

Foreword

Across the UK, Britons share a broad consensus on the importance of welcoming people fleeing war and persecution, with three in four Britons supportive of taking in refugees from countries in conflict or crisis.¹ Yet the UK has never had a clearly articulated national refugee policy. Amid the growing politicisation of asylum, including in relation to movement across the English Channel, Britain needs a long-term and sustainable vision for responding to one of the defining issues of our time. Following the passage of the Nationality and Borders Act and the Government's proposals for removing people seeking asylum to Rwanda, which undermine Britain's leadership in the international community and weaken the global system for managing asylum claims, there has never been a more important moment to outline the contours of a national refugee policy that is principled, pragmatic, and effective.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the foundations for a national refugee policy. It aims to serve as a framework for public debate by 1) articulating the challenges and narrating them in accessible language, 2) identifying realistic, workable solutions that balance principle and pragmatism, and 3) stimulating informed public debate that transcends party politics. Our audience is intentionally broad: politicians, policymakers, and the public. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of the authors – covering politics, academia, charity, and philanthropy -- reflects a shared desire to create a unifying vision for Britain's role in responding to one of the defining global challenges of the Twenty-First Century.

Each of the co-authors brings different backgrounds and perspectives; we agree on some issues and disagree on others. However, we are united in a belief that the United Kingdom needs a better national refugee policy that is principled, pragmatic and effective. We also share a commitment to building bridges and working collaboratively across the political spectrum. The authors are grateful to friends and colleagues in the UK and abroad who kindly read and commented on earlier drafts of this paper.

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Executive Summary

- The forced displacement of people is one of the defining global challenges of the Twenty-First Century. In the past decade, Europe has faced two large-scale refugee movements, from Syria and Ukraine, and the United Kingdom has received record numbers of people seeking asylum across the English Channel.
- The UK's recent policy to remove people seeking asylum to Rwanda is likely to be ineffective, costly, and risks weakening the global system for managing asylum claims. There is an urgent need to rethink our national refugee policies in a way that protects vulnerable people fleeing war and persecution, reduces human smuggling, and retains widespread public support.
- The UK needs a national refugee policy that is principled, pragmatic, and effective. This is especially important in the aftermath of Brexit, as the UK seeks to forge its own approach to managing the arrival of people seeking asylum.
- National refugee policy must be based on clear values. In the past, refugee policy has often been a source of national unity and pride, when based on the principles of compassion, multilateralism, and innovation.
- National refugee policy must provide a strategic framework for global, national, and local engagement, working across the whole-of-government rather than being dominated by any one government department. A viable refugee policy must include roles for the Home Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCDO), the Ministry of Levelling-Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC), for example, and have stronger coordination through a Cabinet Committee on Refugees.
- Effective refugee policy must begin with a focus cooperating with France and the European Union to negotiate viable joint assessment at relevant 'hot spots', responsibility-sharing, and return measures that adequately replace the provisions of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Cooperation with our immediate neighbours is essential for a functioning asylum system that will bring more order to refugee arrivals, and it should be a diplomatic priority.
- Safe and legal pathways, including through resettlement, family reunion and complementary pathways are needed to allow refugees to reach the UK without recourse to dangerous journeys. The UK should build on existing innovations such as the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) and community sponsorship schemes including Homes for Ukraine, which allow refugee numbers to increase in accordance with the support of the British public.
- In order to make the asylum system effective and reduce costs, the UK should clear its sizeable and growing backlog of nearly 120,000 people awaiting an initial decision by establishing a dedicated backlog clearance team and exploring ways to speed up the decision making process, particularly for those nationalities that have a high grant rate

where it could be possible to make a grant of status based on the papers the applicant has already submitted, rather than requiring people to attend a substantive interview. This will allow a 'reset' on asylum policy, allowing rapid and efficient decision-making to resume.

- People seeking asylum should be given greater access to the right to work in order to support themselves and contribute to the national economy. The right to work should begin six months after arrival, and no longer be restricted by occupation.
- The UK should play a leadership role on global refugee policy. This should include a renewed commitment to the UN Convention on Refugees by engaging more actively in the Global Compact on Refugees. It might also include working with a coalition of likeminded states to negotiate a 'solidarity pact' to clarify the allocation of responsibilities between states in areas that are ambiguously or inadequately addressed by the international refugee system. This should be done in ways that are compatible with international law.
- Refugee integration policies need to be strengthened by supporting local authorities to improve access to social housing, English language programmes, employment support, and public services. This should be supported by earmarked central government funding, linked to key performance indicators. Integration support should be made available to all refugees, based on their individual needs, rather than their method of entry into the UK.
- The governance of national refugee policy needs to be reformed, including by improving Home Office culture, augmenting the role of independent experts, and strengthening parliamentary oversight of refugee policy.

Introduction

The forced displacement of people is one of the defining global challenges of the Twenty-First Century.

In recent years, Europe has faced two large-scale refugee movements, from Syria and Ukraine. Since 2020, the United Kingdom has faced the challenge of record numbers of people seeking asylum crossing the English Channel, while it has also been called upon to offer sanctuary to people affected by the legacy of British foreign policies in Hong Kong and Afghanistan.

Across Europe, asylum and immigration are a major practical challenge, raising concerns of how to reduce deaths, tackle human smuggling, and restore access to protection for refugees. They have become a source of political polarisation, often at the heart of rising populist nationalism. In Britain, asylum—especially channel crossings and accommodating people seeking asylum in hotels—receives daily media attention. While asylum and immigration are no longer among the top five most important issues in UK politics, polling shows that channel crossings and therefore asylum are among the top five issues for Conservative voters.

Although Britain has created a series of innovative refugee policy responses, some policies have divided opinion, provoking criticism for failing to deliver workable long-term solutions that reconcile security and human rights. The Government's resort to an expensive and ineffective plan to remove people seeking asylum to Rwanda reflects the political imperative to 'take back control', reducing human smuggling and prevent deaths in the English Channel. But it also highlights the inadequacy of current thinking on how the country responds to refugees.

Following Brexit, the UK is no longer part of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The Dublin system is no longer available to facilitate the return of people seeking asylum to France who crossed the English Channel. The UK needs to forge its own national approach to managing the arrival of asylum seekers, albeit one that is premised upon international cooperation.

The Nationality and Borders Bill was introduced to Parliament in order to address border control. There are questions about whether it will achieve this. But it also leaves open the question of how the UK will assist and protect refugees forced to flee war and persecution, both at home and abroad. How can it do so in a way that ensures refugees have access to safety, dignity, a fair hearing and opportunity, and yet is politically sustainable and retains public confidence?

Refugee policy should be a strategic priority for the United Kingdom. We need a national refugee policy – a series of principles and a common language that can guide our leaders and shape public debate. Refugee policy does not have to be divisive; it can and should be a source of national unity as it has in the past for Conservative and Labour-led governments. What would a unifying national refugee policy look like?

A national refugee policy offers the opportunity to depoliticise our response to refugees: a long-term strategic plan has the potential to transcend party political lines. By basing it on shared values and a common narrative, it offers a means to forge cross-party consensus on the principles that should underlie Britain's response to refugees. There is no reason why refugee response could not be a source of national pride in the way that it has sometimes been in the past.

The key is that national refugee policy needs to be proactive and forward-looking, not simply reactive to events. It must offer strategic guidance at global, national and local levels. At a global level, Britain should be leading and working with others to manage refugee situations. At the national level, we must deal with spontaneous arrivals via a whole-of-government approach. And at the local level, we must ensure that refugees are offered the chance to contribute and commit to Britain.

A national refugee policy must therefore go beyond the work of the Home Office or any single department. It implicates the work of the Home Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCDO), the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Levelling-Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC), the Department for Education, and the Department of Health and Social Care. We need joined-up collaboration across Ministries, engaging strategically across both domestic and foreign policy.

A Major Global Challenge

There are more than 100 million displaced people in the world, of whom nearly a third are refugees.

Numbers are likely to rise further. Displacement patterns are shaped by broader geo-political trends. Authoritarian states, armed conflict, and chronically fragile states, all force people to flee their communities, often across international borders. Disrupted weather patterns, rising desertification and drought, and the slow onset of natural disasters are intensifying these pressures. Meanwhile, technology is increasing the aspirations and ability of displaced people to travel across borders, and even continents. This is not necessarily a threat, and, given the right policies, can instead be an opportunity.

The majority of forcibly displaced people remain in their countries of origin as internally displaced people, and of those who cross a border to become refugees, more than 7 out of 10 are hosted in an immediate neighbouring country.ⁱⁱ These are usually low and middle-income countries in crisis regions. However, in the absence of adequate opportunity or protection close to home, a significant minority of refugees move onwards; often as part of ‘mixed’ migration movements.

These so-called ‘secondary movements’ of refugees, from an immediate neighbouring country to another country, represent a political and operational challenge. In the case of the UK, the implications are most evident in the English Channel, where boat crossings by people seeking asylum have become a divisive political issue. There is an urgent need for sustainable policy solutions that effectively address public concerns in a way that ensure that refugees have access to safety and protection. From the Mediterranean to the US-Mexican border, rich countries around the world are facing a challenge of rising numbers of asylum seekers against the backdrop of a fragile and fractured world. At present, rich countries are quick to push responsibility onto ‘upstream’ or ‘downstream’ neighbouring countries, undermining the spirit of international cooperation.

In the last decade, Europe has faced two large-scale refugee influxes as a result of crises on its doorstep. The Syrian refugee crisis in 2015/16 and the Ukraine refugee crisis in 2022 reveal that large scale refugee movements can affect any region of the world. Europe now hosts 13 million refugees,ⁱⁱⁱ which would have been unimaginable before 2015. The UK hosts a relatively small proportion of these refugees, even though it has experienced rising numbers of boat arrivals in the aftermath of Brexit. Despite these trends, British public attitudes towards refugees have steadily warmed since 2015.^{iv}

Many other refugee movements further away also have direct implications for Britain’s geopolitical interests. The UK has needed to manage evacuation and programmes for refugees arriving from Hong Kong and directly from Afghanistan following the Fall of Kabul. Public attitudes were highly receptive to these interests and prioritising historical connections.

The international refugee system, based on the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the work of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) offers an indispensable framework for international cooperation relating to refugees. It establishes a common definition of a 'refugee' and the rights to which people fleeing war and persecution are entitled, and supports host countries around the world to meet their obligations towards refugees. These institutions provide an indispensable framework because they create a reciprocal commitment among all states to protect refugees, which in turn supports British national interests, including by obligating countries around the world to assist refugees.

The failure to come up with effective long-term planning across the whole of government has major implications for political stability. The inability to deliver effective and principled solutions has contributed to political polarisation and the rise of populist nationalism across Europe. In Britain, however, there has been a steady growth in positive attitudes towards refugees and immigration since 2015. The public generally believe that people fleeing war and persecution should be able to find refuge, that Britain should 'do its bit', and that Britain should have a fair asylum system.^v Support for Britain taking in refugees crosses the political spectrum, even if there are greater concerns among Conservative voters about disorderly people movements and the Government they elect not appearing to have control, which has kept asylum and immigration among the top-5 electoral issues for Conservative voters,^{vi} although the salience of these concerns overall has fallen away since 2016.

This challenge is not specific to the UK. The whole of geographical Europe faces a long-term challenge in how to manage the arrival of people seeking asylum. There are no magic bullets. Policy makers are operating under constraints – limited foresight, weak international mechanisms to achieve joint action, limited resources, and a media willing to exploit any fault or error in the system. But as a global player, Britain needs to lead and be a central part of a multilateral response to one of the defining challenges of our time. Practical solutions are available and require strategic planning.

Vision and Purpose

The purpose of UK refugee policy is to ensure that people forced to flee war and persecution can access a fair hearing, safety, dignity, and opportunity.

Underlying this is a commitment to care and compassion, and to assist the most vulnerable people. This is rooted in a duty of rescue, to ensure that when distant strangers face unimaginable circumstances – violence or torture, for example -- they can find sanctuary and safe haven for themselves and their families.

It is also based on a belief that if the world is divided into sovereign nation-states, then everyone around the world should have a right to be a member of a nation-state, somewhere in the world. That nobody, simply because of where they were born, should be denied a fair hearing, a safe place to live, work, contribute, call home, and enjoy citizenship.

These values are deeply rooted in British culture. Britain has a proud history of protecting refugees, both within the UK and abroad, and millions of Britons are personally connected to refugee stories through their family history. From Belgians in the First World War to Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust and offering resettlement to Ugandan Asians fifty years ago, providing sanctuary to people in need has been central to our history. The UK's leadership on refugee policy has come from Conservative and Labour governments alike who until recently have always sought to grant people fleeing war and persecution a fair hearing on UK soil. Britons with refugee backgrounds have made enormous contributions in all walks of national life.

In the contemporary world, delivering on this vision relies upon working internationally, nationally, and locally. Internationally, the UK can use foreign policy and development assistance to expand refugees' access to protection in other countries around the world. Nationally, it can work to ensure that refugees can find safe and orderly ways to enter the UK, whether as people seeking asylum, resettled refugees, or through other legal migration pathways. Locally, it can ensure that refugees are able to integrate successfully, access public services, and contribute economically.

Refugee protection is not the responsibility of any one country alone. But nor can it be shirked. It is a shared global responsibility. The UK's contribution should be commensurate with being the sixth largest national economy in the world, and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, with aspirations to lead on the world stage. Contributing our 'fair share' means admitting and integrating people, while also supporting refugees in other regions of the world. It involves acting globally in a way that sustains an effective multilateral refugee system.

The country's overall contribution needs to be adaptable and responsive to geopolitical changes around the world. Refugee movements and their geographical distribution are shaped by the overall patterns of war, authoritarianism, and state failure around the world. A secure world requires a smaller response than a fractured and fragile one. The UK needs to

act in good faith to work cooperatively with other countries in response to changing patterns of displacement.

Inevitably, meeting our international obligations towards refugees entails a cost – through public services, asylum and immigration support, and overseas development assistance. But the cost of alternative approaches such as the Rwanda policy may well be much higher. In addition, the UK’s commitment to delivering an effective refugee policy offers many benefits, and supports our national interests.

It enables us to serve as a beacon for liberalism, democracy, and human rights around the world. It enables people with skills, talents, and aspirations to contribute to our national economy. It ensures that other countries around the world reciprocally commit to integrate refugees, supporting a greater proportion of the world’s refugees to access protection around the world. This contributes to international stability thereby supporting the national interest.

Three unifying values and principles stand out as characterising British Refugee Policy in the past and as essential for ethical and effective refugee policy in the future:

Compassion

Compassion – concern for the suffering of others -- is a central British value, as revealed in almost every British values survey. From the NHS to the highest levels of charitable giving in Europe, support for vulnerable neighbours and strangers is central to who we are as people. It cuts across the many faiths that exist within British society.

Compassion underlies the commitment to protect vulnerable strangers fleeing desperate circumstances. The inclination to protect is present in public reactions to suffering, from the Ethiopian famine of 1984 to atrocities committed in Bosnia during the 1990s, or the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Britain has a history of prioritising protection for the most vulnerable – whether women, men, or children. As a society, we cannot stand idly-by in the face of suffering and injustice.

The principle of compassion should underpin British refugee policy, shaping how we support refugees. It should enable us to recognise and respond to the needs of refugees, but also to manage our refugee policies in a manner that is humane, dignified, and does not cause additional human suffering.

Multilateralism

Britain has a great tradition of multilateral engagement, within and beyond the international refugee system. It was a founding signatory of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, and has always been one of the leading funders of the UN Refugee Agency’s humanitarian relief work around the world.

International cooperation is the cornerstone of refugee protection. The refugee system relies upon reciprocity and collective action. If countries free-ride on the generosity of others, then the system risks collapse. And while multilateralism and the United Nations are far from

perfect, the UK has historically played a part in leading gradual adaptation, reform, and improvement within multilateral institutions.

Working collaboratively with other countries relies upon shaping the work of the United Nations, building partnerships with refugee-hosting countries around the world, and cooperating effectively with the UK's immediate neighbours in Europe. In a globalised and interdependent world, it is impossible to manage refugee policy without working collectively and in solidarity with other countries.

Multilateral engagement serves the UK's national interest. Delivering humanitarian and development aid supports other countries' willingness to host refugees, reducing the need for onward migration. Similarly, resettlement of vulnerable refugees, especially those with particular vulnerabilities, reduces the burden on developing countries, demonstrating solidarity beyond aid. Resettlement can also serve to meet particular geopolitical imperatives, as has been the case with the UK's support for people fleeing Hong Kong and Afghanistan.

Innovation

The UK has been a source of innovation and leadership for the global refugee system. It has historically taken a creative and pragmatic approach to identifying new ways to sustainably and effectively ensure refugee protection in a changing world. The UK has particularly embraced a whole-of-society approach, working with business and civil society to improve outcomes for refugees, both within the UK and abroad.

Historically, the UK's innovations within refugee policy that have shaped international practice include creating the first-ever World Refugee Year, Jobs Compacts for refugees in Jordan and Ethiopia, adoption of Europe's first community sponsorship resettlement scheme, and working with NGO partners, business, and other sectors to provide complementary skilled migration pathways for refugees. These innovations have generated multilateral engagement, contributing to shaping and updating refugee assistance for a changing world.

Crucial for innovation is evidence. Refugee policies should be evidence-based and evidence-generating. The UK's most successful innovations have either been based on an existing knowledge base, or have offered important insights for how to improve refugee policy over time. It is therefore central to building creative sources of best practice that our refugee policies are strongly connected to research and evidence.

Shaping the Global System

The UK should lead on global refugee policy by engaging multilaterally and working cooperatively with partner countries to protect refugees around the world.

Global refugee policy is not just about what happens within the UK or at its borders. Refugee protection is a shared global responsibility. An effective response to forced displacement relies upon international cooperation. The UK is not the only country facing challenges relating to people movements around the world, but British leadership at the multilateral level has an important role to play in finding solutions. As one of the largest donors to the UN refugee system, the UK can play an important role in beginning and leading debate on reforming and updating the global refugee system.

The majority of the world's refugees are hosted by low and middle-income countries that neighbour conflict and crisis. They are in countries like Jordan, Pakistan, Uganda, and Colombia. Their ability to access protection, and whether they embark on long journeys to reach safety, is shaped by the opportunities that are available to them close to home.

The FCDO plays a central role to play in delivering assistance, protection, and solutions to displaced people around the world. It should do so through foreign policy, addressing the root causes of displacement through engagement with conflict resolution, peace-building, and addressing the causes of state fragility. It should also do so through using humanitarian and development assistance to improve refugees' access to rights and opportunities in cities and refugee camps in host countries in their regions of origin. By supporting host countries around the world, it incentivises countries to keep their borders open to refugees and to adopt inclusive and progressive refugee policies.

It is also important that the FCDO builds strategies to address push factors relating to displacement. This begins with mainstreaming considerations of displacement into all aspects of foreign policy, considering how dynamics of conflict and state fragility in countries of origin contribute to internal and cross-border displacement. It can also consider ways in which trade policies and development assistance can be used to influence refugees' access to protection and solutions within first countries of asylum.

In the past, the UK has played an important leadership role in global refugee policy. We are one of the founding signatories of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and earliest members of UNHCR's Executive Committee. In 1959-60, the UK led the first-ever World Refugee Year under Harold Macmillan, mobilising countries around the world to end the legacy of displacement created by the Second World War and raising funds for emerging refugee crises around the world.^{vii} In 2016, the UK's London Summit, led to the Jordan Compact, which mobilised countries around the world to open-up labour market opportunities for Syrian refugees.^{viii}

By engaging with the global refugee system, the UK can shape its future. The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees defines who is a 'refugee', and the rights to which refugees are entitled. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) supports states to meet their obligations under

the Convention, and coordinates assistance to refugees around the world. This multilateral framework is indispensable and plays an important strategic role in ensuring that all states around the world reciprocally commit to respect the rights of refugees.

However, the existing multilateral framework does not answer every challenge currently faced by the UK and the wider world. In particular, it is ambiguous on the allocation of responsibilities between states and many of the requirements of states faced by large or mixed people movements. Important ambiguities include 1) the role of the 'safe third country' principle (i.e. the conditions under which refugees can move onwards from another safe country), 2) the responsibility to support other host countries around the world (e.g. the UK's obligation to support Poland during the Ukraine crisis), 3) guidance on return and readmission procedures, 4) eligibility for many people fleeing new drivers of displacement (e.g. natural disasters and generalised violence).

Rather than retreat into unilateralism or non-compliance with international refugee law, the UK should play a leading role in committing to the UN Convention on Refugees and seeking to shape multilateral efforts. Britain's recent policy to remove people seeking asylum to Rwanda for this reason risks being counter-productive, undermining the system on which the UK and other democracies rely in times of global crisis. The Rwanda plan proposed to detain people seeking asylum who cross the English Channel and then forcibly send them to Rwanda on a 'one-way-ticket', transferring full responsibility to Rwanda.

Similar past precedents, such as Australia's offshore processing of people seeking asylum on Nauru and Papua New Guinea, suggest that the Rwanda plan is likely to be extremely costly and ineffective, weakening the global refugee system, while undermining the UK's leadership in the international community.^{ix} The UK courts found that some individuals could not be removed, and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found that other people should not be removed until a judicial review challenging the legality of the policy was heard. UNHCR has argued that the policies are incompatible with international law, and evidence suggests that its impact on deterrence may be limited. The plan was a symptom of a broader trend: towards using unilateral and bilateral solutions to address problems that can only truly be solved through multilateral engagement.

There are many more constructive ways in which the UK can work multilaterally, rather than just unilaterally or bilaterally. In the first instance, it is important that the UK makes a renewed commitment to the UN Convention on Refugees by engaging more actively in the Global Compact on Refugees, launched by the UN in 2018, and the Global Refugee Forum. The Compact was based on a UN-led process, was non-binding and provides a mechanism for states to formally pledge their individual commitments to refugee protection. It also focuses on support for refugees in low and middle-income regions of the world.^x Previous pledges the UK made such as resettling 5,000 refugees in the first year of the UK Resettlement Scheme have not been followed through leading to a loss of international credibility so the importance of making a renewed commitment must not be overlooked. The upcoming Global Refugee Forum in 2024 provides an opportunity for the UK to make a strong contribution both in terms of its own pledges and marshalling collective efforts.

At the same time for the UK and EU, it is important to recognise that there remains a gap in clarifying the allocation of state responsibilities in areas in which existing international law is ambiguous. To address this one possibility could be to explore developing a new state-led, binding refugee solidarity pact, which would build upon the existing refugee system, but update it to address emerging challenges. A state-led solidarity pact could provide a new intergovernmental framework that is consistent with, and builds upon, existing international law, addressing areas in which inter-state responsibility is inadequately defined.

It would agree on key questions relating to the allocation of state responsibility for refugees, which are inadequately addressed or highly contested within existing refugee law. These might include the conditions under which the safe third country principle applies, the responsibility to support other host countries during a large-scale refugee crisis, shared expectations on return and readmission, and eligibility criteria for people fleeing drivers of displacement that fall outside the dominant interpretation of a 'refugee' in international law.

This type of 'solidarity pact', agreed by a coalition-of-the-willing of major donor and host countries, should strengthen multilateral commitment to refugee protection while also meeting many of the UK's strategic interests. It could address key questions such as 'safe third country', return and readmission, and be buttressed by a Global Refugee Fund administered by the coalition to support host countries affected by large refugee movements.^{xi} The UK is well placed to lead this type of reform given its track record of convening major global refugee summits, as well as chairing and agenda-setting within relevant informal groups such as the Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum, and Refugees (IGC). These are just examples of the many ways in which the UK can remain at the heart of shaping the multilateral response to forced displacement.

The UK can also lead gradual reform of UNHCR processes, ensuring that they remain innovative and relevant. Areas in which it might lead reform include reforms of how states design their resettlement systems, including the referral process, how states coordinate on resettlement, and the ways in which refugees are matched with receiving country preferences. The UK has already co-signed the UNHCR Resettlement Strategy which includes many of these proposals. The FCDO also has a significant contribution to make to strengthen UNHCR's engagement with international development, including by strengthening collaboration with the business sector to improve refugees' access to jobs and education around the world. But to shape reform, the UK has to play a leadership role from within the global refugee system. It can also lead through international cooperation by working to support refugee-hosting countries around the world, using its convening power to chair and influence discussions within relevant international forums, and by consistently innovating to deliver refugee protection that is adapted to the challenges of the contemporary world.

Ensuring Safe and Orderly Passage

The UK needs to ensure that there is a safe, fair, and orderly way for people fleeing war and persecution to reach our shores.

Managing spontaneous arrivals of people seeking asylum is one of the most challenging strategic and operational issues facing policy-makers around the world. It relies upon finding ways to ensure refugees can access sanctuary, while also managing borders. And this is particularly difficult when refugees rely upon the same migration routes as people who may not be in need of international protection. Creating effective asylum policies relies upon international cooperation. The use of people smugglers is a direct consequence of insufficient safe routes to the UK for people seeking protection.

However, there is disagreement on both the principles that should underpin asylum and the practices that are effective. For example, in the UK context the 'safe third country' principle, which suggests that refugees should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, has particularly important implications. It calls into question whether the fact of going through France – a safe country – means that all people seeking asylum crossing the English Channel should be France's responsibility. However, the 'safe third country' principle in international law is highly contested, even though it is a part of the EU's Common European Asylum System (CEAS). While the government might present 'safe third country' as a matter of common sense, for it to be legal under international law, any application of the 'safe third country' principle would need to be negotiated with France or other relevant countries.

In a post-Brexit world, managing asylum effectively relies upon the UK's working constructively with France and the European Union. The English Channel needs to be managed but this can only happen in a way that is based upon cooperating bilaterally or between Britain and the European Union, and working pragmatically and competently to find solutions that reconcile security and human rights. There are no obvious precedents available that indicate that chaotic border crossings can be resolved without the active participation of governing bodies on both side of a border.

Orderly, fair, and competent solutions can be found to reduce the English Channel boat crossings. This relies upon exploring mechanisms for preliminary assessment of UK asylum applications on French soil at designated 'hot spots' in Northern France. Options could be either a) 'joint' Anglo-French processing centres or b) 'juxtaposed' (i.e. separate but coordinated) national processing centres on French soil. In order to make either approach work, the UK and France would need to agree shared principles for eligibility and responsibility-sharing.

As a first step, a system of preliminary assessment could ensure that those people with family connections are fast-tracked and safely transferred to the UK and those who have made an asylum claim in France (or elsewhere in the EU) are dealt with in the French system. This would open up a safe route for a defined group of people, reducing the need to resort to people smugglers.

For those who would fall outside these categories, the UK and France could explore shared principles for recognition, responsibility-sharing, and return. Joint (or juxtaposed) assessment centres would need to provide rapid good quality assessments of people's asylum claims. These could be open, consular centres at which people would be actively informed of their right to make an asylum claim and have access to independent expert legal advice and support provided by NGOs.

For people not in need of international protection (or even some refugees), assessment centres could offer access to other forms of visa, whether employment, education, or family reunification visas. For example, during the Ukraine crisis a significant number of Ukrainians arrived in the UK on visas outside of the two bespoke schemes set up by the UK government. In the context of the English Channel, there is also earlier precedent of David Blunkett as Home Secretary in 2002, using low-skilled employment visas to clear the makeshift Sangatte camps near Calais. 1,200 Iraqi Kurdish and Afghan individuals with family links to the UK were offered four-year work visas to come to the UK and supported through Job Centre Plus to find work in the UK.^{xii}

For those not in need of international protection, and for whom other visa pathways are unavailable, return is an important part of enabling the asylum process to retain credibility and public trust. However, it is crucial that returns only takes place after accurate good quality thorough refugee status determination. Investment is needed to ensure that status determination within assessment centres is of high-quality while still being rapid enough that people do not have incentives to resort to human smuggling networks.

For more complex cases in which more rapid assessment within the processing centres was not possible, or in which there was a strong basis for legal appeal, a pre-screening process could be established to provide people with humanitarian visas that allow safe passage to the UK, where they would reside pending the outcome of their asylum claims.

All of this depends upon effective diplomacy, requiring the UK to negotiate with France and other European countries to agree on issues such sharing responsibility for people seeking asylum and costs to be borne by each country. France and the UK might need to agree to each take responsibility for a designated proportion of those who are recognised as in need of international protection, ensuring that everyone who is entitled to protection is able to find sanctuary.

Even if a joint assessment centre model is implemented, it is important to recognise that some people will continue to bypass the centres and travel directly to the UK via smuggling networks and that they should be given a fair hearing. For people seeking asylum who arrive in the UK, it is important that the UK respects the human right to seek asylum, and that it provides fast and fair procedures, investing in the training and staffing needed to improve the speed of decision-making whilst also maintaining the quality.

Attempts to tackle people smuggling need to be multi-faceted. In addition to faster processing of claims, greater information is needed, including by incentivising information sharing from within smuggling networks. And yet, compared to investment in managing other forms of smuggling, relating to drugs, for example, overall government investment in managing people

movement is inadequately low. The UK needs to build greater dedicated capacity for intelligence and law enforcement relating to smuggling, while working closely with Europol.

It is also essential that, regardless of status, all people seeking asylum are treated with compassion and in accordance with their human rights. There will inevitably be people who are not refugees, but for whom it will not be possible to establish their identity or nationality, or for whom no third-country return agreement exists. When returns are possible, they should be accompanied by support for reintegration into the societies to which we send people. A significant amount of research exists on how to support people with financial assistance to return voluntarily with dignity, enabling returnees to socially and economically integrate upon return to their country-of-origin.

Beyond asylum, there is a need to strengthen resettlement, family reunion and complementary pathways for refugees to come to the UK. In recent years, the UK has introduced a community sponsorship resettlement scheme, adapted from Canada's private sponsorship of resettlement model. Early indications suggest that it can be effective in mobilising community support, reducing opposition to the intake of refugees.^{xiii} During the Ukraine crisis, the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme underscored the level of public willingness to support refugees at a community level and introduced a historic first where individuals could 'name' refugees, with the government screening and ensuring security vetting is undertaken. There is much to recommend the scheme, which in some ways is ingenious and unique, but it was put in place at speed and it is vital to identify the learning and build any future model based on recognised best practice to realise the full potential and benefit. Some of the issues to consider include improving safeguarding, strengthening welcoming infrastructure to support and train hosts, and engaging the wider community level including by involving refugees from all backgrounds.

The UK has also successfully piloted the use of labour migration pathways for refugees from other parts of the world. Working with the NGO Talent Beyond Boundaries it has provided labour migration visas to health workers from refugee backgrounds in the Middle East to work within the NHS, including most notably within the Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust.^{xiv} There is significant scope to expand such complementary schemes from hundreds to thousands, in ways that can create opportunities for refugee integration in areas in which we have labour shortages.

In addition, the UK should further strengthen its traditional refugee resettlement schemes, such as the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) that built upon the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) for Syrian refugees created in 2015. Furthermore, the UK should maximise the strategic use of resettlement, for example thinking through the targeting mix of resettlement places to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and to leverage a commitment to durable solutions by other refugee hosting countries around the world, while also working through where additional value can be best used—for instance that the most vulnerable may be inappropriate for community hosting.

Supporting Integration

The UK needs a coherent whole-of-government approach to deliver effective refugee integration.

Refugee integration takes place mainly within local communities, and it relies upon a range of public services, including housing, education, health and social care. At central government level, this requires joined-up policymaking across the Home Office. The Ministry of Levelling-Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC), the Department for Education, and the Department of Health and Social Care. It also requires joined-up thinking between central government and local authorities.

For too long, community-level responses in the UK have been in crisis. 37,000 refugees and people seeking asylum are in sub-standard accommodation, often requiring the Home Office and local authorities to spend significant sums on hotel or other temporary accommodation, and sometimes leaving people seeking asylum homeless.^{xv} Employment opportunities and related service provision, such as access to language training and vocational courses are frequently inadequate for ensuring labour market integration. Meanwhile, some local authorities feel that education, and health and social care facilities are under-resourced when there are increases in demand.

An important aspect of integration is addressing backlogs and waiting time in the asylum system. The current backlog at the end of June 2022 was nearly 120,000 people awaiting an initial decision, over the double the number at the end of 2019.^{xvi} Nearly three quarters have been waiting for more than six months and there is currently a 20-week wait to even register an asylum claim. This backlog has been growing for the past decade, leaving people's lives in limbo with damaging impacts for individuals, families, and receiving communities. There are a range of policies that could quickly and easily address this. For example, for those from countries that are known to be unsafe or for unaccompanied children, refugee status might be provided on a prima facie basis with mechanisms for fast-tracking the assessment of claims. In 2003, the UK used fast-tracked claims to clear backlogs during David Blunkett's term as Home Secretary, alleviating pressure on the asylum system. The scheme offered 'indefinite leave to remain' to 15,000 families who had arrived more than three years earlier.^{xvii} In 2006, the then Home Secretary established the Case Resolution Directorate (CRD) to process a backlog of around 500,000 unresolved cases. Under the CRD 190,000 people received a decision on their case, with 172,000 people receiving a grant of leave before it closed in 2011.^{xviii} There are opportunities to learn from this experience.

Establishing a dedicated backlog clearance team and undertaking a rapid one-off (or time-bound) group-based assessment for nationalities for whom refugee recognition rates are high would take immediate pressure off the asylum system, reducing costs, and enabling rapid and efficient decision-making to resume.

Clear and coherent refugee policy is needed at a local community level. In order to thrive, refugees and people seeking asylum need security of housing and access to work. It is also important that local constituents share in these benefits, so as to avoid creating animosity or

backlash at the local level. Part of the Levelling-Up agenda should include prioritising support for local authorities that commit to receive higher levels of people seeking asylum and refugees, and have coherent plans for refugee integration. Central government should create standards for effective refugee integration strategies, with direct earmarked funding for local authorities, linked to clearly defined key performance indicators as part of a national refugee integration strategy.

More coherent policies and greater support for local authorities could change public narratives. A significant source of public concern about asylum comes from the perception of resource competition, in relation to housing, public services, and employment. Evidence shows that public support for refugees is much greater when they are perceived to contribute economically to receiving communities. With the right policies, refugee-receiving communities can be supported to share in and recognise the benefits of welcoming refugees. Such policies include earmarked funding for local authorities that receive refugees, and best practice of how councils can mainstream consideration of refugee and receiving community needs within their service delivery. This in turn may contribute to breaking the negative media-political cycle that stigmatises people seeking asylum.

This also relies upon informing the public, ensuring that communities understand who is coming from where, and why. It relies upon using data accurately and in ways that does not conflate total immigration with the number of people seeking asylum, which is only around 5% of immigration into the UK.^{xix} Local authorities and public service providers should be supported with key information and consistent language to explain and articulate the situation of people seeking asylum and refugees within their community.

Local civil society organisations and businesses also have an important role to play. From conversation clubs and faith-based organisations to NGOs offering training and mentorship, civil society across the country can contribute to integration outcomes, and they should be systematically included in planning at community level. The UK's adoption of the community-sponsorship model for resettled refugees provides a valuable framework for increasing local participation in integrating refugees and people seeking asylum.

A crucial step towards integration is strengthening the right to work for people seeking asylum. At the moment, people seeking asylum arriving in the UK are not allowed to work for the first 12-months following arrival and then face limitations in terms of the type of work they can do. This negatively effects socio-economic integration and increases the public perception that people seeking asylum are dependent on the welfare state.^{xx}

Evidence shows that receiving communities have much more positive attitudes towards refugees when they perceive them to make an economic contribution.^{xxi} There is also no evidence that allowing people seeking asylum the right to work creates a pull factor that increases immigration.^{xxii} The UK has already offered Ukrainian refugees the immediate right to work upon arrival, and work rights should be expanded for asylum seekers, offering them a pathway to autonomy and reducing reliance on the state. As a next step, the right to work should be available 6-months after arrival and applied to all employment sectors, rather than limited to shortage sectors.

Improving Governance

The UK needs to reform the governance of refugee policy to improve coherence, accountability, and culture across government.

National refugee policy requires a whole-of-government approach to enable long-term planning. At the moment refugee policy is dominated by a single and dominant department, the Home Office. This leads to an over-prioritisation of security and border control within refugee policy, downplaying the important role of other parts of government. Refugee policy is not just about border control.

There is a need for culture change within the Home Office in relation to the management of asylum and immigration. The Wendy Williams Windrush inquiry revealed the distorting effects on Home Office culture created since the early 2000s by attempts to introduce a ‘hostile environment’ to the UK.^{xxiii} She highlighted the greater need for the Home Office to adopt a culture capable of seeing the ‘face behind the case’. Similarly, The Home Office’s early handling of the Ukraine response, both in terms of visa access and ‘Homes for Ukraine’ led to public criticism, although improvements in the scheme showed that, at its best, the Home Office has the potential to be effective.

There is a need to improve coordination across government, and strengthening mechanisms of accountability. The recent short term creation of a Minister for Refugees within the Ministry of Levelling-Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC) was a step in the right direction, although that Minister’s role was limited to the Afghan and Ukrainian schemes. There should be a Cabinet Committee on Refugees to enable stronger coherence across government and accountability to Cabinet. Similar Cabinet Committees were created for the Ukraine and Afghanistan crises for instance. The creation of DLUHC with a Minister for Refugees focusing not just on one particular group of refugees offers an opportunity to improve coordination with local authorities.

Stronger sources of independent oversight of national refugee policy are required in order to ensure that policy is aligned with evidence, informed by expertise, and appropriately balances security and human rights considerations. Options include an independent government body, along the lines of an Independent Refugee Policy Commissioner/Commission, with parallels to other areas such as the UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, or the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales. Similar structures exist elsewhere in relation to refugee policy; for example, through Sweden’s quasi-independent ‘Governing Board’ and ‘Scientific Advisory Board’, which offer oversight as well as independent expertise on evidence-based policy for the Swedish International Development Agency, which oversees humanitarian policy.

Parliamentary oversight by Westminster (as well as other representative bodies such as the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, and Cities) should also be strengthened. In the UK, Parliament plays little role in overseeing the asylum and immigration system compared to most other countries. At the moment, a significant amount of rule-making relating to asylum comes in the form of Home Office executive privilege via secondary legislation. This highly

centralised system of immigration rule-making gives considerable discretion to the Home Office, limiting effective collaboration and consultation across government and society. The Home Affairs Select Committee's powers could, for example, be enhanced to offer better and more regular scrutiny of secondary legislation and immigration rulemaking by the Home Office. This is especially important within a post-Brexit context in which significant amounts of immigration, refugee, and asylum law will need ongoing reform in the years to come.^{xxiv}

Refugee policy must be seen as a cross-cutting political and societal issue, with implications for foreign policy, public services, and local government. While the Home Office has an important role to play, refugee policy needs to be shaped by concerns that go beyond the remit of any single government department.

Conclusion

The forced displacement of people is one of the defining challenges of our time. It represents a major challenge for policy-makers, for which there are no simple solutions. In order to guide action, the UK needs to create its own national refugee policy – one that is principled, pragmatic, and effective.

A clearly articulated national refugee policy has the potential to restore public confidence in our asylum system, revitalise our global reputation, and ensure refugees' access to safety and dignity. In this paper, we have outlined the basis of what such a policy could look like, and what it would mean for the role of Government, globally, nationally, and locally. In order to make this vision a reality, we all need to work together, across sectors, in ways that transcend party politics.

- ⁱ See research conducted by Ipsos for British Future <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/three-in-four-britons-back-principle-giving-refuge-to-those-fleeing-war-or-persecution>
- ⁱⁱ UNHCR reported that in 2021, 72% of refugees find sanctuary in a neighbouring country. With the Ukraine crisis, this proportion may have increased slightly. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>
- ⁱⁱⁱ According to UNHCR, there were 7 million refugees in Europe (including Turkey's 3.8 million) at the end of 2021. In the first half of 2022, a further 6 million Ukrainian refugees entered European countries.
- ^{iv} Kerrie Holloway and Christopher Smart with Diego Faures, Claire Kumar and Amy Leach (2021), 'Public and Political Narratives on Refugees and Other Migrants: UK country profile', (London: ODI), October 2021
- ^v Steve Ballinger (2022), 'Where is public opinion on refugee protection?', British Future, <https://www.britishfuture.org/where-is-public-opinion-on-refugee-protection/>
- ^{vi} See, for example, YouGov polling on the most important electoral issues, according to voters: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country?crossBreak=conservative>
- ^{vii} Peter Gatrell (2011). *Free World? The Campaign to Save the World's Refugees, 1956-1963*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- ^{viii} Veronique Barbelet, Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Dina Mansour-Ille (2018), 'The Jordan Compact Lessons learnt and implications for future refugee compacts' (London: ODI), <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/12058.pdf>
- ^{ix} Australia's Asylum Seeker Resource Centre produced a joint report with other NGOs estimating the costs of Australia's offshore processing model at around £300,000 per year per person, <https://asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/1912-At-What-Cost-report.pdf>
- ^x For an overview of the Global Compact on Refugees, see, for example: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>
- ^{xi} This would have the benefit of offering multi-year funding, being available to support middle and high income countries if needed, and supporting the strategic interests of the group.
- ^{xii} Nick Pearce (2015), 'Dusting off the Sangatte playbook: A humane, practical course of action in Calais', <https://www.ippr.org/blog/dusting-off-the-sangatte-playbook-a-humane-practical-course-of-action-in-calais>
- ^{xiii} Research conducted by More in Common in November 2021 on attitudes towards increasing the intake of Afghan refugees found that when this intake was framed through the lens of community sponsorship, the number of people in support increased by 4 per cent and against fell by 10 per cent. Overall, support for a larger intake shifted from 44-44 to 48-34 per cent.
- ^{xiv} NHS Employers (2021), 'Supporting Refugees into Employment with Talent Beyond Boundaries', <https://www.nhsemployers.org/news/supporting-refugees-employment-talent-beyond-boundaries>
- ^{xv} BBC (2022), 'UK hotel bill for 37,000 migrants actually £4.7m a day, Home Office says', 3 February, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-60249130>
- ^{xvi} According to Home Office data released in August 2022 at the end of June 2022 there were 117,945 people awaiting an initial decision. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets#asylum-applications-decisions-and-resettlement>
- ^{xvii} The Guardian (2003), 'Asylum Amnesty for 50,000 Heralds Tough New Measures', 25 October, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/oct/25/immigrationandpublicservices.immigration>
- ^{xviii} John Vine (Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration) published a report on the CRD's work in 2012, which is available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/546576/UK-Border-Agency's-handling-of-legacy-asylum-and-migration-cases-22.11.2012.pdf
- ^{xix} An estimated 388,000 foreign-born people living in the UK in 2019 originally came to the UK to seek asylum, according to Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey. This made up 5% of the UK's foreign-born population in 2019 of 9.48 million, and 0.6% of the UK's total 2019 resident population of around 67 million. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>
- ^{xx} Moritz Marbach, Jens Hainmueller & Dominik Hangartner (2018), 'The Long-Term Impact of Employment Bans on the Economic Integration of Refugees' *Science Advances* 4(9), DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aap9519
- ^{xxi} Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller & Dominik Hangartner (2016). 'How economic, humanitarian, and religious concerns shape European attitudes toward asylum seekers'. *Science*, 354(6309), 217-222.
- ^{xxii} Lucy Mayblin (2016). 'Complexity reduction and policy consensus: Asylum seekers, the right to work, and the "pull factor" thesis in the UK context', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18(4), 812-828.
- ^{xxiii} 'Independent report: Windrush Lessons Learned Review by Wendy Williams' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/windrush-lessons-learned-review>
- ^{xxiv} Will Somerville and Alasdair Murray (2018), 'Building the Future: Immigration and Integration in the Next Decade', 21 September 2018, www.rampproject.org/reports