

# Working towards a compassionate asylum system

British Red Cross response  
to the Borders Bill

June 2021



# About the British Red Cross

**The British Red Cross is the largest independent provider of support and advice to refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK. Every year we help over 30,000 people at all stages of the asylum process including providing food and clothing to 16,000 refugees and helping to reunite almost 1,000 separated families. The British Red Cross has destitution services in 58 towns and cities across the UK, providing basic support to those not in receipt of any support from statutory services.**

## **i People seeking asylum**

A person seeking asylum has normally left their own country due to war, persecution or violence and has requested protection in another country. Their application to receive legal protection is not yet decided.

## **i Refugee status**

Since the foundation of the UN Refugee Convention in 1951 countries have formally welcomed and given protection to people seeking asylum. Refugee status is a legal status granted to someone who has been forced to flee his or her country and has been recognised as having a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group.

## **i Global context**

Around 1% of the world's population - 79.5 million people - are forcibly displaced. This number has nearly doubled compared to ten years ago, and 40% of this group are children.

The majority, 85% of displaced people are hosted in developing countries – and 73% are in neighbouring countries or close to the country they have fled<sup>1</sup>.

## **i UK context**

In 2020, the UK received 37,550 applications for asylum, around a third of the number received each by Germany 124,380, France 103,370 and Spain 108,225<sup>2</sup>.

Around 42% of people seeking asylum in the UK are women and children, 8% are children arriving in the UK alone without a parent or guardian. The five main countries that people granted asylum in the UK flee from are Iran, Syria, Sudan, Eritrea and Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, Global Trends 2019

<https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, Asylum and Managed Migration Database

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/asylum-and-managed->

[migration/data/database](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-statistics-quarterly-release)

<sup>3</sup> Home Office, Immigration Statistics Quarterly Release

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-statistics-quarterly-release>



## We believe every refugee matters

*“The main thing we need as humans: we need to feel like we belong, we have a route, we have people around us who care and want to be around us.”*

Refugee, and British Red Cross staff member

When terms like ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are stripped away from someone, we’re left with who they really are: a person.

A person like you or me, with dreams, stories, thoughts, and feelings.

A person who’s had to run, to escape, to hide themselves and their loved ones away, in fear of violence, conflict, or persecution. A person who doesn’t feel **safe**.

In their search to find safety, someone might have been forced to leave their home behind, take dangerous journeys, and risk their life as an absolute last resort.

Right now, around one per cent of the world’s population have been forced to flee their homes. No one country alone can respond to this humanitarian need, but the UK can and should be a global voice for protecting people’s rights to humane treatment when they flee, wherever they are in the world, and set an example at home through the support offered to the small number of people who do seek safety from war, violence and persecution here.

In March 2021 the government introduced a [New Plan for Immigration](#) that sets out proposals to reform the UK’s asylum system. We believe many of the proposed changes will make it even more difficult for women, men and children, to find safety in the UK.

**The British Red Cross is calling for a fairer, more effective and compassionate asylum system that provides safe routes, fair decisions and supports refugees, no matter how they arrive in the UK.**

In this briefing we set key issues and some of our alternative recommendations to the government. As part of our vision for a fairer, more effective and compassionate asylum system in the UK, we believe that:

Every refugee should have more ways to find safety, where putting themselves and their families at risk isn’t the only option.

Every refugee should be able to safely reunite with their loved ones, because families should be able to be together.

Every refugee should be treated with dignity and expect a fair decision based on their need for safety.

Every refugee should have a safe place to call home, and should have access to the support they need, no matter where they are in the asylum system.

And every refugee should be able to recover from trauma and rebuild their lives, because past experiences are important – but they don’t define us.

Everyone deserves to feel safe, move forward with their lives and contribute to society no matter who they are.

## More ways to find safety and reunite with loved ones

**People are losing their lives in search of safety. Expanding existing, and creating new, safe routes, would give people safe alternatives, reducing the number of people forced to take dangerous journeys to reach protection in the UK.**

This can be done by providing:

- a robust resettlement programme
- a safer and expanded family reunion route
- humanitarian visas that allow people seeking asylum to apply from outside the UK

Since 2015, 25,000 refugees have successfully been resettled to the UK and a further 29,000 people (90% of whom are women and children) were reunited with family members in the UK through refugee family reunion. This allows adult refugees to be joined by their spouse/partner and children under the age of 18.

The government should build on these successes. While there is a welcome commitment to continue to provide resettlement places, there is **no new target for how many people will be resettled in the UK**. Without a clear commitment it will become increasingly difficult for local authorities and support organisations to plan and build the required capacity and expertise to provide a successful resettlement programme.

The government is also proposing to limit access to family reunion for many people granted refugee status because of how they arrived in the UK. **These proposals will reduce the number of families being reunited and increase the risk of families taking dangerous journeys to be with their loved ones.**

People seeking asylum can only claim asylum if they are physically in the UK. **The Borders Bill, due to go through parliament this year, is an important opportunity to introduce Humanitarian Visas.** These allow people to come to the

UK through a controlled route before having their application for asylum processed. These visas can be an efficient and individualised way to grant access to protection for people who may otherwise face dangerous journeys.

However, given the scale of displacement these policies alone will not end people needing to take irregular journeys in search for safety. It is imperative that people forced to take these journeys to reach the UK are not discriminated against and are treated fairly. **Safe routes are not an alternative, but complementary, to a fair, humane and effective asylum system.**

### British Red Cross recommendations

**Expand existing and create more safe avenues than is currently offered in the new immigration plan. The UK government should:**

1. **Set a resettlement target of at least 10,000 people a year**
2. **Expand family reunion for all refugees and ensure that it is safe and accessible.** Including by:
  - allowing adult refugees in the UK to sponsor their adult children and siblings who are under the age of 25
  - Implementing the recommendations in our *Long Road to Reunion* report to make the application process safer
  - Implementing an integration package for arriving families
3. **Be ambitious in its plan to increase safe routes by creating new routes for people to seek asylum outside the UK, by:**
  - Implementing a pilot of Humanitarian Visas.

## Fair decisions based on people's need for protection

### Addressing delays in decision-making and ensuring that asylum decisions are right the first time should be a priority for any reform of the asylum system.

People seeking asylum often wait months, or in some cases years, for a decision on their asylum application. Despite fewer people seeking asylum in the UK, the number of people waiting over six months for a decision doubled over the course of 2020, with 72% (46,796 people) waiting more than six months. The increase is not only due to Covid-19, between March 2018 and March 2020 there had been a 134% increase in people waiting more than six months for an initial decision.

It's not only the length of time that asylum applications take, more decisions need to be right first time. In 2019, 45% of appeals against initial refusals on asylum applications were successful. [Lessons Not Learned](#) published in 2019, compiles findings from over 50 publications issued over the last 15 years on the quality of asylum decision-making processes and charts the many recommendations for improving decision-making that have not been implemented.

People we work with describe the impact of perpetually waiting, feeling anxious, fearful and being unable to work or move on with their lives. Making better and faster decisions on asylum applications would mean fewer people are left waiting in limbo and reliant on Home Office support. It would mean more men, women and children who have fled war, persecution and danger can start to rebuild their lives.

Instead the government is proposing to introduce legislation to strengthen rules on the 'inadmissibility' of asylum claims. Through these rules, the Home Office can decide that a person's asylum application should not be considered in the UK if it believes they have travelled through

another safe country. Decisions are not taken on the strength of someone's asylum claim.

The British Red Cross believe **the focus of the UK's asylum system should be firmly on people's need for protection, not on their journey to the UK.** With one per cent of the world's population currently forcibly displaced, providing access to protection systems is a key element of international solidarity. There are very few safe routes to seek protection in the UK, making it even more important that people can continue to access protection through the UK asylum system.

### British Red Cross recommendations

#### The UK government should:

- 1. Consider asylum applications based on people's need for protection and not how they travelled to the UK.**
- 2. Put improving asylum decision-making at the heart of plans to reform the asylum system.**
  - The Home Office should ensure that decision-makers are properly resourced to make decisions on applications with expertise and in a timely manner. In most instances, this should not take longer than six months.
  - People should be regularly updated on the progress of their application.
- 3. Make sure that early, good quality legal advice is available to people seeking asylum.**
- 4. Work with refugees to make effective reforms to the asylum process and improve decision-making.**

## A safe home and support to rebuild lives

**Providing the right support people need while waiting for an asylum decision, and after a decision, to recover and rebuild their lives, should be a core part of a compassionate and fair asylum system.**

The British Red Cross' recent report, [Far from a home](#), found that an increasing number of asylum-seeking women, men and children in the UK are living in unsafe, unsanitary and isolated accommodation, that falls far short of expected standards, for months and even years at a time. As well as the increasing backlogs in asylum decision making, this is in part due to failures to secure enough community dispersal accommodation.

Instead of addressing these issues, the *New Plan for Immigration* – which sets out the UK government's ideas for changes to the asylum system - proposes to house people seeking asylum in reception centres. As we have witnessed in the ongoing use of ex-military barracks, institutional-style accommodation can have significant negative impacts on people's mental and physical health, as well as isolating people seeking asylum from wider communities.

A more compassionate and effective asylum system would give people accommodation within communities where they can make connections, access essential services and better engage with the asylum process.

The government is also proposing to introduce a new form of temporary protection status for refugees who arrive in the UK irregularly, with reduced rights to family reunion and to public funds. Temporary Protection Visas have been used in Australia at various points since 2001. The [Australian Red Cross](#) has reported that *“temporary protection institutionalises uncertainty, and often poverty, amplifying pre-existing trauma and suspending the process of settling into a new country”*.

The British Red Cross supports around 16,000 people every year who are experiencing destitution at various stages of the asylum process, around 1 in 5 have been recognised as refugees by the government. [Research](#) by the London School of Economics and British Red Cross found that improving and extending the support the Home Office provides to refugees after a decision on their asylum claim, from 28 to 56 days would improve job prospects, health outcomes, reduce homelessness and destitution, saving the taxpayer up to £7m each year.

Instead of proposals on temporary protection and reception centres that will reduce protection for refugees and damage integration, the British Red Cross believe reforms should **focus on improving integration, enabling people to contribute to their new communities and rebuild their lives in the UK.**

### British Red Cross recommendations

#### The UK government should:

- 1. Address the inadequate supply of suitable asylum support accommodation:**
  - Work with local authorities, devolved governments, voluntary sector organisations and others to expand community dispersal accommodation.
- 2. End the use of ex-military barracks as asylum accommodation and move people into safe and suitable housing in the community.**
- 3. Extend the move-on period for newly recognised refugees from 28 to 56 days and improve support for refugees, as set out in [Still An Ordeal](#).**
- 4. Work with refugees to make meaningful reforms to the asylum system and improve integration.**





## Reflections from VOICES Ambassadors

The [VOICES Network](#) brings together people with experience of the issues that affect refugees and people seeking asylum. With training and support, VOICES ambassadors work together to speak out to change policy and practice.

***“We thrive in our communities if given the chance. Making sure this happens should be a priority in the UK Government’s plans to reform the asylum system, rather than putting us into centres separated off from the rest of the world.”***

***“When you are in a difficult position - you do not choose which route to follow. You go either to a refugee camp in the neighbouring country for years or the other option people have are to be forced to pay smuggler’s to reach safe places because there is no other route.”***

***“The UK government should develop immigration policies that welcomes refugees rather than penalising them because of the route they used to arrive in the UK. When someone claims asylum, they claim because they want a proper life, not a life of uncertainty.”***

***“Motivation to work, get out of bed and live life only has meaning when your family is here”***

### Contact Us

You can follow us on Twitter to see our latest work and activities on [@RedCrossPolicy](#)

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