

# **Afghan migrants in London: accessing support in hostile times**

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## Executive Summary

### About the study

This project, conducted between **January and July 2022**, is funded by the Transformation Fund, and developed by the **Global Diversities and Inequalities (GDI) Research Centre** in partnership with local authorities **Islington Council, Lambeth Council, Haringey Council**, and local charities, including **Afghan Association Paiwand, Afghan Association of London, Migrants' Rights Network and Living Under One Sun**.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has forced thousands to flee their homes. Images of Afghans clinging to planes at Kabul airport, shone a spotlight on the desperation of those trying to flee the new Taliban regime. The British government evacuated approximately 17,000 people from Afghanistan between April and September 2021<sup>1</sup>.

Afghan organisations in the UK quickly mobilised to provide services and resources to support the new arrivals<sup>2</sup>. Despite the UK government's claims to support those seeking to leave Afghanistan, the 'hostile environment' and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 continue to curtail the rights of those seeking asylum in the UK.

Drawing on the experiences of diverse Afghans in London, this project provides valuable data on these important issues and makes recommendations for how services and support could be improved.

Research team: led by **Professor Louise Ryan**, Director of the GDI Research Centre and **Dr María López**, Deputy Director of the GDI Research Centre.

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<sup>1</sup> Walsh, P. and Sumption, M. 2021. Afghan refugees in the UK. Available at: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/afghan-refugees-in-the-uk/>

<sup>2</sup> Mistlin, A. 2021. A thin stretched welcome for Britain's new Afghan arrivals. The Guardian. 28 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/28/a-thin-stretched-welcome-for-britains-new-afghan-arrivals>

**Peer researchers:** Najiba Askari, Khandan Danish, Samiullah Khaillyzada and Farid Fazli.

**Research assistant:** Alessia Dalceggio.

## **Aims and objectives of the study**

Working with Afghan organisations and peer researchers, this study aimed to:

1. Understand the needs of diverse Afghan communities in London.
2. Explore the particular experiences of recently arrived Afghans, especially evacuees.
3. Assess how different agencies and associations are responding to the needs of Afghans and what more needs to be done.

## **Project overview**

Multi-method study:

Interviews, focus groups and walking interviews.

- Ethical approval from London Metropolitan University research ethics committee.
- Participants have been pseudonymised to protect their identity.

## **Afghan participants: sample description**

- **30 Afghan people** took part in the study.
- 20 interviews and 4 walking interviews, 2 focus groups.
- Recruited through the **peer researchers**.
- 56.7% (17) identified as female, and 43.3% (13) identified as male.
- 5 stakeholder interviews.

- 2 directors of migrant organisations and 3 employees of local authorities.

### **Focus groups: sample description**

Conducted face to face at two community organisations, one in South London and one in North London.

#### **Focus group 1:**

Involved only female participants (8) including a peer researcher who provided support with translation when needed.

#### **Focus group 2:**

Involved 7 participants (3 men and 4 women) including 2 peer researchers who supported the setting up of the focus group; no translation was required.

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*On the 15th August I was in Afghanistan, when the Taliban took over the control of Kabul, I was in the city... I tried too many times to go inside the airport, unfortunately the Taliban were firing at the people... So I decided to escape from Kabul, and I was crying when I left my country.*

*(Mirwais)*

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## Key findings

### Evacuation from Kabul airport (Aug 2021)

- **Chaotic situation** at airport “worse than it was seen on TVs” (Liqman).
- Those staying for 2 days outside the **Baron Hotel**, processing centre, mentioned the **lack of any facilities including toilets**.
- People waded through a **canal of filthy water** in search of British soldiers.
- **Desperate efforts were made to get through the crowds** and be processed, despite having the correct documents.
- British authorities were **suspicious of fake emails** and reluctant to accept documents at face value.
- All expressed their gratitude to the British authorities for being evacuated.
- However, many vulnerable people were not evacuated.

### Safety and Security

- Participants raised concerns **about close family**, including wives, children, siblings, aged parents, and friends still in Afghanistan.
- There was particular worry about the safety for those from **ethnic minorities (for example, those of Hazara background), human right activists or whose families** had been connected to the previous political regime or the military.

### UK Hotels

- **‘Bridging hotels’**: mostly central London high end hotels for evacuees.
- **‘Contingency hotels’**: for those who arrived via other routes (including irregular routes) often offer far less support, cheaper and lower quality accommodation than bridging hotels.

- Participants **praised the role of NGOs.**

## Housing

- **Rehousing:** big concern for people in hotels.
- **Lack of transparency and information** from Home Office (HO).
- Several **key informants from local authorities** said that they had identified properties in their boroughs but the **HO had not found families** to take up these properties.
- Several of our participants have now been relocated by the HO from central London hotels to cheaper hotels across the country.
- By summer 2022, almost 10,000 Afghans were still in hotels. In August, the HO started to advise people to find their own rented accommodation<sup>3</sup>.

## Employment

- **Long term residents in London:** had rebuilt successful careers.
  - Many had established successful businesses in London.
  - Many of the second generation had graduated from university and obtained professional jobs in areas like accountancy and law.
- **Among the recent arrivals**, especially those who were still in hotels: general sense of frustration about the slow process in securing the right to work.

## Education and de-skilling

- More than half of our 30 participants were highly educated.
- Education was seen as a **route towards social mobility and economic stability.**

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, D. 2022. Afghan refugees in the UK told to find new homes on Rightmove. The Guardian. 15 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/aug/15/afghan-refugees-in-uk-told-to-find-new-homes-on-rightmove>

- **Educational achievement** was perceived as a marker of success in their own migration experience and for their children.
- Participants were keen to reactivate their careers in Britain but worried about de-skilling.
- This was particularly the case for recently arrived refugees but also women from the established community in London.
- **Language barriers** were identified as a cause in participants' experience of de-skilling.
- Childcare was often a factor in women's access to English language courses.

### Professional Networks

- Lack of professional networks.
- Several Afghan students, who had come to the UK on scholarships, expressed **concerns about their employment prospects** despite gaining qualifications from British institutions.

### Discrimination and Racism in London

- Most participants reported **not having experienced overt racism** in Britain.
- Several **praised the multiculturalism in London**.
- However, some did experience racial comments, microaggressions and what they understood as **structural racism** in the UK.
- Dilaram mentioned stereotyping of Afghan women:

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*When I was saying I am from Afghanistan they were shocked, 'Oh how did you come as an Afghan woman, how did you manage to come to the UK, because I know Afghan women cannot go outside, I know Afghan women cannot go freely everywhere?' [...] whenever people outside the country see you as an Afghan woman they*

*automatically stereotype you.*

*(Dilaram)*

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## **Gender**

Many participants mentioned:

- **Restrictions and violence** against women because of so-called ‘traditional’ values in Afghanistan.
- However, some participants **praised men’s efforts** to adapt to the new situation in the UK.
- Several people highlighted **pockets of resistance** among some more traditional Afghan men in the UK.

## **Generational differences**

Spokespersons from Afghan community organisations summarised the **range of services provided across the generational spectrum:**

- **Saturday schools** for young children.
- **Youth clubs** and sports activities for teenagers.
- **Women’s clubs.**
- Support for those Afghans entering **older age.**

The established Afghan community in London has started to do well. However, the community is diverse. There are specific concerns about Afghans living here without official documents, working cash in hand and living with friends. As a key informant who had worked at the Afghan embassy in London explained:

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*“We don’t know exactly but these are likely to be mostly young, male and single”*

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As the community grows and enters the second-generation other challenges emerge

such as family issues and inter-generational communication.

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*There are some cultural issues... a sort of clash between the families sometimes because the children have grown up here but the parents are the first generation of refugees here so they give a hard time and don't understand each other*  
*(A key informant from an Afghan organisation)*

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## Recommendations

Based on our findings and in conversations with our advisory group and with our Afghan participants at dissemination events, we have developed the following recommendations:

**Government and Security Forces** – need to learn lessons so that mistakes are not repeated in any future evacuations.

**Home Office** – need to increase staffing and reduce bureaucracy to ensure a speedier and more efficient processing of asylum applications.

**Foreign Office and Home Office** – should work quickly with international partner organisations to facilitate safe relocation of those at risk, still inside Afghanistan, including the vulnerable relatives of evacuees.

**Home Office and Local Authorities** – faster and more effective communication and cooperation is needed to ensure the rehousing of thousands still in temporary hotel accommodation.

**Home Office and Job Centres** – should cooperate to deliver better communication regarding Afghans' right to work.

**Statutory Bodies** – should provide appropriate and long-term funding to services for Afghan migrants beyond emergency response.

**Funders** – enable NGOs to provide specialist counselling for victims of trauma including culturally sensitive and appropriate forms of support.

**NGOs and statutory services** – coordinate efforts to assist new waves of arrivals, including undocumented and recent refugees, to access accurate and appropriate information.

**Statutory bodies, local authorities and NGOs** – ensure accurate information to new arrivals regarding the costs of living in and outside London especially in the

context of spiralling energy costs.

**Job Centres, Professional organisations, educational institutions and employment agencies** – to coordinate to provide fast reaccreditation of qualifications and support reemployment of refugees.

**Employers, including Afghan businesses** – provide internships and work experience opportunities for new arrivals.

**Local Authorities and Education Providers** – coordinate school provision for Afghan school children after relocation from bridging hotels.

**Local Authorities working with NGOs** – ensure adequate provision of supplementary support and education to children especially those hit hardest by the disruption of the pandemic and evacuation.

**Local Authorities working with NGOs and specialist services** – provide information about hate crimes/incidents, discrimination, and routes of reporting.

**NGOs and specialist charities** – enhance awareness and address gender-based violence and encourage women to engage in activities outside the home environment.

**Local Authorities, NGOs and statutory services** – work together to address the care and needs of the emerging elderly Afghan population.

## **Background**

The study was conducted by a research team from the Global Diversities and Inequalities (GDI) Research Centre, based at the London Metropolitan University, and four peer researchers from two specialist Afghan organisations, the Afghan Association of London and Paiwand. The research team was led by Professor Louise Ryan, Director of the GDI Research Centre, and Dr María López, Deputy Director of the GDI Research Centre. The peer researchers were Najiba Askari, Khandan Danish, Samiullah Khaillyzada and Farid Fazli. The research assistant was Alessia Dalceggio.

The research was designed in partnership with an advisory board which included members of London's local authorities Islington Council, Lambeth Council and Haringey Council, and four local charities, the Afghan Association of London, Paiwand, Migrants' Rights Network and Living Under One Sun. The research was reviewed and approved by the London Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Committee and was conducted between January 2022 and July 2022. The study was funded by the University's Transformation Fund.

## **Context of the research**

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has forced thousands to flee their homes. In preparation for the drawdown of the UK armed forces from the country, around 15,000 Afghan and British people were evacuated in what was called Operation Pitting. Although the British Government did not publish a breakdown of the figures, it was reported<sup>4</sup> that approximately 5,000 people of those evacuated during the operation were eligible for the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), a scheme aimed at providing relocation and assistance to people who worked with or for the UK government and/or UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan and to vulnerable

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<sup>4</sup> Gower, M. 2022. Commons Library Research Briefing. UK immigration routes for Afghan nationals. House of Commons Library. Published 27 January. Available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9307/>

Afghan nationals. Female politicians, members of the LGBTQ+ community, women's rights activists, and judges<sup>5</sup> were among those who were called forward.

A further separate scheme, the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), was established to resettle Afghan people most at risk of human rights abuse, such as women and girls, members of ethnic and religious minority groups as well as LGBTQ+ individuals. This scheme is being kept under review and aims to resettle up to 20,000 individuals in total.

The Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme has come under criticism for its prioritisation of people already in the UK. The Refugee Council already reported an increase of asylum applications from Afghan people since summer 2021<sup>6</sup>, and multiple stakeholders were concerned that this delay in opening the scheme to people in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, coupled with the absence of other safe/accessible routes, would likely result in people resorting to make unsafe journeys to the UK<sup>7</sup>.

The Home Office provided Afghan people resettled in the UK with emergency 'bridging accommodation'. This type of accommodation was set up mostly in hotels and was meant to be a temporary measure until individuals' needs were assessed and more permanent solutions were organised<sup>8</sup>. However, over one year after the initial cohort of people arrived in the UK, very few people have been provided with permanent accommodation and indeed it is particularly difficult to find accurate figures as to how many people have been rehoused and how many still remain in hotels. During a parliamentary debate on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, the then Minister for Afghan Resettlement, Victoria Atkins, reported that approximately 4,000 individuals had been or were in the process of being moved out of temporary

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<sup>5</sup> Home Office. 2021. Afghanistan resettlement and immigration policy statement. 13 September. para 2. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghanistan-resettlement-and-immigration-policy-statement>. See also Foreign Affairs Committee. 2021. Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan, HC 685, 1 September. Q45; Q54. Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2650/pdf/>.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 1 above.

<sup>7</sup> HC Deb 6 January 2022 c185. Available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-01-06/debates/EF3A7605-F42D-407E-A43B-0570ED67C160/AfghanCitizensResettlementScheme#contribution-A69F445E-FC9A-4366-AB19-F380F14A7033>

<sup>8</sup> Leeds Migration Partnership. Afghan Emergency 'bridging accommodation' – November update. <https://migrationpartnership.org.uk/afghan-emergency-bridging-accommodation-november-update/>

accommodation<sup>9</sup>, leaving approximately 12,000 people still in bridging hotels. Indeed, in August 2022, the Guardian newspaper reported that 9,500 Afghans were still in temporary hotel accommodation<sup>10</sup>.

Meanwhile, Afghan organisations in the UK struggled to cope with the demand for their services and the scarcity of volunteers as well as resources to support new arrivals<sup>11</sup>. Yet, under the UK government's 'hostile environment' policy, the rights of asylum seekers have been severely curtailed. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 further reduces these rights. Moreover, the Government policy of 'off-shoring' people seeking asylum to Rwanda indicates the hardening of immigration policies.

This project aimed at providing valuable data on these issues, drawing on the rich narratives of Afghan people, both recently arrived and more established migrants, as well as the views of key stakeholders. We hope this research will help to inform the strategic planning of migrant organisations, local authorities, and other key stakeholders and service providers.

## **Aims and objectives of the study**

Working with Afghan organisations and peer researchers, this study aimed to:

1. Understand the needs of diverse Afghan communities in London.
2. Explore the experiences of recently arrived Afghans, especially evacuees.
3. Assess how different agencies and associations are responding to the needs of Afghans and what more needs to be done.

## **Research methods and participants**

The research is a multi-method study which included interviews, focus groups and

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>10</sup> Quinn, B. 2022. UK treatment of Afghan refugees 'continues to be source of shame'. The Guardian. 15 August <https://amp.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/aug/15/uk-treatment-of-afghan-refugees-continues-to-be-source-of-shame>

<sup>11</sup>Taylor, D. 2021. UK Councils say they are 'ready to assist' Afghan refugees but lack housing. The Guardian. 28 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/28/uk-councils-ready-to-assist-afghan-refugees-lack-housing>

walking interviews.

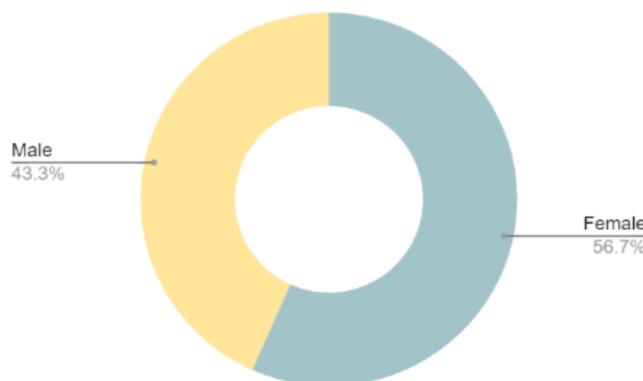
This project received ethical approval from London Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Committee. All participants were given a sheet providing information about the study, the way in which their data were going to be treated and instructions on how to withdraw from the study, should they wish to do so.

Translation was provided where required. All interviews, focus groups and walking interviews were subject to informed consent. All participants have been pseudonymised to protect their identity.

### **Afghan participants sample description**

Overall, thirty Afghan people took part in the study. Most participants were recruited through the peer researchers, and consideration was given to the diversity of the sample in terms of gender, age, family situation and time of arrival.

Just over half (56.7%; N 17) of our participants identified as female, and 43.3% (N 13) identified as male.



*Image 1. Participants' gender*

Route and year of arrival in the UK varied greatly among participants, with just over half (53%; N 16) of our participants having arrived between the years 2020-2021 (i.e., student cohort and recent arrivals). For a detailed discussion on route of arrival please see Key Findings, Section 1. Diverse routes of arrival and immigration barriers.

<b>Participants' route of arrival</b>					
<b>Route</b>	Student	Recent arrival	Previous wave	Marriage	Other
<b>No of participants</b>	4	12	8	5	1

*Table 1. Participants' route of arrival*

## **Interviews**

We conducted twenty interviews with newly arrived and long-established Afghan migrants in London to identify their perceptions and needs. Most interviews were conducted face to face, while eight were conducted online using MS Teams. Some participants who were interviewed individually also took part in focus groups. Furthermore, we conducted four follow-up walking interviews with participants who had all been included in the previous round of interviews. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, fully transcribed, and anonymised to protect confidentiality.

## **Focus groups**

To further understand and capture the diversity and richness of participants' everyday experiences, we carried out two focus groups,. The focus groups were conducted face to face at two community organisations, one in South London and one in North London. The first focus group involved only female participants (N 8), including a peer researcher who provided support with translation as needed. The second focus group involved seven participants (three men and four women) including two peer researchers who supported setting up the focus group. In this focus group no translation was required.

## **Walking interviews**

We conducted four walking interviews with participants who had already taken part in individual interviews. Using a location of their choice as a starting point, these

walking interviews were conducted around the area to understand how participants navigate their local environment, the extent to which they feel a sense of familiarity and belonging in specific places in London and any obstacles they encounter in building local attachments.

## **Follow up emails**

To track any changes in circumstances, over time, we established email contact with all the newly arrived participants within our sample. We are keeping in touch electronically with them, specifically to understand whether they have been or are going to be rehoused. Nearly a year after they first arrived, very few have been rehoused in permanent accommodation and several have been moved to hotels outside London.

## **Stakeholder interviews**

We also conducted five interviews with key stakeholders, including two directors of migrant organisations and three people from different London local authorities. These interviews were all conducted online using MS Teams. The interviews with these key informants were crucial in helping us gain relevant background information and to inform our understanding of the current context, especially the challenges facing recently arrived refugees and the services engaging with them.

## **Working with peer researchers**

Working with peer researchers is a key aspect of participatory research and ethical good practice<sup>12</sup>. That is not to suggest that peer researchers are simply used as cheap labour for data collection purposes. In our project, although we had a tight time frame and limited budget, we sought to work closely with the peer researchers to shape and inform the study. Our four peer researchers were identified and recruited via our two Afghan partner organisations. The peer researchers were

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<sup>12</sup> Ryan, L., Kofman, E., & Aaron, P. 2011. Insiders and outsiders: working with peer researchers in researching Muslim communities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(1), 49-60.

provided with online training, and we had regular communication via WhatsApp and email. Moreover, except for one peer researcher who moved outside London, we met with the peer researchers in person on several occasions, including at the focus groups and some individual interviews, where they provided assistance with translation, as well as during visits to the community organisations and for dissemination events. The peer researchers played a key role in the recruitment of participants. Because two of the peer researchers were recent arrivals, they were well placed to connect us to people in the same cohort, including several who were hotel residents. It is largely due to the endeavours of the four peer researchers that we were able to access such a wide variety of participants, especially those still located in the hotels. In this way, the peer researchers were instrumental in shifting the key focus of the project to include more recently arrived evacuees. We invited the peer researchers to share their reflections with us in this report and two have provided the following as brief summaries of their experiences.

### ***Najiba Askari***

I am writing about my experience of doing research with Afghans in London. It was an interesting job because I met more people and heard their different life experiences in London. Some people experienced a challenging life and some of them were similar to my own life in London.

Actually, after the crisis in Afghanistan, I was looking for a volunteering job in order to take a small part, along with others, to help Afghan refugees. When I heard about this project I sent my CV and after the interview I was very excited for this opportunity to be involved in the research project run by the team from London Metropolitan University.

Therefore, I learned from this project effective communication and management skills. I also had a chance to work and meet experienced researchers and learned how to have good collaboration with colleagues.

Although I did have professional work experience in Afghanistan, since I came to the UK, 5 years ago, I did not do office work or anything similar to this project because of my lack of confidence.

Working as a peer researcher makes me more confident and gives me motivation for other work. It was like a key for a better start. Now, I am more confident about other jobs and familiar with confidentiality, patience and priorities during work. I am also able to manage meetings or other programs on time.

### ***Khandan Danish***

As an Afghan woman who left everything behind and experienced emigration in exile, I knew what it meant to be a refugee. Therefore, I got interested in getting involved in this research with Afghan refugees in London in order to give back my time and expertise to my own community.

I believe my previous experience working with the Afghan community, helped to reach out to relevant Afghan refugees and therefore helped this research project to be more insightful.

In the meantime, being involved in this project, working with a professional research team from London Metropolitan University, has enabled me to transfer my knowledge in a new setting and to develop new skills and knowledge.

## Key Findings

### 1. Diverse routes of arrival and immigration barriers

Among our thirty participants there were many varied routes and periods of arrival. Some of our older interviewees had left Afghanistan in the 1990s when the Taliban first came to power. For example, Ahmad Shah had visited Europe on many occasions for business reasons and after the Taliban came to power, he claimed asylum in the UK in 1998. Since then, he completed a PhD and built up a successful career working with NGOs and with various local authorities in London, specialising in the area of equality and diversity.

We also interviewed participants who arrived via unofficial routes, including both recent and some more long-established residents. Rabiya, her husband, and small son fled Afghanistan in 1997, over land via Tashkent in Uzbekistan, on to Russia and then across Europe via Poland in a journey that took almost one year and relied upon a succession of traffickers. Her story resembles that of one of our most recent arrivals, Sher Shah, a young man who travelled via Iran, Turkey, Greece and then on to France before finally arriving in the UK in the autumn of 2021 when he claimed asylum. In both cases, although separated by over two decades, the participants relied on very expensive people smugglers and took huge risks to seek sanctuary. These accounts indicate the enormous lengths that people are prepared to undertake when fleeing danger<sup>13</sup>.

Four of our participants had arrived in 2020 on prestigious scholarships to study at British universities. These participants had all competed at the highest level of academic achievement to attain these highly coveted opportunities. In all cases, their plan was to complete their Master's degrees and return to their jobs in Afghanistan.

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<sup>13</sup> Kaytaz, E. S. 2016. Afghan journeys to Turkey: narratives of immobility, travel and transformation. *Geopolitics*, 21(2), 284-302.

Of course, these plans were turned upside down when the government collapsed in 2021. Unable to return home, these four had to apply to change their status from student visas to asylum seekers. This process proved slow and complicated. Indeed in at least one case, the student ended up becoming status-less as his student visa expired before his asylum claim was processed. This had serious implications for that man's access to resources including support for his disabled child.

Among our participants, there were also 'marriage migrants'. These five women had entered the UK to marry Afghan men already resident in the country. Begum for example, arrived in 2018 to marry her husband who had already lived in London for over 10 years and was a British citizen. The couple had one son aged two years. Begum, a university graduate, had worked for a large international NGO in Kabul before her marriage. She is now attending English classes and hopes to return to work once her son starts school.

Ten of our participants were recent evacuees who had left Kabul airport in August 2021. Their narratives recounted very similar experiences of the appalling conditions at the airport and around the processing centre at Baron Hotel. These experiences will be discussed in more detail later in this report (see section 2. Evacuation from Kabul August 2021). While the evacuation process was terrifying and chaotic, a notable feature of their accounts is the suddenness of their relocation. The disruption of their lives occurred quickly and unexpectedly as the government collapsed and they were forced to flee at very short notice; within days they found themselves in London. As Nasreen, a young woman, explained: 'suddenly the situation changed, and we just come here and now we are here.' A sign of her unanticipated relocation was the fact that she only brought one bag: 'I just had one bag that was my laptop and that's all, I didn't bring anything with me... My laptop and my phone... I didn't bring my charger!'. The suddenness of their arrival contrasted markedly with the long, slow, protracted journey over land and sea undertaken by those who came via different routes such as Rabiya and Sher Shah, mentioned earlier.

Of course, it would be simplistic to assume that all our participants neatly fitted into specific migration routes and categories. As the experiences of the students mentioned above illustrates, immigration status can change over time in unexpected ways. Some of our participants had travelled back and forth to the UK on numerous

occasions and via different immigration routes. For example, Gulkan originally arrived in London in 2011 for work-related reasons. He later returned to Afghanistan and was again posted back to London with his job in 2017. Gulkan expected to return home, but these plans were suddenly disrupted in 2021 with the rapidly changing political events in Afghanistan. Thus, like the students mentioned earlier, Gulkan had to apply to change his status and suddenly found himself claiming asylum in the UK. Having occupied a high level and respected position in Britain, Gulkan now finds himself immersed in the slow and highly bureaucratic Home Office procedures without any power to expedite the process. Having had his initial Home Office interview in November 2021, he explained: 'I'm telephoning the Home Office every month, up until now [March 2022] ... they say, 'Wait, you have to wait'.

Mirwais had also spent time in the UK in the past. Mirwais and his family had visited Europe regularly for business reasons and had travelled to the UK for holiday on tourist visas. 'I used to come to the United Kingdom several times when I was [working] in Paris. My wife and my kids, they came several times here for a visit, families or holiday.' But now, like many others, Mirwais finds himself in very different circumstances and caught up in the uncertainty of the Home Office system:

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*my expectation was that I have visa when I arrive to the UK, I can apply for family reunion to bring my kids, they are depending to me. So since six months I'm here, I stop in a hotel in South London, honestly speaking, I am an asylum-seeker now.*

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Because of their concerns about the safety of their families in Afghanistan, many of our participants were desperately pursuing ways to bring relatives to the UK. Nasreen was especially concerned about the security of her sister, who had been a sportswoman in Afghanistan: 'my family are also worried about her because it's hard for a girl if the Taliban know her that she was a sports woman... the news said that Taliban are kidnapped many women. The last week 29 women just gone.'

Our data show the diversity of routes that Afghan people have taken to come to the UK over more than 20 years. Our findings illustrate how people's experiences and opportunities are shaped by the wider political context and events that operate beyond their control. These findings also show how circumstances can change

suddenly, in unexpected ways, with consequences for immigration routes. Even those who had previously held secure roles and immigration status can find themselves plunged into new and unfamiliar situations as they navigate complex, slow, bureaucratic processes. Beyond the participants themselves, it is also apparent that immigration barriers are having serious implications on family reunion and causing untold stress and anxiety. Despite their deep concerns about the safety of close relatives, including wives, siblings and parents, participants are struggling to navigate the immigration regulations to achieve family reunion in the UK. Hence, there is urgent need to ensure that proper legal advice is available to help support people through the complex maze of immigration regulations.

## **2. Evacuation from Kabul August 2021**

We interviewed a significant number of people who had been part of the recent evacuation from Kabul Airport in August 2021. A common theme among our participants was the speed with which their 'normal lives' in Afghanistan had suddenly fallen apart when the Taliban seized power in the summer of 2021. As Liqman, a male evacuee, stated:

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*I myself didn't expect that this thing, this kind of situation ... we didn't think that after 20 years everything would be collapsed, organisations, governments, everything would collapse and we would be forced to leave Afghanistan.*

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All the evacuees described the chaotic situation at Kabul airport. As Liqman emphasised: 'It was I think many, many times worse than it was seen on TVs'.

Nasreen, who was accompanying her elderly grandmother, described 'there was a lot of people, and everyone was pushing each other'. Ebraheem, who went to the airport with his wife and young children, including a baby, became so fearful for their safety in the crowds that he advised his wife to return home:

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*Look at this crowd, if we go further or go forward how do you feel, this little daughter will die, maybe the crowd will come*

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*together and press her, and she will die.’ I told her, ‘Go back home with my father and after that I will see what will happen.*

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In the end Ebraheem was evacuated without his wife and children who still remain in Afghanistan.

Participants recounted waiting in the crowds outside the processing centre at the Baron Hotel for several days. The conditions were atrocious and many of our interviewees described being without food and water. Liqman recounted:

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*the British Army were providing some bottles of water but that was very rare, it was not enough, just they were throwing them to the crowd and everybody who are more stronger or taller they could catch it, all people couldn't catch it.*

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Liqman, who waited for two days and two nights outside the Baron Hotel with his young wife, mentioned the total lack of any facilities such as toilets: ‘the most difficult thing was that there was no toilet for two days, especially it was really difficult for women, it was terrible’.

For those participants who waited in the queue with young children, the situation was especially difficult. Baseerah, her husband and four young children soon ran out of the little provisions they had brought with them: ‘just sleeping on the ground with very warm weather and also lots of flies... just lying on the grass for two nights without proper food’.

Moreover, several participants reported hearing gun fire close by and were fearful of being hit in the crossfire. Baseerah explained ‘there was a lot of gunfire’ and the children were terrified because of ‘continuous gunfire and shots.’ Similarly, Liqman reported that people near him in the queue were shot: ‘I have seen two people that have been injured because of bullets’.

As well as the appalling conditions, people were also very worried about getting processed in time before the situation deteriorated even further. Despite having the correct documents, there seemed no guarantees about getting through to the airport. Several participants told us about their desperate efforts to get through the crowds

and be processed. For example, Ebraheem described how he waded through a canal of filthy water trying to find British soldiers:

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*there is a big dirty water and I put myself there and I ask for the army, the British Army. They answer me 'no' they are Americans. I go forward and ask from the next soldiers, 'Are you British?' They said, 'No, we are German'. At the end there were British soldiers ... I came to them at 7pm, they said to me, 'You should wait for tomorrow at 8am', and one night I was in that water...I showed my email to them, and they took me out from that and said, 'You go'.*

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Some participants told us that the British authorities were suspicious of fake emails and thus were reluctant to accept documents at face value. Malala, a young woman, recounted: 'they couldn't trust our email document, because they say that, "Everyone has it and it's fake"'. Malala also told us about her desperate efforts to get through to the British authorities. Having waded through the filthy canal for four hours shouting out for soldiers to accept her documents, Malala finally found two female British soldiers who were willing to listen to her: 'they helped me, they found me inside the water, where I stood, and then I handed her my email, and then she noticed and checked my sisters' name, and then we were allowed to get in'.

All our participants were immensely relieved to be evacuated and expressed their gratitude to the British authorities: 'I'm really thankful of this British Government because they brought us from that bad situation' (Nasreen). Nonetheless, there was also a view that many vulnerable people had not been evacuated: 'many other people who deserve to be evacuated, they were left behind' (Malala).

Overall, there was general agreement that the evacuation process was precarious and having the right connections was often a key factor in negotiating safe exit from the country. As a key informant from a local authority noted: 'the emphasis on the connection with the British that was used to organise the evacuation doesn't map onto any of the international instruments that determine who should be getting protection'.

Abubakar explained how his evacuation was made possible by a connection with a British official who helped him to get all the necessary documents. Similarly, when

Malala finally managed to get into the airport, she had to draw upon her connections to influential British people, including a well-known journalist: 'they interviewed me, and they also called [journalist's name] and the British Embassy in London...they called, and they approved that we were eligible to come'. By contrast, Malala recounted the situation of an Afghan policewoman, who was at risk from the Taliban, but who lacked any influential connections and was denied the opportunity to be evacuated.

Participants described the overwhelming sense of relief when they finally got on the planes to leave Kabul. However, their emotions were very mixed as they considered those left behind: 'It was kind of joy that I was safe, and it was really sad that I leave my country behind, a lot of friends behind' (Malala). Moreover, having never been to Britain and not having expected to suddenly relocate to this country, people had absolutely no idea what to expect upon arrival.

However, among our diverse sample of participants, we also heard accounts of those who were unable to be evacuated on time from Kabul airport. Zaman explained that his brother, a senior Afghan army officer, who had the correct documents, tried on several occasions to reach the airport, with his wife and children, but could not get through the crowds before the evacuation process was terminated. That brother is now in hiding in Afghanistan and Zaman is fearful for his safety. Similarly, Mirwais had not managed to get to the airport and was forced to leave Afghanistan via another route:

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*On the 15<sup>th</sup> August I was in Afghanistan, when the Taliban took over the control of Kabul, I was in the city ... I tried too many times to go inside the airport, unfortunately the Taliban were firing at the people...So I decided to escape from Kabul, and I was crying when I left my country. So when someone is leaving his home, so I was walking along the borders to Pakistan, so I entered Pakistan.*

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It is apparent that the evacuation was hurriedly arranged and chaotic, with a lack of basic provisions including water and toilets. Our findings confirm other sources by indicating there was insufficient personnel on the ground to process the huge

numbers who sought to leave<sup>14</sup>. It is equally apparent that not all those who were most at risk have been successfully evacuated. Our data suggest that knowing ‘the right people’, having good connections, was a factor in ensuring safe transit out of Kabul airport. It is necessary that lessons are learned by government departments and that any future evacuations from any other country does not repeat the same mistakes.

### **3. Bridging and Contingency Hotels**

Many of our participants have lived in ‘bridging hotels’ in/near London for over one year and we are keeping in touch with them via email to monitor any changes. Those who arrived in the evacuation from Kabul Airport in August 2021 had to self-isolate for 2 weeks in ‘quarantine hotels’ before they were moved to bridging hotels. We also interviewed people who arrived via other routes (including unofficial routes) and were accommodated in ‘contingency hotels’, often cheaper and lower quality accommodation than bridging hotels, that also offered far less support.

It has become apparent that the UK government has accommodated Afghans in two very different kinds of hotels depending on their routes of arrival. While people who arrived through cross-Channel migration were accommodated in contingency hotels, those evacuated from Kabul airport in 2021, and who are going through the resettlement process, were accommodated in mainly ‘high end’ hotels, including five stars ones. One of our key informants from a local authority suggested that these processes have created ‘two types of Afghans’ when, in reality, there is no difference between them: ‘while those living in bridging hotels will be allowed to work and claim benefits... the others are stuck in limbo, in a hotel where meals are provided with £8 a week’<sup>15</sup>.

On the positive side, most participants in bridging hotels expressed their gratitude to British authorities for providing accommodation to refugees in comfortable hotels in

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<sup>14</sup> House of Common Foreign Affair Committee. 2022. Missing in action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Published 24 May. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmfaff/169/report.html>

<sup>15</sup> A similar situation was previously noted in relation to Syrian refugees who arrived via different routes, see Karyotis, G., Mulvey, G. & D. Skleparis. 2021. Young Syrian refugees in the UK: a two-tier system of international protection? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47:3, 481-500

nice and secure areas in London. Abubakar for example, praised the British government for providing Afghan refugees with lots of facilities, in five stars hotels at no cost. To him, 'we have everything. The food is very best, lunch, the dinner, and the breakfast'.

Several participants praised the role of NGOs in promptly mobilising to assist and advise new arrivals. Baseerah, a mother of four young children, who has limited English language proficiency skills, praised the work of Afghan organisations for providing interpreting skills when reading emails, making GP and school appointments, organising meetings with the Home Office and with the Job Centre, and providing advice on their application to Universal Credit. Hamida, who has two children, praised the work of Hopscotch in organising swimming training programmes, English language courses and a kid's playgroup for Afghan refugees in the hotels: 'this organisation is working brilliant'. On visiting the hotels, we observed many such NGOs, including Afghan organisations, running advice sessions in the bridging hotels. By contrast, one participant in a contingency hotel, Sher Shah, told us he had no access to any such forms of information and support.

For those participants in hotels, their main concern was the long waiting times and complete lack of information about their legal status and the resettlement process timescale. Our interviewees were not aware of when and where they would be relocated. Some participants explained how the lack of information exacerbated their anxiety. Participants were concerned that they would be moved around the country from one hotel to another at short notice, and that children's schooling would be disrupted. This concerns proved to be well founded. Through follow up emails, during the summer of 2022, we found that some of our interviewees had been moved to hotels outside London at short notice. Such was the case for Sher Shah, who was suddenly informed by the Home Office that he would be moved to another hotel outside London. Liloma and Mirwais have also been moved to hotels outside the capital. Moving around the country from one hotel to another, at short notice, disrupted study and work plans.

Although participants were very grateful for the hotel accommodations, some expressed concerns about the lack of space for children to play. As a result, other residents complained that children were running around and making noise. Some

complained about the lack of privacy for families at the hotels. Hamida, who is studying to complete her medical studies, noted the lack of facilities in the hotels: 'I can't study in the bedroom. My husband is here, the children are coming'.

One key informant from an Afghan organisation said that some people, particularly those who had enjoyed relatively privileged lives in Afghanistan, were embarrassed to ask for information or make use of the facilities provided at the hotels: 'and as a result, they missed a lot of opportunities and lots of benefits. And now they are in a stage that they have run out of everything'.

Several participants, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds, described some negative experiences in the hotels. One Hazara woman told us that other Afghans in the hotel had been rude to her and called her 'Chinese'. She had raised this complaint with the hotel authorities and the local council had sought to address some ethnic tensions between Afghan residents in the hotel.

Despite expressing their gratitude to the British authorities for hosting them in hotels, our participants emphasized three main concerns. First, the long waiting times and total lack of information about their legal status and the timescale for resettlement; this would require more transparent communication from the Home Office to avoid uncertainty and some tensions at the hotels. Second, the need to provide proper spaces and activities for children. Third, to address some instances of ethnic tensions between Afghans in hotels, there is the need to engage those groups in common activities to get to know each other better.

#### **4. Immigration Status**

For participants who were awaiting immigration decisions, the main concern was the complete lack of information about their legal status and the long delays in the resettlement process timescale. Our interviewees were not aware of when their status would be confirmed and, as discussed in Section 6 Employment, this had serious consequences for their rights to work, but also heavily impacted on participants' mental health and wellbeing.

For instance, Liqman reported not receiving information about issues related to financial support, and that there were considerable delays between registration and

activation of Universal Credit or receiving the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) card (respectively five weeks and two months). Liqman highlighted that such lack of information does not allow refugees to make any plan: ‘We don’t know what will happen tomorrow... so I cannot plan for anything’.

As illustrated in previous sections, our data show the diversity of routes that Afghan people have taken to come to the UK. Besides those directly evacuated from Kabul airport in 2021, we also interviewed people who arrived via other routes, including unofficial ones. For example, Sher Shah, a 24-year-old man, unable to be evacuated, paid traffickers to travel from Afghanistan via Turkey and Greece, on to the ‘Jungle’ in Calais and then by sea to Britain. Arriving on British soil he sought out a police station, claimed asylum and was promptly arrested. Because of the current situation in Afghanistan, the UK government has paused deportations, so Sher Shah was eventually moved to a contingency hotel.

As noted by several of our key informants, the government has accommodated recently arrived Afghans in two very different kinds of hotels depending on their routes of arrival. While evacuees from Kabul airport were accommodated in mainly ‘high end’ hotels, Afghans who arrived around the same time through cross-Channel migration, like Sher Shah, were accommodated in cheaper contingency hotels. The difference in treatment is not simply about the type of accommodation. We also noted that while extensive support systems have been put in place for evacuees in bridging hotels, there is little or no support provided in the contingency hotels.

One of our key informants from a local authority emphasised that these processes have created ‘two types of Afghans’ and ‘a completely artificial, false distinction’ based on route of arrival in the UK when, in fact, there is no difference between these people who are fleeing the same situation at the same time.

As mentioned previously, our findings illustrate how people’s experiences and opportunities are shaped by the wider political context and events that operate beyond their control; these circumstances can change suddenly, in unexpected ways, with consequences for immigration routes. Even those who had previously held secure roles with specific immigration statuses, can find themselves plunged into new and unfamiliar situations as they navigate complex, slow, bureaucratic

processes.

Four of our participants had arrived in 2020 on student visas to attend British universities on prestigious scholarships. These participants had all competed at the highest level of academic achievement and were planning to return to their jobs in Afghanistan once they had completed their Master's degrees. With the government's collapse in 2021, these plans were turned upside down. Unable to return home, these four had to apply to change their status from student visas to asylum seekers. Those who had arrived on student visas were outside of the hotel settings and all faced serious difficulties with accommodation. Dilaram had arrived in the UK in September 2020 and since then she has been living in the university students' accommodation. However, the university can only provide accommodation to her until the end of her visa or when she graduates: 'I cannot get an accommodation outside because it is costly, and I don't have a valid visa. No one can give me a contract for a house'. Dilaram faces an uncertain future as her status is not yet clarified and, having completed her studies she needs to leave the university halls of residence, but she is unable to access private rented accommodation.

Of course, not all our participants neatly fitted into specific migration routes and categories. As the experiences of the students mentioned above illustrates, immigration status can change over time in unexpected ways.

Some of our participants had travelled back and forth to the UK on numerous occasions and via different immigration routes. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, Gulkan originally arrived in London in 2011 for work-related reasons. He later returned to Afghanistan and was again posted back to London with his job in 2017. He expected to return home, but these plans were suddenly disrupted in 2021 with the rapidly changing political events in Afghanistan. Thus, like the students mentioned earlier, Gulkan had to apply to change his status and suddenly found himself claiming asylum in the UK. Having occupied a high level and respected position in Britain, Gulkan now finds himself immersed in the slow and highly bureaucratic Home Office procedures without any power to expedite the process.

Mirwais had also spent time in the UK in the past. Mirwais and his family had visited Europe regularly for business reasons and had travelled to the UK for holiday on

tourist visas. 'So, I used to come to the United Kingdom several times when I was [working] in Paris. My wife and my kids, they came several times here for a visit, families or holiday.' Yet now, like many others, Mirwais finds himself in very different circumstances and caught up in the uncertainty of the Home Office systems:

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*my expectation was that I have visa when I arrive to the UK, I can apply for family reunion to bring my kids, they are depending to me. So since six months I'm here, I stop in a hotel in South London, honestly speaking, I am an asylum-seeker now.*

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Our findings show how diverse groups of Afghans, including evacuees, those arriving via unofficial routes, but also those who were already in the UK on student or work visas, are now immersed in slow and complex bureaucratic processes to secure their status. Waiting many months to receive information from the Home Office is not only causing stress and anxiety but also impacts on their housing, right to work and education. There is a need for more open and transparent communication from the Home Office about the status of immigration applications. Staffing issues at the Home Office need to be addressed to make the process speedier and more efficient.

## **5. Rehousing**

Apart from securing their immigration status, another big concern for people in hotels was rehousing. Participants, who have lived in bridging hotels for almost a year, complained about the lack of transparency and information from the Home Office about when and where they might be re-housed. Liloma told us: 'When we asked them how long we should wait for a house and other information they always tell us, "We don't know. Just wait and we'll let you know ... but still none of us know about the future'. Another participant, Hamida, said that the Home Office had stated simply there were not enough properties in London for all families.

A key informant from a local authority, explained that the Home Office asked all the London boroughs to get involved in the resettlement process of Afghan families:

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*Someone else in our team would say to the Home Office, “We have this property,” and the Home Office would come back and say, “We have this family.” And that’s the point that we get involved.*

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However, she explained that in reality the inefficient administration of cases was slowing down the process. That local authority had identified several properties in their borough but, so far, the Home Office had not found families to take up all these properties. A key informant from another local authority stated: ‘our Council has taken on an additional housing officer to try and speed up communication and processes of getting people settled’. Another key informant from a different local authority described similar delays in receiving families; even though they had identified some available properties in the borough, the Home Office had not allocated families to take up these vacancies, which resulted in the council losing money on those properties.

Many of our key informants and interviewees pointed to under-staffing at the Home Office as hampering the re-housing process. While some Home Office personnel were described as helpful, it was apparent that they were overburdened and struggling to cope with the pressures of the system. One key informant described the Home Office pace as ‘glacial’ and complained about complex bureaucratic processes and lack of clear channels of communication. Several key informants stated that the Home Office did not communicate regularly and sufficiently with the local authorities, an issue which further exacerbated the rehousing process.

For hotel residents, especially those with children, waiting in hotels for months on end was becoming exasperating. Baseerah expressed her fear that the Home Office would keep families in hotels ‘for one more year’. During a dissemination event in July 2022, we met up with Malala, who informed us that she and her sisters were still in their hotel, almost a year after their evacuation. In follow up emails in August 2022, Malala informed us that the HO had instructed her to find her own privately rented accommodation<sup>16</sup>. It seems that after one year, the HO is now attempting to move people out of hotels and into the private sector.

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<sup>16</sup> This point has been also reported in the Guardian newspaper, see <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/aug/15/afghan-refugees-in-uk-told-to-find-new-homes-on-rightmove>

The lack of information and the possibility to be relocated anytime and anywhere in the UK was upsetting many participants. For example, Liqman, who was living in a hotel room with his pregnant wife, heard from the Home Office that they may be relocated to other hotels in Aberdeen, Leeds or Manchester because London hotels were very expensive. Indeed, his fears proved to be well founded because, when we followed up with Liqman by email in August 2022, he and his family had been moved to a hotel outside London.

Many participants wanted to stay in London and close to their current hotels, if possible, because of wider networks of relatives or friends or a general sense of Afghan communities in the city. For example, Nasreen notified the Home Office that she preferred to stay in London because she wants to live near her 90 years old grandmother, who is a long-term resident of the city. Although they had wished to stay in the London area, in follow up emails, we found that one participant, Hamida, and her family, finally had been rehoused in a flat in Yorkshire. Even those who expressed their willingness to move outside the city, seemed to be still waiting months and months for relocation. Such is the case with Baseerah, who expressed her preference to the Home Office to relocate in Manchester, where she and her husband have extended family and friends.

Spending almost one year in a hotel in central London had also given some participants expectations about what life in Britain was really like. For example, Malala told us that families who had a 'very fancy home in Afghanistan were expecting the same kind here'. In our interviews, we also noticed that most of the hotel residents had not travelled outside of central London and so had no sense of how most ordinary residents actually lived. We heard some anecdotal evidence from interviewees that a few families were unhappy with the accommodation offered, because it was in outer London boroughs, in unfamiliar areas, not close to their hotels, or did not conform to their expectations, and so had declined the housing offer. We also heard from some key informants in local authorities that some families were expressing a preference for particular kinds of accommodation based on what they were used to in Afghanistan. We cannot verify the frequency of this occurrence, but this may partly explain some of the delays in matching families and properties.

One of our key informants from a local authority highlighted that the lack information

shared with the families may create a high level of expectation leading to disappointment. By the time local caseworkers meet with them, the Afghan families are often surprised and unprepared:

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*It's not what they've been told. It's not what they've been advised...  
They're not prepared for the abundance of paperwork... even when  
we're trying to be slow and clear with interpretation.*

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In this respect Ebraheem, who was trying to bring his wife and children from Afghanistan, expressed his confusion about the whole relocation process. He explained that the Home Office told him that he was moving to a house by himself, but he moved to a shared flat with two other men. The lack of privacy exacerbated his diagnosed anxiety: 'I faced some difficulties that I cannot share with my family because they are not here'. Later, he emailed us to say that he moved from that accommodation to a rented house with Afghans friends. He moved in search of a cheaper accommodation in a town in the Midlands where he could find a job and send money to his family in Afghanistan. Hence, we believe it is very important to follow up our participants as they move out of the hotels to see how they are coping with life in ordinary society.

Indeed, interviewing people in hotels, we often observed that they were not well prepared for the reality of living in a city as expensive as London. For example, when interviewing Baseerah in her hotel room, she was very positive about how easy life seemed in London and in the UK generally. Currently, Baseerah and her husband are learning English. As mentioned previously, they have four young children. Baseerah's husband is looking for a job but feels that he will not be successful until his English improves, and they are currently receiving Universal Credit. It is hard to imagine how they would manage financially to support themselves if moved to a flat in London, especially in the current context of the spiralling cost of living.

Our findings highlight the lack of transparency and information from the Home Office about when Afghans might move out from hotels and the anxiety this situation is causing. This has been a hugely expensive programme with little to show at the end of one year. By August 2022, almost 10,000 Afghans were still in hotels awaiting re-

housing<sup>17</sup>. There is a need for more transparent and regular communication from the Home Office to avoid uncertainty, tension, and false expectations among people, as well as improved communication between the Home Office and Local Authorities to identify suitable properties and speed up the process of allocation. It is also important to inform people about the various areas and types of houses available to them, especially outside central London, as well as the reality of living in the capital; this would ensure that current hotel residents are better prepared for the reality of high living costs, especially in the context of current cost of living crisis, soaring energy prices and rising inflation rates.

## 6. Employment

The employment picture among our participants was quite varied. Some of the long-term residents in London had rebuilt successful careers and were thriving. A key informant told us that Afghans were hard working, and many had established flourishing businesses in London. Moreover, we were told about many of the second generation, the children of Afghan migrants, who had graduated from university and obtained professional jobs in areas like accountancy and law. However, our rich data show a range of diverse experiences.

Among the recent arrivals, especially those who were still in hotels, there appeared to be confusion about their rights to work. Ebraheem, as noted in the previous section, was one of the few participants who had been rehoused from a hotel. However, he described his ongoing difficulties in getting a job: 'I wash two days non-stop dishes in a restaurant, they said, "You have insurance number, you have a bank account, but we cannot pay. Why? Because you don't have proper documents"'. There was a general sense of frustration about the slow process in securing the right to work, as Ebraheem explained:

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*I have done a biometric and still waiting for documents. So I don't receive any other call from the Home Office about the documents or*

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<sup>17</sup> Burke, D. 2022. Nearly 10,000 who fled Afghanistan a year ago living in 'unsuitable and unsafe' hotel rooms. 14 August. Mirror. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/nearly-10000-who-fled-afghanistan-27738326>

*requirements, I'm just waiting for them. But I have biometric, and they filled the form for me for permanent residency.*

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Similarly, Nasreen had several interviews for café and hotel jobs but the lack of clarity about her right to work was a recurring problem:

*The Home Office said "you're allowed". Also we have got a letter that state that "you are allowed to work, to study" ... But when we are going for a job, in the middle of the interview they want like ID number or something, reference number or something but we do not have that. They are saying that without that "we cannot give you a job, we cannot hire you".*

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Although Nasreen has a national insurance number, she had not yet received her Biometrics Residence Permit (BRP). Many participants were frustrated by how slow the Home Office was in processing employment rights. Although many people had their biometrics interviews, there seemed to be a long delay before their status was confirmed and hence there was confusion about their right to work.

Nonetheless, even though participants' right to work was unclear, many told us that Job Centres were putting them under pressure to look for work. Ebraheem said:

*every time the Job Centre are giving us lot of appointments and they are telling us that, "Why you don't find the jobs?" We are answering that we are looking for a job.*

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Baseerah and Liqman also complained about Job Centres: Baseerah stated that the Job Centre was not actually helping her husband to find work, while Liqman complained about being constantly invited to various appointments, sometimes several times per week. His wife, who was heavily pregnant, was also continually being called by the Job Centre, although she was unable to work at that time.

Most of our participants were highly qualified and had professional jobs in Afghanistan. They were keen to work and reactivate their careers in Britain but were very worried about de-skilling. Abubakar, who held a senior government post in Afghanistan, recounted some advice he received from friends in London:

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*they told me “Don’t work in the Pizza Hut” and minicab in the Uber, “you should work with the government or in the charity”, like this kind of project.*

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However, despite being multi-lingual, he was worried that his lack of English proficiency would limit his career options in Britain: ‘I can improve my English because my English is a little bit weak. I will improve my English, but I can speak Pashto, Urdu, Dari, a little Arabic’.

Zaman was a qualified doctor with many years of experience in Afghanistan. He had arrived in Britain in 2020 to pursue a master’s degree. Having arrived on a student visa, he was now applying for asylum. He was deeply concerned that his career was now over, and he would never be able to work as a doctor: ‘You know medicine is seven years in Afghanistan... I got specialisation, which is three years, that’s 10 years. I got a degree and PhD two years, so it was 12 years... But here, I’m nothing... I think I am lost here, yes’.

Another qualified doctor, Rabiya, had been in London since the early 2000s, but during that time she had not managed to restart her medical career:

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*I’m looking now for job for healthcare assistant or for phlebotomy, to take blood samples... quite an easy job... No, I couldn’t find jobs. I study a lot but I couldn’t pass my English STAT exam. This was my problem, I finish ESOL level two and then functional English, then I did try to get pass STAT exam, I couldn’t pass the exam.*

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Rabiya emphasised English language fluency as the key stumbling block in restarting her career and differentiated between everyday English and professional English: ‘If you want to learn simple English to talk with people everyday life, it’s easy, yeah, but, academic language, I have to know academic language. It’s very hard’.

Among our participants we also interviewed several Afghan young people in their 20s, who were studying at London universities. Despite gaining qualifications from British institutions, they expressed some concerns about their employment

prospects. One issue raised was a lack of professional networks. Shabnam, a recent law graduate, observed: 'I have also seen people, I have applied with people for some positions where they had connections and I didn't have, so they get the job.'

Another issue raised by these young graduates was negative stereotypes of Afghans, especially Afghan women. Dilaram explained:

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*Like if you were Afghan you were definitely involved with terrorist activity... so obviously like if you're an Afghan definitely... a little bit of a label, so your CV is at the bottom because it disadvantages you because of the background that you have, the background that you came from. And another thing, so if you're an Afghan woman for example, there's always have been like things about Afghan women, ok, we may face some problems because in terms of courage, in terms of commitment, in terms of freedom of movement.*

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In other words, Dilaram perceived a prejudice among some employers that Afghan women would not make good workers because of so-called 'traditional' values, especially concerning their freedom of movement to travel around for work meetings.

Overall, among many of our recently arrived participants, including those in hotels and those who had arrived via student routes, there was a sense of having to start their careers from scratch. Baryal, who graduated from a British university and also had experience working for international organisations in Afghanistan, stated: 'when you come to the UK you have to start from scratch, like working from very starting positions'. This point was echoed by Hamida, an evacuee: 'we are starting from zero here'.

Therefore, we can highlight three key issues. First, the need to clarify and expedite the right to work for recently arrived Afghans; this would also require better coordination between the Home Office and Job Centres to avoid persistent confusion. Second, there is a need to provide mentoring, advice and networking opportunities for people to enhance their chances of securing professional jobs commensurate with their qualifications. Third, English language proficiency is clearly a priority. It is apparent that people are held back from realising their true potential,

including longer term residents, especially women, and thus better support around language development is needed.

## 7. Education

More than half of our thirty participants, both from the older generation and new arrivals, were highly educated. Many participants had studied at university level, either in Afghanistan or in other countries, such as Russia, Poland, and Iraq while for others education opportunities had provided them with the possibility to come to the UK (see section 1. Diverse routes of arrivals and immigration barriers). Despite the generally highly educated profile of our participants it was noted that many who had been living in the UK for longer, including several women, had experienced de-skilling and were unable to practice their profession (see section 6. Employment).

Participants who had not had the chance to gain an education in Afghanistan or in other countries, emphasised their children's educational success in the UK and were most proud of their achievements<sup>18</sup>. For many people, education was seen as a way towards social mobility and economic stability, and educational achievement was perceived as a marker of success in their own migration experience. Witnessing their children thriving in their new environment made the (often) difficult migration journeys and the sacrifices associated with them worthwhile, a theme that is reflected in wider migration literature, and that was also highlighted by Ahmad Shah:

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*their children do very well. Because of the fact that the vast majority of Afghans have been deprived themselves from proper education back home ... when they come here they can see the value of education for their children ... So, second generation Afghans are successful, I would say, and they're doing very well at schools, very talented. And one of reasons probably is the fact that their parents are pushing. Because they have been deprived themselves, they want to make up for that by bringing up their children properly, sending them to good schools and all that.*

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In some cases, migration, education, and safety were closely linked. Ghorzang for example, sent his children to the UK first, not only to remove them from risks in

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<sup>18</sup> See also Gladwell, C. 2021. The impact of educational achievement on the integration and wellbeing of Afghan refugee youth in the UK, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47:21, 4914-4936, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2020.1724424](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1724424)

Afghanistan, but also to provide them with opportunities which would allow them to improve their situation and in turn help their family:

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*And before ... I came to this country I sent my children, they got their education. This country gave them education. They have now very good jobs. Their income is quite good, and by the help of them, then following we could come, we could manage to come to this country as well.*

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For newcomers, access to education and particularly to English provision was crucial to restart their career or gaining new additional qualifications. Zaman's wife for example was keen to get involved in business, however she first needed her English qualifications. As she was dependent on her husband's status, she was not yet eligible for English classes, a fact that seemed to cause some frustration for both, as explained by Zaman:

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*...always she is asking me when she can go to English classes but still she is not eligible going to the school, to classes, English classes ... She, I already told you, that she depends on me, her status is dependent on me. Yeah, it is [stressful].*

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Many of the new arrivals were enrolled on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, and could also access college, although the process was not always clearly explained and left people confused as to which provision they could access. This was the case for Liloma, who had wanted to start college as soon as possible but was told she had to wait. By the time she received the go ahead, Liloma had missed the deadline and had to wait until the following semester. It was also noted that there was great variety in the educational needs of new arrivals. Although English language was a clear priority for many people, some recently arrived people spoke fluent English. These participants, usually younger generations, had learned English in Afghanistan, for example at the American University, and were looking for different development opportunities which were not being considered by the government and the support services, as Shabnam commented:

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*Like all of us don't need a course for English right now ... it would be nice to have a survey maybe and see where everyone are right now and then try to come up with [something] based on their needs.*

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Another concern for new arrivals was settling children into schools. For participants who were living in hotels, this process had been managed and organised for them by local authorities. Our key informants and parent interviewees agreed that the process of assigning children to schools had gone smoothly. Nonetheless, this process was not entirely without challenges. Baseerah, a mother of four, explained that her two school-age children had been assigned to a school that was far away from the hotel and required them to take the bus, while her other two children were assigned to a nearby nursery that could be reached on foot. This meant that she and her husband had to share school runs in different locations, as well as fit them around their own ESOL course schedules.

Henceforth, the availability of school places is likely to become an issue. Two of our stakeholders explained how initially it had been easy to find availability in schools because the numbers of people being rehoused in specific boroughs were still very low. Nonetheless, it was noted that if the numbers of people being moved to certain areas increased quickly, schools might need to apply waiting lists. Furthermore, as people are starting to be moved out of hotels and rehoused in other areas, or outside of London, children will need to be transferred to different schools.

On a positive note, children were generally recognised to be easily adaptable, and most parents reported that their children were happy and had settled well into school. The process of settling in was easier for those who already spoke some English or who had studied the language in Afghanistan, as Zaman commented:

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*[My children] they are very good, even more than my expectation. When I was in Afghanistan they were going in a good quality school, their lessons were in English and they used to study in English and this is why it was a bit easy for them to integrate.*

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In contrast, for children who did not speak English, like Yosra's children, schools adopted creative solutions to help them participate in school life:

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*Especially for my children it was very hard ... because they didn't know English. That was very hard as well for, I remember for my son, [he] talk[ed] after four months in school ... [In] school... they have some placard around the neck and they show the teacher this placard. For example, one of them for water, one of them for play, one of them for, for example I'm hungry, and something like this. Everything they want, the[re is a] placard [for].*

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English could be a barrier also for some parents. Baseerah explained that the school had an Afghan interpreter, who was present whenever there was an important meeting or issues of public interest were being discussed; however, for basic daily communication, parents and teachers relied on Google Translate. In some cases, there had been episodes of miscommunication, but this was generally on matters of lower urgency.

Language courses and education provision were important also for those participants who had come to the UK to join their husband or to get married. Often these young women did not speak any English or had basic knowledge of the language. Most of these participants had enrolled in beginner courses, but had to stop once they had become mothers, as explained by Maryam:

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*I start to study my English [on a course], from alphabet, from beginner, and for one year only, and then I got my children.*

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When we interviewed her, Maryam had re-started college and was going to classes at night-time, however she still found it stressful to balance her education with her home life. Limited time and lack of child-minding provision were recognised by most women as the major barrier to education, as expressed by Khdiija:

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*At least I have to learn something, at least I have to learn English. There are not some place you can go with the children and we can study. ... I want to study.*

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Structural barriers, like visa restrictions, further complicated access to education opportunities for this group of women; this was the case for Changa, who was told by

her college that due to the limited remaining time on her visa they couldn't enrol her. Despite the difficulties with access to education and balancing study- and home-life, these women held high aspirations for education and eventually for employment.

Our data show the risks of de-skilling and lost careers. It is necessary for opportunities to be provided, by statutory bodies, for speedy re-accreditation, for example in medical fields, so that highly qualified refugees can re-activate their careers. More widely, the need to encourage women to enrol and improve their English language skills was mentioned by many, including stakeholders from Afghan organisations, as a key way to enhance women's confidence in British society; this would positively impact on both their employment and their social life, hence also addressing issues like isolation and loneliness.

## **8. Safety and security**

Many participants, both new arrivals and also those from earlier waves of migration, who had visited Afghanistan in recent years or who had family connections there, talked about how suicide bombs had ruined the safety and security of Afghanistan. Several people shared anecdotes of near misses, involving car bombs, and how this continued to impact their lives and mental health while in the UK. Dilaram told us about how her sister's death, in a bomb explosion at Kabul University in November 2020, had caused deep trauma for her. Other participants, like Bilal, narrated how he had narrowly escaped being blown up.

Most participants raised concerns about close family, including wives, children, siblings, ageing parents, and friends still in Afghanistan. Especially for those from ethnic minorities groups, human right activists or whose families had been connected to the previous political regime, there was particular worry for their safety.

Many participants, especially among recent evacuees, felt that relatives were in danger under the Taliban regime because of their links with the previous government. Abubakar explained that just before his evacuation, Taliban fighters had accosted him: 'One Taliban commander who came to me, "You don't have a beard", I say to him, "I don't have it", and he slapped me'. Moreover, other members of the Taliban had questioned his sons about Abubakar's whereabouts. Likewise, Liloma, a young activist woman, narrated how she was threatened directly by Taliban

supporters during her work in rural Afghanistan: ‘they told me, “We will kill you”. When the Taliban came, I thought they would come to my house’. Having been evacuated in August 2021, Liloma is now deeply concerned about the safety of her relatives.

Several individuals, from ethnic minority groups, mentioned how their relatives were suffering severe threats. Begum, who is from the Hazara ethnic group, said she feared for her activist sisters who were hiding and in constant fear for being arrested. She spoke about the enormous difficulties for them and her widowed mother to survive in Afghanistan with no work or a man to look after them (see section 9. Gender): ‘my mum says: “I am the lucky here because I am safe. I am the lucky one”’.

For this reason, many participants were desperately trying to get relatives out of Afghanistan or neighbouring countries. For example, Mirwais showed deep concern about his family left behind and spoke about his desperate efforts to bring them to the UK:

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*the problem is my kids, my wife, now they arrive to Turkey... They escape from Afghanistan to Iran and Iran to Turkey, they are in Turkey. Every day they are calling me, they're in a very bad situation, you know in Turkey there is no protection for Afghans, they are deporting people back.*

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For some participants there was almost a sense of guilt that they had managed to escape while leaving their families behind. In consequence, they now felt a huge sense of responsibility to help relatives to get out of the country. Ebraheem told us how his fears over the situation of his family back in Afghanistan had increased his levels of anxiety and depression: ‘Red spots came on my body, and I have small surgery and I’m in hospital. Also, with thyroid problem and with anxiety and depression’.

Moreover, several participants highlighted how relying on unstable communication with Afghanistan had increased their fears that something bad had happened to their relatives. Such was the case with Zaman, who said he was suffering from a ‘phobia

when looking to the messages from Kabul', as he fears that any communication from home will be bad news.

Yet, reflecting on security under the Taliban government in Afghanistan, we found divergent opinions. Several participants, particularly long established residents, said that there was more security now that the Taliban were in power. That was the case with Eid Mohammad, a retired engineer who arrived in London in the early 2000s, who expressed his willingness to support the new government with the running of the country, if needed.

Yet, others explicitly challenged this idea and showed distrust of the Taliban government. Hamza, who feared for his siblings and father in Afghanistan, explained that far from living in a secure environment, being critical of the Taliban government, even in private, had serious consequences: 'In Kabul right now, you cannot criticise the Taliban. Immediately you will face disappearance, you will face torture, you will face anything'. Hamza explained how the lack of freedom was often misrepresented as a sign of security. Instead, he presented a more complex view of security, which must be accompanied by freedom and rights for all, women and girls included:

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*security is not enough, it's a cage, a bird that is in a cage is fully secured. We are human beings, we need freedom, we need rights.*

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Hamza went on to argue that poverty, rather than security, is the real problem in Afghanistan now:

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*Taliban don't provide us anything, no jobs, no freedom, no food, people are selling their children for food. What should we do with this security? Security is not enough.*

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In the words of another man, Gulkan, people left and will continue to leave because of a compendium of 'economic and political reasons, political repression and persecution'.

London was often described as a place where people felt safe, unlike the ever-

present threat of danger in Afghanistan. Begum, a longer-term resident in the city, said she did not worry that her son would be kidnapped on his way to school, which was a real fear in Afghanistan. London also provided lots of opportunities for her son:

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*We feel safe here. We live without distress. There are lots of opportunities for my son... [He] can be a child... But in my country, no. Especially for Hazara people.*

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Our findings reveal that different waves of migrants raise different concerns about safety and security in Afghanistan and in the UK. Most of our participants, particularly newly arrived who were connected to the previous political regime, those who had been human right activists or belonged to minority ethnic groups, were deeply concerned about the dangers for relatives and friends in Afghanistan. Furthermore, they expressed fears and frustration about being apart from their families, many of whom were living in precarious situation back home. In contrast, London offered our participants a safe and secure environment to prosper and raise their children. Yet, London was not without its challenges as discussed in the next section.

## **9. Stereotypes, negative attitudes, and racism**

Throughout the course of our interviews and focus groups, participants were encouraged to speak about their experience in London and whether they thought the city was welcoming towards migrants. Participants were also asked about their opinion as to how British people might perceive Afghan migrants in the UK and if they had encountered or experienced the effects of negative perceptions or stereotypes.

Most participants reported not having experienced overt racism from British people, and several of our interviewees mentioned that the multicultural makeup of the city played a significant role in making them feel welcomed. Ahmad Shah, a participant who had lived in London for almost 25 years, said that Afghans might not experience as much negative attitudes and marginalisation compared to other groups because, in his opinion, most Afghans do not stand out as ‘visibly’ different. Ahmad Shah explained that he was often perceived to be Italian, Greek or Turkish, and he thought

this was because he did not fit British people's expectation of what an Afghan person might look like:

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*So they were thinking, okay, because the picture we have from Afghans is that they have a long beard and a turban and all that.*

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Some people mentioned that the way in which the emergency situation in Afghanistan was reported, as well as the images of evacuation shared by the media, helped elicit sympathetic responses from most members of the public. Abubakar, one of our recent arrival participants, explained:

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*You know, all of the people say [to] me the British people is very good. They are very good with us ... when we are going outside, [meeting] face-to-face with other people, [they say we are], 'most welcome', they are giving hug to me.*

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The feeling of being welcomed in London was contrasted by many with the stereotypes and negative attitudes they experienced in Afghanistan as well as other countries. In Afghanistan, some people experienced exclusion and even persecution based on ethnic and religious differences, such as Begum and Malala who highlighted the mistreatment of Hazara people. In some cases, these divisions and tensions were reproduced in the UK, as illustrated by Malala's experience of being called names by other Afghan residents in the hotels (see section 3. Bridging and Contingency Hotels):

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*it really hurt me, because we are all here, and then the discrimination that's among ethnicities in Afghanistan, they brought it here.*

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Several people also commented on being mistreated in countries like Iran and Turkey, where Afghans were stigmatised, marginalised and exploited as cheap labour. Bilal, a participant who had left Afghanistan in his youth and had lived in Iran for many years, recounted:

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*Oh my God, in Iran we had a lot of problem because we didn't have document, we had problem because they said, "You are [an] immigra[nt], you don't have document, you have a lot of problem".*

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Bilal shared with us the discrimination and the disrespect he faced in Iran and Turkey, where he was frequently stopped and searched, asked for documents, and where he was always at risk of being deported. Even though it would seem that similar characteristics such as language and religion would prevent Afghans from receiving unfair treatment in neighbouring countries, Bilal explained that their status of immigrants negatively affected the way in which they were perceived and treated. This was echoed by Gul Mohammed, who mentioned that ultimately people were coming to London because it was perceived as a welcoming place, compared to Afghanistan's neighbouring countries:

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*as a Muslim there is many neighbouring, Muslim, very rich countries we are not going there, because we are not welcome there.*

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Rabiya, who had lived in Holland for many years before moving to the UK, told us that although she got along well with Dutch people and felt generally welcomed, she experienced an incident where her neighbours scratched her husband's new car, because they did not think an immigrant deserved to have a beautiful car.

Compared to the experiences of marginalisation in Afghanistan and other countries, a lot of participants perceived London to be a safer, more welcoming place. Nonetheless, some participants, both newly arrived and those who had been settled for a longer period of time, did experience racial comments and remarks, microaggressions and what they understood as structural racism. Zalaikha, who had lived in the UK for nearly 25 years, talked about 'hidden social discrimination' and recounted an episode she experienced at work:

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*you're at a meeting and you'll have people from this country [UK], and you have somebody like me or some more people like me there. But there is a joke going around and you can see that it is a patronising joke...yes, I have this experience.*

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In some cases, racially charged comments were made by other migrants, either Afghans who had arrived many years earlier, or migrants from other nationalities. Dilaram recounted a time in which an Iranian shop keeper made a generalising comment about Afghans and narcotics. Dilaram defined this episode as the only experience of racism she had in the UK, however later in the conversation she said that she was often encountered gender stereotypes about Afghan women, as noted in a previous section on Employment.

Some younger participants felt that these and other stereotypes, such as prejudice about Afghans and terrorism, also impacted on their experiences in the UK, including employment (as seen in Shabnam's and Dilaram's comments in section 6. Employment).

Even though many people felt able to share some of their experiences of stigmatisation and exclusion, it is important to consider that a lot of our participants, especially new arrivals, felt extremely grateful to be in the UK and to be safe. This feeling of gratitude might have prevented some participants from disclosing further negative experiences, while others did not recognise unacceptable behaviour at first, as Khdiya explained:

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*when some people are speaking kindly, we just say, 'Oh, she's right, she's kind to me', but when you listen their words, that's different, that's different. That's my experience.*

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Khdiya also mentioned that not knowing which behaviours were unacceptable or unlawful in the UK might have also prevented people from recognising or reporting incidents of prejudice, stereotypes or racism. Interestingly, we noted that participants who had attended university in the UK were less likely to accept discriminatory behaviour and/or were quicker and more confident to call it out.

These findings suggest that both recent arrivals as well as longer-established migrants would benefit from receiving specific information about issues such as hate crimes, hate incidents and discrimination. Local authorities, community organisations and specialist services (statutory and NGOs) could work in partnership to provide awareness-raising sessions in the community, to ensure that individuals are aware of

their rights and routes of reporting should they wish to do so.

## 10. Gender

In many of our interviews, participants mentioned the restrictions and violence that women suffer because of so-called 'traditional' values in Afghanistan. Several participants, including men such as Mirwais, expressed fears for their female relatives and friends back in Afghanistan, where the situation is particularly difficult for women activists.

Begum feared for her sisters and her mother in Kabul. Her father had died, and the women did not have any man to protect their interests. Moreover, as they were members of the minority Hazara community, Begum explained that they were particularly at risk of being harassed by the Taliban:

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*Women were arrested by Taliban, and they were woman activists. They were arrested. They abused them in their prison. They did many things to the Hazara people.*

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However, securing visas to bring relatives, even those especially at risk, was proving to be extremely difficult. As mentioned in previous sections, this caused a great deal of distress to our participants.

Some participants referred to wider cultural patterns such as the role of in-laws, including mothers and sisters in-law, in exerting control over young brides who were discouraged from pursuing education and employment. Such young wives were expected to take care of extended families, carry the responsibility for housework and cooking, and caring for children and elderly relatives. Baseerah, for example, noted that her in-laws in Afghanistan did not want her to study or look for a job. Similarly, Hamida explained how coming to the UK enables her to resist the pressures of her in-laws in Afghanistan on her husband for 'allowing' her to go to university:

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*She's a woman. It is not right for women to study at university. She has two children. She must take care of her children and her*

*husband. You are creating a problem in the family with this decision.  
Why do you let your wife join university?*

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For many recently arrived women we interviewed, being evacuated to Britain provided an opportunity for a fresh start with their husbands and children. Yet, for others, especially young women in hotels, the pressures to conform to the gender and cultural norm in Afghanistan continued in the UK. For example, some women mentioned how they were challenged by other Afghan women if they did not cover their hair in the hotel. Several female interviewees, such as Hamida, Liloma and Malala, told us that as soon as they stepped out of the hotels, they immediately removed their hijab. They also expressed the desire to make their own decisions about if and when to cover their hair. This was the case particularly for Liloma, who was living in a bridging hotel. In the hotel, she felt rejected by other Afghan residents for not wearing the hijab. Similarly, in another hotel, Malala told us that she heard some 'bad words' from Afghan men and felt pressured to cover her hair. This situation may stabilise once people are resettled out of hotels and can make their own decisions.

Our sample is diverse and while some women chose not to wear the hijab, others were keen to do so. Yosra, a woman who had lived in London for over 5 years, expressed the view that London was a tolerant city. Before arriving in the UK, Yosra had lived in Iran for many years and had heard that it would be difficult to wear the hijab in London. However, after arriving in the city, she was pleasantly surprised that she could wear her hijab in public places without fear of criticism or hostility.

Some participants said that gender rights/freedom in the UK were causing problems in traditional Afghan families. For example, Shabnam explained that gender rights and situational uncertainties were exacerbating the tension among evacuee couples who were forced to 'spend their time with each other' in small rooms in hotels. She stated that men often feared they would 'lose' their wives:

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*It's not that they will definitely break up with their husbands, we hear a lot that they will totally change their behaviour, but humans don't work like that.*

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In some cases, it appeared that tensions in the hotels may spill over into instances of physical violence. A few participants, such as Liloma and Abubakar, referred to specific incidents of domestic abuse involving husbands and wives in hotels. In at least one case, it seemed that the police had become involved. A key informant from an Afghan organisation referred to the 'severe' incidence of domestic violence resulting from the 'ongoing war culture' in Afghanistan. She highlighted that most of the new arrivals were either born or raised in the 'war culture' that destroys public services:

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*if you live in a violent environment, where violence is a necessity or a norm, then domestic violence and child abuse becomes a norm as well.*

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This key informant said that the cases of gender violence were particularly difficult to identify in the bridging hotels because they happened 'in the privacy of their rooms'. The need for specialised organisations on gender violence to intervene was highlighted by this key informant and also by some of our interviewees. We also heard from interviewees that some husbands were controlling their wives by not allowing them to study and learn English and by exerting financial control over the women.

Both male and female participants, including those from established communities in London, referred to the need to encourage Afghan women to engage in activities outside the home to develop their English language skills and enhance their confidence. Some women participants, such as Zalaikha, praised men's efforts to adapt to the new situation in the UK. Yet, several other participants highlighted pockets of resistance among some more traditional Afghan men in the UK. For example, one male participant, Hamza, stated that 'some Afghans don't believe that their girls should go to school here in UK, even if they are UK citizens'. Similar points were made by other highly educated men, such as Gulkan and Zaman, who both described their surprise at encountering negative views about female education among some older Afghan men in the UK.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the various associated lockdowns had an impact

particularly on women. With many educational and cultural centres going online, many women stopped interacting with others and became isolated at home. Shogofa, a long-term resident, described how the Saturday school where she volunteered closed during lockdowns, taking away her opportunity to engage with other people and socialise.

Overall, many of our participants highlighted the difficulty for Afghan women to challenge traditional culture. Zalaikha, who lived in the UK for 25 years and was running a group for Afghan women, explained that many Afghan women just continued to conform to traditional male dominated culture in the UK: 'we just keep quiet and carry on listening to what is happening, but do not say something back or challenge the situation.' Zalaikha also noted that it is difficult for women to believe that 'something special will happen for Afghan women' when there is gender discrimination 'for English women and others and not only Afghans' in the UK. She highlighted how the battle to gain gender rights affects not only Afghans but all women, as they suffer gender inequality at all levels, e.g., in education, employment and home environments.

Several key informants noted that many Afghans, especially the recently arrived but also some of the more settled communities, do not fully understand their rights and obligations in British society. Many participants underlined the urgency for government institutions, especially the Home Office, to provide more transparent and accessible information on rights and benefits to newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees, particularly to those with limited command of English. Several participants mentioned incidents impacting on women with limited or no awareness of the regulations in the UK regarding the rights of women and children, so more intervention from institutions is needed.

However, accessing information about rights and benefits was presented as a two ways process. On the one hand, it was recognised that the onus should be on local authorities, service providers and NGOs to ensure that information is available to Afghans in an accessible way; on the other hand, participants like Ahmad Shah pointed out that it was also important for Afghans to be proactive in seeking out and requesting relevant information.

We thus emphasize three main concerns. First, there is the need to accelerate the right to work for recently arrived Afghan women. Second, there is the need to facilitate the intervention of specialised organisations to address any instances of gender abuse in the privacy of rooms at the hotels. Third, that there is a need to encourage Afghan women, including long-term residents, to engage in activities outside the home environment. English language proficiency has come across as an essential tool to enhance women's confidence and active participation in society.

## 11. Generational Differences

The Afghan population in the UK is relatively recent. There have been several waves of arrival over the last three decades, as Gulkan explained: 'most of the Afghans came post-2001 to the UK, or maybe started from 1996 where the Taliban came to power'. A key informant who previously worked at the Afghan embassy in London told us that this recent pattern of migration in the UK is different from other countries like Germany and the US which have much older and more established Afghan communities<sup>19</sup>. It is difficult to get exact details on the numbers of Afghans in the UK. This key informant told us:

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*in 2012 when we asked the Home Office about the number of Afghan refugees living in the UK, they were telling us that 56,000 Afghans were registered legally in the UK, be it in the form of granted full citizenship or asylum seeker at that time, but obviously they told us at the same time that there were an awful lot of other numbers that they were not registered with the UK government because they are not moving forward to take asylum or we don't have any information about them.*

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According to this key informant, with the recent evacuations the number of Afghan in the UK is probably closer to 100,000, but as other key informants noted, it is very difficult to get precise numbers regarding how many people were evacuated.

Speaking to a range of participants and key stakeholders, our study reveals the

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<sup>19</sup> Fischer, C. 2017. Imagined Communities? Relations of Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora Groups in Germany and the UK, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 38:1, 18-35

diversity of Afghans in London and the variety of their experiences and needs.

Spokespersons from Afghan community organisations summarised the range of services provided across the generational spectrum. From Saturday schools for young children, through to youth clubs and sports activities for teenagers, to a women's club and support for those Afghans entering old age, these organisations cover the entire life course. These activities also demonstrate the different needs of the various generations and how these have changed over time.

When Afghans first started to arrive in significant numbers in the 1990s, the main challenge was language. Arriving without speaking any English at all, Gul Mohammed described how he had relied upon a Pakistani neighbour, with whom he communicated in Urdu, to translate all his official letters and documents into English.

Overtime the established Afghan community in London has started to do well. A key informant from an Afghan group told us: 'Afghan community members [are] now involved in very good businesses'. As Gulkan explained, many Afghan 'are very well settled in London because of the nature of this, being a capital, open to so many opportunities and also good standards of living, etc., they are well welcomed'. He further explained that, as well as establishing successful careers, Afghans 'were also part of the large prestigious UK universities here. It worked very well so for them it was very good'.

However, there are also other constituencies such as Afghans living here without official documents, working cash in hand, and living with friends. As a key informant who had worked at the embassy explained: 'we don't know exactly, but these are likely to be mostly young, male and single'. He went on to explain that prior to August 2021 it was very difficult for ordinary Afghans, even well-off ones, to get visas to enter the UK. Most visas issued were for diplomats or students. Without legal routes of entry, many Afghans had turned to highly dangerous and very expensive unofficial routes (see Section 1. Diverse routes of arrivals and immigration barriers).

A key informant from an Afghan association described the situation of young unaccompanied minors, usually males, who arrive illegally and who are especially vulnerable and in need of support. Until recently, these migrants tended to be deported as soon as they reached 18 years, but currently such deportations have

been suspended, though the prospects for this group of Afghans remain unclear.

As the community grows and enters the second generation, other challenges emerge such as family issues and inter-generational communication. As a key informant from an Afghan organisation explained:

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*there are some cultural issues... a sort of clash between the families sometimes because the children have grown up here but the parents are the first generation of refugees here so they give a hard time and don't understand each other.*

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Zalaikha noted that some parents from the older generation, especially if they have limited English language proficiency, feel threatened by what they see around in British society:

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*Women from older generations do not want their daughters to go that route, and therefore their insecurity comes, and they are scared that they will lose their children.*

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Therefore, families often turn to Afghan associations in such situations and to seek advice on how to manage inter-generational disagreements and misunderstandings.

Moreover, some participants expressed concern about what might be termed 'pockets of segregation'. Gulkan for example, who had arrived in the UK over a decade ago, observed some groups who live in densely co-ethnic areas and have limited engagement with wider society:

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*This is not a successful approach, this is not a good approach for us.... because we want these people to be more aligned with the UK culture.*

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In a focus group, participants expressed views about the extent of segregation, exemplified by Shabnam:

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*I also felt a sense of segregation in the city... I have seen a lot of Afghans in the Harrow area and also a lot of Afghans in the Ealing Broadway. So, I feel like these areas are very much concentrated for Afghans.*

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However, in reply, another focus group participant, Zalaikha, explained that people may feel a sense of safety and security within these areas:

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*you feel secure to be a bit in your own community because you don't get that security when you're with others. So that experience make you to be between your own people.*

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Zaman, who had arrived in London in 2020, expressed concern about attitudes he had observed within some of these communities. As highly educated professionals, he and his wife were surprised to encounter in London some older Afghans, long-term residents in the UK, who espoused deeply conservative views, for example about the education of girls. As noted previously in section 10. Gender, Gulkan also mentioned gender as an area of concern. He described attending a meeting where some older community members in the UK expressed support for gender segregation.

Zalaikha, who as mentioned previously had worked with an Afghan women's group, explained how some traditional attitudes may become hardened in the context of migration:

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*being in a new place, it is not safe, therefore we become more religious, I know quite a lot of Afghans who were more liberal in Afghanistan, coming to the UK they became more religious because that's their way of feeling secure to pray to God.*

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Among Afghan community organisations there is a clear focus on helping Afghan women to develop confidence and skills to actively participate in society:

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*Our main focus was for many, many years to work with women in our community to give them the confidence to come out, to work, find employment, education.*

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Zalaikha also explained the need to work with communities to gently encourage and persuade attitude shifts:

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*people are more cautious about women to protect them more, to not go where it's not necessary or not raise your voice when there's no need for it. But that makes us like to not have the skills to challenge the things which should be challenged when we are in this country.*

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A female key informant from an Afghan organisation explained that it was difficult to openly tackle some issues because of the fear of causing offence or provoking a backlash. Thus, while domestic violence, for example, was a concern, it was difficult to openly address this topic and organisations tended to deal with it quietly and were wary of having a public programme about domestic abuse (see section 10. Gender).

Reflecting the changing demography of the Afghan population in London, an emerging area of work for community groups concerns older people. Some of the first waves of migrants are now entering old age and raising new challenges around the provision of elder care. As one key informant mentioned: 'We facilitate some of the social and cultural party for them to take them out of their home.' However, as this section of the population grows there is likely to be a necessity for more provision to address the particular needs of older Afghan people.

Our findings highlight the range and diversity of the Afghan population in the UK and London in particular. Demographic changes mean there is an emerging elder population with particular needs, especially around care. Meanwhile at the other end of the spectrum, there are young, second-generation Afghans, born in the UK, who may have different experiences and expectations from their parents. Moreover, new waves of arrivals, including the undocumented as well as recent refugees, further diversify the Afghan community and add to the various services and support mechanisms required to ensure positive experiences within British society. This

situation is likely to create further demands on Afghan organisations, as well as local councils and service providers.

## Recommendations

Based on our findings and in conversations with our advisory group and with our Afghan participants at dissemination events, we have developed the following recommendations:

**Government and Security Forces** – need to learn lessons so that mistakes are not repeated in any future evacuations.

**Home Office** – need to increase staffing and reduce bureaucracy to ensure a speedier and more efficient processing of asylum applications.

**Foreign Office and Home Office** – should work quickly with international partner organisations to facilitate safe relocation of those at risk, still inside Afghanistan, including the vulnerable relatives of evacuees.

**Home Office and Local Authorities** – faster and more effective communication and cooperation is needed to ensure the rehousing of thousands still in temporary hotel accommodation.

**Home Office and Job Centres** – should cooperate to deliver better communication regarding Afghans' right to work.

**Statutory Bodies** – should provide appropriate and long-term funding to services for Afghan migrants beyond emergency response.

**Funders** – enable NGOs to provide specialist counselling for victims of trauma including culturally sensitive and appropriate forms of support.

**NGOs and statutory services** – coordinate efforts to assist new waves of arrivals, including undocumented and recent refugees, to access accurate and appropriate information.

**Statutory bodies, local authorities and NGOs** – ensure accurate information to new arrivals regarding the costs of living in and outside London especially in the

context of spiralling energy costs.

**Job Centres, Professional organisations, educational institutions and employment agencies** – to coordinate to provide fast reaccreditation of qualifications and support reemployment of refugees.

**Employers, including Afghan businesses** – provide internships and work experience opportunities for new arrivals.

**Local Authorities and Education Providers** – coordinate school provision for Afghan school children after relocation from bridging hotels.

**Local Authorities working with NGOs** – ensure adequate provision of supplementary support and education to children especially those hit hardest by the disruption of the pandemic and evacuation.

**Local Authorities working with NGOs and specialist services** – provide information about hate crimes/incidents, discrimination, and routes of reporting.

**NGOs and specialist charities** – enhance awareness and address gender-based violence and encourage women to engage in activities outside the home environment.

**Local Authorities, NGOs and statutory services** – work together to address the care and needs of the emerging elderly Afghan population.