

Written evidence submitted by Sulha Alliance CIO (AFU0008)

Brief Introduction of Organisation and Expertise

The [Sulha Alliance CIO](#) was founded by former Afghanistan veterans and academic specialist [Prof. de Jong](#) (Department of Politics and International Relations, University of York) to campaign for and support former Afghan interpreters and other Locally Employed Civilians (LECs), who worked for the British Army. The Sulha Alliance is the only organisation in the UK that specialises in supporting this community and has done so since 2016. Prof. de Jong has conducted research into the protection and rights of former interpreters and other LECs working for NATO forces since 2017. In 2017, she was invited to give oral evidence to the Defence Select Committee on this issue and in 2022, she led the publication of the report '[Divided in Leaving Together: The resettlement of Afghan locally employed staff - A comparison between Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and the US](#)'.

The Sulha Alliance played a crucial role in addressing flaws in the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) when it was launched in April 2021 and provided written and oral evidence to the Defence Select Committee in 2021. The Sulha Alliance was the first to [highlight the plight of the GardaWorld contractors](#) who guarded the British Embassy in Kabul, even before the withdrawal in August 2021; as a consequence, it is still involved in their resettlement under ACRS Pathway 3. The Sulha Alliance is in frequent contact with ARAP and ACRS applicants in Afghanistan and in third countries, such as Pakistan.

Recommendations:

- I. **ACRS pathways should be re-opened for direct applications:** Currently, the scheme's implementation fails to reflect the original intention of the policy to ["provide a safe and legal way"](#) in order ["to support those who have assisted UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for UK values, as well as vulnerable people, such as women and girls at risk."](#) The timeline for the opening of the second stage of the ACRS pathways should be communicated.
- II. **ACRS and ARAP facilitation of crossings into third countries should be aligned:** Help for those eligible for relocation under ARAP and ACRS should be the same with the MOD's expertise and contacts behind-the-scenes used for both groups. Those working to help ARAP-qualified Afghans have successfully and safely ensured thousands have crossed into third countries. Despite obvious risks, this has been a hugely successful, life-changing operation. In contrast, ACRS-qualified Afghans say they have 'no help' with obtaining passports, essential documentation, Pakistan visas, and border crossings. We recommend that the expertise gained over the past two years by those assisting ARAP should be utilised for all.
- III. **Support for ACRS/ARAP eligible Afghan children in hotels in Third Countries:** Provide Afghan children in the hotels of Pakistan and other third countries who are all currently deprived of education with access to the UK school curriculum, professional English language courses, the equipment required for digital access and child-development appropriate leisure activities. Such modest investment is in everyone's

interests. It will be of major benefit for the future of these Afghan children, as well as the wider UK society that they are eager to join. The psychological benefits to these children trapped in their hotels is also very clear. The positive impact on the parents, some of whom are depressed and contemplated suicide, would also be considerable.

- IV. **Expedite transfer of ACRS and ARAP eligible Afghans currently waiting in third countries to the UK.** The *de facto* suspension of regular transfers to the UK, which was put in place in November 2022, should be lifted. The current large backlog of transfers with over 2,000 eligible Afghans in limbo in third country hotels must be resolved as a matter of urgency. The Government should commit to transferring ARAP and ARAP eligible Afghans in third country hotels before their entry visas expire, in line with the original intention of the policy and to avoid contributing to the illegal status of Afghans in third countries.

Evidence

Progress of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) pathways & the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme

Situation for ACRS and ARAP applicants in Afghanistan

1. More than 2 years after the Taliban took over Kabul, **thousands at risk and/or eligible for relocation to the UK under the ARAP or ACRS schemes are still hiding in Afghanistan or left in limbo in third countries.**
2. The MoD has admitted that it **failed to meet its own target of issuing first decisions to all ARAP applicants by August 2023.** In the last few months, we have seen a rush in decisions, **mostly negative**, likely made by relatively less experienced case workers.
3. **Inconsistencies, delays, and lack of clarity in the Afghan resettlement policies and their implementation** have hampered the Government's stated purpose of the resettlement schemes arising out the UK's specific role and mission in Afghanistan.
4. **Inconsistent decision-making** on ARAP and ACRS applications is a constant cause for concern among our contacts. This is also highlighted recently by the Justice Report [*'Reforming the Afghanistan Resettlement Schemes: the way forward for ARAP and ACRS'*](#). JUSTICE found that neither scheme is working as it should. Despite promises to help Afghans relocate, there remain significant delays, lack of transparency, and lack of consistency to Government decision-making. This has resulted in a lack of clarity about how the schemes operate, a convoluted application process with significant implications for the subsequent relocation.

Case Study 1: A 38 year-old former frontline translator, 'Mirwais' (not his real name) is in hiding in Afghanistan with his wife and three children after being refused resettlement

under ARAP because he had been dismissed after being in a room where another translator was using drugs – a dismissal he disputed. Three interpreters had been in the room on a Helmand base; all were dismissed for the same reason. Yet one has been deemed eligible for ARAP, while Mirwais has been refused despite having glowing references from those UK troops he worked beside. The ex-translator claims his case shows the inconsistencies in decision making by the ARAP teams: ‘There is no difference between our cases, but one official gives a lifeline to my colleague, another refuses me on the same evidence.’

5. Locally Employed Civilians (LECs) who were directly employed by the British Army in other capacities than as patrol interpreters have virtually all [received negative decisions on their ARAP applications](#). This is **in contrast with the policy towards LECs during the evacuation operation Pitting itself, raising questions of fairness.**
6. The **refusal grounds for non-interpreter LECs under the ARAP policy remain opaque**. MoD Guidance states that to be eligible under ARAP Category 2, the nature of an applicant’s role must have a) been such that the UK’s operations in Afghanistan would have been materially less efficient or materially less successful if a role or roles of that nature had not been performed and b) exposed them to being publicly recognised as having performed that role; and c) as a result of that public recognition, their safety must now be at risk. However, in the refusal letters issued to LEC applicants, there is no clarification whether the applicants are deemed to fall short of criteria a, b and/or c. This lack of clarity makes it almost impossible to request a review of the negative decision.
7. Another **area of concern is the assessment of ‘risk’**. Whole groups who worked for the UK such as mechanics, welders, drivers and camp guards received a ‘blanket refusal’ under the ARAP policy. But it is clear that for some their work with the UK is well known among Taliban, especially as many were recruited from the local area.

Case Study 2: The dangers are illustrated by the case of a 35 year-old ex-mechanic, who was refused resettled under ARAP. In September 2023, Taliban went to his home looking for him. They demanded to know from his 87 year-old father where he was hiding. When the father refused to ‘give-up’ his son, they beat him so badly he suffered internal bleeding. He died in hospital but told his son the Taliban said they would kill him because he was a ‘traitor’ who had worked for the West. We have verified the mechanic’s story through interviews and the circumstances of his father’s death; further evidence can be provided to the Committee upon request in this and other case studies.

8. Currently, **none of the ACRS pathways is open for direct applications**. The first application phase of Pathway 3, the only pathway originally open to direct applications, closed more than a year ago, in August 2022.
9. Initially, the Government announced that “[beyond the first year \[of ACRS pathway 3\], the Government will work with international partners and NGOs to design and deliver Pathway 3](#) and allow us to welcome wider groups at risk”. However, despite the fact that

the first year of pathway 3 has come to an end in August 2022, the Government has not yet made any announcement about Year 2 of Pathway 3. Instead, it has quietly changed the wording of the policy from 'the first year' to '[the first stage](#)', avoiding accountability on the initial promise. There are **no published details of the timeline for the opening of the second stage of ACRS Pathway 3.**

10. There is **no published policy on the application of the ACRS cap of “[up to 20,000](#)”** persons. There is a lack of transparency on how this cap is applied, whether and how applications are prioritised (i.e. given urgent consideration rather than being assessed on a first come first served basis), and how the numbers are distributed over the three ACRS pathways.
11. Despite the fact that “[the UK formally opened the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme \(ACRS\) on 6 January 2022](#)”, Afghans who were evacuated in August 2021, but who did not meet the ARAP requirements, **have been retrospectively categorised as resettled under ACRS Pathway 1.** This includes a large number of [Afghan family members of British nationals](#), who managed to get on evacuation flights, who neither met the criterion of having supported the UK mission nor of being particularly vulnerable or at risk. This cohort's retrospective labelling as resettled under ACRS, has made the overall cap of up to 20,000 for the ACRS resettlement scheme even more limited.
12. ACRS Pathway 3, which in the first year was open exclusively to Expressions of Interest from British Council contractors, GardaWorld contractors and Chevening Alumni has a quota of 1500 persons. **No rationale has been provided for this quota or how numbers have been triangulated between the three different Pathway 3 cohorts.** No further details have been released following a [Freedom of Information Request](#) “*to provide details of the discussions that took place at ministerial and departmental levels showing how the decision was reached to make 1,500 places available under Pathway 3 of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme*”. Our evidence suggests that the number of eligible applicants with their family members is highly likely to exceed this number. This quota needs to be reviewed if, as one lawyer put it, “it is not to arbitrarily undercut the whole purpose of ACRS to (i) protect and (ii) deliver on obligations owed”.
13. **Continued delays in ARAP and ACRS decision making, contribute to more applicants having expired passports and other documents.** There is a misguided assumption that Afghans have marriage, adoption and birth certificates in their possession, as according to UK custom these would be issued at the time of the event itself. However, this is not common practice in Afghanistan, which means that [applicants still have to obtain these documents from Taliban authorities, which exposes them to risk and financial extortion.](#) The continued delays with ACRS and ARAP decisions and the economic crisis in Afghanistan leave applicants in a precarious financial position, which constitutes a further barrier for obtaining documents. The delays and requirements also fuel illegal travel and resorting to people smugglers.

14. Applicants who have received letters confirming their eligibility for ARAP and ACRS still face the **difficult and dangerous challenge of escaping into a third country**, mainly Pakistan. Those challenges include obtaining passports for all family members; often, only the 'principal' applicant has one – at a time when the Taliban controls the passport office while holding the Biometrics of many who worked for the UK – securing a visa for Pakistan, which can cost up to £1,000, making their way through checkpoints and then across a border administered by Taliban officials.
15. The **help provided behind-the-scenes differs considerably between ARAP and ACRS** and there is a clear need for them to come under one umbrella. The MoD-run ARAP team has been able to help silently with documents, including passports, visas for third countries, transportation, negotiating checkpoints, security and border crossings, and liaison with the BHC in Islamabad, easing the threat and burden to Afghans in danger because of their work for the UK. Thousands have been helped to safety.
16. However, **Afghans who qualify for ACRS report they are offered none of this assistance or advice**. They feel they are effectively 'on our own' and ask why those overseeing ACRS (FCDO) refuse them the same help as ARAP. They believe it could cost lives and means those who worked for the UK and qualify under ACRS are forced to face the danger of being left behind in country longer.

Case Study 3: A former Afghan teacher and manager for the British Council is in Pakistan waiting to relocate to the UK, but his wife and children are still trapped in Afghanistan. The 45 year-old and his family are eligible to relocate to the UK under ACRS but he is the only one with a passport. The teacher, who spent a decade working for the British Council in a rural province, was brutally beaten by the Taliban in front of his family and only left them behind because of further threats. He said it was 'impossible' to obtain passports and travel documents without help as it would cost both thousands of dollars but also expose his family to the Taliban, who control the passport office. His journey to Pakistan had been made, he said, without help from the UK although he is now in a BHC-funded hotel.

Situation for ACRS and ARAP applicants in Pakistan, Iran and Turkey

17. After their eligibility is confirmed, eligible Afghans are accommodated in British FCDO funded hotels in Pakistan, and to a lesser extent Iran or Turkey. They are supported by the British High Commission (BHC) or respective Embassies.
18. In December 2022, the **UK Government suddenly stopped transferring Afghans waiting in third country hotels** – the last RAF relocation flight was in November - citing a lack of accommodation in the UK. On the 6th of July 2023, [the MoD admitted that only 45 individuals eligible under ARAP and ACRS had been relocated from Pakistan to the UK in 2023.](#)
19. **The number of eligible Afghans in limbo in Pakistan hotels now exceeds 2,000 people, about half of whom are children.** This number is increasing every week.

Case study 4: A 34 year-old former frontline interpreter says he is ‘trapped’ in his Iranian hotel room with his wife and three children, his life in ‘limbo.’ Forced to flee into Iran because of Taliban death threats in February, he has been granted a visa to come to the UK, but told he is unable to travel until housing is found. ‘It is an impossible task to find housing from here, my former colleagues now in Britain can’t find housing so how can I do so from Iran?’, he says, pointing out that their visas have expired already. His ARAP application predated the August 2021 evacuation and had originally been rejected but the decision – like many others we are aware of – was overturned in the courts. A High Court judge concluded that his application had been the subject of ‘unconscionable delay’ by the Home Office.

His video testimony is one of the testimonies [available to watch](#) on the Sulha Alliance twitter account.

20. Robert Jenrick, Minister for Immigration at the Home Office stated in May this year that [“hotels are unsuitable accommodation”](#), which Minister Johnny Mercer from the Ministry of Defence also confirmed earlier this year. While similar statements have been made about UK hotels, the **conditions in third country hotels are incomparably worse with fewer support and facilities.**
21. Despite this issue being raised by the media, politicians and lawyers, the **UK Government has neither published concrete plans to source accommodation nor a timeline to resume transfers to the UK.** The government is linking their relocation to finding housing in the UK, a condition likely to see them remaining many more months, if not years, in hotels in third countries.
22. ACRS and ARAP eligible Afghans arrived full of hope in Pakistan and other third countries, ready to begin their new lives. Having sold all their belongings and their homes, having said goodbye to their loved ones, **they now despair that they will ever**

be resettled. Most were only able to bring one suitcase, which they say they still live out of today.

Case Study 5: A female British Council teacher explained: “In my classes I taught English and UK values, such as equality, diversity and inclusion for men and women in Afghanistan. These values are not common in Afghanistan. When Taliban took control of Afghanistan, my life was in danger. Therefore my family and I fled to Pakistan. I received my application approval from ACRS 7 months ago, but we are still stuck in Pakistan. I would like to request the British government to solve the housing problem for Afghans who are stuck Pakistan. We are unable to find accommodation in the UK from Pakistan.

Her video testimony is [available to watch](#) on the Sulha Alliance twitter account.

23. Caseworkers in Pakistan provide little help in finding accommodation. They also **don't provide sufficient detail on what is deemed 'suitable' accommodation** to Afghans who are trying to source accommodation themselves.
24. Communication about the timeline for transfer to the UK is, at best, vague. For instance, in recent communication to those in Pakistan who already have been issued with UK entry visas, they are told that “**We are unable to say how long it will take us to find accommodation for you**, and so we encourage you to look for your own if you are able to”.
25. More than 1,000 Afghan children are left in limbo for the foreseeable future, with many of them already in third countries for over one year. The **UK Government has so far refused putting formal facilities in place for the children**, such as access to digital education sources introducing them to the UK school curriculum, British Council-led English language classes and a programme of sports activities.
26. Those currently in Pakistan have repeatedly spoken out against their **abandonment and the lack of support leading to mental health issues and distress** (see [Newsnight](#) 17 May 2023 & [Daily Mail](#) 1 June 2023). Those in hotels speak of incidents of domestic violence and attempted suicide.
27. In recent communication, ARAP and ACRS eligible Afghans in third countries have been asked to sign a ‘Code of Conduct: Expected Behaviours’ document. This includes the **guidance that support can be withdrawn at any time** and that once support is withdrawn they have a limited time to move out of the BHC accommodation. This will likely leave people stranded and living illegally in third countries.
28. For some, this warning is particularly alarming, as **approvals previously issued have been rescinded.**

Case Study 6: A 36 year-old former supervisor of interpreters, who has spent 16-months in a Pakistan hotel with his family awaiting relocation to the UK having told he was eligible for ARAP, has now been informed he no longer qualifies and faces being returned to

Afghanistan. An original negative decision on his application was overturned and he was sent an email in August 2021 stating he was eligible for ARAP. A second email in May 2022 repeated that he was ARAP eligible. He was advised to travel to Pakistan with his family and was placed in a BHC hotel. However, in August 2023, he was sent a letter stating the two previous emails had been 'sent in error' and were 'invalid'. He called the announcement 'a bad shock'.

29. The prolonged delays in the hotels have meant that **the majority of the 2,000-plus ARAP and ACRS eligible Afghans has seen their visas expire**. This is the case in Pakistan and Iran where the authorities have been cracking down on Afghan 'illegals.' In the last three days of September, [in Islamabad alone a reported 800 were detained](#), more than half with expired visas.
30. What has caused alarm for Afghans awaiting relocation to the UK is that **seven of those detained only a few weeks ago, were ARAP-qualified and were detained after being woken by police in their beds of their hotel at 6am**. The hotel is one of those used and paid for by the BHC. Until this incident, these hotels were seen as 'safe' and 'off-limits' to the Pakistan authorities. Like many others, the visas of all seven had expired, so technically those held faced deportation to Afghanistan.
31. The seven say they were arrested by anti-terrorist police taken to a police station where they **claim to have been beaten and made to stand for six hours without food or water**, before [being released after BHC intervention](#). The BHC caseworkers sent round a message asking Afghans in their care 'to not be alarmed', but the arrests, coming days after another guest house was visited by Pakistan police and intelligence officers, have caused fear among those waiting to relocate. They have escaped Afghanistan for their own safety, but now no longer feel safe in Pakistan either.
32. The arrests of undocumented Afghans by Pakistani police similarly affects ACRS-qualified Afghans.

Case study 7: As one British Council contractor reported: "Four persons in our group of 43 families have been arrested by the Pakistani police on our way to hospital, because our visas were expired and passports taken by the British Embassy. We were treated very badly and finally made to pay money for our release. Now we are instructed by IOM not to leave our guest houses or they won't be responsible if we are arrested again. We are literally living like prisoners here. We couldn't go out of the guest houses for the last two weeks since we were instructed by IOM. And there's no clear timeline when this situation will end or when we will be given visas and resettled. Currently, all of us are running out of money as we hadn't worked since the Taliban takeover. Many of my colleagues say they don't have even 5000 Pakistani Rupees (\$40) to buy necessary things. Our children and ourselves haven't had access to education for the last two years. In summary, our situation hasn't changed very much from when we were in hiding in Afghanistan. Now we are living in fear of deported back to Taliban."

33. Finally, we are approaching the second anniversary of a former front-line interpreter being accommodated in a hotel in Pakistan; this is the longest an ARAP eligible Afghan has spent in a third country hotel, but many others have been in limbo for more than 1 year. This **'detention' has not only severe implications for their mental and physical health, but also for their ability to integrate and rebuild a life in the UK.**

This evidence has been prepared by:

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