

Stuck in the middle with you

Capturing contribution and closing the integration gap at the heart of the UK immigration system's approach to safe and legal routes for refugees

Russell Hargrave
Jonathan Thomas

SMF

**Social Market
Foundation**

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FIRST PUBLISHED BY

The Social Market Foundation, March 2021
11 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QB
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The UK should amend its existing immigration rules to allow more people to enter the UK on humanitarian grounds who can make economic contributions to the UK. This would be aligned with the Government's proposals for a New Plan for Immigration which commits to "look at the range of people accessing resettlement schemes including the potential for people to achieve better integration outcomes in the UK".
- In terms of safe and legal routes into the UK, the current UK immigration regime divides migrants between: economic migrants, who largely enter via the UK's Points Based System; and refugees, who enter through the UK's resettlement programme, largely under criteria set by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
- Reality is not so neat. Many people can make a case to enter the UK on both economic and humanitarian grounds, but end up being 'stuck in the middle' and unable to enter. Many of these people are in only marginally better circumstances of humanitarian need than the most vulnerable refugees whom the UK is resettling, but these people would on average have significantly better economic integration prospects in the UK, and require less investment of time and money in their integration.
- These additional entrants should be selected according to their humanitarian need, but also their propensity to integrate socially and contribute economically. Such approaches have been successfully adopted in countries such as Canada and Australia.
- Refugee resettlement efforts in the UK command broad support from politicians and civil society actors, who agree that Britain should support and welcome those in greatest need.
- Because the most vulnerable refugees are – quite rightly – selected for entry to the UK on purely humanitarian grounds, many face huge challenges to integrating socially and contributing economically here.
- Focusing resettlement efforts *solely* based on selection criteria *exclusively* framed on the basis of UNHCR determined vulnerability – and determinedly not taking any account of refugees' skills, employability or integration potential in the UK – risks undermining both political and public support for the UK's refugee resettlement programme.
- Demonstrating more clearly to the British electorate that humanitarian entrants can integrate socially and contribute economically is important to retain public consent for the UK's existing resettlement schemes.
- That consent is likely to be tested in the economic aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic. Not least because the UK's current approach to resettlement tends to place refugees in a number of less prosperous parts of the country which may face the sharpest economic downturn. There is a real risk that host communities' support for refugee resettlement may erode over time if those who are resettled come to be seen as a burden on public services and welfare.
- Therefore, alongside resettling the most vulnerable refugees, new humanitarian routes to enter the UK, which can offer control and compassion but marry that with contribution, should be established by reforms to both the UK's existing refugee resettlement programme and the economically-driven Points Based System.

- On the resettlement side, the Mandate Scheme – little-known and rarely used, but in place for the last 25 years – which allows refugees to be resettled to the UK if they have close family connections here, should be reformed, expanded and publicised for potential use by people in humanitarian trouble spots who stand a better chance of integrating socially and contributing economically to the UK because of their existing connections here.
- The Mandate Scheme has been admitting on average around only 25 refugees per year for the last decade to join a close family member in the UK. Whereas in Canada the figures suggest that typically over 10,000 of those refugees it resettles in a year have a family member already in the country. That suggests a rebooted and reformed Mandate Scheme could at least be expanded in a pilot scheme to allow initially hundreds, potentially thousands, of refugees with existing connections and better economic integration prospects, to enter the UK.
- The Points Based System should be adapted to award extra entry points to would-be migrants on the basis of the humanitarian distress they find themselves in, facing threats to their wellbeing and security. These points could then be used by them in combination with points for other skills and attributes they have to contribute to the UK economy in order to be able to secure a work visa entry to the UK.
- These proposed reforms therefore build on and out from those existing UK immigration policies – refugee resettlement and the Points Based System – which have been a political success because they meet the public’s demand for security and control while providing flexibility over who enters the UK. This bedrock of support provides the UK with an opportunity to go much further, at a time when the global needs for refugee resettlement continue to far outstrip countries’ willingness to receive resettled refugees.
- There is a strong and recent precedent for a more novel approach to the UK’s immigration rules that allows entry based on a combination of economic/integration prospects and humanitarian need. The offer the UK is now making to those Hong Kong citizens with British National (Overseas) status to come to the UK is an example of such a combination, and demonstrates that the Government is willing to reflect reality and take a blended approach to entry criteria where this is merited.
- Such an approach can command public support. Polling evidence shows that two-thirds of British people who are aware of the Government’s offer are supportive of allowing entry to the UK to Hong Kong residents with BNO status.
- The Home Office should establish pilot projects using both the Mandate Scheme and the Points Based System to seek to admit more migrants on combined economic integration and humanitarian grounds.
- The outcomes and outputs of these pilots should be closely monitored and measured, and compared, before deciding whether to further invest in their expansion.

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

There is a large hole in the middle of the current UK immigration entry system. The gap is between the economic migration allowed by the points-based system (PBS) and the humanitarian migration allowed by the UK's refugee resettlement programme. Many refugees or others in challenging humanitarian situations who may have the greatest potential to economically integrate and contribute to the UK fall into that hole. Because unless a refugee can amass the amount of points required by the PBS as it currently stands, or is selected for the purposes of the UK's refugee resettlement programme – which programme currently selects annually only a tiny fraction of the world's refugees and does not factor in potential economic integration and contribution into the selection process at all – that refugee has no safe and legal route into the UK.

But both the PBS and the refugee resettlement scheme command significant cross-party political and public support in the UK. There are therefore different possibilities to combine elements of both of these regimes in a way that is both politically and publicly acceptable, and which could provide a controlled humanitarian immigration route into the UK for those with better economic integration prospects. This report sets out the context and the case for this, the ways in which it might be possible to construct, pilot and present acceptable safe and legal routes which could achieve this, and the issues and questions that would need to be addressed to practically effect this.

The political context for building out safe and legal routes to the UK

The issue of the treatment of refugees has once again become politically charged in the UK. In the wake of the EU Referendum, the UK's exit from the EU, and the settling of the details and implementation of the UK's post-Brexit immigration system for work, at the political level the signs are that the debate around immigration issues in the UK may be set for a return to the noughties era. This was an era when political rhetoric in the UK around, and media reporting of, asylum issues largely dominated the immigration debate, and the line between public empathy and antipathy expressed towards asylum seekers and refugees was often a fine one. Political and public tensions over this issue ran high. And this era provided perhaps the clearest articulation that the workings of the asylum and refugee system matter not just for those unfortunate enough to be caught up in the system's workings, but, more fundamentally, for political and public views towards immigration policy and control more broadly.

Over the past year we have begun to see a return to this same dynamic in the UK. The current Home Secretary, Priti Patel, took advantage of the rise in boat crossings by migrants over the English Channel in 2020 to talk, and be seen to act, tough on 'illegal' migration to the UK, floating numerous ideas for intercepting and forcing seaborne migrants back to the French shore, as well as for funnelling asylum seekers into offshore processing hubs.¹ The arc of this narrative ran seamlessly into her Conservative Party Conference speech, promising a new asylum system for the UK that is firm and fair.²

The media focus has been very much on the 'firm'. But for the 'fair' she situated this in the context of "welcoming people through safe and legal routes" and her party's "proud history of providing a safe haven to the most in need". In doing so she drew a connection between the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians, of which the UK took over 40,000 in the early 1970s – and which is part of her own family history – the UK's recent experience of

resettling refugees – “proudly resettling more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU country” – and the support the UK was promising to those “fleeing political persecution in Hong Kong”.³ Since her speech the promise on Hong Kong has been actioned with the announcement of the new Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Visa to enter the UK.⁴ The Government has also announced a review of safe and legal routes to the UK for asylum seekers, refugees and their families.⁵ Ministers have also stated a “commitment to further constructive engagement to identify ways to level up access to safe and legal work pathways for talented displaced persons”.⁶

Now the Government has followed up with its proposals for a 'New Plan for Immigration'. This doubles down on the course this Government has set, and seeks to cement the path it has decided to tread; tougher on asylum seekers coming to the UK directly, and more accommodating to refugees being resettled to the country through the UK's refugee resettlement scheme. The Government also now seems increasingly concerned with the economic and integration outcomes of those refugees it accepts for resettlement, and open to reconsidering the range of people who can access the UK's refugee resettlement schemes.⁷

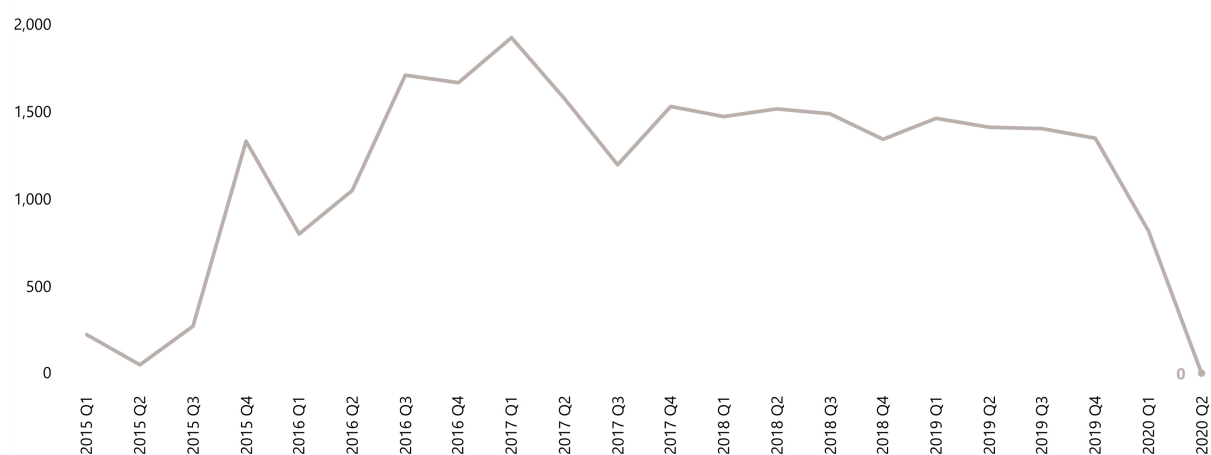
CHAPTER TWO - THE UK RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

A rare jewel in UK immigration policy?

The fact that a review of safe and legal routes to the UK is on the table at all is perhaps testament to the relatively positive political perception of the safe and legal route to the UK provided by the UK's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). This scheme, to resettle into the UK from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region the most vulnerable refugees who have fled the Syrian crisis, has been in place for the last seven years. While the primary responsibility of the Home Office, it is a joint endeavour involving both the Department for International Development (as was) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The VPRS has become the UK's flagship resettlement scheme, making up the vast majority of the UK's refugee resettlement programme in this period (up until July 2017 those resettled to the UK under the VPRS were granted humanitarian protection status rather than refugee status, but since then all who have arrived under the Scheme, whether prior to or after July 2017, have been entitled to refugee status in the UK⁸). Particularly since the political commitment made in 2015 by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to resettling 20,000 under the VPRS in a five-year period⁹, the VPRS has led to a real step-change in the UK's efforts to resettle refugees, at least until the travel restrictions of COVID-19 returned the resettlement figures to zero.

Figure 1: Refugees resettled in the UK

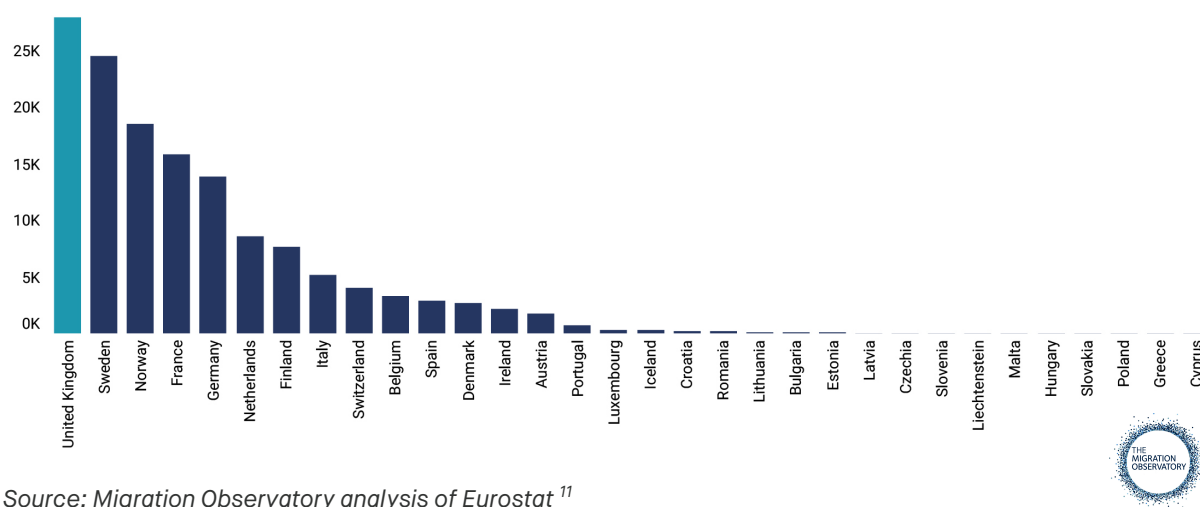


Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics¹⁰



As a result of this step-change, the UK has risen to the top of the European resettlement charts over the past decade in terms of absolute numbers of refugees resettled.

Figure 2: Total refugees resettled in European countries from 2010 to 2019

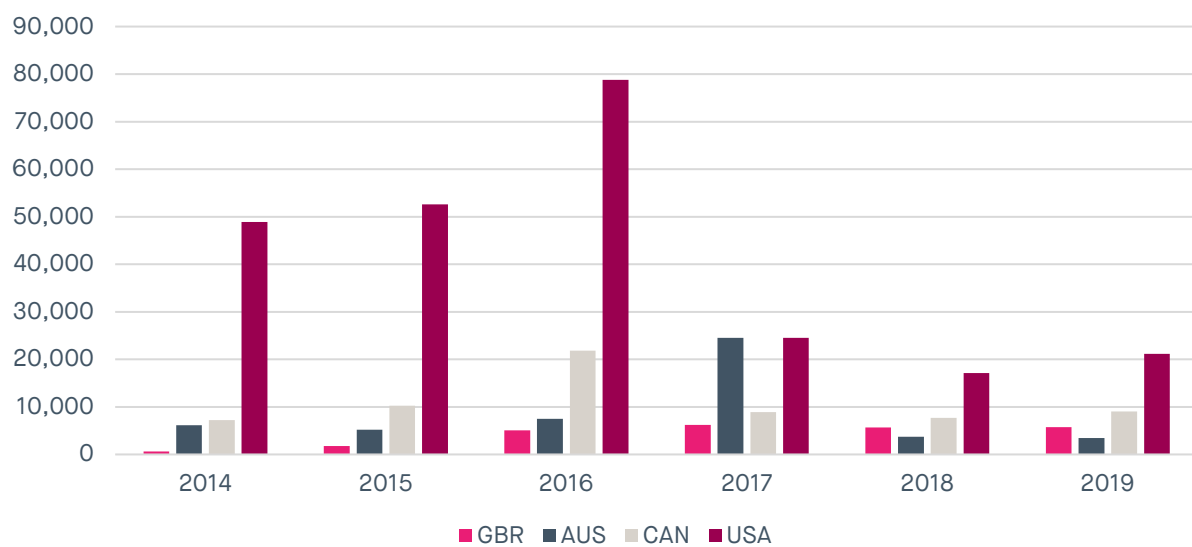


Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Eurostat ¹¹



And at the global level the UK has gone from nowhere to very much somewhere in the refugee resettlement charts. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic it overtook Australia to rise to third position overall behind the United States and Canada.

Figure 3: Total number of people resettled under the UNHCR's resettlement programme, by nation



Source: UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder

The step-change is not just in the numbers, but also in the nature, of the UK's refugee resettlement programme. Or at least it was before COVID-19 intervened and put everything on hold.¹² Announced by the Government in June 2019, the three largest resettlement schemes operated by the UK – the VPRS, the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) and the Gateway Protection Programme – are being consolidated as a single UK Resettlement Scheme, with an initial resettlement target of 5,000 refugees per annum.

This will in effect just be a floor under the UK's commitment, as those resettled through the UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) – whereby community groups can apply to act as sponsors to provide practical support to refugee families being resettled into

their community under the VPRS or VCRS – and also through the oldest of the UK’s resettlement routes, the Mandate Scheme, will be in addition to the yearly commitment under the UK Resettlement Scheme.¹³

This ‘separate’ treatment is an important development in respect of the CSS, and one that has been welcomed by stakeholders involved in the Scheme. It helps not only to bolster the status of the Scheme, but now being framed as in addition to the Government target also helps to counter the concern amongst civil society about the perception that civil society is just being used to deliver what should be a government function¹⁴, a common concern in a number of countries where these schemes exist¹⁵.

As importantly, these routes – the UK Resettlement Scheme, the Community Sponsorship Scheme and the Mandate Scheme – will not have a specific geographical focus, being open to refugees from anywhere in the world.¹⁶ The Home Office has stated though that, initially at least, it anticipates little change in the geography of the UK’s resettlement caseload, “with the majority coming from the MENA region”.¹⁷ Not least because of the backlog of referrals under the VPRS and the VCRS, which will be carried over. But also because of the degree of comfort that the Home Office and local authorities feel with the perceived public acceptance of Syrian refugees. And also a consequence of practical realities; the current system has largely evolved around primarily catering for Arabic speaking refugees, so now has established resources of Arabic interpreters.¹⁸

Nevertheless, while the UK does already operate smaller programmes without geographical restrictions, the UK’s assumption of a global basis for its ongoing resettlement approach is still a potentially significant departure. The UK’s history of engaging in refugee resettlement on any meaningful scale has typically only been in response to specific crises – the plight of the Ugandan Asians and the Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s, those fleeing the Syrian civil war in the past decade. Now, notwithstanding the continued lack of clarity on future funding, the acceptance of the need for refugee resettlement seems to have been put on a more permanent institutional footing.

Per the Home Secretary’s Conservative Party Conference speech¹⁹, there seems to be a growing articulation that refugee resettlement into the UK is potentially a rare jewel of immigration policy; something that the UK can be ‘proud’ about, and that a broad swathe of politicians across the political spectrum, but also the public, as well as the refugee/humanitarian sector, can get behind.

From the humanitarian perspective, refugee resettlement allows some of those refugees fleeing from the world’s most desperate conflict situations to find a safe home and a chance to restart their life without having to risk perilous journeys at the hands of often long chains of shadowy facilitators to reach the UK’s shores. The resettlement route also greatly improves the chances that families can relocate to the UK as a whole, intact, family unit, rather than running the risk that they will need to split up, or be split up, on the journey. Indeed the majority of resettlements under both the VPRS and the VCRS have comprised four- or five-person family groups.²⁰

From the political perspective, resettlement of refugees allows the Government to maintain complete control over admission to the country. In possession of full information, the Government can control each part of the process. Unlike direct, in-country, asylum

seekers, the Government can decide how many refugees, from where, and in what situations, it offers resettlement to. One aspect of this control is the extensive nature of the security checks that can be carried out as part of the resettlement approval process, leveraging the information available to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – the United Nations agency responsible for the global refugee resettlement programme and process.²¹ And from the Government’s perspective, resettlement does away with the significant costs and challenges, operational, legal and otherwise, associated with the day-to-day workings of processing and assessing the claims of those in the asylum system who have made their own way to the UK to claim refugee status.²²

At the local government level, over 300 local authorities in the UK have agreed to receive and be responsible for resettled refugees through either the VPRS or the VCRS. This compares with less than 20 such authorities which had been involved with the Gateway Protection Programme which had previously been the UK’s main refugee programme. The fact that five years of central government funding – amounting to over £20,000 for each refugee – has been made available at the local level to support resettlement under the VPRS and the VCRS has helped to draw in local authorities to participate.²³

Unlike under the Mandate Scheme, where there is no interaction with local government and no supportive funding available at all, and the Gateway Protection Programme where the funding lasts for only one year²⁴, under the VPRS and the VCRS funding for the first year comes out of the UK’s overseas aid budget, with further funding, on a tapered basis, provided out to the end of the fifth year²⁵. It is on this basis, and on the understanding that funding going forward will be secured for the consolidated UK Resettlement Scheme on the same basis, that the Local Government Association has expressed its support for the new consolidated Scheme.²⁶

From the British public’s perspective, the degree of control inherent in refugee resettlement provides important comfort and helps secure the acceptability of resettlement to the public. The British public’s support for helping refugees has been articulated as conditional on robust security screening.²⁷ Resettlement only allows those who have passed security screening at the individual level to come to the UK. The fact that they have already been assessed to be refugees, through the UNHCR process, sidesteps any suggestions or perceptions of ‘bogus asylum seekers’ or ‘forum shoppers’ who are seen to be exploiting the UK’s hospitality, which suggestions or perceptions often tend to cloud the British public’s perception of the asylum system and the degree of support that the public will afford to that system. The fact that refugees can come to the UK together in their whole family unit, and that – unlike spontaneous, in-country asylum claimants arriving in the UK – they can legally work, and commence their integration into, and contribution to, the UK’s economy and society from the moment they arrive, is not just a huge potential advantage to those refugees, it is also important for the public’s support.

The Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) was launched in July 2016. Through it, groups of the public can come together at the local level to apply to be official sponsors, for a two-year period, of refugee families being resettled into their community. By participating in it, sections of the public have begun to come together to actively operationalise this support. Community sponsorship is a significant undertaking, with a rigorous application

process run by the Home Office to ensure that sponsorship groups have the means and commitment to support refugee families in practice. Approval of sponsorship groups through that process has been slow, and in terms of absolute numbers community sponsorship is still a very small part of the overall resettlement picture – a little over 2% of those resettled through VPRS have been resettled with the involvement of CSS groups.²⁸

Nevertheless, a scheme such as the CSS can have an outsized impact on engagement and perceptions at the public level. The evidence in the UK has been slowly building that the element of community involvement, engagement and responsibility through the CSS can have a materially positive impact on both refugees and host communities.²⁹ The most recent evidence from the US suggests that, even in one of the most polarised of polities, the very existence of a public sponsorship program, where groups of the public can have the opportunity to sponsor resettled refugees, can materially improve overall support for a resettlement program even among those groups who most oppose that program.³⁰

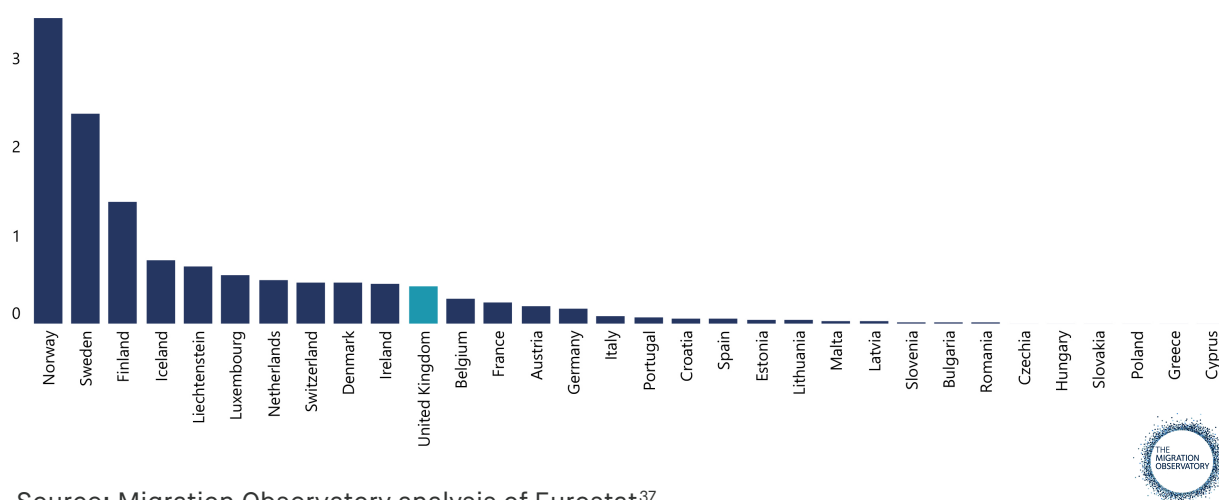
The CSS seems to be here to stay. Given the two-year period of sponsorship, CSS groups are now recycling through the system, i.e. are now sponsoring a subsequent family after they have reached the end of their sponsorship period with their initial family.³¹ And while it is not itself constituted as a separate resettlement scheme – being tied into supporting those families resettled under the VPRS and the VCRS – the Home Office has made clear that, under the new consolidated UK Resettlement Scheme, in terms of numbers, those resettled through the CSS will be counted as being in addition to the yearly aggregate resettlement commitment under the UK Resettlement Scheme.

The case for greater ambition in the UK's refugee resettlement scheme

Given the step-change that has occurred it may seem harsh to argue that the UK could be going further in this area. But it is exactly this bedrock of support for refugee resettlement which provides the UK with the opportunity to do more. In the context of the global need for resettlement, the case for considering this is clear.

UNHCR does not recommend resettlement for the vast majority of the world's refugees. Instead resettlement is reserved for those from 'refugee-producing situations' for whom neither local integration in their current country of location nor voluntary return to their home country are viewed as a realistic option.³² Of the over 26 million refugees currently worldwide³³, the UNHCR views nearly 1.45 million as being in need of resettlement³⁴. But typically, given the size of the resettlement programmes agreed to by those Global North states that are willing to accept resettled refugees, less than 10% of the projected resettlement need is even submitted by the UNHCR annually for consideration by those states.³⁵ On top of that, the reluctance of the US under the Trump administration to take as many resettled refugees as they had previously been taking, plus the disruption of COVID-19, meant that 2020 saw the lowest refugee resettlement numbers globally in almost two decades.³⁶

In recent years the UK's resettlement *numbers* have risen to overtake Australia's and close in on Canada's. Yet those countries have much smaller populations than the UK. Indeed, in terms of the UK's relative performance on a *per capita* basis, even in the European context the UK's resettlement performance begins to look a little less stellar.

Figure 4: Total refugees resettled in European countries from 2010-2019, per 1,000 population

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Eurostat³⁷



As the Chief Inspector of Borders has pointed out, the new consolidated UK Resettlement Scheme’s annual aim of 5,000 resettled is in fact smaller than the most recent (pre-COVID-19) combined totals for the UK’s three resettlement schemes that are being consolidated, which for 2019 amounted to 5,600³⁸. While the 5,000 target excludes refugees coming through the Mandate Scheme or resettled through the CSS, at current levels those numbers would certainly not make up the difference.³⁹

It is in this context that some in the UK have argued that the UK should be going further in its resettlement commitments. In 2019 the House of Commons International Development Committee called on “the UK Government to increase its resettlement numbers to 10,000 places annually – as advocated by UNHCR – in a new, consolidated resettlement scheme”.⁴⁰ And, following the announcement of the new consolidated scheme, the House of Lords EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee wrote to the Home Secretary:

“We urge the Government to reconsider its modest aim to resettle 5,000 refugees in the first year of the new scheme. With the experience and infrastructure from delivering the VPRS already in place—and in the context of record numbers of forcibly displaced people worldwide—the Government should be more ambitious in its resettlement target.”⁴¹

Economic integration outcomes: a fly in the ointment

But economic integration outcomes for resettled refugees in the UK represent a dangerous crack at the heart of the UK’s existing resettlement approach. And one which, if left unaddressed, not only undermines the potential for the UK to scale up its level of resettlement commitment and resettle greater numbers, but may even become a threat to the current level of support, amongst both British politicians and public, for even the existing level of resettlement commitment. The central, dangerous fact is how hard integration is to achieve. While in theory resettled refugees can legally work, and can commence their integration into, and contribution to, the UK from the moment they arrive, in practice achieving good employment and economic integration outcomes refugees resettling to the UK has proved very challenging.

To secure continuing broader public support for accepting refugees in significant numbers, it is important that those granted refugee protection can become integrated

into UK society through work. This picture is very clear from 2018's National Conversation on Immigration, which showed that, while sympathetic to the plight of refugees arriving in the UK, the British public wanted to see them integrate into and economically contribute to the UK through working. It also showed that awareness that refugees were not working fostered a damaging perception that they were receiving more generous welfare provision than British citizens.⁴²

The co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Refugees, David Simmonds, has recently stated:

“The UK’s commitment to providing safe refuge to people fleeing violence and persecution relies on cross-party consensus and the compassion and goodwill of the public ... [there is] an understandable public desire for new arrivals to the UK to become tax-paying, economically active members of society as soon as possible.”⁴³

Poor integration outcomes are not good for anyone. Not for those being resettled, nor for those promoting resettlement, nor for those in the communities in which the resettlement takes place. “A good refugee policy needs to be a good host community policy.”⁴⁴ And there is a risk that host communities’ support for refugee resettlement may erode over time if those who are resettled, many to less prosperous regions of the UK, are viewed as being a drain or burden on public services and welfare indefinitely, unable over time to meaningfully economically integrate and contribute.

Public expectations and perceptions in the UK around the economic integration prospects of refugees are decidedly downbeat. In a recent poll, only 51% thought that refugees arriving in the UK will successfully integrate.⁴⁵ And the perception largely reflects reality. Even after 25 years in the country ‘asylum migrants’ are less likely to be in employment not only than the UK born, but also than migrants who came here through other routes, including even other non-work, such as family, routes.⁴⁶

The integration challenges for resettled refugees seem to be the starkest amongst the refugee population as a whole. In a recent survey of the economic outcomes of Syrian refugees across the Netherlands, Austria and the UK, the vast majority of the resettled refugees in that survey came from the UK, and 87% of the resettled refugees in the survey were unemployed, compared with 77% who had arrived ‘spontaneously’.⁴⁷ “As at Spring 2017 only 48 (2%) of the refugees of working age resettled via the [VPRS] Scheme in 2016 had obtained employment”.⁴⁸ While this may not be thought unduly surprising still relatively soon after arrival, and of course these outcomes can, and do, change over time, the employment rates for refugees under the Gateway Protection Programme have also been very low, even with the benefit of the significantly longer time period over which the length of that Programme allows assessment to be made.⁴⁹

In terms of the outcomes of the VPRS, “the 20,000 target has remained the only performance measure of any real consequence ... [and the] VPRS has benefited from having this single, simple target, and from ministerial and top management interest in ensuring that it was met.”⁵⁰ But the fixation on achieving the target numbers to be resettled has arguably been to the exclusion of considering other measures to evaluate the scheme’s performance. The need to develop evaluation measures and “defining what success looks like beyond meeting the 20,000 target” was flagged by the National Audit

Office back in 2016. From a cost evaluation perspective of the scheme, the NAO pointed out that this depended “in large part on the characteristics of those entering the country, the extent to which refugees need medical treatment or welfare services, and the extent to which they can gain employment and become self-sufficient”.⁵¹

In the words of the Chief Inspector of Borders, “any evaluation needs to consider how well resettled refugees have integrated into society. But this is not easily measured.” In 2017 the Home Office commissioned Ipsos MORI to produce a ‘three-year qualitative longitudinal evaluation’ of the integration outcomes of those resettled under the VPRS and VCRS. But no output from that evaluation has yet been made public.⁵²

Indeed, the purpose of a recent COMPAS report on evidence of refugee integration policy outcomes from other countries was partly to share some lessons learned which could be useful to the UK, but also to highlight “the lack of research with formal impact evaluations of this type in the UK”. And the need for the collection of longitudinal survey data, as well as the use of administrative data, for refugees in order to “explore their long-term economic trajectories”.⁵³

The need is not just for the Government to collect and use evidence, but, as with the case of the Ipsos MORI evaluation, to actually make that evidence public. This is particularly important in the case of refugee resettlement, where the outcomes are dependent upon the collaboration of many different actors: central government, local government, local community groups, civil society, private actors and more. If only one of those actors knows the outcomes of important evaluations, that is sub-optimal.⁵⁴

In UK studies focused on resettled refugees, a recurring, if unsurprising, theme has been that difficulties in accessing English language skills and employment have been at the core of poor integration outcomes.⁵⁵ “Good English language skills are a prerequisite, not a result of integration”.⁵⁶ And that, in terms of the VPRS, failure to acquire a sufficient standard of spoken English swiftly enough is a key factor holding back many resettled refugees from avoiding “long-term dependency, and difficulty in accessing services, benefits and employment”, and from taking advantage of vocational and skills training courses to upgrade their qualifications.⁵⁷

Daily interactions in English obviously help. But the longer-term evidence from those coming through the Gateway Protection Programme shows that such interactions are generally not sufficient on their own. More formal learning opportunities are therefore crucial.⁵⁸ The provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in the UK is funded through the Adult Education Budget, with additional funding available for resettled refugees. There is a Home Office requirement that local authorities resettling refugees provide a minimum of 8 hours per week of English language tuition for the first 12 months, or until the refugee has reached ESOL Level 3 proficiency.⁵⁹

But the amount of funding for ESOL delivery through the Adult Education Budget has been cut in half over the last decade⁶⁰, and there is no national ESOL strategy, nor national standard approach across the UK. Numerous questions have also been raised about these courses in the specific context of refugee resettlement. About the funding available, but also about the variable provision of such courses across different parts of the country – which has increasingly become an issue as resettlement has expanded geographically across the UK under the VPRS and VCRS – whether the courses meet the diverse needs

and backgrounds of refugees, and the difficulties many refugees can face in practically accessing such courses even where they are available.⁶¹

In the survey of Syrian refugees across the Netherlands, Austria and the UK, the UK had the highest proportion of refugees – nearly two thirds – who said they could speak the language ‘Not at all’ or only ‘A bit’. This may be explained by the fact that 85% of the refugees from the UK in the survey were those who had been resettled, whereas for the other two countries in the survey the opposite was true; 85% were spontaneous in-country arrivals. This would seem to reiterate the very particular challenges that can arise with integrating resettled refugees.⁶²

There has even been a suggestion that for those refugees resettled in the UK even the acquisition of higher language skills has not necessarily immediately translated into better employment outcomes, and that that may be at least partly because refugees may over-estimate the language skills needed to find employment.⁶³ Perhaps, as the Swedes put it, “Perfect Swedish is overrated. But comprehensible Swedish is deeply underrated.”⁶⁴ Indeed the balance between the standard of English language skills that have been acquired, and the decision and opportunity to then begin to seriously seek work, seems to have been a key area of tension within the integration approach adopted in the UK under the VPRS.

While language skills are obviously key to accessing employment opportunities, the reverse is also true; employment opportunities, even in entry-level positions, while not a substitute for formal language learning opportunities, can be an important complement to them. And they can significantly aid not just the acquisition of language capability, but the development of social interactivity and connections which can support that capability and integration more broadly.

“The employment relationship means that the migrant has little choice over how they interact. They must engage. They cannot ‘opt out’ and ghettoize themselves as migrant critics claim happens in society at large. They must get along or at least learn to survive. In this way the workplace offers on a daily basis an intensity of experience that is rarely encountered in non-work sites.”⁶⁵

In terms of the interaction of the decision to take on an entry-level job in the UK labour market, the time taken to enter the market, and language ability and progression, while the freedom of movement for EU workers may seem a world away from that of resettled refugees, some aspects of EU freedom of movement as it played out in the UK may be instructive. One of the features of the free movement of workers into the UK from the EU was that it provided the opportunity for a number of higher-skilled migrants to swiftly access the UK jobs market through lower-skilled routes of entry. While this perceived ‘underutilisation of skills’ or ‘brain waste’ came in for criticism from some quarters, it also had a positive aspect. In allowing migrants to immediately access the labour market and gain an economic foothold in the UK very quickly⁶⁶, albeit on the lower rungs of the ladder, it provided them with the time and also the opportunity to improve their English language and orientation to UK society and culture before some of them then were then able to use their talents to move relatively rapidly up the ladder and more fully deploy their skills at a higher level more aligned to their education. This seems to have been one of the reasons that over the last 20 years EEA migrant workers in the UK have exhibited considerably higher median 5-year real earnings progression than either UK or non-EEA workers.⁶⁷

But of those resettled from Syria under the VPRS, although most men had a pre-existing trade or, in a minority of cases for both men and women, a university qualification, the lack of English language skills, coupled with the desire through the VPRS to promote English language preparedness before employment, has meant that for many the shift into employment in the UK has been a slow process.⁶⁸ As a result some local authorities have questioned whether, although it may look relatively generous on paper, the tapered funding available in years 2-5 after resettlement is sufficient in practice.⁶⁹ And whether the Home Office's expectation that resettled refugees will achieve a level of self-sufficiency and financial independence in the first 12 months is realistic.

While the economic integration expectations may not be materially different from those in other major resettlement countries, such as the United States, Canada and Australia, unlike the UK, some of these other resettlement countries have selected at least some of their refugees for resettlement based on an assessment of their prospects for integration and self-sufficiency over a reasonable timeframe, which might then make those countries' expectations of swifter integration and self-sufficiency rather more realistic and achievable.⁷⁰ Certainly in the UK though, "all the evidence in relation to the 'integration journey' for resettled refugees points to them requiring substantial support well beyond the 12-month point."⁷¹

Other integration challenges of those refugees resettled from the Syrian conflict to the UK have stemmed from: time out of work⁷² and limited employment opportunities in the country they have fled to, from which they are being resettled; whereabouts they are resettled in the UK – "A number of refugees resettled in more remote locations expressed the view that they would like to move to another location in the UK either to join relatives and friends, or to places where they believed there were better employment and education prospects" – and the very fact of dispersal across the UK – "A small number of refugees also desired living closer to members of their own community, who could help accelerate the integration process".⁷³

Many refugees from Syria owned their own business or worked in a family business in Syria or earned a living in the informal economy before coming to the UK. But the vast majority are unable, or seem disinclined, to follow these routes in the UK. Many resettled refugees are also, perhaps understandably, reluctant to step outside their existing skills and qualifications to take jobs in sectors with which they maybe less familiar. Partly because of their concerns about navigating necessary retraining opportunities in a strange environment. But also it seems that, for some at least, a factor behind this reluctance may be the risk inherent in retraining versus the certainty of government support which may be considered as sufficient for their current standard of living, and may even appear attractive when set against what they have recently endured prior to coming to the UK.⁷⁴ This is not inconsistent with evidence across a number of European countries that has suggested that welfare systems can slow migrants' socio-economic integration if migrants feel those systems already provide sufficiently for their needs.⁷⁵

Certainly there has been difficulty in making the whole system joined up in the way that supports resettled refugees' acquisition of language skills translating into employment. Indeed, some aspects of the operation of the system can seem quite at odds with each other in this respect, in a way that can seem to undermine, rather than support, integration prospects. For instance finding employment takes a refugee out of eligibility

for continued funding of ESOL classes.⁷⁶ And while English language programmes in the workplace can be very effective they are infrequently offered in the UK, and there is no government funding available for them.⁷⁷ Another example of where the system can appear at odds with itself has been instances where attending English language tuition has resulted in resettled refugees being subject to benefit sanctions on the basis that they had attended that tuition rather than seeking work.⁷⁸

Unemployment has been found to be one of the most damaging of all life events in terms of the adverse impact on life satisfaction.⁷⁹ And, even when time out of work is only temporary, it has potentially long-term damaging effects. Research – often carried out in the context of periods when migrants may be legally prohibited from working, such as when awaiting determination of an asylum claim, but no less applicable to migrants who can legally work but do not immediately find or take a job – overwhelmingly points to how important early labour market integration is in refugees' long-term economic integration prospects. Even six months out of the workplace can take years, in some cases decades, to make up.⁸⁰

What are the policy options to mitigate the risk that the UK's current resettlement approach begins to lose the public's confidence and political support? This may happen if too high a proportion of those coming in are *perceived* to be long-term unemployed, struggling to integrate economically, and as constituting a 'burden' on society.

Post-COVID-19, with harsher economic conditions looming, this question arguably comes into even sharper focus. Certainly evidence points to the fact that, unsurprisingly, economic downturns tend to lead to less favourable sentiment towards immigrants.⁸¹

The co-chair of the APPG on Refugees has stated:

“At a time when public spending is likely to come under increased scrutiny, it is more important than ever to demonstrate that the Government is spending money efficiently and ensure that refugees are able to support themselves rather than immediately relying on the welfare system. We need to harness the skills and talents of everyone in our country to enable successful integration and to prevent wasting taxpayers' money.”⁸²

The risk around how refugee resettlement is perceived in the UK is heightened by the relatively high public profile of Syrian resettlement, coupled with the dispersal approach and the range of areas across the UK now involved in the programme, all of which has meant that the arrival of resettled refugees has usually been a subject of local media coverage⁸³. But this risk is also arguably compounded by the UK's criteria for the selection of those to be resettled, which approach is being taken forward into the consolidated UK Resettlement Scheme. This is to offer a safe and legal route to the UK only for those refugees determined as most vulnerable by UNHCR under its seven resettlement submission categories: Legal and/or physical protection needs, survivors of torture and/or violence, medical needs, women and girls at risk, family reunification, children and adolescents at risk, and lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions.⁸⁴ The Government is also clear that the UK's resettlement schemes “are not selective on the basis of employability or integration potential.”⁸⁵

CHAPTER THREE - MOVING THE NEEDLE ON ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IS NOT EASY

The question about resettled refugees' economic integration prospects in the UK sits within the context of a broader debate about what is the best approach to helping refugees to integrate and begin rebuilding their lives and productive engagement in society.

Some have argued that Global North states' distinctive place in the chain of global production is often entirely ill-suited to providing productive opportunities for most refugees from poorer countries, and that it is not in the interests of either those refugees or the Global North states to try to fit a square peg in a round hole. Instead, this argument suggests, most refugees will be better off being provided with employment opportunities in-region, closer to their country of origin and closer to the economic and social milieu with which they are most familiar. This can be best achieved by in-region countries opening up their labour markets to harness the contributions those refugees can make. And the contribution of the Global North states should be in helping to support, even create, the right infrastructure for this, such as the special economic zone established for Syrian refugees in Jordan.⁸⁶ But the size and heterogeneity of the situations and circumstances of the world's refugee population is such that there are still many of the world's refugees for whom UNHCR believes resettlement to the Global North to be the best, indeed only viable, solution. So what could the UK do to improve the economic outcomes of those resettled here?

In both of his reports on the UK's resettlement programme, the Chief Inspector of Borders has focused on the bottleneck of processing cases and, as a consequence, the lengthy period between the UK's acceptance of refugees for resettlement to the UK and their actual arrival here.⁸⁷ A potential upside of this timelag though is that it would seem to provide an opportunity to prepare refugees for life in the UK, before they arrive, by providing pre-departure language training and cultural orientation.⁸⁸ But also to help manage any unrealistic expectations on the part of the refugees of what they will be provided with in the UK, and also the extent to which other family members will be allowed to join them later⁸⁹, as misunderstandings in this regard can have an adverse impact for years after arrival. "Pre-departure orientation is low cost and has impacts on later integration."⁹⁰

The Home Office uses the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to provide cultural orientation for those being resettled to the UK. In the case of the VPRS, the Chief Inspector of Borders reported that the pre-departure workshop for this purpose for the refugees from the Syrian crisis was extended from the one day (5 hours) offered under the Gateway Programme to two days (10 hours) "in recognition of the challenges faced by this particular cohort of refugees". But he also reported that IOM themselves did not consider 10 hours as sufficient for this purpose, and that it is less than other countries such as the US, Canada and Australia provide.

In 2018 the Chief Inspector commented:

"Given that refugees are waiting on average 35 weeks from acceptance on the Scheme to resettlement, a 2-day cultural orientation workshop delivered 2 weeks

prior to departure appeared to be a case of “too little, too late”, especially as refugees were arriving in the UK with little or no English.”⁹¹

As a result he recommended the Home Office needed to “be more directly engaged with the pre-arrival stages of the process” and should explore with IOM:

“how to make more effective use of the period between a refugee’s acceptance onto the Scheme and their departure from the ‘host’ country, to improve their integration ‘journey’ (for example, providing pre-departure English language tuition), to manage expectations and improve the geographical matching process.”⁹²

Yet by the time of the Chief Inspector’s next report, two years later in 2020, little appeared to have changed:

“In 2018, [the Chief Inspector of Borders] recommended providing ESOL classes to refugees accepted through the VPRS while they waited to be resettled in the UK. Inspectors were told that the Home Office had decided that the logistical challenges of providing pre-departure ESOL training were “prohibitive”. However, based on the evidence [the Home Office] was prepared to share, it was too easily convinced that this was neither feasible nor worthwhile.”⁹³

In terms of what happens post-arrival, while there is acceptance that English language preparedness is a priority, there seems less agreement around the optimal balance between language preparedness and the need to “also emphasise and direct resources at employment preparation at the earliest opportunity to ensure self-reliance and mitigate any risk of dependency” -- even if this means refugees taking entry-level jobs and/or changing their field of employment from what it was in their home country.

But there is also evidence that UK employers are unclear about resettled refugees’ right to work. And that this can therefore run contrary to efforts aiming to get those refugees into work. This is because the punitive measures aimed at employers who employ anyone without permission to work in the UK – which are part of the UK Government’s hostile environment suite of measures aimed at in-country immigration control – can mean that, in the event of any confusion as to whether resettled refugees are entitled to work, employers may be unwilling to run what they may see as a risk. Employers therefore need to be educated about the fact that refugees are free to work, about the skills they can bring, and encouraged to provide language training, where practical, alongside employment or vocational training.⁹⁴

And at the same time both central and local government could seek to learn not only “from best practices across the UK, but also to learn from experiences in other countries where companies are more active in integration activities including language and vocational training”.⁹⁵

Lessons from the German experience?

Indeed, Germany’s recent experience with the economic integration of Syrian refugees might give some hope, and pointers, in this respect. But behind the headlines the reality is unsurprisingly rather mixed.⁹⁶ On the one hand the German government responded to the Syrian influx by pushing over 1 million refugees through integration and language

courses, a concerted effort which saw the employment outcomes for Syrian arrivals fare better than those of the Yugoslavian arrivals 20 years earlier.⁹⁷

But it is also important to remember that, in comparison with the UK, many more of the Syrian refugees that Germany received were self-selecting direct arrivals, and as such most were not necessarily the most vulnerable refugees. Indeed, studies suggest that a key contributor to the relative German success in economic integration of Syrian refugees was their above average (for Syria) level of educational attainment.⁹⁸ But even then, many of those refugees, while finding jobs, have not been able to find jobs anywhere near matching their skillset.⁹⁹

And when looking at the numbers hired by the private sector it is unclear how sustainable this employment has been. There is evidence that for some employers hiring was at least partly motivated out of social responsibility. And much of the hiring was into internships rather than permanent positions. Nevertheless, internships can be an important bridge into the labour market for refugees, in providing them with not only an opportunity to learn and gain experience, but also to prove themselves and demonstrate their skillset.

Unsurprisingly, language has been cited by German companies as the number one barrier to integration in the workplace. Even after completing a standard integration language course many refugees required further job-specific vocabulary training, at a significant cost. Overall, the extra integration costs incurred by a German company in the first year in employing a refugee have been estimated at roughly a 40% premium to the regular training costs they would incur for a German worker.¹⁰⁰

While the German experience has shown that economic integration of refugees can work and can generate net benefits, it is clear that it can require significant upfront commitment and investment. And it can be a long haul – on both sides. There have been Syrian refugees who have not felt able to integrate in Germany, and have chosen to leave Germany as a result. Indeed there have even been instances where refugees have felt so at odds with the expectations and norms of German society that they have chosen to arrange their return to Syria, sometimes through the very same smuggling networks that secured their passage from Syria to Germany in the first place.¹⁰¹

In many ways though, comparing the German and UK approaches to economic integration of refugees does not primarily come down to decisions of immigration policy. Not least because the German approach to economic integration is a consequence of Germany's more formalised, structured and cooperative approach (between employers and labour unions) to language skills, qualifications, training and apprenticeships, *for everyone*.

For a number of manufacturing jobs it is hard to work in Germany unless you have achieved prescriptive qualifications and certifications acquired from a recognised German trade body. It is obviously a struggle to satisfy those stringent requirements without undergoing specific German training, wherever you come from – this is true even for those coming to Germany from the most developed markets; witness the vocational training qualifications that one can take in the US which are specifically certified or endorsed by German companies or German regional chambers of commerce.¹⁰²

A consequence of the German approach to training and skills accreditation means that Germany has to invest in refugees if they are to get these sorts of jobs. Another by-product

of the more formalised structures of the German economy is that they make the economic integration outcomes of refugees in certain parts of its economy easier to track.

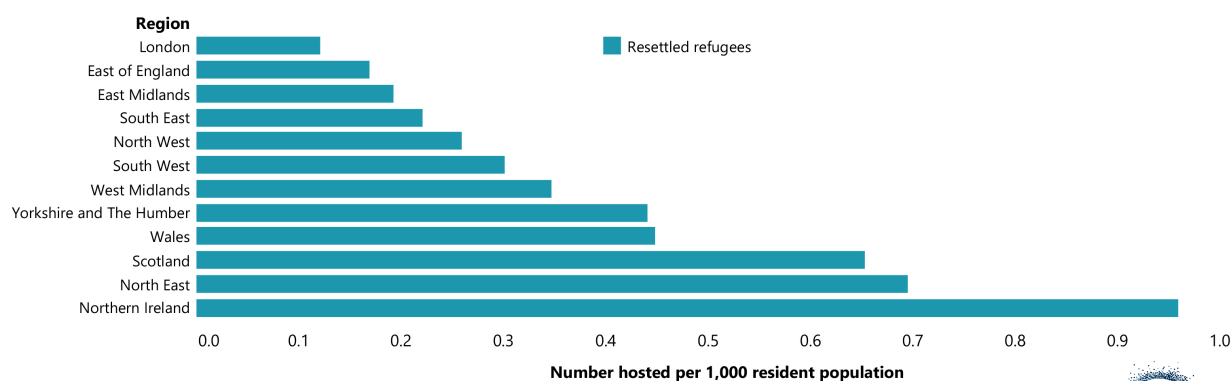
In contrast, the UK takes a much more hands-off and flexible approach to training and skills development, for everyone. This approach inevitably feeds through into its more hands-off approach to potential new workers coming into the UK economy from overseas. This means that, on the one hand, it can be much easier for a refugee without a prescriptive set of skills or qualifications to access a job in certain parts of the UK economy than it is in the German economy. But it also means the UK is not particularly predisposed to invest time and money in their training and integration into the economy in the same way either, or to track their progress in that regard.

This does not mean that there are not lessons that cannot be learned and applied in the from the German experience and approach. But it does mean that fundamental differences in the structure and approach of the two economies make it unrealistic to think that the UK can simply, through a few immigration policy adjustments, 'become' more like Germany in terms of its approach to the economic integration of refugees.

Lessons from elsewhere?

But, as even the COMPAS report¹⁰³ points out with its selection of examples of approaches from other countries, there is in any event rarely a single, best, agreed way forward on even the most fundamental issues around refugees' economic integration. In the UK, even in an area as core as language skills, debates continue about the most appropriate content, and the best approach to delivery/accessibility, of ESOL programmes. There has been much argument and anecdote, but less actual formal evaluation to better understand what works best in what situations and what might best be changed as a result.¹⁰⁴

The same could be said for the dispersal of resettled refugees around the UK. Unlike in some countries, such as Germany where dispersal triggers off a formulaic key based on each Lander's tax receipts and population size¹⁰⁵, in the UK dispersal under the VPRS and the VCRS has been based on the willingness of, and partnership with, local authorities and community sponsorship groups to take resettled refugees. The expansion of resettlement in the UK has meant that many local areas have seen resettlement of refugees for the first time.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, on a per population basis *more* resettled refugees have been placed in those areas of the UK – outside of London, the South East, West Midlands and the North West – which have for the most part typically experienced little or no previous refugee resettlement, and less international migration overall.

Figure 5: Resettled refugees by region, per 1,000 population (June 2020)

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics¹⁰⁷



These places may also be those where the breadth and depth of available economic opportunities may be smaller, and unsurprisingly studies have shown that placing refugees in areas which themselves may have greater economic challenges is not necessarily most conducive to those refugees' chances of employment and economic integration.¹⁰⁸ It is clear that in practice some refugees have felt stymied by the economic opportunities in the places where they have found themselves resettled.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps none more so than the Syrian refugee who used to run a construction company and was resettled to the Isle of Bute.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, it is argued that different places can provide different opportunities and approaches to support, and that the dispersal model for resettlement, in partnership with local authorities and community sponsorship groups, has in some cases at least, been transformative for both refugees and communities alike.¹¹¹ As the COMPAS report makes clear, the UK is not alone in struggling to work out what is the best model for locating refugees. And is not the only country which doubts whether the model that the refugees would generally prefer – co-location with their fellow citizens – is necessarily in the best long-term interests of refugees or the receiving country.

Co-ethnic enclaves have advantages – they can maximise and leverage bonding social capital, with the formation of networks which can lead to faster transition into employment and better labour market outcomes, at least in the short term, and, particularly where work is able also to be carried out exclusively in co-ethnic teams, even circumvent the language barrier. But they also have significant disadvantages – undermining the likelihood of building of bridging social capital outside the enclave, and the need and ability to engage with the language, or the culture, or indeed to access broader economic opportunities and resources.¹¹²

One area of current debate though is whether, accepting the case for, and within the constraints of, a dispersal model, there is a 'smarter' model of dispersal in terms of where to best place the refugee in terms of their greatest potential for economic integration.¹¹³

In Switzerland, for example, the current process of refugee dispersal is random allocation of refugees across cantons proportionate to their population size – under this process a French speaking refugee will therefore as likely be relocated to a German speaking canton as a French speaking one. Immigration Policy Lab, an organisation working with the Swiss government, is investigating whether refugee dispersal can in practice be better aligned

with the desire for more effective and cost-efficient economic integration, by using an algorithm to identify synergies between the potential geographical locations and the personal characteristics of the refugee. This project is now at the pilot phase; 1000 refugee families will continue to be dispersed under the current system, and will have their employment outcomes compared with 1000 refugee families dispersed under an algorithmically enhanced allocation. But even this approach to dispersal allocation will still be delivered within the existing parameters and constraints of a proportionate allocation across Switzerland, as well as a proportionate allocation of refugee families by country of origin, to mitigate against the possibility of enclaves developing.¹¹⁴ So it will be interesting to see the extent of any improvement that this smart allocation can actually achieve in practice, given the parameters and constraints within which it is operating.

All of this is to say that the focus of this report thus far -- on the importance for resettled refugees of good economic integration outcomes, and the challenges around this -- is not arguing that there are no policy ideas and actions that can usefully be tested and taken around language, location, job search and employability assistance, which could improve economic integration outcomes for those vulnerable refugees resettled to the UK. Nor is the report arguing that the Home Office has no proposals for improving the economic outcomes for these refugees – such as the Refugee Transitions Outcomes Fund, a joint programme it is establishing with the Department of Work and Pensions.¹¹⁵ We also accept that there are even more innovative ideas out there in the broader international community for unlocking more effective investment in resettled refugees' integration and economic outcomes. These include resettlement bonds and outcomes-based social impact bonds.¹¹⁶

Instead, our thrust is to argue that this issue matters, deeply, and that there is no easy fix here. Currently it may be true that “the lack of formal evaluation means that it is not possible to identify successful and cost-effective programmes to improve the outcomes of refugees in the UK.”¹¹⁷ But, even if that is the case, it seems clear that even with a perfect policy response the employment and economic integration prospects for resettled refugees in the UK would still in many cases remain a significant challenge *where the UK is intent on resettling only the most vulnerable refugees*.

Even those most upbeat on the economic prospects for resettled refugees, and the longer-term fiscal and economic value they can create, have acknowledged that this may not be the perception at the local level. “The communities that shoulder the short-term costs of resettling refugees do not necessarily benefit from the economic and fiscal contributions that refugees eventually make ... the costs of resettlement are more *immediate, local* and *salient* than the benefits, which tend to accrue in the future, at the national level, and less conspicuously.”¹¹⁸ And it is exactly instances of the ‘immediate, local and salient’ that have in recent times on occasion caused trust and confidence in British politicians’ handling of immigration matters to evaporate, often with unpredictable political consequences.

The purpose of this report is therefore to suggest another angle from which this challenge could be approached.

CHAPTER FOUR - COULD THE UK SEEK TO IDENTIFY THOSE REFUGEES AND OTHERS IN HUMANITARIAN NEED WHO MAY HAVE BETTER ECONOMIC INTEGRATION PROSPECTS HERE?

Introduction

The Government has stated that:

“The new UK Resettlement Scheme will continue to be based on vulnerability, with refugees assessed for resettlement by UNHCR against their resettlement submission categories.”¹¹⁹

The co-chair of the APPG on Refugees has noted:

“There is a danger that refugees can become a burden on local communities, not because they are burdensome but because we have not set them up for success.”¹²⁰

But in only countenancing the resettlement of the most vulnerable refugees, as narrowly defined by UNHCR, and without taking any other factors into account, the UK inevitably creates a significant headwind in setting up resettled refugees for success here. This also creates a situation which is very intensive in terms of the time, money and resources that must be devoted to it in order to make headway.

This report does not argue that the UK should not continue to resettle some of the world’s most vulnerable refugees, working hard at both the national and local level to set them up for greater success and to improve their economic and integration outcomes in the UK.

But it does argue that:

- Focusing its resettlement efforts *solely* based on selection criteria *exclusively* framed on the basis of UNHCR-determined vulnerability, and determinedly not taking any account of refugees’ skills, employability or integration potential in the UK¹²¹ in time risks undermining both political and public support for the UK’s refugee resettlement programme.
- Such a narrow focus also misses a number of people in almost equally desperate circumstances but who would on average have significantly better economic integration prospects in the UK, and require less investment of time and money in their integration. To put it another way, if, as some argue, economic value really is being wasted because of a failure to invest enough up-front in the integration of resettled refugees¹²², why not at least also open up an *additional* path for those who need less up-front investment?
- Attracting and accepting such people into the UK *alongside* resettling the most vulnerable could improve the British public’s perception of the contribution made by refugees, and their ability to successfully integrate in the UK. In doing so this could have a beneficial impact for the reception of *all* refugees in the UK, including the most vulnerable.

This report therefore argues that, alongside resettling the most vulnerable refugees, parallel tracks should be aimed at selecting some refugees, or others in challenging

humanitarian circumstances, who have greater employment chances and economic integration potential in the UK.

Examples from other countries?

In addition to UNHCR's Resettlement Submission Categories, those countries willing to resettle refugees may set their own priorities or selection criteria for their resettlement schemes. And, when comparing the UK's approach to resettlement with resettlement programmes in other main Global North countries, one difference is that a number of those other countries select at least some refugees based on criteria that either explicitly or implicitly represent an assessment of the resettled refugee's likely potential for integration and self-sufficiency in the receiving country within a reasonable period of time.

Here are some examples¹²³:

Norway

Norway has various prioritisation categories for humanitarian resettlement, but for cases falling outside of those categories, it then prioritises "individuals considered to be able to make the best use of services for integration in the settling municipality. Individuals with education or experience relevant to the Norwegian labour market are given priority".

Canada

"Those applying for resettlement must demonstrate willingness to become self-sufficient within the first five years. For example, on arrival skills and qualifications, evidence of in-country family/sponsor and language skills (particularly English and French) are taken into consideration by visa officers to determine such self-sufficiency."

Australia

Under the Australian government's offshore resettlement scheme, the extent of an applicant's connection to Australia is taken into account.

In addition to that main scheme, the Australian Community Support Programme also allows "local communities and businesses, together with the support of families and individuals, to recommend and support applicants for the issue of humanitarian visas for resettlement as well as provide employment opportunities and help them settle into life in Australia".

Only those who can realistically become financially independent within the first year are eligible to enter under this programme however. There are therefore additional criteria for resettlement under this route; as well as be residing in a resettlement priority country, the refugee must:

- be aged between 18-50
- have functional English language ability
- have an offer of employment and/or skills and attributes to enable them to be work-ready upon arrival in Australia

Germany

Given the large numbers of refugees that Germany was directly receiving at the height of the Syrian crisis, the country operated only smaller refugee and humanitarian resettlement schemes. Different eligibility criteria applied across different schemes, but alongside the usual vulnerability categories such criteria included:

- family or other ties in Germany conducive to integration
- ‘integration potential’, determined by level of school and occupational training, work experience, language skills, religious affiliation, age.

Germany also established a private sponsorship scheme for Syrian refugees, operated by the German Lander, which provided not only German citizens, but also those Syrian citizens who had arrived in Germany and lived there for more than a year, with the opportunity to sponsor relatives from Syria to relocate to Germany by committing to financially support their accommodation and living costs for up to five years.¹²⁴

Here then are a number of diverse and different examples of other countries that have either added integration based criteria to the UNHCR’s vulnerability assessment for resettlement, and/or have run parallel resettlement programmes alongside their vulnerable person resettlement programme, aimed at resettling refugees with a greater potential for swifter integration and/or positive economic outcomes.

This does not mean that those countries have not themselves still faced some criticism that their refugee resettlement approach imposes a burden on broader society. In Canada for instance, some argue that the significant levels of migration permitted by the Canadian government in recent years has created a fiscal burden on Canadian society largely due to the reception of refugees whose economic prospects were not sufficiently assessed.¹²⁵

But these countries’ approaches do implicitly acknowledge that refugees are a heterogeneous group, and that this heterogeneity may exhibit itself across a number of factors and attributes, including the presence or absence of family networks or existing contacts of a refugee in the receiving country, the refugee’s (in)ability to speak the language of the receiving country, and their previous qualifications and experience of employment. It is also largely accepted that these may all have a significant impact across different aspects of a resettled refugee’s integration into the receiving country in a way which merits, at least for part of their resettlement programme, a channel that specifically seeks to identify those for whom the prospects of integration are enhanced by the presence of these factors or attributes.

CHAPTER FIVE - HOW MIGHT THE UK SEEK TO STRUCTURE ENTRY ROUTES FOR REFUGEES AND THOSE IN HUMANITARIAN NEED WHO MAY HAVE BETTER INTEGRATION PROSPECTS HERE?

If the target group is those refugees or others in humanitarian need who would appear to have enhanced integration prospects in the UK, the gap that most of this group falls into lies between two cornerstones of the Government's immigration system: economic migration under the points-based system (PBS) – designed to attract skilled workers who are regarded as bringing a net positive economic contribution to the UK – and the humanitarian migration effected by the UK's refugee resettlement programme – which helps some of the most vulnerable move to safety in the UK.

It is therefore possible to approach the question of the target population that is found in that gap from either end of the spectrum – using the PBS or the resettlement programme to create paths for that group. This report argues that there are good reasons for doing both, in parallel. Indeed, as the PBS and the refugee resettlement scheme both command significant cross-party political and public support in the UK, it would make sense to work with the grain of the existing system to use both of these structures to expand the UK's offer to refugees in a way that benefits not just those refugees but also the UK itself.

Most fundamentally though this approach reflects the fact that the reality of life is on the whole much more blurred than policymakers or advocates typically allow. It is not just that refugees can look like economic migrants and vice versa. In an important sense – despite the distinctions that are drawn for legal reasons – in reality refugees almost always are also economic migrants, in that not only is their safety and security fundamentally impaired by their situation, but their ability to economically survive is too.

Because becoming a refugee is something that can happen to anyone, in any number of different ways, and in any number of different circumstances, such people will be found all along a continuing spectrum. This means that some of those in challenging humanitarian situations, but who would have enhanced integration prospects in the UK should they be able to come here, may look quite similar to those who could apply for a skilled visa to enter the UK – indeed in more stable times may have been able to do just that. While others in that category may, on the other hand, look very similar to those referred by UNHCR to the UK under the refugee resettlement programme.

It therefore makes sense to approach the challenge/opportunity of this group from both ends in considering how they could best be identified and supported to come to the UK. By considering, at one end, whether there is a resettlement route that could capture integration potential and not be solely based on UNHCR determined 'vulnerability'. And at the other end whether the PBS could be adjusted to allow for 'humanitarian points' to be awarded in certain situations. Currently the PBS is configured to allow in economic migrants for sponsored employment in jobs requiring specific qualification levels, and at specific salary levels. But the PBS has the flexibility to assign value to whatever the Government so decides it wishes to assign value to, for the purposes of admission to the UK. And the PBS could relatively easily be harnessed to the cause of admitting those refugees, or others in challenging humanitarian situations, who are most likely to be able to economically integrate into the UK.

And these routes could be used not just for refugees, but also for those who may not technically meet the strict legal definition of ‘refugee’, but who nevertheless have been determined to clearly merit humanitarian protection. Indeed, it will often be clear that persons need humanitarian protection before it is clear that they meet the ‘refugee’ definition. And this approach can thus allow for swifter practical intervention to assist those in humanitarian need.

Of course this raises an issue around selection; which humanitarian crises should the UK seek to respond to in this way, and why some and why not others. But that is in effect already the case. The UK has made the decision to prioritise refugee resettlement from the Syrian crisis. And it was the humanitarian protection route through which those resettled from Syria were originally dealt with. Prior to mid-2017 those coming into the UK from the Syrian crisis under the VPRS and the VCRS were granted humanitarian protection, only subsequently being switched to refugee status.¹²⁶ And, regardless of anything suggested in this report, this will also be an issue in the future in any event, because under the new UK Resettlement Scheme the Government has stated that it will seek to develop a proposal for an emergency resettlement process, “allowing the UK to respond quickly to instances where there is a heightened need for protection, providing a faster route to resettlement where lives are at risk.”¹²⁷

While approaching this challenge from both ends of the spectrum has the same goal – increasing the numbers of humanitarian-based migrants in the UK who have better chances and opportunities to economically integrate here – the details of the system and structure to achieve this, and the outputs and outcomes at either end of the spectrum, would have important differences. At one end this would be a resettlement-led approach, involving new thinking to increase the breadth and depth of vision of the UK’s refugee resettlement approach. At the other end, the new thinking would instead be applied to the Points-Based System, taking a sponsored employment route into the UK and increasing the breadth and depth of vision of that approach, to include points for certain humanitarian characteristics and circumstances in the way that tradeable points are made available and allocated within that System. Expanding these two ends of the spectrum in this way would mean admitting into the UK two cohorts of people who have different characteristics, but who also share much in common in terms of their humanitarian situation and potential to economically integrate into and contribute to the UK.

The resettlement end of the spectrum: how might the UK best develop a resettlement approach with integration prospects in mind?

From a resettlement perspective, the aim is not to replace the resettlement of vulnerable refugees, but to supplement it. In a way that would provide comfort, to both the Government and the public, by allowing greater numbers of refugee/humanitarian resettlers into the UK, without the risk that control is lost. At the same time, this regime would provide confidence that those being resettled through this route are more likely to be able to relatively swiftly integrate and make an economic contribution to the UK.

Targeting those refugees -- or others in humanitarian need who have enhanced integration prospects in the UK -- would not require particularly complex criteria. Indeed, three factors might be thought to be key pointers to those refugees who might find it easier to more swiftly economically integrate into the UK:

- their degree of connection with the UK, including time previously spent in the UK, and any existing family members in the UK;
- their confidence and capability in using the English language;
- their skillset and previous qualifications and employment history, and its relevance and reference to employment sectors and opportunities in the UK.

Such refugees might be the most vulnerable refugees in UNHCR's determination of that term, but they might not meet that definition. Targeting such refugees is therefore possible both inside and outside UNHCR's determination on vulnerability. That is, within the existing identified 'vulnerable' population based on their existing resettlement submission categories, UNHCR could be asked to identify those who might also tick any of these three 'economic integration' boxes for the UK. Such refugees would also exist outside of this narrowly defined 'vulnerable' population, but still be in a challenging situation where they may benefit from coming to the UK, and the UK may benefit from having them. An example would be a doctor who has fled to a neighbouring country in fear of his life, but is not able to practice there and is only able to survive by working in the informal economy.

The Mandate Scheme – an international scheme of mystery

The UK arguably has the core of such an approach already in place. Indeed, it has done so for 25 years. However, it is hardly used. The Mandate Scheme, dating back to 1995, is the oldest part of the UK's resettlement programme, but in recent years the only part of the programme that operates without an annual target for numbers to be resettled through it. As a result, it seems to have been left to wither on the vine, particularly when compared with the other parts of the programme.

Figure 6: Summary of UK resettlement schemes

	Number of people resettled in 2019		Number of people resettled since 2014	
	Total	Of which, children	Total	Of which, children
Gateway Protection programme For refugees in urgent need of resettlement, living in protracted situations anywhere in the world.	704	276	4,296	1,886
Mandate Scheme For refugees anywhere in the world who are family members of a person who is settled or on the path to settlement in the UK.	11	0	97	26
Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme For refugees of the conflict in Syria who are deemed vulnerable by the UNHCR's criteria	4,408	2,123	19,353	9,594
Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme For child refugees and their families in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey, who are deemed 'at risk' by the UNHCR.	489	278	1,747	1,003
Total	5,612	2,677	25,493	12,509

Source: House of Commons Library ¹²⁸

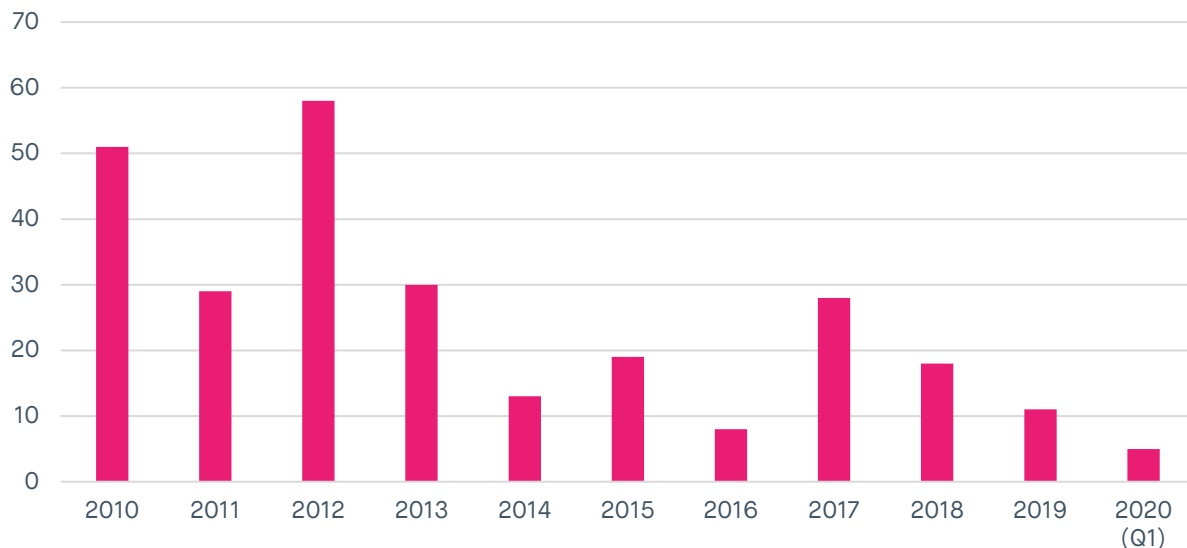
As currently constructed, the Mandate Scheme is designed to resettle refugees from anywhere in the world who are in the UNHCR system and for whom the UK is the most appropriate country for resettlement, and who have close family members living in the UK willing to accommodate and support them.¹²⁹ Previous time spent in the UK, including visits here, can also be taken into account.¹³⁰

UK-based relatives of the refugee do not themselves need to have refugee status, but they do need to have settled status, or leave to remain in a category leading to settlement, in the UK. Under the current Mandate Scheme rules, the refugee to be resettled must fit into a restrictive definition of close family – a minor child, spouse, or parent or grandparent aged over 65 of the person settled in the UK.¹³¹ While wider family members may be considered for resettlement in exceptional circumstances, UNHCR, the Home Office and the English courts all seem to have interpreted such 'exceptional circumstances' very restrictively, even in circumstances where the refugee has spent previous time in the UK.¹³²

Looking at its history, the Mandate Scheme might be thought to merit a description of international scheme of mystery. In 2019 only 11 people were resettled under it. Although

this was a relatively low number for the Scheme, it was not out of context. The bumper year for the Scheme in the last decade was 2012, but even then only 58 people were resettled through it.¹³³ In total, the Scheme has resettled 435 people.

Figure 7: Total number of refugees resettled via the Mandate Scheme in the past decade



Source: Chief Inspector of Borders ¹³⁴

As befits something of such tiny scale, there is little to be found in writing on the Scheme. And what there is seems almost willfully opaque. A rare mention of the Scheme comes in the Refugee Council’s June 2016 submission to the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee wondering why, given the amount of refugees in need of resettlement, and notwithstanding the numbers starting to come in through the VPRS, more refugees were not being resettled into the UK under either the Gateway Protection Programme or the Mandate Scheme, and recommending “that the Government uses its various resettlement programmes to their full potential”.¹³⁵

In terms of profile, both the Mandate Scheme and the Gateway Protection Programme have been thoroughly put in the shade by the limelight afforded to the VPRS. But, for Gateway, it has still at least remained the topic of research reports.¹³⁶ And has still merited the Chief Inspector of Borders’ inspections. Whereas the 2020 report of the Chief Inspector of Borders on ‘UK Resettlement Schemes’ rather sums up the lot of the Mandate Scheme. For notwithstanding the title of his report, unlike the other four limbs of the UK’s resettlement programme – VPRS, VCRS, Gateway, and the CSS – the Chief Inspector does not actually inspect the performance of the Mandate Scheme. And his only mention of it comes in two short paragraphs, on the penultimate page of his 109 page report. This might be considered to perfectly encapsulate the shroud of mystery surrounding the Scheme:

“In 2018-19, just 18 refugees were resettled through Mandate. In 2019-20, the figure was 11. Resettlement Operations staff aspired to increase the number of cases resettled under Mandate, but they acknowledged that ‘there needs to be work to understand why they are getting so few referrals from UNHCR, it’s hard to understand why so few are coming through that route.’ However, a larger Mandate programme raised questions about resourcing and Resettlement Operations also acknowledged that this could prove challenging.”

Stakeholders have argued that allowing families in the UK to apply for resettlement of relatives with the support of CSS groups if they could not afford to support the process themselves would 'improve integration as it would mean families could bring in other family members'. This could also address some of the requests made by CSS groups to resettle named and/or linked VPRS/VCRS cases."¹³⁷

This is sufficiently noteworthy to be worth spelling out. Yes, this report argues that the Mandate Scheme could, and should, be reformed and expanded, as a route which could take in refugees who have better integration potential. But here we are just talking about the Scheme standing ready to be used in its current form, and for which there clearly seems to be live, current, demand. This is in a situation which could improve the integration outcomes both of those arriving, but also of those already arrived, if certain key family members are allowed to join those already resettled in the UK. And which, given the requirement for accommodation to be provided initially by existing family members in the UK, would bypass the major bottleneck which builds in significant time delays in resettlements under the VPRS and VCRS; that is the arranging of accommodation. Yet when trying to understand why the Mandate Scheme does not appear to be being used anywhere near its full potential, the answer from the Home Office is entirely unclear.

What seems to have happened is that without an explicit target, and with other resettlement schemes having such targets, the Mandate Scheme has become locked into a cycle of restrictive interpretation, low numbers and low expectations, which have caused a downward spiral from an already low base. Which seems counterintuitive in the context of what the UK should be trying to achieve, not just for refugees, but for itself. If the presence of family members facilitates swifter integration why not make more use of this route?

Remember that other countries have allowed such a route, such as the German Lander-based private sponsorship scheme. It seems unlikely that so few are coming through the Mandate Scheme simply because the people it could bring in do not exist or have no interest coming to the UK. In Canada, for instance, almost two thirds of resettled refugees who are privately sponsored are sponsored by a family member already in Canada. And after one year the employment rate in Canada of those so privately sponsored is over four times that of resettled refugees who are not so sponsored. But even one third of those coming through the Government-Assisted resettlement route also have a family member in the country.¹³⁸ Extrapolating those existing resettlement population percentages to the numbers being resettled to Canada in the most recent years (prior to COVID-19) that would suggest over 10,000 of those refugees being resettled to Canada each year may already have a family member there.

Yes, rebooting and reforming the Mandate Scheme would likely require increased resourcing. But this needs to be compared with the resourcing required for the alternatives. Certainly, as currently drawn, particularly in comparison with other resettlement routes the Mandate Scheme provides a rather resource-lite entry route into the UK. As it is rooted in the concept of family support, and indeed accommodation with existing family in the UK, no integration funding or assistance is currently available at all from the Home Office post-arrival in the UK for those resettled through the Scheme, although travel and medical costs pre-arrival may be covered.¹³⁹

Investing more in the Mandate Scheme should be money well spent in terms of the net benefits it could unlock, to further increase the chances of positive integration outcomes and economic contribution. In Canada, large numbers of those receiving assistance through its resettlement programmes have a family member already in Canada, but that does not mean that resettlement support cannot be accessed. In Australia, while not eligible for the most intensive level of support, skilled migrants coming through a resettlement/community support route are still entitled to access language training through the Adult English Migrant Programme.¹⁴⁰ Under the Mandate Scheme, just because those relocating have the benefit of living with, and receiving support from, family contacts should not mean that support for improving employment prospects and language skills is not made available to them otherwise.

Indeed, although this cohort may not need the same degree of resettlement and integration support, there may be a case for such a cohort being able to access a different version of the initial support package – potentially a slimmed down version, but one that also aims higher and quicker and orientates them more immediately towards employment opportunities. There is another potential advantage that could come from providing some level of in-country support under the Mandate Scheme, which is that it would provide at least some level of interaction and in-country contact that is not present in the current incarnation of the Scheme, providing touchpoints and data benefits which could themselves be important to de-mystifying the Scheme and understanding the profile and progress of those coming to the UK through it.

Without at least an increase in focus, and ideally material adjustments to the Scheme, it is hard to see that the Mandate Scheme's future will be any less mysterious than its past. Whereas the Gateway Protection Programme is now being rolled into the consolidated UK Resettlement Scheme, with the separate Gateway, VPRS and VCRS teams consolidated into one team within Home Office Resettlement Operations¹⁴¹, the Mandate Scheme is being left to one side by the Home Office, to run alongside, rather than be part of, the UK's new consolidated Resettlement Scheme.¹⁴² More than ever, the Mandate Scheme therefore seems to be being pigeon-holed as a fringe endeavour and, very much like the refugees it is meant to help, not being given the chance to fulfil its potential.

But perhaps its standalone status also provides an opportunity to shine a light on the Mandate Scheme, and to remember that it is still there. And to reassess what it is there for, and to consider why it is being so little used to resettle refugees into the UK when those refugees who can come through this route are those who could and should have better integration potential here.

Dusting down the Mandate Scheme should ideally be combined with polishing it up. This polishing should take a number of forms:

- Rebranding – the name 'Mandate Scheme' does not really 'speak' to anything or anyone.
- Setting targets for the Scheme.
- Marketing and publicising the Scheme.
- Setting new expectations and processes with UNHCR for UNHCR to pro-actively identify and refer those who could qualify for the Scheme.

- Broadening the parameters of family members and connections with the UK that could qualify to come through the Scheme, particularly where those broader family members and connections have English language, relevant qualifications and employment skills.

The points-based system (PBS) end of the spectrum: how might humanitarian concerns best be introduced as ‘tradeable’ points in the UK’s points-based immigration system?

From the PBS end of the spectrum, what is missing is a potential visa route for people who both have skills to offer the UK (although falling short of qualifying under the existing PBS, as currently configured) but are also in humanitarian need. Designing visa routes for this cohort of people is in line with the UK’s long-standing political commitment to help vulnerable people, while also helping refugees who may be better equipped to economically integrate more swiftly into UK society. Currently this cohort of people find themselves caught between the two systems. Tweaking the PBS – specifically the ‘tradeable’ parts of that system – would be a targeted way to close that gap.

Governments all over the world use points-based systems as a core part of their immigration selection and control systems, including Canada, New Zealand and Australia.¹⁴³ And, in the run up to the 2019 general election, the Conservative Party presented its post-Brexit work immigration system to the British public as an ‘Australian-style points-based system’. A points-based immigration system has proven attractive to a number of governments in the Global North precisely because it promises to combine two things that politicians want to achieve through immigration policy: *control* over who is admitted to the country as an ‘economic migrant’, including cap(s) on numbers if/where thought appropriate; and *flexibility* in selecting such migrants according to an assessment of the skills, experience and perceived economic contribution they will bring to the receiving country.

The UK’s PBS means that foreign nationals applying for a visa to work in the UK under the main (skilled worker) route¹⁴⁴ – which now includes those coming from European Union countries now that EU free movement to the UK has ended – are granted points for certain characteristics relating to both themselves and to the job they are arriving to do in the UK. To be eligible to gain entry to the UK a total of 70 points is required. Three points-scoring characteristics are mandatory under the UK PBS: speaking English at the required level; applying for a job at the required skill level (RQF 3 or above); and having a job offer from an approved UK sponsor employer. These three mandatory characteristics add up to a total of 50 points. The other 20 points can be acquired through characteristics which are ‘tradeable’ rather than mandatory, meaning applicants are afforded some flexibility in *how* they accumulate points to reach the overall required threshold.

As currently configured in the PBS, the ‘tradeable’ points can, as with the mandatory points, be achieved by a mixture of attributes of both the person applying for the visa, and of the job they are applying for the visa for: these ‘tradeable’ points can be achieved by the job paying a certain salary level – generally matching the ‘going rate’ for that job or within a specified % of that ‘going rate’ – or being in a ‘shortage occupation’, or the applicant having a PhD-level qualification in certain subjects or in a subject that is relevant to the job. What this means in practice is that, as the Home Office guidance puts

it: “all applicants will be able to trade characteristics, such as their qualifications, against a lower salary to get the required numbers of points”.¹⁴⁵

In terms of control, the UK PBS is in effect the UK Government’s policy resolution of two poles of the UK’s approach to immigration post-Brexit. The first is a repeated political pledge to attract ‘the brightest and the best’ from overseas to contribute to this country. The second is the implicit pledge that the end of EU free movement to the UK should prevent people without work, or working for lower salaries, from coming to the UK, which is seen as delivering on a core element of the successful Brexit campaign fronted by Boris Johnson.

In doing so, the PBS allows the Government to articulate its aim to “give top priority to those with the highest skills” while making the claim that the new PBS “will reduce overall levels of migration”¹⁴⁶ but also quietly parking the commitment made by previous UK governments since 2010 to bring annual net migration below 100,000. The UK’s PBS can be criticised as being neither particularly ‘Australian’, nor the step change for immigration policy which the Government might like to present it as. The PBS skilled worker route resembles little more than an enhanced version of the previous Tier 2 worker route. But, in tandem with the end of EU freedom of movement to the UK, the framing of the PBS allows the Government to let the annual net migration target fade into obscurity, and instead promise a different sort of control, measured by *who* is coming into the UK rather than the number of people entering. This approach is more aligned with opinion polling and other opinion research since the EU Referendum which shows public concern about immigration more directed towards ensuring that those who enter the UK from overseas are treated fairly – both from the perspective of migrants themselves but also of receiving communities in the UK – and can make a contribution, rather than about controlling the numbers of immigrants per se.¹⁴⁷

The UK’s PBS, as currently configured, focuses on the economic contribution of those coming in through the typical metrics of language ability, skill level, wage level, educational qualifications, and meeting the UK’s need in shortage occupations. As proponents of the PBS have articulated, it does though afford the UK significant flexibility though as to the basis on which it admits skilled migrants who can integrate and contribute to the UK’s economy.¹⁴⁸

Examples from overseas show how a PBS can adapt to circumstances. The total points required for a visa can be lowered or raised; the points available for certain skills or backgrounds can be adjusted according to the changing needs of the host country’s economy. Canada, for example, has just lowered its points requirement significantly this year in order to offer a larger number of permanent entry skilled work visas at a time when the country is struggling to fill its requirements for labour due to the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁴⁹ This sort of flexibility is also a feature of countries which run regional as well as national immigration systems. In Australia applicants who narrowly miss out on scoring enough points under the federal PBS might score additional points to enable them to reach the threshold necessary to obtain a visa to work in a particular region which has a regional labour shortage in a particular industry.¹⁵⁰

There is currently no humanitarian dimension to the UK’s PBS, with all decisions regarding people who are in danger of persecution overseas being handled through the asylum system (for anyone who arrives in the UK and asks for protection), and the refugee

resettlement programme (for anyone under UNHCR's protection overseas who is able to come to the UK under the refugee resettlement programme). But while the core humanitarian dimension of the UK's immigration policy should, of course, continue to function in this way, there is no reason why the UK PBS should not include humanitarian considerations. Doing so can meet the two central immigration pledges by the UK government to recruit 'the brightest and the best' from all over the world while maintaining what the current Home Secretary has described as the UK's "proud history of providing a safe haven to the most in need"¹⁵¹.

This would be achieved by giving people overseas, who have relevant skills but might otherwise fall short of the points they need to qualify, *and who are also living in precarious humanitarian conditions*, points related to that humanitarian need. These extra points would, in some cases, then push the applicant over the points threshold and qualify them for a skilled worker visa to come to the UK. But what would be the circumstances that would give rise to these 'humanitarian points'?

One approach would be to make such points available for applicants who live in countries where the data shows refugee outflows to be the highest. Ministers would have discretion to cap the number of countries under consideration, but, subject to that, the choice would be guided by the annual independently-published UNHCR Global Trends data.¹⁵² Another approach would be to adopt a more multi-faceted approach to those countries where humanitarian danger is considered highest. This might appear to require some harder, more subjective distinctions, but there are a number of independent agencies with whom the UK Government already partners which could assist in this determination, including UNHCR, IOM, and the International Rescue Committee. In addition, applicants could receive points if they are registered as refugees with UNHCR.

They could also receive extra points if they have family connections in the UK, not just being those of 'close family' but extending beyond parents and children to including siblings and step-relations. This would be on the basis that even broader family ties such as this in the UK should be beneficial in terms of the applicant's economic integration potential here. Overall, looking across the broad sweep of the UK's immigration and asylum policies, the UK's approach to allowing families to come together and reunite in the UK has become increasingly suspicious and restrictive, despite the evidence that this can contribute positively to socio-cultural stability which in turn could be considered supportive of positive integration outcomes for migrants.¹⁵³ It is against this background that some parliamentary bills pushing to expand family reunion for refugees have proposed defining family much more widely.¹⁵⁴

'Humanitarian points' could act as a 'top up', bringing a relatively small number of additional points to an applicant's score, but potentially enough to get them to the threshold required for a skilled worker visa. Or they could carry a greater number of points, and bring even greater clout to the visa application. There would be a number of different options available to the Government in this regard, depending on its appetite for bringing humanitarian considerations into the process and therefore how much weight it wished to accord to humanitarian points. Both in terms of how many points it accorded to each humanitarian characteristic, but also how, and to what extent, those characteristics could be aggregated together for points scoring purposes.

Another key decision for the Government would be how ‘tradeable’ it was willing to make humanitarian points, in terms of what other points scoring attributes in the PBS humanitarian points can substitute for. This would include deciding whether, for this particular category of PBS applicant, the Government wishes to maintain, or relax, some or all of the current PBS mandatory requirements – being speaking English at the required level, applying for a job at the required skill level, and having a job offer from an approved UK sponsor.

Here are some examples of how this could work in practice in its most simple formulation, starting with an example from the Home Office itself on how an applicant might qualify for a skilled worker visa under the current UK PBS:¹⁵⁵

1. Mechanical engineer coming to the UK with salary offer of £26,750. The “going rate” salary threshold for the profession applies

‘Going rate’: £33,400	Points
Job offer	20
RQF 3 or above	20
English language	10
Salary	0
Job offer in a shortage occupation	20
Total	70

In this scenario, the applicant meets the 70 points threshold as the flexibilities built into the existing system allow them to ‘trade’ some characteristics. Their salary is too low to score any points in the salary category, but they are able to make up the shortfall because they are coming to the UK to work in an occupation with job shortages.

It is relatively simple to see how a humanitarian category could be added here. Here is the same scenario, with a humanitarian category (worth 10 points) added:

2. IT consultant coming to the UK with salary offer of £30,100. The “going rate” salary threshold for the profession applies

‘Going rate’: £33,400	Points
Job offer	20
RQF 3 or above	20
English language	10
Salary	10
Job offer in a shortage occupation	0
Humanitarian characteristic	10
Total	70

In this scenario, the applicant scores 10 (rather than 0) points for their salary because although it is below the ‘going rate’, it is 90% of it. And with another 10 points for having

a humanitarian characteristic – e.g. registered refugee in the UNHCR system – the applicant would amass enough points even if the job was not in a shortage occupation.

Or to give another example, if the humanitarian category was worth 20 points:

3. Construction manager coming to the UK with salary offer of £24,000

Salary requirement: £25,600	Points
Job offer	20
RQF 3 or above	20
English language	10
Salary	0
Job offer in a shortage occupation	0
Humanitarian need	20
Total	70

In this case, if the humanitarian characteristic brought 20 points, the applicant could reach the threshold even with a lower salary and a job outside a shortage occupation.

Such an adjusted system should be possible without posing insuperable practical challenges to the Home Office. Just as the resettlement route can build on the existing infrastructure of the UK's resettlement programmes, and potentially the Mandate Scheme in particular, so building in humanitarian considerations into the framework of the PBS can use the existing infrastructure of the new UK PBS which has been rolled out from the start of this year after the intensive work to develop it.

Indeed, there may be the opportunity for cross-fertilisation between the two routes. Those potentially eligible today under the Mandate Scheme due to close family connections in the UK could also be potentially eligible to enter under the PBS route if those connections helped them reach the required number of points. Certainly, the expanded relationship and cooperation between the Home Office and UNHCR since the onset of the Syrian crisis, and the UK's expanded refugee resettlement commitment from that region, could form a basis on which the Home Office could build, to work through UNHCR to seek to identify refugees under UNHCR's care who have English language capability and any history of family connections or of time spent in the UK.

This would help deliver on the Government's "commitment to further constructive engagement to identify ways to level up access to safe and legal work pathways for talented displaced persons"¹⁵⁶ and indeed its commitment, a few weeks prior to that statement, "to further constructive engagement on identifying ways that we can level up mobility for displaced persons across the labour market", which it noted it had recently discussed with a number of interested parties, including the organisation Talent Beyond Boundaries.¹⁵⁷

Talent Beyond Boundaries is an international NGO which works to link employers in Global North states with highly-skilled displaced people around the world, and to help governments adapt or create visa routes allowing those talented refugees to bring their skills to those countries.¹⁵⁸ It has already worked with national and regional governments

in Canada and Australia to pilot visa programmes. Implementing a humanitarian category into the PBS would be a potential option through which the UK Government could introduce such a route in the UK.

Of course, the Government might consider there to be a number of potential cons in terms of mixing humanitarian concerns with the UK PBS in this way. One of the strengths of the UK's asylum/refugee system, and its international legal basis in the United Nations Refugee Convention, is that its exclusive focus on humanitarian protection means that refugees get the protection they need in the UK, regardless of their prospects in the UK. The same is true of the UK's refugee resettlement programme, provided that refugees satisfy UNHCR's vulnerability criteria. Even where a PBS with humanitarian categories *supplements and does not replace* these systems, it may therefore prove controversial in blurring this boundary.

Similarly, ministers support the PBS precisely because it is focused purely on economic migration. Given the recent history of negotiations over the design of the PBS with business groups, unions, immigration advocates and experts on the Government-appointed Migration Advisory Committee, there may be understandable caution, at least in the immediate term, about introducing new humanitarian angles into the system, even if only in a relatively small number of cases.

From a practical perspective, introducing humanitarian categories into the PBS would require difficult decisions around which situations and characteristics would be in scope and which not, and undoubtedly some dividing lines which might well be challenged. For instance, why is the situation in Syria designated as meriting extra points, whereas the situation in Yemen or Eritrea is not? If family connections in the UK were to be a point-scoring element, it would also require agreement on the definition of what are acceptable 'family' connections for this purpose, and, as already touched on in this report, this is not necessarily an uncontroversial question.

But there are also potential pros to the approach proposed in this report, in addition to those already outlined. In a measured, but real, way it seeks to introduce progressive ideas on the UK's role as a positive humanitarian force into mainstream immigration policy. But it does so in a way that works with the grain of the Government's approach to immigration control and flexibility, and to the admission of migrants who can economically contribute to the UK. Our approach here taking as its basis policies that already stand at the strategic heart of the Government's immigration policy framework. Utilising the PBS means this approach could be delivered at a significantly lower cost than the resettlement route, which typically requires far greater resources to operate.

There is also recent evidence, from the British public's reaction to the visa offer made by the UK to some Hong Kong residents, that the British public may be broadly supportive of immigration routes to the UK which seek to combine perceived economic benefit to the UK with a humanitarian impulse.¹⁵⁹

Our approach would put a humanitarian angle back into the mainstream of Home Office thinking, at a moment when there is a risk that political focus is beginning to shift away from policies welcoming refugees – largely based around resettlement – towards much more restrictive ideas and rhetoric based on more aggressive off-shoring and returns of those claiming asylum in the UK.

The opportunities for evidence-based policymaking

Another advantage of approaching the challenge/opportunity – identifying those refugees, or others in humanitarian need, who have enhanced integration prospects in the UK – from two different ends of the spectrum is that both these routes could be run in parallel, initially as low-key pilots. As referred to earlier, one of the advantages to the more formalised structures of the German economy is that it can make it easier to track the economic integration outcomes of refugees in certain parts of its economy. The two potential routes outlined in this report present a perfect opportunity for a practical experiment in the UK with this potential benefit; the outcomes could be tracked explicitly from the outset, and yield multiple beneficial evidential outputs in an area which is sorely lacking them.

The outcomes and outputs of both routes could be closely monitored and measured before deciding whether to invest in them further and expand them. And to provide evidence as to whether those coming through these routes are indeed economically integrating better than those coming through the existing vulnerable refugees resettlement route. If the economic integration outcomes are not as good as expected, it should be possible to gain an understanding of why this is from the evidence available, or to relatively easily target specific research in order to do so. And the requirements and conditions of both or either of these routes could then be altered accordingly.

The degree of control in both routes is rather different. Under the resettlement approach the Government has direct control over the numbers admitted. Under the PBS approach this control is more indirect, being through an employer-led work visa route, but the Government does have the option of more direct control, through capping the numbers of those admitted annually under this route. The decision on whether this option is required in practice could again come from evidence on the outcomes from the pilots we propose. On the basis of this, the Government could decide that it is not worried about the numbers coming through the PBS route as long as the outcomes for those coming through this mechanism look good, but once up and running any concerns about numbers through this channel versus outcomes could be addressed by imposing a cap. Or by seeking to control flows as well as, or instead, by making adjustments to the application of the points system; how many points are awarded, and for what attributes, and recalibrating this to make entry tougher if the flows are considered too high. In any event, the relevant attributes and the points scored for those attributes should be kept under regular review, precisely to make the best use of the flexibility inherent in the PBS design.

Perhaps most importantly though, from an evidence-based policymaking perspective, would be the chance to compare the outcomes and outputs *between* the two routes, and understand what is driving any materially different integration and economic outcomes and outputs between them. To what extent, for instance, are any such differences attributable to differences in the situation and circumstances of those arriving through the two different routes? Are any such differences in outcome more attributable instead to differences in the different post-arrival experiences associated with the two routes, such as differences in the employability assistance and language support provided between them?

Another important aspect of comparison though would be not just between the two routes, but also looking at the outcomes of these routes *versus* the integration and economic outcomes and outputs that are seen from the main UK Resettlement Scheme. In fact, the experience of the new routes suggested in this report could potentially offer lessons for the broader application to the challenges of integration in the UK, not only as faced by those refugees resettled in the UK under different routes, but also as experienced by refugees in the UK who have made their own way here. These lessons might have relevance beyond even that, and be relevant to challenges around migrant integration in the UK more broadly, beyond just those with refugee status.

CHAPTER SIX - THE BLURRED LINES (OF HONG KONG), AND CONCLUSION

Various sections of the Government, and of civil society, have an interest in keeping quite separate and distinct categories of ‘economic migrants’ on the one hand, and refugees/those displaced in humanitarian crises on the other. Particularly for those supporting refugees there is a fear that any blurring of the line between the two can only be damaging to their cause. But that need not necessarily be so. Indeed, the opposite may be true.

To avoid any acknowledgment of the blurred lines of real life can itself be damaging, making it all too easy for refugees to be tarred with the brush of being economic migrants. In real life, “political upheavals, conflicts and economic difficulties often occur simultaneously giving people multiple motivations for the decision to move”. Where does the line lie between those fleeing persecution and those fleeing a life that has simply become intolerable? Does the fact that “conflict, particularly when it becomes protracted, undermines the ability to earn a livelihood and feed a family by killing primary breadwinners, destroying businesses and making it impossible to travel to work” turn a refugee who can claim protection into an economic migrant who cannot? Does an Afghan refugee who flees to Iran, or a Syrian refugee who flees to Turkey, but then finds that they cannot work and make a life for themselves in those countries, and then later moves on to the UK, thereby become an ‘economic migrant’ and forfeit their refugee status? “In expressing the need to create a life and not only to live, ‘refugees’ have ‘shown their hand’, revealing themselves to be ‘migrants’ in search of economic betterment”. There is no way around this fact.¹⁶⁰ Or, to put it another way, not only do ‘economic migrants’ exercise their agency as far as they can; refugees do too. And not only can refugees suffer considerable constraints on their ability to move, so too can ‘economic migrants’.¹⁶¹

A blurring of the lines is currently playing out in how the Government has reacted to developments in Hong Kong, and the offer the UK is now making to those Hong Kong citizens with British National (Overseas) (BNO) status to come to the UK through the new Hong Kong BNO visa.¹⁶² On the one hand this offer is rooted in the technical formalities of immigration law and status. The UK is making this offer to those Hong Kong citizens it feels a particular responsibility for through its past colonial connections. In order to be eligible, a person needs BNO status (or be a dependant living in the same household as someone with BNO status), a status deriving from Hong Kong’s position within the former British Empire and created when Britain handed Hong Kong over to China in 1997.

But the offer is, as the Home Secretary has stressed, “a very generous one”, which eschews the usual requirements of non-humanitarian immigration routes. It does not require a certain level of English language ability, or skills, or salary, or minimum income, or indeed a job offer from a UK employer at all.¹⁶³ Nor does it include any cap on the numbers who might come, other than the requirement of the BNO status itself which is estimated to include 5.4 million Hong Kong residents. What explains this generous offer? In essence it aims to marry perceived economic benefit to the UK – or at least a degree of confidence in the economic integration potential of those who may come to the UK from Hong Kong – with a humanitarian impulse.

There is a humanitarian element in the sense that the offer would not be being made without the threat that China is viewed as posing to Hong Kong citizens’ liberty and

security by imposing its national security legislation on them. But importantly there also seems to be a political presumption by ministers that their background, education, skills and demographics mean that, even if large numbers of them do come to the UK, the Hong Kong BNOers will be able to swiftly and productively economically integrate here,¹⁶⁴ and thereby contribute tax revenues. Indeed, the official mid-point estimate of the flows under this route computes a net fiscal benefit to the UK of £2.65 billion (without accounting for the additional visa and immigration health surcharge fees raised from the Hong Kong BNOers, which themselves have an estimated net benefit of over £700 million).¹⁶⁵

One might argue with the premise that the Hong Kong BNOers will so self-evidently need little support and be net contributors in this way.¹⁶⁶ But if this were not the premise of policy, the UK would unlikely be making this offer, at least in the generous way that it is. It is also notable that for the first five years the Hong Kong BNOers will have no recourse to public funds in the UK. They will also have to pay the annual Immigration Health Surcharge for access to the NHS in that period also. So although the initial entry visa for Hong Kong BNOers is considerably cheaper than other visas, the cumulative costs even for a couple without children staying in the UK, and obtaining indefinite leave to remain over the five year period and then subsequently applying for British citizenship, runs to almost £14,000.¹⁶⁷ This might be thought to act as a helpful financial ‘filter’ of those thinking of coming but who do not have adequate savings or disposable income.

Of course, the position of the Hong Kong BNOers is a very particular one, as the Home Secretary has reiterated: “BN(O) citizens in Hong Kong are in a unique position, which is why I have designed a policy which is specific to them in the wider immigration system. It will not set a precedent. It’s a proportionate response to the situation which has arisen.”¹⁶⁸

However, it does seem that the British public is broadly supportive of this offer, and seemingly considerably more so than they were 30 years ago. In 1990, just a third of respondents who had heard of the proposals then approved of them, whereas as of last July nearly two-thirds who had heard of the proposals supported giving British passport-holders in Hong Kong a permanent right of abode in the UK.¹⁶⁹ And what the Hong Kong BNO offer does show is that the UK Government is willing to think outside the usual boxes of the immigration system, and to consider hybrid immigration routes which contain elements of both humanitarian protection and economic potential where this can be for mutual benefit. In that respect there is much to welcome, and something to build on, in terms of thinking more broadly and expansively about those refugees or others in challenging humanitarian situations who may have the greatest potential to economically integrate in, and contribute to, the UK.

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