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REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS ON RESETTLEMENT: THE SVP'S WORK WELCOMING AFGHANS



St Vincent
de Paul Society

England and Wales

Turning Concern into Action



Securing a ‘warm welcome’ for Afghans in the UK

‘I am determined that we welcome them (Afghans) with open arms and that my Government puts in place the support they need to rebuild their lives. We will never forget the brave sacrifice made by Afghans who chose to work with us, at great risk to themselves. We owe them, and their families, a huge debt.’ **Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson**

Back in August 2021, this statement by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson captured the UK Government’s initial commitment to evacuating and resettling Afghan men, women and children fleeing their homeland following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. Under Operation Pitting, around 15,000 people were successfully evacuated from Afghanistan, including both Afghans and British nationals.²

Through what was dubbed ‘Operation Warm Welcome’, the UK Government pledged to help Afghan arrivals rebuild their lives in the UK, and to support their integration by granting them Indefinite Leave to Remain as well as access to accommodation, education and healthcare. In order to do so, the UK Government set up two schemes: **The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)** and the **Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)**.

This briefing documents the experience and expertise of the SVP’s frontline volunteers and members who stepped up to welcome, help and support Afghan citizens resettled in the UK. Working with Afghan families and various partners, they gained an informed understanding of the key difficulties, challenges and barriers to integration the Afghans encountered. The insights and recommendations that follow are a direct result of their commitment and determination.

Operation Warm Welcome and Afghan resettlement schemes

Launched in April 2021, the ARAP scheme is intended for Afghans who worked with the UK Government or the UK’s Armed Forces in Afghanistan and their partners, dependent children under the age of 18 and additional eligible family members.³ The ACRS was launched in January 2022 with the aim of providing protection to Afghan citizens who are deemed to be most at risk, including girls, women, members of minority groups, and those who support values such as freedom of speech, democracy and women’s rights, as well as their spouses or partners, dependent children who are under the age of 18, and some additional family members in exceptional circumstances.⁴

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/operation-warm-welcome>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data>

3 *ibid*

4 For further information about the ACRS, see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/afghan-citizens-resettlement-scheme>

Under the ACRS, the UK Government pledged to resettle more than 5,000 people in the first year. It was envisaged in 2022 that as many as 20,000 people would be resettled in subsequent years with the scheme being described in early 2022 by the Home Office as “one of the most ambitious resettlement programmes in the world.”⁵

Yet the UK Government has faced growing criticism for failing to deliver the warm welcome it promised. The official schemes have not delivered in the way many hoped they would, and the resettlement of Afghan citizens in the UK has not taken place in the numbers initially envisaged. Many Afghans have been stuck in UK-government funded hotels in Pakistan on temporary visas while they wait for available accommodation in the UK, while an increasing number are attempting to get to the UK by risking their lives crossing the Channel in small boats. They are unable to claim asylum and are also subject to being detained and removed due to the recent Illegal Migration Act 2023.

Those Afghans who have managed to resettle in the UK have also faced various difficulties and struggles. Many are trapped long-term in, what was supposed to be, temporary hotel accommodation. Their access to more suitable housing is frequently restricted by a lack of available housing stock, problems accessing allocated funding, and discrimination from private landlords. Those Afghans who remained in bridging accommodation were recently

issued with eviction notices, a government decision that caused angst and panic and risked some becoming homeless. A further issue is that there has not been a process to allow family reunion. This means that a significant number of Afghan citizens in the UK were separated from their family members when they were evacuated and are still waiting to be reunited.

Overall, the general consensus is that Afghans resettled in the UK have suffered a significant amount of anxiety, distress and hardship, which has most certainly had a negative impact on their integration into British society. We are publishing this timely briefing in the hope that the lessons learned and policy recommendations it outlines inform future resettlement schemes, and improve the help and support offered to those people resettled in the UK.

The SVP's work with Afghans resettled in the UK

The SVP's focus on issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees is an important aspect of its social justice work, which is, in turn, central to the organisation's mission and vision. In the last few years alone, the SVP has campaigned for a fair, compassionate and humane asylum system, speaking out against both the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act and the government's plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda. Our young Vincentian volunteers and members participated in a campaign which increased awareness of asylum seekers' and refugees' experiences in the UK, and our St Vincent's community

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-family-resettled-under-afghan-citizens-resettlement-scheme>





hubs and members across the country have been wholly committed to offering Afghans a range of support, help and advice. Both our engagement with national-level policy developments and our understanding of local-level issues and lived experiences have resulted in the SVP becoming an increasingly established, respected and trusted stakeholder on issues regarding asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in the UK.

The SVP's work with resettled Afghans specifically has been substantial, and it has played an important role in supporting and helping with the integration and well-being of Afghan families resettled in the UK under both the ARAP and ACRS schemes. Volunteer members from the Telford-based Good Shepherd Conference, for example, supported over 200 Afghans, including grandparents, parents and children, trapped in hotel rooms and hoping to be moved into permanent homes.

As members from the [Conference](#) said:

"When a relative of one of our Conference members mentioned that families evacuated from Afghanistan had arrived at a local hotel within our parish, we arrived to find exhausted and traumatised people who were thankful for arriving in a safe country.

They had left everything behind, families, homes and most of their belongings... they could only bring a 10kg bag irrespective of the size of the family. For those with babies this meant they arrived only with a small supply of baby formula and nappies... in essence they had nothing but the clothes they travelled in."

Galvanised by witnessing such heart-breaking examples of injustice and inequality, our community collaborated with a range of partners, including their parish, local schools, other SVP Conferences, the local parish council, charities, local businesses and sport clubs to meet the Afghans' short-and-long-term needs. They visited and befriended them, and provided them with a range of practical items, such as mobile phones so that they could keep in touch with family still in Afghanistan, clothing, toiletries, pushchairs, suitcases, beard trimmers and shopping vouchers.

Other initiatives included organising English-language lessons, social events and trips, craft meetings, and the use of cricket, football and sport facilities, and providing them with sewing machines and bicycles. They also helped with trying to find suitable housing for the Afghan families, and they worked to raise awareness about family members still in Afghanistan who remain in grave danger.

SVP members in other parts of the country also supported Afghan families in various ways, such as by meeting and welcoming them when they first arrived in an area. In Wetherby, members of the SVP Conference based at St Joseph's Catholic Church supported the Afghan families being housed at one of the town's hotels by helping with the organisation of English-language classes for the women in particular. They advertised for volunteers through local church bulletins and their networks, and they worked closely with the St Vincent's centre in Leeds and a number of qualified teachers.

This ground-level work has enabled the SVP to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and difficulties experienced by the resettled Afghans. Consequently, we have shared our insight and recommendations with MPs and Ministers, and our Social Justice team has collated and submitted evidence and case studies to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's inquiry on the Home Office's Afghan resettlement schemes. Furthermore, SVP members have also helped and supported Afghans who made their own way to the UK, such as by donating money and goods.

Key findings: the difficulties faced and the barriers to integration

Accommodation

SVP volunteer members working on the frontline over the last few years have identified multiple difficulties and issues faced by the resettled Afghan citizens. The most concerning has undoubtedly been the absence of available and suitable accommodation. Many Afghan families were trapped long-term in cramped so-called 'bridging' hotel accommodation, often with entire families living in single bedrooms.

Not only was this challenging for them in a practical sense, but it also impeded and delayed their ability to rebuild their lives in the UK and become integrated into British society.

The fact that the Afghans had to wait so long for permanent housing had a domino effect on many other aspects of their lives. For example, it meant that it was impossible for them to accept job offers and secure long-term employment, or for their children to become truly settled in schools.

Ahmad⁶, for example, was offered a job as a television producer, but he had to turn it down because he was unable to find accommodation for him and his family close to his workplace. This was partly down to the issues he encountered with regards to the support offered by the Home Office to help him find accommodation.

Living long-term in hotel accommodation also affected the Afghans' mental health and general well-being, with many understandably becoming isolated, depressed and upset.

As members of the Good Shepherd Conference said:

"The effects of living in one room for two years with all of the family, and with no prospect of a permanent home, began to take its toll on their mental health."

⁶ Not his real name





The difficulties encountered by the resettled Afghan families with regards to housing have stretched beyond their experiences in hotel accommodation. Finding suitable long-term housing in the UK's private rented sector proved to be extremely challenging, with demand far exceeding supply in most areas. Affordability was also a widespread issue because, largely due to the language barrier, many of the Afghans were unable to secure jobs that allowed them to earn the minimum income required by landlords. It was often the case that the Local Housing Allowance was not enough to cover rents.

Discrimination

These issues were further exacerbated by some landlords who, fearing that tenants might be unable to make rental payments as a result of the rising cost of living, took out landlord protection insurance that would have been invalidated had they accepted tenants who did not meet certain income and affordability criteria.

Furthermore, some of the Afghan families also faced discrimination at the hands of landlords who do not accept tenants claiming Universal Credit or who are in receipt of Local Housing Allowance. Many would only consider tenants with personal guarantors who met certain income criteria, and not guarantees provided by Local Authorities.

Certain property websites had an option through which landlords could filter out people who were on benefits, thus enabling such discrimination to take place.

Lack of Home Office, welfare and integration support

Some of the Afghan families also experienced a lack of Home Office support, with promises made earlier this year to send many of them to suitable accommodation within a short amount of time not fulfilled. Furthermore, the August deadline by which Afghans were asked to leave hotels and the eviction notice they were served caused much anxiety and distress. Some of the families being supported by SVP volunteer members were successfully moved to permanent homes, but others were moved to new, and often low-quality, hotel accommodation to continue to wait for their new pre-matched homes to become available. The threat of homelessness, not being informed about where they would be moving until the very last minute, and being moved to different and new locations only accentuated the feelings of panic and upheaval among the Afghan families.

Our volunteers also identified a number of other barriers and difficulties faced by the Afghan citizens they worked with. For example, they were often neither provided with internet access, nor were they proficient in English, both of which are essential for liaising with letting agencies and finding suitable jobs and housing. Difficulties accessing the necessary funding and support meant that those families that were re-housed in privately rented accommodation often struggled to find work, learn English and become integrated into their new

surroundings. Furthermore, many of the Afghans supported by the SVP experienced severe mental health issues and isolation, yet lacked the necessary specialist help and support.

It is important to be mindful of the fact that these barriers, difficulties and anxieties were faced by individuals and families who had already experienced an unimaginable amount of pre-migration trauma, upheaval and distress.

The lessons learned and recommendations for policymakers

The SVP's work with Afghan citizens at community level exposes a clear need for a much more comprehensive and thought-out strategy which reflected both the short-and-long-term aspects of their resettlement.

Housing

- A far more strategic approach is required to help the Afghans find suitable permanent homes much sooner, thus allowing them to vacate hotel accommodation and begin to rebuild their lives. Such an approach would benefit from the advice and guidance of landlord associations, and by identifying landlords who have properties available and who are also willing to support Afghan families.
- Furthermore, using ring-fenced funding to create teams of Home Office staff to support the Afghans living in hotels would grant them the help they need when liaising with letting agents, and indeed with any other aspects of their settlement and integration.

- The Afghan families' ability to navigate and access the UK housing market would be strengthened if provided with internet access. Readily available information about where properties may be located, such as in relation to job and training opportunities, schools and transport links would also be helpful. The latter would no doubt provide reassurance to those who feel apprehensive about moving to a new and unfamiliar area about which they have little knowledge. We know this because our volunteers prepared a presentation about the benefits of different locations for the Afghan families which has proved extremely helpful.
- Overall, not enough has been done to mitigate the realities of the UK's private rented sector, especially in relation to limits in supply, affordability and the financial pressures experienced by landlords, or to support the Afghans in overcoming these. Our work is helping to include and welcome Afghans into communities across the country, giving hope for a brighter future.

Wider integration support and provision

- Beyond the provision of accommodation and food, greater consideration should be given to the integration support that is needed to help Afghans settle, especially in more rural areas that no doubt felt isolated to them. This should include social activities and events which bring local communities together and help Afghan families to feel included and welcome.



- It is also apparent that more might have been done to offer a multifaceted support package of a long-term nature to the Afghan families, both when living in hotels and once they had been re-housed. They would have certainly benefited from readily available one-on-one dedicated support which they could access as and when they needed to help them find jobs, learn English, and secure mental health support, and useful information about their new areas and communities. Alongside housing, these areas are crucial to the integration process and to allowing migrants and refugees to become part of their local communities. SVP members and volunteers have provided meals based on Afghan dishes, and provided day trips and other social activities which help to make Afghan families feel welcome and that their heritage is valued.

Greater collaboration and communication between stakeholders

- While there were many different stakeholders playing a role in helping with the resettlement of Afghan citizens, including the Home Office, local agencies, faith groups and civil society organisations, greater collaboration would have helped ensure that Afghans were aware of the support available and that funding was accessed by those in need. A further lesson learned is that, as has long been the case, voluntary organisations, charities and faith groups have an important role to play in welcoming, helping and supporting migrants and refugees.

Groups like the SVP that are working at the grassroot level possess a distinctive perspective on the difficulties faced by new arrivals. They have a unique insight into the barriers and difficulties faced by communities as well as the effectiveness of government policies and are well-equipped to advise policymakers on any changes needed moving forward.

“We have developed stronger links with the local authority and local charities that will help us in our work in the local community in the future and we have discovered that we can provide immediate support on the ground at speed – by enabling our local parish communities to put their faith into action and strengthening the experience of our Conference.”

Member of an SVP Conference

Therefore, there should be a greater effort among political stakeholders to collaborate and communicate with members of such local groups who, working on the frontline, frequently have an unparalleled understanding of situations as they unfold, which in turn can and should inform policy developments.

Conclusion

It has now been over two years since Kabul fell to the Taliban and the British Government pledged to offer Afghan citizens fleeing their homeland a warm welcome in the UK. Yet by no means is this story over, with those Afghans resettled across the UK still needing help and support as they continue to rebuild their lives.

Furthermore, we are likely to see ever-greater numbers of people migrating and seeking asylum in years to come, with international migration no doubt becoming one of the most important, challenging and debated issues of the 21st century.

As we move forward, we must hope that we can learn from and channel both the Afghans’ lived experiences, bravery and resilience, and the compassion, humanity and kindness shown by the individuals across the country who listened and responded.

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