

Oral statement on the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the government's continuing support for Afghans.

The United Kingdom has always been generous to those fleeing persecution...

And last August, as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated rapidly and dangerously, we worked at great speed to evacuate 15,000 people to the United Kingdom and offer them immediate sanctuary and support.

This number was the second largest number evacuated by any country, behind only the USA. Our priorities during Operation Pitting were clear: to save as many lives as possible while keeping the British public safe.

The people evacuated included courageous Afghans who had worked closely with the British Armed Forces, as well as other vulnerable people at risk and British Nationals and their families living in Afghanistan.

Since that evacuation, we have helped a further 1,500 people enter the UK, including female judges, human rights defenders, and LGBT Afghans.

And, today, I am pleased to inform the House that the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme opens formally. We will resettle up to 20,000 people under this scheme.

I emphasise that this scheme is in addition to the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy which provides a route to safety for any current or former locally employed staff working with the UK Government and around 7,000 people alone have already been helped by this scheme.

It means that the United Kingdom has one of the world's most generous humanitarian offers to vulnerable Afghans. This is the government's New Plan for Immigration in action, through which we help those in greatest need via this safe and legal route.

In September, we announced our aim to settle 5,000 people in the first year of the ACRS. In light of the emerging situation in Afghanistan – and the success of our evacuation efforts – we will exceed that aim.

The first to be resettled under the new ACRS will be those already evacuated and in the UK. They include women's rights activists, journalists, and prosecutors, as well as the Afghan families of British Nationals. We are supporting those British Nationals who have been assisted by Her Majesty's Government to the UK and as well as their families who require such help as we recognise that they experienced the same trauma and have the same needs as their Afghan neighbours fleeing Kabul alongside them.

And whilst this policy work has been developed, we have got on with the job

and now granted the first people indefinite leave to remain under the ACRS.

And... we will open two further referral pathways under the ACRS this year, to bring more people here safely.

From the Spring, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will refer refugees in need of resettlement who have fled Afghanistan.

The UNHCR has the global mandate to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees. We will continue to receive such referrals to the scheme in coming years.

The third referral pathway will resettle those at risk who supported the UK and international community effort in Afghanistan, as well as those who are particularly vulnerable, such as women and girls at risk and members of minority groups.

In the first year of this third referral pathway, the government will honour our commitments and offer ACRS places to the most at risk British Council and GardaWorld contractors, and Chevening alumni. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will be in touch with those eligible to support them through the next steps of this process.

Beyond the first year of the ACRS, we will work with international partners and NGOs to design and deliver this unprecedented third referral pathway – this will allow us to welcome wider groups of Afghans at risk beyond Year One.

Mr Speaker, as I have said before, the capacity of the UK to resettle people is not unlimited. We have had to take very difficult decisions about who will be prioritised for resettlement, and it is frankly for other countries to step-up and follow the UK's ambitious lead. This scheme reflects the realities of the scale of the challenge, our previous pledges and our endeavours to resettle people well in the UK.

And we continue our international efforts in Afghanistan and the region...

In addition to continuing to bring at-risk people to the UK, we have been coordinating closely with international partners, including through our Presidency of the G7.

We have doubled our aid for Afghanistan to £286 million, including vital humanitarian assistance to save lives this winter.

In conclusion, in the four months since Operation Warm Welcome has been launched, we have worked across ten government departments, with all Devolved Administrations, with around 350 councils and local agencies, as well as with charities and volunteers to offer...

a new start for our new citizens and the freedom to succeed in the United Kingdom.

- We have provided immediate sanctuary for more than 12,000 people,

- including accommodation, food, healthcare, education and support;
- More than 4,000 people have moved or are being moved into their new homes since the first ARAP flights in June – this is an unprecedented pace of re-settlement;
 - And I'm pleased to confirm, contrary to press reports over Christmas, all children who were evacuated under Op Pitting are now in school and those children who have joined us since then are either in school or being placed in schools as quickly as possible;
 - 97% of evacuees are registered with GPs and everyone has been offered Covid vaccinations;
 - We have launched a brand new housing portal on gov.uk for members of the public to offer accommodation;
 - We are working with the regulators of professions to assess and recognise Afghans' qualifications, especially in sectors that need recruits, such as teaching and healthcare;
 - We have made it easier for local community groups to support Afghans through the Community Sponsorship Scheme, which will begin welcoming Afghan families later this month;
 - We have developed a new integration programme, tailored to the needs of this traumatised group, which has been piloted and will be rolling out shortly; and
 - We are creating from scratch a new approach to employment, housing and integration – Jobs First – to help Afghans become self-sufficient as quickly and as well as they can.

This is the New Plan for Immigration in action.

I have always acknowledged that resettling such large numbers of people well will take time and it demands care.

I therefore urge colleagues across the House to work with their councils and communities to help us build bright futures for our new Afghan citizens.

I commend this statement to the House.