, I eventually resorted to an FOI just to find out a date. It took four months eventually to get that, but I still have not heard it from the MoD press office itself. You do wonder whether anything has changed since 2023, when the MoD slipped so alarmingly easily into a most unprecedented—

- Q4 **Chair:** It is very disconcerting to hear that you still feel that there is a lack of transparency from the Ministry of Defence on the questions that you are posing.

Sam Greenhill: Yes. Well, some questions have simply been ignored with no explanation.

- Q5 **Chair:** No doubt we will come to these issues during the session. We will be delving into the impact of the secrecy, resettlements and accountability, and Members have different areas that they want to focus on, including risk assessments. Ms Bancroft, what else would you like to place on the record at the outset, further to your submission in July?

Holly Bancroft: We could not go away and ask external experts for their views or get answers to questions because we were under a super-injunction. The MoD also did not want to investigate anything that was presented to them. There are many examples of caseworkers bringing examples to them that were not investigated. Until the Rimmer review, they also did not go to any external experts. The court process itself was a lot of hypothetical exercises—"What might be the case if x, y, z happened?"—but not able to rely on much external expertise. Having the super-injunction lifted, and the exercise of the Rimmer review, sheds light on some of the issues. It just shows me what a closed process it was that it was not possible during the process to get basic answers to basic questions. The MoD also was not investigating to find out basic answers to basic questions.

One thing I have been concerned about since the lifting of the super-injunction is the movement of people out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It seems to me that that is not happening very much. I do not know why that is, but I think you guys should try to find out what has slowed down the process of evacuation and why it has become very difficult to get people out.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Ms Bancroft, your views are duly noted. Let me reassure you that the Committee has every intention to conduct a comprehensive inquiry. During the coming months, we will be taking evidence from many of those who were involved and trying to get to the bottom of things.

Q6 **Lincoln Jopp:** I want to go all the way back to the breach itself. Can you give us a sense of the extent to which, in your investigations and dealings, it was just assumed that it was a cock-up? Did anyone entertain the notion that it was deliberate?

Larisa Brown: This is really important, because we were never told how the leak had happened. We were going into an election period. It could have been a Minister, for all we knew. We had no idea how it transpired. We did investigations over that time, didn't we?

Sam Greenhill: We did, but right at the very beginning, in August 2023, when my colleague David Williams, who you mentioned, found out about it and asked the MoD about it, the first thing he was told by somebody was that it was being considered as possibly a malicious leak and that a hostile state actor—potentially Iran or Russia, or the Taliban—could be involved. That is what they were looking at initially. Obviously, that was then ruled out, but we never got to the bottom of exactly what had happened, other than that I believe it was a mistake by a soldier. Personally, I wouldn't blame that soldier. We have all sent an email in error. There was obviously a systemic problem that caused—

Q7 **Lincoln Jopp:** But no one ever considered that the soldier might have done it deliberately. That is my question.

Larisa Brown: Quite early on, I found out what had happened, and I knew that it was not a malicious—well, I heard it from my sources. The problem was that we couldn't ask a lot of questions, because we were bound by the terms of the super-injunction, so we could only speak to people who we knew also knew about the super-injunction. I was led to believe quite early on that it was not a malicious act, that somebody had done it by mistake—in error—and that that person was really trying to help the Afghans, but we did not have the details.

Q8 **Alex Baker:** We are going to delve into some of the detail now. What do you think each Government got right and what should each Government have done differently in respect of this legal process?

Sam Greenhill: I think initially the right approach was secrecy. It was obvious they were dealing with a monumental blunder. There were lots of unknowns. A huge number of lives were at risk. It was right to start off with a secret process.

I think Larisa is completely right, and she made this point in court to the judge. When we got to the general election, the judge was saying that the super-injunction should be lifted and the special advocates—the KCs who are security cleared and have seen all the secret material—were saying there was no justification for it. That was the inflection point where the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government should have realised that they needed to abandon their stance on the secrecy.

Obviously, we then had a change of Government, and business pretty much continued as usual to begin with until we got to 11 November—nearly a year ago—when we had a slight change in tactic from the Government. I can go into great detail on that, but essentially they changed the mood from one of, “We must have complete secrecy” to one of, “You, the press, need to remaining silent while we, the Government, release selected, cherry-picked information to the public.”

Q9 Derek Twigg: Was that October or November? There was a HEA meeting—

Sam Greenhill: There was a HEA meeting in October, correct, and then in November we had one of our hearings, at which we learned the detail of that meeting.

Q10 Alex Baker: Is there anything the other two witnesses would like to add on what the Government got right and what they didn’t get right?

Holly Bancroft: I personally think that the Rimmer exercise should have been done far earlier than it was. We need outside expertise to assess some of these issues. Rimmer did that exercise without disclosing key information. Stuff like the general picture of risk in Afghanistan is stuff that you need to establish with people like the UN—you need to try to get the expertise in—from the minute this happens, really, and there was not really a desire to do that.

Throughout the whole process, the response to the breach was very slow, in terms of setting up a resettlement scheme and deciding how many people they were going to help. Part of the reason we got involved was that it took four or five months from the breach happening to them turning up and saying, “We’re going to help 150 people.” We thought, “What? This is so slow,” and we felt compelled to get involved in order to hold the MoD to account on setting up whatever it was that they were going to do. Part of that is due to the structures of government and how that worked. We often found that ministerial meetings would happen just before we went to court so that there would be something to tell the court. That seemed to be an impetus for making stuff happen.

Larisa Brown: The super-injunction was in place for far too long. Healey, the Secretary of State, should have ordered the Rimmer review sooner in my opinion, because that was not ordered until earlier this year—I think January. That should have happened way sooner. In terms of the previous Government, there were questions about whether there should have been a super-injunction at all—in fact, Rimmer said in his review that it might have essentially made matters worse, because it would increase the value of the dataset to the Taliban. Some people I have spoken to would probably argue, “Well, did they need it in the first place? If they’d just had a story in the *Daily Mail* as a result of David Williams that weekend, would it have gone unnoticed by the Taliban, and that would have been the issue dealt with?” I do not know the answer to that, but when Ben Wallace



HOUSE OF COMMONS

applied for the injunction to begin with, he thought it should be a time-bound injunction. What we had was an indefinite injunction, and we saw no end date to it.

Chair: We will be going further into the Rimmer review, so we will leave the questions on that for the moment.

Q11 **Alex Baker:** I am interested in the idea that there could have been a different way of doing this and of acknowledging the lack of accountability that has gone on in all of this. Do you think there could have been provisions put in place for secrecy while briefing the Intelligence and Security Committee so that there was some basis of accountability within the process?

Larisa Brown: I was really surprised that the Intelligence and Security Committee was not briefed. That committee is designed to be able to handle the most sensitive matters and intelligence from the Defence Intelligence unit in the MoD. This was raised in court and the MoD suggested that it did not need to be briefed, so I would be interested to see what those discussions behind closed doors were.

Q12 **Alex Baker:** As it stands, you were the only people who were left to make the checks on what was happening. What does that tell us about where the gaps in oversight are when Governments take on unusual steps, as they have in this case?

Larisa Brown: The special advocate argued that the democratic process was in the deep freeze, and that was true because—you are right—we were the only people who were actually holding, or trying to hold, the Government to account. Throughout this process, we were not allowed into the closed hearings, so we were doing it with our hands tied behind our backs, because we could not make well-informed arguments without knowing what the MoD justification was for the super-injunction in the first place.

Sam Greenhill: And the special advocates who did have access to all the secret material were not making inquiries that we would make with people in Afghanistan or in the UK-Afghanistan community. There was nobody really, apart from the MoD itself, who could check stuff out and know all the background. That is a problem—that is a gap—and I do not know what the answer is, other than that there should possibly be a rule that super-injunctions should not last for any longer than a set period of time, or something to force them to come out and be a bit more open initially.

Q13 **Jesse Norman:** Thank you for coming in, and for your testimony. I want to pick up some of the points on the legal process that was undergone. Larisa, you mentioned that there were private hearings and reserved hearings—or hearings to which you were not admitted. We are building a picture of private but open hearings—where defendants can be there—and private but closed hearings, where secret information is shared. What is so striking is that it seems as though the judge decided in his judgment initially—not on a petition—that this should be a super-injunction, that it should be global, and that it should be indefinite. Is that true?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sam Greenhill: No, that is not quite right.

Jesse Norman: Can you put us straight on that?

Sam Greenhill: As I understand it, he did indeed upgrade it from an injunction to a super-injunction, but it was never indefinite. The MoD had asked for four months to take some protective actions—to rescue people. It is just that after four months, it asked for an extension.

Q14 **Jesse Norman:** So the MoD did not seek the super-injunction; the MoD sought the injunction.

Sam Greenhill: That is true, but with the caveat that, ever since they got the super-injunction, they did not want to lose it.

Q15 **Jesse Norman:** I understand; I am just trying to be clear on the facts. Originally, the MoD applied for an injunction, and it was upgraded to a super-injunction. They thought, “Oh, goody! We will re-apply for a super-injunction when it occurs,” but originally, they had only asked for four months. They then reapplied and it was granted.

Sam Greenhill: They did not have to reapply—it just rolled on. There were hearings, and the judge wanted to weigh up various things.

Q16 **Jesse Norman:** There were hearings, people are speaking to this from different parts, and you are getting a chance to cross-examine the people coming in and speaking to the judge?

Sam Greenhill: Eventually, but it rolled on over and over. In fact, in his judgment of May 2024, when he said that he was going to lift the super-injunction, the judge made the point, “I have to grasp the nettle, otherwise this will just go on indefinitely.”

Q17 **Jesse Norman:** Okay. So then the High Court wanted the super-injunction to be discharged, and the then Secretary of State appealed that. Have I got that right?

Sam Greenhill: Yes.

Q18 **Jesse Norman:** What was the reason why the Government, in your judgment, chose to appeal at that point? Why do you think they were so keen that they should retain the super-injunction aspect?

Sam Greenhill: The obvious answer is that they felt it was offering great protection to their teams operating on the ground, and no doubt it was. We do not know exactly why they appealed, because the appeal court heard an entire day of submissions and, I believe, fresh evidence from the MoD entirely behind closed doors. We were not in there, so we do not know exactly what they presented to the appeal judges. By the time we got there the next day, it was obvious that the MoD had given a very convincing case. Taking it at face value, it is because it was offering protection for their teams on the ground. It was, of course, right in the middle of a general election campaign.

Q19 **Jesse Norman:** Okay, but the decision was made before the election was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

called, so the judge had no reason for thinking the election was going to get called.

Sam Greenhill: Well, hang on—when was the election called? It must have been called in May.

Chair: It was May '24.

Lincoln Jopp: It was early June.

Sam Greenhill: Early June, was it? Okay.

Q20 **Jesse Norman:** Sorry, but there was a slight suggestion that there might be a political influence—

Larisa Brown: We knew it was coming.

Jesse Norman—and I think we can discount any political suggestion. The judge was not being influenced either way by any politician in relation to the general election.

Sam Greenhill: No, that was not a factor. If you wanted to say there was any political interference, it would have been about whether or not to have an appeal, not the substance of the appeal.

Q21 **Jesse Norman:** Okay. So they had an appeal and it was successful. They then did not appeal it further to the Supreme Court.

Sam Greenhill: “They” meaning the press?

Jesse Norman: That’s right—you didn’t, I should say.

Sam Greenhill: No, we didn’t.

Jesse Norman: Why is that?

Sam Greenhill: A number of factors. Some of it was legal advice that we cannot discuss, but it was also—

Q22 **Jesse Norman:** The grounds did not exist. It looked good in law, as it were—there was no arguable case to be made to the Supreme Court. Would that have been the kind of argument that they would make?

Sam Greenhill: Yes, and we had not seen any of the evidence that they had given to the appeal court judges, so how were we supposed to fight without that. We would be going in totally blind.

Q23 **Jesse Norman:** Okay, brilliant. A couple of other quick things: before this, the super-injunction was extended to cover this new secret settlement regime, the ARR—if I’ve got that right—with potentially enormous further costs, so there was a significant expenditure of public capital being covered by the super-injunction, as well as all the proceedings designed to protect individuals in theatre. Is that right?

Larisa Brown: Yes—billions of pounds.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Holly Bancroft: You see that in some of Chamberlain's judgments. He is starting to think, "How is it actually possible to keep this huge process secret?"

- Q24 **Jesse Norman:** Right, so there is an enormous machinery of government going on around the ARR, which is being kept secret by the super-injunction alongside all the other material?

Holly Bancroft: Yes.

- Q25 **Jesse Norman:** Thank you. My final point would be to note that we have detected a change within this Committee—I think it is a matter of public record—in the quality of information we have received from the MoD. It has not just got worse; it has become structurally worse in the channels that they give us. I have questioned the Secretary of State on the issue, and I have no doubt that, without putting words in the Chair's mouth, it will be something that we think about in future.

Larisa Brown: Since when?

Jesse Norman: When the Secretary of State appeared in front of us. That is just for information. Thank you; and thank you, Chair.

Chair: Let's now move on to the impact of secrecy, with my colleague Fred Thomas.

- Q26 **Fred Thomas:** Secrecy is quite a burden to have. You had that for a long period of time, which you are used to as journalists because you protect your sources. So you have some element of secrecy anyway. However, the judge in the judgment in July of this year said that it was a "remarkable" feature of this whole situation that there had been "no mention in the media of the underlying matters" for the years that the super-injunction remained in place. Larisa, you mentioned earlier, I think, that maybe he got that wrong because you were able to allude to a "national security incident" when asking General Jenkins a question. However, notwithstanding that, the judge thought it was remarkable that, despite a super-injunction, none of this came out in the media.

Larisa Brown: That was approved, by the way. The MoD said we could write that. That wasn't me trying to breach the terms of this or anything like that.

Fred Thomas: No, that's clear and on the record.

Sam Greenhill: He did say that; it was words to the effect that he was astonished that we had kept our traps shut for two years.

- Q27 **Fred Thomas:** So my question to you is this. Do you think he means he is astonished that you, the media, kept your trap shut—as you say, Sam—or do you think he is alluding to parliamentarians? We as MPs have parliamentary privilege. Under the Bill of Rights, you could not put an injunction on us—well, I wasn't here at the time, but the previous Parliament. Do you think that he is alluding to that and surprised that no one in Parliament raised this?



Sam Greenhill: No, in his judgment, he was specifically talking about the media. But elsewhere in the case, he was certainly incredulous, I would say, at various other aspects of what you are talking about, which is why Parliament was being kept in the dark. Keeping that secret was, for all of us, very hard. As Larisa said at the beginning, the hardest part was when we were speaking to Afghans—Holly, I am sure, had exactly the same experience—and knew that they were potentially in danger, but we were unable to ask them if their names might be on a list. We couldn't say there had been a list that had been leaked and that their details may have been lost. These are people who were being raided by the Taliban sometimes. They had family members who were being rounded up. And we simply weren't able to warn them; we weren't allowed to warn them. That went on for nearly two years, and that was very difficult. My colleague David Williams says that since July lots of translators have said to him, "Why didn't you tell me, David? My mother was beaten. I could have done something if you had told us." It was very, very difficult to keep that secret.

Q28 **Fred Thomas:** It must have been hugely challenging. Holly, do you want to touch on that? Give us a sense of the professional and emotional strain that the super-injunction put on you guys as reporters.

Holly Bancroft: Yeah, it was really tough. Initially, when I first got served with the injunction, I thought, "I will put examples to the MoD, try to email them with cases, and say, 'Is this phishing email because of this leak? And this person has had this happen to their family.'" I would try to email them and say, "Can you look into this?" It quickly became apparent that they were not going to do anything with anything that I was emailing them, so I kind of stopped doing that. There was a bit in the initial part where—I got into this because they were evacuating some people, and there was a process I found really stressful whereby they gave people eligibility and then took it away. Knowing the background to all that was really hard: you were trying to raise people's cases, but also thinking, "I don't want to raise certain information. If it's information that has been shared with me privately, I shouldn't share it." So there was a real tension—"I don't want to share a lot of stuff in a court case that they do not know about, but how do I represent their interests? How do we raise their voices in that forum?" That was lacking in this whole process.

Touching on what you said about Parliament, I think the judge became quite concerned about parliamentary statements being made to provide cover. There was an instance where the Secretary of State made a statement to Parliament to provide cover for the secret scheme that was happening.

Q29 **Fred Thomas:** What do you mean by "provide cover"?

Holly Bancroft: Essentially, he gave an update about the Afghan settlement schemes and the plan to close them. That was to provide an excuse for the MoD to explain to councils, for example, why there were suddenly people arriving in their area. A parliamentary statement was used to explain, "We're merging the schemes; it's going to be called this."



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Therefore, "That's what we're going to use to tell councils and MPs what's happening." That was submitted to the court: "This is our plan—to provide cover by using this statement." I know that judge was quite shocked by that when it happened.

Sam Greenhill: That was when, as I said, he was incredulous. I have covered the royal courts for nearly 30 years and I have never seen anything like it. We had had a year and a half of complete secrecy. The public could not be told. We were under threat of jail if we told anyone. MPs could not be told anything. Meanwhile, select groups of Ministers were meeting behind closed doors to sign off enormous sums of public expenditure to set in train a secret migration scheme knowing, because Whitehall had starkly told them so, that it could lead to problems with social cohesion, that 10% of the new arrivals were expected to enter the homelessness system, and that there was a link to last summer's riots, health, and education. That was all going on with no parliamentary scrutiny at all. That is when the MoD suddenly announced in court that it had this plan to make a statement to Parliament.

Q30 **Fred Thomas:** And that was when?

Sam Greenhill: We found out about it on 11 November last year, in court. Holly was reading from a document, from the MoD, that the court was shown. We have gone from total silence to the MoD suddenly saying that it was going to fill the void with some selected facts. I thought that was an Orwellian leap from the original purpose of the injunction.

Q31 **Fred Thomas:** You are talking about the statement in Parliament?

Sam Greenhill: Yes. The MoD said the Government were going to make a statement that would help to provide cover for the numbers who are arriving, to "control the narrative", and to set out "the scale but not the cause" of the challenge.

All these things are total bread and butter issues for the House of Commons. You should all have been debating this, but instead they have this idea that they put this statement to Parliament with no one being told. That is when the judge, I say, was incredulous. Our KC—Jude Bunting, who is fantastic—was very good. He said to the judge that the MoD was deliberately misleading Parliament "by omission" because the Government were going to make this statement but not tell the full facts. That is when the judge highlighted that this was "political", to use his word. He said that the statement to Parliament was "to provide 'cover', as it's put, for the political consequences of bringing people to the UK by a statement that does not tell the whole truth to Parliament". In response, the Government's eminent KC was reduced to saying that the statement "would tell as much of the truth as possible."

The written statement came from John Healey in December last year. He talked about there being some 90 Afghan families. Had we not been gagged, we could have told MPs that, at the same time in the court, the MoD was talking about some 40,000 Afghans.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: I believe Derek Twigg wants to come in.

Q32 **Derek Twigg:** Are you suggesting that the sensitivity around small boats, asylum and people coming to this country illegally coloured the Government's view about how they would handle this?

Sam Greenhill: No.

Holly Bancroft: I think it had an impact on accommodation. That was a big logistical issue for them. They were bringing over tens of thousands of people. The current pipeline for the Afghan schemes is into more settled accommodation, but if you are bringing in tens of thousands of people you are going to have to start using hotels. I think they were aware of the political sensitivity of using hotels. But I think that is the only way it came in—it was kind of, "We have got to plan the accommodation for people coming in, and what is the impact of that going to be?"

Larisa Brown: They were worried about that, though, as well, because they were worried about explaining why all these people are here, and making clear that there was a difference between Afghans that might have come here illegally and Afghans that were being given sanctuary because they served alongside British troops.

One of the reasons they needed to do that statement was to make clear that they are still bringing Afghans, but the statement actually did not clarify which schemes were going to close. They didn't mention, obviously, the secret ARR scheme that was set up in response to the leak.

Q33 **Derek Twigg:** Keeping this in the scope of misleading Parliament and what you have said so far—we will not go into the Rimmer review; other colleagues will come on to that—I think you said early on that they had the original injunction in place and you understood why that was in place. At what point do you think they should have lifted that and come clean to Parliament? And how would that have helped or not helped the people who could possibly have been picked up by the Taliban, for instance?

Sam Greenhill: The obvious time to have done it was when the judge had assessed it. He had done the balancing act and had weighed up the pros and cons in May 2024. That was the time to have stopped their battle, as it were. Obviously, it is going to have a huge effect. They called it break the glass, the moment when—

Q34 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry—obviously, you know more of the detail than we do. At that point in 2024, given what you have said that the judge said, why would the Government then continue with it? What was the purpose for them to do that, if you believe that there was an opportunity at that point to say, "This is what happened"?

Sam Greenhill: It was obviously convenient for them. It was helping their teams—

Q35 **Derek Twigg:** It could be convenience at any point in time, even now that it has come out.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Holly Bancroft: Well, their view changed very substantially, both on the assessment of risk and on the assessment of how far the data had spread. When they appealed the decision, their position as of now was definitely not their position.

Q36 **Derek Twigg:** You feel from what you knew and what the judge said that the risk had changed, but the Government did not feel that the risk had changed.

Larisa Brown: Their argument at that point was that they were still trying to bring Afghans out who were on the list, and therefore if we revealed the existence of the list in the media, you are alerting the Taliban to the fact that there is a list out there, and the Taliban could try and get their hands on the list, and they believed that the Taliban might be able to get their hands on the list. That is why they argued in court that they were continuing it—because they thought it was a risk to the Afghans.

Q37 **Derek Twigg:** You would have thought that a new Government comes in, in July, and there is an opportunity. Why do you think they didn't take it then?

Sam Greenhill: I imagine they were being briefed by MoD officials that it is really helpful to us to have this super-injunction, because we can carry on with the rescue evacuations without anybody knowing about it, and it just is easier—I assume. But I mean, they will tell you that.

Q38 **Derek Twigg:** But then in October they decided to change the tactics, in terms of having a narrative rather than keeping it secret.

Sam Greenhill: Because it got so big. They were bringing in thousands of people.

Larisa Brown: Seven billion pounds at that point—

Sam Greenhill: I stood at Stansted airport watching these unmarked planes arrive. On one day, there were two that landed. These planes that land at Stansted, instead of turning left to the passenger terminal that everyone loves and loathes in equal measure, go right to the private hangar. It got enormous. Local authorities were having to deal with all of this. I would see a report on the BBC—Holly pointed to one. Local towns were having unrest problems. There were military barracks where hundreds of people were being brought in and there was no explanation to local communities. It was causing a strain. No one could tell the truth.

Q39 **Derek Twigg:** That goes back to the original question. Was that a part of the narrative—the worry about the issue of immigration?

Sam Greenhill: Yes, so they felt like they had to say something, but they were stuck because they could not tell the proper story.

Q40 **Derek Twigg:** Right. It is a bit, also, “new Ministers being caught in headlights” type of thing—“What is going on here?”

Sam Greenhill: I just go back to what the judge said about grasping the nettle—he said that this would go on indefinitely because they will just



HOUSE OF COMMONS

keep saying it is useful to carry it on, every three months, for ever. How long is this evacuation scheme going to last for? They have shut it down to new applicants, but they are still going to honour the offers made and that will involve the operations on the ground going on for quite some time, I should think.

Larisa Brown: There was also a law firm that became aware of the super-injunction, and I think that that changed the thinking in the MoD to some extent as well. They realised that it could no longer hold, because Afghans were being signed up to sue the Government.

Q41 **Derek Twigg:** Do you think that, from the previous Government to this Government, the issue about misleading Parliament and Parliament being kept in the dark was never the main consideration in this?

Sam Greenhill: It came up at every hearing, right from the start.

Derek Twigg: I am talking about Ministers.

Sam Greenhill: Well, we know from the court papers that Grant Shapps, the former Secretary of State, was advised to tell the Speaker, John Healey—then in opposition—and of course the Intelligence and Security Committee. He said no. The judge was very unhappy about that—you could tell—and eventually they did brief those people.

Larisa Brown: They didn't brief the ISC.

Sam Greenhill: Not the ISC, but they did brief Mr Healey and the Speaker.

Q42 **Derek Twigg:** Okay. My final question is slightly different. We are looking at the way the MoD works. On the timescale, what do you know—that is not already in the public domain—about when senior people or Ministers were informed that the breach had happened and there had been a mistake?

Sam Greenhill: I think it was 14 August, wasn't it?

Larisa Brown: Wallace found out very soon—was it the 14th or 15th?

Sam Greenhill: On the 14th, the balloon went up.

Q43 **Derek Twigg:** But there is no evidence that they knew before then.

Sam Greenhill: No, in that whole 18 months—nothing.

Q44 **Fred Thomas:** So the super-injunction has been lifted, and most of this is out in the open now, but it is not all out in the open; there is still an injunction, and some things are covered by it. I want to ask you about that, but I will preface this by saying that we do not want you to say anything you should not; I am conscious that there are lots of things you cannot talk about. Can you comment on the significance of what is not public—what is under injunction—or how the public might react if that information was public? Are you happy to do that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sam Greenhill: I don't think it is anything that dramatic. There were lots of details. Some we can talk about, because there was a whole hearing where we had to argue about what we would like to say. In most cases we lost, but in some cases they allowed us to. One example of that, which I am therefore allowed to talk about, was that in the early stages, when the MoD was trying to think of ways to deal with this problem, one idea was to beg favours from Britain's allies—to see whether any would take some of these data-affected Afghans—and the USA was one of the allies. When it came to reporting this story, the MoD wanted us to censor "USA" from the reports. This was argued in court, and eventually the judge said that we could say the USA. The reason they did not want us to say it was, in their words, "international relations". I think that the judge took the view that that was more a political or diplomatic reason than a national security reason. He allowed us to say things like that. There are examples like that. There was another one we thought of—what was it?

Larisa Brown: It was negotiating with the Taliban. It is probably helpful to explain that we had a 1,500-page bundle, and we had to go through a painstaking process in court to determine what we could and could not reveal from this bundle. We were arguing that we wanted to be able to say the US part, and we also wanted to be able to say that there was a part that was headed "Negotiation with the Taliban". The rest of that was blacked out, so we do not know what it included. We wanted to be able to say that they were discussing negotiating with the Taliban. In the end, we won that as well.

Obviously, we and the public do not know any of the stuff that was said in the closed hearing. Then there were hearings and discussions we had about matters like informing Parliament and various other things that we cannot tell you about, because we have not had approval for those documents, discussions and court transcripts to be released. We were going to the MoD and the courts to say, "We want to reveal that this quote was said in this hearing on this date," and this was all happening in the final days before the super-injunction was lifted. We had to get approval for every single sentence. It was a mammoth task.

Q45 **Fred Thomas:** That sounds like an epic task. On the things you have not been able to share—for example, the conversations and discussions around disclosing things to Parliament and the direct quotes that you have not been able to share—do you think the public would find them shocking?

Larisa Brown: Who knows for the closed evidence? We do not know. On the rest of the stuff, I do not think it fundamentally changes the story now, but at the time it would have been helpful to be able to say those things.

Chair: Let us now move on to the issue of risk assessments. Emma Lewell will start us off.

Q46 **Emma Lewell:** Thank you very much, Chair. Good morning, everyone. I want to touch on the Rimmer review. Based on the evidence that we have before the Committee, I am struggling with how the risk assessment



HOUSE OF COMMONS

moved from individuals at risk of death in August 2023 to secrecy still needed to protect life in November 2024. Then in June the following year, there was a diminished risk to individuals. Do you feel that Rimmer was a fair and accurate assessment?

Larisa Brown: All I would say on this is that they stopped relying on the defence intelligence assessments. There were not any defence intelligence assessments in the immediate period leading up to the Rimmer review. I would like to know more about that. I am sure that is something that you can delve into. I know Holly has something to say on the Rimmer review.

Holly Bancroft: I think it was a useful exercise. If you want to dig into the Rimmer review, I would suggest going to organisations such as the UN and Rawadari, which is an NGO that does a lot of documentation of reprisal attacks. It is useful to have a picture of what reprisals are like in Afghanistan and who is affected by reprisals. I think that exercise is useful.

We got a sense of what the defence intelligence assessments were through what people said in the hearings we were allowed to be in, but we never got to know what was in the defence intelligence assessments. We ourselves do not know the substance of those assessments. Obviously Rimmer did a different exercise in terms of being able to get expertise from outside. Lots of people who submitted evidence will have different opinions on whether that was a correct assessment of risk and whether it reflected enough the specific risk to Afghan security forces who are connected to the UK. I am sure you will hear different views on that, but I would recommend, if you can, trying to speak to a UN special rapporteur or Rawadari to get a sense of the overall picture. I try and do a lot of the documentation of reprisals myself but, being a journalist, you deal with anecdotal evidence. You try to tell individual stories, but it is harder to get that nationwide picture in the same sense. If you want to dig into the risk, I would recommend doing that.

Q47 **Emma Lewell:** Holly, on the back of that, why do you think Rimmer did not look more deeply into reprisals?

Holly Bancroft: I can't speak for him, but I think he did deal with that issue because he spoke to these organisations, or he definitely relied on some of their reporting. He spoke to Person A and some of the caseworkers involved who have detailed knowledge of specific instances.

The issue with reprisals, as I have found from trying to document them myself, is that you can document what happens to a family, you can document a killing and you can document a death, but individuals do not necessarily know why that has taken place, so it is very difficult to draw a direct link to this specific data breach. Even if this specific data breach has resulted in death or reprisals, it is really hard to directly prove that, if that makes sense.

The problem that I have had with trying to tell individual reprisal stories is that it is hard to go beyond the circumstances of what happened and figure out why it happened to that individual. Lots of people have different



HOUSE OF COMMONS

reasons. Families have different stories. It might be that people came from out of town. It might be they feel that someone within their community has told someone else about their previous service. It is very varied in terms of trying to figure out why things have occurred. But I would recommend you investigate that.

Larisa Brown: What he did, though, he could have done far sooner. He didn't need to wait until then to speak to those people. Actually, one of our frustrations throughout was that we were speaking to somebody named as Person A, who I think might be giving evidence later, and she was saying that she believed that the Taliban already had the list and were going through it and killing people on it. We were surprised that the MoD did not want to question her further. I think she was questioned about it in the end, but it took too long to speak to people like that.

Holly Bancroft: This is what I was saying earlier. We would send in examples of a phishing email or things that Person A had said, and they would not follow the steps to try to speak to that family or investigate that thing. Towards the end of the process, we did give them a bunch of names of people who had been killed in reprisal attacks. They cross-referenced that with the database, which was not that useful because a lot of the names they couldn't match, with spellings and stuff. From memory, we gave them 250-plus names and they identified 17 people who were on the database, and 14 of those had been killed after the data breach had happened. They came back with, basically, "We have struggled to match up the names with issues on the database."

Q48 **Emma Lewell:** I am just wondering how you would reconcile your view about lifting the super-injunction with continued reprisals. That must be quite—

Larisa Brown: For me, this is crucial, because obviously Ministers had a different argument. My belief was that it was the right of the Afghans to know that their name was on that list. If they knew that, they could move house, change their phone number or tell their family members to flee. They should know. That was one of our arguments. The MoD decided not to tell those people for two years, so for two years, at any point, the Taliban could have suddenly got the list. Also, the MoD admitted that there was a possibility during this time that the Taliban did have the list. They didn't know; it was all based on probabilities. Therefore, I thought they were gambling with death, because they knew that there was a probability—a chance—that the Taliban had that list and were killing people. That was my view throughout: the Afghans deserved to know.

Sam Greenhill: That was something that the judge was very good on. He had this idea all the way through that we don't know whether the Taliban have the list or not. If they do have the list, the super-injunction is making life much harder for Afghans who are on the list, because the Afghans themselves don't know about the data breach, but the Taliban have the list. In one of his rulings, he said that one thing that can be said for absolute certain is that they will be far better off learning about it from the British Government than from a knock on the door from the Taliban.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q49 **Emma Lewell:** At the point when the assessments that the super-injunction relied upon were made, and it was put in place, was it being said then that the Taliban could already have the list?

Sam Greenhill: All the way through the case, they didn't know. As Larisa says, it was all based on probabilities. They just didn't know whether they had the list or not.

Q50 **Emma Lewell:** I think you said that you have never seen these defence intelligence assessments, or that you were not privy to them. Do you know whether they were being refreshed regularly throughout these years? Do you know who did them? Do you know how many assessments were being done? What was the process?

Holly Bancroft: We put all these questions to the MoD and they didn't answer. I was interested in knowing: is it one person, is it lots of people, is it a department? Are they specialists or not specialists?

Emma Lewell: We want to know.

Holly Bancroft: Yes. They did get updated.

Larisa Brown: We know some detail, but I am not sure what we can say. Sorry.

Sam Greenhill: I am just having that thought. We were never told their processes. We were told some of their conclusions, but we would have to check whether or not those were redacted—I can't remember off hand.

Larisa Brown: We wanted some details published, and I do not know where we got to.

Sam Greenhill: Ultimately, it was a very opaque situation for us, and most of the evidence on that was heard in total private.

Emma Lewell: Okay. I will leave it there.

Q51 **Mr Bailey:** I would like to explore and answer the question of who should be held accountable for the data breach and for the Government's response to its discovery. In doing so, I would like to consider whether individuals are at fault, or whether we are dealing with good people responding, to the best of their ability, to a series of unfortunate circumstances. I will lean quite heavily on the evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, which I hope you have all seen. I questioned the permanent under-secretary on this, and he has issued a letter in response to some of it. I put it to you that managing the recovery of UK citizens overseas, or non-combatant evacuation operations—NEOs, as we know them—is principally the responsibility of the Foreign Office, as detailed in "Joint Doctrine Publication 3-51", the Government's own document on non-combatant evacuation. Let us perhaps start there: who is responsible for this breach?

Larisa Brown: Obviously there was the individual soldier who sent the list—twice in one month—by mistake. I think it is much bigger than that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

individual. That person, I have been told, was really trying to help the Afghans, and work out exactly who should come here, whether their applications were truthful and whether they had served with the British military. So I would not say that that person—

- Q52 **Mr Bailey:** Okay. We accept, and have seen, that individuals make mistakes, and their propensity to make mistakes is based on the position that the system puts them in. That individual was in the MoD?

Larisa Brown: Correct, and he has been moved from dealing with the Afghan cases to somewhere else in the MoD. He has not been sacked. When you look at why that breach happened, my understanding is that Ben Wallace, after a previous data breach, had asked the Department to make sure that if it was sending any data out of the MoD, that was checked. So who was supposed to be doing that process, and why didn't they?

- Q53 **Mr Bailey:** Okay. In his response, David Williams, the permanent under-secretary, recognises that the breach was made by an individual. As you have described, we are not going to lean on the individual, because they are a subject of the surroundings they are placed in. We know, or it has been inferred, that this is about a lack of appropriate systems to prevent or mitigate the error. All the discussion has been about this taking place within the Ministry of Defence. It is reasonable that this takes place within the Ministry of Defence and not the Foreign Office?

Sam Greenhill: They were the lead Department.

- Q54 **Mr Bailey:** Why?

Sam Greenhill: Because this all started with the ex gratia scheme and then ARAP. The *Daily Mail* has been running a campaign for 10 years, Betrayal of the Brave, to try to help people get sanctuary in the UK who had served alongside soldiers.

- Q55 **Mr Bailey:** Why is that the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence, though?

Sam Greenhill: Because it was in large part military interpreters that ARAP was set up to help rescue, so that scheme began. I think the MoD has been behind at every stage, playing catch-up—

- Q56 **Mr Bailey:** What I am asking you, and I will come on to some of the comments you have all made, is whether it is reasonable. The Foreign Office is responsible: "An individual's eligibility will be determined by the FDCO and the Border Force". Everyone is focusing on the Ministry of Defence. Does it seem reasonable that the MoD would have a case worker system to deal with—

Larisa Brown: Yes, because the whole point is that the reason this soldier leaked this list is that he was using the knowledge inside the military to determine whether these Afghans had served alongside officers or soldiers from the British military—alongside our troops. So you needed MoD input, and that was what he was doing at the time.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sam Greenhill: They needed that. But if you are saying, “Was it right that it was the MoD that was in charge of this database?”, not necessarily. I would say that the person responsible is whoever came up with the idea of, “Let’s put all the data in one Excel spreadsheet.” Why did they not have a much more secure system for managing the data? That is who should take the blame for this. In terms of whether that would be an MoD or a Foreign Office system, I do not know how Government works, but certainly that would be where I would look.

Q57 **Mr Bailey:** Brilliant. I agree with you entirely. That is why I put it to the PUS that the failure inside the MoD was to aggregate the data in the first instance, because that is a breach in and of itself—large collections of data, and mixing data of various kinds, is a breach. Regardless of whether an individual pressed “Send”, there was already a breach. But the point I am trying to explore is whether it was reasonable for the Ministry of Defence to act as a caseworker, that is the responsibility, according to the MoD’s own documents, of the Foreign Office. I am trying to understand whether the Foreign Office failed to do its job, or whether the MoD was too willing to accept something that it was not capable of doing.

Holly Bancroft: DARR was set up and exists, essentially, as a caseworking unit. Why that happened—why it was put to the MoD to do that—I do not know. But the whole unit exists to assess Afghan resettlement claims. Yes, you could question whether the MoD should be running it, but the reality we are at now is that there is this whole department under the MoD full of caseworkers who do all these resettlement assessments.

Larisa Brown: It has always been with the MoD. Since 2015, when I have been reporting on all the schemes, it has always rested with the MoD. As Sam said, it started off with Afghan interpreters and then grew and grew. It seems to make sense that you would continue to keep it within the MoD in some form.

Q58 **Mr Bailey:** Your premise—your understanding—is that this is an MoD responsibility rather than a Foreign Office one.

Larisa Brown: ARAP is.

Mr Bailey: The management of the eligibility of people to come to this country—the caseworking—is an MoD responsibility.

Holly Bancroft: It has become that, yes.

Sam Greenhill: Principally it is, because the unit had to find out whether people had indeed served alongside British troops, or whatever it is that they were claiming. Obviously, after they are given ARAP eligibility—if they are—other Departments, such as the Home Office, get involved to check on security systems and various other things, to see whether they can actually come here.

Q59 **Mr Bailey:** This is very important. The FCDO has systems to manage casework, because managing people is normal for it as an organisation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The point I am trying to make is that, in accepting this, the Ministry of Defence invited on to itself stuff that it was not capable of doing. I want to know whether it was Ministers or officials who put that individual into the position where they made the breach, because they were not given the appropriate equipment or training. In terms of the department that has now been built and put in place, was it the fault of Ministers or officials for drawing their people into this?

Larisa Brown: I think that is a question for the MoD.

Sam Greenhill: It is a brilliant question. We would love to have the answer.

Larisa Brown: I would also like to know whether anyone has been held to account. If you speak to the MoD, they will not tell you that anyone has been investigated. I would like to know the answer to that.

Q60 **Mr Bailey:** That is why I asked you in particular, Larisa. In your articles, you claim that Ministers were “gambling with death”, based on the probabilities—that was one of your quotes. My view, for what it is worth—you need to comment—is that the failure in risk assessment was the failure to realise that the 800 people the MoD thought they were going to deal with was circa 14,500, or in excess of that. As a result, someone was inviting that amount of pressure on to people who were not appropriately resourced or trained to do these things. That is where accountability stops, not with the individuals below them. Whether that was Ministers or the PUS is germane to this discussion. That is what I am trying to get after.

Larisa Brown: Yes. We are not going to give our opinion on who should be held accountable personally—I do not know the answer to that. But in one of the stories I wrote, I mentioned Gwyn Jenkins. I thought it was interesting that a Minister, at the time, in Cobra, asked Gwyn Jenkins whether he or Admiral Tony Radakin—CDS at the time—were going to resign over this. Clearly, Ministers felt that senior military chiefs should be taking responsibility. That is quite interesting to me.

Mr Bailey: It is, and also why someone would invite that responsibility. Do you see my point? Out of those individuals or the PUS—I have asked them, and I challenge you to go and look at the Public Accounts Committee discussion on this—someone has to be identifiable for inviting that on to their people, and we have to know the reasons why they would choose to do so.

Q61 **Ian Roome:** It must be very frustrating for you as journalists not to be able to report this. I want to focus on something you said right at the beginning, Larisa, about the general election period.

The Afghan Solidarity Coalition wrote at the time that, “The prolonged duration of the injunction raises serious concerns about political motivations rather than protection imperatives. The length of this injunction conveniently covered all eventualities surrounding the general election—loss or win—ensuring no direct implications for MPs or Ministers involved in the breach response.” What impact do you think that that had

on your reporting around the general election period and then the change of Government?

Larisa Brown: I think we would be having a very different conversation now if the Conservatives had won the election, because we would be looking back with hindsight at them blocking us from reporting this seismic story.

We talked about the fact that, in that period, we were really mindful of the fact there was an election. There was a lot of discussion about when the super-injunction might lift. There was discussion in court about the fact that it needed to be before people voted. Then, of course, the Government appealed that decision, so it was not necessary.

Sam Greenhill: Then fast-forward a year, and we were having the same conversation about trying to get it lifted before the summer recess. At one point, it was looking like it might conveniently be lifted about two days after the recess started, thus denying all of you the chance to debate it in Parliament.

Q62 **Ian Roome:** Holly, have you got anything to add about the election period?

Holly Bancroft: I do not think there was anything. We obviously felt the election was looming, but there was not any sense that there were particular political reasons as to why x, y, z decision was taken. I slightly feel that any side would have appealed the High Court decision. It is a natural legal next step, so we would always have ended up at the Court of Appeal, probably.

Sam Greenhill: The judge did not say, "This is political," but he made the point that we were not talking about a secret weapons programme. He said something like, "We are talking about a secret resettlement scheme for immigrants to the UK. These are the political consequences of this scheme." He made that point, and it was very clear to him—that was a year ago, in November, so it was after the general election. But he was obviously, as I keep saying, incredulous about certain points.

Q63 **Ian Roome:** The Conservatives were in government. The election was called. The result was announced that Labour were forming the new Government. What was going through your minds about this particular injunction at the time? Were you thinking that they should have acted quicker?

Sam Greenhill: Larisa, you spoke to somebody who wanted to get it lifted quickly.

Larisa Brown: Yes.

Sam Greenhill: I remember thinking, from what you were being told, that they might have a complete change of heart about it, but they did not. They then had that October HEA meeting, where they were talking about extending the scheme and about £7 billion of public money. It was very clearly about increasing the scope and the numbers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Larisa Brown: And it went on for a year instead.

Sam Greenhill: This in October: "The current policy response to the data incident will mean relocating c.25,000 Afghans" and will "extend the scheme for another 5 years at a cost of c.£7bn." There was clearly no particular change; if anything, it got deeper.

Q64 **Ian Roome:** Given that, what is your frustration around the MoD not giving you the responses you need now, after all this time?

Sam Greenhill: It just makes you wonder whether anything has changed since that moment, two and a bit years ago, when they so alarmingly easily went down the path of an unprecedented act of state secrecy.

Q65 **Mr Bailey:** On the back of that, can I just point out something from the Public Accounts Committee? You have all just said that billions of pounds have been managing this fallout—you just made reference to that. I put it to the PUS that a caseworker system costs £5,000, and I think we pay about £1,500. That is the risk decision that someone failed to make in 2021. Again, it is about responsibility. It is billions of pounds on defence. Should this have come from the defence budget, or should it have come from the Foreign Office budget?

Sam Greenhill: I do not think they had worked out where it was coming from. They knew it was going to cost up to £7 billion, but that was taking into account housing and various other costs when people were actually in Britain. They had not worked it out; there was no suggestion from any of the things we saw that the Treasury had signed this off, or that they knew which budget this was coming from. Of course, the Chancellors—both Conservative and Labour—were in these meetings. There were meetings of pretty much all the senior Ministers, apart from the Prime Minister, so the Chancellors would have been aware that a lot of money was needed, but we do not know where—

Q66 **Mr Bailey:** But the Chancellor would not have been aware, at that moment, that someone who had an organisation that was not capable of handling this information had made a decision that was a £7 billion gamble on a failure to invest £5,000.

Sam Greenhill: That is a very striking way of putting it.

Q67 **Ian Roome:** Have you ever been told publicly that the MoD do not now have personnel keeping things on spreadsheets, to ensure that this does not happen again?

Larisa Brown: You have been told that?

Ian Roome: No, I am asking whether you have been told that they are not using this system of Excel spreadsheets now, so that this same issue could not happen again.

Larisa Brown: They changed the system at some point, but I do not know the detail of that. I would hope they are not doing that.

Q68 **Ian Roome:** I hope they have changed it as well, but I am wondering if

anything has gone out there publicly about this.

Sam Greenhill: Probably on Google Docs.

Larisa Brown: I think there is something about them changing the system, but I cannot remember the detail.

Q69 **Chair:** You referred in your evidence to a “confusing disconnect”, and you said that the Government presented a very different narrative in court about the number of Afghans to be relocated to the one that it presents today. For example, the narrative in court was that the costs could be up to £7 billion, and the number of people we are dealing with could range from 25,000 to 42,000, whereas the narrative now seems to be that the costs are up to about £850 million, and around 6,900 people are involved. Do you believe that there is an agenda behind this change in narrative?

Sam Greenhill: I do not know whether there is an agenda, but it was very stark that, when the Government were arguing with the judge about keeping the super-injunction, there was one set of numbers, for both the cost and the people coming, that were very high—they were large numbers. However, when the Government was explaining to the public what had happened, after the super-injunction was lifted, these numbers suddenly shrunk to very small numbers. I do not think we ever say that there was an agenda or that the numbers were wrong; it is just that, as far as we are concerned, they found it very difficult to explain it to us.

Holly Bancroft: I also think it would be quite hard for the MoD to tell. I do not think they necessarily started to record, “This person is here under ARAP, but their risk has been reviewed as a result of this data breach.” Obviously, you then have the ARR scheme, which is more comprehensive, and I think they do have numbers for that. Especially with the money, a lot of it got merged in the response, so I think it might be a bit difficult for them to figure out exactly what numbers came when, which scheme they were under and what that then cost.

Q70 **Chair:** So it is more a case of confusion and chaos, rather than some ulterior motive or agenda.

Larisa Brown: At the beginning, they were only going to let in about 150 of the Afghans, and they then decided who they believed would be at higher risk. It is a bit unclear how they then went from 40,000 to 20,000.

Sam Greenhill: Then 6,900.

Larisa Brown: Yes, it was 6,900 at one point. I would be really interested to know how they decided who gets to come and who does not. At one point they were saying that 40,000 people were at high risk.

Q71 **Chair:** The Afghan Solidarity Coalition have written that they believe there are “political motivations” behind this, rather than the “protection imperatives” that should have been at the forefront of how the Afghans were dealt with. What are your views on that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Larisa Brown: It is really hard to know what the motivations are, but I genuinely think that John Healey, Grant Shapps and Ben Wallace cared about the Afghans and what happened to them.

Holly Bancroft: That did not necessarily translate into speed of action, however, especially at the beginning. I definitely feel that the schemes were expanded as a result of the legal process—we forced the MoD's hand because of the legal process. If they were left to their own devices, I do not think this would necessarily have happened. It definitely felt like they were coming up with answers because of the legal process.

Sam Greenhill: Anecdotally, you talk to Afghans and they cannot understand why someone else has been prioritised over them. There seems to be a bit of a mismatch there. The MoD has always been very slow to get these schemes up and running. It took a lot of campaigning to get ARAP up and running. Operation Pitting was a bit of a disaster from the point of view of ARAP people, because most of the 15,000 people were not eligible for ARAP. It was just someone doing a favour for somebody—it was all very last minute and chaotic. People came who were not necessarily the ones you would have chosen if you had sat down and had a proper look at it in the first place. That characterises the whole system: it has been quite hit and miss.

Q72 **Mr Bailey:** Can you think of another non-combatant evacuation that was run by people who do not do it as their job?

Larisa Brown: I don't know.

Mr Bailey: It absolutely bemuses me that no one has pointed out that if there was an NEO anywhere else, we would not be talking about the Ministry of Defence. I get the eligibility and that some of the people had Ministry of Defence backgrounds, but you just mentioned the fact that this arrives at Pitting—this is a huge failure of foreign policy. It is the Foreign Office's job to manage and understand where UK EPs are in a country, such that when an evacuation is called, they know the priority of those people.

Larisa Brown: I am pretty sure that at the time of Pitting the Foreign Office—

Mr Bailey: They were on holiday.

Larisa Brown: I think they had people in the country who were pulled out, so the MoD then sent people to Afghanistan. The troops who served during Operation Pitting were obviously extremely brave and worked really hard, but there was no concrete policy there. They were allowing people into the airport who were not on the list and then having to tell them to get back out. They were allowing people in who should not have been there and not allowing others in. It was very chaotic, as we all know.

Q73 **Fred Thomas:** Holly, I want to go back to something you alluded to earlier in the session. It comes from the discussion about the unknown numbers, from the MoD point of view, of Afghans being resettled. You said



HOUSE OF COMMONS

it is becoming much harder to resettle people from Afghanistan here. You recommended that we look into that and ask why. What lines of inquiry do you suggest we take? What are some of the potential reasons?

Holly Bancroft: I would like to know, for example, how many people have been evacuated from Pakistan to the UK since the super-injunction was lifted, and how many people have been moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

I recently reported on a case of a family who were deported from a Pakistan hotel run by the UK back to Afghanistan. The picture in Pakistan is essentially that the Pakistan Government are not happy about this happening and continuing to happen. We heard in the court case that they had given until the end of 2025 as a hard deadline by which to get this scheme closed. Obviously, they are not keen on people without visas, and often the visas run out because people are waiting in these hotels for Home Office checks that take a long time. I recently reported on a family that was then deported back to Afghanistan.

I have not heard of many people going through the process, and that is quite worrying to me. It might be that I am not getting access to the right pieces of information and not speaking to the right people. You could just ask, "Do you have a figure?" They might say that for operational reasons they cannot disclose it, but in private they could maybe tell you how many have been moved through the process. There are still people who are eligible for ARAP and ARR who are waiting, and they have not been evacuated.

Q74 **Fred Thomas:** Larisa, are you able to suggest any reasons we might look into as to why it is becoming, seemingly from the reporting, harder and there is less of a willingness on the part of the UK Government to resettle certain Afghans in the UK?

Larisa Brown: I was speaking to one of my sources in the MoD last week, and they said that the numbers had barely changed since the super-injunction had been lifted, in terms of bringing people here. That suggests that they have hardly brought anyone at all. Immediately after the super-injunction lifted, at least one flight came here, but since then there has possibly been no flights—we are unclear. We want to know how many flights have come here since, and how many people. They should be able to tell you those figures. They have told me those figures before, so we should have an updated figure.

Q75 **Fred Thomas:** You have reported on the MoD saying that it was reviewing some cases of rejected applications from certain Afghans.

Larisa Brown: Yes. It is quite complex, but they have told some of the Afghans they have allowed as far as Pakistan that they can come to Britain and are eligible, subject to Home Office checks. They then go to Pakistan and can wait up to two years in the hotels—this has happened in at least one case—only to be told that they have not passed those Home Office checks and will be deported back to Afghanistan. That has actually happened.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q76 Fred Thomas: Do you put that down to bureaucratic incompetence, or do you think that is deliberate?

Larisa Brown: I think that is bureaucratic incompetence. It is shameful, really, that you could allow someone to live in a hotel for two years, thinking they are going to come to a new life in Britain, and then deport them back to Afghanistan.

Q77 Fred Thomas: It is certainly shameful. I am just wondering whether it is incompetent or deliberate. Sam, you look like you would like to comment.

Sam Greenhill: I do not know the answer, but I would love to. It is very convenient for the Government, isn't it? They have said that the numbers are much lower now than they were telling the court. The key questions are: why are they lower and how have you achieved that? Obviously, we have the situation where huge numbers who have been waiting in Pakistan, believing that they were coming, are now being sent back to Afghanistan. Apparently, that is because of something, but they will not say what. Home Office checks would be one answer, but is it really true that all of those thousands of people have suddenly all failed Home Office checks?

Larisa Brown: There are also people who are still in Afghanistan who have been told that they can come to Britain, but they are waiting in Afghanistan.

Q78 Fred Thomas: Larisa, when you reported on this, you specified that some of the cases that were being reviewed, which had been rejected, were from Afghan special forces—is that right?

Larisa Brown: Yes. I think there are about six of them. One of them was an interpreter. A lot of the cases are about the special forces—the Triples—but I cannot remember.

Holly Bancroft: It gets confusing, but separately to all this there is the Triples review, which was originally looking at 2,000 applications of Afghan links to specialist units and reviewing rejections due to failures in the way their cases were specifically handled. That is still ongoing, and they added a whole bunch of new cases to that a few months back. That is a separate arm to the rest of the resettlement schemes.

Fred Thomas: From some perspectives, it is not so easy to separate them, because ultimately we are talking about whether we can resettle people from one country. But I take your point.

Holly Bancroft: And a lot of them are data-affected people, so that also comes into it.

Fred Thomas: There is an overlap.

Holly Bancroft: Yes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Larisa Brown: And the MoD will say, “We’re bringing these people as a result of the Triples review,” but it will be crucial to know how many people were on the dataset and might not have come otherwise.

Fred Thomas: Which we do not know.

Larisa Brown: We don’t know yet.

Chair: Let us delve further into the resettlement aspects with Ian Roome.

Q79 **Ian Roome:** Given your connections, knowledge and experience, particularly your connections in Afghanistan, were the Government justified in their decision to close the resettlement schemes to new applications in July?

Sam Greenhill: No. We expected them to close at some point, but there are plenty of people who were not aware that they were about to close and who needed to reapply for whatever reason. For example, their original application may have been lost, or they may have had their homes raided by the Taliban. You have one email address and one phone number, and if your home is raided, the advice of the British Government is to change your number and destroy your documents to keep yourself safe. But as a result, you then need to reapply, and there are a lot of people who would have reapplied and could have reapplied, but now cannot. The schemes were obviously going to end at some point—we knew when we campaigned to set them up that they would not last forever—but to do it now seems slightly unfair.

Larisa Brown: There is also the fact that it happened on that day. Basically, we were told in the morning that it would close at 3 o’clock, I think. Surely you should give people more notice.

Sam Greenhill: I asked the MoD and they did not reply until after 3 o’clock.

Larisa Brown: And they did not update the website until after 3 o’clock. I think it still said that you could apply even when you could not. It could have been handled a lot better.

Q80 **Alex Baker:** Looking at the whole course of the resettlement programme across the whole piece, what did each Government get right and what should they have done differently?

Larisa Brown: You mean over the decade?

Alex Baker: Exactly, yes.

Larisa Brown: I have been reporting on all the schemes since 2015—maybe even since 2014. I was at the *Daily Mail* previously and I ran its “Betrayal of the Brave” campaign with David Williams. Initially, Afghans could come only if they had served for a period of 12 months in Helmand province and then had been made redundant. Those were very narrowly defined criteria, and we argued that that should be widened. They also had a separate scheme where you could come if you had been intimidated.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

But a lot of the Afghans had evidence of intimidation but were still being rejected.

From the beginning it was a very ungenerous policy. We managed to get the policy changed several times over the years, first with Gavin Williamson, who changed it marginally, and then I sat down with Ben Wallace and Priti Patel, and they changed it in a better way, to bring in more Afghans.

Overall, throughout all the years it has been really, really difficult. I feel like it has been cruel at times, when Afghans have been able to come but then not bring their wives and children further down the line, and they have been separated from them. Some Afghans have been told that they could come here and then they have been rejected at the last minute.

One of the cases that I found really quite harrowing was that of an Afghan who had bought dresses for his little girls, and they were so excited to get on a flight to Britain—he had even been given the flight details—and then he was told at the last minute that Home Office checks meant that he could not come any more. Then America accepted him. There have been stories like that—it has all been quite chaotic over the years.

Everything happened too late. They started asking more Afghans to come, but then Op Pitting happened and people were just abandoned. People were allowed into the airport and then told, “Actually, you’re not on the list, so you’ve got to go out on to the streets,” where they could be killed by the Taliban. We reported that two people who were allowed into the airport in Kabul were later killed, after being thrown out by the British. It has been ungenerous and cruel at times over the last decade.

Q81 Alex Baker: It is really inspiring to hear you talk about the work you have done sticking up for people who do not have a voice. You should be really proud of that work.

The LGA is clear—we have already talked about this—that the lack of co-ordination between Government Departments is clearly a huge issue. Obviously, there is a debate as to which Departments should have been part of this. Clearly, the lack of co-ordination was a huge issue. What do Governments need to learn from this when it comes to co-ordination between Departments?

Larisa Brown: I just said about meeting Ben Wallace and Priti Patel. Priti Patel was Home Secretary at the time and Wallace was Defence Secretary. That was a good example of where they were working together to try to change the policy. You needed Priti because it was about bringing in wives and family members, and making that process more streamlined. Then you needed Ben Wallace because he was responsible for bringing in all the interpreters and the people who had served the British military.

In recent years, they do need to work better together. You need the Foreign Office working with MoD officials to make sure that the policy is all joined up. One of the problems is that a lot of the Afghans do not really know which scheme to apply for, so they will apply for all the schemes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Then you will have multiple cases of individuals. It is really hard to know who should come under what scheme, and they don't even know. The whole system needs more clarity.

- Q82 **Alex Baker:** To come back to the plight of Afghans, presumably your work continues. We are approaching the cliff edge on the transitional accommodation for Afghans that have come, in December this year. Have you any thoughts on how the Government are approaching the risk around that cut-off? Homelessness is the big risk in all of this.

Larisa Brown: Do you know what? I don't actually know any details about how they are going to manage that situation. I know there are still Afghans in military bases. I know there are still Afghans in accommodation, in Inverness actually. But I don't know the specifics on what they are planning to do to manage all of that.

Alex Baker: That is something we should probably ask about.

Larisa Brown: Yes. I would be really interested to know.

- Q83 **Lincoln Jopp:** Part of the reason we are looking after the Afghans is that this will not be our last rodeo and we want to be able to go down range and rely on consent, to a certain extent, to be able to operate among the people. Among your contacts both still in Afghanistan and Pakistan and in the military bases back in the UK, have people expressed to you a regret for having worked for the Brits, or are they positive about the experience? Would they do it again?

Larisa Brown: I think a lot of them would do it again. I spoke to a former interpreter who I based my book on called Jamal Barak. I asked him about what Afghans were facing in the UK. He said that, basically, he does not feel safe going to the local mosque in his traditional clothes, and that his family suffered significantly for this country, but he also wanted to make the point that they were happy to fight and even die for this country. I think a lot of the Afghans, despite some of their experiences, are really proud of serving with the British military.

However, I do think there is a concern about what the policy is, if you want to employ these people in future. I would have to check but I know that I have written previously that, since the chaos surrounding the Afghan schemes, they then decided to employ interpreters via third parties when they had a deployment somewhere else. What is their policy now when they employ interpreters abroad? It would be really interesting to see if that is a whole policy—to employ them via third parties so that they don't have responsibility for them further down the line.

- Q84 **Chair:** It has become abundantly clear that various Government Departments were responsible for different aspects of the resettlement and other issues pertaining to this. In your view, who should we have in front of us in terms of former and current Ministers?

Larisa Brown: Ben Wallace, Grant Shapps, James Heappey.

Sam Greenhill: The current one—Luke Pollard.

Larisa Brown: Yes, all the current ones. John Healey.

Q85 **Chair:** Anybody outside of the Ministry of Defence?

Holly Bancroft: The people in the HEA meetings, if you can get them.

Larisa Brown: Natalie Moore might be a good one. We heard from her quite a lot in the court proceedings. She was the one who said in a statement about providing cover, so she would be quite a good one to speak to.

Sam Greenhill: Anyone from the Treasury who could explain where they thought the money was coming from.

Q86 **Chair:** Given the housing allocations, do you think there was anybody involved in the MHCLG?

Sam Greenhill: Not in the ministerial meetings, I don't think.

Holly Bancroft: I think they were in them. We would have to check the membership of the HEA, but I think there was someone from MHCLG.

Chair: It is good to get your opinion on that.

Q87 **Ian Roome:** Any former Prime Ministers?

Sam Greenhill: Yes, all of them. Why not?

Larisa Brown: They knew about it.

Sam Greenhill: Of course.

Q88 **Fred Thomas:** I want to come back for a second to the wider question we were discussing a minute ago about resettlement of Afghans, and Afghans from particular units. As we ascertained earlier, there is an overlap with this data breach. Holly, you reported in July this year about the inquiry that two judges reported on into some of the MoD casework, and the processes carried out on whether to give refuge in particular to special forces Afghans.

You wrote, including quotes from the judges—I will read it out because it is quite powerful—"Caseworkers, along with the liaison officer from UK special forces who was assisting them, 'were not given access to relevant records relating to payments,' and so didn't know that these Afghan fighters had received direct pay from the British." You then wrote, again quoting the judges: "MoD officials were 'overly reliant' on UKSF personnel for input and 'placed too much weight on personal knowledge and judgment'." You continued: "One UK special forces liaison officer, who was tasked with investigating applicants' links to the special forces, would refuse applications if the relevant UKSF unit failed to respond to his enquiries, the judgment found."

I would like your opinion, because you have clearly looked into this closely and reported on it. Is it your sense that this was just incompetence, or were these special forces liaison officers, as suggested by the BBC, doing this on purpose?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Holly Bancroft: From that court case, there was nothing submitted that showed malicious intent. Essentially, a guy in the role of liaison officer just refused all those applications. I think that goes down to whether the MoD is right to do this casework, and who has the right expertise for it. Essentially, you have caseworkers who do not have specific knowledge of this unit and what its role was and how they were paid or not paid. Then they rely heavily on an individual or a number of individuals who have that knowledge or can access that sort of information.

There is always back and forth about whether you can say there was a blanket refusal, but a lot of these Triples were being refused because no one assessing their applications really knew their service. I remember that at the time we were saying, "You paid these guys." They would say, "No, we didn't." Then later pay records emerged. A lot of knowledge within the MoD was not accessible to some branches. They then made wrong decisions, which made them overly reliant on people with UKSF links.

In terms of figuring out whether that can be linked to the ongoing Afghan inquiry, the BBC probably has the best sources on whether that is the case. That did not emerge in this court case, but that does not necessarily mean it is not the case. Maybe that is one to ask the BBC.

Q89 **Fred Thomas:** Do either of you want to comment on that?

Larisa Brown: No, I don't know the details well enough.

Sam Greenhill: I didn't cover it.

Q90 **Mr Bailey:** Because it has been raised a number of times, I would like us to recognise the extraordinary efforts of the servicemen and women who delivered Operation Pitting. They did so under exceptional duress as a result of failures that they had to overcome to make the decisions that you spoke about on the gate.

I also want to try this once more: what was the Foreign Office's role in applying that duress to the organisations, which resulted in this failing? There has just been no comment, and among the people who you would like to see in front of us, you have not mentioned Dominic Raab, who happened to be on leave when Op Pitting occurred.

Larisa Brown: I don't have anything further to add. I just cannot remember the specifics of what the Foreign Office was doing at the time. I just remember that some of them left Kabul and the MoD had to send people in at the last minute.

Holly Bancroft: There was an inquiry into the Op Pitting response. I remember that there was a whistleblower within the Department who gave a lot of evidence on the chaotic nature of the FCDO response in particular. I would have to go back and read that review, but I do not know anything about whether that left the MoD having to pick up the pieces.

Mr Bailey: The decision to evacuate was a Foreign Office decision.

Chair: I am extremely grateful to Ms Bancroft, Ms Brown and Mr Greenhill



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for giving evidence. This was the first hearing in the Defence Committee's inquiry into the Afghan data breach and resettlement schemes. There is no doubt that, over the next few months, we will be delving further into this, but I am extremely grateful for your written contributions as well as for today's oral evidence. As I intimated at the outset, on behalf of the Committee, I am very grateful to journalists for their grit, determination and perseverance in their pursuit to expose this entire chapter. Everybody was kept in the dark, including many of us parliamentarians, over those couple of years.