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Welcoming Afghans

Lessons from Operation Warm Welcome



**More in
Common**

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Overview

Over the last two years, Britain has welcomed around 25,000 people from Afghanistan¹. The two year anniversary of the fall of Kabul provides a unique opportunity to reflect on what we have learnt since the Operation Pitting evacuation.

When it comes to designing and delivering better approaches for welcoming future cohorts of refugees, the failures of the last two years give us as much to learn as the successes and this paper will explore both in order to understand valuable lessons.

The failures of the scheme are clear. That thousands of Afghans have spent up to 700 days in cramped, temporary accommodation only to be evicted in recent weeks is a failure that must be acknowledged. It has provided a welcome that does not live up to Britain's values. The disarray and expense of the scheme are not what Afghans refugees deserve, nor what the British public are entitled to expect. With eviction notices coinciding with the two year anniversary of Operation Pitting, urgent action must be taken to live up to the promise the Government made to Afghan families in 2021 - many of whom risked their own lives to help British forces in Afghanistan.

Some successes of the scheme which have received less attention are worth acknowledging. Over the last few months, local authorities, central government and voluntary and community organisations have worked together to find more long-term accommodation for Afghan families through a pre-matching housing scheme that will allow many of them to put down roots in communities across the country over the coming months. A proper funding package has also been created to allow local authorities to provide wraparound support for Afghan families for the next few years.

This paper will explore what worked and what did not across five key areas:

- Emergency response
- Housing and accommodation
- Leadership design
- Funding model
- Integration

The lessons and areas for improvement are informed by both the Afghan families who've experienced this system first hand, as well as extended conversations with those involved in devising policy and running operations on the ground. More in Common has surveyed over one hundred Afghan refugees in hotels across the country over the last month and conducted a series of 1:1 in-depth conversations with experts on this policy area - in terms of both its design and delivery.

Britain has a proud tradition of welcoming refugees. Over the last few years, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, Hong Kongers, Afghans, Syrians and others have been welcomed to the UK by a controlled, safe and orderly system that was capable of innovating, taking risks and embracing the generosity and compassion of the British public.

There is a risk, however, that an increasingly polarised policy context and debate on small boats and channel crossings does little either to reduce the number of crossings (something that the public expect and refugees deserve), or to acknowledge what Britain has done well in our welcoming programmes across multiple cohorts in recent years.

¹ Afghan Resettlement Programme: operational data - GOV.UK

The next General Election is an opportunity for all parties to present their vision for the future of Britain's refugee policy and approach to welcoming. The lessons from the successes and failures of welcoming Afghans to the UK should inform a reset and are an opportunity to spell out a new approach to refugee welcome in the UK - one which works for those refugees coming to Britain, and can command the confidence of communities across the country.

Key lesson 1: Emergency Response

The context

Operation Pitting was one of the largest and fastest emergency evacuations that Britain has ever played a part in. Over the course of two weeks, 15,000 people were evacuated from Afghanistan to the UK.

One of the features (and greatest strengths) of the British approach to refugee welcome is its responsiveness. While many other countries require legislative consent to establish new refugee welcome programmes, the high degree of executive freedom allows for ministers to set up schemes in a matter of days. This was seen both in the response to both Operation Pitting and in the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The offer for the Afghan cohort was also strong and generous to Afghan refugees – with indefinite leave to remain, quick access to the benefits system and other wraparound support from local councils. It is an example that could be used for future cohorts.

The main drawback of a rapid low-oversight approach is that early mistakes are missed and, without correction, become embedded as a feature and, ultimately, a failing of the system. For example, this is evident in the resettling of too many Afghans in urban centres (such as London and Manchester) where they subsequently set down roots but now cannot afford to remain permanently in a community in which they have been establishing a future for almost two years. A more proactive approach to sharing the responsibility for emergency accommodation across the country could also avoid the potential local backlash by creating the sense that more local areas are taking their ‘fair share’ of refugees.

One of the choices facing governments is whether accommodation and sanctuary should be provided immediately in the UK or in a safe third country. While the length and overuse of hotel accommodation has rightly been criticised, it should be weighed up against alternative policy options. Thousands of Afghans who intend to seek sanctuary in the UK are currently waiting in hotels in Pakistan. Our expert interviews highlighted some of the challenges there. The hotels in Pakistan, managed by the British High Commission, can only provide very basic medical support which means medical problems can go unresolved and ultimately makes for a more difficult resettlement to the UK, whenever it may happen. Time in third country hotels is also wasted in terms of finding pre-matching accommodation or starting English language lessons or cultural integration.

One of the themes of our interviews was responsiveness: not only of the government in establishing the scheme, but also the voluntary and community sector in providing wraparound support. The voluntary and community sector deserves credit for taking risks and setting up integration support in hotels and temporary accommodation across the country. Many did this in the absence of guaranteed funding and provided critical welcome support in hotels across the country. Our interviews identified a series of good practice examples when it came to cultural awareness workshops and supporting the mental health of refugees.

The lessons learned

Our conversations with key stakeholders in the design and delivery of the emergency response identified a series of key lessons that should be applied in the case of future cohorts of refugees:

- **Clearer expectations from the start:** Experts and practitioners felt that clearer expectations on the different roles that central government, local authorities and the voluntary sector were playing in the scheme would improve the effectiveness of the emergency response. Clarity from the start would have helped build stronger relationships with the Afghan refugees in hotels and, ultimately, would have lessened the delays in providing some key elements of the welcome over the past two years.
- **Tighter timetable for temporary bridging accommodation:** Bridging accommodation should only ever be temporary. That refugees have spent two years in cramped hotel accommodation is a clear failure of the system. In future, more work should be done from the early stages of emergency response to create paths to permanent housing solutions.
- **Use the bridging accommodation time wisely:** Stakeholders felt that, in addition to wraparound support, the period in which refugees are in one place in bridging accommodation should be used to welcome them more effectively into the UK. Refugees should be provided with better cultural education, and support for language learning and job hunting, alongside assistance to secure permanent housing solutions. Some of those we spoke to discussed the opportunity to do better and more intelligent matching between refugees and the areas that they will ultimately settle in across the UK. That would involve finding out more about the types of places they have come from and what could work well for them in the UK (for instance settling in rural areas with people who have experience of living in such areas in their home country, as one of our stakeholders suggested).
- **Understand cohort-specific sensitivities:** There is a premium on learning the lessons from the last two years so that we can build welcome approaches which are culturally sensitive to the needs of the cohort being welcomed. In the context of Afghan welcome, family size, gender dynamics, literacy and medical needs added layers of complexity to this cohort. There were also shortcomings in managing cultural sensitivities between Hazara and Pashtun Afghans². Practitioners told us that in some cases Hazara Afghans and Pashtun Afghans stayed in the same hotel accommodation for the last two years, which may have had the potential to lead to tensions between these different religious and ethnic groups. More broadly, practitioners felt that even if it was appropriate for Hazaras and Pashtuns to be accommodated in the same hotel, more practical help and support was needed to reduce tensions around facilitating religious observances or other cultural practices. Often cohort-specific cultural sensitivities require outside-the-box thinking; for example, in terms of family size, instead of looking for large houses for large families, local authorities could use adjoining apartments as a workable solution to accommodate compound families.
- **Understand the gender dynamics more effectively:** Practitioners told us that a gender-specific approach needed to be applied more readily to both the

² In Afghanistan, Hazara are a religious and ethnic minority practising Shi'a Islam in a country where the majority group of Pashtun Afghans practise Sunni Islam.

emergency response and longer-term resettlement. Among existing refugees, they identified the additional support needed for Afghan women who needed to learn English and to find routes to employment or better support for pregnant women.

- **Use the cohort's diaspora more effectively:** There is untapped potential in using the diaspora of a specific cohort to help find connections and solutions to a range of practical challenges (such as language barriers). Using the diaspora can create a strong foundation for community-based welcome initiatives.
- **Better guarantee the security of those in bridging accommodation:** Policy experts and practitioners raised their concerns about the security and safety of some Afghan families. They felt that the government could do more to ensure that refugees feel safe as they begin life in the UK. Our conversations also suggested that government messaging on refugees and immigration in general has contributed to an environment in which it was harder for voluntary and community organisations running bridging accommodation or wraparound support to ensure the safety and security of refugees.
- **Avoid the profusion of schemes:** Experts identified that multiple schemes and rules within the Afghans Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ARCS) and programmes for other cohorts caused unnecessary confusion and slowed down the decision-making processes. A simpler approach should lead to more streamlined processes and decision making in the future.
- **Building capacity for establishing emergency support across local authorities:** Practitioners identified an opportunity that would come from the existence of a contingency fund or capacity built to ensure that local authorities and the voluntary and community sector could stand up emergency welcoming support when needed in the future. However, more also needs to be done to share best practice across local authorities to ensure funding is used effectively. Those involved in supporting Afghan refugees highlighted real differences in quality between the activities of the most and least effective local authorities.
- **More strategic use of third country bridging accommodation:** If third country bridging accommodation is to be used to support future cohorts - for instance as part of a safe routes programme (and sometimes it will be the best option available) - it should be used in a more strategic way. That should involve - as much as is feasible given the nature of geo-politics - an appropriate timeline for its use. More important still is using time in third country bridging accommodation to start language lessons, and begin pre-matching on jobs and housing. Embassies in neighbouring third countries can play a proactive role to ensure that refugees do not end up transitioning from bridging accommodation in a third country to bridging accommodation in Britain, but instead to a more permanent home and job in the UK.

Key lesson 2: Housing and accommodation

Context

Many Afghan families (around 10,000 people) have already moved into a more permanent home in the UK. Among this group, many children have settled into schools and many of their parents have jobs and are setting down roots in their new communities. While this process should have taken place sooner and more efficiently, these families now have safety and security and this is to be acknowledged.

However, at the end of March this year, around the same proportion of Afghans (about 9,000 people, half of whom children, remained in hotels or serviced accommodation. That families were stuck in cramped accommodation without their own front door or a route to independence, a year and a half after the initial evacuation from Kabul, is the central failing of this welcoming programme.

The pace of successfully transferring Afghans from hotel or temporary accommodation into homes has been painstakingly slow. More in Common's analysis of government data found that the pace of resettlement of Afghans (those matched or waiting to move in) between August 2022 and May 2023 averaged 87 people per week³. If that pace had continued, it could have taken over two more years to clear the backlog, without releasing any capacity to welcome *additional* refugees from Afghanistan.

In recent months, the pace of resettlement to permanent accommodation has increased, partly in response to the eviction notices served on Afghans in hotels and a final take-it-or-leave-it offer of accommodation. A take-it-or-leave-it policy does not lend itself to an orderly or compassionate resettlement and integration system. While the success of pre-matching should be replicated elsewhere, the take-it-or-leave-it approach should be reviewed to ensure it is only used in circumstances where it is absolutely necessary.

The failures according to the Afghans themselves

Our survey of Afghans living in temporary accommodation makes clear the challenges and failures in both the design and delivery of the Afghan scheme.

- Three in five Afghan respondents (59 per cent) said they knew 'nothing' or 'very little' about housing options; even more knew little about housing offered by councils (72 per cent), while three in five (55 per cent) knew little about the options in the private rental sector. Given that some of the reported 'support' took the form of sending a regular Rightmove property link to Afghans in need of longer-term housing, more work clearly needs to be done in informing these refugees about options in their community.
- Job opportunities were the most important factor in choosing a new place to live, followed by proximity to friends and family.
- Almost all Afghan respondents (92 per cent) have been actively searching for housing in recent months. Financial support to cover rental costs was the single most important factor in convincing people to move from their hotel or hostel.

These statistics are supported by longer-form quasi-qualitative research with Afghan refugees. Respondents told us about the failures of communication with local authorities and the Home Office on housing; the stress and anxiety of trying to 'find your own accommodation'; the repeated rejection of housing applications; and the receipt of offers

³ Afghan Resettlement Programme: operational data - GOV.UK - More in Common's calculations were made using wayback machine

of accommodation unsuitable either because of not taking into account job prospects or for being in areas hundreds of miles away.

“During mid 2022 we were offered a council house which was close enough to my studies and my wife's relatives. However, after accepting the offer, the local authority didn't accept us. It was mainly due to a miscommunication between the LA and HO. The reason wasn't declared. However, we have heard from unofficial sources that 2 bedrooms wasn't enough to accommodate my family. As a result, we had faced high levels of anxiety and depression while our hopes vanished and stayed another year in a small hotel room with little children.”

“I searched nearly 6 months for an accommodation for myself and my family, I viewed more than 35 houses and filled nearly 30 application forms for them and almost every one of them got rejected.”

“I tried for more than a year to secure a property in the private sector where I wanted to move, but I didn't have any success. I have a full-time job with a relatively good salary, but I failed to secure a property in the private sector. The government just recently offered me an affordable house near my relatives and friends but it took almost two years.”

“I live in Bristol at the moment in bridging accommodation for almost one year and the Home Office offered me permanent accommodation in Northern Ireland which is very far from where I live now. I declined this offer because I want to live near my sister and cousin who are in Bristol.”

“I viewed and filled applications for more than 20 houses none of the landlords agreed to give me her/his house because I don't have the background of renting a house in UK, even I have a good job and the council office is paying the 6 months rent upfront but that is not important for the landlords.”

Lessons learned

In addition to our research with Afghans in temporary accommodation, we asked policy experts and practitioners about the lessons that could be learned and applied in future cohorts. The recommendations from stakeholders included:

- **Accepting that some form of bridging accommodation is inevitable in emergency evacuation situations**, but work can be done to improve its effectiveness. There should have been more urgency in matching individuals with accommodation, and a funding package from central government to assist with finding permanent accommodation or developing quick solutions should have been forthcoming.
- **Reflecting on the appropriateness of hotel accommodation for bridging accommodation:** The use of hotel accommodation has had an outsized influence on the public and political debate on refugee resettlement. While in some emergency situations hotel accommodation will be the only suitable option, time and resources should be invested in building up alternative temporary bridging accommodation that both works for refugees and can command public support.
- **Refugees should be better supported to find their own accommodation or through well planned pre-matching schemes:** One-off, take-it-or-leave-it offers

should be avoided in all but the most extreme circumstances. Offers for housing should be made when they are appropriate and take in account the broader integration context, including access to opportunities for work, healthcare and education. Put simply, if the broader integration context is not taken into consideration, the permanent resettlement of refugees is unlikely to be successful. Indeed, in our survey of Afghan respondents, the top consideration for choosing housing was proximity to job prospects. Afghan refugees want appropriate and permanent housing solutions that can give them a path to independent living in the UK.

- **Clearer communications about securing accommodation independently:** Our conversations with stakeholders revealed that Afghan refugees were initially told that, if they independently looked for their own accommodation, they could lose other financial or wraparound support. After months in limbo, they were forced to find their own accommodation on a much tighter timetable. The changing schemes and narratives did not help Afghans navigate what was already a confusing scheme and a challenging housing market. If the system design relies to an extent on refugees finding their own accommodation, then the support and communication must be better.
- **More agile support to help refugees navigate the private rental market:** While upfront support from local authorities (either in the prepayment of rent or in acting as a guarantor) helped eventually, more broadly the support for Afghan refugees in navigating the private rental market fell short of what it should have been and was too little for too long, and then came too late. A more nimble and reactive support framework is needed to help refugees navigate the private rental market independently. A review should be conducted into the effectiveness of local authority caseworkers and Home Office Liaison Officers (HOLOs) in supporting refugees to find accommodation over the last two years.
- **Build up the infrastructure of social landlords to build capacity for welcoming refugees:** Given the context of the private rental market, often the only or most appropriate type of house for refugee families will be those owned and run by social landlords, such as housing associations. The government should work with such landlords to find ways to support building their capacity and make our refugee welcome processes in the UK work more efficiently.
- **Be realistic about the time it will take to resettle refugees from different cohorts:** Difficulty in finding housing on the private rental market is an experience that many Afghan refugees will share with Britons across the country. However, our stakeholders told us that many refugees are at a particular disadvantage. One stakeholder put it that ‘if twenty people were in a queue for the same house, there was no chance that the refugee family would be successful’. The policy design should factor the additional barriers that refugees are likely to face in finding private rental accommodation.
- **Set expectations around rejecting housing offers:** Home Office figures suggest that over 300 households (around 1,200 people) have refused accommodation offers⁴. In our survey of Afghans, half of respondents (49 per cent) said they wanted to move from temporary accommodation but only if the accommodation was right

4 Afghan Resettlement Programme: operational data - GOV.UK

for their families. This should not be interpreted as ingratitude, but should be understood within this broader context: that refugee families want to ensure they are making decisions that will get their family on a path to independent living in the UK. Housing offers need to be made in places where there are routes to employment, schools and NHS support so that refugees can quickly rebuild their lives here in Britain. Policy experts and practitioners said they would welcome a review of the expectations that government, local authorities and refugees themselves have around what a proportionate and legitimate number of refusals of housing offers might be before enforcement action would be taken in bridging accommodation.

Key lesson 3: Leadership model

Many of the problems with the Afghan welcome scheme stem from a failure of the design and delivery of a proper leadership model.

In the survey of Afghans in hotels, respondents were asked how much they trusted different groups and institutions involved in their welcome to the UK. Using a range from one to ten, where ten is the highest trust, Afghan respondents were most likely to trust the British people (9.92 out of 10), followed by the British government (7.97 out of 10) and local authorities and councils (6.55 out of 10).

These rates to some extent reflect the themes from our conversations with many of those involved in the design and delivery of the Afghan scheme: positivity and pride about the generosity and response of the British public, gratitude towards the government for eventual action, but frustration with local authority delivery.

Our conversations identified both the problems and opportunities for improvement of the leadership model for central government, local authorities and the voluntary sector. Throughout this analysis, we highlight our recommendations from experts and practitioners on how the leadership model could be improved.

Lessons for central government

Overall, stakeholders described their frustration with the central government's inconsistent and confusing leadership on Afghan resettlement over the last two years. While the cross-government approach adopted (Home Office, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Cabinet Office) was broadly welcomed, in practice it caused confusion with different government departments and ministers dealing with different pieces of the Afghan welcome puzzle.

Some practitioners noted that, following the departure of Lord Harrington as Minister for Refugees, there was the clear absence of a point-person at the top levels of government to drive forward policy delivery. Part of the profusion of schemes (ARAP, ARCS and others) was a symptom, stakeholders felt, of this lack of consistency and vision for Afghan welcome across government.

Many of the people we spoke to gave central government credit for its work in recent months as a convenor, for example with the Afghans Charities Coalition, alongside other initiatives - and the engagement of senior officials in finding solutions to a series of practical problems with the Afghan scheme. It is clear from our conversations with stakeholders that there is much potential for the government as a 'convenor' in this space, but that potential was not reached in full over the last two years. More work is needed to establish the convening infrastructure within government so that central government, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector can work well together to share best practice, pool resources and troubleshoot problems.

There are also clearly some elements of refugee welcome and co-ordination that are best done at a national or central government level. One of these specific challenges we heard was that central government should work more on building up refugee welcome capacity, and emergency refugee welcome response capacity, outside of London and Manchester,

where permanent housing post-bridging accommodation is out of reach for many refugee families.

Lessons for local authorities

Local authorities received the brunt of criticism for the failings of the past two years, both from our stakeholder interviews and our survey of Afghans.

The main criticism of local authorities centres on a lack of coordination. Many refugees' offers for housing and jobs fell through because local authorities were too slow to react and not agile enough in finding solutions to complex challenges. Part of the failure of the policy design was that local authorities had no incentive to act quickly on finding permanent accommodation for Afghans, partly because the government funding model was too slow to give them the tools they needed, and partly because the Home Office was paying for temporary accommodation up until an Afghan refugee presents as homeless at which point the local authority would be liable. Work should be done to explore how to incentivise quicker action from local authorities.

Stakeholders also criticised both staff turnover at the local authority case-worker or liaison officer level, and the deployment of inexperienced staff to do complex casework in hotels. Our stakeholders outlined that, in a context where getting Afghan families to trust officials was going to be difficult (due to Afghans' own low levels of trust in institutions and home country experience), the approach taken by local authorities made this more difficult. In some local authority areas, the use of the diaspora or Afghans who had previously been accommodated in the bridging accommodation helped to build trust more effectively.

Local authorities were also criticised by our stakeholders in their approach to funding. At one level, this was a product of some local authorities not utilising the generous funding available for Afghan resettlement and opting out of their responsibilities. Practitioners estimated that as many as one in five local authorities have opted out of involvement in Afghan resettlement or taken any of the available budget.

Our conversations also revealed frustration with local authorities for acting as budget gatekeepers. Some practitioners suggested that this approach by local authorities might have been driven by a desire or necessity to backfill previous cuts to council integration and resettlement budgets over the last decade or so. However, such an approach limited local authorities' ability to directly help the Afghan families in their communities.

The experts we spoke to suggested two policy opportunities when it comes to improving the leadership and delivery model of refugee welcome for future cohorts.

- **Minimum compulsory resettlement responsibility for local authorities:** The opt-out nature of refugee resettlement from some local authorities (albeit the model used for the Afghan cohort was an improvement from the more widespread Syria opt-out) means that the local political dynamics of managing refugee resettlement are much more challenging. By mandating a minimum compulsory level of resettlement responsibility across local authorities, vetoes are removed and the foundation for a more orderly and controlled scheme is laid. This has the potential to limit local backlash to refugee resettlement because there is a sense that every locality is taking its fair share of refugees. There should, of course, be flexibility in

the scheme for local authorities to decide to increase their capacity where appropriate and the appropriate incentive model in place to support uptake.

- **Greater regionalisation of the refugee welcome:** One of the key themes emerging from our stakeholder interviews was the sense that working together on a regional level could help the voluntary and community sector and local authorities to innovate and deliver support more effectively. Stakeholders identified devolution deals, combined authorities and metro mayors as the appropriate level for regionalisation of refugee welcome.

Lessons for the voluntary and community sector

There is much that the voluntary and community sector can be proud of when it comes to their work on Afghan welcome over the last two years. In an emergency situation, and often without the certainty of funding, they put into place wraparound support to help Afghans receive a warm welcome here in the UK. Some practitioners found that the overall standard of wraparound support was inconsistent across the country, and more specialist and targeted support was needed when it came to helping Afghans experiencing trauma after fleeing from the Taliban.

One of the lessons for government, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector is to better engage and involve ordinary people in a community-led and people-led approach to refugee welcome. The last 18 months of the Homes for Ukraine scheme has shown the potential for such approaches which both work for refugees and can command public support.

To realise this potential, the voluntary and community sector, local authorities and central government have to trust and rely on the generosity of the British public, and also approach this resettlement from the principle of subsidiarity, focusing on what government, local authorities, the voluntary and community sector and ordinary people can do best in providing welcome.

Some officials have cautioned that a Homes for Ukraine-style model would not be appropriate for the Afghan cohort given the family size, cultural and language barriers, and the complex medical needs of many Afghans.

While a 'hosting' model where hosts open up their houses is unlikely to be appropriate for the vast majority of the Afghan cohort, the claim that community sponsorship groups cannot deal with complexity does not match the reality of successful hosting models elsewhere. Of course, there will be some cases of acute complexity where government or local authority-led support for refugees will be needed, but in the vast majority of cases, community sponsorship groups are willing and able to deal with the complex needs of the people they are welcoming, including more vulnerable refugees.

However, our approach to dealing with complex cases, in policy design and delivery terms, needs to be more practical. In one conversation, a stakeholder put it that they were given a complex case of a child who would need specialist medical attention every month in Birmingham. Given that they were in a rural area in South West England, it was too complex to arrange a 400-mile round trip at least once a month. If that child was placed with a community sponsorship group in Birmingham, the difficulties of supporting that young person would be reduced.

More in Common's previous research with the hosts of the Homes for Ukraine scheme has shown their willingness to welcome and sponsor future groups of guests and refugees from other countries. It would be a mistake not to rely on this generosity as we design future systems. However doing so will require a shift in mindset and approach from those in national and local government, as well as some in civil society from acting as gatekeepers to enablers of welcoming opportunities.

Key lesson 4: Funding model

In short, the assessment of experts we spoke to was that the funding provided was at the right amount, but delivered too late, and not directed to the right people.

The current funding envelope for Afghan welcome is designed to help move Afghan families from bridging accommodation to permanent accommodation, and provide an integration package once they have been settled into permanent accommodation.

Over the last two years, the government has developed a £285 million support package⁵ to help local authorities to settle Afghans families in permanent housing in their communities including:

- £250 million expansion of the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) to help councils source homes to house Afghans currently in bridging accommodation;
- £35 million for councils to increase support and overcome the barriers to private rented accommodation;
- Over £7,000 per Afghan refugee for local authorities to enable them to support people moving out of hotels, including through deposits, furniture, rental top-ups and rent advances and others.

The government has devised a package of integration support for local authorities once an Afghan household has been permanently settled in their community outside of a bridging hotel. Each local authority receives £20,520 per person over three years. The government has also provided £4,500 per child to cover education in the first year, £850 for adult English language support and £2,600 for healthcare⁶.

The funding framework is flexible and allows local authorities to decide where it can be best used. However, as highlighted above, the opt-in nature of the funding means that not all local authorities have signed up for the support. Stakeholders also criticised the patchy use of resources across the country.

One of the challenges identified in our conversations was the lack of transparency of funding at the local authority level. Stakeholders in the voluntary and community sector outlined the knock-on consequences of not being aware of how much funding is available: this has the dual effect of limiting their provision of support to those who need it and restricting their ability to hold their local authorities to account for delivery. The profusion of pots of money from the central government also causes similar confusion for local authorities in terms of their understanding of their own responsibilities.

Clearly, any future scheme needs to balance the democratic oversight that funding local authorities provides, with the agility and responsiveness of civil society in delivering important integration work on the ground. Consideration should be made of the benefits and drawbacks of alternative national-local funding models (delivered for example via the National Lottery Community Funds).

⁵ New support for Afghans in UK hotels to find settled housing - GOV.UK

⁶ UK government support for resettled Afghans in bridging accommodation factsheet – August 2023 - Home Office in the media

There are clear opportunities from the lessons learned from this cohort of Afghan refugees to build better funding models in the future:

- Greater transparency on funding to help make partnerships between government, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector work more effectively;
- Avoiding funding envelopes (such as £1 million per day on hotel accommodation) that jar with the public opinion and taxpayers' legitimate expectations around value for money;
- Avoiding local authorities acting as gatekeepers for funding, and provide alternative ways to get money directly to voluntary and community sector organisations, while maintaining some level of democratic oversight;
- Developing contingency funding pots for voluntary sector organisations to stand up capacity quickly in the face of future emergencies;
- Continuing the approach of some local authorities and central government in designing procurement focusing on how much money is needed to deliver a good service (from housing to wraparound support) rather than making the delivery fit with a specific funding envelope.

Key lesson 5: Integration

Integration is too often ignored in the broader debate about refugees and immigration but it is fundamental to building a system of refugee welcome that both works for refugees and can command the confidence of the British public.

Of all of the groups we asked about, it was in the British public that Afghans in hotels across the country had the highest trust. A key lesson from this experience of Afghan welcome has to be better involving the British public in our refugee welcome from the start.

Our interviews highlighted the effort that many voluntary and community organisations went to to design integration initiatives that helped build relationships and made people feel welcome. Examples include:

- In-depth presentations and support on how to use housing websites such as Rightmove instead of receiving links and being expected to self-navigate. Best practice examples also talked through the trade-offs between relocating from London or Manchester to more affordable places around the country.
- Real community welcome: one practitioner shared an example of where a bridging hotel brought in Afghan chefs to cook a community meal for the whole hotel and then organised a cricket match. This kind of community-building activity is something that is best delivered by voluntary and community sector experts.

However, our survey with Afghans in hotels outlined the shortcomings of the integration approach when, after two years, over a third have no or only basic English language skills (a number that is likely to be an underestimate based on the nature of the survey), and fewer than half have found employment.

Our survey found that:

- More than a third of respondents (36 per cent) said they were fluent or proficient in English, while a quarter (25 per cent) said they had conversational competence, and just under two in five (38 per cent) said they had basic or no English.
- Our survey found that two thirds of Afghans in hotels (64 per cent) are currently looking for employment, 42 per cent are currently employed, while 58 per cent are not currently employed.

Our conversations identified a series of lessons to be learned from the experience of the last two years:

- **Involve and empower communities early:** Voluntary and community organisations should be viewed as a key delivery body from day one, with the capacity to quickly stand up strategic integration support from the start.
- **More resource needed to help Afghans into work quickly:** Jobs and workplaces are key accelerants for integration and more work should be done to ensure refugees can get access to employment early. This cohort of Afghan refugees had the automatic right to work; this should be extended for other future cohorts of refugees.

- **More effective action on learning English:** More proactive action is needed to ensure that English language learning is part of the warm welcome for any refugee coming to the UK. More in Common's research shows that command of the English language is one of the key factors in driving up support for welcoming refugees. More innovation is needed in this space from online platforms (like the Oak Learning Platforms) and better support in communities.
- **Do more to ensure those refugees who settle in the UK participate in civic life:** More should be done to ensure that those who are given refugee status in the UK are given routes not only to employment and housing, but also to participate fully in the civic life of their community and the country more broadly. An obvious example is that this cohort, having already spent two years in the UK, has the potential to play an important role in supporting future cohorts of Afghan refugees set to arrive in the UK.
- **Better matching between refugees and their communities:** Practitioners told us that more intelligent and practical matching can make the system of refugee welcome much smoother, for example, avoiding resettling in a rural area a refugee who has only ever lived in cities.
- **Better involvement of institutions and corporate bodies in integration:** The involvement of workplaces and businesses has been sorely missing from recent welcome schemes for Ukraine and Afghanistan, and had been envisaged in the stage two of Homes for Ukraine. Work should be done on how best to empower corporates and institutions in the integration of refugees; activities might involve building accommodation quickly, providing employment opportunities or becoming a lead sponsor.

Conclusion

Despite the promise of Operation Warm Welcome and the speed of its establishment, it is clear that it has not lived up to its potential. The British public's generosity of spirit towards Afghan refugees has not been met by what has so far been delivered by local and national Government.

The result is that many Afghan families have been let down. From being stuck in hotels for hundreds of days to being forced out of those hotels with eviction notices, Afghan families did not experience the warm welcome that they deserved and the government promised.

These failures in the design and delivery of refugee welcome are ones which all those involved in refugee welcome, but most of all local and national Government, need to learn from.

However, those failings should not obscure the success stories including those of the 10,000 individuals already in permanent accommodation and embarking on their new lives in the UK. Nor should it reflect negatively on the committed and dedicated work of public servants, those working in civil society and individuals in helping them to do so.

Future schemes must combine the UK's commendable agility and speed in immediate response, with proper planning about what the lives of refugees in the UK will look like in the long term. That includes thinking about where and what sort of bridging accommodation is most appropriate, clear expectations and responsibilities for moving into permanent accommodation. This will inevitably involve some degree of capacity building and proactively working with social landlords to better plan and prepare for future waves of refugee welcoming.

However, accommodation should not be seen as the start and end of refugee welcome. This research and a significant body of existing literature highlights the crucial importance of integration provision and support, from education and employment opportunities to cultural awareness and English language instruction. A failure to properly invest in integration support is clearly a false economy.

Greater certainty is also needed from the outset about what financial support will be available and how it should be used. Civil society organisations should know that their welcome efforts will be properly funded, and there should be an expectation that local authorities follow the best practice in their peer group.

Finally, more needs to be done to properly embed ordinary people and communities in welcoming efforts. The Homes for Ukraine scheme showed the depth of potential for UK community-led welcome; rather than viewing this as a one-off success, consideration needs to be given to how the model can be extended to different cohorts, including the next wave of Afghan arrivals. While every element of the scheme will not be transferable, much is.

More in Common's previous research found that almost three quarters of those ready to sponsor again would be willing to support an Afghan family. To properly realise community-led welcome, local authorities, national government and civil society will require a mindset shift from gatekeepers to enablers of community participation.

Despite the failures, it is not too late to get Operation Warm Welcome back on track. There is more that we can do to support those Afghans already in the UK and a lot that we can do to better support and welcome the next cohorts due to arrive. What's more, we can ensure that the legacy of the past two years is not defined by the failures of planning and policy, but

instead in providing the impetus to build a better, more compassionate approach to community welcome that commands public confidence.

Methodology

In-depth interviews

More in Common conducted a series of in-depth interviews with policy experts and practitioners in late July and early August 2023. Interviews were conducted and subsequently analysed by More in Common researchers. Interviews were conducted under the principles of Chatham House.

We also conducted a roundtable with policy experts and practitioners in July 2023 to inform the research design and gain initial feedback on their assessment of the schemes.

Afghans Survey

More in Common surveyed 132 Afghan respondents in hotels, hostels and temporary accommodation across the country in partnership with USPUK as part of their work supporting Afghan refugees to settle in the UK.

The fieldwork occurred between 13th July 2023 - 13th August 2023 and was available in three languages - Dari, Pashto and English. The survey was distributed by USPUK Co-ordinators and their charity partners.



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