

Safe Routes



What are safe routes?

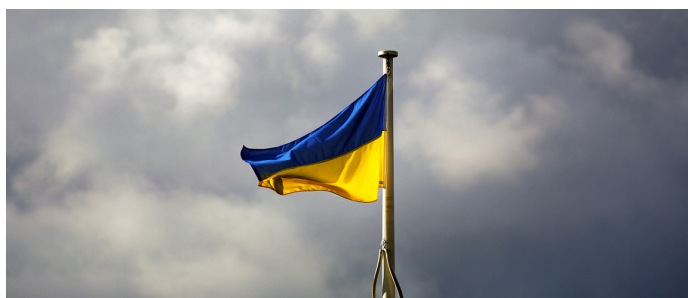
When conflict or persecution occurs, it is up for other states to help refugees flee by setting up safe and legal routes. Refugees have a right to claim asylum in any state that is a signatory to the Refugee Convention 1951, which the UK proudly helped draft.

In the cases of Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria and Hong Kong, the UK offers some types of safe routes for those fleeing political persecution. The UK currently operates two main safe routes for asylum seekers and their families: 'resettlement' and 'family reunion'. Read more about these on the next page.

Safe routes stand for a compassionate society that welcomes those seeking safety. They aim to ensure that refugees can access asylum in a dignified and secure manner, in line with international humanitarian principles and human rights standards.

Background

Conflict and persecution has exacerbated the use of dangerous routes refugees make when forcibly displaced. Many refugees have little choice but to make dangerous journeys such as the small boat crossings across the English Channel. These boats used are often overcrowded and the people on board are at risk of capsizing, hypothermia, and collisions. The policies of European governments to make asylum difficult pushes refugees into dangerous journeys.



Homes for Ukraine

The Homes for Ukraine scheme enables UK residents to sponsor Ukrainians fleeing the war. Sponsors provide rent-free accommodation and Ukrainian guests are granted visas allowing them to live and work in the UK, with access to public services and benefits. Over 200,000 Ukrainians have arrived under this scheme so far.



Kindertransport

One of the most famous 'safe routes' offered in the UK was the Kindertransport, a British scheme to rescue 10,000 Jewish children from Nazi-occupied territories. This 'safe route' was not operated by the British government but rather by individuals and charities such as World Jewish Relief and Quakers, who acted as 'guarantors' for those children.

Why does it matter

Helen (name has been changed), a 16-year-old girl fleeing conflict from Eritrea, finally arrived in the UK after a dangerous and difficult boat journey across the English Channel. Despite being only 16, officials from the Home Office arbitrarily decided her age was 22. Helen was placed in accommodation with adult men much older than her, where she felt unsafe. Staff told her that they could not help her with her age. This situation is one of many which could be avoided by the implementation of safe routes.

Resettlement



Resettlement schemes offer refugees and asylum seekers a safe route to permanent residency and protection. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees suggests resettlement in cases of risk of gender-based violence, threats to children, survivors of torture, urgent medical needs, family reunification, and lack of other solutions.

The government is functionally making resettlement more difficult by denying the right to work for those seeking asylum and denying citizenship to those who use the irregular routes that government policy forces them to take. This creates a catch-22 and is a clear breach of the Refugee Convention 1951.

Family Reunion



It is common for families to be separated during forced displacement. As such, the UK allows refugees to sponsor a family member to be able to join them. However, the definition of family used by the Home Office is unfairly strict. The current mechanism for family reunion only allows adult refugees to sponsor a spouse or a child under 18.

A child refugee in the UK is not allowed to be reunited with a parent if the child is not already in the UK. The UK, one of the only European states, along with Switzerland and Liechtenstein, does not allow child refugees the simple mechanism to ask to be reunited with their family.

The government's line



The government does not plan to expand safe routes. Instead, it has stated an aim to deter refugees from claiming asylum in the UK. There is no evidence to support the claim that the harsh treatment of refugees and asylum seekers serves as a deterrent for people seeking refuge and asylum to make the journey to the UK. Even if it were true, we see no moral, legal, or economic reason to deter refugees in the first place.

Recommendations

Setting a target for resettling refugees which significantly expands on the number currently being resettled.

Allowing children to be reunited with parents and using a more realistic definition of what counts as family.

Building a scheme with the EU which allows for family members in different countries to be reunited.

Piloting a "refugee visa" that allows people to travel to the UK before applying for asylum.