

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Afghanistan: safe routes and resettlement](#), HC 706

Tuesday 14 September 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 September 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Ms Diane Abbott; Ruth Edwards; Simon Fell; Adam Holloway; Tim Loughton; Stuart C McDonald.

Questions 1 - 53

Witnesses

I: Kate Clark, Journalist, Afghanistan Analysts Network; Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor, Representative to the UK, UNHCR; and Laure-Hélène Piron, Director, The Policy Practice.

II: Alex Fraser, UK Director of Refugee Support and Restoring Family Links, British Red Cross; Councillor James Jamieson, Chair, Local Government Association; and Enver Solomon, Chief Executive, Refugee Council.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kate Clark, Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor and Laure-Hélène Piron.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this Home Affairs Select Committee oral evidence session looking at the situation for Afghanistan, for refugees and for those for whom the UK owes a duty of care in Afghanistan. We are very grateful to our witnesses this morning for coming to give evidence to us. We have Laure-Hélène Piron, director at Policy Practice, Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor, from the UNHCR, and Kate Clark from the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

Can I begin by asking each of you in turn to say something very briefly about the work you or your organisation is doing at the moment on Afghanistan, your assessment of the current situation for those who are still in Afghanistan and who may be at risk. Rossella, can I start with you?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: Thank you very much. What the UNHCR does in Afghanistan is what it has been doing for quite a while. The attention of the world is focused on Afghanistan now, because of the fall of the Government and the dramatic scenes that we have seen at Kabul Airport. The reality is that Afghanistan already had close to 3 million internally displaced people, and this year we have added another close-to 600,000.

UNHCR in Afghanistan is particularly involved in trying to provide humanitarian assistance to persons who are displaced internally, and in some cases also to some who are not displaced but have found themselves without the means of survival. This speaks to the fact that one of the great challenges for the Afghans generally is the extreme fragility of the economy, which is now further breaking down because, of course, Afghanistan was a country on life support with transfers from abroad. For us, this will remain the primary concern and the primary area of intervention. We are active in almost all districts. I am glad to say that we are able to work, with challenges, but we are able to stay and to deliver. That is what we will be trying to continue to do as long as it is possible.

Outside, we have not yet seen large outflows. While there has been an uptick in the number of people leaving, we have not yet seen any dramatic outflows. We are advocating for borders to remain open in the region but also beyond. Indeed, one of my requests to you will be to continue to consider keeping your borders open because we are on a programme of relocation and resettlement. The resettlement programme and its details were announced last night. Welcome as they are, they will never cover the full extent of the need so that will be my request to you, particularly in the light of the Bill that is about to be considered in Parliament.

Kate Clark: I am the co-director of an NGO based in Kabul, the Afghanistan Analysts Network. We have a publicly available website where we publish research about Afghanistan. It is somewhere between journalism and academia. It is accessible but very well sourced and is rigorous, neutral and fact based. We publish on the war, on the economy,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

on culture, and we get funding from Governments like your own. That is how we work.

Previously, I was the BBC correspondent in Afghanistan—just before 9/11 and just after—so I have had quite a long history in the country. I was on one of the evacuation flights, so I have experienced the calm, organised, kind work that was done for people on the ground in Kabul, for which I was very grateful.

Q2 Chair: Your assessment of the situation now?

Kate Clark: It is a catastrophe for Afghanistan, the way that the power has changed hands. You do have people for whom the Taliban winning means an end to the war; it means an end to air strikes, fighting and night raids. For them, this is in some sense a good thing that has happened. In other parts of Afghanistan, the Taliban are an occupying army. They do not match the culture of the people that they are working with, who they are ruling. They have chosen to have a very, very narrow-based government. It is all Taliban. It is all male.

Of the 33 positions announced last week, 30 come from one ethnic group in a very diverse country. They are mainly from the south and almost all Mullahs. There has been no attempt at all to match men to ministries. If you have an Islamic education, if you fought with the Taliban, this is the division of spoils. The same thing as happened in 2001 but this is even more extreme.

Afghanistan is a country that has relied on foreign income: aid—development aid and humanitarian aid—security sector support and the money that our armies have spent there. That money has pretty well all gone at the stroke of a pen. There is a huge trade imbalance. Afghanistan imports six times more than it exports; it imports wheat, rice, staples, medicine, fuel, electricity. There is no way that the Taliban can run the Government in a business-as-usual way. They do not have the expertise. They have ruptured the relationship between Afghanistan and the donors and they have also shown no desire to compromise in a way that would help that relationship be fostered.

Q3 Chair: What do you see as the impact of that on people's safety, the number of people who might be at risk, but particularly the number of people who might be at risk and to whom the UK might owe a duty of care?

Kate Clark: First, economically; half of Afghans live in poverty. There are huge numbers of malnourished children. That is going to get worse, particularly in the cities where you have lots of people who were on salaries, who will not get any money now and who do not have land to grow food. There was already a drought. There is already Covid. Expect an impending humanitarian catastrophe this year. I am not exaggerating.

Then there are the people who will be directly targeted by the Taliban. At the moment that seems to be high-profile government officials, people working in intelligence, judges, people who were putting Taliban in prison,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

people who worked with British forces or at the embassy. People from particular ethnic groups are being disappeared. We had reports of that in Kabul. People from the Panjshir and the Shomali—those are the areas where there is still resistance to the Taliban.

You will get people who are just on lists for personal revenge by opportunistic people who are piggybacking on this change of regime, “My father stole land from your father 30 years ago. You are now in charge. You want to get your revenge on me”; that sort of thing. Or, “Stuart, I think you’ve been working with the foreigners. I think you’ve got money at home that I would quite like to see and I am your neighbour and I will inform on you”. The sorts of things that we see in every place in the world where there is a change of regime of this nature.

Then you get the sort of authoritarian rule of a very narrowly based Government that will rub up against people who do not want that sort of rule. It is not all Afghans, but imagine the Taliban. They have been living in places where they do not see women’s faces uncovered unless it is their mum’s or their sister’s or their wife’s and suddenly they are confronted with uncovered women complaining about their rights. You will see problems with freedom of the press, freedom of the academics, women wanting to work and wanting their girls to go to school.

Not everyone who is at risk got out so there are people lingering in Kabul who are very frightened at the moment but who do need to get out.

Q4 **Chair:** Do you have an assessment of how many?

Kate Clark: It is difficult to know. Some of the ex-army people have been talking—and I am sure they have been talking to you—about the interpreters they have worked with, or particular members of the Afghan security forces who they think are at risk. There are lots of people who I think can probably get out on commercial flights at some point and who are not in danger, so dependents of British passport holders. There is a mass of people who are not at risk but who probably do want and need to come here. There are certain people who are at risk who are in hiding, moving every night, trying to survive while they try to find a way to get out of the country.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you. Laure-Hélène, can I ask you about the work you have been doing and for your assessment of the situation, particularly for those at risk?

Laure-Hélène Piron: Thank you. I am here representing citizens and volunteers who have been helping our former colleagues leave Afghanistan. I used to work for the British Government, for the Department for International Development. In 2010 and 2011, I was a team leader and I hired Afghans to work with me in the embassy. Since mid-August, we have been worried for our former colleagues and we have created a loose network—an international network now—of former employees of the British



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government, the American Government and others, trying to pass on information to our former colleagues.

First, I can give you some examples of the types of Afghans who worked with the British Government, those who have been helped. There has been an amazing effort from my former colleagues to get people out, but too many are still left in Kabul. If you want, I can share with you some examples.

Chair: Thank you. That would be very helpful.

Laure-Hélène Piron: There was the ARAP scheme, which was meant to be for government employees. Some got out. Some got out as refugees before ARAP. When I contacted my former colleagues, one of them, who worked for DfID for eight years, had not been included on the ARAP list so I provided a reference on that day, 15 August, and I never got a confirmation e-mail that she had been accepted or that my reference was accepted.

Then you have a category we are deeply worried about, people who were the implementers of UK programmes. The UK spent around £3.5 billion since 2001 on aid in Afghanistan. You can imagine the number of people we reached. To reach them, we had to work through private sector companies, such as ASI—or, in those days, Coffey—to work with NGOs, to work with the British Council. ARAP is very clear that it is helping former government staff but it also has to much more clearly include the implementers of our programmes.

I have received regular detailed information from some of those involved in the programmes and I will give you some numbers. From an organisation that had over 50 projects over 16 years, only 20 former staff members have received clearance out of 160 who applied.

A final two other categories I want to mention, one is the relatives of those who worked for the Afghan—

Chair: Laure-Hélène, could you say those figures again. The volume is quite low so we are straining to hear you.

Laure-Hélène Piron: One organisation, which had implemented 50 projects for the Government over 16 years applied for 160 staff. Only 20 former staff received clearance from ARAP.

I am also worried about colleagues who were not evacuated and who worked for the British Embassy. The embassy took too long to confirm that they were allowed to leave. For example, a single unmarried woman had been accepted on the ARAP scheme for one month before 15 August. She then had to have her biometrics checked but, because of the time it took for the systems to confirm she was eligible, she was not able to make it to inside the airport and be evacuated. She is still worried for her life and her family's lives.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Another category I want to mention are the relatives of those who worked directly for the British Government or who worked for implementers. Some of them are very vulnerable, such as the widowed father who has no one to look after him anymore. These people are also finding it extremely hard to be accepted under the ARAP scheme.

The final category—and again their status is not very clear, and the new scheme announced yesterday is not going to be able to cover them—are those Afghan officials in government and civil society who worked closely with the UK over the 20-year period. They are at risk and they could not be processed. They could only be processed if they had high level contacts who could lobby at the highest possible level, directly with Ministers or directly with influential MPs. Those officials are not clearly covered by the new scheme that was announced yesterday.

You were also asking about the situation on the ground right now. Yesterday, I asked for an update from my colleagues about what was happening. You have things like phishing e-mails being sent by the Taliban so that they can predict data on who is around. There are lists of people who worked for the British and other foreign Governments. Businesses belonging to relatives of those worked for the British Government have been closed.

I know of a brother who was arrested and is missing. I know of two people who were shot and are in hospital and I will tell you a very tragic story I heard yesterday. This is about the mother of someone who worked for one of those implementers of a British programme. The Taliban came to her saying, "You need to tell us where your son is" and she refused and they had an argument. When she was almost about to hit the Taliban for insisting too much, asking where her son was, she was shot dead, and this person who is hiding wrote to us and said, "Please save our lives. I lost my mother yesterday but I will lose my kids tomorrow".

These people are in hiding, in Kabul, and they do not understand the UK system. They do not know which schemes they should be applying for. They are in hiding. They are having difficulty with internet access. Some of them do not speak good English. They rely on volunteers like me to explain the different systems to them and to lodge applications but, as you know, we have not received responses to the applications. We know about the thousands of phone calls and e-mails that were sent.

At the end, it is individuals like those former colleagues and partners who are waiting to hear whether they will get the right papers, so that right now they can try to make it to the border and they will be allowed to cross into a neighbouring country. You know that Afghanistan is landlocked, so people have to go to third countries, but if they do not have the right paperwork, they may be returned to the hands of the Taliban who they are trying to hide from. This is where the UK—I saw in the debate in Parliament yesterday—was not sufficient, was not clear enough. People who have already applied to the ARAP scheme or the special cases e-mail, should



HOUSE OF COMMONS

automatically be referred to the new scheme. They should not be having to reapply. The former colleagues I speak with, who are eligible for ARAP, have been told recently to reapply. We do not understand what is happening within the system.

We also heard on several occasions yesterday the Minister for Safeguarding and Afghan Resettlement refer problems back to the Ministry of Defence. Again, it should not be such a complicated system. There should be one point of contact, applications should be reviewed and passed on to the responsible organisation.

I know my former colleagues, UK officials, and those in non-government organisations, are doing the utmost they can but it is at a political level that there is a blockage. We need to have many more staff involved in the resettlement programme. I think, in addition to the Government, the UK public has to understand the scale of the challenge. This is not just another crisis happening round the world.

This is a crisis of our own making, by the UK as a close ally of the USA. We were in Afghanistan for 20 years. We had a huge development programme, many activities in the Helmand provincial reconstruction team, where we worked with local governors, local populations, trying to help them rebuild their lives, fight drug production by the Taliban. We have abandoned them. We did not have in place the right system to evacuate the right individuals, so the scale of the challenge is enormous. Five thousand to be accepted this year under the new scheme announced yesterday is good but it is not enough. That should be a minimum. It should be 5,000 individuals, but not including their families, for example.

Q6 Chair: Can I follow up to clarify the things that you have said? You have cases of people who clearly were locally employed, directly employed, but for whatever reason were not on the list, who are now accepted as being part of the ARAP scheme but who were not able to get out. That is one group of people for whom there are still huge difficulties.

The second group, you said, were the implementers, or working through contractors. Their lives are now at risk and you hear from terrible stories that their families are now at risk as well. In those cases, have you had any reply from the ARAP scheme? Have they been told that they are not eligible for ARAP or have they just had no reply at all from ARAP?

Laure-Hélène Piron: It is a very mixed picture. Sometimes we just get no response whatsoever. Sometimes people are told they are accepted on the exceptional basis. Sometimes they are told they have to reapply. There are big issues around the clarity of the communications and clarity about the reasons for people being rejected from the scheme.

I would also like to correct one point about current British employees. Some were accepted on ARAP and could not be evacuated. Others have still not heard. The colleague that I have been helping is outside of Afghanistan by pure luck. She still has not heard—a month after we made



HOUSE OF COMMONS

application—whether she is going to be accepted or not. Her visa is running out. She has to go to the UK very quickly with her family. She has not heard. So, even British employees of the British Government are not always accepted on the scheme. They are told they are not eligible when we know, in this case, that she was.

Then you have this other category of the implementers, which again is a very mixed picture.

Q7 Chair: Do you have a sense of the scale? Do you have even an estimate based on your work? I think the Government referred to there being 300 or so people as part of the ARAP scheme who were still in Afghanistan. Does that sound like the right figure to you? Or do you think the figure is very different from that?

Laure-Hélène Piron: I think it is going to be in the hundreds, potentially in the thousands. The issue is that we do not know how many people applied to the Government schemes. They are not answering our questions. They have not even logged all the applications. Therefore, it could be hundreds, it could be thousands, who still have a right to come to the UK. Until we know exactly who has applied and to what scheme, we will not get the actual numbers. This is why we need the Government to tell us who has applied in the different categories, but it is going to be more than 300 for sure.

Chair: Thank you.

Q8 Ruth Edwards: Kate, Laure-Hélène mentioned some tragic examples of reprisals that she knew about. Have you seen this as a wider trend, that either Afghans who have worked for a national government, such as the British Government, or an international organisation, have been subjected to reprisals?

Kate Clark: I wanted to ask Laure-Hélène what she meant by “implementers”.

Laure-Hélène Piron: This is a bit of a technical question. The aid programmes, the international development programmes, where we support health or education for Afghans, or elections, decentralisation of the Afghan Government, are not delivered by people like me who worked in the embassy and managed the funds. We have to issue contracts to other companies who will have staff on the ground who can work in ministries, can go to schools to provide materials. In the aid world, these are what we call implementers, contractors. They are the companies that do the work. They hire Afghans, highly educated Afghans, who speak English, who have good relationships, who are publicly known and who will be associated with the UK effort and with the British Government.

Kate Clark: We are talking about tens of thousands of people—

Laure-Hélène Piron: Potentially, but not all of them will be at high risk. Those with the highest risk will be those who worked, for example, in the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

counter-narcotics programme. You know the UK was involved in Helmand and counter-narcotics was a priority, so these individuals would be at high risk.

Kate Clark: Sorry. I just needed to clear that up, to see what we are talking about.

Laure-Hélène Piron: Absolutely.

Kate Clark: It is quite a murky picture at the moment. One of the problems was the US/SIV programme, the special immigrant visa, which meant that anyone who worked for the US Embassy, or a contractor—I think contractors as well; certain organisations, anyway—could get a visa to the US after two years. I think what happened in the last few weeks, that cascaded, that idea that if you worked for a foreign organisation or a foreign Government, you were necessarily at risk.

The fact that there were planes evacuating people meant that people like me, people like Laure-Hélène—and others I am sure—were contacted by people that we knew who wanted to get out, and quite reasonably, absolutely reasonably. I think there has been a very muddled picture. Some people are definitely at risk and there is also a huge body of people who would like to get out of Afghanistan for absolutely reasonable reasons and there was an opportunity to go.

The violence, the chaos, and the way that lots of Afghans just came to the airport, just to see if they could get out on a plane, meant that it was very difficult. I do not criticise anyone for what has happened, apart from the general policy failure of not predicting what might have happened and starting to do scenario planning. Once this started, it was like dealing with a natural disaster; just hands on deck, and save the souls that you can.

At the moment, we are monitoring to see exactly what is happening on ground. It is very difficult. There are definitely punishment beatings of people on lists who could not get out, including on British lists. Taliban intelligence is good. They were doing targeted killings and suicide bombings. They knew somewhere like Kabul very well and not just Kabul, but that just happens to be where I know best. So, there are definitely people being targeted at the moment for their links with the British Government.

As to the wider risk—drivers, gardeners, cleaners, cooks, people working in humanitarian jobs, in education—I think we are still seeing what the nature of the risk is. It could change, as well. You have this authoritarian Government, they are met by people who do not like them, they are the equivalent of an occupying army, so you may get an increase in the violence used by the Taliban to deal with civilians in places like Kabul. I do not think the risk that people may be under is a fixed state and it may well go beyond people who just worked with the British Government.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Another thing to mention is the demand, which is not going to go away. If people are not brought out through legal routes, I predict that they will be going through illegal routes and it will be difficult because of the nature of the borders and the countries around Afghanistan. It is a problem, but I cannot talk about refugees as a “problem” for us. Obviously it is a problem for themselves. It is an issue that governments such as the British Government are going to be facing.

Q9 Ruth Edwards: Rossella, we have had verbal assurances from the Taliban that people will be allowed to leave. In your organisation’s experience on the ground, is that playing out in practice? Or are the Taliban saying one thing and doing another?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: You need to consider that we are not involved in the evacuations at either end of the process so we do not monitor people’s departures, although we do try to monitor people’s arrival in neighbouring countries to keep tabs on the development of the situation, taking into account that indeed—as Kate said—this is a very fluid situation.

You will have seen, at the beginning of the week, yesterday, I think, PIA announced the start of commercial flights, and earlier there was another flight, which I believe might have been chartered, by the Qatar Airlines. There are now some ways out but obviously these will be for people with passports and visas.

We have noticed that there is something of an increase of movement across certain borders. We do not have access to all border points, so what I say has to be, to some extent, taken with a pinch of salt. We know that there has been an uptick in border crossings. We try to monitor and ask questions, but these are all borders into Pakistan and Iran where there are always a great many border crossings, for trade, for medical reasons, people who have family on both sides, so not everyone who crosses is intending to seek asylum, but some do.

We have seen a slight increase in the number of people registering with us in Pakistan, for example, ethnic minorities representing a fairly large percentage, but we are still talking about a few thousand, so far. Of course, unfortunately in the context of Afghan displacement, which is normally counted into the millions, that is a relatively small number.

These are people passing through official border crossings. We also know that some people are trying to go through unofficial border crossings with the help of smugglers but we are not in a position to measure the flow or, at this stage, the challenges that they might be going through.

As Kate was saying, there are different profiles of people who are fleeing and therefore presumably a different focus by the Taliban on stopping them. There will be people who are perceived to be in opposition to their rule and maybe people whose profile has already brought them to the attention of the Taliban. There will also be a number of people leaving



HOUSE OF COMMONS

because life in their region has become impossible for economic and other reasons.

By the way, there is also a drought that has given the coup de grace to what was already a faltering economy. There will be people who are leaving for those reasons, and there will be people who are leaving because of fighting in their districts. There are different typologies and because of that, presumably a different focus by the Taliban on their exit.

Q10 Ruth Edwards: Laure-Hélène, you mentioned that it seemed to be somewhat confusing as to who was covered by some of the different resettlement schemes that the UK Government have. How do the UK packages compare with what other countries are doing? Is there anything we can learn from them?

Laure-Hélène Piron: I have had to decide to focus just on the UK because I cannot comprehend what is going on in the USA, France, or Germany at the same time, but I know who to refer cases to.

For example, I have been told that, while in the UK sometimes we had no response for ARAP or special case applications, from the US people would get a response in one or two days during the height of the evacuation period. There was a clear failing in not having enough staff in place in time to process all the cases.

I agree with what Kate said. What was done by my former colleagues, by civil servants and the military, was absolutely amazing in those very tense weeks but we were just too slow to respond and we are still too slow to respond.

In terms of numbers, I know that Canada has also said they would accept 20,000 Afghans. The UK is also saying we will accept 20,000 but the UK had a much larger presence in Afghanistan than Canada had, so you cannot compare the two at all, in my view.

Q11 Ms Abbott: I would like to apologise to our witnesses for being late. I was at another Committee.

In common with most of my colleagues in the House of Commons, I am dealing with a great deal of casework around Afghanistan. I want to raise something relatively narrow and specific. I am dealing with a number of cases of British residents or British passport holders who are trying to get information about their relatives in Afghanistan and, ideally, trying to bring their relatives to the UK. These are not necessarily relatives who worked for the British Government but are just their relatives.

In some instances, families were split up quite arbitrarily. For instance, they went out as a family, then the husband came back to go back to work and his wife and children are trapped there. We had a statement yesterday from Ministers. You may have read it. Ministers said that they did not know anything about relatives of British nationals in Afghanistan, that they could not tell anybody anything and they could not do anything. Do you have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

any thoughts as to how the British Government could identify British nationals, or the relatives of British nationals, who were in Afghanistan and what the Government could do to facilitate them ultimately coming to this country?

Kate Clark: Is that not a normal thing, where you have a British passport holder who has dependents, to bring them back? Is that not a normal feature of life?

Ms Abbott: Yes, it would be. That is why I am raising it. I was shocked to have a Cabinet Minister tell me, "There is nothing we do" because I deal with that type of casework all the time.

Kate Clark: There were a lot of dependants on the plane with me. Because of the nature of migration from Afghanistan, where you have had a lot of single men, I think there have been a lot of dependants still in Afghanistan or who were visiting, as you say, summer holidays. I am surprised that it is not part of normal life but I know family reunification is quite a tricky thing for the Home Office. Are you saying that you think it should be easier now?

Q12 **Ms Abbott:** All I am saying is that, for me, family reunification is bread and butter casework and I am shocked to have Ministers tell me that there is nothing they could tell British residents and there is nothing they can do to unify these families. That is what I am saying.

Kate Clark: I am surprised, but it is not my field. I am quite surprised because people have documents; they have what we call e-ID cards, biometrically certified ID cards. Many people have passports. You can tell which British passport holder's—typically his, but it might be her—children are, or spouse.

Ms Abbott: The Minister said we no longer have armed forces in the area and there is nothing we can do.

Kate Clark: They should be able to get out on commercial flights. I don't think they need to be evacuated, necessarily.

Ms Abbott: I will not pursue this. I am just saying that I have a lot of very upset constituents who cannot get any information about relatives and Ministers are saying that, even when it comes to providing information, there is nothing they can do, let alone help facilitate these people coming to this country.

Q13 **Chair:** Laure-Hélène, do you have any thoughts on the family reunion issue? Do any of the people you dealing with have families of dependants?

Laure-Hélène Piron: I have been focusing on my former colleagues and the partners of the British aid programmes, but in the chaos of those days at the end of August, I was receiving lots of applications to triage myself and it was like where to apply, and among them I received details of a British resident who had a British wife. I am the one who put in an application for him through the special cases e-mail. This is the only



HOUSE OF COMMONS

positive response I received. I then called his wife, who reached out to him to say he can go to the airport. I don't think I should have been put in that position of defending the interests of and informing a British resident but that was the chaos of the situation in the second part of August.

I think it is possible to find out through MPs who have done some absolutely amazing work. I think we are raising the voices of Afghans in the UK and Afghans in Afghanistan who still want to come to the UK. MPs have been fabulous during this crisis. Through that you are getting lists of relatives who want to come and it should not be impossible for the Home Office to compare those numbers.

What I am seeing through the ARAP scheme is unclear criteria to decide on family reunification. Sometimes, former British employees were told, "You can travel but you can only take one person with you" during the evacuation process. In one case, an unmarried lady was told, "You can choose between your mother, your father, your brother or your sister" and it took them a day to decide who she would go with, and they said, "You can apply. It will take a week" and if they had applied and it took a week, they would have missed all the evacuation flights.

That person still has the rest of her family who need to be evacuated and the British Government have the name but are saying, "We don't want to evacuate or repatriate too many relatives". Afghans have large families who will be dependent on the breadwinner, and parents who have let their daughters work for the British Government. They will be seen as a specific category and they are specifically vulnerable.

Q14 Ms Abbott: Just one more question on family reunification. The Committee has heard, and I have heard as an individual Member of Parliament, of people who should be eligible for family reunion but they are not able to leave Afghanistan because of difficulties getting passports or UK paperwork. Do any of you have any understanding of what is happening for people in those circumstances? What more could be done to enable family reunifications.

Kate Clark: Are you talking about Afghan passports?

Ms Abbott: I am talking about both.

Kate Clark: For British passports you would always have had to have gone to, probably, Islamabad in Pakistan because the British Embassy in Afghanistan did not run a consular service. Obviously it is not there at all anymore. I think that would have always have been the case.

For Afghan passports, it has been chaotic because they have just had a regime change. I think the service for both the passports and the national ID cards will come back online eventually, but it will take some time. I think it may be just a question of waiting until something can be done. Of course, if you are applying for a British passport, you need some Afghan documentation and many Afghans, particularly women and kids, do not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have any. I think it will be a bureaucratic challenge to do anything until the services start working again in Kabul.

Q15 **Ms Abbott:** It is a bureaucratic challenge?

Kate Clark: I would say so, yes.

Q16 **Simon Fell:** Rossella, you touched on this in your opening statement. Your organisation has identified the burgeoning humanitarian crisis going on in Afghanistan. Could you tell us a bit more about that and how you see it developing over the next few weeks and months?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: The situation is very fluid. There is some good news. A couple of days ago, a donor conference resulted in \$1.1 billion in pledges and that is fundamental because at this point, the only services available depend on the humanitarian community. The UN Emergency Relief Co-ordinator, Martin Griffiths, also announced that he had written assurances from the Taliban that humanitarian workers would be able to work and that they could enjoy freedom of movement and even employ women. To the extent that this will be translated into reality on the ground, this is obviously good news.

Of course, there are some unknowns here. One unknown is the fact of whether or not there will be fighting, whether at this point or at some stage. We are on the crest of upheaval. We will have to see whether things eventually settle down in a manner that would make it possible for people to regain some normalcy in life. If we start seeing IDPs returning home—a few seem to be doing so and we have been assisting them to re-establish themselves in their villages—some economic activity will resume in the regions. We are talking about very marginal agriculture, as you know, but something getting going.

That could help stabilise at least part of the population and it would presumably limit the risk of a large outflow towards neighbouring countries. Of course, that would require the international community to be quite committed. I know some countries have some reluctance towards assisting within Afghanistan for obvious reasons but the reality is that the Afghan people do need assistance and there are no two ways around that. The international community will channel the funds and use them for the welfare of the Afghan people and this must happen. There is no question about it.

At the same time—and at the moment there are some complicated conversations going on about it—there is the question of maintaining the borders open for those who feel that they cannot stay in Afghanistan. We have already heard from the other two speakers that there are some categories of people who we expect would be hard pressed to remain. As you know, Pakistan and Iran have been very generous over decades, hosting millions of Afghan refugees. There is now, as you can see, a certain degree of reluctance and Pakistan, for example, has been stating it will not open its borders. At the same time, however, there is a level of contingency



HOUSE OF COMMONS

planning in both countries and some people are getting through anyway. It is a question of maintaining a dialogue, recognising also the fact that these countries will need some assistance to deal with new refugees arriving in the country.

Q17 Simon Fell: Thank you. What is the situation like for the NGOs on the ground now? Is the money that has been released being funnelled directly to the NGOs or is it going via the Taliban?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: International funding does not go through the Taliban. It goes straight through international organisations.

Q18 Simon Fell: Do they have freedom to operate within the bounds of the state as it exists at the moment?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: I cannot speak for the NGOs, frankly. So far the UN has a degree of freedom in operating. As of last week, we were able to operate in, I believe, 26 out of 32 provinces and indeed in all but three, were even able to work through our female colleagues. That is definitely a positive and it is something that also allows us to engage on the issues that we are all very concerned about. For example, we have 19 schools under construction, which keeps pushing the envelope a bit on health and education, seeing that they are there for both boys and girls.

I cannot talk about NGOs, though, so possibly my colleagues know better.

Q19 Simon Fell: Kate wanted to come in. Thank you.

Kate Clark: A couple of things: one is that much of the Taliban leadership is under sanctions, the US in particular, but also UN and EU and British sanctions, which makes it very difficult to work with them, particularly the US ones, because you can get into trouble if you are seen to be supporting the Government, sanctioned individuals or the sanctioned Government. That is one problem.

Secondly, humanitarian aid will not cover what has been lost so there will be catastrophic humanitarian consequences just because of the scale of the money that was going into Afghanistan and that now is lost. That includes not just aid but the dollars have stopped; the dollar supply has stopped. The banks cannot open. There is nothing in the Treasury. There is nothing coming in. It is not just about feeding people. Health is a good example. Governments like ours can probably keep that going because it has gone through a World Bank programme that went through NGOs, so it does not have to touch the Ministry of Public Health. But education, which was largely funded by donors? Do you want to work with the Taliban Ministry of Education? There are so many logistical, practical and ethical questions. If you do not give money to Afghanistan, people will probably die. There will be refugees. If you do give money to Afghanistan, you will be helping the Taliban to survive as a regime. It is not straightforward at all.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I am glad we have moved the conversation on. The evacuation, while important, was about a tiny fraction of the people in Afghanistan, but it really sucked attention of the British Government and others from the much wider, more serious, deeper and longer lasting questions to do with Britain's relationship with Afghanistan and what you do when you have a government that has taken power by force, that is authoritarian, that is against British interests and is a country that Britain has been supporting to the hilt? There are so many questions that need to be answered, policies that need to be decided, and they are all tricky. They are all ethically tricky and logistically tricky. So, good luck with that.

Q20 Simon Fell: Thank you. I appreciate that. Laure-Hélène, if I can pick up on the NGO point—if indeed you can answer this—what is your understanding of how well they are able to operate on the ground? Do they have the freedom they need from the Taliban to disburse aid or assist in whatever programmes they are working on?

Laure-Hélène Piron: I am not following that issue but some of my former colleagues are. We have written a briefing paper on what needs to happen now in Afghanistan, but I don't want to say more. I don't want to say anything about NGOs.

Kate Clark: I can answer it.

Laure-Hélène Piron: Good. Please go ahead.

Kate Clark: The Taliban will probably not have any problem with humanitarian aid. A lot of NGOs kept their staff. They did not want them leaving. They recognised that they would need experienced people on the ground to run that sort of thing.

Health will be fine, including women working in the health sector. Then you face problems: all the other things that Britain was helping with. Schooling will be problematic, probably. Primary school girls are all right for the Taliban. Anything older, they have problems with. They will have problems with the curriculum as well, as we have seen from how they have run the areas under their control.

Civil society, leadership, agricultural support: you name it. The Taliban will, first, possibly have problems with the programmes; secondly, with female staff, and, thirdly, they may well want to tax. They have been taxing projects in areas under their command, under their rule, and I predict that that will be a problem.

Q21 Simon Fell: Last question. When you say the Taliban have a problem, or they might have a problem, does that mean they will not allow them to operate, or that they will intervene in what that NGO would be planning to do?

Kate Clark: Expect interference. Expect women workers to be sent home. Expect attempts to tax or extort.



Q22 **Stuart C McDonald:** Rossella, could I start with you? I want to turn now to the issue of the resettlement scheme in particular. Could you tell us about the discussions that UNHCR has had with the Home Office and any thoughts that you have on the scale of the programme that has been put forward, the timescale by which it is going to operate and something about how it is going to work in practice?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: We are still discussing the details. As you know, this programme, the ACRS, the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme, which is a bit of strange name if you think about it, encompasses three different components of which only one is what we would normally refer to as resettlement. For us, resettlement is solely the process through which we take people who are refugees in an asylum country to a third country where they will be provided with permanent residence and a path to naturalisation.

The other schemes, people who may have been flown out directly by a government, these will not count as resettlement schemes for us.

Having just made this little clarification, we will be part, therefore of the announced number of up to 20,000 in five years. I think it is difficult to say whether it is enough or not. There are already 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees outside, around the world and 90% are in Pakistan and Iran. Therefore, I would say almost upfront any number, any realistic number, will probably be inadequate for the needs that we expect. That said, there is also an issue of realism.

Resettlement is an operationally complex endeavour that requires structures in place and proper systems to assure that we identify the right people and that the system is conducted with the necessary integrity. I would say it is great that we have the scheme. We will definitely look forward to working with the Government to assure that those who are identified as being the most vulnerable or at risk in the country of asylum.

Again here, please allow me parenthesis, because we are often shown that there is a certain conflation between the situation of people who are at risk in their own countries, and the resettlement. People who are at risk in their own country, may or may not be priority candidates for resettlement because resettlement does not look at that; it looks at your situation in your country of asylum and therefore looks at vulnerability and risk factors in the country of asylum rather than in the country of origin.

To go back to your question, Stuart. We are grateful for these announcements and we look forward to the fine details. It will probably look fairly similar to programme for Syrian refugees that has been, I think, a resounding success. Then we will see if there is scope for this to be in place.

I would also like to say something else. At the moment, the world is looking at Afghanistan. The UK certainly is. We should not forget that there are many other refugees in very vulnerable circumstances whose resettlement



is now lagging behind because of the priority being given to the Afghans. We also need to make sure that we do not forget about those people.

Q23 Stuart C McDonald: I will come to Laure-Hélène in a moment, but I think there were two important clarifications in there. First, that resettlement is something that is aimed at people who have already left their country of origin.

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: Yes.

Stuart C McDonald: Secondly, from what you say, it is not an application process.

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: No.

Stuart C McDonald: It is a referral process; is that right?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: That is correct.

Q24 Stuart C McDonald: Picking up on the point that, generally speaking, resettlement operates in the countries of asylum, there was an interesting part in the Minister's statement yesterday when she said, "We will work with international partners and NGOs in the region to put in place a referral process for those inside Afghanistan where it is possible to arrange safe passage as well as for those who have already fled". Has the Home Office discussed that aspect of things with you, how it would be possible to—

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: That is not something we would be involved in. We do not do evacuations.

Q25 Chair: Can I just ask if Laure-Hélène wants to come in specifically on that point? Stuart's question was about what the Government have said about working with NGOs on a referral system resettlement scheme for those within Afghanistan. Have you had any contact about that scheme or been aware of it?

Laure-Hélène Piron: No, not yet. I will just make a couple of points about this scheme, first to welcome that it was launched and announced yesterday, but I have a couple of worries. One is whether the 5,000 places have already been taken up by those that we evacuated in August. We don't know how many places are still available. There are rumours, because communication has not been great, that most of the places have already been filled—that is something you could check—but I hope not. Secondly, the criteria were not very clear yesterday. We need to have clear, transparent criteria to select who is going to be eligible for this scheme. What made me personally, in my capacity, worried yesterday during the parliamentary debate was how some very senior politicians are able to get the right paperwork to help some people cross the border; organisations and people with the right contacts. We need to have a fair system so that those assessed to be at high risk will be the ones that are helped, not just whoever happens to have access.

Q26 Stuart C McDonald: Can I come in on that point? If I could go back to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Rossella first: isn't this where the confusion between evacuation and resettlement arises, in that resettlement is not aimed at those at a particular risk? It is aimed at those who have a particular vulnerability in the country where they have already been recognised as refugees; is that right? There is a sense in which politicians seems to be thinking that the resettlement scheme is going to help people who it really will not help and they should be looking instead to ARAP and various other schemes.

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: There has been a certain degree of mixed messaging, from the media and generally. Some of the people who were directly identified in Afghanistan were called refugees while they were still there and there has been a bit of conflation of terminology. This is not because we are hung up on semantics but, for example, this has led our office in Kabul being besieged by Afghans who were demanding refugee certificates, believing that those were necessary for them to be resettled from Afghanistan, which is not a possibility.

Likewise, I think some comments that have been made by a variety of persons in the past weeks have sort of suggested to some that they might qualify for resettlement. Comments were made about women and children being given priority and that has created, I must say, quite a number of difficulties for our offices, which have been suddenly besieged by large number of Afghans, including people who have been in exile for many years, hoping to find a way to get to the UK and the US and so on. So, yes, we are very keen on clear messaging because what we say here is read differently when it is heard by people who are pretty desperate to leave now, sometimes because of an imminent danger but sometimes simply because Afghanistan is not a country that reasonably they would want to continue to live in.

Q27 **Stuart C McDonald:** I know we are a bit short of time but can I also ask you about Afghans who are already in the United Kingdom and either in the asylum system or have previously been in the asylum system. Have you any particular calls on the Home Office as to how these Afghans should be treated?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: You are talking about the ones who have not had success. Did I understand correctly?

Stuart C McDonald: Indeed. They are either still waiting for a result, or—

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: We have asked the Home Office, and indeed all other countries, not to return any Afghans back home, regardless of their status in this country.

We would like to see the continued processing of asylum applications here for those who have made it to the UK, and then for those who fulfil the criteria for refugee status to receive the status that they deserve and need and for those who are rejected, for the time being, to receive some form of temporary permit to remain in the country while working and waiting to see then how things develop in Afghanistan. That is what we have asked and what we would like to see here.



Q28 **Stuart C McDonald:** Finally, you mentioned briefly the Borders Bill. Given the small number of places, in the grand scheme of things that you have mentioned, in resettlement schemes or indeed some of the other schemes we have been speaking about earlier, there will inevitably be an increase in the number of people seeking to arrive in the UK to claim asylum. How would the Borders Bill impact on them and what would be your message to the Home Office about that?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: It would impact on them as it would impact on any other asylum seeker and not in a positive way. To be honest, I find it a bit ironic that the very same people that we felt so affected by, when we saw them hanging from planes in Kabul, we are now discussing how they should be extracted. If they extracted themselves and made it here, if that were law, they would first off be potentially liable for years in jail and then subject to some attempts to return them to some other countries, which, as we know, at the moment, do not exist. If found to be refugees, they would have access only to abridged rights under the Convention and, in particular, not be entitled to family reunification and assistance.

There is something ironic in the way we are so concerned about the same people when they are there but we are ready not to consider them when they are coming to the UK. As you know, it is well known that the UNHCR has been critical of the Bill, which we regard as being in breach of international law and—for those who are interested—also as not likely to meet its stated objectives.

Chair: Thank you very much. We need to move on to our second panel in a second, so a final question from Adam Holloway and then I have a final question to follow up.

Q29 **Adam Holloway:** Thank you very much, Chair. I apologise for being late. I will preface this by saying that if I were any Afghan, whether I had worked for the West or not, I would wish to get out of there at this time.

Can you give us an idea of the actual situation on the ground? I know former Afghan Government Ministers, former Afghan intelligence officers who are feeling perfectly secure in Kabul under the Taliban. I appreciate the Taliban is not a unified thing. That is the first question.

Secondly, over the last month we have evacuated the corrupt elite but we have also evacuated most of the educated, professional middle-class. What are the chances of them ever returning once their children are at school in Texas, Norway or wherever else?

Kate Clark: This evacuation has been a disaster for the country. It has lost technically able people. It has lost the awkwardly independently minded journalists, human rights activists and women's activists who have bravely taken the last Government to task in Kabul and will do the same—not everyone—as you have seen from the demonstrations on the streets, but, yes, as you said, anyone who gets out I absolutely support.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Afghanistan has been a bit of a disaster. In a regime change in Afghanistan, things are always chaotic and violent and it will depend on who you know. We saw that last time around with the Taliban reaching out to people whom they knew were on the victorious side in 2001.

At that point, the US persecuted Taliban trying to live in peace. They used mass indiscriminate arrests. They used torture. They sent people to Bagram and Guantanamo. They did not let the Taliban live in peace. This is why we are here now.

There is a danger with the Taliban that they are carrying out reprisals. They are the victors now, heady with victory, thinking they have this god-given right to do what they want. Again, the cycles of revenge are being set up right now. I do fear for Afghanistan's stability with this narrow-minded, narrowly based authoritarian Government. I expect more people to try to leave.

As to the risk, yes, it varies. I might be an intelligence person who has put Taliban in prison. I might be in real risk. I might have a cousin on the other side who can protect me. Perhaps I have tribal links. It can be varied and quite arbitrary. Many people are at risk, in hiding, moving from house to house at the moment, as we speak. Others have had punishment beatings. Others have had their children detained because they come from the wrong ethnic group. They are searching from police station to police station, as we speak, trying to find out where their children are. We are talking about teenage boys here.

Laure-Hélène Piron: I will make two points. I have been advocating for those who work directly for the British Government or those who collaborated with UK programmes and are now at risk. They give us evidence of the threats they receive from the Taliban. Earlier on I mentioned someone's mother was shot dead. Two people in hospital were shot. Someone's brother disappeared. These are all individuals who have a link to the UK's presence in Afghanistan, which is why we have a moral and legal obligation towards those people. The UK Government have a duty of care towards them.

Secondly, people do not want to leave their countries. The colleagues I hired to work for me in the British Embassy wanted to stay in Afghanistan, but they fear for their lives. If Afghanistan becomes stable again, I know that they will want to go back and build their lives again. I know part of the conversation has been that lots of Afghans want to leave right now, but those people applying to the ARAP scheme, and those who will be trying to apply because they do not know how to the citizen's resettlement schemes, fear for their lives and their relatives' lives right now.

Kate Clark: Can I make one quick point?

Q30 **Chair:** Very quickly because we will lose time for our second session.



Kate Clark: Afghans who are British passport-holders have stolen a lot of money from the Afghan state. I urge the British Government and the HMRC to watch the money. Who is buying big properties, not only in Britain but elsewhere?

Q31 **Chair:** Thank you. Rossella, did you want to have a final point on that?

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor: No, not really. On the question of whether they will ever go back, it is a fact that when people establish their lives, with the passing of the years they tend to put their own roots down. However, we have seen people going back when the situation changes or they feel that they can go back. We saw Somalis go back to Somalia when there was a modicum of stability to restart businesses. A lot depends on how things shape up in the country. In the past, millions of Afghans did go back to Afghanistan.

Q32 **Chair:** Quickly and finally, to clarify Laure-Hélène's evidence earlier, are you still pursuing the ARAP scheme for people?

Laure-Hélène Piron: Yes. We are still waiting to hear back on the ARAP scheme. Some of my former Afghan colleagues have had to reapply to ARAP and fill in a form they have filled in once or twice before. We do not know exactly what is going on. The ARAP scheme applications still have to be processed and then triaged if they cannot go to ARAP.

It is the same for the new resettlement schemes. We need to understand much more clearly how people can be referred to those schemes. How will the UNHCR collaborate with the Government? Which NGOs will be working with the Government? We are concerned about those with a direct link to the UK aid programme. Right now, we do not know how they can apply. These two schemes have to be clarified.

Chair: Thank you. I thank all of our witnesses for giving evidence on our first panel. We appreciate your time and the work that you are doing. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alex Fraser, Councillor James Jamieson and Enver Solomon.

Q33 **Chair:** We will move on to our second panel now. Welcome to our second panel, who are taking their seats at the moment. We have Councillor James Jamieson joining us online from the Local Government Association, Enver Solomon from the Refugee Council, and Alex Fraser from the British Red Cross.

In this panel we want to concentrate on the support and arrangements for Afghan families arriving here in the UK, both through the ARAP scheme and through the resettlement scheme in future, and also any special case arrangements.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Before I ask you about those issues, did any of our panel—particularly Enver and Alex—have any views on the questions we were raising with the first panel about the difficulties for people who are still in Afghanistan to whom the UK might owe a duty of care?

Enver Solomon: The point made by the previous witnesses that there are significant numbers of people who are still in Afghanistan and are looking to reach safety in the UK was pertinent. The additional point that not everyone will be able to come out on the ARAP scheme or the resettlement scheme—the ACRS—again is pertinent.

To recognise the reality of the situation that our previous witnesses touched on, many people will have to and will seek to make a difficult, challenging and dangerous journey overland to reach the UK and, when they get to the UK, the question remains whether they will be given a warm welcome. As the UNHCR touched on, the Government's proposals under their Borders Bill suggest that they will be treated in a different way and will be subject to a more cruel, harsh response. Those points are worth emphasising.

Alex Fraser: Yes, I agree with Enver. Also, to add to that and build on some of the discussion around family reunion in particular, the families that I have met in the last couple of weeks who have arrived from Afghanistan, their close family members who remain at risk in Afghanistan are absolutely at the front of their minds. They had a lot of questions about family reunification. I do not know if we will be coming on to that in a further question or I can speak more about that now.

Q34 **Chair:** Let's cover that now before we get on to the wider support issues.

Alex Fraser: In the announcements yesterday there was some mention of the importance of family reunion, but it was disappointing to see that there will not be the ability for families to actively apply for family reunion. There is an understanding around the challenges in terms of the biometric information, being able to access visa application centres and the security of the safe passage itself, which is critical for the process. However, as soon as families are able to start making those applications to avoid a moment down the line, when that becomes possible, that would help because there will be a lot of applications and they will take time to process.

Families, as a starting point at least, understanding their rights and entitlements in respect of refugee family reunion will be important. As I am sure we will go on to speak about, there is a general problem at the moment with people not having a sense of their rights and entitlements and access to information about those different things.

Q35 **Chair:** The document that the Government published yesterday about the resettlement scheme in the section on family migration and family reunion says that people will still be required to meet the eligibility requirements, including providing biometrics, but also says there is currently no option to give biometrics in Afghanistan, which suggests that all those cases are



therefore suspended. Are you aware of that being a problem or is family reunion still taking place?

Alex Fraser: Absolutely, that is a problem, but the application itself could be started with that final part about biometrics to follow. Rather than waiting until that is possible, let's do something about it now and in the coming months. If I may add, the definition of "family" is important. The families I met would describe their close family as including siblings and older children. The current rules would not allow for those family members to join them.

Enver Solomon: Chair, there is also an important distinction between family union rights under ARAP and under the resettlement scheme. They are different, which is important for the Committee to understand. Those on the ARAP scheme will get indefinite leave to remain and, under those immigration rules, rights to family reunion are more restricted than if they are given refugee status or humanitarian protection status, which is what they would get under the ACRS. People that come under ARAP will not have the same rights to be united with their spouses or their children as those under the resettlement scheme. That appears to be an unfair differentiation that the Home Office is looking at, but as it stands it is a differentiation.

Chair: I have Tim Loughton and Diane Abbott to come in on this issue and then we want to go to Councillor Jamieson on some of the wider resettlement issues and support in the UK.

Q36 **Tim Loughton:** What would a practical refugee scheme look like, given that we are in limbo here? Not only do we not have a post-Dublin family reunification scheme for a lot of people still coming to the country, but people who have come from Afghanistan and have reached—through whatever means—UK shores are in the system. People in Calais are still trying to come across the Channel. They will include some Afghans who will not have special status. Then people outside of Afghanistan may start to make that land journey. Of course, we have those people who have legitimately been brought here as part of the evacuation. It is all a bit of a mess in terms of whose rights at what stage and at what geographical location they might be in.

What should we do, going forward, in terms of those people who are still making their way, potentially, from Afghanistan and close to Afghanistan to the UK? In terms of the systems on the ground, given that we do not have a UK mission in Kabul and it has relocated to Doha and then we have some resource in Pakistan, should we be identifying specific agencies that are still able to work within Afghanistan so that one of those refugee agencies would look after UK interests and other potentially French or German for potential destination? Do we need to set up the equivalent of the Syrian vulnerable persons scheme specifically to look as a whole at Afghans who have left Afghanistan in the last few weeks, the last few months, the last year or whatever? It is a big question. What does an ideal system look like to deal with that mess?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Enver Solomon: The intention is to absolutely do an equivalent of the Syrian scheme. The Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme is very much modelled on that. The ambition for 20,000 is exactly the same as the Syrian scheme. There is a question about whether 20,000 is enough. Our view is that instead of 5,000 a year we should be more ambitious and look at 10,000 a year. The pipeline will certainly be coming through the system, as the previous witness from the UNHCR, Rossella, explained. Absolutely, an ambitious resettlement scheme is needed. There is no question about that.

For those who are unable to access the scheme, the reality is—and we know this from what happened back in 2015 with the Syrians—there are two groups. There is the group that is already in the country awaiting a decision on their asylum claims. Previously, back in 2015, those decisions were fast-tracked and good quality, quick decisions were made, the vast majority for refugee protection because of the situation. The same should be the case today for Afghans. There are more than 3,000 Afghans in the asylum system as we speak, awaiting a decision.

For those who do come overland—and it is difficult to forecast the number but there will certainly be some—the principle that we need to hold on to, which is what we have always done in this country, is a fair hearing on British soil. They need to be given that hearing. They need to have their case quickly and rapidly assessed. If they meet the threshold for refugee protection, they should be granted that. Given the current situation in Afghanistan, you would imagine that the vast majority of those should get refugee protection and certainly have their case dealt with quickly.

The Government have already said that they are not intending to return any people to Afghanistan at the moment. Absolutely, we should not be returning people to Afghanistan.

It is imperative that all decisions made for people who do come into the country via the Channel or other means are taken quickly. We have a huge backlog in the system. More than 70,000 people are waiting for a decision. Nearly 55,000 are waiting more than six months. Getting on for 35,000 are waiting over a year. It is imperative that we have good quality, rapid decision-making. In Germany, virtually all decisions are made within a matter of months. There is no reason we should not be doing the same here.

Alex Fraser: I agree with everything Enver said. I add that specifically the refugee family reunion system and the process as it stands is complicated and expensive. For a lot of people, a safe, legal route to protection for their families is out of reach. There is a need to look at refugee family reunion as part of a range of safe, legal routes to protection, alongside—as Enver has said—making sure that people who arrive seeking sanctuary in the UK are greeted with exactly what we have seen in these last few weeks: with compassion, dignity, and people wanting to understand their needs and treating those people well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

As Enver said, at the moment over 70,000 people are waiting for a decision on their asylum application. Most of those people will have taken horrifically dangerous journeys to find protection here. It is important, as Enver said, that they are able to play some part in society while they wait. In some cases, people will wait for years.

Q37 **Chair:** Thank you. Councillor Jamieson, do you want to come in on this point? We will come to the issues about support here in a second, but do you or the LGA have a view on the ideal system given the challenges we face?

Councillor Jamieson: As our name suggests, we are local government in the UK and our expertise is not in Afghanistan, so I will pass on that one.

Chair: I will come back to you shortly. Thank you. Diane Abbott.

Q38 **Ms Abbott:** I was interested in what you both had to say about family reunion because, as I indicated to the earlier panel, I am dealing with a lot of people seeking family reunion, which in the normal course of events they ought to have some hopes of but are actually facing an administrative vacuum, as far as I can see.

I was interested that you said people might have fewer family reunion rights under ARAP than they would normally have. I was interested that you said the family reunion process could begin prior to having the biometric information just to get it going. Do either of you have anything to add?

Enver Solomon: The differentiation around the family reunion rights for those under ARAP and for those under the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme is significant. Under ARAP, you will not have the right to bring your spouse or children under 18 over to the UK. You will need to follow another costly process, which has rules attached, such as a minimum income requirement and an English language skills requirement. Also, family members who are then able to come to the UK will not be allowed to work or have access to public funds. However, those who get refugee status under the resettlement scheme are able to bring their spouses or their children under 18 here and there are no further restrictions on those spouses or children.

Overall, as Alex has pointed out, I would argue that our family reunion rules are restrictive. I am sure this is the case for many Committee members. You might have children between the ages of 18 and 25. They are young adults. They still need considerable family support. They are outside of the rules. It is not possible to bring one of your children who is a young adult over to this country if you are given protection. The rules seem particularly restrictive, from our perspective.

In addition, we know that children have come in alone through the evacuation programme recently. We saw those disturbing pictures of babies being passed over the fence so they could get out, so families were separated. We know children have arrived alone. If a child comes here



alone, the rules are highly restrictive. They are not able to be reunited with their parents or with their siblings. Again, our view is that that is unnecessarily restrictive and, as Alex has pointed out, this closes off what should be a safe and legal route for people to reach safety and find sanctuary and protection in the UK.

Q39 **Chair:** Thank you. Can I come to Councillor Jamieson about the support available in the UK now? What is your assessment of the support that is currently available for people arriving through ARAP's special and resettlement routes?

Councillor Jamieson: The issue here is that a lot of this is modelled on the Syrian system, which was generally very successful and helped integrate a lot of families in desperate need into the UK. Councils across the country have seen the desperate scenes in Afghanistan and want to help.

The difference with this scheme—and I would separate the two schemes—is, unlike the Syrian scheme, this is an immediate scheme and, therefore, we are having to work a lot quicker and a lot harder in a short space of time. I hope, as the citizenship scheme moves forward, there will be more time to put things in place.

One thing is pace, and linked to that pace is a lack of information about exactly who has come over, their needs, their family size and the support they need. Then also a crunchy issue for us is family size. From the information we have gathered so far, we are talking about families that average between six and seven members per family. That raises a big housing issue. If you look at most of the housing stock in the UK and particularly social housing, it is two and three-bed. There is already a huge shortage of four and five-bed housing in the UK for families in need. We need to resolve this big housing issue.

I am pleased that the Government did say that they would step up and provide the funding that was needed. The initial £20,000 or so over three years is helpful. A number of councils would like to see a commitment that that funding would extend to five years if need be. There is also some commitment to look at exceptional costs. Quite clearly, the needs of families will vary radically and some families may need substantially more support.

Many of these families coming over now, as opposed to the families who previously came over on ARAP, have come out with nothing, effectively, and therefore we need to provide them with all that support, whether it is just clothes and shoes and the basics of life. Many of these families have faced trauma. What mental health support do they need? Then how will we help them integrate into our society? We need to do a whole series of things, but in the short term the big issue we have is many of these families are in hotels, either in quarantine or in holding hotels, and the system overall at the moment is, if I am generous, creaking.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We are looking at Afghan resettlement in the context, as Enver was saying, of 70,000 or so asylum seekers in the limbo process of not knowing whether they can stay and a large number of unaccompanied asylum seekers—I am trying to remember the figures but tens of thousands—are in quarantine hotels coming back from red-list countries. Local authorities have all those dynamics placed upon them and frequently at short notice local authorities find out that all of a sudden red-list hotel or unaccompanied asylum seekers are appearing in a hotel tomorrow.

The co-ordination and pace in the short term is giving us a bigger issue. In the longer term, it is about having the right size of accommodation and the certainty that the funding will be there longer term if it is needed.

Alex Fraser: To add to that, having spent some time with families last week and indeed this morning, it is a mixed picture in terms of what families told me about what they understand about the situation now, having arrived here. They absolutely recognise it is a difficult and chaotic period. Generally, the people I have spoken to understand why perhaps things were not in place as they might have been had there been a much lower number of arrivals.

As we move now into a period where, as of this week, most people will be out of quarantine hotels and into bridging hotels, a much better flow of information is needed as a starting point and a better assessment of the needs of the people who are in the hotels. There has been a lot of effort to do that through organisations like the British Red Cross and others working in the sector in partnership with the voluntary sector and back into the Government, but we need to think around how we co-ordinate that well through the coming few weeks so that people's immediate needs and people's longer term needs are clearer.

Everybody I have spoken to has said they want to get into their housing as soon as they can so they can start to re-establish themselves with their families, start to think about how they get back into work or into education, enrol their children at school, have access to health and so on. My absolute feeling is that everybody wants to—like all of us around this table—play their part in society and contribute back.

I heard time and time again how grateful people have been for the fact that they have been granted safety. When I met families in Leicester last week, they said it was incredible to walk out of the hotel and walk down the street and feel safe. The questions they had were, "What is happening next? When will I get some form of financial support?" That is a huge issue we are seeing on the ground. In fact, the people I met this morning told me they had been given no cash at all to this point. I know it is problematic, but that needs some urgent attention. Without cash, people have no agency to get the most basic things. One guy told me he did not even have £1 in his pocket. He feels a sense, as all of us would, of wanting to protect his family now and look after his family now. People do not want handouts



HOUSE OF COMMONS

but they do need a hand up. I know that is happening and I know there are pressures.

It might also help to take more of a holistic view about all the different schemes that operate in the UK and think about how there might be perhaps wider inclusion across all of the UK for people to continue to play their part in supporting people as they try to find protection here.

Enver Solomon: There are some real challenges in meeting the needs of the Afghan families that are in hotels as we speak. Just under 70 hotels are in use. As Alex said, the vast majority are now moving into bridging hotels.

Our experience on the ground through our work and also through speaking to Afghan community organisations and other voluntary-sector organisations is that there are some significant gaps. The first gap is, as Alex said around cash. We were working with some families up in the north who have been without cash for three to four weeks, having moved out of quarantine hotels into bridging hotels, and were distressed about that.

We have also been told about situations in hotels where mothers have not been able to access baby milk or baby food because the hotel has not been able to provide that for them. The voluntary sector and community organisations have been doing incredible work to get those essentials into those hotels, but there have been instances when staff in the hotels have not been able to facilitate them being given to families once they arrive.

There is a real challenge around mental health support. It was noticeable that the Government announced additional funding to veterans' organisations for therapeutic support. Families in hotels that we are working with are suffering some serious mental health issues, which is not surprising given the trauma they have been through, but we know that the £3 million, which is welcome, from the Department of Health and Social Care will provide only roughly £500 or £600 per head, which will provide for GP registration, an initial overall health assessment and access to Covid vaccination. There is a big gap around therapeutic support. If families will be in hotels, as we are hearing, for a number of months or at least three months, they need some additional therapeutic support.

In addition, there is an inconsistent approach across those 70-odd hotels to what wraparound support should look like. Some councils that are moving swiftly and that are working with agencies like mine, the Refugee Council, are quickly putting in support. Our staff are going in and providing that support, helping people register with GPs and helping them get their biometric residency permit, which then enables their children to access education, helping them understand where they are in the system, the orientation and so on, all the basics that they need. Other councils have not been moving as swiftly as that and the system seems to have a lack of clarity about the expected standard of wraparound support for every single family in every bridging hotel.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In addition, we should recognise that the Government have had to move at speed, but in my understanding the same number of operational civil servants who are having to deal with this situation were already dealing with more than 10,000 people in the asylum system in hotels. Put on top of that the 8,000 who have now come into the system and it does raise a question as to why the operational capacity has not consequently been increased. If it is not, despite the best efforts of those incredibly dedicated and hardworking civil servants, there will be gaps in the system as I have described and the support will not get through to those families. That is a real issue.

Finally, as our colleague from the Local Government Association highlighted, there has not always been the best communication and join-up with local councils. Councils have discovered that there are large numbers of Afghan children in hotels in their area, having not previously been informed about that. Councils have expertise around safeguarding and around child welfare due to their duties under the Children Act. It is important to leverage that expertise so they can then support these vulnerable children. There is a big gap in provision for those children who are in hotels.

Q40 Ms Abbott: I want to ask a bit more about these bridging hotels and families. I am a Hackney MP and we are—because we do not think we have much choice—putting Afghan migrants into, essentially, business hotels. You have a family of six or seven and you have one child in every room and it is wholly unsatisfactory.

How long will people have to be in these bridging hotels, in your opinion?

Alex Fraser: That is a good point. We share that concern as well. The answer to that would be for the shortest possible time. That is why the need to find housing and to develop the engagement across local government to try to get that housing made available as soon as possible is critical. The announcements yesterday will, hopefully, help in terms of the funding package. Of course, they are no place for families, especially given the trauma that the families have experienced, to spend any length of time.

I have to, though, to build on Enver's point, pay tribute to everybody who has stepped up to the plate in this last month, including incredibly hardworking civil servants and the staff in the hotels. When I was in Leicester last week, the people running the hotel there could not do enough to help and they were conscious of the fact that they needed to make sure that there were some provisions set aside for the families. They managed to get that working quite well. I am sure it is a mixed picture across the country but it was the same at the hotel I visited this morning.

It absolutely needs to be for the shortest possible time but, as Enver said, even if it is for a matter of weeks and hopefully not months, wraparound support provided in the hotel is critical, starting with information. Actually, as I left the hotel this morning, I was pleased to see someone from the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

DWP had arrived to have a conversation with some of the families. It is starting to improve in terms of that information flow but it is challenging, as Enver said. We have 70 bridging hotels across the country and there are literally thousands of people in those hotels.

I suppose part of the other challenge is a bit more parity now with the announcement on the resettlement scheme yesterday, but people have a range of entitlements, which makes it even more confusing when people are having conversations about what will happen next, rights and so on.

Q41 Chair: Councillor Jamieson, do you want to add anything on that?

Councillor Jamieson: I agree with my two colleagues that we need to reduce the time as far as possible in these bridging hotels. It will not be easy but it is far from ideal. There was a comment about each child in their own separate room, but where do the children play? Where do they get their interaction? Also, there are safeguarding issues of mixtures of children and adults who do not know each other all in the same place. We have a lot of concerns. We need to get them out.

The big issue comes straight down to housing. We keep asking ourselves whether we take a somewhat more pragmatic attitude and say that somebody leaving a hotel for a house that may not be as big as we would ideally like it is better than spending another month or two in the hotel. We have those pragmatic, difficult questions.

I would like to address—and we have certainly seen this with broader asylum seekers—the tendency for them to be housed in areas of cheaper housing. We have to recognise this. If there is to be genuine dispersal across the country, the fact of the matter is that renting a four-bedroom house in Surrey, for instance, will cost an awful lot more than renting a four-bedroom house in Barnsley. If we are to have proper dispersal across the country, then we need a funding mechanism that reflects that.

Q42 Tim Loughton: Thank you, Councillor. I wanted specifically to take up the dispersal scheme as to your thoughts and whether we must have a mandatory dispersal scheme. Although many councils have come forward, still fewer than half of local authorities have volunteered to be part of the scheme. You are shaking your head, so you can put me right on that one, which will be helpful.

For practical purposes, you are right about the nature of accommodation and the differential in prices of accommodation. You cannot just magic it out of nowhere. We know of the pressures on councils now for housing people on their own homeless lists.

I—and I am sure other MPs—have people sending us emails saying, “I have a spare room and I would like to help”, or whatever. Of course, that is only part of the problem. It is no good dumping a family of six in a spare room in somebody’s house, for all the goodwill they want to extend, miles away from any support systems or any other Afghan families, in the same way as a Scottish island offered to take a family of Syrian refugees. Putting a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

family of Syrians on one of the islands was not much use for the longer term.

What practically can councils do, supported by the Government, working with those local populations, to come up with local solutions and be more creative, which is the only way we will provide appropriate accommodation given the restraints that you have mentioned?

Councillor Jamieson: To go back to your first point, my understanding is a majority of councils have now, so to speak, put their hand up. The numbers are slightly difficult to get hold of because, for instance, some counties have co-ordinated and volunteered on behalf of all of their district. Somewhere like Staffordshire counts as one council despite the fact that there are about 12 councils in total. As with everything to do with this, the data is far from perfect.

One or two councils have a natural reluctance. For instance, one or two areas already have a high level of asylum seekers and it is understandable that they might have.

On your point about dispersal across the country, before we talk about mandating it, first we must put in a system that enables dispersal. The funding is a key issue here. Looking to house in the cheapest available housing will naturally focus it on certain councils and we absolutely do not want that. We have to accept that in certain parts of the country we do not have large numbers of large Victorian urban housing. We have a lot of expensive potentially detached housing if you are looking for five and six-bed. We need to reflect that in the funding mechanism. If we are relying on housing benefits, that may not work. It is key that dispersal reflects the real cost of large housing, where there are even greater variations of cost across the country than for two and three-beds. That is important.

You asked what the public can do. I have been amazed and impressed with the sheer outpouring of support and willingness of the public. You mentioned hotel staff and others. This is fantastic. In fact, up the road from me in Newport Pagnell, a cricket match was organised the other weekend between some refugees and the local cricket team, which was fantastic.

The problem is that you do not want warehouses of clothes, baby shoes and whatever. You need to tailor everything to an individual family. In most instances, it will be simply money, and I know a number of councils and others have put forward schemes where people can volunteer money. People can support other organised schemes through charities like the two represented here today, but unfortunately the idea of leaving a bag of clothes at your local council will not help necessarily. It is about a more systematic approach. Support the charities that are supporting the refugees and contribute financially.

If somebody does have a large home, as opposed to a room, and is willing to rent that to the local council for Afghan refugees, please do get in contact



with your local council because long-term housing is the biggest issue with getting these refugees out of hotels as quickly as possible.

Q43 Stuart C McDonald: Could I follow up with Councillor Jamieson first with a handful of questions? To drill down, what more information after yesterday's statement and publication does local government need?

Secondly, can you comment a bit more on the tariff? I have not been able to find how the tariff announced yesterday compares to the one offered for the Syrian scheme. I do not know if you have information on that.

Could you say a bit more about the fact that this is operating on a three-year basis rather than five-year and the implications of that for local authorities?

Councillor Jamieson: Apologies. I might have missed something of your questions. On your question on the tariff, my understanding is the funding is similar—I could not swear it is identical—to the Syrian regime. The difference is that that was for five years rather than three years. Clearly, five years would be better.

In terms of data and information, we want two things. We want to know what families are there, the size of the families, the ages of the children, what skills they have, what needs they have and what trauma they have—information about the families, which yesterday's statement did not have.

The second thing is co-ordination. Councils have done a fantastic job in a number of areas as regards, for instance, the hotels, but it is hard to do that job if you do not know about the hotel until the day before. Three Departments across the Government are commissioning hotels at the moment and within the Home Office three different subdepartments are commissioning them, never mind trying to co-ordinate those.

It is about information about the families, their needs and so forth, and it is about co-ordination so we know when a hotel will be used for Afghan refugees, asylum seekers or red-list hotel or when a series of housing in a town is taken over for asylum seekers in general. We need to know that sort of information. We are keen to get that kind of information and data.

Q44 Stuart C McDonald: You have referred to the challenge in terms of the necessary size of housing and others have raised that point as well. Are there any policies or solutions to that or is it just a matter of resourcing? I saw yesterday in a statement reference to a £20 million flexible funding pot. I am guessing that is perhaps what that is to be used for. Have you had discussions with the Home Office about that?

Councillor Jamieson: Funding is a big part of it because we will be able to access more large houses mostly in the private sector. Acquiring private rented is a resource cost issue.

There is also the issue of information on families. It is different in terms of short-term housing need if you have a family of six and all four children are under the age of six because they can share rooms and so forth, or if



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you have a family of six with a 12, a 13, a 14 and a 15 year-old. It is both information and the resources to access this housing, probably through the private rented market. On that point I made about dispersal, the cost of housing, particularly large housing, varies dramatically.

I would also make a comment, and certainly I talk about Central Bedfordshire locally here. When we took on the Syrian refugee programme, we deliberately housed three families in a street so they had their own readymade network. Being able to do that type of thing is helpful so you do not have a family completely isolated from the rest of their community. Having some people nearby is useful but that is the ideal. It makes it, again, a little bit more difficult to find the appropriate housing in the right places if you are not looking for one house but looking for, say, three.

Q45 Stuart C McDonald: A way to try to free up some accommodation would be to fast-track Afghans in the asylum system already so that they can be moved on beyond asylum accommodation. In addition, you also have a couple of hundred who have gone into a limbo process whereby they have had notices of intention served on them by the Home Office, which means their asylum claim is not even considered for six months. I take it you agree that that is the right thing to do in itself but it would also have that benefit of freeing up some accommodation.

Enver Solomon: Absolutely, it would. I recognise the challenge around accommodation, but we are talking about a sixth of the size of the Emirates Stadium, Arsenal's ground in north London with 60,000 on a Saturday. Also, if you do the calculation, if half of councils stepped up, they would have about 58 Afghans in each of their areas, the equivalent of 12 houses if you assume an average of five in a family.

I recognise the challenges, do not get me wrong, but it should not be beyond our capability to seek solutions to this. We know that private rental providers have stepped forward and made offers to the Government. We know also of barriers such as the benefit cap, the housing allowance and so forth, but there must be ways to find a solution around this given the numbers I have laid out.

It is imperative that we move people out of bridging hotels as quickly as possible because life in hotels is not good for these families and is not good for these children. We know the experiences of people in the asylum system—my own organisation published a report back in April about the experience for those in hotels—is damaging to their mental wellbeing and their overall physical health as well.

It is imperative that a standardised model of support is in place in these bridging hotels, provided by local authorities, with the requisite funding and information from central government. At the moment, the voluntary and community sector is having to fill in a lot of the gaps in London and in other parts of the country as well. That is not a sustainable situation.

Q46 Stuart C McDonald: Mr Jamieson, did you want to come back in on that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Councillor Jamieson: I agree with Enver. The housing is out there if you can afford to pay the rent for it.

A second issue—and I am delighted the Committee took this up—is that there are an awful lot of MoD housing properties in some parts of the country that are unoccupied. Being able to access that would make quite a difference as well.

Q47 **Stuart C McDonald:** Okay. Could I go to Alex Fraser finally? You spoke about how one complicating factor had been the myriad statuses that the various people who had arrived enjoyed. As I understand it, among those evacuated were people who were not coming under the ARAP scheme. Previously we were told that they would then be treated in line with the resettlement scheme, but yesterday the announcement appeared to be that they might be treated under the resettlement scheme. What happens to those who do not fit either of those categories? Do we know?

Alex Fraser: That is a good question. The problem is that while that remains a question without a clear answer, people are uncertain of what the future holds for them.

Q48 **Stuart C McDonald:** Enver Solomon, will they have to enter the asylum system?

Enver Solomon: That would be the only option for them and it is not clear. We need clarity about whether they will be transferred across to the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme. We know a few hundred are in this situation as we speak. My staff who are working with families are saying that they are not getting clear information. We need clarity on that.

Q49 **Simon Fell:** We have touched on this a bit already, but I am interested in the role of the Home Office and the challenges that the Home Office is facing at the moment. When the UNHCR reviewed the Syrian resettlement programme, it talked about the need for mental health support, language training and issues like that.

I will come to you first, Enver, because you have touched on this already. What is your view on whether the Home Office has learned its lessons from where it could have improved and built upon the Syrian scheme? Is it in the right place or does it have a way to go yet?

Enver Solomon: There has been, definitely, some attempt to learn lessons. Also, to be fair to the Home Office, it has had to move at speed to put this scheme in place. It is important that it continues to consult with agencies like mine and others that have worked on the Syrian programme.

It is significant to recognise the difference here. A lot of the families that have been settled that came from Syria had been in refugee camps or in temporary accommodation for long periods of time and, as a consequence, their ability to engage with the labour market was much more hindered. Their skills levels were quite low. Their levels of tertiary and secondary education were quite low.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

For a lot of the Afghan families that have come that will not necessarily be the case. Their ability with the requisite support to access the labour market should be relatively positive but it is imperative, and one of the key learnings from the Syrian programme is that they need that support to access the labour market and to access sustainable, long-term employment.

Another key learning is the lack of capacity for English language support. The cuts to support for English as a second language and ESOL do need to be addressed as part of this programme.

Q50 **Simon Fell:** Are you seeing the Home Office prioritising these areas?

Enver Solomon: If you look at the funding package that was announced yesterday, it is broadly the same as the Syrian programme with potentially a bit more additional funding in the pot, but it is not significantly increased or significantly greater capacity there. It is broadly like for like. As I say, some gaps particularly around English language support and particularly around employment support, too, still should be looked at.

Alex Fraser: I agree with everything Enver said. The only thing I would add—and it is critical—is to enable participation of, in this case, people who have arrived from Afghanistan to talk about how they have experienced things so far. What they would say is important in the time ahead, whether it is in respect of the housing that might be available or all the other needs that they have. That participation being important was a learning from the Syrian programme as well.

How can that work well and be meaningful? Organisations like the British Red Cross, the Refugee Council and others are there to help build some of these bridges and create those safe environments for those conversations to happen.

Q51 **Simon Fell:** Are both of your organisations having a good dialogue with the Home Office at the moment or would you like that to step up?

Enver Solomon: We are having a dialogue with the Home Office. As I say, the challenge here is that the Home Office's operational capacity is massively stretched, I would argue overstretched, because of the point I was making earlier. It was already having to deal with, in effect, a crisis in the asylum system due to the backlog and due to the large numbers in so-called contingency accommodation, including hotels and the army barracks in Napier, and some real challenges there. Then it has suddenly had to deal with this as well with the same operational capacity. That is not a feasible level of response to expect from the Home Office.

It is also important to recognise that we know that the Home Office's approach to the asylum system and to the refugee protection system has been based on a political desire to make the system quite austere, quite harsh and quite hostile. The political view has been that if you do that, you are less likely to create so-called pull factors for people to want to come to the UK for the political reasons that different Governments have set out.



The consequence of that is that the system is stretched extremely thinly. It does not always see the face behind the case, which was the key recommendation of Wendy Williams's Windrush review. As a consequence, people do not get the support that they need and are not always treated with the compassion and humanity that they want to be treated with. Therefore, to deliver suddenly an operational warm welcome that is trying to do something radically different becomes challenging as a consequence.

Alex Fraser: I echo the point on resourcing. All the roads seem to lead to quite a small number of people in the Home Office. That must be extremely challenging for them. Despite the fact that, as I said earlier, they have absolutely stepped up to the plate and have worked phenomenally hard for the last couple of months, it is not sustainable, not if we want to see some of these reforms, which will be hugely challenging. They are in part challenging only because there are not enough people to share that load of the challenging

Q52 **Chair:** Does Councillor Jamieson want to add anything more about that issue of the capacity and culture of the Home Office and its ability to respond to this?

Councillor Jamieson: I echo what others have said. We have seen civil servants working hard, trying to do the best they can. It is a stretched process. To be frank, a lot of the public sector is stretched. Many of us had expected our officers to maybe have a slightly slacker August, which did not happen. Overworked officers ended up with even more work.

Q53 **Simon Fell:** I have one final question for you, Councillor Jamieson, in terms of your dialogue with the Home Office. You referenced earlier that you were hopeful that you would get some data on the numbers of people moving to areas, where they were being sited and that sort of thing.

Is it an endemic problem in terms of your dialogue with the Home Office that things are not being shared and crucial information is not coming your way or are you confident you will be able to work through these things?

Councillor Jamieson: We have found with regard to asylum seekers in general, red-list hotels and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children that we are hit by a wave each time and there is a lack of data and a lack of co-ordination. The Afghans are the same. Over time—and that has been weeks in most instances—it has improved significantly as people have settled down and co-ordinated and shared information.

If I take accompanied asylum-seeking children as an example, albeit over a longer period, we spent six months talking to the Home Office and the Department for Education and we have ended up with a sensible scheme that is reasonably funded and, on a largely voluntary basis, is seeing unaccompanied asylum-seeking children finding placements across the country.

To be honest, that is my expectation with this. This was all urgent and those things were not put in place, bearing in mind the overworked civil



HOUSE OF COMMONS

servants. We are beginning to see better information. We have improved dialogue. Enver was mentioning councils doing wraparound support at hotels. We are having that conversation about how we do that, how we fund that and how we can work with the Home Office to do that. It is a steady improvement.

Chair: Thank you very much for your evidence this morning. We are conscious that this is a fast-moving situation. We are hugely grateful for the work of all your organisations on this.

Would it be possible for each of your organisations to provide us with any form of written-up data, in three or four weeks, about the progress you are seeing, any challenges emerging and also the work being done at that point? We will continue to follow these questions and to raise these questions with the Home Office as well. Thank you very much for your evidence today. We appreciate your time. Thank you. That concludes our evidence session.