

Written evidence submitted by the Afghan Solidarity Coalition**Follow-up to Defence Committee Hearing on November 16**

We would like to thank you again on behalf of the Afghanistan Solidarity Coalition for the opportunity to give evidence to the Defence Committee on November 16. We very much appreciate the time and space you gave us to share our experience and the difficulties our Afghan colleagues are facing.

We wanted to take the opportunity to follow up on a few of the details that we were unable to go in-depth on in the session.

Proposal for Civil Society Implementation Group for ACRS

As mentioned in the session, we sent a letter to Victoria Atkins on the 25th of September proposing the establishment of an ACRS Central Implementation Group, comprising Government and civil society representation to deliver on the scheme's commitments. This Group will bring their combined expertise to bear on questions of eligibility, priority and referral and ensure that these reflect Afghanistan's particular security and gender concerns and includes voices of women from the region, who understand the cultural, socio-religious and geopolitical context of Afghanistan/South Asia. On the 26th of October we also sent this proposal to Stephen Barclay in his capacity as Chair of the Cabinet Committee overseeing the resettlement scheme. We are yet to have a response from Victoria Atkins and Stephen Barclay.

On the 17th of November Diane Abbot raised our proposal for a civil society implementation group working with HMG to speed up the implementation of ACRS on our behalf at the Home Affairs Select Committee Evidence Session with Victoria Atkins. It is clear from Victoria Atkins' response in the session that our proposal has not been considered, despite affirming to the committee only moments earlier that "we want to work with established charities and existing diaspora here in the UK".

We have attached a copy of our Implementation Group Proposal to this correspondence. The Defence Committee might consider emphasising to the Home Office, the FCDO and the MOD the importance of establishing such a group to ensure cross-department coordination between the three which was a clear issue during our evidence session, and to also ensure that civil societies expertise and experience is informing the scheme.

Eligibility Criteria for ARAP

As Peter Gordon-Finlayson outlined during the hearing, during Operation Pitting, many at-risk individuals were processed at Baron Hotel and evacuated to the UK as they were deemed eligible under ARAP Category 4. The same reading of Category 4 must be applied to determine eligibility under ARAP now, over two months later where the definition of "those who worked in meaningful and enabling roles alongside HMG" is inclusive of the following:

- those who have worked on UK Overseas Development Assisted (ODA) funded programmes, and who are now at risk because of this association with HMG

- those who have worked on initiatives funded by HMG to advance British interests, such as the UK's foreign policy agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. This includes, but is not limited to women's human rights defenders, civil rights organisations working on counter-extremism in the communities, those working within the justice and security system, academics and researchers, and former members of the Afghan government.

In regard to women's human rights defenders and women peacebuilders, the UK has committed to the protection of women's rights in its [2018-2022 National Action Plan](#) (NAP), of which Afghanistan is a focus country. Co-authored by the FCDO and the Ministry and Defence, the NAP explicitly acknowledges that "the protection of women's rights improves peace and stability, economic growth and poverty reduction", a commitment reiterated in HMG's [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#) in March this year. This is an agenda that those in the above categories have worked to achieve in the last 20 years in Afghanistan, and who are now at-risk for doing so.

The UK's commitment to the protection of women's human rights extends to emergency relocation and assistance of those working for these rights, as set out in [ICANs Protection Framework for Women Peacebuilders](#). The FCDO participated in the development of the Framework, financially contributed to this and publicly endorsed it. Only on 19th April this year, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon at the UN Security Council briefing referenced the framework saying: "The United Kingdom, I assure you, is absolutely committed to protecting and promoting women peace builders and we are proud to have supported the International Civil Society Action Network's Protection Framework. I urge others to support and implement its expert and effective recommendations." Given the disastrously slow implementation of the ACRS, which is yet to open, and since category 4 of the ARAP scheme is inclusive of these at-risk Afghans whose risk to life means they cannot wait for the opening of ACRS, we urge HMG to assist in the evacuation of those we have outlined here. This is a moment for HMG to act upon its ongoing commitment to Afghans who worked alongside the UK, where reneging on its commitments is likely to have larger knock-on effects on the UK's foreign relations, security partnerships and global diplomacy.

List of colleagues left behind

We thank Stuart Anderson for inviting us to submit a list of our Afghan colleagues eligible for resettlement under Category 4 of ARAP to the Committee. We are currently finalising the list of people who have worked in meaningful and enabling roles alongside the UK government in extraordinary and unconventional contexts. The work of all these people was funded directly by HMG to advance UK interests, and they are now at high and imminent threat to life because of it. We would like to thank the Committee for considering these cases and for their work with the relevant parts of HMG to facilitate their timely relocation.

Recommendations for the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme Delivery and Implementation

Given the fast-changing conditions in Afghanistan, HMG should make sure that there is a centralised, coordinated implementation of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) that is co-designed between HMG and its counterparts in civil society to effectively prioritise, refer and resettle through the scheme.

The ACRS already states *that prioritisation and referral for resettlement will be in one of three ways*

1. *Vulnerable and at-risk individuals who arrived in the UK under the evacuation programme will be the first to be resettled under the ACRS. People who were notified by the UK government that they had been called forward or specifically authorised for evacuation, but were not able to board flights, will also be offered a place under the scheme if they subsequently come to the UK.*
2. *Secondly, the government will work with the UNHCR to identify people most at risk and refer them for resettlement, replicating the approach the UK has taken in response to the conflict in Syria.*
3. *Finally, the government will work with our international partners in the region to implement a referral process for those inside Afghanistan (where safe passage can be arranged), and for those who have recently fled to countries in the region. This process will likely be affected by the ongoing situation within Afghanistan¹.*

To make sure that these three referral pathways are coordinated and that the lead agencies are working together effectively, we propose that HMG establish a **Central Implementation Group**. This Group will ensure that HMG benefits from the knowledge and expertise of those directly engaged with at-risk Afghans, that the scheme is gender responsive, conflict sensitive and inclusive of those who are prioritised by the scheme.

How would this group work?

Central Implementation Group would work with the HMG to co-design the implementation of the ACRS, making sure that those who are eligible can resettle in the UK as soon as possible. The Group would:

1. Recommend and refer at-risk people to the ACRS including collating and collecting names of individuals, organisations, groups, contractors, implementors who assisted with these efforts (consistent with referral pathways 2 and 3);
2. Provide updated and current information of risk and context specific advice for groups of people at risk (consistent with referral pathways 2 and 3);
3. Identify the obstacles and the critical pathways to ensure their protection and safe and timely passage to the UK (consistent with referral pathway 3); and
4. Critically assess the ACRS scheme to ensure that it delivers for those most at risk and vulnerable. This includes understanding the cultural contexts that the scheme needs to respond to and being sensitive to the particular needs of women and children when facing resettlement.

The Group should be convened by, and report to, the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State (Minister for Safeguarding and Afghan Resettlement). The Group will have an agreed Terms of Reference with clear lines of reporting to the Parliamentary Undersecretary.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/afghan-citizens-resettlement-scheme>

This Group would meet regularly due to the urgent nature of the Afghanistan crisis and increasing risk and violence/threats being faced by vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. Meetings will be scheduled by the Office of the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State or the delegated Department.

Who would this Group consist of?

The Group should consist of a representative of each of the FCDO, MoD and Home Office Afghan Crisis Unit; a representative each from UNHCR and INGOs who refer into the scheme (pathways 2 and 3); and Afghan women leaders (across relevant sectors), academics, and experts with direct counterparts in Afghanistan particularly those with direct on-the-ground daily access and knowledge about the conditions that at-risk groups are facing. This composition reflects the key groups required to successfully implement the scheme as it is outlined by the HMG in the [Afghan Resettlement and Immigration Policy Statement](#).

9th December 2021