



Home Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 17 November 2021

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Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Ms Diane Abbott; James Daly; Andrew Gwynne; Adam Holloway; Dame Diana Johnson; Tim Loughton; Stuart C McDonald; Gary Sambrook.

Questions 54 - 101

Witnesses

I: Victoria Atkins MP, Minister for Afghan Resettlement, Home Office; Emma Haddad, Director General, Asylum and Protection, Home Office; Catherine Frances, Director General, Local Government, Strategy and Analysis, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Victoria Atkins, Emma Haddad and Catherine Frances.

Q54 **Chair:** Welcome, Minister Victoria Atkins, Catherine Frances and Emma Haddad to give evidence to us now on some of the issues around Warm Welcome and the Afghanistan resettlement scheme.

Can I ask you initially, just following on from the questions we have previously been putting about issues around Channel crossings, how far events in Afghanistan are going to increase the number of people who are fleeing persecution in Afghanistan and who end up being exploited by criminal gangs and making very dangerous journeys as a result?

Victoria Atkins: First of all, may I thank you and the Committee for your scrutiny of Operation Warm Welcome? I hope during this session we will be able to lay out both what we have achieved thus far and also our plans and ambitions for the future. I would also make the point that this is genuinely a cross-Government effort. When I speak on behalf of fellow Ministers, I hope I do them justice and also do justice to the work of individual Departments.

In terms of the wider migration picture, you will be aware that, through Operation Pitting, in those two weeks in Afghanistan we managed to evacuate some 15,000 people. That was an extraordinary number in very difficult circumstances. The world is now having to contemplate what may unfold in the region as a result of the instability in Afghanistan. I know my colleague Emma will be able to assist on some of the detailed planning that goes on across Government in terms of migration movement, but I am sure the Committee will understand that there will be times that we are not able to share data, because it is based on intelligence.

Q55 **Chair:** I am simply asking for an assessment as to whether you think that this is going to increase the number of people who are making these dangerous journeys, potentially right across Europe, potentially to reunite, for example, with family who are here in the UK but end up being exploited by criminal gangs, not least because there is no safe legal route for them to take.

Victoria Atkins: If I may just take that last point first, we are in the process of setting up a safe and legal route. This is the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. This is in addition to ARAP, which has been in force since April. We flew some 2,000 people out before Operation Pitting under the ARAP scheme. In the longer term, of course, the UK has been helping those who assisted the British Army since 2014.

In terms of safe and legal routes, we absolutely understand the concerns that people have, which is why, as I say, we are setting up this new safe and legal route under the ACRS. It is taking us some time, not least because of the very difficult security situation in Afghanistan. We also want to ensure that any scheme we set up is future-proofed for the



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people of Afghanistan, because, as we all acknowledge, there will be movement. We are seeing it at the moment. Indeed, we are continuing to fly people out from third countries who have escaped Afghanistan.

Q56 Chair: I want to come back to that. Particularly following our previous session, I am just trying to look at some of the links between them. The Afghanistan resettlement scheme currently does not have a family applications route within it. Is that correct?

Victoria Atkins: Again, you will recall that I set out our policy statement on 13 September. The scheme itself will include the ability for dependents to come across with principals, as indeed has been the case with ARAP and so on.

Q57 Chair: Let us take, for example, the situation of a family who are desperately trying to leave Afghanistan because their lives are at risk from the Taliban, who have family here. They are not dependents of family here, so they are not covered by the normal family reunion rules, although bear in mind that family reunion visas are not applying at the moment because of your biometrics challenges there. They have to leave Afghanistan. The country that they have a connection with, where they have family who could help support them and so on, is the UK, but they are not sponsored by an international organisation in Afghanistan or elsewhere. They currently have no way to be able to apply to be one of those families included in the resettlement scheme. Is that correct?

Victoria Atkins: We are talking about a population of 40 million. We and other countries around the world have some very difficult choices to make in the future. I do not shy away from that; I have tried to be frank with the House on that.

Q58 Chair: You are ruling out any kind of family route. Once people have fled Afghanistan, they may in practice be trying to reunite with family. There might be other people who have family in other countries and they might be trying to join them. If you do not have a safe legal route for those people to connect with their families through your existing resettlement scheme, are you not increasing the likelihood that they will end up in the arms of people smugglers and traffickers instead?

Victoria Atkins: I will turn to Emma in a moment, who leads in the Home Office on wider asylum policy. As I say, we are putting in place this safe and legal route. We have set out the criteria and we feel the responsibility enormously, because we know that we will not be able to offer a home in the United Kingdom to every Afghan who may be worried, frightened and terrified by the actions of the Taliban. We simply cannot.

Q59 Chair: Do you accept, then, that some of those families will not be able to apply through a legal route and that you will see an increase in the number of those families who end up coming into the arms of the people smugglers instead?



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Victoria Atkins: If I may, I am going to pass to Emma now, because I am not privy to all of the information across Government that assists in those wider cross-Government decisions.

Emma Haddad: Thank you, Minister. If family members have fled Afghanistan and go to a third country and can go to a visa application centre and give their biometrics, they can apply in the normal way through the family visa route, if you are a family member of a British national and meet the rules, or through family reunion, if you are a family member of someone offered refugee protection or other humanitarian protection. That will still apply.

Q60 **Chair:** The family reunion connections are quite narrow in terms of dependents. It will be quite narrow numbers who will be covered by that.

Emma Haddad: Under the rules, they are generally spouse or partner and dependents under 18, yes.

Q61 **Chair:** You are not currently proposing to have an expanded route within the existing resettlement scheme that you have.

Emma Haddad: I do not believe we are. The normal family rules will apply.

Q62 **James Daly:** Can I just expand on some of the Chair's points? How many British nationals are currently stranded in Afghanistan awaiting passports or related documentation? That is specifically British nationals and family reunification.

Victoria Atkins: I can give you the high-level figure on British nationals. Again, I would caveat this answer very heavily. By definition, British nationals are not required to notify the British Government of their existence in Afghanistan, so we have to rely on them telling us through the GOV.UK portal and in other forms that they are still there in Afghanistan.

We have a number from FCDO. There are around about 1,700 that we have helped to reach in third countries, including dependents. That is outside Afghanistan. As I say, we are limited as to who is in Afghanistan. Unless they have told us, we will not necessarily know they are there.

Q63 **James Daly:** Just going further, how many individuals are in Afghanistan and unable to apply for family reunification visas due to a lack of biometric data?

Emma Haddad: I have data on how many family reunion applications we currently have outstanding.

Q64 **James Daly:** You could give us that as well, please.

Emma Haddad: This is internal management information. To give you an idea, I am happy to share it.



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Victoria Atkins: Please, I would just caveat that we are very careful at the moment about the status of these figures.

Emma Haddad: These will not be in the published statistics, but I can give you an idea, because I know you were given figures at the last hearing that covered this. There are currently 170 family reunion applications from Afghan nationals awaiting decisions. 137 of those came in after the evacuation concluded. That will not include any that have recently been lodged and are awaiting an appointment to register biometrics. It does not necessarily completely answer your question, because people cannot give their biometrics at the moment in Afghanistan.

Q65 **Chair:** This is just the number of people who applied while you still had UK authorities operating in Afghanistan, when you had biometric services in place.

Emma Haddad: Some 137 have applied since the evacuation concluded. I would need to check. I do not think we still had biometric services functioning at that point. I will need to come back to you.

Chair: That would be very useful.

Q66 **James Daly:** In terms of the application process, how long is it going to take for these individual cases to be processed?

Emma Haddad: On family reunion, if we do not have biometrics and somebody does not get to a third country, to a visa application centre, to give their biometrics, we cannot continue with the application at the moment.

Q67 **James Daly:** Just following on there, what is the Home Office doing to resolve the issue of biometric data requirements for those in Afghanistan?

Emma Haddad: There are ongoing talks across Government about how we can put in a functioning visa application service if and when conditions allow. We are also talking to other countries about whether we could something jointly or with third-sector organisations. Conditions and the fast-moving situation mean that it could be some time. It is pretty complex over there.

Victoria Atkins: As you would expect, our priority is the nation's national security. These checks are essential. It is why there is no further answer that we can give in addition to that, I am afraid.

Q68 **Andrew Gwynne:** Good morning, Minister. Can we start on the numbers and get some clarity about them? In your opening statement, you mentioned that 15,000 had been evacuated. We have also talked about family reunion subsequently, although those numbers are much smaller. At Defence Questions on Monday, Minister James Heappey said that 7,000 principals and their families so far had been evacuated under ARAP. Their families could be plus one or plus six or more. Is the 15,000



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an accurate total figure of everybody evacuated from Afghanistan to the UK? What is the actual figure?

Victoria Atkins: Can I thank you, genuinely, for asking this question? The Committee will appreciate that, during the emergency of Op Pitting, we were trying to get bodies on planes. The 15,000 figure is the number of human beings put on planes.

In relation to ARAP, as I have already mentioned, we had started flights out under ARAP before Operation Pitting commenced on 15 August. Between April and Op Pitting in mid-August, we flew out around 2,000. That is ARAP and dependents. Through Op Pitting, we flew out around 5,000. The 15,000 figure has since reduced, because some of the people who we flew out have their own homes and have gone back to their own lives. Indeed, I have a constituent who happily, thank goodness, made it out and has returned to their family home.

We were trying to help other countries; other countries were trying to help us. People may have flown on to other destinations. Of the 15,000, we got to a point where roughly 11,000, as I said on the Floor of the House, are in what we are calling bridging accommodation. As Minister Heapey has referred to in his oral answer, we have endeavoured to fly people since Op Pitting from third countries, where it is possible and where checks, et cetera, have been conducted. That figure in bridging hotels should never be viewed as a constant, "That is it for the next six months, a year and forevermore". It will fluctuate as people move out into permanent accommodation and we will also have people moving in.

Q69 **Andrew Gwynne:** There are 11,000 in bridging accommodation.

Victoria Atkins: It is now around 12,000 because of the new flights that have come over.

Q70 **Andrew Gwynne:** How many Afghan evacuees are in the United Kingdom in total?

Victoria Atkins: We flew out 15,000. As I say, not all of them stayed in the UK. I do not have the figures for who flew out. Some of them are British nationals or have indefinite leave to remain. As a state, we do not have the power either to detain them against their will or indeed to track them. Giving the example of my constituent, she is in the constituency but there is no way that the state would necessarily know where she is, because we have not required people to tell us where they are going. They are British nationals or they have indefinite leave to remain.

Q71 **Andrew Gwynne:** 11,000 is the best figure that we have.

Victoria Atkins: 11,000 or 12,000, yes.

Q72 **Andrew Gwynne:** In September, the Home Office said it had so far secured permanent housing for only 2,000 people. Is that still the correct figure?



Victoria Atkins: No. I am really pleased to be able to help the Committee with the most up-to-date figure. Again, I am caveating this, because, as you will appreciate, it is a very dynamic situation. We have had over 300 local authorities offer properties, which is great news. We are working with them and with others to try to raise it up even higher. We now have around 4,000 individuals who have either moved into a settled home, are awaiting a move-in date—in other words, the house is being done up and they are about to move in—or they are in the process of being matched to a house.

As Emma will be able to tell you, the exercise of matching families to properties is critical operationally. We are doing it in a very careful manner. We are trying to do it in a trauma-informed manner as well, because some of our adults and our children are highly traumatised. We are trying to do it in a careful and caring way to match the right home to the right family.

Q73 **Andrew Gwynne:** That is good news, considering where the figures were only in September. Going back to the bridging accommodation, how many of those children are staying in hotels?

Victoria Atkins: Again, I am caveating the figures, but around half of the 12,000 are children. Again, this is a really important point. When it comes not just to bridging accommodation but also permanent homes, all of the wraparound services that we and local authorities are providing have to match the needs of that family.

For example, there may be properties suitable for a large family with children of primary school age and, because there tends to be a little more flex in primary school provision nationally, we will be able to move them to an area where their children can slot straight in to school. It is a little bit tricky with some of our secondary school areas. Manchester is doing a fantastic job in terms of bridging accommodation, but I am very understanding of the concerns they have voiced about the schools being able to manage numbers locally.

With children, it is really important that we do not just look to schooling when they are in permanent homes. We also want to make sure they are in the education system while they are in the hotels. I have said previously that the majority of children are either in school or have been offered a place. I can now confirm that over three quarters of the local authority areas have enrolled children living in bridging accommodation and hotels into schools, and eight are in the process of doing so. Over the coming weeks, we expect that every single child will have a place at school.

Q74 **Tim Loughton:** Welcome, Minister. Can I just follow up by concentrating on the children among those refugees? There were 6,000 children. Roughly a third of families have been placed or are in the process of being placed in more permanent accommodation. One can very roughly say that there may be 4,000 children still in hotel accommodation, with



all the caveats that you have referred to.

Victoria Atkins: With all of those caveats, yes.

Q75 **Tim Loughton:** When the Permanent Secretary appeared in front of this Committee some time ago, there seemed to be some confusion as to who had corporate parent responsibility for those children. We subsequently wrote to the Home Secretary to ask her to clarify that. In her reply of 22 September, it was still not clear who has corporate parent responsibility, whether it is the Home Office and, if it is, on what basis they have assumed that from local authorities, who would normally assume that. What exactly is the position as to who is directly responsible, as corporate parent, for those 4,000-odd children who have been in hotels for in excess of three months?

Victoria Atkins: I am going to ask Emma to come in.

Emma Haddad: The formal answer is that local authorities have the statutory responsibility as corporate parent for children in their areas, whether they are in a hotel, whether they are in a house or whether they are going to school. That is the legislation. The practical operational answer is that we are working really closely as a multi-agency forum everywhere that there are children housed in hotels. We are working closely with the local authorities and with the voluntary sector. We have Home Office people on the ground; we have DfE involved; we have local services involved. Operationally, it is a big multi-agency effort. Statutory responsibility lies with the local authority.

Q76 **Tim Loughton:** The local authority is the corporate parent.

Emma Haddad: Yes.

Tim Loughton: When, again in the letter of 22 September, the Home Office was asked about undertaking risk assessments on the temporary accommodation, i.e. hotels being used by the children, the reply was that there is an expectation that hotels meet the statutory health and safety requirements and that the Home Office can request copies of the relevant health and safety certificates. It went on to say that the Home Office has requested some of those certificates. The Home Office appears to be playing the role of corporate parent there.

Our query was not really about the fabric safety of the accommodation, although that is an issue and of course there have been some incidents of children being physically injured because of inadequate accommodation. Our concern was primarily with the safeguarding and welfare of those children, which is a matter for social workers. Given that some authorities had Afghan children placed in hotels in their local authority area without the local authority being consulted or even told, how can the local authority be acting as a corporate parent in that case?

Emma Haddad: The circumstances in which we had to respond at the time—this was an absolutely huge and unprecedented situation—were the arrival of 15,000 people in the space of two weeks, of whom many were



children and practically all of whom went into managed quarantine hotels first. After 10 days, we had to find beds for them, food for them and a roof over their heads. The choices were very limited. We had to use hotels. We had no choice.

Procuring that amount of bed space in that amount of time, to get people moved out of quarantine and into a safe bed, meant that we had very little choice of where to go. We could not consult, as we would normally like to do, in the normal way and work with local authorities in a proper spirit of partnership. I am hugely grateful to local authorities, who responded overnight and extremely quickly. Together, as I said, in a multi-agency way, we have put things in place to make sure that all of those safeguarding duties are being followed. There are escalation processes; there are assessments being undertaken of every child.

Did it happen very quickly at the beginning? Yes. Did local authorities have a big choice in the fact that we were putting children and their families in hotels in their areas? No, they did not, because of the circumstances.

Q77 Tim Loughton: We do not at all underestimate the challenge of having that problem all of a sudden in a short space of time. Nobody is denying that. It is not a question of whether local authorities had a choice; you needed to find accommodation. We could not believe that it is such a big ask that the Home Office actually inform the host local authority that there are children now in the care system within their own borders. In certain cases, particularly in the neighbouring authority to mine, Brighton and Hove, that did not happen.

What I am concerned about now is the clarity of where the buck actually stops in terms of the welfare of those children. The Minister has said that a good number of them are getting some form of education. That is great. However, permanence of placement in education is what they really need. Placement at a school when they are settled in permanent accommodation is really important. So far they have missed three months, and it may well be three more months, or longer, before those children get placed.

This Committee just wants to understand what the role of the Home Office is as opposed to what the role is either of Kent, as the authority for where many of them have arrived—as well as looking at some of the Channel crossing refugees and asylum seekers, as we were discussing earlier—the local authority where they happen to have been placed or the local authority where they happen to have ended up, where there is permanent accommodation. Are there absolute proper protocols as to who their designated social workers are? What assessment has been done of whether it is really in the children's interest that they are in hotel rooms for three months now with very few facilities that children would normally have as basic. There is a lot in there.



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Victoria Atkins: There is a lot in there. Nobody wants a single Afghan child, or indeed adult, to stay in hotel accommodation any longer than is necessary. They are only in bridging accommodation because we do not have the sorts of large houses available, standing empty, ready for them to move into.

Indeed, it is in marked contrast to the approach that was taken with the Syrian resettlement scheme. That did not happen under the same sort of emergency conditions. For people who were selected by the UNHCR, all of their paperwork was sorted out while they were in-country. The house, the school, their medical needs and everything else was sorted in this country before they were allowed to set foot on a plane. We have not been able to do this with the Operation Pitting contingent, but, of course, as we go forward, that will be different and all the better for it.

In relation to the children who are in hotel rooms at the moment, over the coming weeks, DfE and local authorities are confident that they will all have a school place. The majority of them are in school at the moment or have been offered a place. In terms of their education, I appreciate that it is not as ideal as we would like if they were in their permanent home, but they are still getting that education. You may have seen, over the last couple of weeks, DfE, as part of its announcement of providing electronic devices to the most deprived and disadvantaged children, has specifically set aside 6,000 devices for Afghan children, because we want them to integrate as quickly as possible into their education.

In terms of the matching process, schooling is absolutely part of that matching process, as I said in my earlier answer. I am just trying to find my Dear Colleague letter. I set out the package in my most recent Dear Colleague letter to colleagues to try to give colleagues reassurance and confidence when discussing this with their local authorities. We have set out a really ambitious package for local authorities who are looking after families and Afghans in permanent accommodation. That is wraparound support, including extra funding for school places so that those children are helped through their schooling.

It is very difficult. I do not underestimate that at all at the moment. We want to get them into permanent homes and we have the package available for local authorities, as they move into those permanent homes.

Q78 **Tim Loughton:** I will just ask one more question, because we need to move on. Can you tell us how Afghan nationals arriving across the Channel, say, through illicit means, be they adults or children, are treated? Will it be differently to Operation Warm Welcome?

Victoria Atkins: It will, because Operation Warm Welcome was conducted through the safe and legal route of ARAP from April onwards. We then had Operation Pitting, and in due course we will be confirming the terms of the ACRS. In terms of other routes in, again I am going to defer to Emma, who has oversight of the whole system.



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Q79 **Chair:** I am going to ask you to send us some further information in writing on that one.

Victoria Atkins: Yes, of course. I am very happy to.

Chair: I am just going to ask everybody to ask very short questions and give short answers so we can quickly squeeze through as much information as possible.

Q80 **Adam Holloway:** First, congratulations. You have done brilliantly in the circumstances. One of my constituents, a deputy head teacher, asks whether, if you are going to educate children of the same age in the same classes, which is putting considerable pressure on her school, you are providing extra dosh for Afghan children who do not speak English?

Victoria Atkins: We most certainly are. First of all, we are extremely grateful to head teachers and teaching staff across the country, who have scooped these children up and who are looking after them and helping them integrate. There is extra funding. I will be provided with it in a moment. This funding is to help those integration issues that schools will be finding, particularly around the English language. Of course, we are also helping fund English language lessons for adults as well. It is £4,500 per child within the permanent package, in addition to the £20,000 per person.

Q81 **Stuart C McDonald:** Just to follow up on the education questions, among the figures you did not give a proportion or a figure for the number of children who are actually now in school and the number who are not. Are you able to send us that if it is not readily to hand?

Catherine Frances: You are quite right. We did not quote that figure. It may be something that DfE has, working with local authorities. The local authorities hold the child-by-child data. We can certainly revert to DfE and provide the best that is possible. We may have local authority by local authority.

Q82 **Stuart C McDonald:** That would be helpful, thank you. As I understand it, the MoD has been used to gather information about Afghans in hotels. One issue that was raised with me was that sometimes there had been a difficulty in them accessing interpreters, and children had had to be used as interpreters, which is probably not satisfactory for a number of reasons. Is it possible to fix that?

Victoria Atkins: Yes. Can I put on record my thanks to all of the squaddies and soldiers around the country who went out to conduct these interviews? Again, Committee members will appreciate that they were not able to conduct the sorts of detailed interviews that would happen in peacetime before people got on to planes. The MoD has done a great job of asking the sorts of questions we need in both central Government and local government.

In terms of language, we are beginning another process of casework, interviewing to try to find out where those gaps in the information are.



We very much appreciate that the use of children is not ideal and, wherever possible, we want to work not just with established charities but also with the existing diaspora here in the UK. We are really keen to help seize those opportunities for this kind of volunteering that we have received.

Q83 **Stuart C McDonald:** Once that information is gathered, then you can make decisions. I absolutely appreciate that the matching has to be a very careful process, but another issue raised with me by local authorities is that sometimes that process takes so long that local authorities have become reluctant to release houses, because they release houses for the scheme and then end up with those houses sitting empty, waiting for a Home Office decision. Is there anything that could be done to speed that process up while making sure that the process of matching is still thorough?

Emma Haddad: Right at the beginning, people were offering properties and the teams were really focused on the safety and wellbeing of people who had just arrived so there was a bit of a delay. We are now getting into a much better matching rhythm and there should not be a long wait. Matching is a bit of science, because it is about the size of family, any vulnerabilities, any access requirements and any things that need to be done to the property before moving in. There can sometimes be a few weeks before it is ready for the family to move in. There should not be a delay on our side in using the property as quickly as possible.

Victoria Atkins: We are realistic. We want to get people out of bridging hotels as quickly as possible, and we know that local authorities are doing their absolute best. We also want to draw in the expertise of the private rented sector to try to help us with some of this. There is also what I am calling a jobs-first approach. In other words, we estimate that around about a third of the adult population are ready for work. Some of them are incredibly skilled people. We want to move them into the jobs market as quickly as we can. Let us look at employment as a drive as well as accommodation needs.

Q84 **Stuart C McDonald:** On that issue, I take it that they will need to have their immigration status sorted out before they are able to move on to that. What percentage of the people in the bridging hotels are in that position?

Victoria Atkins: Emma knows the documentation. I must not use incorrect language. Everyone in a bridging hotel who arrived as part of Op Pitting or ARAP is free to work, if they feel able to. We appreciate that not everybody will be able to. Emma, do you want to come in?

Emma Haddad: The vast majority of people on arrival in the UK were given six months' leave, which gives you access to public funds, access to employment and access to housing. We are now converting all of those to indefinite leave to remain. They do not need to wait for the BRP to access employment.



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Q85 **Stuart C McDonald:** It will sometimes be tricky to find a job if you only have six months' leave. The faster that process can—

Emma Haddad: Yes, when they need the BRP because the employer will not accept the six months' leave, we are escalating cases.

Victoria Atkins: In terms of my latest Dear Colleague letter, we think about 200 job offers were made as of the date of that Dear Colleague letter. This is a very dynamic, exciting market.

Q86 **Stuart C McDonald:** Finally, we want people out of hotels as fast as we can, but, while they are in there, they need to get access to everything that they need. We have had evidence that there has not been, in too many cases, access to essentials like sanitary products or toothpaste. They have had no access to information packs or, very importantly, cash, and there have been some problems with ASPEN cards. Is that going to be resolved? Has it been resolved?

Victoria Atkins: On ASPEN cards, all adults have now been issued with ASPEN cards, the cash cards. This Committee will know them well. That is in addition to people having full board, so meals at the hotel as well as bedrooms. I understand that there was a technical problem at one point with the ASPEN cards, which perhaps led to a little bit of a delay, but it has been resolved.

Q87 **Ms Abbott:** I wanted to ask about the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. When will it be open for referral?

Victoria Atkins: We are working on it at pace. The honourable lady raises her eyebrows. I am trying to be as frank and open with the House as I can be on this. This is a brand-new immigration route. It is being set up at pace. I am not an Immigration Minister, but normally immigration policy takes many months, if not longer, to formulate. We are setting it up at pace in the difficult scenario in-region that we have already discussed. We want to get it right.

As I have said, there are going to be some very difficult choices for policymakers and others to make. We are working with international partners to set this scheme up so that, when it is operational, we can launch it and do so with great confidence.

I should say as well that of course some of the people who are evacuated may well be eligible under the terms as we set them out in the policy statement of 13 September. They may well be eligible anyway. We are just having to work within the framework that we set out in the statement to deliver a policy and deliver an immigration route that is really going to work for Afghans.

Q88 **Ms Abbott:** Are you able even to give us an estimate of when it will be operational? As you will know, there are hundreds of desperate people in Afghanistan who will want to know.



Victoria Atkins: Just taking a step back, at the moment we do not have any presence in Afghanistan itself. We have mentioned briefly biometrics and so on. There are very real practical difficulties with how people move in and out of Afghanistan. This is why it is taking time. We have teams of people across Government working on this. We want to be able to launch it, but we need to be confident in its framework and its operational ability when it is launched.

Q89 **Ms Abbott:** Have Government considered the suggestion that I know has been made that you should establish an Afghan citizens resettlement scheme implementation group that would bring together Government and civil society? That might speed things up.

Victoria Atkins: Forgive me, but I do not recall such a suggestion. Are you able to help me with who suggested that?

Q90 **Chair:** Many of the refugee charities have suggested that they want to work with the Government on implementing this.

Victoria Atkins: We are delighted. We really want to work with refugee charities. Emma is at the coalface, as it were. You can help with the meetings.

Emma Haddad: We have been discussing a lot of this and getting advice and input from the refugee charities. That is happening. I would not call it a formal implementation unit, but those conversations are happening.

Q91 **Ms Abbott:** Yes, but the Minister has been telling us how difficult this all is. If there was a formal implementation group, drawing on the knowledge of refugee charities, maybe things could move a bit faster.

Victoria Atkins: Some of the issues that we are facing are of a geopolitical nature. They involve assessments as to what may or may not happen in the future in-country. They involve assessments as to the criteria that we have set down in the policy statement. As I hope the Committee will know, I am always very committed and keen to work with the voluntary sector. They can bring great expertise and experience. There are still parts of the policy that we have to resolve across Government.

Q92 **Ms Abbott:** How many of the 56 staff, which I understand are expected to operate this scheme, have actually been recruited?

Emma Haddad: I have a team of around 50 now in place just on the ACRS and the ARAP side of resettlement. I also have an additional 35 just looking after people in the bridging hotels. We also have a case working unit of about 40, so it is a lot more than the 56.

Q93 **Ms Abbott:** Will the Minister tell the Committee whether the UK will start evacuating directly from Afghanistan, in other words using direct charter flights, which I understand Germany has done last week?



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Victoria Atkins: Foreign Office and MoD colleagues will know the exact extent of discussions or lack of discussions that may or not be occurring across our international partners. We are trying to facilitate routes for those who may be eligible, such as British nationals or people eligible for ARAP, both in third countries and in Afghanistan. Again, I must caveat this with the reality of what we are seeing on our television screens even this week.

Q94 **Ms Abbott:** Yes, we have all seen the images on television screens. Are you saying that you are not considering direct charter flights?

Victoria Atkins: No, please do not put that assertion into my answer at all. I have said that there are many parts of Government that are involved in this, including both the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. I cannot be drawn on discussions that they may or may not have been having.

Chair: Minister, we know you need to leave, but we just have a question from Diana Johnson.

Q95 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I just want to ask you some questions about local councils. You said in one of your earlier answers that over 300 local authorities had stepped up and were providing accommodation to Afghans. My understanding is that there are about 343 local authorities. I just wondered why you thought the others were not stepping up.

Victoria Atkins: I am going to ask Catherine from DLUHC to help with this.

Q96 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Because time is short, I am just interested in what the Home Office can do to encourage this. At the moment, we know that there are some local authorities—there are some in the West Midlands—that have stopped accepting Afghans because they believe the current voluntary system is unfair and they have disproportionately carried the burden of the scheme. This relates back to the asylum dispersal scheme.

Catherine Frances: In terms of levelling up, one of our roles is to try to work with local government to bring forward the housing offers, which then get plugged into the Home Office system for matching. That is important context. You are absolutely right: over 300 local authorities have offered. It is slightly complex to unpick that, because in some two-tier areas, for example, you have some local authorities offering on behalf of each other, which gets slightly complex.

We have regional outreach teams with each part of the country, talking to local authorities, saying, "Come on. Why have you not pledged? Why have you not brought properties forward?" and trying to unblock any of the problems that they have. What I would flag is that, first, the money is in place now in terms of the support offer. As the Minister said, there is over £20,000 per person. There is education funding and health funding. In addition there is a housing fund that is in place, which is £17 million



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over three years. The critical thing is that a local authority can use that to access large properties, which are particularly in demand for this group of individuals. They can use that to access properties in the private sector as well.

We are getting a lot of very positive feedback from councils, but we do need to keep pushing them. We think it is a partnership piece of work here. We have a portal open. People are bringing forward housing nominations and we are channelling those straight to local government, which can decide whether the properties that have been brought forward are appropriate, given all of their safeguarding responsibility and all of the property responsibilities they have about quality of housing. We are doing all of that to bring forward stuff. This is going to be an ongoing piece of work over months.

In answer to your specific question, can we compel anyone? No, we cannot. In legislation, we cannot compel councils to do anything, and nor would we seek to do so. In each local area they have a different balance, as you allude to, of housing need and different pressures, and they also know their communities much better than we do.

Q97 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Just very quickly, at the beginning of that answer you talked about levelling up. I was not sure whether you were referring to that in the general sense of the Government's policy around levelling up or—

Catherine Frances: It was the Department; I apologise.

Q98 **Dame Diana Johnson:** That is fine. I just wanted to be clear, though. There are lots of parts of the country where housing costs are much lower—I am thinking of towns and cities in the north—that have in the past been used disproportionately in terms of dispersal. Do you see that this might happen again in terms of this particular group? I noticed what the Minister said about jobs first and trying to look at where skills could perhaps be used. I am perhaps worried about this dispersal based on housing costs, which will mean that areas that in the past have taken more than their fair share will continue to take more than their fair share, if it is based on that.

Victoria Atkins: We want this to be a United Kingdom-wide exercise. I am delighted that we are working with the devolved Assemblies and we want the opportunities to be spread around the country. That is why we have been very careful with the matching exercise. There is a great deal of work going into that. We are working with employers as well to develop this jobs-first approach, and there will be more news on that in due course.

We are very keen to ensure that every part of the United Kingdom can take advantage of the people who we have welcomed from Afghanistan. I have met people in bridging accommodation, and people have very kindly welcomed me into their new homes. There are very qualified people,



people who we will genuinely welcome within local areas. The amazing generosity from the British public in donating items in the very first few weeks in the aftermath of Pitting and their continued interest shows that many of our communities really do want to welcome them with open arms.

Q99 **Chair:** Will the resettlement scheme be announced before Christmas?

Victoria Atkins: I cannot be drawn on that at the moment. We are working at pace.

Q100 **Chair:** Will it definitely be launched before March?

Victoria Atkins: I am going to have to give the same answer at the moment, but this is a snapshot in time. By definition, any Committee hearing is a snapshot in time.

Q101 **Chair:** Is it possible that it will not actually be launched until this time next year?

Victoria Atkins: That is certainly not my intention. We want this scheme to be up and running. We just have to do it in a safe way. That is absolutely not the intention of me or other Ministers.

Chair: In conclusion, I just would urge you to see the connections between the two evidence sessions that we have heard this morning. We would have considerable concern that the lack of safe and legal routes is not only meaning that there are people who are in Afghanistan at the moment whose lives are at risk but also that more people will end up in the arms of criminal gangs and people smugglers who will be exploiting their desperation as a result. At least being able to set out some timetable for people might hopefully prevent more of those dangerous journeys taking place.

Thank you very much for your evidence this morning. That concludes our evidence session today.