



# **RAMP**

Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy Project

## **DELIVERING ON 'OPERATION WARM WELCOME':**

**Reflections on the Welcome and  
Integration Support provided to Afghans  
evacuated under Operation Pitting**

**June 2022**

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# FOREWORD

**(by David Simmonds MP, CBE)**

Operation Pitting successfully evacuated 15,000 Afghan and British Nationals from Kabul airport as the Taliban seized control of the country in August 2021. I am proud of the work of the British Military in what was the UK's largest humanitarian aid operation in over 70 years. I am proud that these Afghans arrived in the UK with immediate legal status, the right to work, access to public funds and that many came with some, if not all of their immediate family members.

Quite rightly, we now have a responsibility to help those who arrived, who in many cases were integral to the work of the UK forces and British institutions in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, to thrive. My experience of working with and for local authorities has made me deeply aware of both the challenges and rewards in supporting refugees to settle and integrate into UK society. There is a need for integrated approaches which ensure they have secure accommodation, access to English language learning, together with support to find suitable employment.

I therefore welcomed the launch of Operation Warm Welcome on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021 as a cross-departmental effort promising support with education, housing, finding employment, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to help these Afghans settle and integrate in the UK. Many of this cohort arrive with skills and recent work history which means that, if they are well supported, they can restart their lives quickly. Given the significant labour shortages currently facing the UK, we should be prioritising supporting refugees to enter the workforce. If we are able to provide them with the tools they need to integrate effectively, we would be meeting our duty to them.

Since the launch of Operation Warm Welcome, the UK Government has also responded to the Ukrainian refugee crisis caused by the Russian invasion. Government departments have had to dedicate resources to the development of new routes to safety for Ukrainians and to support a new cohort of arrivals - a vitally important work which however by no means lessens our responsibility towards those who arrived from Afghanistan.

It is now ten months since Operation Warm Welcome was launched, and, with 12,000 Afghans remaining in bridging hotels, it is a good opportunity to consider how the scheme has impacted these individuals' integration process in the UK.

A cross-party group of parliamentarians who are part of the Refugee, Asylum, and Migration Policy Project (RAMP) asked the RAMP team to take a snapshot of the current situation facing the Afghans who arrived as part of Operation Warm Welcome to inform our own work in this area. This report draws on interviews with local authorities, national and local refugee support charities together with refugees themselves. It considers their experience under a range of integration indicators and discusses what has worked well, as well as suggesting recommendations for the improvement of this scheme, and refugee integration support more generally.

We hope that this will be a helpful tool for parliamentarians, the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to inform their work in ensuring these Afghans can integrate well to life in the UK and be supported to use all of the skills and experience they bring. We also hope that the experience we have gained from this scheme will help us learn more about how to successfully welcome other groups of refugees to the UK in the future.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Along with the United States and NATO, all remaining British service personnel in Afghanistan were scheduled to withdraw from the country by 11<sup>th</sup> September 2021. This withdrawal of international forces was accompanied by the launch of a major Taliban offensive against Afghan Government forces resulting in the capture of Kabul on August 15<sup>th</sup>. The security situation on the ground became increasingly dangerous, particularly for those associated with British and NATO forces and institutions.

The Ministry of Defence deployed military personnel to Afghanistan to evacuate British nationals, their families and those at risk due to their association with British institutions. This evacuation was called Operation Pitting and 15,000 people left Afghanistan for the UK on more than 100 flights between 13<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> August 2021. On 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021, '**Operation Warm Welcome**' was launched by the UK government as a cross-departmental effort to help the Afghans evacuated during Operation Pitting<sup>1</sup>. The government promised to provide *"the vital support they need to rebuild their lives, find work, pursue education, and integrate into their local communities"*<sup>2</sup>.

Ten months have passed since the evacuation flights of Operation Pitting and concern has been expressed by many about the wellbeing and integration of these individuals, especially given that 12,000, half of whom are children, remain in temporary hotel accommodation<sup>3</sup>.

This report aims to;

1. Provide a snapshot of the reception and welcome received by this cohort of Afghans.
2. Assess the welcome received in terms of its contribution to this group's integration, in the short, medium and long term.
3. Develop recommendations into how the integration prospects of this cohort of refugees can be further improved.
4. Offer insights from the research into how future integration and resettlement infrastructures can be further improved both at the national and local level.

Some Afghans have found employment and are settling into communities in permanent accommodation. Others, however, are still awaiting confirmation of their immigration status, do not have sufficient ESOL provision and are finding that uncertainty around where they will be permanently located is affecting their ability to enrol in full time education or find work.

Children are generally in school, with our research showing that this is positively impacting their wellbeing and chances to mix with other children. However, extended stays in hotels for families with children is very challenging, as there is limited space to play, run around, cook appropriate food and have family space. Our interviews consistently revealed that concerns about family members who remain in Afghanistan is a primary preoccupation for many individuals. The lack of progress on reuniting with family, including with minor children and those called unable to board evacuation planes, contribute to this issue continuing to be a great cause of concern for this cohort. Questions around the ability to access legal routes for families to reunite remain significant, especially given the recent introduction of provisions in the Nationality and Borders Act that could result in Afghans who arrive through irregular routes being subject to differing integration support.

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1 Home Office, "**Factsheet: Operation Warm Welcome in action**", October 29, 2021.

2 Home Office, "**Operation Warm Welcome under way to support Afghan arrivals in the UK**", September 01, 2021.

3 Kevin Foster, Answer to **Parliamentary Question 13085**, June 08, 2022.

Based on what we heard, this report makes a number of recommendations about actions that could be taken to better support those included in Operation Warm Welcome as well as other refugees. A full list of recommendations can be found on pp. 30 -35, but the key recommendations are as follows:

## Key Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1:**

**Move all Afghans out of hotels into permanent accommodation as a matter of urgency**

To achieve this, the Home Office should:

- 1.1 Provide stronger Ministerial oversight and accountability.
- 1.2 Increase Home Office caseworker capacity for matching and working collaboratively with local authorities and Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) to move people into suitable permanent housing.
- 1.3 Increase decentralisation of the matching process to involve regional bodies (SMPs, local authorities and NGOs) more closely.
- 1.4 Improve communication with the Afghans about the move to permanent accommodation.
- 1.5 Accommodate large extended family groupings in separate accommodation close to each other rather than wait until larger properties become available.

### **Recommendation 2:**

**Enable Operation Pitting families to be reunited as a priority**

To achieve this, the Home Office should:

- 2.1 Standardise family reunion rights across the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) schemes and provide guidance and information about the process for family reunion applications.
- 2.2 Enable speedy family reunion for all those family members of Afghans in the UK who were called forward for evacuation in August 2021 but were not able to board the flights, and remain in the region.
- 2.3 Prioritise the processing of pending refugee family reunion applications for Afghans.

### **Recommendation 3:**

**Ensure everyone in this cohort has sufficient English language provision**

To achieve this, local authorities should:

- 3.1 Prioritise access to meaningful ESOL provision for everyone in the cohort. Ensure that where existing local ESOL provision is not suitable, creativity is encouraged. This is relevant for parents with young children and 16-17 year olds.
- 3.2 Coordinate the provision of tailored ESOL provision across the different refugee and asylum seeker cohorts that they are supporting, to help make sure it is cost-efficient.
- 3.3 Ensure ESOL is accessible to people who are in employment.

### **Recommendation 4:**

**Ensure this cohort can access higher education and employment opportunities with the ultimate aim of both providing income and allowing them to use their skills and experience**

Central Government, Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) and local authorities should;

- 4.2 Ensure that specialist refugee employment and education support is available in each local authority, including individual job and education coaching assistance and introductions to local labour market opportunities.

## **Key Recommendations for broad refugee integration strategy**

### **Recommendation 5:**

**The Home Office should take advice from the Department for Education and the Minister for Children with regards to the accommodation policy for child refugees and asylum seekers.**

### **Recommendation 6:**

**Home Office refugee integration and support strategy should be developed with an understanding of the interaction of all the different schemes and cohorts of refugees and asylum seekers that local authorities support and how they impact the ability of local authorities to make future commitments.**

# 1. OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

This section sets out the scope, terminology and process of data collection for this research.

## 1.1 The Afghan Cohort in this Report

The Afghan cohort in this report comprises individuals and families who arrived in summer 2021 during Operation Pitting, who qualify under different government schemes. These include, for example, current or former staff employed by UK Government in Afghanistan since 2001 and certain people employed through contractors, some families of British citizens and Afghan Nationals living in the UK and some other Afghan citizens who were identified as particularly vulnerable to persecution (see full details of who is included in different schemes in *Figure 1* on next page).

To some extent, this cohort of refugees has characteristics that may affect their integration prospects in specific ways. Some of the people arriving were recently employed in Afghanistan and had good English language skills; some were highly educated and came from high socioeconomic backgrounds, while others did not have high levels of education or literacy and had very limited English language skills. We observed different skills, education levels and professional experiences within families and across different genders. This cohort is also diverse in ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Given this diversity, we believe that this cohort is sufficiently similar to other refugee arrivals to allow fruitful comparisons. The findings from this study therefore may also be relevant for improving the integration prospects of other refugee groups.

We also acknowledge that the sudden nature of the crisis in Afghanistan made the relocation of this cohort to the UK different from resettlement schemes in that it operated under emergency conditions and led to specific challenges around pre-arrival planning and coordination. However, as starkly illustrated by the Ukrainian crisis, given the unpredictability of conflicts in the current geopolitical context, we believe that important lessons can be drawn from this report about improving the UK resettlement and integration infrastructure even under emergency conditions.

## 1.2 Use of the Term ‘Refugee’

For the purposes of this report, we will refer to this cohort of Afghan people as refugees unless it is relevant to refer to them by the government programme by which they came to the UK. We recognise that they are not all categorised in UK law as a refugee who has been through the UK asylum process, or assessed by the UNHCR as a refugee for the purposes of resettlement. However, for the purpose of the discussion around integration in this report, the similarity of this Afghan cohort’s characteristics with those defined as a refugee in the law means that the use of the term is the most appropriate.

### **Figure 1: Government Schemes, Rights and Pathways for Afghan arrivals**

This cohort of Afghans was eligible for entry to the UK under the different schemes and pathways set out below.

**Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)** has been open since April 2021 to any current or former staff employed by HMG in Afghanistan since 2001, together with certain special cases of those employed via contractors and who are assessed at serious risk (House of Commons Library, Research Briefing Briefing 9307, January 2022). Eligibility is regardless of employment status, rank or role, or length of time served. As of March 2022, the Home Office stated that provisional data shows more than 7000 people have arrived in the UK under the ARAP scheme in total (Home Office Statistics, 26 May 2022).

**Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)**; these include family members of British or Afghan nationals living in the UK evacuated under Operation Pitting. Also included are others deemed particularly vulnerable or at risk in Afghanistan, such as women human rights activists, journalists and prosecutors. This scheme was formally announced in January 2022, but initially focused on granting status to 6,500 of those already brought to the UK under Operation Pitting. The scheme will bring 20,000 people to the UK over the next few years (House of Commons Library, Research Briefing Briefing 9307, January 2022).

## **1.3 The Research Process**

The research for this report is based on a qualitative methodology. This involved, firstly, an analysis of the UK government policies on Afghan integration and a review of existing studies on the policies that have been shown to contribute to successful refugee integration. Secondly, between late February and early April 2022, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with key informants, mainly including staff from national voluntary organisations, local authorities and local charities who were involved in directly supporting this cohort of Afghans integrating in the UK. Among these participants, we also interviewed four Afghan refugees, who arrived with their families in the summer of 2021, qualified under different schemes and are living both in hotel and permanent accommodation. They shared their experiences of integration and welcome in the UK so far<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the methodology used in this research, including our sampling method, selection of interviewees, justification of the different perspectives included, and profiles of the refugees we spoke to, see Annex A at the end of the Report.



## 2. UNDERSTANDING EXISTING EVIDENCE ON INTEGRATION

### 2.1 Defining Integration

In 2018, the UK government published a “Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper”<sup>5</sup>, in which integrated communities were defined as ‘communities where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities’. This definition has been subsequently employed by the Home Office in developing its integration strategies<sup>6</sup>. It is widely acknowledged, however, that there is no single definition of integration in the context of migration, asylum and refugee resettlement. Both as an analytical construct, and a policy objective, refugee integration remains a multifaceted concept; it refers to various legal, economic, social and cultural processes that occur when newcomers settle, and aim to fully participate in a host society, which is itself constantly changing and diverse in multiple ways.

Policy experts, academics and governments have increasingly accounted for this complexity. Most definitions<sup>7</sup> of **integration** in the refugee context stress that:

- Integration is a **‘two way’ or ‘multi-directional’ process** - in the sense that it requires some degree of ‘adaptation’ from both refugees and existing residents in the host society.
- Integration is **‘multi-dimensional’** - in the sense that it depends on multiple factors, which include both access to material resources as well as social relationships, general perceptions of welcome in the host society, and a sense of belonging.
- Integration is **‘context-specific’** in so far as it depends on the characteristics, capacity and opportunities of specific local areas, for example levels of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, job opportunities and refugee support services, which all need to be considered in planning for refugee integration.

While there is agreement on what integration requires in principle, there is also a recognition that refugees face specific disadvantages, compared to other groups of migrants, in successfully achieving integration in host countries in the Global North<sup>8</sup>.

5 HM Government “**Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper: Building stronger, more united communities**”, March 2018.

6 Home Office, “**Home Office Indicators of Integration framework**”, Home Office Research Report 109, June 03, 2019.

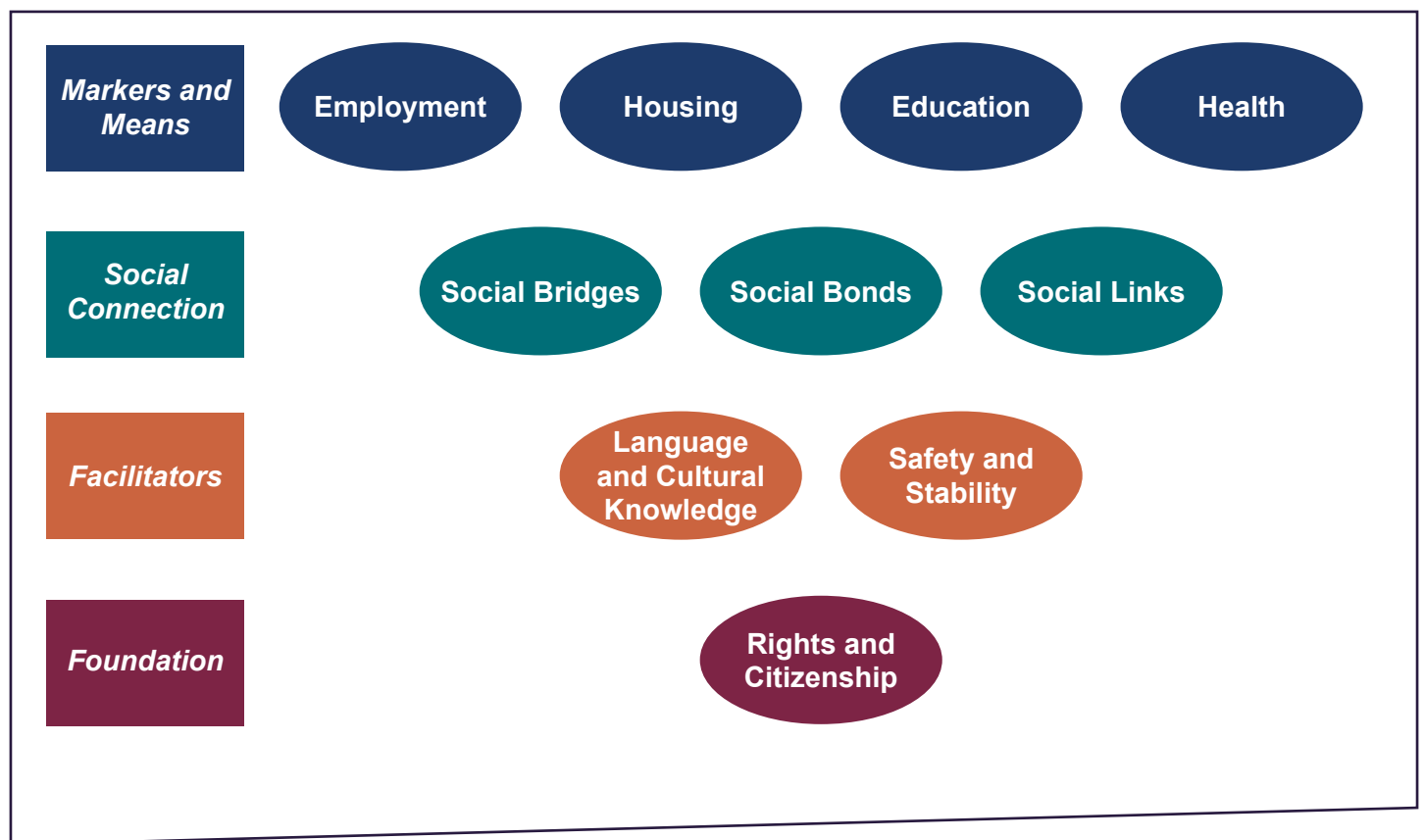
7 Arlene Robertson “**A New Life For me: Integration Experiences of Syrian Refugee Children and their Families**” Bernardo’s Research, March 01 2020; Home Office, “**Home Office Indicators of Integration framework**” 2019; Michael Collyer, Linda Morrice, Linda Tip, Rupert Brown, Eveline Odermatt “**A long-term commitment: integration of resettled refugees in the UK**”, University of Sussex, December 2018; UNHCR, IOM, City University London “**Towards Integration: The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in the United Kingdom**”, November 06, 2017; Gaby Atfield, Kavita Brahmhatt, Therese O’Toole Atfield, “**Refugees’ Experiences of Integration**”, Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, July 07, 2007.

8 Isabel Ruiz and Carlos Vargas-Silva “**What Works for Improving Refugee Outcomes in High-Income Countries? Policy Insights for the UK**” The Centre on Migration, Policy & Society (COMPAS) Report, January 2021.

## 2.2 The Main Ingredients of Successful Integration

One of the most influential conceptual frameworks of the main ingredients of successful refugee integration was developed by public policy scholars Ager and Strang as part of an evaluation of integration projects commissioned by the Home Office in the mid-2000s<sup>9</sup>. Ager and Strang's framework identified ten main 'domains of integration', structured across four vectors of analysis. These include progress in employment, education, health and housing; access to rights and models of citizenship, processes of social connection between and within different groups in society and overcoming challenges around language, culture and local environment (see *Figure 2* below).

**Figure 2. Ager and Strang's 2008 Framework of the core domains of integration**



<sup>9</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 21, Issue 2, June 2008, Pages 166–191.

They found that access and achievement in the sectors of employment, housing, education and health were crucial markers of integration, a finding confirmed by more recent studies. For example, with regards to employment, one of the indicators that has attracted most attention in the literature<sup>10</sup>, recent studies have shown that refugees face specific challenges due to the lack of recognition of their pre-existing qualifications, employment gaps due to protracted displacement, difficulties with the English language, and they lack of contextual knowledge of the job market and lack of social networks<sup>11</sup>. Many studies have concluded that refugees require tailored assistance with finding employment, citing among good practices the direct matching between refugees and employers conducted by either NGOs or governments<sup>12</sup>, the provision of specific job counselling services, such as CV writing workshops, and providing help with interviews and individual job coaching<sup>13</sup>. Qualitative studies also suggest increasing opportunities for self-employment, including by providing financial support and mentorship for refugees to start their own businesses<sup>14</sup>, as well as providing access to further education and vocational trainings to equip refugees with the skills they need to acquire to be employable<sup>15</sup>.

Ager and Strang cite various ‘processes of social connection’ as mediating success in the sectors discussed above. They distinguished between: ‘social bonds’, which refer to the establishment of social relationships within similar groups (i.e. families, ethnic, national, religious and other social groups), ‘social bridges’, which refer to social relationships with other groups in the host society (i.e. other British citizens and residents) and ‘social links’ which allow refugees to access public services. They concluded that all three are necessary for successful integration. The analysis of this report, will mainly focus on: social bonds, which are particularly important for refugees’ emotional stability and for developing a sense of ‘being settled’, as well as having been linked to better mental health and employment outcomes; and social bridges, which have been proved to increase social cohesion in the host society. This framework for understanding community cohesion has been used widely by more recent studies, and similar conclusions have been reached<sup>16</sup>.

Furthermore, Ager and Strang considered knowledge of the local language, culture and environment as key ‘facilitators’ of integration, in so far as they enable refugees to overcome the barriers they face in fully participating in the host society. More recent studies have stressed the importance of English language and pre-arrival cultural orientation for refugees’ wellbeing, social cohesion, educational and employment outcomes, and accessing healthcare<sup>17</sup>. In particular, quantitative studies have shown that language competence is linked to employment outcomes for refugees, and that additional hours of language training are directly related to better employment prospects<sup>18</sup>. Studies have shown that language barriers, and the need for further training, is

10 Stephen Castles, Maja Korac, Ellie Vasta, Steven Vertovec ‘**Integration: Mapping the Field.**’, *Centre for Migration and Policy Research and Refugee Studies Centre*, University of Oxford, 2001.

11 Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, “**What Works for Improving Refugee Outcomes**”, 2021; Collyer et al., “**A long-term commitment**”, 2018, UNHCR et al. “**Towards Integration**”, 2017.

12 Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, “**What Works for Improving Refugee Outcomes**”, 2021; Michele Battisti, Yvonne Giesing, and Nadzeya Laurentsyeva, “**Can Job Search Assistance Improve the Labour Market Integration for Refugees?**”, CESifo Working Paper No. 7292, 2018.

13 Sarvimäki, Matti and Kari Hämäläinen “**Integrating Immigrants: The Impact of Restructuring Active Labor Market Programs.**” *Journal of Labor Economics* 34 (2016): 479 - 508. Joonas, Pernilla Andersson, and Lena Nekby. “**Intensive Coaching of New Immigrants: An Evaluation Based on Random Program Assignment.**” *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 114, no. 2 (2012): 575–600.

14 Collyer et al., “**A long-term commitment**”, 2018.

15 Ager and Strang, “**Understanding Integration**”, 2008. Alice Bloch and Carl Levy. *Refugees, Citizenship and Social Policy in Europe*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.

16 Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, “**What Works for Improving Refugee Outcomes**” 2021; Robertson “**A New Life For me**” 2020; Collyer et al., “**A long-term commitment**”, 2018.

17 Joseph Coley, Marie Godin, Linda Morrice, Jenny Phillimore, Carlyne Tah, Home Office “**Integrating Refugees: “What works? What can work? What does not work? A summary of the evidence”**”, Home Office, 2019. See also: Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, “**What Works for Improving Refugee Outcomes**” 2021; Robertson “**A New Life For Me**” 2020, Collyer et al., “**A long-term commitment**”, 2018; UNHCR et. al. “**Towards Integration**”, 2017.

18 Daniel Auer “**Language roulette: the effect of random placement on refugees’ labour market integration**”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44:3, 2008, 341-362. Alexia, Lochmann, Hillel Rapoport and Biagio Speciale, “**The Effect of Language Training on Immigrants’ Economic Integration: Empirical Evidence from France.**” *European Economic Review* 113 (2019): 265-96.

particularly important for refugee children over the age of 13 who have moved to full time education in the host country<sup>19</sup>, that parents' language barriers prevent them in their children's education<sup>20</sup>, and that poor knowledge of the language incentives long-term dependency on the state<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, especially during early stages of settlement, interpreting services and translation opportunities are important for refugees to access key services<sup>22</sup>. More recent policy research has also discussed the importance of digital literacy and of a more subjective sense of safety and stability as other key facilitators of integration<sup>23</sup>.

The last, and most foundational, dimension of integration identified by Ager and Strang is that of equal access to rights (including citizenship rights/ paths to citizenship, family reunification, and equality in the law) and underlying conceptions of different citizenship models. This is because equal access to rights and responsibilities reflects the 'basis for full and equal engagement within society'<sup>24</sup>, and was identified to constitute a precondition for an harmonious society. Similarly, recent studies have mentioned reducing waiting times for asylum decisions as impacting on refugees' mental health and employment outcomes during the asylum process<sup>25</sup>, and the importance of a clear and affordable paths to citizenship for refugees for overall well being, and increased confidence in engaging with public services<sup>26</sup>.

In 2019, the Home Office, in collaboration with other government departments, NGOs, local and regional institutions and refugees, published an updated Indicators of Integration framework 2019 (*Figure 3*). The refined Home Office's framework counts fourteen domains of integration; opportunities to engage in leisure activities for refugees and social care were added as additional markers of integration, as was the inclusion of digital skills as one of integration's *facilitators* and the issue of 'responsibilities' was added to access to rights. For the purposes of this report we will rely on the original core domains of integration identified by Ager and Strang, as they appear most relevant to the characteristics of this cohort at this stage of their integration process.

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19 Collyer et al., "**A long-term commitment**", 2018.

20 Robertson "**A New Life For me**" 2020.

21 Coley et. al "**Integrating Refugees: What works?**" 2019; Collyer et al., "**A long-term commitment**", 2018.

22 Ager and Strang, "**Understanding Integration**", 2008.

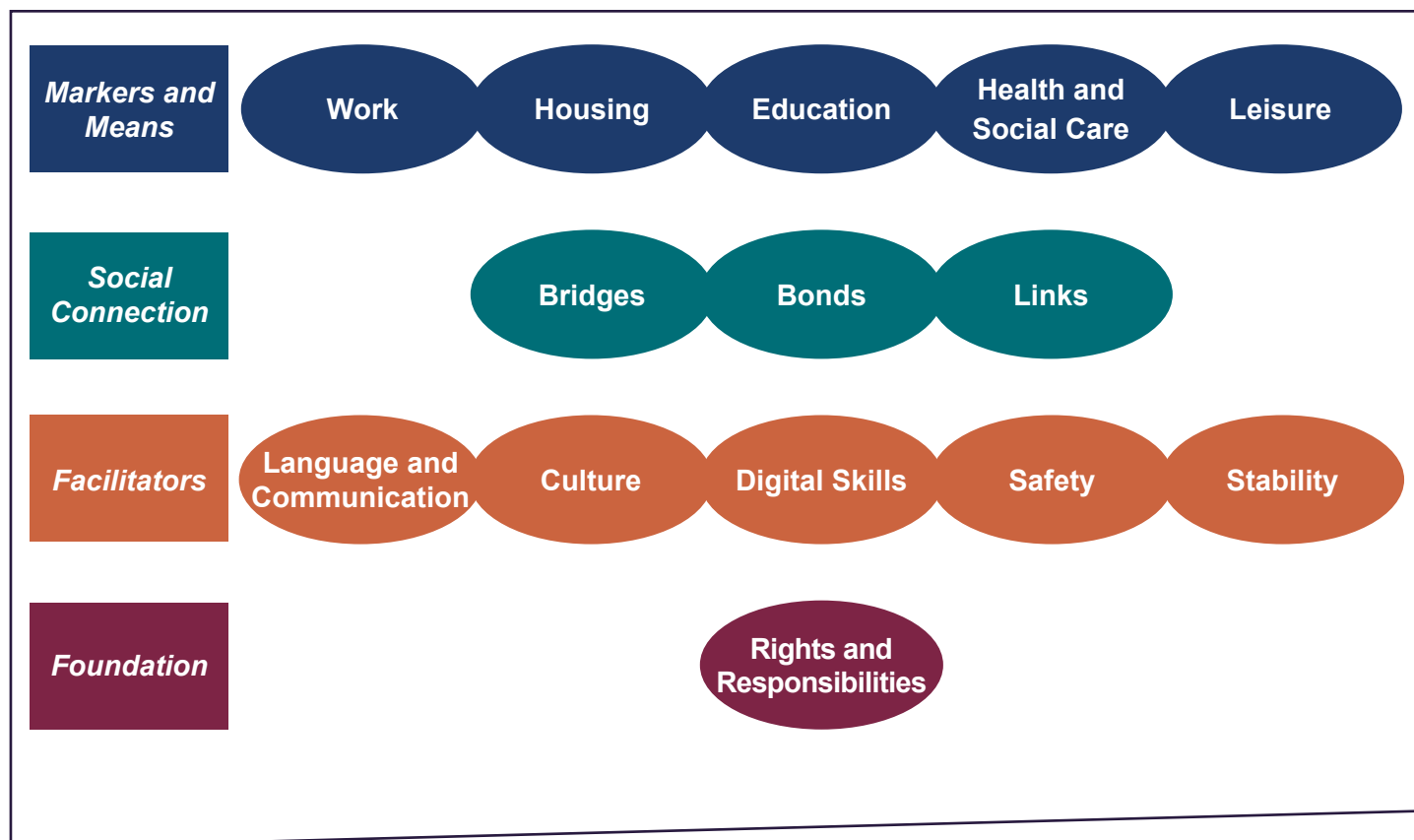
23 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, "**The UK Digital Strategy**", Policy Paper, March 01, 2017; Home Office, "**Home Office Indicators of Integration framework**" 2019.

24 Ager and Strang, "**Understanding Integration**", 175-176, 2008.

25 Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, "**What Works for Improving Refugee Outcomes**" 2021, Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner, and Duncan Lawrence, "**When Lives Are Put on Hold: Lengthy Asylum Processes Decrease Employment among Refugees.**" *Science Advances* 2, no. 8, (2016): E1600432.

26 Collyer et al., "**A long-term commitment**", 2018.

**Figure 3. Home Office's 2019 Indicators of Integration Framework**



Overall, the studies reviewed show significant consensus around the main indicators of successful refugee integration, and provide suggestions of specific policies that support integration, which we use as a basis to analyse our findings and develop our recommendations to the Government.

## 3. ‘OPERATION WARM WELCOME’: THE UK POLICY RESPONSE TO AFGHAN ARRIVALS

### 3.1 Numbers of Afghan Arrivals

The majority of those who arrived in the summer of 2021 were part of the 15,000 people evacuated by the British Military in Operation Pitting in August. Of this number, 12,000, 6,000 of whom children, required accommodation and were placed in ‘bridging hotels’ on a temporary basis until permanent accommodation could be arranged<sup>27</sup>. By November 2021, the then Minister for Refugees, Victoria Atkins, stated at the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) that around 4,000 people from Operation Pitting had either been transferred or had been matched to a more permanent home<sup>28</sup>, a figure that remained the same by January 2022<sup>29</sup>.

By June 2022, the Minister for Immigration Kevin Foster reaffirmed that 12,000 Afghans were still in hotels, a figure which included 3000 additional people who had come to the UK through ARAP or ACRS since Operation Pitting. Of these, by June 2022, 6,000 people had moved or were in the process of moving into homes since June 2021. *At the time of writing this report, an updated figure on the number of the Operation Pitting Cohort either remaining in hotels or moved into permanent accommodation was not available from the government.*

### 3.2 The Provisions of ‘Operation Warm Welcome’

Operation Warm Welcome is being delivered through close working between the Home Office and Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021, the Government promised that Afghans would be given:

*“the vital support they need to rebuild their lives, find work, pursue education, and integrate into their local communities”<sup>30</sup>.*

Local authorities have received funding to support individuals for three years. The total funding was matched to that for the Syrian Resettlement Programme (VPRS) although not the length of time, which was five years for VPRS. In year one there will be integration funding for local authorities to support education, English language and health provision.

The Government stated<sup>31</sup> that due to the speed and amount of accommodation that had to be found, they had little choice but to use hotels for initial accommodation and were unable to consult and work in partnership with local authorities around the use of hotels due to the size and emergency nature of the operation<sup>32</sup>.

27 House of Commons, “**Oral evidence: Afghanistan: safe routes and resettlement**” HC 706, November 17, 2021.

28 House of Commons, “**Oral evidence: Afghanistan: safe routes and resettlement**” HC 706, November 17, 2021.

29 Victoria Atkins, “**Oral statement to Parliament: Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme**”, January 06, 2022.

30 Home Office, **Operation Warm Welcome under way to support Afghan arrivals in the UK**, September 01, 2021

31 Home Office, “**Factsheet: Operation Warm Welcome in action**”, October 29, 2021.

32 House of Commons, “**Oral evidence: Afghanistan: safe routes and resettlement**”, 2021.

The Minister for Refugees Victoria Atkins, in her statement of January 2022<sup>33</sup>, confirmed that 350 local authorities were providing accommodation for Afghans. The stated intention was not to keep people in temporary accommodation for any longer than absolutely necessary with a huge effort to get families into permanent houses as soon as possible<sup>34</sup>. In an answer to a written question on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2022, Minister Kevin Foster confirmed that the length of stay in a bridging hotel is dependent on a number of factors, including offers of appropriate accommodation from local authorities<sup>35</sup>.

The Government considered that around a third of the Operation Pitting Cohort were ready to work and so instituted a ‘jobs first’ approach<sup>36</sup>, which looked at employment and the job opportunities in different areas as a basis for matching to permanent accommodation, rather than purely relying on housing availability. In her statement of January 2022, the Refugees Minister Victoria Atkins announced a new approach to employment, housing and integration to help Afghans to become self-sufficient as quickly and as well as they can<sup>37</sup>. The stated policy aim of the government was:

*“To assist with the successful integration of families to life in the UK we are piloting a ‘Jobs First Pilot’ in partnership with the Department of Work and Pensions. This pilot went live on 31 January. Participants will receive a range of support from Work Coaches to move into work. Importantly, participants will also receive support from a specialist cross government case working team to tackle non-employment barriers. LAs and charities are also actively supporting the pilot. The focus on both employment and non-employment barriers that prevent the take up of job offers will, it is hoped, increase the likelihood of a person moving into work, either in their current geographical area or in another part of the country”<sup>38</sup>.*

Further to this, in an effort to capture the public desire to help the Afghan people, a Government portal was created for people, organisations and businesses to register offers of support.

<sup>33</sup> Victoria Atkins, **“Oral statement to Parliament: Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme**, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Home Office, **“Factsheet: Operation Warm Welcome in action”**, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Foster, **Answer to Parliamentary Question 318**, May 18, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> House of Commons, **“Oral evidence: Afghanistan: safe routes and resettlement”**, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Victoria Atkins, **Answer to Parliamentary Question 114608**, February 23, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Victoria Atkins, **Answer to Parliamentary Question 114608**, February 23, 2022.



## 4. DISCOVERING THE REALITIES OF WELCOME: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

*“I appreciate the support of the British government. It was the best time the government could help us, it was at the time we really needed it most. I said to a British person ‘we weren’t able to bring anything from home, we didn’t bring anything’, but he said ‘you brought yourselves’ and I thought this was very nice”.*  
(\*Nahal, in permanent accommodation, Bristol, May 2022)<sup>39</sup>

This section moves to discuss the main findings of our research. Findings are structured according to our analysis of the main themes emerging from our interviews in relation to the main indicators of refugee integration provided by Ager and Strang. These are ranked broadly in the order of importance. While discussed separately, these integration themes are closely linked with one another, and should be seen as interdependent. For example, access to family reunification rights - discussed in the themes of rights - is crucial for Afghan refugees’ overall levels of wellbeing. Similarly, securing stable accommodation is linked to all other indicators of integration for this cohort.

<sup>39</sup> The names of the refugees interviewed have been changed to protect their identity.





## 4.1 Accommodation

Good quality and stable accommodation is one of the main markers of refugee integration, especially in the short to medium term<sup>40</sup>. Existing studies have demonstrated a link between secure housing and refugees' well being, sense of emotional stability and improvement in community relations<sup>41</sup>. Likewise, studies about resettled refugees and asylum seekers have shown that frequently moving houses and being held in temporary, short-term and unstable accommodation is detrimental to refugees' mental health and well-being. Ensuring stable accommodation for refugees has become particularly difficult in the UK in recent years, given the limited availability of both social housing and affordable privately rented accommodation. This is evidenced by UNHCR's recommendations on improving access to affordable housing in their assessment of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) scheme and its impact on integration<sup>42</sup>.

### Planning

There was minimal pre-planning between local authorities and the Home Office of how to deal with 15,000 people arriving at the same time. Whilst it was appreciated the emergency nature of the situation, there was no apparent framework set up in anticipation of such a circumstance. The Home Office centralised operations and procured contingency accommodation in hotels - many of which had spare capacity due to the impact of COVID-19 on travel. The intention, expressed by the Minister for Afghan Refugees, was that the hotels would be a temporary measure whilst permanent accommodation was procured.

Local authorities were given no or very little advance warning of hotels in their area being used in this way. Therefore, councils were not able to offer their local knowledge and expertise to the Home Office's decision making. Councils explained that a large number of people arriving in a small area had a significant impact on local public services, such as schools, GPs, dentists, colleges and charities. These insights from councils could have improved decisions around location of the cohort. Some hotels are located far from city centres and this has created real challenges of isolation for the families and lack of opportunity to access services and engage with the community outside of the hotel.

Local authorities described the lack of accurate data on who was placed in hotels in their areas as a barrier to being able to plan support services. In some cases they reported that the Home Office did not seem to know who was in the hotels. This was significant for local authorities who have a statutory duty of care to these refugees.

### Lack of Communication and Poor Expectation Management

Neither local authorities nor refugees themselves were given an indication of the length of time that they would stay in the hotels. Our interviewees described expectation management from the Home Office on length of stay in hotel accommodation and on the provision of permanent accommodation as poor or absent. This was extremely unsettling for individuals, and the vacuum of information from the Home Office regarding next steps was filled by rumours from within the Afghan community. This in turn contributed to later challenges when it came to encouraging people to move from temporary to permanent accommodation (see p.13). Whilst it was widely

40 Coley et. el. "Integrating Refugees: What works? ", Home Office, 2019. Collyer et al., "A long-term commitment", 2018.

41 Collyer et al., "A long-term commitment", 2018; Stephen Glover "Migration: An Economic and Social Analysis", Occasional paper 67, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office, 2001.

42 UNHCR et. al. "Towards Integration", 2017.

appreciated that due to the emergency circumstances much was unknown, it was felt that there could have been more communication about what was known. The fact that there was no or little communication gave the impression that moving refugees out of hotels was not a priority.

This uncertainty about how long families would remain in the hotels affected both the nature and timeliness of the integration support offered to them. One local charity supporting families in a hotel, reported that, after six months, they shifted to offering support associated with medium and longer term integration, rather than just providing emergency support. This longer term support included providing formal ESOL classes for adults, given that the local college courses were full. Had their actual length of stay been anticipated, they would have begun ESOL classes sooner rather than four months after arrival. Similarly, refugees wanted to begin employment-related courses (for example for employment in security roles) but they were uncertain as to whether they should begin, or wait until they were in permanent accommodation.

### **Variable Support in Hotels**

Some councils have provided support to Afghan families through existing employees who already support resettled refugees, asylum seekers or people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Other local authorities have contracted integration support to local charities, some of whom had previous experience of working with refugees. In some areas, there has been a mixed approach. The national voluntary organisations interviewed stated that the support and integration provided in the hotel environment is extremely variable with limited standardisation.

Those interviewed for this research described initial support consisting of addressing immediate needs, including accessing key services such as healthcare, children's education, registering for Universal Credit, local orientation, including the use of public transport was also vital, particularly for enabling children to attend school.

Some councils and local charities reported that immediate needs could be more easily addressed when people were in one place. For example, DWP officials could visit the hotel and deal with multiple queries at one time. Vulnerabilities of certain individuals were also more easily identified than if people were more dispersed from the start.

There was great value in skilled personnel with lived experience, including women, supporting the families, as they have the cultural understanding and experience of working in a trauma-informed way together with local knowledge they can extend to the Afghan families.

### **Hotel Conditions**

It was widely appreciated by interviewees that the emergency nature of the evacuation meant that many aspects of refugees' arrival were not as well planned as those arriving on resettlement schemes. Whilst certain circumstances could be accommodated in the short term, the consensus was that the length of time that people have remained in hotels is now deeply problematic.

Whilst it was recognised that the hotels used across the UK vary greatly, those interviewed for this report appreciated that the hotels were clean and warm with good private room and bathroom facilities. Food was an important factor from our interviews particularly as the length of their stay increased. This finding is not surprising as research has shown the emotional and symbolic significance of food for refugees' cultural and religious identity, as well as perceptions of hospitality (Vandevoordt 2017).

Often parents were concerned about their children refusing to eat food unfamiliar to them and their inability to cook them alternatives. As Afghans remain in hotels for longer, providing culturally appropriate food and ensuring dietary variation becomes more important. While we heard of some efforts by hotels to consult with the families about what food was preferred, and what was required for religious purposes such as during Ramadan, many hotels still fail to address these issues and there remains a need to ensure agreements on food provision within a contract.

Moreover, the inability to undertake everyday tasks in one's preferred manner was something that over time became a concern. For example, some individuals expressed that they would rather have the facilities to do laundry and cooking themselves, in the way they are used to.

Over time, particularly vulnerable individuals with health needs, disabilities or severe trauma found hotel life particularly challenging and isolating. There were some anecdotes of individuals being marginalised by other Afghan families in the hotel because of these differences.

Local authorities reported that the system was not flexible enough to enable particularly vulnerable families to be moved to more appropriate accommodation either within or outside of the hotel.

The hotel setting enabled some refugees to form strong social bonds with each other, but when they were then moved to different places across the UK for permanent accommodation, this has been very disrupting. Interviewees did however note that, for Afghan women, hotel living could be particularly isolating as the entire domestic sphere - where they spent most of their time - was focused on a hotel room.

## **Children in Hotels**

There was consensus amongst our interviewees that hotel accommodation is not suitable for children. National voluntary organisations reported children becoming restless and aggressive in the hotel environment. They don't have space to run, to play or to be noisy. This can make it very stressful for families, particularly when children are not in school or when they have lived in the hotels for a long time. They reported using parks in good weather for children to play where they are close to hotels.

Some smaller families were in one hotel room but many were divided between multiple rooms. This was a concern when parents were supervising young children in multiple rooms and raised safeguarding concerns when children were moving between rooms alone when other adults were in the corridors. Often large families would gather for the day in one room which was extremely challenging.

## **Transition from Hotel to Permanent Accommodation**

*"The council is powerless as to where Afghans are permanently located"*  
(Local Authority Official, London, March 2022)

The Home Office is centrally managing the matching and movement of people from hotels to permanent accommodation. Despite the institution of a central housing portal by the government was well received, both local authorities and voluntary organisations reported a lack of effective planning and coordination from the Home Office and central government on this issue. This was often attributed to a lack of data about this cohort, in terms of both general socio-demographic details including age and family sizes, and more specific needs assessments of vulnerabilities and complex cases. While it was understood that this lack of data was initially due to the chaotic

nature of the evacuation, there was an understanding that the Home Office could have focused on collecting data on this cohort more systematically while Afghans remained in temporary accommodation. Indeed, some councils have reported that having Afghans all in one place in bridging hotels, may have initially helped with these efforts and with the necessary planning needed to move people to permanent accommodation. Similarly, some national voluntary organisations have pointed to the lack of Home Office officials in the hotel environment, beyond Hotel Liaison Officers who dealt with individuals' immigration status issues, to coordinate the matching work in a more informed way.

Local authorities felt that they were not listened to and some said that the Home Office design framework was neither transparent nor proactive, while being overly bureaucratic. For example, a minor misspelling of a name by the local authority resulted in the matching process having to be restarted despite the identity of the person being clear from the other data present. There were also examples where little regard had been paid to the welfare of refugees. An example of this was when a family arrived from a hotel to permanent accommodation after a long journey having not had any food during the journey. They had further not been given notice of their journey so had travelled without their possessions, clothes or provisions for their baby. Local authorities reported that even though they may have a positive working relationship with Home Office staff, the officers with whom they liaise change every month which makes continuity and progress on cases very difficult.

Furthermore, the Home Office didn't have accurate data on the specific needs of each family and this was a barrier to timely allocation and led to prolonged stay in hotels. It further resulted in permanent accommodation being left vacant, having a significant negative impact on refugee wellbeing. An example was where families transported from hotels to permanent accommodation did not match that expected by the receiving council. This led to the prepared accommodation not being suitable and their either being accommodated in emergency accommodation or returned to the hotel.

It was also reported that the Home Office system did not allow for sufficient flexibility in the matching of refugees to areas where they had already established links that would aid their integration in the longer term. For example, where an individual had a job offer through their own networks, it was not easy for the local authority to intervene and match them to accommodation available in that area. When we heard of cases where successful matching based on established links was achieved, it required a great degree of persuasion and lobbying from the local authority.

## **Families Refusing Permanent Accommodation**

*"For ACRS individuals the hotel is the only place they are familiar with. The Home Office is right, people are refusing accommodation, they have been there too long"*

(National Voluntary Organisation Representative, London, March 2022).

As families have remained in hotels for months rather than days and weeks, they have begun to settle and become established. They have become familiar with the local area, feel safe, have built links, their kids have settled in school and individuals have started courses at colleges. Feeling settled with social connections are all important for long term integration outcomes. At this point, a move to a different area for permanent accommodation is potentially disruptive. Consequently, as time has progressed, local authorities have reported more families refusing to move to the permanent accommodation they are matched with.

Our interviews suggest that, in place of accurate information from the Home Office, rumours from friends and acquaintances had filled that vacuum. There is a widespread sense amongst refugees that they can refuse offers and will then get offered a better option. There was often a desire to go to London, Manchester or other cities where there are bigger, established diaspora communities. There was a lack of understanding and little information offered about areas outside the major cities which led to refusal of offers of accommodation in some parts of the UK.

This has led to frustration in local authorities who had to deal with the impact of families not arriving when expected. The experience of some local authorities was that families would be refusing to travel on the day once all the wrap-around support and orientation had been set up.

We heard examples of staff from councils where Afghans were refusing to travel attempting to counter this by visiting hotels themselves to explain more about their area and accommodation on offer; often larger with bigger gardens than city accommodation. This approach was more successful for Afghans in hotels in smaller towns who were persuaded to accept offers. Local authorities reported trying to coordinate the move of a number of families from a hotel to a new area with permanent accommodation at the same time to aid them to settle in a new area but the centralised matching process didn't allow this to happen.

As time has progressed, some local authorities have succeeded in negotiating with the Home Office to permit them to move some of the families from hotels into local permanent accommodation. The system however was reported as simply not functional for the speed at which people need to be moved out of hotels.

*"I would move anywhere in the UK as I know everywhere in the UK has the same services and development - we can't all be accommodated in London"*  
(\*Benesh, Hotel Accommodation, London, May 2022).

It is understood that the Home Office is piloting a new, multi agency approach to matching in Manchester, Luton and Kensington and Chelsea, based on more nuanced work understanding the skills, employment opportunities and housing.

## **Procurement of Permanent Accommodation**

Local authorities have been procuring property mainly on the private rented market for either the length of the three year scheme or five years at local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates. Five years is preferable for councils as it gives the refugees longer to get to a stage where they do not rely on housing benefit for rent. Five year tenancies have been harder to negotiate with landlords in areas where there is a high cost private rental market.

Existing social housing has not been used by most councils, showing their acute awareness of the need to manage wider community concerns over pressures on housing. Some local authorities reported that this cohort of landlords is made up of people with a variety of different motivations, including those who have inherited money and don't want to care for the property, new landlords and socially minded landlords - with many coming forward out of a desire to help the Afghan community. The councils sometimes offer support with maintenance and repairs of the property to encourage landlords to participate.

A London local authority described that they had bought properties with the Right to Buy Back fund which the Mayor of London made available for refugees as well as residents. Another London local authority had found the funding from central Home Office to assist with rents for the first year, which was helpful to attract landlords given the shortfall between the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and the commercial rates for large properties in particular. This however does mean that after year one the family has to be able to have income such as to afford the rent.

The child benefit cap has meant that for those with larger families, rent has been unaffordable in some areas of the country relying solely on benefits.

### **Quality of Permanent Accommodation**

It was reported that there was huge variation in the quality of permanent accommodation, which has led to comparison amongst families and dissatisfaction by some. This is often reflected in the high rental prices in some areas. Expectations of those who arrive is also a factor, particularly those on the ARAP programme who often lived comfortable lives in Afghanistan and held a certain status by their education and association with the British forces or institutions. Some refugees described moving into dirty accommodation whereas other housing was new and stocked with everything they might need.

Processes have differed across the UK but a common approach has been that through a combination of council, landlord and community groups working together, the houses have been fully furnished with essential food and cleaning items provided on arrival. Councils have reported that this joint working was a positive experience, enabling a range of people to be involved, matching the huge public desire to support the Afghan people.

The poor matching system however, has resulted in the breakdown of council relationships with landlords who end up with properties standing empty. Some councils have paid significant outlay in repairs and furnishing of the properties together with paying for rent whilst they stand empty - for one council, this was circa 20 homes standing void for 6 months. This becomes challenging internally within the council, as social housing is desperately needed by others in the community and it is not good for councils to keep empty houses. A lot of work goes into relationship building with landlords and community groups, and when plans don't progress, goodwill is lost and it becomes harder to respond to future refugee crises.

The Home Office has continued to state that the prevalence of larger families in the Afghan cohort has meant it has been more challenging to find affordable property which is sustainable under the benefit cap. Those working with the Afghans in hotels reported however that some of these families are extended and could be housed separately.

As with hotels, some councils provided support to the refugees in-house and others contracted out to other organisations. Our research highlighted minimal shared best practice on refugee support and it was evident that in the cases where councils or the charities had experience of working with refugees the support offered was much more appropriate and culturally relevant. Where there wasn't a history of refugee support, it appeared that learnings and best practice from others wasn't adopted.

The findings of this report on accommodation demonstrate that, for this cohort, accommodation has been a significant factor in integration outcomes and prolonged temporary hotel living has created barriers in the success of other integration markers.



## 4.2 Access to and Enjoyment of Rights in the UK

Existing literature shows the importance of having secure immigration status in good timing, as a means to access rights and services that enable full participation in the UK on an equal footing with other residents<sup>43</sup>. For analytical purposes, it is useful to distinguish between: *the 'entitlement offer'* provided by the British government to Afghans, the package of legal entitlements offered to Afghans under the ARAP and ACRS scheme; and the *enjoyment of these rights*, including a discussion of any barriers that may prevent this in practice.

### The Entitlements Offer

*"There is no discrimination against refugees here. (...) We thank the British people for their support to refugees." (\*Zemar, in hotel accommodation, Bristol, May 2022)*

Among our interviewees, there was a generally positive view about the package of rights offered to this cohort by the British government. Particularly well received were the right to work and full access to benefits, which were favourably contrasted with the entitlements granted to asylum seekers. The granting of Indefinite Leave to Remain for those under ARAP and ACRS scheme was also welcomed. Being granted a path to citizenship, in particular, has been shown to increase levels of well being and the ability to plan for the future<sup>44</sup>. Having been granted these rights, and not being formally discriminated against in UK law, was met with a deep sense of gratitude from some of the refugees we interviewed.

*"We are very happy to have equal rights in the UK, to have equal respect, to have freedom, to have opinions" (\*Nahal, in permanent accommodation, Bristol, May 2022)*

Nevertheless, some voluntary organisations expressed concerns about the government not granting refugee status, the main legal tool to provide international protection, to this cohort. Among the negative consequences of not granting refugee status to Afghans, the most cited issue was that of family reunification rights, which are easier to obtain with refugee status. Other consequences of not having refugee status included eligibility for home student status' maintenance grants and access to university scholarships tailored to refugees. Government confirmed<sup>45</sup> in January 2022 that ARAP and ACRS will have home student status from August 2022 - this was, however, one year after arrival.

Finally, according to the national voluntary organisations and some of the refugees interviewed, there was confusion about the eligibility criteria and the entitlements provided by the different schemes, including for example the issue of the disparity in terms of family reunification rights between those qualifying those under ARAP and obtaining ILR, and those qualifying under the second referral pathway of ACRS, under which they would obtain refugee status. Similarly, some of the refugees interviewed pointed to the confusion and lack of information about the families of the ARAP cohort currently in the UK having been told that they qualify under ACRS.

43 Collyer et al., "A long-term commitment", 2018; Ager and Strang, "Understanding Integration", 2008.

44 Collyer et al., "A long-term commitment", 2018; UNHCR et. al. "Towards Integration", 2017.

45 Michele Donelan, **Answer to Parliamentary Question 114749**, February 03, 2022.

## More Complex Access to Family Reunification Rights

Family reunification was reported to be the most immediate legal request made by Afghans upon arrival, and constituted a great source of distress for this group of refugees. Some national voluntary organisations reported that during the evacuation process some parents were separated from their children, some family members of British Citizens who were called forward for the evacuation were not able to board flights, and, in the case of the ARAP cohort, applications of elderly dependents were not always included. While acknowledging that those arriving under ARAP and ACRS are entitled to bring their spouse and minor dependent children, voluntary organisations reported complexity in accessing these rights, and a lack of clarity around the procedure to do this<sup>46</sup>. The ARAP cohort for example had to list each individual family member on the application form before leaving Afghanistan to satisfy the requirements. Crucially, at the time of writing, organisations expressed concern with the lack of guidance and support from the Home Office on how to navigate all of these requirements for Afghans who are now in the UK but have been separated from their immediate family members during the evacuation, or are seeking to reunite with other family members. These circumstances have caused serious concerns for this cohort, and have had a detrimental effect on their wellbeing.

National organisations held the view that granting refugee status would have clarified the rights and procedure available to this cohort, however acknowledged that the current practical challenges for making applications from Afghanistan would remain.

## Practical Barriers to Enjoying Rights

*'It has been a nightmare for families transitioning to ILR, people initially received temporary leave to remain in a variety of different forms that were very informal: even a stamp on a piece of paper, heard of a person getting on a post it note, some people got only one month to stay'* (National Voluntary Organisation Representative, London, March 2022)

A number of practical barriers, delays, and bureaucratic obstacles to accessing the rights promised by the UK government have been highlighted by the various stakeholders interviewed. Their impact is significant especially in the first period of settling in the UK society, as they determine participation in various aspects of their new life in the UK, including opening bank accounts and finding work.

### *From Temporary to Indefinite Leave to Remain*

Almost all of the organisations and local authorities interviewed between March and April 2022 reported that the majority of the Afghans they support had not yet received Indefinite Leave to Remain. This was a concern to voluntary organisations as many of the temporary leave permits initially issued by the UK were about to expire at the time of the interviews, and Afghans would have subsequently had no valid immigration status. Nevertheless, national organisations and local authorities have recognised that a lot of progress has been made by the Home Office on this front, and trust that ILR would be delivered to the majority of Afghans by June 2022. Particularly well received was the appointment of the Afghan Casework Team from late January 2022, which was considered very effective in dealing with individual cases.

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<sup>46</sup> Footnote



## *Biometric Residence Permits*

*'I don't know what's happening next, until I receive my BRP'*

(\*Zemar, in hotel accommodation, Bristol, May 2022)

Whilst Afghans await their ILR, they should be issued Biometric Residence Permits (BRPs) to prove their identity and residence in the UK, which are needed to fully participate in life in the UK. All the organisations interviewed reported delays with BRPs. They also pointed to some very informal proof of residence obtained by this cohort of refugees, including sometimes a stamp on a piece of paper. However, by now, the issue of proof of residence appears to be resolved as the amount of formal correspondence from the Home Office to the refugees about their right to remain in the UK, which serves as proof of residence, has significantly increased.

BRPs are crucial to access a number of essential services and rights in the UK, such as opening bank accounts and passing employers' checks on right to work. Nevertheless, local authorities, national voluntary organisations and local charities have circumvented these obstacles to integration by providing letters vouching for the identities and residence rights of the Afghan refugees they supported, and many of them have reported that some banks and employers have taken a more lenient approach to allow Afghans to access their services and opportunities. The impact of this support is evident in the testimonies of the refugees interviewed as the effects of not possessing BRPs in their everyday lives appear mixed, with most having been able to open bank accounts and some being able to find employment. This was a good outcome due to the extra-work undertaken by voluntary organisations and local authorities in vouching for Afghans, but it could have been avoided if the process of issuing BRPs was faster. Moreover, for some refugees not possessing a clear proof of residence still constitutes an obstacle to properly plan for the future and be able to commit to full time employment.

## **Access to Universal Credits**

Registration to universal credits has proved much more efficient. Despite some initial delays, by March 2022, the national voluntary organisations interviewed reported that the majority of the Afghans they support have been registered for universal credits. The same finding was reflected in the case studies of the refugee families we interviewed. The deployment of DWP officials, who have regularly visited the hotels and successfully registered Afghans for Universal Credits, National insurance number, and child benefit, was reported as particularly effective by local authorities and refugees alike.

## 4.3 Access to Healthcare

Access to health has long been recognised as another essential precondition for refugees to fully integrate in, and be able to contribute, to their host society. From our interviews it emerged that while the physical health needs of this cohort are variable, their mental health needs are complex, and require additional funding and prioritisation in Home Office policy.

### Physical Health

We found the physical health needs of this cohort to be diverse, with a commonly reported issue being that of availability of dental services. Maternity services and reproductive health was also found to be a significant area of need in this cohort.

Our interviews reflected good access to primary healthcare support, with no concerns highlighted about being able to register with a GP. We found that the majority of Afghans have been offered COVID-19 vaccinations, with some councils providing a wide-range of vaccinations and offering specialised health checks for a number of diseases.

Voluntary organisations, however, highlighted the need to provide cultural training around accessing NHS services, such as who to contact for different medical needs and managing expectations around frequency and timeliness of appointments. The need for more cultural awareness of both refugees and doctors appeared particularly relevant in the case of female and sexual healthcare, where women were sometimes unable, due to cultural reasons, to express their needs. Related, several interviewees also stressed the importance of availability of interpreters (other than family members) to meet the refugees' demand in order to enable effective communication between doctors and patients. This was particularly relevant for women who often had less English language than their husbands.

### Mental Health

*'All the time I worry about them' (\*Zemar, in hotel accommodation Bristol, May 2022)*

Interviewees have reported wide-spread mental health needs within this cohort around experiences of trauma related to conflict, as well as anxiety and guilt about family members left in Afghanistan. Some organisations stated that the hotel environment exacerbates these difficulties, in so far as it allows a large group of traumatised people to be in one setting for a protracted and indefinite time period. The instability of temporary accommodation was also reported as not being a suitable base for someone to start counselling.

*'People are always asking about family reunification. This is the most heart-breaking side, people are desperate to bring vulnerable family members left behind. Sometimes they don't know what's happened to them. Especially for families where little children have been left. They cry all day long'. (Representative from Local Charity, Bristol, April 2022)*

Afghans can access mainstream NHS primary mental healthcare through the NHS Immediate Access to Psychological Services (IAP), as well as specialist referrals. We also heard of examples of emergency treatment for significant mental health issues. While some organisations positively recognised that the Home Office ring-fenced additional funding for mental health support, there was generally a feeling that the whole area was under-resourced compared to the scale of need for refugee mental health support. Organisations noted that the mental health needs of this cohort often fell between the cracks of existing services, as they were too serious to be addressed by IAP, while not complex enough to require a specialist referral. A need for greater provision of specialised refugee mental health services in the community was widely reported<sup>47</sup>, as was the need for cultural awareness amongst support workers and NHS professionals in approaching these matters. The intersection between domestic violence and refugee trauma was also highlighted as an area where greater support was required. The availability and prioritisation of independent, trained interpreters in mental health was also stressed.

Alongside resource issues for refugee mental health affecting access, the barriers created by cultural stigma around mental health were also reported by both local authorities and NGOs. The hotel environment was considered as not conducive to building trusted relationships that allow individuals to overcome cultural reluctance to make use of mental health services.

#### **4.4 Social Relationships and Community Cohesion**

Existing studies have recognised the building of social relationships within and among a range of communities in the host society as crucial for the integration outcomes of refugees, as well as for promoting a harmonious, cohesive and non-conflictual society (Collyer et. al 2018; Ager and Strang 2008). We will refer to different types of relationships, including ‘social bonds’ and ‘social bridges’ discussed earlier in this report, to evaluate the progress made so far with regards to this cohort.

#### **Cultural Orientation for an Internally Diverse Cohort**

From our research it appears that this cohort is diverse in linguistic, ethnic, and cultural terms, as well as socio-economic and educational backgrounds and skills. In a context where Afghans have been living together in a hotel setting for several months, national organisations have noted that some small tensions have emerged within this cohort, including divisions between Pashtun and Dari ethnic groups and between families from Pakistani versus Afghan heritage, which have been amplified in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. The different government schemes under which Afghans are eligible have also further divided this cohort into different social groups with different mechanisms for claiming their rights<sup>48</sup>.

This internal diversity has implications on the ways in which various groups engage with British society and culture, and on how they may interact with one another. For instance, voluntary organisations have observed that families of British citizens from Afghan heritage already have an established social network in the UK, which often includes both British citizens and second generation Afghans and other immigrant communities. Conversely, those under the ARAP scheme have developed strong ‘social bonds’ and internal support networks with one another, but have not yet established many external relationships of ‘social bridges’ with host communities. Similarly, the diversity of views on social issues, such as on gender roles, means that national and local governments have to systematically invest in post-arrival cultural orientation in a way that is easily

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<sup>47</sup> Even larger organisations with some capacity for mental health support seem unable to meet current demand, for example the Refugee council has only one therapist visiting Afghans in hotels. However, smaller charities can often only provide general welfare activities, such as sewing or cooking classes, which provide opportunities for social interaction.

<sup>48</sup> More broadly, the contrast between Afghans supported through these ad hoc humanitarian schemes and asylum seekers is particularly stark, in terms of both legal entitlements and provision of support from central government, resulting in asylum seekers being significantly less supported. This could also have implications for social cohesion among refugee communities in certain areas.

understandable to these different groups, especially given the context of an emergency evacuation that has not allowed to conduct any pre-departure cultural orientation, which existing studies have shown to be conducive to longer-term integration<sup>49</sup>.

## **Welcome from Host Communities and ‘Social Bridges’**

From our interviews there is a generally positive picture of the welcome provided by local communities to Afghan refugees, especially when coordinated by local charities with an expertise in refugee resettlement and integration support. National voluntary organisations have pointed to some concerning incidents in the autumn of 2021 - such as episodes of hate crimes towards residents in hotel accommodation, and incidents of bullying of Afghan boys at school. However, these were described as isolated incidents. At the same time, interviewees have stressed an outpouring of support and generosity from various local communities, particularly in terms of donation of basic necessities, offers of financial support before Afghans were registered into universal credits and offers to volunteer and participate in various Afghan welcome activities.

### *Variable Support in Different Local Areas*

In terms of the support provided by local authorities, our interviews revealed a mixed picture. Where city councils have contracted specific integration services to local charities with previous experience in refugee resettlement, a number of activities that foster social interaction are on offer, even in hotel accommodation. These include celebrations for Nowruz (New Year), international women’s day, Christmas, cooking and sewing classes, introduction to local mosques and faith groups, walking groups and trips to local attractions, sporting activities, welfare and general support provided by ‘befrienders’ volunteers on an individual basis.

In some of these areas, when Afghan families have been moved to permanent accommodation, local charities have provided ‘welcome parties’, during which they are encouraged to meet other Afghan families, as well as local residents living in the same area. Welcome parties were generally well received by the refugees we interviewed<sup>50</sup> and seen as an initial opportunity to start building social relationships. However, it became clear that more regular engagement is needed to cement these relationships in the longer term. Other families have found neighbours and the local community to be welcoming, and relationships have organically developed through everyday interaction in both multicultural and areas of less cultural diversity. Everyday social interaction and general ‘friendliness’ from local communities has been shown to be essential to refugees’ subjective feelings of belonging in host societies (Ager and Strang 2008). One Afghan refugee, who was moved to permanent accommodation in late August 2021, reported that her family formed a close relationship with a British neighbour, who helped them with various practical issues when first settling in their new home. This suggests that moving people to more stable and permanent accommodation may help achieve longer-lasting relationships between Afghan refugees and host communities in Britain.

49 Collyer et al., “**A long-term commitment**”; UNHCR et. al. “**Towards Integration**”, 2017.

50 Although those Afghans we interviewed have generally appreciated these opportunities for social interaction, others are looking for more substantive and professional advice on finding jobs, enrolling in further education and obtaining financial assistance to do so at this stage of their settlement in the UK.

## *Rural Areas*

In rural, more isolated and less diverse areas in other parts of the UK, where Afghan families have been moved to for permanent accommodation, national organisations have expressed concerns about the risk of severe social isolation and standing out. However, our research showed a positive case study of integration support provided by a local council in a rural area without an established Afghan community. This council has put significant work into welcoming Afghans who moved there for permanent accommodation, drawing on their positive experience of Syrian resettlement. Their integration support included regular drop-in sessions for advice and connections with local agencies, a comprehensive orientation programme and a fastrack number to Police Community Support Workers. Afghans were welcomed into events with existing refugee communities. Pre-existing knowledge of the English language of this cohort was helpful in engaging in daily life and the reception from the host communities was positive given the broad public knowledge of events in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, while the council had intended to invite a few Afghan families into communities where there were no existing Afghans to facilitate integration across groups, the Home Office matching systems did not permit this. Even in this positive integration context, some families have struggled from not having other Afghans around, whilst others have thrived.

## *'Social Bonds' and 'Social Bridges'*

Our findings show the emergence of deep 'social bonds' within this cohort, particularly among ARAP families. These bonds are known to promote refugees' wellbeing, health and to a certain degree employment outcomes (Collyer et. al. 2018, Ager and Strang 2008, Hale 2000). In terms of 'social bridges', while public sympathy for the situation in Afghanistan and the existence of an Afghan diaspora in the UK has been beneficial, more progress remains to be made on achieving broader interaction with a range of host communities. This point was particularly evident in the narratives of many of the refugees we interviewed; with the exclusion of one family headed by a British citizen, the majority of the other families had formed close relationships mainly with other Afghans in their cities, and in some cases with the volunteers from the refugee charities involved with supporting them.

Accommodation also seems to be a key factor for enhancing social connections between Afghan and host communities: while the use of temporary hotel accommodation appears as a barrier to forming broader social connections, movement to permanent accommodation led Afghan families to start connecting with neighbours in a meaningful way.

## 4.5 English Language, Education, and Employability

English language and access to education, including high quality ESOL opportunities are understood to be crucial elements of successful integration. Existing studies found that young people aged 13 - 24 find it harder to transition in education because of language, as they have missed academic content and are facing unfamiliar systems and academic practices. Consequently, their expectations of being able to access full time education and gain qualifications are not matched in practice. It has been shown that young resettled refugees find it hard to gain qualifications when they are 16 and 18, and that they have significant pressure from their families to find a job at age 18. However, those who do go to University have significant family support. In contrast, it has been shown that nursery and primary aged children find the transition easier<sup>51</sup>.

Existing evidence has established that the duration of time an individual has been without work before coming to the UK impacts employment outcomes in the UK. Given that many of the Afghan cohort led their normal lives until shortly before evacuation, it's an important factor to move them to education and work as soon as possible so as not to lose this advantage.

### ESOL

*"It feels like we are wasting time"* (\*Benesh, in hotel accommodation, London, May 2022)

ESOL classes are available for this cohort but the extent of the provision and ability to access is a mixed picture. Nationally, there was also a challenge in women being able to access ESOL due to both cultural and practical reasons, including ESOL classes being too hard to get to on foot with small children. Our interviews showed that having online options, or having a crèche in the classroom, improved access for some, but in other areas mothers with young children had not been able to access ESOL which had added to their isolation. In one area, the women were not keen to attend until the classes for men and women were split, and only when this was done did women begin attending. Having experienced women support workers with lived experience, willing to listen and be flexible, helped to identify and eventually solve this problem.

Some ESOL was an existing local college provision, although in some areas college courses were only available to start in September. Some classes were set up by councils specifically for this cohort where there were sufficient numbers, for hours ranging from 5 - 8 a week. There was frustration by some Afghans in hotels of not having access to more hours of ESOL - they were keen to improve their English and start working as soon as possible. Not starting ESOL until six months after arriving and then just five hours a week was a frustration. Nationally an issue has been of people with different English levels all being taught together in one class. Interviews also highlighted the need for ESOL provision at different times in the day so that those who had jobs could continue improving their English skills.

### Children's Education

Interviewees reported no clarity at the beginning as to whether children in hotels should be in school. Some councils arranged school places, funded school uniforms regardless and acknowledged that in retrospect this was the right decision given the length of time they have remained in the hotels. Such prioritisation of schooling for children was not an expectation from the Home Office initially. Government reports now that all children in this Afghan cohort are now in school<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> Collyer et al., "A long-term commitment", 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Victoria Atkins, "Oral statement to Parliament: Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme", January 06, 2022.



Some councils provided buses to ensure the children got to school until their parents were familiar with using public transport. Due to the availability of school places, journeys to school can be further than the local school and families can also have children in different schools because of places available, resulting in multiple drop offs. This was something that families required support with in the initial stages.

Most of those interviewed spoke about primary school children settling in well to schools and that in the context of hotel living, school was of huge benefit to the children. There were however examples of some children finding it harder to settle at school due to language and especially in making friends. It was also reported that many 3 and 4 year olds are in nursery school; this was reported as an important factor for whether mothers attended ESOL classes.

It was reported that school places were more limited in secondary schools and accepted distances for a child to travel on public transport were often too challenging for a newly arrived young person unfamiliar with the city, transport and language. On some occasions, these places were successfully appealed but it meant the young person was out of school for 6-8 weeks during the appeal.

A model that helped with child education was where a member of the council education department was on the refugee working group enabling good coordination and resolution of challenges.

For those councils offering permanent accommodation, school places have largely been arranged before the children arrive as would be the case with resettlement programmes.

## **16/17 Year Olds Education**

Existing studies show that it can be a challenge to find appropriate education for the 16/17 age group. This is because they often do not have sufficient English language for college courses and the ESOL provision at college for this age group is limited and often full for mid year entry. One local authority interviewed had overcome this challenge by providing some resources through their interpreter for some one-to-one learning opportunities to improve the young person's English to a level suitable for college. Another local authority was only able to facilitate two hours a week of online ESOL for a young person, which meant she remained at home while her family attended school, ESOL classes or sought work. Interviews made it clear that there was little guidance on how to support this age group, and provision depended on the creativity, experience and resource individual employees had.

## **Adult Education**

There were examples of some people undertaking college courses including security and community interpreting. There was also a group who were keen to progress in education to ensure that they could obtain a 'professional' job. They were keen to have this opportunity, rather than having to take 'any' job. This finding contradicts to some extent with the government's 'jobs first' approach, which instead mainly focuses on entry level jobs. National refugee organisations would advocate that refugees should be working at their highest level, so that they can sustain a life in the UK and fulfil their potential, aspirations and dreams.

From the interviews, it was clear that support to access further and higher education instead of, or alongside, employment was not consistent. Within the arrival period of the first year, the support focus was on improving English language and obtaining any kind of job. For those with aspiration for professional roles or higher education, this advice and support was not seen to be readily available. Those that were progressing to these goals appeared to be doing so by their own ingenuity and perseverance. Government support did not appear to be informed by broader integration principles, but instead it seemed to be focussed on helping refugees getting just any job.

## 4.6 Employment Outcomes

As we have previously noted, secure accommodation is understood to be a key factor in enabling someone to focus on taking up education or employment. In the context of this cohort, the uncertainty about how long they would remain in hotel accommodation meant that refugees, support organisations, colleges and employers were hesitant about starting permanent education, training or employment. A preoccupation with the welfare of their family in Afghanistan has been a specific focus for this cohort and has made it more challenging for them to focus on their future, including to embark on full-time education and employment. Our interviews also demonstrated that, without extended family support networks, refugees were mindful of the impact of childcare on work, and of the difficulties associated with supporting a spouse coping with a new life in the UK with minimal language skills.

Our interviews with national and local organisations highlighted a strong aspiration amongst this cohort to start work as soon as possible, in order to both better their lives in the UK and to send money back to their family in Afghanistan given the mass poverty and food crisis there.

We found that there was a small number of people in hotels working, for example as delivery drivers. There were examples of people doing voluntary work, for example an Afghan woman on ARAP who was a teacher in Afghanistan but had limited English had begun volunteering at her children's school which she had arranged herself. Her clearly stated aim was to become a teaching assistant and was studying ESOL in parallel. Interviewees identified that the ACRS group tended to have more additional medical needs and be more vulnerable, and they were associated with a more traditional resettlement profile, which is generally further away from getting work. Throughout the research there were examples of Afghans obtaining employment once they had moved to permanent accommodation.

Some national voluntary organisations criticised the government for the lack of in-depth engagement, strategy, and funding on supporting this cohort of Afghans to get into work, despite the government's announcement of the job-first approach. It was claimed that the job-first approach, as currently implemented, disadvantages women with childcare duties and does not recognise that mainstream employment support fails to sufficiently respond to the needs of refugees.

Instead, a number of suggestions were presented by national organisations with expertise in advancing the employment prospects of refugees, which included a call for proper investment in job matching with employers offering vacancies, based on a more systematic identification of people's qualifications, experience and aspirations. These specialised practices need to be integrated into mainstream DWP support nationally, which is the main avenue of support that refugees currently have.

In other interviews with support workers from local charities with no refugee experience, there was an assumption that Afghan women do not want to work because of cultural reasons, while men were left to access employment via their own networks. It was important for support workers to have an insight into barriers refugees face in finding employment and for experience in supporting people to access professional jobs and those suited to their skills and experience. This is important in valuing and recognising refugees' skills and experience which impacts wellbeing. With this, it was clear that refugee employment support needed to include discussions around job expectation, pathways to professional roles as well as information around working culture and how to access employment.



In some local areas, support workers and the council have acted as a conduit for local job vacancies for the refugees. In a climate of labour shortages, employment has been easier for some motivated refugees. Some had job offers in other local authorities, but the limits of the Home Office matching process for permanent accommodation meant the move couldn't be facilitated. Some councils have also offered tailored job search support - CV, application process, and have arranged local job fairs given the interest from local employers to recruit Afghans where they can.

Our interviews highlighted that many Afghans in this cohort were motivated to start a small business and had the skills to do this but there was little framework of support for this.

## **4.7 Wellbeing**

It is widely recognised that integration in all its aspects is closely related to wellbeing. Wellbeing affects how well someone is able to integrate, and the nature of integration support provided, in turn, has an impact on a person's wellbeing. We have touched on how different markers of integration have affected individuals' wellbeing. When combined, they need to be recognised as a significant cluster of factors in the integration of others in similar circumstances.

## 5. OPERATION WARM WELCOME AND THE RESETTLEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

In this final section, we aim to convey our interviewees' reflections on the extent to which existing resettlement structures have been effective in laying down the basis for the integration of this cohort.

Operation Warm Welcome is not refugee resettlement as operated in the UK under a series of programmes in partnership with UNHCR. The most recent UK resettlement programmes include the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPRS and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), run between 2015 and 2020 for those displaced by the Syrian conflict, and the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) from 2020. Resettlement is for refugees who are outside their country of origin, are living in a third country and, due to particular vulnerabilities, require a long term solution. Resettled refugees receive pre departure orientation, their accommodation in the UK is arranged prior to arrival, and they are granted five years leave to remain in the UK and refugee status (rather than having temporary leave to be converted to Indefinite Leave to Remain).

Despite the unique emergency nature of the Afghan evacuation, our interviewees recognised that many of the structures that national and local government, together with voluntary organisations, have created for resettlement, can be flexed and applied to the Operation Pitting cohort.

National voluntary organisations noted that, following the end of the VPRS in 2020 when there was an annual refugee resettlement target of 5,000 a year, the UKRS scheme was announced without an annual target. Without this assurance of funding, local authorities were unable to renew resettlement contracts to voluntary organisations. The halting, and then very slow restart, of resettlement due to COVID-19 amplified this already recognisable trend. This meant that important relationships with NGOs, landlords, local and faith communities - that were part of the local support package for resettled refugees - were discontinued. With the sudden influx of refugees from Afghanistan, rebuilding these relationships took more time. Nevertheless, as seen throughout the report, resources, expertise, relationships and learnings gained from the resettlement programme were significantly drawn upon by local government and voluntary organisations to deliver *Operation Warm Welcome*.

### Lessons Learned From Previous Schemes

There was a general sense, especially from the Local Government Association (LGA) of England and Wales, that some learnings from the Syrian VPRS scheme have been incorporated in the national government support to local authorities in the ARAP and ACRS schemes. An example was the eventual commitment to guaranteed funding for the entire duration of the schemes. Despite the initial delay<sup>53</sup> and its duration for three rather than the five years of VPRS, this guarantee of funding was particularly welcome as it was seen as recognition that integration requires the upfront guarantee of longer term investment. Similarly, recent efforts to nuance the Home Office matching system to account for employment opportunities was also well received.

<sup>53</sup> Local Authorities have reported the inadequacy of a funding commitment by the Government in June 2021, but were satisfied with the Government matching the offer of the VPRS by mid-September. The main challenge was the uncertainty of this funding at the start, which left local authorities having to spend without knowing the exact details of funding provisions. We also heard that some local authorities would have offered to permanently accommodate more people had the funding been known in advance.

Many local authorities and NGOs interviewed were able to use their experience learnt from the VPRS scheme. Those who were involved with supporting this cohort used the processes, systems and community relationships created for integration support in VPRS. Due to the reduction in the UKRS, often relationships between LAs (Local Authorities) and community organisations had to be restarted and LA internal teams were smaller, but there was still precious institutional memory. A particular learning from one LA was that the refugees benefited to a greater extent from integration support from a migrant and refugee led charity rather than from a broader based charity. This was reflected in how the integration support was organised for the Operation Pitting cohort.

In contrast to this positive picture of Government support for the Afghan cohort, some local councils cited the lack of support for asylum seekers who live in their areas (especially those in hotel accommodation managed by private contractors), as well as disparities between different funding pots across other humanitarian schemes for different nationalities (such as difference in education funding between ACRS and Homes for Ukraine on education). They noted that local authorities will inevitably become more involved in the schemes that are more financially favourable. Some local authorities expressed a desire for more standardisation across funding for different schemes, which would simplify their understanding and ensure that different cohorts will be treated equally.

Given these insights about lessons learned from previous resettlement schemes, our interviewees noted that ensuring continuous investment in the resettlement infrastructure, which can be scaled up and down to respond to refugee crises, is necessary to guarantee a pipeline of available accommodation.

## 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 Recommendations for Integration of Operation Pitting Refugees

#### **Recommendation 1:**

**Move all Afghans out of hotels into permanent accommodation as a matter of urgency**

To achieve this, the Home Office should;

- 1.1 Provide stronger Ministerial oversight and accountability.

There should be a clear time frame and regular fortnightly updates to the House until all Operation Pitting individuals are in permanent accommodation. Families with children should be prioritised.

- 1.2 Increase Home Office caseworker capacity for matching and working collaboratively with local authorities and SMPs to move people into suitable permanent housing.
- 1.3 Increase decentralisation of the matching process to involve regional bodies (SMPs, local authorities and NGOs) more closely.
- 1.4 Improve communication with the Afghans about the move to permanent accommodation.

Improve the way that Afghans are informed about the permanent accommodation offer. In locations where permanent accommodation is being refused, seek to understand why from Afghans and work with local authorities about how best to promote their area and the support they are offering families.

- 1.5 Accommodate large family groupings in separate accommodation close to each other.

Where there are large extended family groupings which are making permanent accommodation challenging to locate, consider placing them in smaller properties close to each other. This should be decided with the local authorities and support organisations who know the families.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

**Prioritise the issuing of British Permanent Residence Permits to all Operation Pitting Afghans**

All this Afghan cohort will then be assured of their long term permission to remain in the UK. Easily being able to prove their immigration status ensures access to services to support their full participation in British life.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Enable Operation Pitting families to be reunited as a priority**

To achieve this, the Home Office should;

- 3.1 Standardise family reunion rights across the ARAP and ACRS schemes and provide guidance and information about the process for family reunion applications.
- 3.2 Enable speedy family reunion for all those family members of Afghans in the UK who were called forward for evacuation in August 2021 but weren't able to board the flights and remain in the region.
- 3.3 Prioritise the processing of pending refugee family reunion applications for Afghans.
- 3.4 Introduce no fee for family reunion applications for ACRS and ARAP individuals, in line with refugees.
- 3.5 Review granting refugee status to Afghans on ARAP and all tiers of ACRS.

This will provide established routes to access family reunion, university scholarships and ensure protection from forced return to their country of origin where they would face harm (non refoulement).

### **Recommendation 4:**

#### **Increase the availability of local refugee mental health support**

To achieve this, local authorities and the Home Office should;

- 4.1 Ensure funding is made available for culturally sensitive refugee mental health provision and that it is prioritised in local refugee integration support policy and practice.

### **Recommendation 5:**

#### **Ensure everyone in this cohort has sufficient English language provision;**

To achieve this, local authorities should:

- 5.1 Prioritise access to ESOL provision for everyone in the cohort. Ensure that where existing local ESOL provision isn't suitable, creativity is encouraged. This is particularly relevant for parents with young children and 16-17 year olds.
- 5.2 Coordinate the provision of tailored ESOL provision across the different refugee and asylum seeker cohorts that they are supporting, to help make sure it is cost-efficient.
- 5.3 Ensure ESOL is accessible to people who are in employment.

This enables refugees to work towards being able to access employment which matches their skills and qualifications and to reduce the proportion of refugees overqualified for the jobs they do over time.

### **Recommendation 6:**

**Provide suitable education / training / volunteering opportunities for 16 and 17 year olds**

To achieve this, central, regional and local government should;

- 6.1 Share good practice for supporting this age group to effectively be able to establish themselves in the UK.

### **Recommendation 7:**

**Ensure this cohort can access higher education and employment opportunities with the ultimate aim of both enabling financial independence and matching their skills and experience**

To achieve this, central government and universities should;

- 7.1 Collaborate to expand the number of University Refugee Scholarships which are open to the ACRS and ARAP cohort.

Central Government, SMPs and local authorities should;

- 7.2 Ensure that specialist refugee employment support is available in each local authority, including individual job coaching assistance and introduction to local labour market opportunities.
- 7.3 Ensure that job matching processes are based on a systematic audit of this cohort's different skills, qualification and English language levels along with an analysis of labour shortages in the areas where refugees are offered permanent accommodation'.
- 7.4 Incentivise and support employers to provide paid internships and apprenticeships for this cohort, in this way helping individuals to re-train or up-skill when necessary.
- 7.5 Identify ways to support refugees' entrepreneurial activities, including by allocating funding to support those who aim to start their own business, by supporting mentorship programs that draw on relevant community networks including the existing Afghan diaspora in the UK, and veteran charities.

### **Recommendation 8:**

**Support this cohort to have the cultural understanding to help them in their integration into UK society**

- 8.1 Continue to invest in the post-arrival cultural orientation of all Operation Pitting Afghan arrivals which is easily accessible, delivered by a range of partners and is culturally sensitive to the diversity of this cohort.

This is particularly relevant for this cohort of people who didn't have pre departure orientation.

## 6.2 Recommendations for Broad Refugee Integration Strategy

### **Recommendation 9:**

**The best interests of children need to be fundamental to refugee and asylum accommodation policy**

To achieve this, the Home Office should ensure;

- 9.1 They take advice from the Department for Education and the Minister for Children with regard to the accommodation policy for child refugees and asylum seekers.
- 9.2 Hotels are not used for the standard provision of accommodation for children; unaccompanied or in families.
- 9.3 Hotels should not be used for refugee accommodation for a period over a month.
- 9.3 Policy statements from the Home Office relating to refugee and asylum seeking children should always confirm to local authorities the availability of funding for school places, even for those in temporary accommodation. From the outset, to avoid confusion or delays.

The Department for Education should;

- 9.4 Review the Age Weighted Pupil Unit so that schools in areas with high numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in temporary accommodation don't face acute insecurity. This relates to the impact of high numbers of children joining and leaving within an academic year.

### **Recommendation 10:**

**Policy design needs to take into account the learning that frequent moving is detrimental to refugee integration and well being.**

To achieve this, central Government should ensure that;

- 10.1 Where short term contingency accommodation is used, it should be located close to sources of permanent accommodation with regional partners leading on the allocation.

### **Recommendation 11:**

**Improve communication between the Home Office and refugees and asylum seekers**

To achieve this, the Home Office should;

- 11.1 Prioritise regular, informative communication delivered in a sensitive way to refugees in relation to their legal status, accommodation and family reunion. This is particularly relevant in an emergency situation where new practices and policies are being instituted.

**Recommendation 12:**

**Ensure refugees and asylum seekers receive high quality support regardless of their location in the UK**

To do this, the Home Office, SMPs and local authorities should;

- 12.1 Prioritise effective shared learning of best practices in refugee and asylum seeker integration support in contingency and permanent accommodation. There should be clear expectations of standards which are monitored and evaluated.

**Recommendation 13:**

**Home Office refugee integration and support strategy should be developed with an understanding of the interaction of all the different schemes and cohorts of refugees and asylum seekers that local authorities support and how they impact the ability of local authorities to make future commitments**

To do this, the Home Office should;

- 13.1 Undertake a review and evaluation of the refugee and asylum seeker support provided by local authorities across all the current refugee and asylum schemes including Ukraine, asylum dispersal, asylum contingency, UASCs , UKRS. There should be an assessment of how they interact within a local authority, with each other with different funding models and approaches and influence local resources and infrastructure.
- 13.2 There should be shared learning across these schemes and consolidation of the infrastructure - for example with ESOL provision, accommodation procurement and the training of multilingual refugee support officers.

**Recommendation 14:**

**The Home Office should provide clarity on local authority refugee funding packages and expectations prior to requiring commitment pledges**

**Recommendation 15:**

**Language should not be a barrier for any individual to access services**

To do this, local authorities should;

- 15.1 Prioritise the importance of easily available access to trained interpreters (male and female) who are not friends or family of refugees and asylum seekers regardless of their accommodation or legal status. This is relevant in all settings including healthcare, DWP and wrap-around support.



**Recommendation 16:**

**Local public service providers, including GPs, DWP and schools should have an element of training on the needs of refugees and asylum seekers when a significant cohort moves to an area**

To do this, central government and local authorities should;

- 16.1 Ensure that LA refugee integration guidance and policy includes the requirement that a proportion of employees within public services have training so that they are aware of issues specifically facing refugees which may impact how they access and engage with that particular service.

**Recommendation 17:**

**Prioritise the importance of the collection of accurate data about a refugee cohort**

To achieve this, the Home Office should;

- 17.1 Establish effective systems for accurate and useful data collection of a refugee cohort which can be implemented effectively in an emergency situation. These should support speedy transfer to suitable accommodation, matching with employment opportunities and the identification of any vulnerabilities where specialist support is required.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

*'In terms of Initial efforts, the government should be really commended for doing this evacuation under such conditions, it was clearly the biggest evacuation of refugees that the UK has done post-WW2. (...) In the refugee sector, we have all accepted that this evacuation effort will not be perfect. Organisations are understanding of the challenges encountered by the government'* (Representative from National Voluntary Organisation, London, March 2022 )

Our interviewees appreciated the logistical achievement of Operation Pitting, which involved bringing so many people to safety over a small amount of time, in an emergency situation. Refugees were highly appreciative of the safety they now have in the UK. Due to their interaction with the existing Afghan diaspora in the UK, many have an understanding of the challenges of the UK asylum process, and they recognise the value of being granted leave to remain on arrival. All interviewees acknowledged that having an immediate legal status with access to public funds and the right to work - as well as the fact that many arrived with some family members - constituted a significant advantage on their integration pathway. It was recognised that there has been a strong intention, from both the Home Office and DLUHC, to centre welcome support in their approach to supporting the Operation Pitting Cohort. The three year funding for local authorities to the same level as VPRS has been positive and there have been encouraging examples of local innovation in providing integration support.

Of the integration indicators analysed, providing permanent accommodation has been the most challenging. Our findings did not indicate any significant Home Office's planning for an emergency influx of refugees arriving at one time. Systems and processes that could flex to deal with large numbers, in terms of both temporary and permanent property procurement, were not in place. Systems to collect data on the cohort, and swift matching processes to available accommodation, also appeared deficient. As these systems had to be developed on the go, it was inevitable that this would increase the time individuals would remain in bridging hotels. However, this was not communicated clearly to refugees and local authorities, affecting refugees' wellbeing and the provision of the right type of integration support needed. When the likely time frame for staying in hotels became clearer, more efforts should have been made to look at the needs of children in particular, as well as more initiative should have been taken to find accommodation alternatives.

Our findings revealed that stable and longer term accommodation was a precondition for all other areas of integration, therefore the delay in obtaining stable accommodation for this cohort has affected attainment in other indicators of integration, particularly with regards to employment.

This research found no evidence of a nationwide specialised refugee strategy for provision of jobs, including refugee matching with employers - which existing research has shown to be extremely effective. There were examples of good practice on a local basis, for example local employers sharing their vacancies with this cohort through the council, and a primary school taking on an Afghan teacher as a volunteer. Evidence of central and local government developing pathways for this cohort to achieve employment and education that would match their skills and experience was also limited. Without refugee status, not all university refugee scholarships are open to this cohort, which is a significant factor for ARAP refugees, many of whom have professional backgrounds and would like to undertake further study .

The integration markers of wellbeing and mental health have been particularly affected by the complexity of family reunion applications on the ACRS and ARAP schemes. Lack of clarity around processes for family reunion and poor communication from the Home Office have been particularly detrimental to refugee well being.

Nonetheless, if there was renewed attention by the government on the welfare of this cohort - with particular urgency given to moving them into permanent accommodation, expanding the amount and reach of ESOL provision, providing effective job matching and mentoring - then this could have a significant impact on helping this group of people to make a successful new start in the UK. Given the determination of this cohort to use their skills and to succeed in the UK, there are benefits to reap from successful integration for both Afghan refugees and the UK society.

Operation Warm Welcome had the best of intentions; it started with a desire to do the best for this cohort, it has however stalled somewhat in its delivery. Issues have been most acute in the transition from temporary to permanent accommodation, with the matching process being highly centralised and being too little or too slowly modified according to experiences on the ground. Many people across the central government, local authorities and civil society have worked extremely hard to respond to this group's needs in a crisis situation, and the desire to follow through with the promise of a warm welcome appears still there.

A warm welcome would still be possible if models for accommodation were to be decentralised, systems and processes were constantly reviewed based on the experiences of all partners involved, and more sharing of good practice as to ESOL provision and employment support were to take place.

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 9. ANNEX A: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This report has drawn on a qualitative methodology based on a combination of both secondary and small-scale primary data collection.

### Reviewing policy and evidence on Integration

In terms of secondary research, we have started by reviewing the policies and rights offered by the central government to this cohort with a particular focus on the ARAP and ACRS schemes, as well as the set of measures announced under the 'Operation Warm Welcome'.

Subsequently, we reviewed a small number of selected studies on the policies that have been shown to contribute to refugee integration in high-income countries. We have conducted this review in order to identify the main indicators of refugee integration and the concrete measures that have been proved to enhance refugee integration. We have selected studies that employ a variety of different approaches, including:

- **Quantitative and comparative studies** on early-intervention policies that contribute integration with a focus on employment outcomes of asylum seekers and refugees<sup>54</sup>, and **large qualitative and mixed-methods studies**, based on surveys and interviews, on the longer-term integration of resettled refugees in the UK<sup>55</sup>. These served as a more solid basis to make inferences about what is likely to contribute to the integration of this group of Afghans.
- **Qualitative and ethnographic** studies that explore the subjective understanding of integration from the perspective of refugees, and provide more nuanced analyses of refugees' identity, expectations in the host country and family dynamics<sup>56</sup>.
- Existing **reviews of the Syrian resettlement scheme** and its implications for integration, which allow us to see what policies have worked in the recent past<sup>57</sup>.

This evidence has helped us to ground our observations into a broader context of what constitutes successful refugee integration to make appropriate recommendations to the central government on these topics.

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<sup>54</sup> Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, “**What Works for Improving Refugee Outcomes**”, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Collyer et al., “**A long-term commitment**”, 2018

<sup>56</sup> Ager and Strang, “**Understanding Integration**”, 2008; Robertson “**A New Life For me**” 2020.

<sup>57</sup> UNHCR et. al. “**Towards Integration**”, 2017; Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration “**An inspection of UK Refugee Resettlement Schemes**” (November 2019 – May 2020), November 2020.

## Interviews with key informants and Afghan refugees

To give a snapshot of the realities of welcome provided to Afghans, between late February and early April 2022, we undertook **15 semi-structured interviews** with key informants directly involved in the welcome, reception and integration support of this group, including **4 Afghan refugees** who arrived in the summer of 2021.

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

These interviews lasted around 1h30 each, and were conducted both in person and online. During interviews we asked participants to comment on access to key services that we had identified as linked with integration prospects, including housing, healthcare, English Language classes, educational provision for children, employment, and interaction with the local community.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of participants, manually transcribed, and coded into different themes following a qualitative content analysis. Ethical practices were followed throughout the research, particularly around achieving informed consent, and ensuring the anonymity of vulnerable participants. The names of the refugees interviewed have been changed to protect their identity. Furthermore, we have not included any personal details of the officials from voluntary organisations and local authorities interviewed.

### *Selection of Research Participants*

Given the qualitative nature of this research, key informants were purposively selected according to three main criteria: knowledge of the operational delivery of support services to this group of Afghans; experience in supporting Afghans in both temporary and permanent accommodation; and diversity of organisational, institutional and geographical perspectives. Given the sampling size and method, our findings are not generalizable to represent the provision of integration support in all of the UK, however it still allows us to have an insight into the dynamics of integration support in the contexts analysed. By using these selection criteria, we aim to capture different organisational and geographical perspectives on the integration support provided to Afghans. In particular, we decided to focus on the perspectives of:

1. **National Voluntary Organisations.** We identified three leading organisations with expertise in refugee resettlement in the UK: the **Refugee Council**, **Refugee Action** and **British Red Cross**. We spoke to representatives of these organisations who had direct knowledge of the operational integration-related service delivery for this specific cohort of Afghans. These organisations have been supporting Afghans both in contingency hotels, and in permanent accommodation where they have resettlement contracts with the Home Office (overall covering areas from Hertfordshire, Yorkshire and Humberside, to Wales, Greater Manchester, the West-Midlands and all the way to Northern Ireland). This perspective offers a national overview of the implementation of 'Operation Warm Welcome' policies.
2. **Local Authorities.** To have an overview of different local authorities' perspectives in key regions where Afghans were relocated in the UK<sup>58</sup>. We interviewed the **Local Government Association (LGA) of England and Wales**. This interview provides a more representative perspective as it included a range of local authorities in England and Wales. We also interviewed representatives of **four English councils** as case studies of the local dynamics of providing integration support: **1. Islington** and **2. Hillingdon** in London, **3. Bristol** in the Southwest of England, **4. Cumbria** in the North-West.

<sup>58</sup> While there is no publicly available data on the geographic breakdown of where Afghans have been relocated in the UK, from our interviews it seems accurate to assume that England represents a key region for Afghan relocation.

In terms of the reasons for selecting these councils, we aimed to capture progress on integration in areas with different socio-demographic characteristics and accommodation arrangements: we included multicultural urban areas with an existing Afghan diaspora, cities with a well-developed infrastructure of refugee inclusion, and regions that have less of an established Afghan community and include rural areas alongside city and towns. Moreover, as our background research revealed that accommodation was a key challenge for the longer term integration of this group, we selected councils that supported Afghans both in temporary and permanent accommodation (i.e. Islington and Bristol), as well as councils that mainly offered permanent accommodation for this cohort (Cumbria and Hillingdon). This contributed evidence on living conditions in hotels, and issues relevant to permanent accommodation. The perspective of local authorities is important given that they are crucial actors in the delivery of integration policies in communities.

3. **Local Charities.** We spoke to representatives of local charities supporting Afghans to obtain more detail on the needs of this cohort together with a local perspective on integration. We chose to speak to local charities in the local Authority areas that we had already interviewed, so that we could have a better understanding of the context in which they operated.
4. **Afghan Refugees.** In order to hear directly from Afghans about their experiences of the welcome and integration support received in the UK, we interviewed four Afghan refugees who arrived in the UK between July and August 2021. To select these refugees, we used a snowball sampling method based on referrals from local charities in two of the local councils we approached, namely Islington and Bristol city councils. Given the limited sample size and method used, these testimonies are not necessarily representative of broader Afghan experiences of welcome support in the country. Nevertheless, they constitute illustrative examples of the dynamics, wishes and expectations of some Afghans, and their families, currently in the UK. Despite our sample limitations, we aimed to capture a range of voices by deliberately asking to be connected with individuals of different genders, family composition, legal status and living in both hotel and permanent accommodation.

Below is a **snapshot of the Afghans we spoke to:**

- A female Afghan citizen who arrived in the UK in July 2021 with her husband and two young children, who arrived under the ARAP scheme. The family has lived in permanent accommodation in Bristol since August 2021.
- A male Afghan citizen who arrived in the UK in August 2021 in Operation with his wife and four children, who have applied for the ARAP scheme. The family has lived in hotel accommodation in Bristol since August 2021 but has been given directions to move to permanent accommodation shortly.
- A male British citizen of Afghan origin whose wife and one child arrived on Operation Pitting in August 2021. His other children remain in Afghanistan. They live in Islington in hotel accommodation.
- A female Afghan citizen who arrived in the UK in August 2021 with her husband and five children who were all evacuated in Operation Pitting and qualified under the ARAP scheme. The family has been living in hotel accommodation in Islington since August 2021.



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