

Shut Out and Let Down: the UK Closes its Doors to Vulnerable Afghans

FEBRUARY 2026

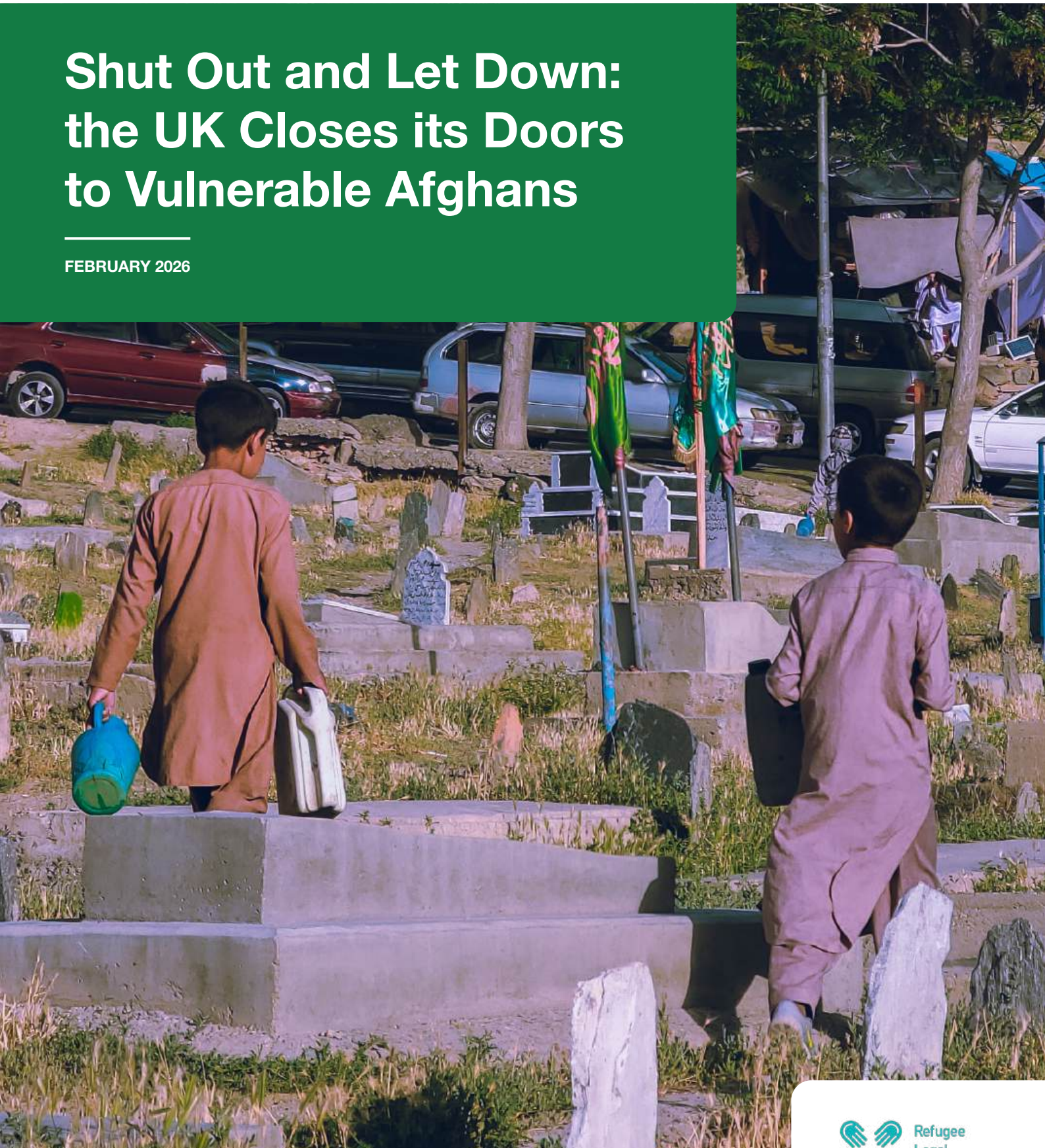


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Koparok village, Sarcheshma, Band Amir, Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2022).
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Peddlers working in the streets of Kabul on a rainy day, Kabul, Afghanistan (2023).
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Acknowledgements

This report is the product of many hands, minds, and voices coming together with shared purpose. Above all, it is shaped by the courage of our clients who entrusted us with their stories and experiences. Their testimonies illuminate the challenges of seeking safety and family reunification, and we are honoured to carry their voices forward in these pages.

The dedication of our volunteer lawyers has been essential to this work. We would like to give special recognition to Ella Rees of Allen Overy Shearman Sterling LLP (**A&O Shearman**), whose extensive contributions to research and report development were invaluable. She also led a team of committed volunteers whose efforts were central to this publication.

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This publication is truly a collective achievement. To all who contributed—clients, volunteers, lawyers, researchers, the designers at A&O Shearman, and artists—we extend our sincere thanks. Your commitment and collaboration have made this report possible and continue to inspire the work ahead.



Foreword

We publish this final report of the Afghan Pro Bono Initiative (APBI) in solidarity with the Afghan families whose resilience continues to drive our work. Since its launch in 2022, APBI has documented, analysed, and responded to the profound challenges faced by Afghans seeking protection through the Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP). This report presents nearly four years of collaborative efforts between Refugee Legal Support, Safe Passage International, and ten leading law firms, united by a shared commitment to provide vital legal advice, representation, and advocacy to Afghan refugees.

Throughout its operation, APBI delivered legal representation for Afghans applying for relocation under the ARP, supported family reunification, and advised on complex legal matters. More than **300** volunteer lawyers contributed over **1,300** hours of expertise to this effort. Since the project began, **284** Afghans have benefitted from legal representation, including a significant number of women, girls, and children. Over **500** individuals benefitted from one-off legal advice at legal clinics, and more than **2,000** Afghans accessed reliable legal information through online sessions and monthly newsletters.

At the centre of this report are the lived experiences of Afghans who continue to show strength despite the systemic barriers that they face. Their testimonies, alongside APBI's casework, highlight the progress that has been made but also the persistent shortcomings of the Afghan Resettlement Programme.

Although the schemes were established with promises of refuge and safety for those fleeing the Taliban's persecution, many applicants faced prolonged delays, exclusions, and uncertainty. This reality is even more pressing now: the schemes have closed, family reunification routes are paused, and access to asylum in the UK has been significantly restricted.

This report is not only a record of achievements and challenges but a call to action. By documenting lived experience and policy failure side by side, we provide evidence for future advocacy and reform, insisting that refugee protection schemes uphold fairness, dignity, and justice.

As APBI concludes, Refugee Legal Support remains firm in its commitment to the Afghan community and will continue to provide advice and support through its wider services. We extend our deepest gratitude to all who have contributed to this initiative. The work of protecting refugees does not end here—it continues in the advocacy, research, and practice of those who carry forward the lessons captured in these pages.

Shamim Sarabi

Research and Community Engagement Lead

Executive Summary

Four and a half years after the Taliban took control in Kabul, Afghanistan remains unstable. The **sharp cuts to US overseas aid** in 2025 have deepened the humanitarian crisis leaving several million fewer Afghans receiving assistance as a result. **75% of Afghan households** cannot meet their daily needs, a situation worsened by the **continued exclusion of Afghan women** from society.

Against this backdrop, the Government **closed the Afghan Resettlement Programme** (the combination of ARAP and ACRS) to new applications and **paused Refugee Family Reunion** in 2025. These decisions removed the few viable routes for at-risk Afghans to reach safety, ignoring the substantial backlogs and unresolved claims.

Our 2023 report, **‘Two Years of Empty Promises: the UK Leaves Afghans Stranded and at Risk’**, and our 2024 report, **‘Still Waiting: the Afghans abandoned by the UK’**, documented serious implementation and delivery failures in both ARAP and ACRS that ultimately prevented them from operating effectively.

The purpose of this report is threefold: first, to document the social, humanitarian, and economic context inside Afghanistan which continues to deteriorate; second, to present what APBI has achieved since 2022, drawing on our casework to illuminate the human impact of policy choices; and third, to assess whether the UK’s Afghan resettlement schemes have met their stated aims and provided genuine access to safe routes.

As of November 2025, **19,622 Afghans** have been resettled in the UK under ARAP. This number should, and could have been, higher had decision-makers applied ARAP’s purpose of protecting those who risked their lives working with Britain in Afghanistan. ARAP has been characterised by long delays and poor communication which has left eligible Afghans in precarious situations. The treatment of “so-called “Triples” members” (**Triples**) continues to highlight the unduly rigid evidential requirements which have hampered the Afghan resettlement schemes. Although the current Government **acknowledges the impact** that the poor-handling of the Triples cases had on Afghans in desperate need of support, this doesn’t undo the severe consequences of administrative dysfunction, including reports of **ex-Triples members being killed by the Taliban**.

When ACRS opened in 2022, the Government **pledged to resettle 20,000 Afghans**. The latest figures show that only two thirds of this number have reached safety in the UK. Successive Governments have squandered the opportunity to create a genuinely protective or safe and legal route. Pathway 3 of ACRS has been particularly underutilised. Its long-promised aim was to protect **the most vulnerable groups** such as women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community, yet this never materialised. No Government expanded Pathway 3 beyond its initial cohorts.

Despite assurances, the ACRS Separated Families Pathway only opened in July 2024 and applications closed three months later. Many Afghans have suffered prolonged separation from their families, causing mental and physical harm. This report explores the human impact of that family separation.

Despite the Government’s emphasis on ‘safe and legal routes’, the **pause of Refugee Family Reunion** in September 2025 eliminated another critical lifeline, especially for women and children who accounted for **93% of Refugee Family Reunion visas** granted in the year ending June 2025. Directing refugees towards the heavily restrictive Appendix FM during the suspension effectively closes the door for most given the prohibitive fees, high minimum income thresholds, English language requirements, and evidential demands that do not reflect refugee realities. The Government has an opportunity to re-design Refugee Family Reunion thoughtfully and APBI urges the Government to capitalise on this rather than capitulate to those who want a hostile environment for some of the world’s most vulnerable people.

The eventual disclosure in July 2025 of **a major data breach** affecting nearly 20,000 Afghans epitomises the inefficiency and controversy that has underscored the Afghan resettlement schemes. The Government has repeatedly broken promises and undermined trust. The revelations have caused deep concern within the Afghan community with **reports of reprisals** against family members or colleagues. Even the Afghan Response Route, created in response to the breach, **has been secretly operated and administered rigidly**, as court cases have shown.

Taken together, the closure of ARAP and ACRS, and the suspension of Refugee Family Reunion, have rendered ‘safe routes’ largely theoretical for many Afghans most in need. Meaningful protection requires transparent, flexible, and well-resourced routes aligned with on-the-ground realities.

About the Afghan Pro Bono Initiative (APBI)

Beginning in March 2022, APBI operated as a collaboration between Refugee Legal Support, Safe Passage International, and 10 leading law firms to address the pressing need for Afghan nationals and their families to access crucial legal information, advice, and representation concerning safe routes to the UK, particularly after the Taliban takeover.

APBI came to an end on 30 January 2026, following the announcement that the Afghan Resettlement Programme was closed to new applicants.

While this project has concluded, Refugee Legal Support remains committed to assisting the Afghan community. It will continue to provide advice and support through its other projects and services, ensuring that Afghan individuals and families can still access the help they need.

To meet clients' and community members' needs effectively, the project focused upon sharing reliable legal and practical information. It did so through a number of avenues, including hosting information sessions, legal advice clinics, and the publication of a monthly newsletter. The project ensured much of the information and resources produced were available in Dari and Pashto, as well as in English, so that information could be reliably disseminated to the target community in their preferred language.

The initiative also assisted individuals in applying for reunification with their families in the UK, the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (**ARAP**) scheme, and the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (**ACRS**).

APBI was also able to offer Legal Aid funding in cases before the Immigration Tribunals and higher courts. This allows clients to benefit from continuity in their legal representation, with APBI supporting them beyond the initial application. We believed that this strengthened the project's ability to ensure meaningful protection and family reunification for the people it was set up to assist, thus enabling the project to assist with higher-impact and more legally complex work.

The project's work was greatly enriched by the dedicated contributions of volunteer lawyers from the 10 leading law firms involved. Volunteers were instrumental in providing essential support to the project, its clients, and the Afghan community as a whole.



The sun is setting behind the hills in Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2023).
Photo credit: © Kayhan

APBI: What We Have Achieved

From its outset, APBI supported Afghans and their families through direct legal representation, one-off advice sessions, and accessible legal information both in the UK and abroad (including Afghanistan and neighbouring countries).

The following section outlines APBI's service delivery figures for the period January 2021 to December 2025.

Since APBI's inception:

56

→
were granted a
visa for relocation
to the UK



Around

50

appeals lodged



284

Afghans have benefitted
from legal representation



40%

are children



38%

are women and girls



3500+ Afghans received answers to their inquiries

500+ Afghans benefited from one-off advice at 9 national clinic sessions



69% are women and girls



62% children



15% elderly parents

700+ Afghans in the UK, Afghanistan, and its regional countries received one-time advice on their cases

Over 800 individuals received information via online information sessions



Over 50 electronic monthly newsletters have been uniquely opened more than 20,600 times



1,300+ hours donated by volunteers to the project



320+ volunteer lawyers contributed to the project

“Thank you again for all your help. We had reached out to everyone and everywhere possible for help but nobody helped, your organisation was the only one replied to our messages and offered help to me and my family. We are so grateful, because before that, we felt completely lost and hopeless.”—Bashir, an Afghan community member*

* All names have been changed throughout this report to protect people's identity.

Afghanistan Since 2021: The Road to Today

Since the Taliban regained control in August 2021, Afghanistan has remained in a complex social, humanitarian and economic crisis. This timeline sets out the key events that have impacted Afghans over the past four years.

April 2021

US President Joe Biden announces **a full withdrawal** of US troops from Afghanistan by September 2021.¹ Taliban attacks begin to intensify and the Taliban start to seize several territories.

The UK Government (the Government) puts in place the **Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy** (ARAP)², allowing eligible Afghans, who formerly worked with the Government, to relocate to the UK.

August 2021

After encircling Kabul, the **Taliban claim victory** over the capital city⁴. The last US and other foreign troops **depart Afghanistan**⁵.

13 August 2021

The Government **launches Operation Pitting**, an evacuation operation to evacuate British nationals from Afghanistan³.

September 2021

Since September 2021, the Taliban have imposed severe restrictions on the rights of women and girls and their ability to participate in the economy and society of Afghanistan outside the home.

In September 2021, the Taliban bans girls from attending high school, making Afghanistan the **only country in the world** where girls cannot continue their education past primary school⁶.

Among other restrictions, **women and girls are now banned** from attending university, travelling over 72km without a male chaperone (*mahram*), accessing healthcare without a male chaperone, playing sports, going to the park and working for an NGO⁷. These restrictions leave women-headed households particularly vulnerable.

6 January 2022

The Government **opens the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme** (ACRS)⁸.

May 2022

The Taliban published a decree requiring all women to wear full-body coverings when in public ("*observing hijab*").

December 2022

The Taliban **bans women from universities** in Afghanistan⁹ and banned women from working for **NGOs**¹⁰.

According to UN Women, **94% of the NGOs that they surveyed fully or partially ceased their operations** in light of the ban on women working for local and foreign NGOs¹¹. The UN cited this ban as a key reason for why it has struggled to raise the money it needs to support Afghanistan. Major donors, including the UK and US governments, significantly **decreased their donations** in 2023¹².

Human Rights Watch reported that the “*Taliban’s restrictions on women’s freedom of movement and employment with humanitarian and other organisations have gravely impeded women and girls’ access to health services, while bans on education for women and girls have blocked almost all training of future female healthcare workers in the country*”¹³.



October 2023

The humanitarian and economic crisis has been **compounded and worsened** by recurrent natural disasters¹⁴.

In October 2023, **four powerful earthquakes** of 6.3 magnitude and multiple aftershocks hit Afghanistan. At least 1,480 civilians were killed and more than 2,100 are injured¹⁵. Approximately **275,000 people require urgent humanitarian assistance**¹⁶. UN—and NGO-led support was provided only to the most affected areas and communities due to shrinking resources and the difficulties in working in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. For instance, they have limited the reach and capabilities of NGOs by barring them from employing female workers and trying to **coerce them** into routing their resources through the Taliban¹⁷.



October 2023

An estimated **6.3 million Afghans are currently displaced**, with many having been displaced multiple times¹⁸.

On 3 October 2023 the Pakistan government announces the “**Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan**” to deport all undocumented Afghan migrants¹⁹. This leads to significant movements of people from Pakistan to Afghanistan. The UNHCR reported that between 15 September 2023 and 4 January 2024 some **493,000 Afghans returned from Afghanistan** to Pakistan²⁰. According to the UN Secretary-General’s **Special Representative Otunbayeva** (speaking to the UN Security Council on 20 December 2023), “*The returnees are the poorest of the poor, 80,000 of them have nowhere in Afghanistan to go. The human rights consequences for women and girls forced to return are particularly severe.*”²¹



Winter 2023/24

Most of Afghanistan experiences **record low precipitation** between October and late January. Severe winter weather, including heavy precipitation, results in at least 39 deaths in late February and early March²².

Overall, it is expected that **severe and unpredictable weather events** and natural disasters will continue in 2024 and beyond due to the impact of climate change²³. The Notre Dame Climate Index ranks Afghanistan in the **lowest tier in terms of vulnerability and lack of readiness** to cope with climate change²⁴.



In January 2024, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (**UNAMA**) **expresses deep concern** over recent arbitrary arrests and detentions of women and girls because of alleged non-compliance with the dress code²⁵.

On International Women's Day, UNAMA urges the Taliban to **end restrictions on women and girls** or else risk pushing the country into deeper poverty and isolation²⁶. In its **2024 gender country profile**, UN Women described the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan as "dire"²⁷.

The **latest report** published by Amnesty International found that human rights violations against women and girls have reached the levels of gender persecution, a crime against humanity²⁸.

In its 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (**HNRP**) for Afghanistan, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (**OCHA**) estimates that **23.7 million people in Afghanistan** (more than half the population) will require humanitarian aid in 2024³². However, (as at 15 May 2024) the HNRP had received **only 16.2 per cent** of the required \$3.06 billion in funding for 2024³³.

Human rights abuses continue

The UN Secretary-General's **Special Representative Otunbayeva**, said the key features of the human rights situation in Afghanistan are:

*"[...] a record of systematic discrimination against women and girls, repression of political dissent and free speech, a lack of meaningful representation of minorities, and ongoing instances of extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, and ill-treatment."*³⁵

Widespread Poverty

The **Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)** reported that whilst Afghanistan continues to experience marginal improvements in food security, over a third of Afghanistan's population (14.2 million people) are still experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above). This includes 2.9 million people in IPC Phase 4 (Emergency)²⁹.

In January 2024, the **UN Development Programme reports** that the Afghan economy is struggling to recover after a 27% contraction since 2020. 69% of Afghans are subsistence insecure, meaning that they don't have access to the most basic items such as utilities, cooking items, winter clothing, basic healthcare and coping strategies needed for mere subsistence³⁰.

Approximately 85% of Afghans are living on **less than one dollar a day**³¹.

May 2024

In May 2024, **flash floods strike** three provinces in North Eastern Afghanistan. Over 200 people are killed and many more are injured and left without shelter³⁴.

Violence still prevails

While direct conflict has significantly declined since 2021, the OCHA reports that **pockets of armed clashes persist** and attacks on civilians have increased in lethality.³⁶ Deliberate attacks employing **improvised explosive devices** continue to be a leading cause of civilian harm³⁷. On 13 October 2023, an Islamic State **suicide bomber** attacks a Shi-ite mosque in Puli Khumri, killing seven and injuring fifteen³⁸. On 21 March 2024, a suicide bomber kills at least 21 people in Kandahar, with **Islamic State claiming responsibility**³⁹. On 17 May 2024, a group of **foreign tourists are attacked** in Bamiyan Province, six people are killed and eight are injured⁴⁰.

21 August 2024

The Taliban intensifies its war on women with new **“vice and virtue” rules**. It announces that women are forbidden from being seen or heard in public, including by singing or reading out loud⁴¹. Under the new rules, women must completely cover themselves, including their faces, when they are outside and they must not look at any man who is not a direct family member.

25 September 2024

Germany, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands announce that they are **commencing legal proceedings against Afghanistan** before the International Court of Justice (the **ICJ**). The countries will argue that the Taliban’s widespread gender-based discrimination and violence violates the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was ratified by Afghanistan in 2003. It will be the first time a case has been brought before the ICJ under this treaty.⁴⁴

11 February 2025

Terrorism remains a constant threat as **ISIL-K carry out a suicide bombing** in Kunduz which kills and injures dozens of civilians.⁴⁶ However, data shows that the **number of terrorist attacks** targeting civilians is decreasing.⁴⁷

Media restrictions

September 2024

The Taliban continues to exert its power by silencing the press and restricting global oversight. Particular measures include clamping down on journalistic freedom, banning the media from airing live debates, and requiring media agencies to **remove “sensitive topics”**⁴². These steps followed a trend: in August 2024, the Taliban **prohibited the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan**, Richard Bennett, from entering the country.⁴³

January 2025

Donald Trump re-enters the White House following his election as President of the United States for a second time. He swiftly **introduces a 90-day freeze** on all existing US overseas aid work,⁴⁵ threatening the future of vital services in Afghanistan which rely on USAID funding.

Erasure of women

Spring 2025

Women continue to be systematically excluded from Afghan society. In February 2025, inspectors from the Department of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice search houses and destroy beauty products at beauty salons established by women in their homes. **Women’s radio stations are prohibited** from operating without a license registered to a man.⁴⁸ In May 2025, women in Herat province face increasingly extreme enforcement of Taliban restrictions as they are now **forced to wear the chador** (a full-body cloak that covers the head) to enter public spaces. Those who fail to comply are detained until they are brought a *chador*.⁴⁹

Foreign aid cuts

April 2025

The US government continues to rollback overseas aid, announcing the **suspension of all remaining US aid** to Afghanistan (amounting to over half a billion US dollars).⁵⁰ US funding constituted **more than 40%** of all aid to Afghanistan in 2024⁵¹ meaning the cuts hit Afghanistan particularly hard and OCHA warns that **several million fewer people** will receive humanitarian assistance in 2025 as a result.⁵² Estimates suggest an additional **14 million deaths** in Afghanistan by 2030 may result from the cuts, disproportionately affecting young children.⁵³



Desperate need

May 2025

A crumbling economy and substantial foreign aid cuts mean the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is dire. According to **OCHA**, over half of the country's population (23.7 million Afghans) now require humanitarian assistance.⁵⁴ 75% of all Afghan households are **unable to meet their daily needs**.⁵⁵

The International Rescue Committee predicts that **"starvation could kill more Afghans than the last twenty years of war."**⁵⁶ The exclusion of women from most work is exacerbating this crisis with just **5% of Afghan women now employed**.⁵⁷



A returnee crisis

July 2025

The number of displaced Afghans in Iran and Pakistan continues to strain Afghanistan's relations with these neighbouring countries. An estimated **2.6 million Afghans have returned** to date in 2025.⁵⁸ On 31 July 2025, the Pakistan government announces that all Proof of Registration cards are now expired and that **staying on in Pakistan is unlawful**.⁵⁹ Returnees face extremely challenging integration prospects due to the scale of the political, economic, and humanitarian crises the nation faces.



1 September 2025

Afghanistan is once again **hit by a deadly earthquake** which kills over 1,000 people,⁶⁰ and leaves thousands more **injured and displaced**.⁶¹ Located on a number of tectonic plate fault lines, Afghanistan is particularly vulnerable to frequent earthquakes and it is in the **top 10 countries most affected by climate change**.⁶² The poor standard of Afghan buildings means the **impact of earthquakes and natural disasters** is often devastating.⁶³



Internet blackout

September 2025

The Taliban begins to **shut down fibre-optic internet** across large parts of Afghanistan to "prevent immoral activities"⁶⁴ which culminates in a 48-hour country-wide **blackout**.⁶⁵ Women and girls who rely on the internet to continue work and education now face **further isolation** from the outside world.⁶⁶



Recommendations in Review

The past year has drastically changed the landscape for Afghan resettlement in the UK. With the closure of ARAP and ACRS, the suspension of Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsor with Protection) and the decision to end APBI, this will be our final report.

Since APBI began in 2022 we have worked closely with other stakeholders and listened carefully to the voices of those directly impacted by the Government's policy decisions. We have used this knowledge to advocate for more effective safe routes, making constructive recommendations in both our 2023 report, **“Two Years of Empty Promises: the UK Leaves Afghans Stranded and at Risk”**, and our 2024 report, **“Still Waiting: the Afghans abandoned by the UK”**.

In 2023, **our recommendations**⁶⁷ included a more holistic case-by-case analysis of ARAP applications, the expansion of Pathway 3 and improved family reunion in relation to ACRS, a better approach to biometrics enrolment and a broader family reunion scope. Although the ACRS Separated Families Pathway 2024 was announced in 2024 which brought some clarity to ACRS family reunion, the rest of the issues remained unresolved.

Our **2024 report** focussed on waiving the accommodation requirement for ARAP arrivals, the evolving issue of Triples cases, continuing uncertainty regarding ACRS Pathway 3 and the need to harmonise family reunion policies.⁶⁸ We welcome the ongoing review into refused Triples cases and the change in policy that means pre-matched accommodation is no longer required, however, the resettlement schemes have closed with many crucial recommendations never implemented.



Labourers looking for work at Mandawi Market, Kabul, Afghanistan (2024).
Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

This table shows the recommendations that we have made each year and highlights whether progress has been made.

Scheme	2023	2024
ARAP	Assess ARAP Applications on a Case-by-Case Basis	Waive Accommodation Requirement
		Lower ARAP Threshold for “Imminent Threat” Cases
		Safe Pathway for Triples Members
ACRS	Transparency and Expansion of Pathway 3	Clear Timeline for Pathway 3
	Improved Family Reunion Rights	Conclude Resettlement of Eligible ACRS Applicants
Family Reunion	Eliminate Financial and Language Barriers	Harmonise Family Reunion Policies
	Safe and Secure Biometrics Enrolment	Case-by-Case Biometrics Waivers
	Widen Family Reunion Scope	
General	Provide Translations of Guidance and Application Forms	Improve Training for Caseworkers
	Provide Emergency Travel Documents	
	Ensure Timely Process of Applications	Community Feedback Group
	Expand Concessions on Document Flexibility	Flexibility in Documentation Requirements
	Provide Bite-sized Information	Regular and Clear Communication
	Expanding Routes for Afghans	Clarify Legal Status
	Allow Resettled Afghans in the UK to Request Refugee Status	

Key:

● Not implemented

● Partially implemented

● Implemented

Fewer delays, thorough decision-making and more transparency have been consistent themes across all our recommendations. These have remained the key barriers to the effectiveness of resettlement of Afghans in the UK. The lack of pragmatism towards evidentiary requirements has resulted in the Government’s policies being detached from reality. Taken together, this means the well-intentioned resettlement schemes haven’t had the impact that they could have, leaving vulnerable Afghans unable to reach safety.

Recent discourse in the UK has often centred around asylum seekers being welcome provided they arrive under “safe and legal routes.” As we will explore in this report, such routes are now few and far between, and, coupled with the UK’s island geography, it is near impossible for people to arrive in the UK without crossing the Channel through irregular means e.g. on small boats or hidden in lorries.

Government data shows that **84%**⁶⁹ of the **7,494**⁷⁰ Afghans who claimed asylum in the year ending June 2025, arrived “irregularly”. Additionally, Afghanistan is consistently in the **top 5 nationalities claiming asylum** in the UK⁷¹ which demonstrates the scale of protection needed. In view of this, the Government’s stated aim of curbing “illegal” migration is at odds with the actions that it has taken; the premature closure of ARAP and ACRS and the suspension of Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsor with Protection). The delays and inefficiencies that we have witnessed mean there are still Afghans waiting for support. These are some of the world’s most desperate people who may now feel their **only option is to attempt a dangerous journey** in the hope of safety.⁷²

A Failure to Deliver: the Inadequacy of Safe Routes for Afghans

This section will assess the main immigration routes for Afghans to come to the UK with analysis of the various challenges encountered through our casework over the past year.

Summary of Routes to the UK

Since 2021, there have been three main immigration routes for Afghans into the UK.*

These are:

- (A) Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (**ARAP**), which enabled Afghan citizens who worked for or with the UK Government in Afghanistan in exposed or meaningful roles to relocate to the UK with a partner, dependent children and any additional family deemed eligible;
- (B) Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (**ACRS**), which allowed vulnerable Afghans and those who assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan to be referred for resettlement in the UK; and
- (C) Family Visas, including Refugee Family Reunion, which allow relatives of those in the UK who meet the requirements to be granted a UK visa.

In addition, there was the Afghan Response Route (**ARR**), a secret resettlement route that was created in response to a major data breach at the Ministry of Defence in February 2022—but this was only made public in July 2025 when details of the data breach were publicly reported. The ARR enabled the Government to bring to the UK those who were not otherwise eligible for resettlement but were now considered at risk due to the data breach.

*Although there are other visas available, such as student visas or investor visas, we will not discuss these in this report.



A narrow footpath running through the agricultural fields of Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2022). Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

(A) Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

The ARAP scheme opened in April 2021 for Afghans and certain family members, who were or had been employed in Afghanistan by the UK Government and were now at serious risk of reprisals from the Taliban. It followed the “**Ex-Gratia Scheme**” which opened in 2013 and closed in November 2022.⁷³ The ARAP scheme did not have any quotas, nor was it limited to particular roles or length of service. Some contractors were also eligible. There were four different categories of eligibility:

- (a) **Category 1**—those who were directly employed by the Government, on or after 1 October 2001, and assessed to be at high and imminent risk to life. They were eligible for urgent relocation to the UK.
- (b) **Category 2**—those who were directly employed by the Government or contracted to provide linguistic services in support of the UK’s Armed Forces, on or after 1 October 2001. They were eligible by default for routine relocation to the UK.
- (c) **Category 3**—those who didn’t meet the Category 1 or Category 2 requirements but might be eligible for other support (short of relocation) as deemed suitable by the ARAP team.
- (d) **Category 4**—special cases considered on a case-by-case basis. This was for those who were directly employed by a Government department, or provided goods and services under contract, or worked closely alongside the Government and contributed to the UK’s military or national security objectives with respect to Afghanistan and then faced a high risk of death or serious injury, or held information which would give rise to a national security risk.

Those relocated under ARAP do not hold refugee status in the UK. Therefore, any family member seeking to join or stay with a recipient of ARAP already relocated to the UK must apply for entry clearance or permission to stay in the UK under Appendix FM: family members (**Appendix FM**) or Appendix ADR: Adult Dependent Relative of the Immigration Rules (**Appendix ADR**).

As of November 2025, **19,622 people had been relocated under ARAP**.⁷⁴



The remaining parts of the historic city, Gholghola, Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2023).
Photo credit: © Kayhan

ARAP Timeline

This timeline shows the development of ARAP from its opening in 2022 until its recent closure in July 2025.

1 April 2021	The UK formally opens the ARAP scheme . ⁷⁵
Summer 2021	Eligibility for ARAP is extended to include Afghans dismissed from service for minor administrative offences and interpreters who supported the UK military as contractors. ^{76 77}
14 December 2021	The grounds for qualifying for relocation under ARAP are narrowed , purportedly “to remove the uncertainty that emerged during and after Operation Pitting (the evacuation of Afghanistan in August 2021) around who would qualify” and to ensure consistency between Government departments responsible for taking initial eligibility decisions. The narrower rules restrict ARAP eligibility to people who furthered the UK’s military and national security objectives. ^{78 79}
18 October 2022	The Home Office publishes a statement of changes to the UK Immigration Rules ⁸⁰ which introduces Appendix ARAP. The simplified rules clarify that the application process has two stages: (1) the application is first made to the Ministry of Defence who decides if the applicant is eligible for relocation to the UK under ARAP; (2) if the applicant is eligible, the Ministry of Defence makes an application, on behalf of the applicant, to the Home Office for entry clearance (if the applicant is outside the UK) or settlement (if the applicant is inside the UK). The applicant is then subject to usual Home Office checks. The new rules clarify that ARAP applications will only be considered under Appendix ARAP of the Immigration Rules (Appendix ARAP) and not on any other basis, including an application for leave outside the rules. ⁸¹
30 November 2022	The ARAP rules currently contained in Part 7 of the Immigration Rules, and provisions regarding applications for additional family members, currently contained within a separate policy document, are brought within the new Appendix ARAP. Applications for additional family members under ARAP will now be made inside the rules , rather than being applications for leave outside the rules under the current policy. ⁸²
30 November 2022	The ex-gratia scheme ⁸³ closes.
11 April 2023	Applicants now have 42 days to respond to requests for information sent by the Ministry of Defence. Failure to respond will result in the rejection of an application. ⁸⁴
18 July 2023	The Minister for Veterans Affairs makes a statement to Parliament confirming the Home Office will continue to provide interim accommodation to legally resettled Afghans (up to 31 December 2023 ⁸⁵) if they meet one of two criteria : (1) they need accommodation during the short period between the end of their notice period and the date on which their settled accommodation is ready for them; or (2) in cases of medical need where a family member required continued attendance at a specific hospital. ⁸⁶
October 2023	Ministers approve a change of policy so that ACRS and ARAP eligible Afghans will be brought to the UK from Pakistan as a matter of urgency. Some will move directly into long term accommodation, but where necessary temporary “transitional” accommodation (including hotels) will be used. The change of approach was prompted by concerns that the Afghans in Pakistan are at risk of deportation to Afghanistan . ⁸⁷

1 February 2024	<p>The Ministry of Defence confirms that all refused applications from members of Commando Force 333 and Afghan Territorial Force 444 will be reassessed and reviewed for eligibility and, if necessary, changed. It is confirmed that each case will be reviewed by a new team.⁸⁸</p> <p>The Government anticipates that the reassessment will take approximately 12 weeks to complete once the review begins.⁸⁹</p>
4 July 2024	<p>A general election is held in the UK. Labour wins a majority, and a new government is formed.⁹⁰</p>
10 July 2024	<p>The Afghanistan resettlement and immigration policy statement is updated in line with operational changes regarding integration support. The statement confirms that the Government will now only facilitate new ARAP arrivals where suitable accommodation can be secured ahead of arrival, including where individuals can be supported to arrange accommodation themselves.⁹¹</p>
October 2024	<p>The Government reports that it has assurances from Pakistan that no one in Pakistan who is being assessed under ARAP will be deported back to Afghanistan.⁹²</p>
18 December 2024	<p>The Government consolidates ARAP and ACRS into one pipeline, named the “Afghan Resettlement Programme” (the ARP).⁹³</p>
1 March 2025	<p>Afghans arriving under ARAP are now offered 9 months of transitional accommodation from the Government.⁹⁴</p>
June 2025	<p>The Government makes clear that it has no intention of expanding the ARAP criteria.⁹⁵ It announces that Phase 1 of the Triples review is now complete.⁹⁶</p>
5 June 2025	<p>Government policy changes, and successful principals now have 30 days from the date on which they respond to their offer letter to make an Additional Family Member application.⁹⁷</p>
1 July 2025	<p>The Government announces that ARAP is closed to new applications with immediate effect.⁹⁸ All pending applications will be processed but no further applications will be accepted. The Government promises to complete the Triples review.⁹⁹</p>
27 November 2025	<p>The latest Government data shows that 19,622 Afghans have been resettled in the UK under ARAP.¹⁰⁰</p>

Communication and eligibility

On 1 July 2025, **the Government closed the Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP)**—the combined ARAP and ACRS schemes) to new applications, with immediate effect.¹⁰¹ This was met with shock and dismay by the Afghan community, and those working alongside it. The International Rescue Committee described the sudden closure as **“a concerning abandonment of the UK’s commitments to the people of Afghanistan.”**¹⁰²

The short notice closure of both ARAP and ACRS saw two of the few safe routes available to Afghans ripped away in a matter of hours. It’s worth remembering that ARAP was set up to protect those who had risked their lives to support Britain and now face grave danger. Its abrupt closure was yet another instance, and the end, of a scheme which **“has fallen dramatically short both morally and logistically.”**¹⁰³

The Government justified the closure on the basis that it was finding **95% of initial ARAP applications ineligible**,¹⁰⁴ suggesting that the UK’s obligation to Afghans has now been honoured. There may be some merit in that argument but its accuracy cannot be known whilst so many applications remain outstanding. As **of 11 September 2025**, over 20,000 applications were waiting for an eligibility decision (11,679 applications were waiting for an initial eligibility outcome and a further 8,293 re-applications were awaiting an eligibility decision).¹⁰⁵ Afghans eligible for help are left stranded whilst their applications are delayed; for many, escaping Afghanistan is a matter of life or death. We have experienced clients waiting up to 2 years for an initial eligibility decision. Now that the scheme is closed to new applications, getting on top of the continued delays must be the Government’s immediate priority.

The impact of the delays has been compounded by a continued lack of clarity. APBI has repeatedly raised concerns about **inadequate transparency and poor communication**,¹⁰⁶ an issue equally raised by MPs in Parliament who have been **frustrated by the lack of updates** that they can give to those who contact them.¹⁰⁷

We recommended in last year’s report that the Government should implement a system that provides regular updates to applicants.¹⁰⁸ In June 2025, the Government committed to introducing an improved communications system, including performance indicators so people can see where in the application stage they are.¹⁰⁹

This was implemented in November 2025, and there now exists an online **ARAP Eligibility Self Checker** where applicants can now check the status of their application.¹¹⁰ The Government has also published **ARAP Key Performance Indicators** with indicative application timescales that differentiate between “complex” and “non-complex” cases in a bid to reduce delays and improve transparency.¹¹¹

This small change is likely to have a big impact: most APBI clients are living in dangerous, precarious situations and the lack of clarity around application timelines heightens their mental stress.

Regrettably, given the history of broken promises and missed deadlines in the ARAP scheme, it remains to be seen how effective the implementation will be.

In the period **1 January 2025 to 30 June 2025**, only 6% of ARAP eligibility decisions were positive and this rate falls to just 2% if you exclude decisions made as part of the Triples review.¹¹² The Government may argue this is confirmation that all worthy claims have already been made and decided, however, in light of the lengthy delays facing applicants, and for all the reasons discussed in this and our previous reports, we consider that this would be a simplistic conclusion.

“We have a very moral case for doing whatever we have to do to fulfil our obligation, and if that means tearing up someone’s bureaucratic rulebook, so be it.”—Sir Iain Duncan Smith, MP, previous Leader of the Conservative Party

Triples cases

The **treatment of Triples cases** was a key trend explored in last year's report.¹¹⁴ The "Triples" were **elite army units** in Afghanistan set up and funded by the UK and other NATO missions.¹¹⁵ Those that were established by the UK included Commando Force 333 (CF333) and Afghan Task Force 444 (ATF444) with Afghans in these units fighting alongside the British military. However, many ARAP applications for Triples were refused on the basis that the applicants had **not been directly employed** by the UK Government¹¹⁶ because they formed part of the **Afghan National Security Forces**.¹¹⁷ Allegations of a **policy of blanket refusals**¹¹⁸ were **denied by the previous Government**¹¹⁹ but controversy persisted.

On 1 February 2024, the previous Government announced that former Triples members who had been denied relocation would **have their cases re-examined**, with around 2,000 applications estimated to be impacted.¹²⁰ The Ministry of Defence announced that **Phase 1 of the review was completed in May 2025**¹²¹ and these 2,000 cases had been reassessed. Given the **widely reported vulnerability** of Triples members,¹²² it is disappointing that Minister for the Armed Forces, the Right Honourable Luke Pollard MP, has stated that Phase 1 resulted in a **final overturn rate of just 30%**.¹²³

There will now be a **Phase 2 of the Triples review**, which the Government has confirmed will continue despite the wider closure of the Afghan resettlement schemes.¹²⁴ This phase of the review will **consider further applications** where the Government holds a payment record or has confirmation that the individual served with the Afghan Partner Forces.¹²⁵ Information available from the Ministry of Defence explains that the ARAP criteria isn't changing but they have updated caseworker guidance on how these payments can demonstrate that someone **worked alongside the UK** for the purposes of Category 4.¹²⁶ "Top up" payments were a key piece of evidence that many felt were previously being overlooked and diminished by decision-makers, so the new flexibility around these payments is welcomed.

Unnecessarily rigid evidential requirements have long been discussed in the immigration space, and it is an approach that has clearly been applied in relation to Triples cases.¹²⁷ The Ministry of Defence (in particular, UK Special Forces (**UKSF**)) rejected applications due to a **"lack of evidence"** despite the unambiguous and established links between itself and the Triples units.¹²⁸

There have been around **27,000 applications** made under ARAP by purported Triples members, which is far above the 5,000 Afghans known to have served in Triples units.¹²⁹ The volume of applications, perhaps higher than the Ministry of Defence were anticipating, has led to severe challenges. However, it's clear that the ineffective systems and management have exacerbated these challenges and severely hampered the implementation of ARAP for genuine Triples members. APBI recognises that some records date back 20 years and that accurate record-keeping is challenging in the context of war, however, it is now clear that these records did exist and should have been accessible. Given that for many, these applications are a matter of life or death, it is unacceptable that a lack of communication between departments has resulted in significant delays for those affected.

The full extent of the dysfunction only came to light as a result of litigation—a judicial review in July 2025 heard evidence from those working within the Defence Afghan Relocation and Resettlement (**DARR**) (a department in the Ministry of Defence) which confirmed that it referred all ARAP cases related to Triples units to UKSF to verify each applicant's identity. The **Director of the DARR** explained "it is now obvious that both DARR and UKSF were overwhelmed with the volume and nature of applications that they were considering."¹³⁰

The High Court heard that DARR caseworkers were relocated to sit alongside UKSF personnel during a period of "sprints" ostensibly aimed at clearing the backlog, which raises **significant concerns about the integrity and transparency of the process**.¹³¹ It is now known that during this period of "sprints", not a single case referred to UKSF was **found to be eligible**,¹³² calling into question the decision-making process. Such disclosures lend weight to longstanding criticisms regarding the UKSF's approach, including **allegations of deliberate obstruction** in relation to Triples cases.¹³³

For example, the then Minister of State for Veteran's Affairs, the Right Honourable Johnny Mercer MP, wrote a letter to the Deputy Prime Minister highlighting the significant conflict of interest that had arisen through the involvement of the UKSF in the ARAP decision making process. Members of the Triples were potential witnesses to the **Haddon-Cave Inquiry on Afghanistan**, an independent inquiry investigating UKSF operations in Afghanistan due to allegations of war crimes, but only if they were present in the UK.¹³⁴ BBC Panorama highlighted that a veto power was given to UKSF in relation to ARAP applications made by Triples during the Haddon-Cave Inquiry, and it reported that the consideration of the cases was overseen by Gen Sir Gwyn Jenkins, who previously failed to report **allegations of extra-judicial killings** by UKSF forces in Afghanistan.¹³⁵ Although investigations were made into allegations of bias, "**no evidence of bias or hidden motives on the part of the UKSF liaison officer**"¹³⁶ was found. However, the investigation did deem the decision makers to be "**lax and unprofessional.**"¹³⁷ It is understood that even applications with compelling evidence were **being rejected by UKSF.**¹³⁸

The veto powers given to UKSF are alarming. The allegations that such a potential conflict of interest was overlooked is a distinct issue from struggling to cope with the volume of applications. This is deeply concerning and significantly undermines confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of the ARAP process for Triples cases.

Although the current Labour Government has said it recognises that the **handling of the Triples cases has failed** "to deliver consistent standards" which "will have significant real-world implications for those who are desperately in need of support and sanctuary,"¹³⁹ this is of little comfort to those affected and in ongoing danger. There are reports of at least five members of Triples units having **been killed by the Taliban following a refusal of resettlement to the UK**¹⁴⁰ and this is a sobering reminder of the human cost of poorly implemented schemes. It would be a small consolation if the Government learnt from the mishandling of records and fragmented collaboration between departments to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated in the future.



A narrow street lined with old-style Afghan houses, Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2022).
Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

(B) Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

ACRS was announced by the Government in August 2021 in response to the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban. It formally opened on 6 January 2022, and it was **closed with immediate effect on 1 July 2025**.¹⁴¹ It sat alongside the ARAP scheme, but unlike ARAP, direct applications (“expressions of interest”) for assistance were only possible in very limited circumstances; in general, individuals had to be referred to the UK through UNHCR or another body. There were three main pathways of referrals under ACRS:

- (a) **Pathway 1**— This covered those identified as needing assistance during Operation Pitting; i.e. those who were evacuated by the Government from Afghanistan in summer 2021 or had been “called forward” but were unable to access the evacuation flights. As of November 2025, **10,351 people have been relocated** under this Pathway.¹⁴²

Individuals resettled under Pathway 1 of the ACRS do not hold refugee status in the UK. The Government opened a **specific family reunion route** in July 2024 for the immediate family members of those who arrived under Pathway 1 (the **Separated Families Pathway**)¹⁴³ and additional family members will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

- (b) **Pathway 2**— This was for Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, i.e. those who fled to refugee camps, who were identified and referred by UNHCR for resettlement. This pathway commenced on 13 June 2022 and the Government anticipated that up to 2,000 referrals would be made in the first year. As of November 2025, **only 1,518¹⁴⁴ Afghans** were resettled in the UK under this pathway.

Individuals resettled under Pathway 2 of the ACRS are recognised as refugees in the UK. As such, they were eligible to sponsor their immediate family under Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection). This route was **suspended on 4 September 2025**.¹⁴⁵

- (c) **Pathway 3**— This was for at risk individuals in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. In the first stage of this pathway the cohort was limited to: British **Council contractors, GardaWorld contractors, Chevening alumni, and their eligible family members**.¹⁴⁶ Individuals wishing to be resettled could **make “expressions of interest”** between 20 June and 15 August 2022.¹⁴⁷ As of November 2025, **1,679¹⁴⁸ Afghans** were resettled under this pathway. The decision-making process for all eligible principals and their dependent family members under the **first part of Pathway 3 was completed** on 28 June 2024.¹⁴⁹ There are no indications that stage two, which was supposed to extend the pathway to a broader cohort of applicants, was ever opened.

Individuals resettled under Pathway 3 of the ACRS do not hold refugee status in the UK, and were informed that any family reunion application would **need to be made under Appendix FM or Appendix ADR**.¹⁵⁰



Bamiyan City view in spring season, Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2022).
Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

When ACRS was first announced, the Government **pledged to resettle up to 20,000 Afghans**.¹⁵¹ However, as of the scheme closure on 1 July 2025, **13,245 Afghans had been resettled** in the UK under ACRS¹⁵² which is two thirds of the pledge. The failure to assist more Afghans in accordance with the pledged aim of the scheme has not been explained.

ACRS Timeline

This timeline shows the development of ACRS from its opening in 2022 until its recent closure in July 2025.

- 6 January 2022**

The UK **formally opens the ACRS**.¹⁵³
- 13 June 2022**

The UK formally **launches Pathways 2 and 3 of ACRS**.^{154 155}
- 20 June 2022**

The Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (**FCDO**) launches the online system for eligible individuals to **lodge an “expression of interest”** in UK resettlement through Pathway 3.¹⁵⁶
- 15 August 2022**

The online system for “expression of interest” in resettlement through Pathway 3 is **closed to further applications**.¹⁵⁷
- 9 November 2022**

The Home Office **updates its guidance**¹⁵⁸ setting out the eligibility criteria for additional family members seeking to move to the UK. The guidance refers to additional family members who are looking to resettle with a family member who is a Principal. A **Principal** is an individual who the FCDO has assessed as eligible in principle under the first stage of Pathway 3 and who is referred to the Home Office for resettlement).

Immediate family members of a Principal may be offered a resettlement place (subject to satisfactory security checks) under Pathway 3 of the ACRS. Immediate family members are spouses/partners or dependent children under 18. Other additional family members may be considered in exceptional circumstances. Circumstances will be exceptional if it can be shown that the family member is sufficiently dependent on the Principal. In particular, cases will be considered where there are specific vulnerabilities or in specific circumstances faced by an additional family member which have led to an exceptional level of dependence on the Principal.

There are two stages in the process where a Principal may declare the family members they wish to be considered for resettlement: (1) in the “expression of interest” when asked for details of their immediate family members; and (2) when the FCDO requests information relating to additional family members.
- 1 June 2023**

The Government **website guidance on ACRS is updated** in line with the new approach to accommodation.¹⁵⁹ On 28 March 2023 the Government announced its intention to issue **Notices to Quit to all Afghans living in bridging accommodation** and that all bridging accommodation would be closed by Autumn 2023.¹⁶⁰
- 25 July 2023**

The Government website guidance on ACRS Pathway 3: eligibility for British Council and GardaWorld contractors and Chevening Alumni is updated to reflect that the Government will only arrange travel to the UK for eligible people when **suitable accommodation has been organised**.¹⁶¹
- 17 October 2023**

In the first stage of Pathway 3, the Government will consider all eligible people who submitted an “expression of interest” and their eligible dependent family members, exceeding the original cap of 1,500 places. **Year 1 of Pathway 3 now being referred to as the first stage of Pathway 3**.¹⁶²
- October 2023**

Ministers approve a change of policy so that ACRS and ARAP eligible Afghans will be brought to the UK from Pakistan as a matter of urgency. Some will move directly into long term accommodation, but where necessary temporary “transitional” accommodation (including hotels) will be used. The change of approach was prompted by concerns that the Afghans in Pakistan are **at risk of deportation to Afghanistan**.¹⁶³

11 March 2024

The Home Office announces it will match households eligible under ACRS Pathways 2 and 3 to suitable allocations of accommodation. Under **the matching policy**¹⁶⁴, eligible households may receive a maximum of one allocation, although this is not guaranteed. Households do not get to choose which pathway they progress through, and allocation of accommodation under either pathway isn't guaranteed. An allocation of settled accommodation may be made either while the household is still abroad or while accommodated in Government funded transitional accommodation.

14 March 2024

The Government website guidance on ACRS is updated to reflect that eligible people can now be relocated to the UK **without the prior requirement for settled accommodation**.¹⁶⁵

1 April 2024

New guidance is published which sets out the Home Office's policy position relating to those legally resettled under Pathways 2 and 3 and currently residing in transitional accommodation.¹⁶⁶ Transitional accommodation was established to provide time-limited safe and secure accommodation for arrivals under the ACRS from December 2023 until the end of June 2024. The guidance sets out the process for how new arrivals will be matched to settled accommodation through the "one allocation" process, and support for those who want to find accommodation independently.

28 June 2024

The decision-making process for all eligible Principals and their dependant family members under the **first part of Pathway 3 is completed**.¹⁶⁷

4 July 2024

A general election is held in the UK. **Labour wins a majority**, and a new government is formed.¹⁶⁸

10 July 2024

The Afghanistan resettlement and immigration policy statement is updated in line with **operational changes regarding eligibility and integration support**. The statement now confirms that those identified as eligible who hold nationality or lawful status in a country outside of Afghanistan, and were notified by the Government that they had been called forward or specifically authorised for evacuation but were not able to board flights, may also be offered a place under ACRS if they subsequently come to the UK. In respect of integration support, the Government will now only facilitate new ACRS arrivals where suitable accommodation can be secured ahead of arrival, including where individuals can be supported to arrange accommodation themselves.¹⁶⁹

30 July 2024

The Government announces ACRS Pathway 1 Stage 2: Separated Families. This is for those who arrived under Pathway 1 between 13 August 2021 and 28 August 2021. Those who are eligible can make a referral to this before 30 October 2024. Adult applicants can request for a partner or minor children to join them, and minor applicants can request their parents or siblings under 18.

18 December 2024

The Government consolidates ARAP and ACRS into one pipeline, named the **Afghan Resettlement Programme**.¹⁷¹

1 March 2025

Afghans arriving under ACRS are now offered **9 months of transitional accommodation** from the Government, however family members resettling under the Separated Families Pathway are excluded.¹⁷²

1 July 2025

The Government announces that ACRS is **closed to new applications with immediate effect**; there will be no further ACRS pathways or referrals, but all outstanding Separated Families applications will be assessed.¹⁷³

27 November 2025

The latest Government data shows that number of **13,548 Afghans** have been resettled in the UK under ACRS (10,351 under Pathway 1, 1,518 under Pathway 2 and 1,679 under Pathway 3).¹⁷⁴ More than **75% of arrivals have been women and children**.¹⁷⁵

Accommodation

Reports suggest that the availability of affordable accommodation is a critical constraint on the Afghan resettlement schemes in the UK, shaping both pace and quality of integration. As highlighted **in our previous report**, the shortage of suitable accommodation generates instability and uncertainty for new arrivals.¹⁷⁶ This **exacerbates integration challenges** due to the impact that housing insecurity has on things such as schooling¹⁷⁷ and access to services.

In July 2024, the Government announced that those found eligible for ARAP would not **have their resettlement to the UK facilitated**¹⁷⁸ unless they secured suitable accommodation. This moved responsibility away from central government and raised a considerable obstacle for many applicants seeking safety.

In our last report, APBI advocated for this barrier to safety to be removed as it was preventing eligible Afghans from accessing the protection to which they were entitled.¹⁷⁹ We are pleased to see that a more comprehensive approach towards accommodation has subsequently been implemented under the ARP (which consolidated both ARAP and ACRS from December 2024 onwards).

For anyone arriving under ARP from 1 March 2025, provided they reach the UK on Government arranged or approved flights, the Government now **offers 9 months of transitional accommodation**.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, **policy guidance**¹⁸¹ sets out a clear framework for moving out of transitional accommodation and securing longer term housing, including through the “Find Your Own Accommodation Pathway” which supports Afghans to find their own homes. Given that we repeatedly hear how difficult members of the Afghan community find navigating the UK housing system, it is welcome news that **specialist caseworkers are now in place** to help new arrivals find somewhere to live after their transitional accommodation¹⁸². We understand that **funding has also been allocated** to Local Authorities to assist with this process.¹⁸³ APBI considers that, if implemented effectively and sensitively, this additional support will greatly improve the integration experience for Afghans.

Regrettably, this support is not available across the board. Family members resettled under **ACRS Separated Families Pathway are not entitled to any accommodation** support and those resettled under other pathways will receive only 3 months of transitional accommodation if their sponsoring family member is not accommodated in transitional accommodation.¹⁸⁴

As of the **end of September 2025**, 3,550 people, over half of whom are children, were in transitional accommodation, while 30,121 people had moved into a home.¹⁸⁵ The priority must be to ensure proper implementation of the new housing framework in order to increase the chance of successful integration.



Old houses in the city of Bamiyan, Hindokosh Mountains, Afghanistan (2023).
Photo credit: © Kayhan



Two women walking along the snowy street of Karte Char, Kabul, Afghanistan (2021). Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

ACRS Pathway 3

We have discussed the failures of Pathway 3 of the ACRS **in each of our previous reports**.¹⁸⁶ The Government's stated aim for Pathway 3 was to ensure the most vulnerable groups—women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community, for example—**could reach safety**¹⁸⁷ but, despite repeated promises, the previous Government **never expanded from the initial three cohorts**.¹⁸⁸ Following its election in July 2024, the Labour Government also failed to take any steps to open up the Pathway beyond the initial cohorts before it was closed alongside all the other routes of the ARP.

The previous Government described ACRS as the New Plan for Immigration "**in action**," expanding safe and legal routes for those in need.¹⁸⁹ With increased emphasis on "safe and legal routes," ACRS Pathway 3 should have been the obvious framework to realise that goal. Instead, it was woefully underutilised and did not reach those it was designed to protect. Since our 2024 report, just 314 additional people have been resettled under Pathway 3, bringing **the total to 1,679**.¹⁹⁰

Overall, **13,548 Afghans have been resettled** in total under the three ACRS Pathways¹⁹¹—far short of the Government's **commitment of 20,000**.¹⁹² Moreover, if those evacuated during Operation Pitting in August 2021 are excluded from the figures, ACRS has resettled only 3,000 Afghans in the UK since the fall of Kabul. Such a delivery gap firstly undermines the credibility of successive Governments stated reliance on "safe and legal routes," and, more importantly, leaves the most at-risk Afghans without a viable pathway to protection.

Separated Families Pathway

We have previously argued that the family reunification processes under ACRS are **inconsistent and, for many, inadequate**.¹⁹³ The system is complicated by the fact that ACRS Pathway 2 arrivals benefit from Protection status (recognition that they are refugees) whilst those arriving under Pathway 1 and Pathway 3 do not.

Despite early assurances that those evacuated in haste would be offered a route for their separated family members to join them, none existed until 30 July 2024 when the Government finally announced the long-awaited “ACRS Pathway 1 Stage 2: Separated Families.” The “Separated Families Pathway” was for the immediate family members of those who arrived under Pathway 1 between 13 August 2021 and 28 August 2021 i.e. during the specific timeframe of Operation Pitting. By the time it was announced and opened, those who were eligible had been separated from their families for over three years.

The Separated Families Pathway was open for referrals until 30 October 2024, allowing just three months for families to make an application. During the referral window APBI assisted more than 30 Afghan families to complete their “expression of interest” forms. The support provided was wide-ranging, including one-to-one legal advice; assistance with completing and submitting application forms; preparation and submission of supporting evidence; and the drafting of personal statements. For many with limited proficiency in English, completing the forms posed a significant hurdle.

“I am so happy now there is actually a form to submit, but it looks so complicated and confusing. I am very worried to ruin my only chance of my family and my application being rejected.”—Jamal, an APBI client who was separated from his family during Operation Pitting

Although designed specifically for a cohort of Afghans, the Home Office did not provide any translated materials to assist applicants to complete the “expression of interest” form. To improve accessibility, APBI produced and shared self-help guides translated into Afghan local languages. With little to no legal support available besides the under-resourced charity sector, the complexity of understanding and completing these forms was a major barrier for the Afghans for whom it was intended. As is often the case, these barriers disproportionately affected the most vulnerable, such as women, children, the elderly, and those in hiding from the Taliban.

Jamila, an Afghan woman aged 23, was separated from her little sister, Farida, during Operation Pitting. Farida was just 9 years old at the time and has been stranded by herself in Afghanistan for the past four years. Jamila has been desperate to reunite with Farida but having received little education in Afghanistan she cannot speak much English and therefore couldn’t complete the form which took a toll on her mental health.

For some, a further barrier to access to the Separated Families Pathway stemmed from bureaucratic mismanagement within the Home Office related to the Pathway under which people had been resettled. Not only did this cause confusion but, as already highlighted, a person’s status under the different Pathways has real consequence as Pathway 2 confers Protection Status whilst Pathways 1 and 3 do not. Many Afghans found that whilst their Biometric Residence Permit (**BRP**) confirmed their status under one Pathway, they were recorded as settled under a different Pathway on the Home Office system. We have seen families resettled in the UK under ACRS go through multiple changes to their immigration status, being shifted from one Pathway to another.

One of our clients had his status changed three times: he started on ARAP, was moved to ACRS Pathway 3, and then to ACRS Pathway 1. Even then, although his BRP indicated ACRS Pathway 1, he was unable to access the “expression of interest” form to submit an application under the Separated Families Pathway. Access to the form required entry of your BRP number and was contingent on that BRP being recognised within the system as issued under ACRS Pathway 1 and, for reasons unknown to us, this client’s BRP card number was not recognised. It would appear that some BRP card numbers were misallocated to the wrong Pathway. The consequence of this seemingly small bureaucratic mistake was that some individuals were unable access the family reunion they were entitled to.



A street lined by trees in Bamiyan City, Afghanistan, (2022). Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

“I didn’t understand why my BRP said I was on Pathway 1, but I couldn’t open the form. I kept trying and trying, and trying, but the system kept rejecting me. I felt completely stuck and didn’t know what to do next”.

—Najeb an APBI client

Through Freedom of Information requests we made, the Home Office confirmed that:



- it received 2,511 referrals on the Separated Families Pathway by the deadline, totalling 8,324 family members;



- as of 5 May 2025, 602 individuals had been found eligible and 1,256 individuals were deemed ineligible; and



- a further 109 referrals had been withdrawn due to duplicate applications or the sponsor no longer wanting to proceed.

These figures suggest that the Home Office has determined around 77% of the referrals, with a success rate of just one third. The Home Office also revealed to APBI that, as of 5 May 2025, 37 requests to make a referral had been submitted after the closure of the expressions of interest window, of which 22 had been accepted, but no substantive decisions on these requests had been made.

As of 5 May 2025, the Home Office confirmed that 76 of the ineligible decisions had been submitted for review and 38% of these were subsequently found to be eligible. High overturn rates are a common theme in the immigration space, highlighting poorly reasoned and inaccurate initial decisions.

We previously recommended harmonising the family reunion routes available to those settled under ACRS as it would go some way to make the system clearer and more effective. Ironically, the recent suspension of Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsor with Protection) means those settled under Pathway 2 and Pathway 3 are now on equal footing. However, this parity offers no advantages as the available routes are unattainable for most. We discuss the impacts of this recent announcement further in the Family Reunion section below.

The Human Impact of Family Separation: the Lived Experience

APBI has supported many Afghans who have arrived in the UK over the past four years. The data we have gathered from our clients shows that the ongoing family separation facing those resettled under ACRS Pathway 1 has had profound, real-life consequences for both those left behind in Afghanistan and those who are in the UK.

Families have endured prolonged uncertainty, grief, and trauma. During the evacuation in August 2021, approximately 80 children arrived in the UK without their parents. Many have spent years without direct contact with their closest relatives. We have spoken with parents in Afghanistan who feel helpless in the face of this separation. Many of the children have faced disrupted development, attachment difficulties, and constant fear for their family left in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

We have had reports from family members who remained in Afghanistan describing how they now live under constant threat from Taliban intimidation: from phone calls and letters, to house searches, arbitrary arrests, kidnappings and even killings. The ongoing risk to many of those in Afghanistan cannot be understated.

Anyone separated from their family faces unspeakable hardship. Those from minority communities such as the Hazara, those associated with the UK, or those who have been outspoken on issues such as democracy and women's rights, face a heightened risk. For lone women and unmarried sisters left behind in Afghanistan, life is unbearably hard and made worse by a lack of male relatives. Under Taliban rule, women and girls are isolated. They are **barred from schooling beyond secondary level, required to wear full-body coverings, and unable to leave home, travel, or use public transport without a mahram (male chaperone)**.¹⁹⁵ Our clients in the UK have been left powerless to protect female family members from forced marriages and sexual violence.

The mental health consequences of such prolonged separation are severe. Clients we have assisted in the UK have struggled with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation. Many have struggled to study, work, or progress with integration due to their relentless worry for their relatives.



A man is walking along the Ministry of Finance building, Kabul, Afghanistan (2023). Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

Masood, who worked as a security officer alongside the British Army in Nangarhar province, was separated from his family during Operation Pitting leaving behind three small children. “I tell my son to be a strong boy, but I can’t sleep at night thinking what would happen to him living there alone, would I ever see him again.”

Hamida, a famous athlete, was left behind when her husband—who worked with the UK government—was evacuated. She was unable to go with him due to a suicide bomb in Kabul Airport. “Every day feels like living in hell, my heart is full of fear, anger and depression. I am locked in a tiny dark room, my voice is not heard, I am not being seen and I cannot see my family or follow my dreams. The world has forgotten about me.”

Reza is an English teacher in Afghanistan. His father was killed, and his two brothers were arrested and tortured by the Taliban due to his role as an English teacher. The Taliban accused Reza of promoting Western culture and immorality among local Afghans. His sisters, who were women’s rights activists, and his elderly mother remain in hiding with an uncertain future.

Majeed submitted an “expression of interest” for his family. He reported being extremely worried about whether his case would be successful, when he might hear from the authorities, or if his family would survive until then. “I escaped to safety, but I could not save my brother and the rest of my family. That guilt will stay with me until the last day of my life.”

Ehsan has been resettled in the UK, but he left behind his brother who was suffering from severe mental illness and was heavily dependent on Ehsan. “I am safe here, but my mind is still in Afghanistan. I cannot eat, I can’t sleep, I cannot study, I cannot work, because I am always afraid of my brother. It took three years for us to get an application for our families to apply for reunion and how many years will it take to get the result.”

These individual experiences reflect a broader pattern of danger and uncertainty for families. The Government’s inability, or unwillingness, to reunite desperate families has weighed heavy on the many Afghans who put themselves at risk to support the UK.

(C) Family Reunion and Refugee Family Reunion

Family reunion allows certain family members to join their relatives in the UK. There are different rules governing family reunion applications depending on whether someone has Protection status (Refugee or Humanitarian Protection) or not.

For those with Protection status, the main way to apply for family reunion is under Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsor with Protection) of the Immigration Rules (**Appendix Family Reunion**). Some applications can also be made “**outside the rules**” where the right to respect for private and family life is engaged¹⁹⁶ (**Article 8**)—or there are particularly compelling circumstances. As we will discuss further in this section, the Government announced in September 2025 that Appendix Family Reunion would be **suspended pending reform**.¹⁹⁷

Under Appendix Family Reunion, a person holding Protection status (both limited and indefinite leave) in the UK could previously apply for the following people to join them:

- a) a spouse, civil partner or partner; or
- b) children under 18 (although there are provisions to allow over 18’s to join in exceptional circumstances).

In the case of spouses and civil partners, the marriage or civil partnership must have been entered into pre-flight i.e. before the sponsor left their country of origin to seek asylum. In the case of unmarried partners or partners with no civil partnership, the parties must have been in a relationship akin to marriage or civil partnership for two or more years before they fled their country.

For children, they also must have been part of the family unit pre-flight (including those conceived pre-flight) and must not be married themselves or leading an independent life.

Those who have settled status (both limited and indefinite leave) can apply for the following people to join them under **Appendix FM**:

- a) a spouse, civil partner or partner; and
- b) children under 18.

Applications made under Appendix FM have the following requirements:

- a) **Financial**: the sponsor must be earning at least £29,000 per year pre-tax. **Until April 2024** the minimum income threshold was £18,600 for a partner and each dependent child added a further amount to the financial requirements.¹⁹⁸ The current minimum income threshold is fixed and does not increase with dependent children.

- b) **Accommodation**: the family must be able to live with the sponsor without the house being overcrowded. The interpretation of which is specified in legislation.

- c) **English language**: adult applicants must be able to pass a basic A1 English test.

Until September 2025, Appendix FM only applied to those holding Protection status who wished to sponsor “post-flight” family members. However, the Government’s current advice is that anyone with Protection status must **use Appendix FM for family reunion applications** whilst Appendix Family Reunion is halted.¹⁹⁹

Non-parent relatives with Protection status (limited leave) can sponsor children under Appendix Child Relative (Sponsors with Protection) (**Appendix CRP**) where there are “serious and compelling family or other considerations” which mean the child should be admitted to the UK. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, applications must meet the following requirements:

- a) **Financial and accommodation**: the sponsor must be able to adequately accommodate and maintain the applicant without recourse to public funds i.e. any Government benefits or assistance. The sponsor must own or exclusively occupy the accommodation.
- b) **Care**: suitable arrangements must have been made for the applicant’s care and accommodation.

There are exceptions for those who cannot meet the maintenance and accommodation requirements where they are the only relative that can provide care and support for the child, who is dependent on them. An equivalent route exists for children joining non-parent relatives who have settled status in the UK: Paragraph 297 of Part 8: family members (**Para.297**). This does not carry the maintenance and accommodation requirements.

Sponsors with settled or Protection status can also apply for adult dependent relatives to join them, under Appendix ADR, which is subject to its own requirements, including:

- a) **Personal care**: the applicant must need long-term personal care which is either not available or unaffordable in their home country.
- b) **Care**: the sponsor must be able to adequately accommodate, maintain and care for the applicant without recourse to public funds.

“I have been disturbed that often the system seems so disconnected from human feeling or human understanding.

Nowhere is that lack of human feeling more apparent than in the effective prohibition of children granted refugee status in the UK sponsoring the immigration of their close family members.²⁰⁰” — Lord Oates, Lib Dem



A piece of Hazaragi embroidery is on display at an Afghan community gathering (2024).
Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

Lack of options

In September 2025, just weeks after closing the Afghan resettlement schemes, the Government paused Refugee Family Reunion; a double blow for Afghans seeking safety. As **highlighted in previous reports**, the family reunion system for refugees was already plagued by ineffective decision-making and unrealistic evidential requirements.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, it remained one of the few lawful routes for families of those granted protection in the UK.

The **Right Honourable Yvette Cooper MP**, then Secretary of State for the Home Department, cited the fact that refugees are applying for family reunion sooner following a grant of refugee status than in previous years²⁰² as a key driver for redesigning the system. This suggests that one feature of the new system will be a waiting period before someone is eligible to make an application.

Unsurprisingly, the claim that applications have shifted **“from people applying one or two years after they have refugee protection here in the UK to people applying in around a month”**²⁰³ does not tell the full story. In 2024, only one third of asylum applications received an initial decision within a year, compared with **around 50% in 2017/18 and 87% in 2014**.²⁰⁴ After prolonged separation caused by the backlog, it is unsurprising that refugees have been applying for family reunion as soon as possible following their grant of status. All our family reunion clients are desperate to begin the process as soon as they can to bring their families back together.

Similarly to the closure of the Afghan resettlement schemes, closure of Refugee Family Reunion risks **incentivising dangerous journeys** for those attempting to reunite with loved ones.²⁰⁵ This is particularly troubling when you consider that **93% of Refugee Family Reunion visas were granted to women and children in the year ending June 2025**.²⁰⁶

Refugee Family Reunion was a lifeline for Afghans rebuilding their lives in the UK. Over 3,000 Refugee Family Reunion applications were made by Afghans in the year ending June 2025, of which **84% were successful**.²⁰⁷



Pashtonestan Street, Kabul, Afghanistan (2022).
Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

Unobtainable requirements

We explored evidentiary issues in relation to Refugee Family Reunion applications in both **our 2023**²⁰⁸ and **2024**²⁰⁹ reports and it is an issue which persists. It is fundamental to the efficacy of any family reunion system that the supporting evidence requirements are realistic and safely obtainable. APBI recognises that the Government needs to verify the credibility of any application before someone enters the UK, but evidential requirements must take into account the context and reality in which applicants live. One client who APBI has been assisting was asked to provide an official, formal death certificate for a family member extrajudicially killed by the Taliban—an impossible request that would put the remaining family members in Afghanistan at grave risk. A more pragmatic approach to evidence would greatly improve the family reunion system, and APBI strongly advocates for this. However, the current rhetoric of the Government suggests that the revamped Refugee Family Union route will only be more restrictive in a bid to drive down numbers, risking further barriers for Afghans seeking safety with their family.

Government statements also indicate the potential introduction of a **minimum salary requirement** for UK refugee sponsors,²¹⁰ similar to that for Appendix FM applications. Indeed, whilst Refugee Family Reunion is suspended, refugees have been advised to apply for family reunion via Appendix FM. We have **previously discussed the prohibitive nature of its requirements** for most Afghans.²¹¹

The **application costs** alone under Appendix FM are out of reach for many: they have been increased to £1,938 per person where the applicant is outside of the UK.²¹² Applicants must also pay the Immigration Health Charge (**IHC**) which is paid in advance for the duration of the visa in six-month increments. For adults the annual charge is £1,035 and for children it is £766. Additionally, applications made in Afghanistan are charged in GBP but those made in Pakistan are in PKR and those made in Iran are in USD. Applications in foreign currency are subject to the Home Office Exchange Rate Policy which often results in inflated sums.



An old man is begging during a cold winter day, Kabul, Afghanistan (2023).
Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

For a spouse and two children, the costs are:

Application fees: $£1,938 \times 3 = £5,814$

Adult IHC: $£1,035 \times 3 = £3,105$

Child IHC: $(£766 \times 3) \times 2 = £4,596$



TOTAL:

£13,515

This is entirely unaffordable for most APBI clients. Aligning Refugee Family Reunion more closely with Appendix FM would, in effect, close another safe route.

As detailed in our 2024 report, **the minimum income requirement for a sponsor was dramatically increased** in 2024 from £18,600 to £29,000 per year.²¹³ A further increase to £38,700—to bring it in line with the minimum general **salary threshold for skilled workers**²¹⁴—was due to be effected in early 2025 but is fortunately on pause whilst the **Migration Advisory Committee** reviews the financial requirements.²¹⁵ The potential alignment of Appendix FM with Skilled Worker thresholds underscores its unsuitability in a refugee context; the policy aims are not the same, as set out below.

The historic difference between Refugee Family Reunion and Appendix FM was deliberate. Refugee Family Reunion existed for those given protection in the UK, due to having a well-founded fear of persecution, to reunite with their loved ones (who may themselves have valid protection claims). This is not analogous to economic migration routes. Refugees face a particular set of complexities which should be reflected in bespoke systems.

As well as the financial requirements set out above, under Appendix FM all adult applicants must demonstrate English language skills to at least A1 CEFR standard, usually through a Secure English Language Test. This is another example where the difference in context between normal family reunion routes and those for refugees is crucial. Language requirements are not imposed on refugees because the system is designed to help the vulnerable, rather than boost economic productivity as may be the case for the wider immigration system.

Language requirements cause particular hardship in the Afghan context since women—who are overwhelmingly the adult beneficiaries of family reunion—tend not to be well educated in Afghanistan and are currently subject to restrictions on education. Afghanistan has one of the **lowest rates of literacy for women** in the world at around just 20%.²¹⁶ The Taliban's tightening grip means the situation for women and girls has been deteriorating daily since 2021. The Taliban immediately **banned girls from secondary and higher education**, making Afghanistan the only country in the world to have such a policy.²¹⁷ Currently, **over 78% of Afghan women are not in education, employment, or training**.²¹⁸ In this context, asking female Afghan applicants to meet a language requirement is tantamount to blocking their ability to access family reunion.

“The Taliban is closer than ever to achieving its vision of a society that completely erases women from public life.” —UN Women²¹⁹

As well as educational limitations, there are practical barriers which compound the challenge for Afghan women. Firstly, at present there are no centres in Afghanistan which can provide Secure English Language Tests. Secondly, Taliban restrictions mean that women cannot leave the house **without being accompanied by a male mahram** to chaperone them.²²⁰ Many of APBI's female clients are waiting to reunite with their husbands and, as such, are without a *mahram* to accompany them to a test centre, particularly as it would require leaving Afghanistan. APBI recognises that the Home Office has a policy whereby applicants can apply for an exemption if they are a long-term resident in a country with no test centres and it is **unreasonable for them to travel to another country**,²²¹ but this is yet another administrative hurdle to jump through. A blanket exemption for Afghanistan would be more appropriate.

The Government has affirmed its commitment to help the women and girls in Afghanistan, including referring Afghanistan to the **International Court of Justice** for violations of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.²²² If it wants to honour that commitment, it should avoid measures that obstruct reunification with family in the UK.

APBI urges the Government not to impose language requirements when the new Refugee Family Reunion route is introduced next year.

Biometrics

Since the **suspension of UK consular services in 2021**,²²³ Afghans have faced persistent difficulties providing biometrics. With no Visa Application Centres (**VAC**) operating in Afghanistan, Afghans must travel to Pakistan or Iran to enrol their biometrics. Deteriorating relations in the region make this near impossible for Afghans to do so safely.

APBI has previously advocated for more flexibility in the biometrics process. We recommended reducing the threshold for an application to be pre-determined or for the biometrics requirement to be **deferred until arrival in the UK**.²²⁴

We pointed out in our 2024 report that travelling to a VAC is particularly challenging for Afghan women who are applying to reunite with their husband given the Taliban's **restrictions on women leaving the house without a mahram** (male chaperone).²²⁵ The Home Office guidance on whether a journey to a VAC is "unsafe"—and therefore whether the applicant may be eligible for pre-determination or deferral—considers local circumstances and gives an example of **lone women where local laws require women to be accompanied by a male relative**.²²⁶ This appears to be a direct reference to the difficult circumstances in which Afghan women find themselves but despite this, and APBI's clients in Afghanistan seemingly meeting the Home Office's criteria, applications under the "unsafe journey" policy are rarely accepted.

Escalating tensions in the Middle East have added to the uncertainty; **the VAC in Tehran was closed** from 18 June 2025²²⁷ to **2 July 2025**²²⁸ due to safety concerns. Although this was temporary it demonstrates the unpredictable nature of the region. Many Afghans in Pakistan have reported difficulties in attending VAC appointments if they are without leave to remain because they are at risk of encountering the authorities and being forcibly returned to Afghanistan.

These practical impediments that stop Afghans accessing safe resettlement routes have been raised in Parliament, particularly in the House of Lords. In a House of Lords debate in relation to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, the Lords discussed an amendment which would allow "**authorised persons**" to collect biometrics from family reunion applicants²²⁹ by widening the current proposed clause 34 which will apply only to evacuees e.g. **scenarios like Operation Pitting**.²³⁰ The Lords discussed the improved technology for biometric data collection which means that the process is more portable, opening up the possibility of **doing it outside of VACs**.²³¹ Unfortunately, this amendment did not pass. The bill itself has passed the final vote in the House of Commons and is now at the final stage in the House of Lords. If the law is passed, it will be interesting to see how clause 34 is used in practice. APBI would urge the Government to explore these kinds of flexible solutions so vulnerable people can benefit from the settlement routes designed to help them, whilst also balancing any national security risk. Currently, the Government's inflexibility in relation to Afghan biometrics means desperate Afghans are being forced to make dangerous journeys across borders with no guarantee of success.



Two boys walking in front of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2023).
Photo credit: © Kayhan

Unaccompanied children

One glimmer of hope in what is an otherwise tough environment for Refugee Family Reunion is that there are some indications that the redesigned route may include provisions for unaccompanied refugee children to reunite with parents. In her statement to the House of Commons, Yvette Cooper said the Government was looking at “**controlled arrangements for unaccompanied children**.”²³² This is long overdue and, as APBI has discussed in **previous reports**,²³³ the UK’s position on unaccompanied children within family reunion is at odds with almost every country in the EU. Unaccompanied child refugees are some of the most vulnerable people in the world. They are alone in a foreign country, having experienced more trauma in their short lives than most people ever will. Despite attempts by previous UK governments to **justify the policy position**,²³⁴ separating children from their parents has never been justifiable. The Court of Appeal recently allowed an appeal in **DM, R (on the application of) The Secretary of State for The Home Department [2025] EWCA 1273**,²³⁵ a judicial review case regarding the policy on Refugee Family Reunion for child refugees, on the grounds that the policy breaches the duty to act in the best interests of the child under **section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009**,²³⁶ and to have regard to the best interests of children in the UK when making immigration policy.

In September 2024, a private members’ bill was introduced in the House of Lords—**the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill**—which would, if enacted, allow refugee children to sponsor their parents and their siblings.²³⁷ The merits of the bill were discussed at length by the Lords, with most coming out in support since it is in the best interests of children, supports integration, and takes children out of the hands of people smugglers. It would be a welcome change if the Government used this bill for the basis of the reforms and finally put the UK on an equal footing with the rest of Europe.

The life-changing impact that being able to grow up with their parents and siblings would have on the individual children cannot be overestimated, and yet the impact to the rest of society is minimal. It is estimated that a child sponsorship route would likely **lead a maximum of 750 additional visas** being granted per year²³⁸ which is negligible relative to the overall numbers.

If no such route is established, and the new Refugee Family Reunion framework makes it harder to bring Article 8 claims (as discussed below), it will be near impossible for refugee children to reunite with their families which is deeply concerning.



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Young primary school girls are walking to school. Education for girls above primary level is banned in Afghanistan. Kabul, Afghanistan (2023). Photo credit: © Kayhan

Article 8

When an applicant is unable to meet the relevant family reunion requirements then the “exceptional circumstances” test is engaged. This requires the decision-maker to consider if there are exceptional circumstances which mean that refusing the application would breach Article 8 (the right to private and family life) due to the refusal leading to **“unjustifiable harsh consequences for the applicant.”**²³⁹ These “outside of the rules” applications will be even more common if Refugee Family Reunion becomes more restrictive.

“Exceptional circumstances” is an extremely high threshold to meet and lacks interpretive guidance. In 2017, the Supreme Court held that it is up to the Home Office to decide what **“exceptional circumstances” and “unjustifiably harsh consequences”** mean.²⁴⁰ This lack of transparency undermines the system and increases the need for appeals.

Since 2021, APBI has worked on **49** number of family reunion appeals, of which **5** were subsequently resolved. The appeal process is lengthy, taking up considerable time and money. Many of these appeals related to family members who were eventually accepted under the ACRS Separated Families Pathway, but its delayed implementation meant the only choice people had for some time was an application under Article 8. Other appeals resulted from very poor initial analysis where the decision-maker had clearly failed to evaluate the evidence properly the first time. With ever-increasing strain on the limited resources of the Immigration Tribunal, poor decision-making is counterproductive and leaves families in limbo, and at risk, unnecessarily.

Despite Article 8 being an already high threshold, it appears that the Government also wants to tighten controls on its application. Yvette Cooper suggested the Government is looking to change the way that Article 8 is interpreted, citing a need to keep up with **“the realities and challenges of today’s world.”**²⁴¹ It is unclear what this may mean in practice, but we are concerned that any narrowing of Article 8 would further limit “safe and legal routes” and push Afghans towards more danger. The Government’s rhetoric around Article 8 is a further example of the Labour party leaning towards the right in a bid to compete with the Conservatives and Reform.

It is worth noting that successful applicants under the “exceptional circumstances” route are not granted “leave in line” i.e. the same leave as their sponsor. Instead, they receive leave for 30-33 months and must reach 10 years before they can qualify for indefinite leave to remain. This contrasts with the provisions for Refugee Family Reunion, whereby applicants could settle in line with their sponsor, and those who can meet the Appendix FM requirements who are eligible to settle following 5 years valid leave. This is another disadvantage that refugees will face if they must rely on applications outside of the rules.

While APBI **supports efforts to simplify a complex system,**²⁴² this seems to be a smokescreen for the Government who instead want to clamp down on family reunion and shrink the numbers to appease right-wing voters.



Women and children gather in Dasht-e-Barchi, reflecting daily life, Kabul, Afghanistan (2023).
Photo Credit: ©Kayhan

(D) ARR

Given the secret nature of the ARR, and the fact that it was only publicly reported once it had closed, this timeline sets out the relevant events which occurred.

Timeline

February 2022	An official in the Ministry of Defence emails a spreadsheet outside of authorised Government systems which contains names, contact details and information on family members in respect of 18,714 Afghans who had applied to either the <i>ex gratia</i> scheme or ARAP (the Data Leak). ²⁴³
August 2023	Members of the previous Government become aware of the Data Leak after someone anonymously posted some of the personal details on Facebook . ²⁴⁴ Some journalists are also alerted.
25 August 2023	The then Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, applies for an injunction to prevent knowledge of the Data Leak becoming public. ²⁴⁵
1 September 2023	The High Court grants a super-injunction “against the world” which means that all reporting on the Data Leak is prohibited, as well as on the existence of the injunction itself. ²⁴⁶ The nature of the superinjunction is the first of its kind. ²⁴⁷
Autumn 2023	The previous Government designs a new Afghan resettlement scheme for those affected by the Data Leak and at the highest risk of reprisals from the Taliban, named the “Afghanistan Response Route” (the ARR). The initial target cohort is 200 principals. ²⁴⁸
April 2024	The ARR takes effect , and 3,000 principals are now in scope ²⁴⁹ .
January 2025	The Government commissions the “Rimmer Review” to conduct an independent inquiry into the Data Leak and the continuing risks. ²⁵⁰
June 2025	The Rimmer Review is complete, and it concludes that there is “little evidence of intent by the Taliban to conduct a campaign of retribution ” against those who had their personal information leaked. ²⁵¹
15 July 2025	In light of the Rimmer Review and wider policy concerns, the super injunction is lifted. The Government explains to Parliament what has happened, and announces the closure of the ARR. It reveals that 4,500 people (around 900 principals and their family members) have been relocated to the UK at a cost of £400 million. The remaining 600 principal invitations will be honoured, with estimates of a total of around 7,000 Afghans being resettled under ARR . ²⁵² Everyone affected by the Data Leak is contacted by the Ministry of Defence and a new Government advice page is created . ²⁵³

ARR was an invitation-only route, with initial eligibility determined by defined criteria. Those who have been resettled under ARR **have been granted settled status (indefinite leave to remain)**, rather than refugee status.²⁵⁴

In order to be **deemed eligible for relocation** under ARR, individuals had to:²⁵⁵

- (a) be impacted by the Data Leak;
- (b) be categorised as at highest risk of targeting by the Taliban, as a result;
- (c) be located in a high-risk country; and
- (d) not have previously been found eligible under either ARAP, ACRS or any other route which provides “settled status”.

The public reporting of the ARR marks a sorry end to the UK's Afghan resettlement schemes; a policy area that has been mired by inefficiency and controversy. In the three and half years before the Data Leak was revealed, the affected Afghans were, unbeknown to them, in a riskier situation. The UK Parliament was also unable to debate the response, and public money was being spent without oversight. Successive Governments chose to shield themselves from scrutiny and offered the barest of support to those who were affected by the Data Leak.

Any data breach in the context of vulnerable people applying for assistance from the Government is inexcusable, but to inadvertently share the personal details of almost 20,000 applicants is shocking.

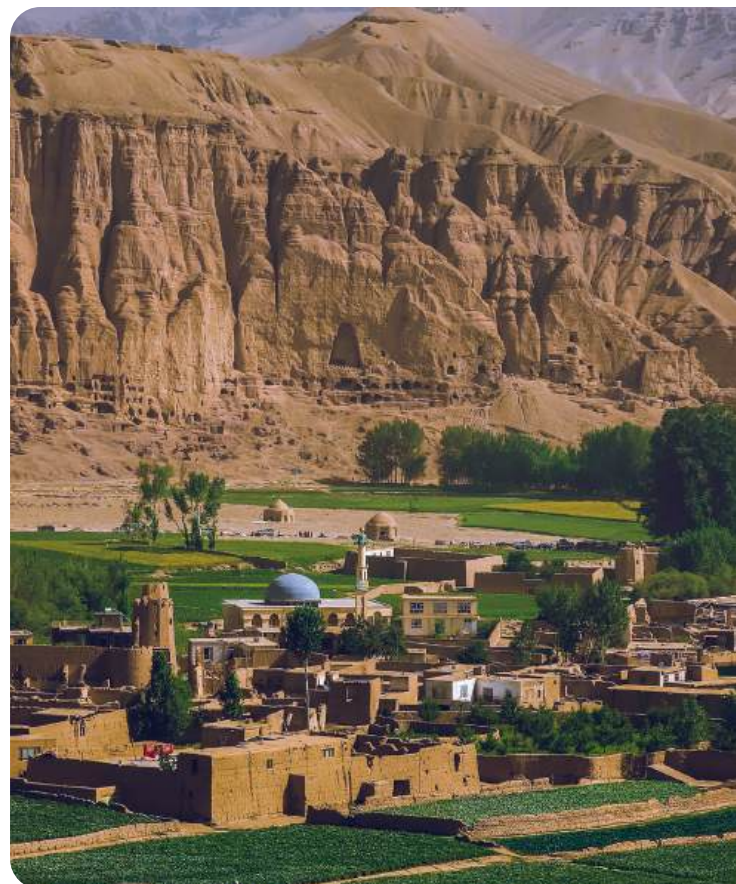
Since 2021, data handling within the Afghan resettlement schemes has been, at best, incompetent and, at worst, negligent. In 2023, the Ministry of Defence was fined £350,000 for an email sent in September 2021 that mistakenly included all recipients outside of “blind carbon copy,” (BCC) **exposing the recipient's identities to their peers and co-recipients**.²⁵⁶ Although the Ministry of Defence **acknowledged the severity of the breach**,²⁵⁷ subsequent events indicate that lessons were not learned.

The Ministry of Defence recently admitted that the unit responsible for Afghan relocations committed **49 separate data breaches between 2021 and 2025**²⁵⁸ which amounts to an average of one every month. Seven were sufficiently serious to require notification to the Information Commissioner's Office—the data watchdog. This level of non-compliance within a **unit managing highly sensitive information** is deeply disturbing.²⁵⁹ To date, the public has been informed of only two of the 49 breaches: the September 2021 email and the February 2022 dataset. A third breach related to a Ministry of Defence sub-contractor was **reported in August 2025**.²⁶⁰

When disclosing the extent of the Data Leak in the House of Commons, the Government explained that it had **“appointed a new chief information officer, installed new software to securely share data and completed a comprehensive review of the legacy Afghan data on the casework system”**²⁶¹ but this is too little, too late. Robust data security measures should have been the absolute priority when setting up the resettlement schemes. The UK is the **third largest AI market in the world**,²⁶² with supposed strong technological capabilities, yet Afghan casework was initially being carried out by the Ministry of Defence on **excel spreadsheets**.²⁶³

APBI acknowledges that the schemes were established rapidly in response to a pressured situation. Nevertheless, the disclosure of sensitive information undermines the very purpose of schemes designed to protect vulnerable people. The Government and the Ministry of Defence should have implemented stronger safeguards to avoid failing so many Afghans.

The Rimmer Report, which the Government commissioned in January 2025 to conduct an **independent inquiry into the Data Leak and the continuing risks**²⁶⁴, was published in June 2025 and formed an important part of the decision to end the ARR and disclose the Data Leak. In the report, Paul Rimmer concluded that it was **“highly unlikely”** that an individual appearing within the Data Leak would itself make them a target for the Taliban given the volume of other information already available.²⁶⁵ However, even where an individual's links to the British military may have already been known on a local scale, it was reasonable for that person to expect that their personal information would not be shared more widely by the Government. It is also not a given that such persons would face no heightened risk because of the Data Leak. Even if their previous work was locally known, there are countless reasons it may still give rise to increased adverse interest from the Taliban or others.



Old houses in the city of Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2023). Photo credit: © Kayhan

A recent survey carried out for RLS has highlighted the devastating impact that the Data Leak has had on hundreds of Afghans. Of the 231 Afghans surveyed who had their data leaked, **49 reported that a family member or colleague had been killed as a result.**²⁶⁶ This calls into question the findings of the Rimmer Review and raises concerns around how much the experience of Afghans was considered when preparing the Rimmer Review.

“... our home has been searched multiple times. My father was brutally beaten to the point that his toenails were forcibly removed, and my parents remain under constant and serious threat. My family and I continue to face intimidation, repeated house searches, and ongoing danger to our safety.”
—A former member of the Triples

With the exception of those who may have seen or heard of the data set, affected Afghans were entirely unaware of the Data Leak until July 2025. Data breaches undermine trust in the Government and the schemes themselves, and these recent revelations have caused deep concern within the Afghan community. Not only are they embarrassing for the Government, but they can mean death for those affected. The consequences aren't theoretical; they put people at risk of serious harm and even death. Several respondents to the recent RLS survey described how the delay in communication **caused more harm** as it prevented them from taking measures to protect themselves.²⁶⁷

“We’ve been waiting for four years under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP), sending email after email, holding on to the promise that the UK would not abandon us. And now this. This breach. This betrayal.”
—An Afghan affected by the data breach

Following the public reporting of the Data Leak, it emerged that a judicial review case was heard in the High Court in April 2024: R (**CX1 & others**) v **Secretary of State for Defence & another** [2024] EWHC 892 (Admin).²⁶⁹ The claimants—a former judge and a former BBC World Service employee—had been found ineligible under ARR due to an alleged lack of links with the UK Government and this decision was being challenged. Through the public release of the determination we now know much more about the ARR and how it operated.

For example, we now know that in 2023, the Ministry of Defence recommended that a condition for eligibility under ARR should be that the individual **“worked alongside, in partnership with, closely supporting or assisting a UK Government department, including where that department can corroborate the link.”**²⁷⁰ This is a similar requirement to the first part of Category 4 under ARAP. A **non-exhaustive list** was subsequently drawn up²⁷¹ of jobs that fit these criteria. Whilst this list has not been made public, the decisions challenged were that the claimants' roles did not fall within it. The claimants argued that the list amounted to **“narrowly drawn criteria which preclude[d] an individualised assessment of risk”** and was therefore irrational²⁷². Dingemans LJ found that the decision that each claimant wasn't eligible was implicitly made on the basis that their roles weren't on the high-profile jobs list rather than a fact-specific review of their particular circumstances. Dingemans LJ concluded that there was **“no evidence that it would be impracticable to give individual consideration in each”**²⁷³ and therefore **“a rule which categorically excludes anyone not in the identified roles is irrational”**.²⁷⁴

The case of *CX1 & others* demonstrates the inflexibility pervasive across all the Afghan resettlement schemes. Even in the context of a potentially deadly mistake by the Government, narrow eligibility criteria were still being applied.

Understandably, many Afghans have been, and remain, extremely concerned about the Data Leak and the risks it poses to themselves and their families. Since the July 2025 announcement, NGOs have been working with the Afghan community to ensure people understand what has happened and the process to find out whether their data was included in the leaked spreadsheet. RLS prepared a factsheet on the Data Leak which can be found **here**.

Glossary

ACRS = Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme

APBI = Afghan Pro Bono Initiative

ARAP = Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy

ARP = Afghan Resettlement Programme

ARR = Afghan Response Route

AT444 = Afghan Territorial Force 444

BRP = Biometrics Residence Permit

CF333 = Commando Force 333

DARR = the Defence Afghan Relocation and Resettlement

ECHR = European Convention on Human Rights

FCDO = Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Government = Government of the UK

HNRP = Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan

ICJ = the International Court of Justice

IHC = Immigration Health Charge

IPC = Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

Mahram = Male Chaperone

MOD = Ministry of Defence

MP = Member of Parliament

NGO = Non-governmental Organisation

OCHA = UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Parliament = the UK Houses of Parliament

RLS = Refugee Legal Support

SPI = Safe Passage International

UK = United Kingdom

UKSF = the United Kingdom Special Forces

UN = United Nations

UNAMA = the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

US = United States of America

VAC = Visa Appointment Centre

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