

Executive summary

Introduction

This independent evaluation was conducted by a research team from the Global Diversities and Inequalities (GDI) Research Centre, based at London Metropolitan University. The research team was led by Professor Louise Ryan, Director of the GDI Research Centre, and Professor María López, Deputy Director of the GDI Research Centre; the research assistant was Alessia Dalceggio, a PhD student. Additional research assistance was provided by Farzana Adell and Mohammad Ibrahim Muzamil, both Afghan students at London Metropolitan University.

The research was commissioned and funded by Islington Council and designed in partnership with the NRPF Refugee and Migrant Service team at the council. The research was reviewed and approved by London Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Committee. The project started in January 2023 and was completed in January 2026.

The project's aim was to evaluate resettlement programmes in the London borough of Islington. The project employed a longitudinal approach to compare experiences of resettlement among Syrians and Afghans in Islington, and track the progress that Afghans made across key indicators over the three years of the research.

Context

Local authorities voluntarily take part in refugee resettlement and there is no mandatory resettlement quota. Islington involvement in resettlement started in 2015 as a small-scale response and since 2021 has developed into a large-scale service, evolving over time as new routes were created and as the council's experience with resettlement developed further. Afghan Resettlement is fully funded by the UK Government, with local authorities receiving a streamlined integration tariff per person over 3 years to support housing and integration. Islington was awarded Borough of Sanctuary status by City of Sanctuary in 2023. As of January 2026, Islington Council has supported 403 individuals

under Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and 255 from the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), for a total of 658 individuals across both schemes.

Methods

The research is a multi-method study including desk research (document reviews, analysis of data), 25 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus groups with key stakeholders. Moreover, interviews with 11 Syrian participants and longitudinal methods using follow-up interviews with 29 resettled Afghans were conducted, the latter over three waves from 2023-2025, to create a unique rich source of lived experience narratives. Many of the Afghan residents are coming to the end of their formal support under the Resettlement Scheme and hence these latest interviews provided an opportunity to assess how they plan to navigate their lives in Islington beyond the resettlement scheme.

Key findings: Islington resettlement approach

Afghan resettlement in Islington is delivered in-house by the Resettlement Team, which sits within the NRPF, Refugee and Migrant Service (Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate). The Resettlement Team is currently composed of 12 members, 5 Refugee Resettlement Officers, 2 Senior Refugee Resettlement Officers, 2 Refugee Resettlement Support Officers, 1 Refugee Resettlement Manager, 1 Refugee Resettlement Housing Lead, and 1 Business Administration Apprentice.

In undertaking our evaluation, we noted how the Resettlement Team expands to include strategic partners in other local authority services, funding 3 specialised roles in iMax (Income Maximisation), 3 in iWork and 2 in Adult Community Learning (ACL). Importantly, we also observed Islington's partnership approach with external organisations to provide holistic support to resettled families and individuals through collaborative work with external partners, namely the Traumatic Stress Clinic, Brandon Centre and University College London Hospital (UCLH) RESPOND Clinic, as well as with organisations such as the Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation (KMEWO) and the Refugee and Migrant Forum of Essex and London (RAMFEL).

The council has developed a bespoke case management system called Resettlement Connect which provides caseworkers with a birds-eye-view of the support systems and partnerships already in place and helps identify areas for development and improvement. In this system individuals are assigned a *red*, *amber* and *green* rating for each of the integration categories, and one for their overall household. The integration categories are:

- Access to Education
- Employment and Volunteering
- Health and Well-being
- Financial Stability
- Housing
- Immigration
- Local Living
- Safeguarding

Housing support and provision changed significantly between the resettlement of Syrian and Afghan residents. With the development of the Afghan resettlement model, Islington developed a role for a dedicated housing lead which sits across the NRPF Refugee and Migrant Service. Funding from the Greater London Authority (GLA) was expanded further through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG)'s Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) to buy back over 400 ex-council homes. Buy-backs are not only assigned to people who fled Afghanistan, but also Ukraine, as well as families and individuals on temporary accommodation waiting lists.

Based on all the interviews and focus groups with the 25 stakeholders, we observed that all services provided beneficial, holistic support to resettled families and individuals. Particularly commendable is the role of the Resettlement Team and their coordination of, support to, and communication with, all partners.

Nonetheless, stakeholders emphasised that in their process of resettlement Afghans are dealing with “*a variety of issues and barriers*” (S11), as they navigate a

new and unfamiliar environment in the UK and complex structural systems. These can result in “*lots of stress*” and “*confusion*” (S11) all while dealing with a profound sense of “*loss*” (S12). Moreover, from this research it is evident that Afghan participants are very diverse, and their needs and circumstances vary considerably. This was also noted by stakeholders, who discussed differential uptake of their services and/or the need to adjust the starting point of support provision on the basis of gender, educational level, professional experience, literacy, age and English proficiency. Hence stakeholders did not operate under a ‘one-size fits all’ type of provision but instead tailored their services to meet specific needs.

What is working well

- **Direct line between service providers and Resettlement Team:** Partner organisations were very complimentary about the Islington Resettlement Team and highlighted their positive working relationship.
- **Ring-fenced/dedicated funding:** Organisations and schools reported that specific funding for the development of services for resettled people helped them prioritise and/or dedicate time, personnel and resources to address the needs and issues encountered by Afghans.
- **Dedicated, service-specific personnel:** Having specific roles for the support of resettled Afghans allowed organisations to build capacity, gain and develop specific skills or knowledge.
- **Bespoke approach to individual, intersectional needs:** Services developed individualised approaches in working with Afghan individuals and families recognising intersecting, complex circumstances, and differential uptakes of services.

Persistent challenges

- **Structural issues:** Some of the most challenging aspects of resettlement were related to wider socio-economic and political structural systems, beyond the remit of Islington Council. For example, financial hardship due to the rising cost of living and benefit cuts, the housing crisis, protracted and complex immigration

procedures¹, affected Afghans in their resettlement journey and consequently limited, prevented or unnecessarily complicated the provision of support by services.

- **Future funding of the scheme:** As the ARAP and ACRS schemes have now been superseded by the Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP), changing funding instructions may impact on the way resettlement can be managed locally. Funding cuts beyond resettlement were also a challenge, especially when stakeholders collaborated with other specialist organisations, such as immigration providers with no access to legal aid.

Key Findings: Afghans and Syrians longitudinal interviews

I thank wholeheartedly [case worker] because since the beginning he helped us in a lot of issues, not just the procedure, procedural answer with registration or these things, but he motivated me and my family members to look ahead into the long-term prospects of our life, not just making on the short-term gains. So, he has been outstanding (Afghan man).

Housing

- Research participants are grateful to the council for providing them with a secure home; certain challenges persist, especially for larger families, although with the introduction of a greater number of available properties (via LAHF) families' experience of rehousing has been positively affected.
- Afghans had been unaware of challenges rooted in structural conditions related to the UK housing crisis and rental prices; hence, some initially struggled to adjust to life in London, partly due to their high expectations about housing size and availability. As time went on, their perceptions and expectations aligned more with the reality of living in London and were particularly happy with the efforts of the council in providing more suitable accommodation for their needs.

¹ These included general ARAP and ACRS applications processes and potential for family reunion.

- While the council has supported families to move to more suitable properties with the introduction of the LAHF programme, rehousing large families still carries logistical challenges and difficulties around housing availability.

Cost of Living

- Afghans are very grateful to be able to access financial support, although as with other residents in London, the higher cost of living in the city poses a considerable challenge. Moreover, their resettlement coincided also with the rise of living costs and the fuel crises in 2021/2022², which also impacted many other UK households.
- For large Afghan and Syrian families, with many children to support, the financial pressures are especially apparent and a worry to parents, especially when affected by the two-child benefit cap.
- Afghans' future financial security depends upon the opportunity to find well paid employment. However, as indicated below, their experiences of navigating the labour market are quite varied.

Employment

- Findings reveal mixed employment patterns amongst resettled Afghans.
- English language and prior qualifications are key. While some got jobs and are doing well, many struggle to find employment, despite having good skills, because of language.
- Ongoing support with language is crucial to ensure that they can get decent jobs and re-activate their skill sets.
- Many women will also need to work to contribute to the household finances, given high living costs in London. Some women are already working and doing well. Others need more support with language and basic training, especially those with limited prior education in Afghanistan.

² See <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9428/> on rising cost of living and <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9714/> on energy crisis.

Language Learning and Proficiency

I'm also thanking Islington Council that provided for us the programme on Fridays that helps us, that we have learnt a lot the English language from the beginning until now (Afghan woman)

- English language proficiency is not only a significant factor that supports people through their resettlement, education and career re-activation, it is a skill that many participants are eager to learn.
- English proficiency among Afghan and Syrians varies over time. Primary school children and young adults who were highly educated before arriving in the UK tend to pick up the language more quickly. Older generations, particularly men, find it the most challenging. We also noted generational differences in language acquisition amongst Syrians.
- Language emerged as a key contributor to independence, both in terms of participants being able to contact services, addressing their challenges and safely navigating their environment. Thus, continued ESOL provision, and even extended opportunities to enhance participants' language learning, are immensely important.
- While volunteering and employment opportunities would greatly improve both Afghan and Syrian participants' English, they often require a high level of English proficiency from the outset, leading to a catch-22 situation.

Health and Trauma

- Accessing the right support is having a profoundly positive impact on both physical and mental well-being.
- Signposting to appropriate health care, including psychological counselling is clearly important and necessary even years after people arrive in the UK.
- Some people found technology helpful in accessing GP appointments and prescriptions. However, it can be confusing and ineffective for some, particularly when it comes to tele-consultations with doctors.

- Findings show the profound mental health challenges faced by some displaced people. Several Afghans and Syrians described symptoms of persistent stress, depression and anxiety – manifesting in sleep disorders, for example.
- The accounts shared by some of the Syrian interviewees indicate the long-term consequences of such mental health issues.

Schools and Education

I can go and pick up my kid and just talk to them. It's very easy. The school... it's excellent and we are very happy and very proud (Afghan man).

- Overall, families found schools to be welcoming places where teachers were approachable, and their children felt safe and supported.
- Families were satisfied with their children's primary school education and progress. However, Afghan and Syrian participants often struggled to understand the many options and requirements for progressing through secondary school into further education and university. This was particularly challenging for recently arrived teenagers with limited English skills, as they were expected to join the GCSE year groups. A key issue is that students are placed in year groups according to their age rather than their English proficiency. In some cases, this has caused stress and fear of failure.

Social Networks and Making Local Connections

- Despite feeling safe in London, some people feel lonely. The extent to which they made new friends depended in part on language skills and opportunities to meet people.
- According to some of our interviewees, it should not be assumed that all Afghans – both newcomers and previous waves of migrants – will form a 'community' on the basis of their shared national origin.
- Making friends with neighbours seemed to be difficult because of busy lifestyles and lack of common languages as well as perceived cultural differences.
- Young people had opportunities to make new friends through college.

- Organised groups like the Friday women's group are vital for many Afghan women in forging very close, new friendships. Volunteer befrienders were also very important for some families.
- Family reunion has transformed some networks and participants were very grateful that relatives now live nearby. But wider government policy has now reduced these opportunities. For both Afghans and Syrians, on-going worry about close relatives in dangerous situations can have a severe emotional impact and prevent people from really embedding in the UK.

End of the scheme

Last week the caseworker visited our flat and they said that we are settling in, we can solve some problems ourselves. There is no need of being under the resettlement scheme anymore (Afghan woman)

- The heterogeneity of resettled Afghans is reflected in their varied capacity to adjust to the end of the 3-year funded scheme.
- Many have the resources, including language skills, to manage very well without case worker support.
- Some, especially those who do not speak English, will continue to need some bespoke support.
- An example of good practice in Islington's resettlement model is that it utilises the funding available over the three-year period to reduce the risk that families will have to extensively rely on mainstream services once they exit the scheme.

Recommendations

Resettlement

- **Resettlement Team (Islington Council):** Ensure that best practice is codified and standardised within the team and across the council and develop longer-term strategies for continued involvement in resettlement programmes.
- **Islington Council:** Ensure that the in-house staffing capacity adjusts in relation to the scaling-up of the programme.

- **Central Government:** Apply lessons learned from the Afghan resettlement schemes, both in terms of what worked well and potential improvements, to inform and benefit existing and future resettlement programmes.

Housing

- **Islington Council:** Review tenancy agreements and make strategic decisions regarding duration, rent level and type of tenancy.
- **External housing providers:** Work collaboratively with local government and the wider community with regards to refugee resettlement to open up housing opportunities.
- **MHCLG:** Continue/expand LAHF programme to all resettled cohorts under the government's 'safe and legal routes' designation (i.e. UKRS).

Financial stability

- **Central Government:** Remove the child benefit cap, which particularly affected large families. This has now been addressed by the Government, and this limit should be lifted in April 2026.
- **Department for Work and Pensions:** Work together with Job Centres and streamline benefits access and support for those who arrive through resettlement routes, including applying a trauma informed response and learning lessons from the collaboration shown in DHSC's Gaza medical evacuation programme.

Employment

- **iWork (Islington Council):** Ensure that resettled refugees with lower levels of English can access volunteering and work opportunities tailored to their skills.
- **Employers:** Create flexible and part time working opportunities for women to support access to employment whilst supporting work-life balance.
- **Job Centres:** Nominate specific work coaches as Refugee Champions to work collaboratively with resettled cohorts to address the specific barriers experienced by refugees.
- **Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education:** Work collaboratively with accrediting organisations (e.g. Eric-Naric Network and

others) to ensure educational and professional qualifications held by resettled refugees are recognised, to avoid risk of deskilling.

- **Ministry of Defence and Central Government:** Create and secure jobs as well as provide training for resettled refugees who had previously worked collaboratively with the British Government/ armed forces in Afghanistan.

Language

- **Adult Community Learning (Islington Council):** Provide continuing, free ESOL for longer than the current 9 hours per week, as well as complementary opportunities with childcare, as and where necessary. Continue encouraging individuals to take up community-delivered ESOL and social opportunities to support English confidence and learning.
- **College and other education providers:** Provide a variety of aim-specific English classes and ensure that enrolment and courses are tailored to the diverse needs of resettled refugees.
- **Islington Council and local education providers, including London Metropolitan University:** Work collaboratively and create preparatory opportunities for higher education, including scholarships and academic English programmes, aimed at resettled refugees and those with insecure status.
- **Home Office:** Reinstate ESOL per-person payments, which had been available prior to March 2025.

Health

- **Healthcare providers and GP Federation:** Ensure multiple entry points into their services beyond electronic pathways, to facilitate access for people who are not digitally literate.
- **Integrated Care Board:** Ensure that available resettlement funding is claimed and used appropriately to enhance services, lower waiting lists, mitigate against existing pressures and meet the specific needs of resettled individuals.
- **Home Office:** Ensure that funding is available to mitigate pressures on existing services and provide long-term funding packages for individuals requiring support

from statutory services such as Children's and Adult's Social Care beyond their funded resettlement period.

Schools and education

- **Department for Education:** Increase CPD (Continuing Professional Development) funding to schools to deepen educational practices in teaching and supporting students with limited English, limited first language literacy, mental health and/or trauma and EAL (English as Additional Language) learners with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities).
- **Islington Council:** Identify barriers and good practice across Islington schools to develop one model and set of standards, aligned to schools' inclusion policies, to welcome refugee students, support their sense of safety and belonging. This will enable young Afghan students to develop, learn and reach their full potential.
- **Schools:** Promote Borough of Sanctuary and community cohesion between students by raising awareness about the experiences of people seeking sanctuary, combating misinformation and building understanding and empathy within the school community.

Social networks and local living

- **Islington Council and VCS:** Create and lead on befriending/buddy programmes to address isolation and loneliness among resettled refugees.
- **Home Office and Central Government:** End hostile environment policies and messaging, ensuring that the needs and hopes of existing and resettled communities are treated equally. Focus on community development and capacity building.

Immigration

- **Home Office:** Re-open family reunion pathways under existing immigration rules and ensure clear, specific guidelines for potential applicants.
- **Ministry of Defence:** provide clear timelines and casework guidance for determining remaining ARAP and Additional Family Member applications.

End of scheme

- **Resettlement Team (Islington Council):** Continue providing expertise and guidance across the council to ensure that refugees and migrants can access mainstream support where needed, particularly after they have reached the end of their funded resettlement support.
- **Home Office:** Carry out needs assessments at the end of the resettlement period to identify funding pressures and potential gaps in provision once resettled individuals transition to mainstream services.