



Supporting young Afghans' education and wellbeing: urgent policy priorities

REUK policy briefing, 6 September 2021

Summary

REUK has 12 years' experience working with Afghan refugee children and young people in the UK, as well as in Afghanistan, and has published leading research for the United Nations on education for young Afghan refugees in the UK. Drawing on this expertise, this document sets out key urgent policy priorities for supporting the education and psychosocial wellbeing of young Afghan refugees in light of the recent events in Afghanistan. Policy recommendations are made to the Home Office, the Department for Education, education institutions, refugee support organisations and funders.

Priority 1: Meaningful access to education for newly arrived Afghan children and young people at all levels must be a core focus of the resettlement scheme.

Education is protective; it is how these children will begin to rebuild their lives and look towards their futures. Refugee children and their families should have access to clear information about the UK education system. Educational settings should be adequately resourced and supported to provide a welcoming, nurturing and safe environment for these children to thrive.

Priority 2: Young Afghan refugees and asylum seekers already in the UK must not be overlooked, and supporting their psychosocial wellbeing is critical. They are facing significant anxiety and concern about the lives of their family in Afghanistan, and uncertainty about their futures. This is compounding existing mental health conditions which have already been exacerbated by COVID-19. Young Afghan refugees must be supported to access psychosocial support services at this difficult time. They must be granted immediate refugee status regardless of previous decisions, and rules should be changed so that their parents and siblings are eligible for family reunion.

Priority 3: Young Afghan care-leavers returned to Kabul in recent years must be counted among the top and urgent priorities for the UK government's resettlement schemes. Their status as a forced returnee is posing a risk to their lives, and their access to resettlement must be prioritised as part of the UK resettlement scheme this year.

Introduction

About REUK and our work with young Afghans

Refugee Education UK (REUK)¹ has 12 years of direct education programming and training for young refugees in the UK. We have worked with over 400 young Afghans in the UK, as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Beyond our programmes, Afghan young people have sat on and chaired our Youth Advisory Board, represented us at conferences and spoken passionately about our collective work. Our senior leadership team has more than six years' experience of working in Afghanistan, with more than half having worked in-country. We have also published [leading research](#) for the United Nations of education and integration for young Afghan refugees in the UK.

About this document

This document highlights key urgent policy priorities for supporting the education and wellbeing of young Afghans in light of the ongoing resettlement of Afghan children and young people to the UK. These priorities draw on REUK's deep expertise and experience of working with Afghan refugees, as well as on our research for Unicef UK and UNHCR on refugee children's education in the UK², and on promoting the educational outcomes, wellbeing and integration of young Afghans.³

Following the introduction, the document is divided into three sections, as set out below. Each section details a key issue of concern to REUK, our policy recommendations and our operational response.

- Priority 1: Meaningful education for resettled Afghan children and young people ([page 3](#))
- Priority 2: Psychosocial wellbeing of young Afghans already in the UK ([page 5](#))
- Priority 3: Resettlement for young Afghans forcibly removed to Kabul ([page 7](#))

Policy recommendations are made to the Home Office, the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, education institutions, voluntary sector organisations and funders.

Situation summary

During the withdrawal of western allies from Afghanistan, the Taliban rapidly advanced and seized power of the country. This has exacerbated the refugee crisis in the region, and has forced significant numbers of Afghans to flee their homes.

Those remaining in Afghanistan face grave human rights violations and atrocities, including a severe roll-back in rights for women and girls, violence and torture, and forced marriages.⁴ Afghans who have connections with the UK or other Western countries, and their families, face particular risks.

¹ www.reuk.org; charity number: 1132509; company number: 06879651

² Ashlee, A. and Gladwell, C. (REUK), 2020. [Education transitions for refugee and asylum-seeking young people in the UK: Exploring the journey to further and higher education](#). Unicef UK.

³ Gladwell, C (REUK), 2020. The impact of educational achievement on the integration and wellbeing of Afghan refugee youth in the UK. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies. DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2020.1724424](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1724424)

⁴ Refugee Council, 2021. [Parliamentary briefing: the situation in Afghanistan and refugee policy](#). Refugee Council.

Responding to the escalation of events, the UK Government has established two schemes to relocate Afghan refugees from Afghanistan to the UK.

- **Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)**⁵ for resettling Afghan individuals and their families currently or previously employed by or linked to British authorities.
- **Afghan Citizens' Resettlement scheme (ACRS)**⁶ for resettling up to 20,000 Afghan refugees in the UK over the next few years, with 5,000 in the first year. The scheme will prioritise the resettlement of women and girls.

The UK Home Office's longer term plans for resettlement of the Afghan refugees arriving in the UK are still unfolding. The scheme is being called 'Operation Warm Welcome', and will be led by Victoria Atkins, the new Minister for Afghan Resettlement.⁷ £12 million is being made available to prioritise additional school places for children to be enrolled as soon as possible, and to provide transport, specialist teachers and English language support for Afghan children.

Priority 1: Providing meaningful education for resettled Afghan children and young people

Key issues

Education is an urgent priority

All children have a fundamental right to education under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and research and experience show that refugee children and their families consistently and firmly prioritise this right.

Education has protective and psychosocial value. For children resettled from Afghanistan to the UK, education will be critical in helping them begin to rebuild their lives after sudden and significant upheaval. By offering a sense of routine, normality and welcome, schools will play a key role in supporting Afghan children to adjust and settle into their new environments. It is critical that timely access to education for these children is facilitated, and that they do not spend protracted periods of time out of school.

The need for clear and accessible information about the UK education system

Research shows that refugee children's access to education can be delayed if their parents or guardians struggle to understand and navigate the UK education system.⁸ For Afghan children and their families, the UK education system will be new and possibly overwhelming. From navigating online application and admissions processes, to understanding how the UK education system works and where their children fit within it, many Afghan refugee families will need support and guidance on helping their children

⁵ Ministry of Defence, 2021. [Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: further information on eligibility criteria and offer details](#). UK Government.

⁶ UK Visas and Immigration and Home Office, 2021. [Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme](#). UK Government.

⁷ Prime Minister's Office, 2021. [Operation warm welcome: press release](#). UK Government.

⁸ Gladwell, C and Chetwynd, G. (REUK), 2018. [Education for refugee and asylum seeking children: access and equality in England, Scotland and Wales](#). Unicef UK.

to access and thrive in education. It is important that information is provided in both Pashto and Dari to ensure that families and children can fully understand and engage with it.

The importance of welcoming and nurturing educational settings

Research shows that refugee children's previous experiences and reasons for fleeing their home can affect their wellbeing and education in the UK.⁹ For Afghan children, the sudden relocation from their homes and having experienced significant fear during the Taliban's rapid advance in Afghanistan is likely to have a continued effect on their emotional wellbeing in the UK. Schools must carefully plan and respond to this, taking steps to ensure that they are a space where children feel safe, and that they build nurturing and welcoming environments for these children, helping them to adapt and thrive. Building a welcoming environment does not have to be expensive: from creating displays in the school that celebrate diversity and refugees, to taking the time to learn how to properly pronounce a student's name, small actions can go a long way:

Policy priorities

The Home Office, the Department for Education and the Minister for Afghan Resettlement should:

- Ensure that meaningful access to education for newly arrived Afghan children and young people at all levels – from primary to tertiary – is a core focus of the Afghan resettlement scheme for both the ARAP scheme and the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme.
- Provide adequate funding and resourcing to schools to create nurturing, welcoming environments for Afghan refugee children, and provide sufficient English as an Additional Language (EAL) support for schools.

Education institutions welcoming Afghan children should:

- Appoint a focal point for supporting refugee children and their families.
- Plan and prepare for the arrival of Afghan refugees and to provide continued meaningful support to them in the longer term.
- Read REUK's [advice sheets](#) produced with Unicef UK for supporting educational access and progression for refugee pupils, particularly the advice sheet on [how to support access to education](#).
- Ensure that all staff supporting Afghan refugee students receive appropriate training on working with refugee children, which can [be provided by REUK](#).

Refugee support organisations supporting newly-arrived Afghan children and families should:

- Support Afghan families through the online school admissions process.
- Share REUK's welcome pack for newly-arrived Afghan children in English and Pashto or Dari (please email hello@reuk.org to order welcome packs).
- Walk refugee families through REUK's welcome pack, providing any additional support, advice and guidance that is needed as they adjust and settle in.

⁹ Gladwell, C and Chetwynd, G. (REUK), 2018. [Education for refugee and asylum seeking children: access and equality in England, Scotland and Wales](#). Unicef UK.

How REUK is responding

We are responding urgently and carefully to the ongoing resettlement of Afghan refugees in three ways:

- We are producing a welcome pack for newly-arrived young Afghans, which will be translated into Pashto and Dari, which explains how they can access the education and wellbeing services they need to adjust to life here.
- As the resettlement situation becomes clearer we will be providing schools and colleges with bespoke training to understand the unique challenges that young Afghan refugees may be facing.
- Recognising that the resettlement of Afghan refugees will continue over the coming years, we are creating a strategy that will enable us to adapt our current work to provide in-person education support to as many Afghan children and young people as possible.

If you would like to order welcome packs or book training, please contact REUK at hello@reuk.org.

Priority 2: Psychosocial wellbeing of young Afghans already in the UK

Key issues

Worry and concern for families in Afghanistan

Young Afghans in the UK are being deeply affected by the escalation of events in Afghanistan. Many have family members stuck and at risk in Afghanistan, including parents and siblings. They are desperate to bring them to safety but UK family reunion rules – which is limited to individual's children or spouses¹⁰ – do not currently allow this. This is leading to a deterioration in young Afghan's mental health and wellbeing.

Anxiety about their futures

Young Afghan asylum seekers who are waiting on outcomes of existing asylum claims or who have recently received a refusal for their asylum claims are extremely anxious; they are worried that they will be returned to Kabul, despite the current crisis. While we appreciate this is very unlikely under the current situation, research shows that living in a state of uncertainty is damaging for young people's mental health.¹¹ Young Afghans urgently need clarity and stability during this extremely challenging time.

Increase in psychosocial and mental health support needs

This difficult situation is leading to a deterioration in the mental health of many of the young Afghans that REUK supports. This is compounding existing mental health

¹⁰ UK Visas and Immigration, 2021. [Settlement: refugee or humanitarian protection](#). UK Government.

¹¹ Children's Society, 2018. [Distress signals: unaccompanied young people's struggle for mental healthcare](#). Children's Society; Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, 2021. [Wasted childhoods: the impact of COVID-19 asylum delays on children](#). GMIAU. The Refugee Council, 2021. [Living in limbo: a decade of delays in the UK asylum system](#). The Refugee Council.

conditions they may face which, among other factors, have been worsened by COVID-19 and lockdown.¹² There is an increased need for psychosocial wellbeing and mental health interventions for this group of young people, and it is critical that this group of young people are not forgotten.

Policy priorities

The Home Office should:

- Extend family reunion beyond the current rules to allow parents and siblings to join young Afghans in the UK.
- Grant all young Afghan asylum seekers immediate refugee status, retracting any existing refusals and issuing revised decisions.

The Department of Health and Social Care should:

- Increase the availability of psychosocial support services to young Afghans.

Education institutions should:

- Recognise the extremely challenging situation that their Afghan students will be facing at the start of the new academic year, exercising discretion and compassion and offering additional support where appropriate.

Funders should:

- Fund and prioritise wellbeing and mental health interventions to meet increased need among young Afghans at this difficult time.

How REUK is responding

Our trained support workers are responding with compassion and dedication to help young Afghans navigate this challenging situation. They are providing them with accurate, up-to-date information, and providing increased psychosocial wellbeing support interventions.

We are also engaging with a range of community organisations and specialist support services to strengthen the resources and support networks available for young Afghans.

¹² REUK, 2021. [The effects of COVID-19 on young refugees' education and wellbeing: insights from practitioners](#). REUK.

Priority 3: Resettlement for young Afghan care leavers forcibly removed to Kabul

Key issue

Risks to young Afghans returned to Kabul

Recent analysis of Eurostat data shows that, since 2008, the UK Government has deported more than 15,000 Afghans to Afghanistan, the highest number of forced repatriations among any other European country.¹³ According to UK government immigration statistics, since the start of 2019, 84 young Afghans (up to and including the age of 29) have been returned to Afghanistan.¹⁴

These young people will be extremely vulnerable: REUK research in 2016 on life after return to Afghanistan for young Afghan care leavers demonstrated that they were at risk simply as a result of their status as a forced returnee.¹⁵ These risks have dramatically increased in light of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, and these young people are now extremely vulnerable.

Since the Taliban took Kabul, REUK has been contacted by a number of young people who spent formative years in the UK care system as UASC, were forcibly returned to Kabul, and are now in hiding as a result of direct risks to their lives.

Policy priorities

The Home Office should:

- Include Afghan care leavers forcibly returned to Afghanistan among top priorities for the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme, recognising the vulnerability and risk to life posed by their status as forced returnees.

How REUK is responding

REUK is committed to providing young people who are contacting us following forced removal to Afghanistan with accurate and up to date information about the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme as details emerge.

¹³ Swindells, K., 2021. [The UK has deported more than 15,000 Afghan migrants to Afghanistan since 2008](#). New Statesman.

¹⁴ According to detailed return datasets provided by the Home Office [here](#). Filtering pivot table as follows: 2019, 2020, 2021 (years); Under 18, 18-29 (age); Home country (return destination group); Afghanistan (nationality). Sum of grand total of returns.

¹⁵ Gladwell et al. (REUK), 2016. [After return: documenting the experiences of young people forcibly removed to Afghanistan](#). REUK; REUK, 2016. [After return policy recommendations](#). REUK.