



# BRIEFING

## Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the UK

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AUTHORS: Nuni Jorgensen  
Mihnea V. Cuibus  
Peter William Walsh  
Madeleine Sumption  
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**COMPAS**  
Centre on Migration,  
Policy & Society



This briefing examines the migration of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees to the UK. It presents statistics on the number of Afghans arriving via small boat, and those given protection in the UK under the two main resettlement schemes for Afghans: the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).

## Key Points

Around 29,000 people received settlement in the UK under the two main schemes for resettling Afghans, as of 30 June 2024. Around half arrived in the third quarter of 2021, around the time of the evacuation.

Afghans were the top nationality among small boat arrivals in 2023. Between April 2022 and June 2023, more Afghans reached the UK by small boat than through the bespoke resettlement schemes.

The number of Afghans seeking asylum also rose sharply after the Taliban took power and nearly all are now granted protection in the UK.

The South East, London, and the West Midlands received the most people under the Afghan schemes. Birmingham, Leeds, and Bristol were the local authorities that received the most Afghan refugees.

The share of those resettled under the Afghan schemes living in temporary accommodation fell from 38% to 12% in the year to 30 June 2024.

Around half of Afghans who arrived under humanitarian visa routes were children. Adults arriving under the schemes were balanced in terms of gender. This is similar to other resettlement schemes but contrasts with asylum seekers, who are predominantly adult men.

Other European countries have also seen an increase in Afghan asylum claimants since the fall of Kabul. The UK ranks fourth at the European level, although it receives comparatively fewer applications relative to the size of its population.

In June 2024, almost ten million Afghans were displaced globally, with 90% internally displaced within Afghanistan or in Iran or Pakistan

## Understanding the policy

There are five main routes through which displaced Afghans are likely to end up living in the UK following the fall of Kabul. Two are humanitarian visa schemes for Afghan nationals and their family members, opened in response to the fall of Kabul in the summer of 2021. The remaining three routes are for people of any nationality rather than Afghans specifically, and have long formed a central part of the UK's protection system.

- **[Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy](#)** (ARAP). Launched on 1 April 2021, this is for Afghan citizens (and their family members) who worked as interpreters or other staff for the UK in Afghanistan and were hence at risk of reprisal from the Taliban. Many of these were evacuated from the country during Operation Pitting. The scheme will run indefinitely and has no limit on numbers. It can be applied for online.

- **[Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme](#)** (ACRS). Opened on 6 January 2022, ACRS comprises three schemes or ‘pathways’. They cover people who came to the UK under the evacuation in summer 2021 (Pathway 1), and other vulnerable Afghans who are at risk in Afghanistan or have already fled to neighbouring countries (Pathways 2 and 3). Under Pathway 2, the UN selects Afghan refugees for resettlement. Pathway 3 resettles British Council contractors, employees of GardaWorld (a security contractor), and alumni of Chevening, the UK government’s international scholarships and fellowships programme.
- **Asylum system.** Some Afghans will make their own way to the UK and claim asylum through the normal asylum process, which requires making an in-country application. Afghans were one of five nationalities subject to “[streamlined asylum processing](#)”, meaning those who submitted their claim before 28 June 2022 would typically have their asylum claim determined on the basis of a completed questionnaire rather than a face-to-face interview. This was later extended to those submitting claims before 7 March 2023.
- **Other resettlement routes.** Afghan nationals can also come to the UK through other resettlement routes not specific to any nationality, such as the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), Mandate scheme, or the Community Sponsorship Scheme. However, the number of Afghans using other resettlement routes has remained very small since the launch of ARAP and ACRS.
- **Family migration and refugee family reunion.** Some Afghans will enter the UK as close family members of an Afghan national already in the country. The available route depends on whether the main applicant in the UK has refugee status. Those resettled by the UN or granted asylum or humanitarian protection are eligible for refugee family reunion, which does not have an income requirement or visa fees. People relocated through ARAP and ACRS Pathways 1 and 3 do not receive refugee status. In July 2024, a new [Separated Family Pathway](#) was introduced to enable Afghans who arrived in the UK following the evacuation to be joined in the UK by their immediate family. Previously, unless their partner and children were included in their initial application, they had to apply through the regular family migration route, which requires meeting income thresholds and paying visa fees.

The government refers to ARAP as a relocation programme, not a resettlement scheme, because it does not involve the UN selecting who will be eligible to enter the UK. For the purposes of this briefing, however, both ARAP and ACRS are referred to as resettlement schemes or ‘humanitarian visa routes’.

People given status in the UK under ARAP or ACRS are granted settlement on arrival. This grants the right to study, work, use public services such as the NHS, and claim benefits. After five years in the UK, those given status under these routes will be entitled to apply for British citizenship, under the usual existing rules and subject to the normal application fees.

### How are Afghans selected under ARAP?

ARAP runs indefinitely, is uncapped, and is targeted at Afghan citizens who worked with the UK in Afghanistan and face threats of Taliban reprisal. It also includes the partner and dependent children of the main applicant and, in some circumstances, additional family members. Afghan citizens who think they meet the scheme’s eligibility criteria must apply to it directly.

There are several [categories](#) of people eligible for relocation under ARAP. These include people who were employed by the UK Government in Afghanistan on or after 1 October 2021; those who were contracted to provide linguistic services for the UK’s Armed Forces in Afghanistan; and those who worked with a UK Government department.

Once an applicant’s eligibility is checked and approved by the relevant government department (MOD or FCDO), they must attend a visa application centre (VAC) to enrol their biometrics. There are no VACs in Afghanistan, which means that people must travel to Pakistan instead. The security and validity checks are completed by the Home Office, which considers whether the applicant poses a potential risk to the UK.

## How are Afghan refugees selected under ACRS?

ACRS [prioritises](#) two categories of people: (1) those who have assisted UK efforts in Afghanistan and “stood up for values such as democracy, women’s rights, freedom of speech, and the rule of law” (for example, judges, women’s rights activists, academics, journalists); and (2) vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT people). ACRS beneficiaries will be referred for resettlement to the UK under one of three pathways:

*Pathway 1.* This is for people who arrived under the UK’s evacuation programme, Operation Pitting, which ran from mid-to-late August 2021. These were the first people to be resettled under ACRS. People notified that they were eligible for evacuation but who were not able to board flights will be offered a place on the scheme if they later come to the UK. On 30 July 2024, a new route was added to Pathway 1: ACRS Pathway 1 Stage 2: Separated Families. In cases where a person arrived in the UK during the evacuation without their family, this route enables them to be joined by their immediate family in the UK.

*Pathway 2.* The UN selects Afghan refugees for resettlement to the UK, in the same way that it did for the Syrian scheme and as it does for the UK Resettlement Scheme.

*Pathway 3.* This is [designed](#) for “people at risk who supported the UK and international community effort in Afghanistan, and people who are particularly vulnerable, such as women and girls at risk and members of minority groups”. This pathway resettled people (and their eligible family members) from three groups: British Council contractors, employees of GardaWorld (a security contractor), and alumni of Chevening, the UK government’s international scholarships and fellowships programme.

Unlike ARAP, the government capped ACRS admissions at 20,000 individuals, which includes family members and Afghans already evacuated during Operation Pitting in 2021.

Those who come to the UK under Pathways 1 and 2 must be referred by the UK government or the UNHCR, respectively, which means that they cannot apply directly to the schemes. For Pathway 3, people needed to have submitted an expression of interest to the FCDO, but this process closed on August 2022. The government has [said](#) that in the future it will work with international partners and NGOs to welcome wider groups of Afghans at risk under Pathway 3. As of August 2022, the details of this second stage had not been laid out yet.

## Evaluations of the Afghan resettlement programmes

Several reports have evaluated the Afghan schemes. A 2023 report by Justice UK, a human rights charity, argued that the schemes’ eligibility criteria were too narrow and unclear. For example, the ARAP’s requirement that applicants should have a “publicly recognisable” role excluded many workers who aided UK operations in informal capacities. Overall, the evaluation argued that the wording employed in the ARAP policy – that Afghan workers should be under “imminent risk” and have contributed to the “success of UK operations” – is too subjective and assigns too much discretion to decision makers.

A 2023 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) [report](#) on the Afghan schemes also suggested that the programmes lacked transparency. The evaluation found that there were often no assurance checks in place to guarantee the quality of decisions and that policy guidelines updates were not always published. Additionally, the evaluation highlighted that ARAP and ACRS applicants have no point of contact to inquire about the status of their application, are not assigned a caseworker, and are often not informed about policy updates.

The Justice UK report, the ICIBI evaluation and a report published by the Afghan Pro Bono Initiative (a collaboration between refugee charities and immigration lawyers) were also critical of some of the application requirements under ARAP and ACRS 1 and 3, such as the need to submit specific supporting documents and requirements to attend a VAC in-person in another country. They argued that the requirements caused delays in resettlement, made applicants incur additional expenses and put some applicants at risk during travel, particularly women and girls.

Following the ICIBI report, the HO issued a response letter in 2024 detailing changes made to the Afghan schemes, which included a more robust assurance regime and greater transparency in communicating policy updates to applicants.

### Understanding the evidence

This briefing mainly uses administrative data from the Home Office. Some of these data are published quarterly as part of the Home Office's official Immigration System Statistics release. These data are complemented in this briefing by provisional administrative information.

Notably, all data relating to the Afghan schemes, including those in the official quarterly statistics, are provisional and subject to change while work continues to ensure that all data related to relocated individuals are recorded on government systems.

Quarterly data on people given status under ARAP and ACRS refer to the quarter that the person arrived in the UK and not the quarter in which they received status.

## Around 29,000 people received settlement in the UK under the two main schemes for resettling Afghans, as of 30 June 2024

As of 30 June 2024, around 29,000 people received settlement under the two humanitarian visa schemes for resettling Afghans – ARAP, for interpreters and other staff who worked with British forces in Afghanistan, and ACRS, the UK's resettlement scheme for Afghans (see Understanding the Policy). Of these, 96% were Afghan nationals (Figure 1).

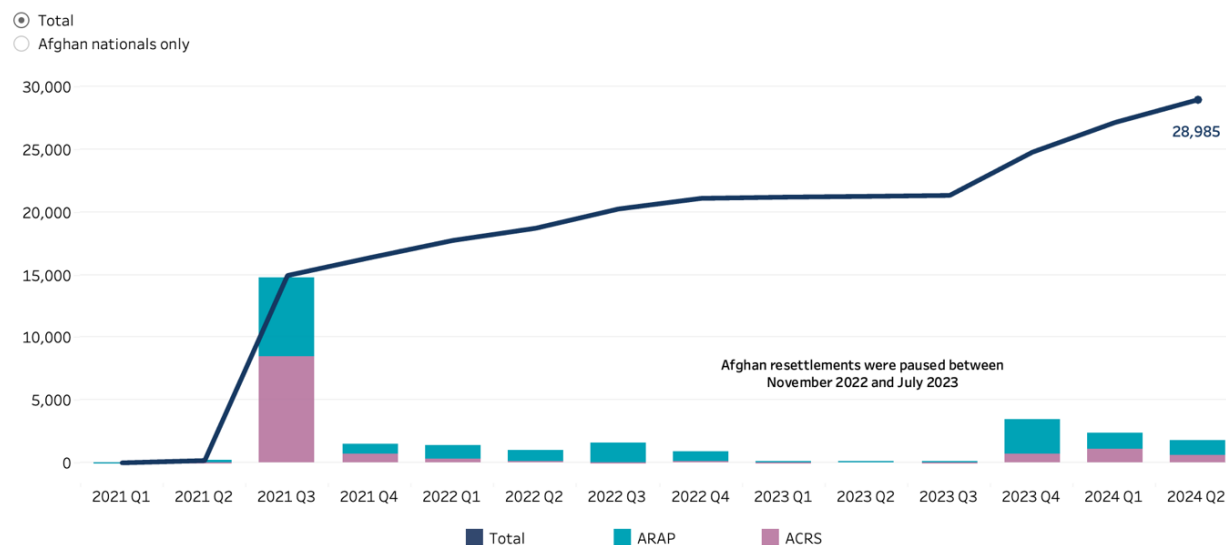
Around 51% of all arrivals under the schemes took place in one quarter – Q3 2021, which included the 'Operation Pitting' evacuation from Afghanistan (13–28 August). Provisional [operational data](#) show that 2,000 people were evacuated before the start of Operation Pitting, followed by another 15,000 during its 16 days (though the latter figure includes some people who did not need resettlement, such as British nationals).

Resettlements under ARAP and ACRS declined after the evacuation and were [paused](#) between November 2023 and July 2023, until secure accommodation could be provided for eligible applicants. However, they increased notably thereafter (Figure 1).

Figure 1

**Around half of all arrivals under the Afghan schemes happened during the quarter of the evacuation**

Number of arrivals under ARAP and ACRS, total at the end of quarter and by quarter and scheme, Q1 2021 to Q2 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending June 2024, Table Asy\_D02.  
 Notes: Total figures include a small number of people where the scheme of arrival was not known. Quarters refer to the quarter of arrival in the UK. Last days of each quarter: Q1 = 31 March, Q2 = 30 Jun, Q3 = 30 Sep, Q4 = 31 Dec.



As of 30 June 2024, more people had received settlement under ARAP (16,800 or 58%) than under ACRS (11,200 or 42%). Of the latter, most resettlements were under ACRS Pathway 1 (78%), which refers to those who arrived in the UK as part of the evacuation, or who were eligible for evacuation but who were unable to board flights and arrived later (see Understanding the Policy).

**Afghans were the top nationality among small boat arrivals in 2023**

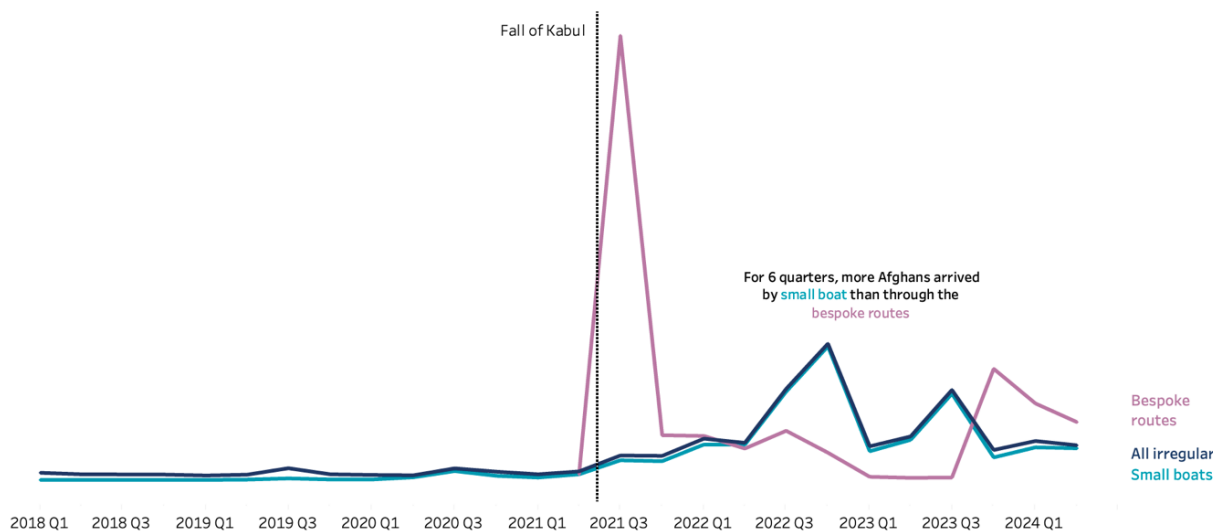
The number of Afghans arriving in the UK without authorisation rose substantially after the Taliban takeover in the summer of 2021, with most using small boats to cross the English Channel (Figure 2).

Between April 2022 and September 2023, more Afghans arrived in the UK by small boat than via the two humanitarian visa routes. In that period, around 13,500 Afghans arrived via small boat, compared to the 3,800 Afghans who were resettled through ARAP and ACRS. Resettlement on the two humanitarian visa schemes overtook small boat arrivals in the first half of 2024, however.

Figure 2

The number of Afghans arriving in the UK by small boat increased sharply after the summer of 2021

Number of Afghan nationals arriving in the UK, by method of entry and quarter, Q1 2018 to Q2 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending June 2024, Tables Irr\_D01 and Asy\_D02.  
 Notes: Q1 = 1 Jan to 31 Mar, Q2 = 1 Apr to 30 Jun, Q3 = 1 Jul to 30 Sep, Q4 = 1 Oct to 31 Dec. Bespoke routes include all Afghan nationals arriving under the ARAP and ACRS schemes.

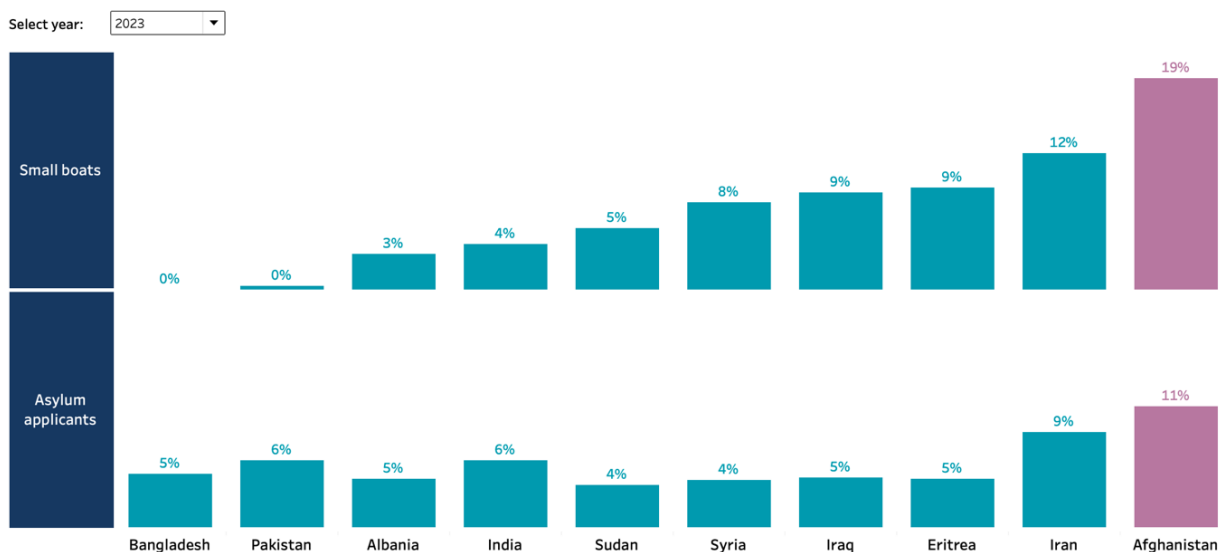


Afghans were the most common nationality among all those arriving in the UK via small boat in 2023, making up 19% of all arrivals (Figure 3). Most people who arrive via unauthorised routes go on to seek asylum in the UK, including those crossing the Channel in small boats. In 2023, Afghans were also the most common nationality among asylum applicants in the UK (though note that not).

Figure 3

In 2023, Afghans became the top nationality among asylum applicants and small boat arrivals

Percentage of all applicants or arrivals, by nationality and year, 2018 to 2023



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending June 2024, Tables Asy\_D01 and Irr\_D01.  
 Notes: Asylum applicants include both main applicants and dependants.



In part, the large number of Afghans arriving in the UK through irregular routes since 2021 may reflect the relatively small scale of the humanitarian visa schemes. Many Afghan nationals were not eligible for these schemes and instead sought other routes to enter the UK (see Understanding the Policy). By contrast, the [humanitarian visa schemes for Ukrainians](#) are relatively expansive, and only one Ukrainian has been recorded crossing in a small boat since the start of the war.

### Nearly all Afghan asylum applicants are granted protection in the UK

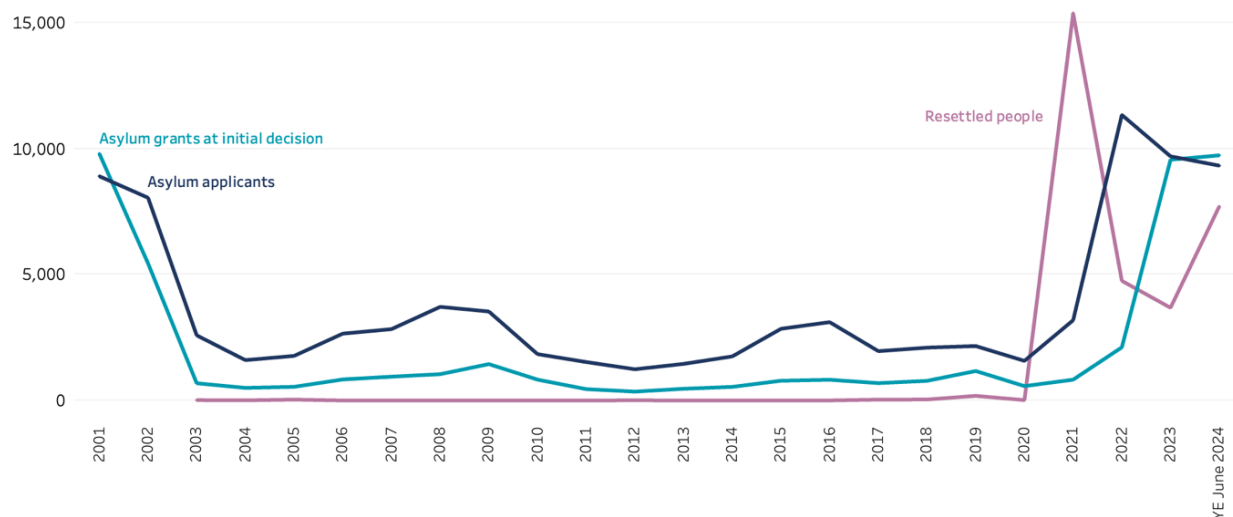
Asylum has been the main route for Afghans seeking protection in the UK since the start of 2022, despite the existence of humanitarian visa routes.

From 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2024, around 24,400 Afghan nationals claimed asylum in the UK, compared to roughly 12,600 Afghans who were resettled under ARAP, ACRS, and the UK’s resettlement schemes for all nationalities (Figure 4).

Figure 4

#### Except 2021, asylum has been the main route into the UK for Afghans

Number of Afghan asylum applicants, grants at initial decision, and resettled refugees, by year, 2001 to year ending 30 June 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending June 2024, Tables Asy\_D01 and Asy\_D02.  
 Notes: Asylum applicants, asylum grants, and resettled refugees comprise both main applicants and family members (known as ‘dependants’ in the datasets). Grants of asylum are at initial decision; the number of grants will be higher once successful appeals are taken into account. Asylum grants includes grants of asylum (i.e., full refugee status), humanitarian protection (HP); and all other forms of leave resulting from an asylum application. Resettled refugees includes *only* Afghan nationals, and comprises all Afghans resettled under the Afghan Schemes, and all other UK resettlement schemes.



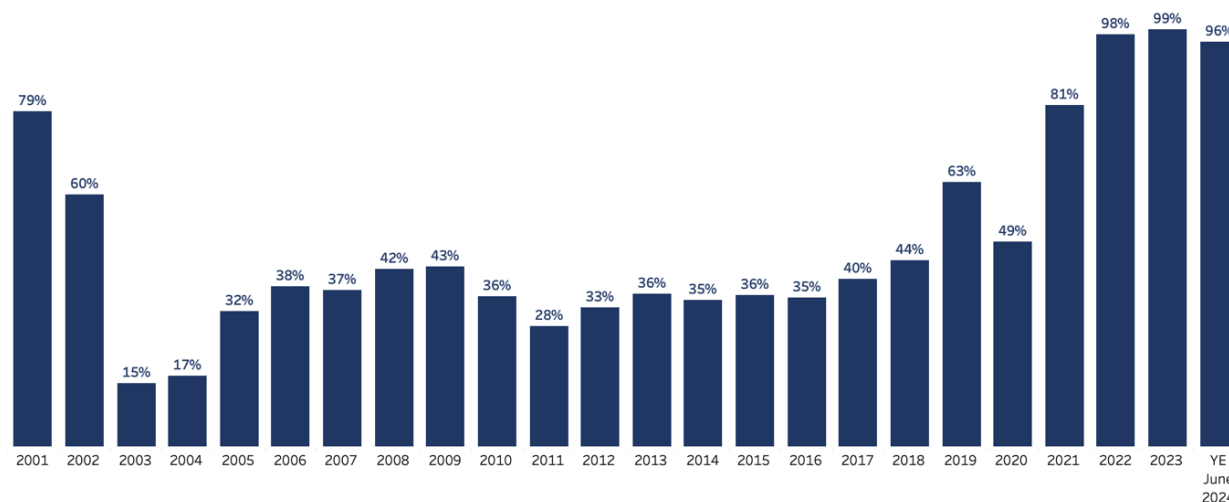
Nearly all Afghans who received an initial decision on their asylum application in 2023 were granted protection. The grant rate for Afghan asylum seekers has increased substantially since 2021 (Figure 5).



Figure 5

**The grant rate for Afghan asylum seekers has been above 95% since 2022**

Percentage of positive initial asylum decisions for Afghan nationals, by year, 2001 to year ending June 2024 (main applicants)



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending June 2024, Table Asy\_D02.

Notes: Positive decisions include grants of asylum (i.e., full refugee status) and all other grants of permission to stay. Withdrawn applications are excluded from the calculation. Grants are at initial decision; the number of grants will be higher once successful appeals are taken into account.



Around 17,600 Afghans who arrived by small boat between 2018 and 30 June 2024 applied for asylum (95% of the total). Of these, roughly 7,700 were granted protection or other leave as of 30 June 2024. Excluding withdrawn applications and administrative decisions, the grant rate stood at 95%, similar to that for all Afghan asylum seekers. Around 6,800 Afghans who arrived by small boat were still waiting for an initial decision as of 30 June 2024, and 71% of them had been waiting for more than six months.

**The South East, London, and the West Midlands received the most people under the Afghan schemes**

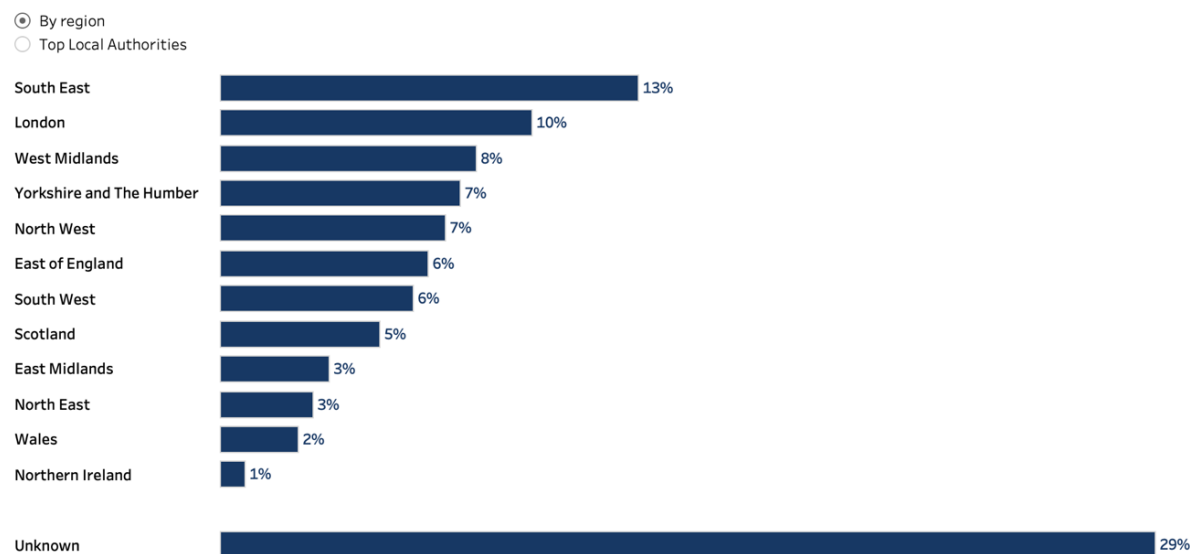
Under the humanitarian visa schemes for Afghans, the largest number of people were housed in the South East of England (13%), London (10%), and the West Midlands (8%). Resettlements were relatively uniform across the country, especially compared to the distribution of the pre-existing Afghan diaspora in the UK – at the time of the 2021 Census, 56% of the Afghan-born population in England and Wales was living in London.

The top three local authorities of residence for people resettled under the Afghan schemes were Birmingham, Leeds, and Bristol, each hosting more than 400 people (Figure 6).

Figure 6

**Where do people resettled under the Afghan schemes live?**

Percentage of arrivals under ARAP and ACRS by region, and number of arrivals by top local authorities, as of 30 June 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending 30 June 2024, Tables Reg\_01 and Reg\_02  
 Notes: A small number of people arriving under ARAP and ACRS were not Afghan nationals. Location data are unknown for 8,337 arrivals, which are excluded from the local authority top.



**The share of people resettled under the Afghan schemes living in temporary accommodation fell from 38% to 12% in the year to 30 June 2024**

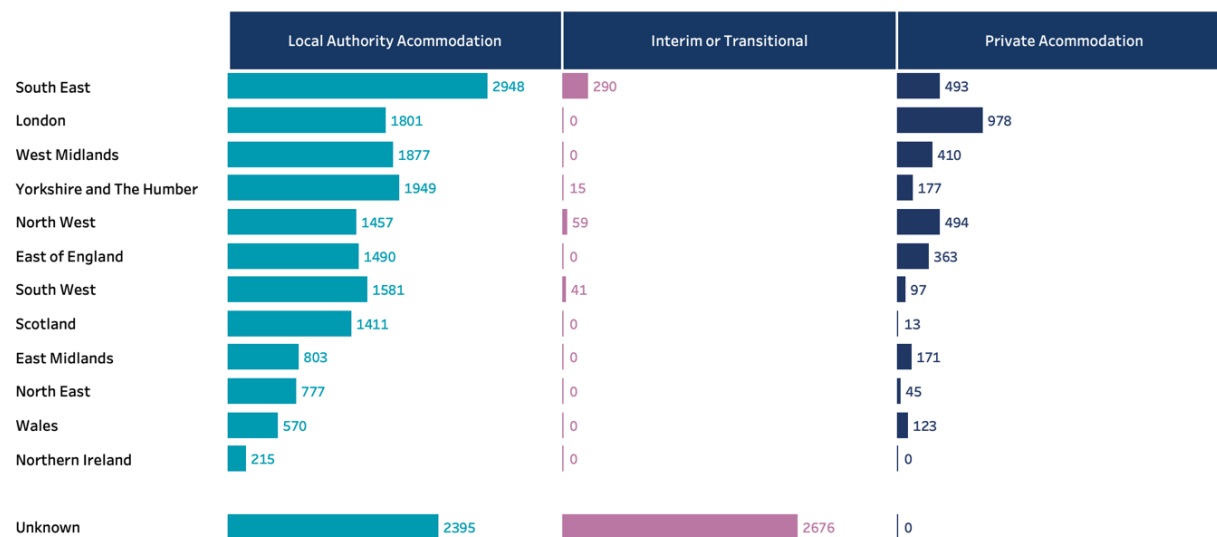
Temporary accommodation – termed interim or transitional in official statistics – has been used to house people arriving in the UK under the Afghan schemes. These are typically hotels or serviced apartments, intended to house people temporarily before they move into long-term accommodation.

At the end of June 2024, around 3,000 people were living in interim or transitional accommodation after arriving in the UK under ARAP or ACRS. Another 22,600 (88% of the total) were living in settled accommodation, mostly provided by local authorities. Private rented accommodation was most common in London, likely due to the city’s shortage of social housing (Figure 7).

Figure 7

In June 2024, 12% of people resettled under the Afghan schemes were in interim or transitional accommodation

Number of individuals resettled under ARAP and ACRS, by region and accommodation, as of 30 June 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending 30 June 2024, Table Reg\_01  
 Notes: Data exclude 3,266 individuals for which no data was available on region or type of accommodation. A small number of people arriving under ARAP and ACRS were not Afghan nationals.



## Around half of Afghans who arrived under the humanitarian visa routes were children, similar to other resettlement schemes

The demographic profile of Afghans varies based on the resettlement scheme and pathway through which they arrived in the UK. Generally, adults coming under the ARAP and ACRS programmes are gender-balanced, and almost half of the arrivals are children, which indicates these programmes were oriented towards families. The profile of people resettled under the Afghan routes since their creation is similar to other resettlement schemes in the same period (Figure 8).

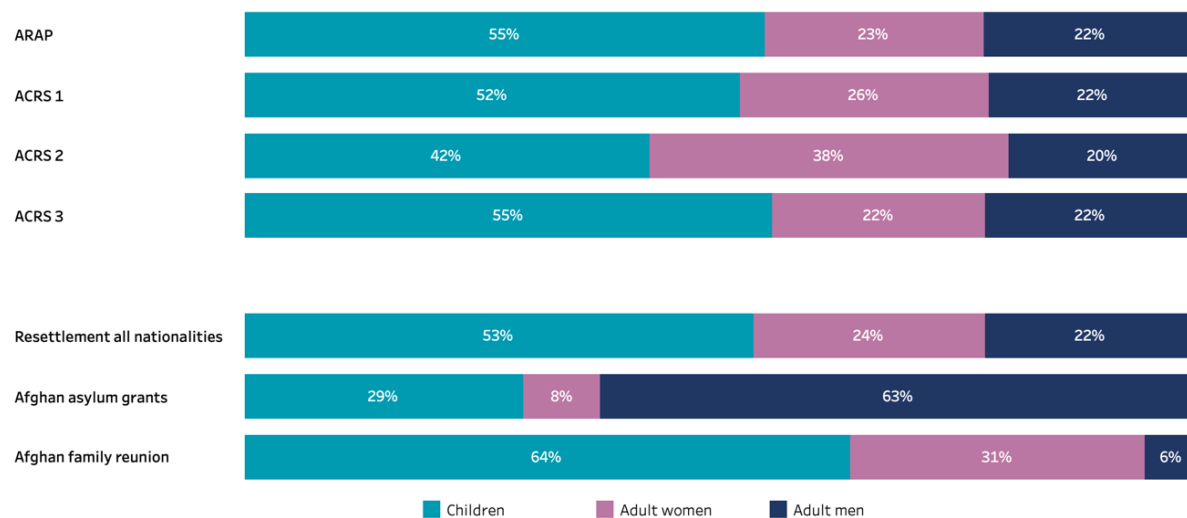
One exception is ACRS Pathway 2, which targets vulnerable Afghans identified by the UNHCR, where a majority of adult beneficiaries were women. This is likely related to the “women and girls at risk” category used by the UNHCR as a selection criterion for this pathway (see Understanding the Policy).

The profile of resettled Afghans contrasts with that of Afghans granted asylum, among whom a majority in the period analysed were adult men. This trend, [observed across other nationalities](#), is related to the tendency of men to migrate first, often through dangerous and unauthorised routes, and later apply to bring their families on refugee family reunion visas after they have been granted asylum. Between Q2 2021 to Q2 2024, 94% of all Afghans granted refugee family reunion were women and children (Figure 8).

Figure 8

**Around half of Afghans resettled under ARAP and ACRS are children, and the adults are gender-balanced**

Percentage of all arrivals, by scheme and demographic group, Q2 2021 to Q2 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending June 2024, Tables Asy\_D02 and Fam\_D01.  
 Notes: Data are provisional and subject to change. Data exclude those whose Afghan route, age, and sex are not recorded in the dataset. 'Afghan asylum grants' refers to Afghan nationals granted permission to stay at initial decision following an asylum claim. 'Afghan family reunion' refers to Afghan nationals granted a family reunion visa.



**Other European countries have also seen an increase in Afghan asylum claimants since the fall of Kabul**

The UK is not alone in receiving more Afghan asylum seekers since the Taliban takeover in 2021. Other European countries also saw a large increase – across EU-27 countries, there were 101,000 asylum applications from Afghan nationals in 2023, around twice as many as in 2019. Relative to population, the EU saw around 22 claims per 100,000 residents from Afghan asylum seekers in 2023 – more than the UK, which received 14.

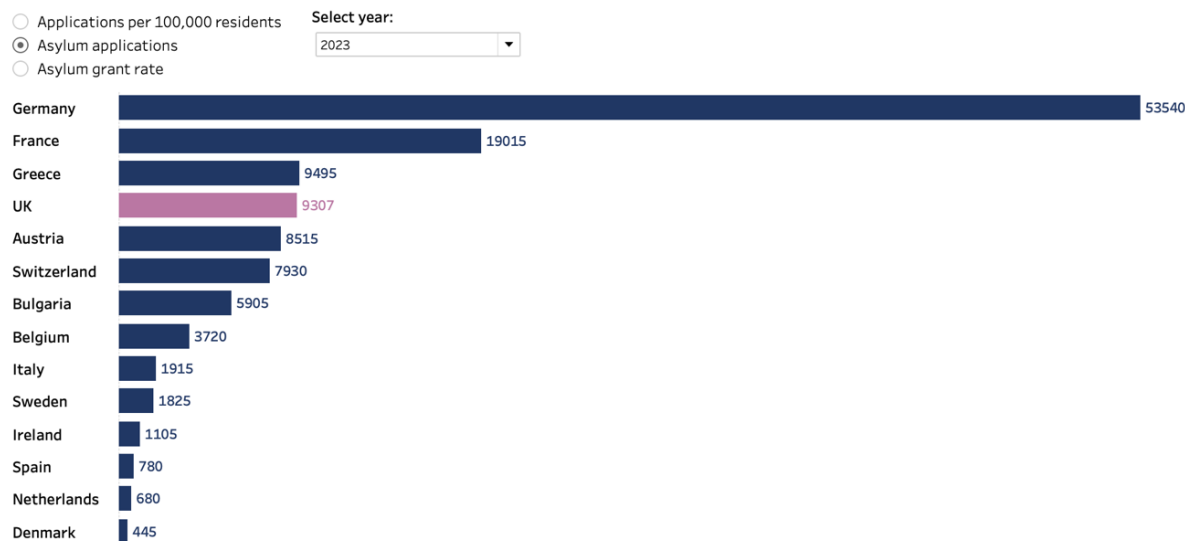
At the European level, the UK ranked fourth in terms of the number of asylum applications from Afghan nationals in 2023, after Germany, France, and Greece. However, smaller countries like Austria, Switzerland, and Bulgaria received many more applications relative to their population than the UK (Figure 9).

Although grant rates for Afghan asylum seekers increased across countries since 2021, the UK has been more likely to grant protection to Afghan asylum seekers than some other European states in recent years. In 2023, the grant rate in the UK was around 99% when including both main applicants and dependants. This is similar to Italy, Switzerland or Germany but notably higher than in France or Sweden (Figure 10).

Figure 9

Other European states received more asylum applications from Afghans in recent years than the UK

Number of Asylum applications from Afghan nationals and grant rate at initial decision, by year and country, 2012 to 2023



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UK Immigration System Statistics, year ending June 2024, tables Asy\_D01 and Asy\_D02, and Eurostat tables migr\_asyappctza and migr\_asydcfsta.

Notes: Data include both main applicants and dependants. Positive decisions include grants of asylum and all other grants of permission to stay. Grants are at initial decision, meaning the number of grants will be higher once successful appeals are taken into account. Withdrawn applications are excluded from the calculation of grant rates.



As of June 2024, almost ten million Afghans were displaced globally, with 90% in Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan

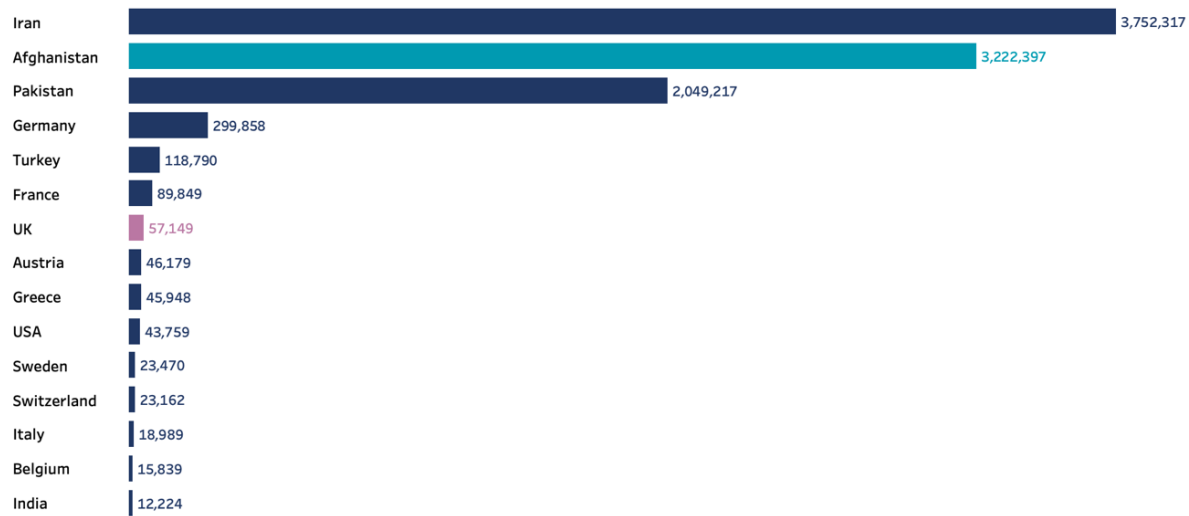
The number of forcibly displaced Afghans rose steeply after the Taliban returned to power – from 5.7 million at the end of 2020 to 9.9 million as of June 2024, according to [UN estimates](#). Of these, around a third remained in Afghanistan as internally displaced persons (Figure 10).

The rest were abroad as refugees, asylum seekers, or in similar situations. Iran and Pakistan host the largest populations of Afghan refugees, though many of these had been displaced before the summer of 2021. The UK ranks sixth globally by the number of hosted Afghan refugees.

Figure 10

**Around 9.9 million Afghans had been forcibly displaced as of June 2024 - most in Iran and Pakistan**

Number of forcibly displaced Afghans, top 15 countries, as of 13 June 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UNHCR Refugee Data Finder.

Notes: 'Refugees and asylum seekers' comprises people who have been granted refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention, those in a "refugee-like situation" but who have not been granted refugee status, and people who have claimed asylum and are awaiting a decision on their claim. Figures for Afghanistan are for people internally displaced.



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## The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



## COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

[www.compas.ox.ac.uk](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk)

### About the authors

Nuni Jorgensen  
Researcher, The Migration  
Observatory

Mihnea V. Cuibus  
Researcher, The Migration  
Observatory

Peter William Walsh  
Senior Researcher, The Migration  
Observatory

Madeleine Sumption  
Director, The Migration Observatory

### Press contact

Rob McNeil  
Head of Media and Communications  
[robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk)  
+ 44 (0)1865 274568  
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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