



‘I returned to life’

why refugee family reunion
must be protected

October 2025

Contents

Foreword	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction and context	6
Methodology	8
Separation	9
Visa Application: hidden costs and impacts of delays	15
Impact of reuniting	22
Conclusion	28
References	38

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Foreword

When my family left Afghanistan, it wasn't because we wanted to. It was because we had no other choice.

My mother's life was in danger after she spoke up for women's rights and education. My eldest brother, Hussein, was seriously ill and we were told the only way to save his life was to leave everything behind and find treatment abroad. We had to pack up everything and flee in darkness. That journey became the story of my childhood.

Looking back, what kept us going through every step of the journey was the fact that we were together. We had nothing certain ahead of us, but we had each other. And that gave us the strength to keep moving.

For many families forced to flee conflict, persecution, or danger, that sense of togetherness is not possible. Families get split apart. Parents end up in one country while their children are left behind in another. Brothers and sisters grow up not knowing if they will see each other again.

That separation doesn't just hurt emotionally; it stops people from being able to rebuild their lives. You can't really settle into a new community, learn, work, or heal when part of you is still elsewhere, still unsafe.

I know what a difference it makes to feel safe with the people you love most by your side. It changes everything. Family is what gives you the confidence to start again. It's what allows people to stop surviving and start living.

That's why family reunion matters. This report is not just about rules or systems. It's about real lives and real families. The British Red Cross sees this every day, standing alongside people who are trying to bring their loved ones to safety.

Reuniting families is not a luxury. It is a basic human need. Every family deserves the chance to be safe together, and to find hope for the future, just as mine once did.

**Hamed Amiri, British Red Cross Ambassador,
author of *The Boy with Two Hearts***



Executive summary

Refugee family reunion has long been a cornerstone of the UK's refugee protection system. It offers a vital, safe and managed route for refugees to reunite with the people they love, who often remain in the dangerous places from which they fled.

When a person seeking protection is recognised as having a well-founded fear of persecution, they are granted refugee status and can apply to reunite with immediate family members, including spouses and children under 18, through family reunion visas. This recognises that refugee families who were forced to separate are unable to continue their family life anywhere other than the UK. This is because they cannot return home safely or relocate elsewhere.

This report explores what the journey to reunion is like for refugee families. It draws on interviews with people who have lived experience of family reunion – either as a **sponsor** (the family member in the UK applying for relatives to join them) or an **applicant** (the family member applying to come to the UK).

We also spoke to sector stakeholders including lawyers and caseworkers from international organisations and charities in the UK and Europe.

Our research found that:

1 No one wanted to leave their family.

Everyone that fled told us they felt forced to separate from their families because of war, the risk of violence, and religious, ethnic or political persecution – often without warning and through no fault of their own.

“Being separated with the children, how you feel as a parent. For me, in my opinion, it was the worst time I’ve ever [had], even when in prison, when I was tortured.”

Man from Sudan, Appendix FRPⁱ sponsor

2 Being separated from loved ones can harm people’s ability to integrate.

Concern for the wellbeing and safety of their loved ones, and anxiety about being separated from them, dominates the lives of many refugees. Our interviews revealed the profoundly negative impact this had on refugees’ mental health, ability to maintain a job, concentrate on education or make connections in their communities.

“I was studying, I was sent to college, yeah. I’m just going there, but I don’t know what they said ... my mind is still, it’s not, I just think of only just my brother.”

Man from Eritrea, Appendix CRPⁱⁱ sponsor

3 Family members – mostly children – are often left in danger while waiting to reunite. Women and children – especially unaccompanied children – were left more vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation while waiting for a decision on their visas. We heard that long wait times made some people feel that making a dangerous journey to the UK was their only option.

"I applied immediately for my family because the situation was critical in Sudan. My children, if they had been one day late, they would have died. Just one day. But they left early in the morning. They left the village at 7.00am. At 10.00am, [the fighters] raided the village. Many people died."ⁱⁱⁱ

Man from Sudan, Appendix FRP sponsor

4 Costs and visa requirements can be a barrier to reuniting and push people towards dangerous journeys.

Participants told us that gathering the correct documentation was particularly challenging for people in conflict zones. Families often had to make expensive, dangerous and lengthy journeys to gather this evidence, sometimes having to travel across borders. We heard how many sponsors in the UK had to work in exploitative conditions or accrue debt to pay the high costs associated with applying for refugee family reunion.

"We just had a case of a 14-year-old girl... We were very close, and she made the journey from Greece to France and then crossed irregularly. It's just the timing really, it's not even how complex it is and the evidence I think, it's just the delay the whole system has... We have loads of children that unfortunately take that route because the time is too long, how long it takes."

Lawyer, international charity

5 Reuniting safely is transformative for refugee families and crucial for integration.

One sponsor described feeling "as if [he had] returned to life". Participants emphasised that knowing loved ones were safe and together was essential for moving past trauma and adapting to life in the UK. Our interviews showed how this significantly improved sponsors' mental health and gave families the certainty they needed to make long-term plans. This improved people's ability to integrate and meaningfully contribute to their new communities.

"So many things have changed, because before, I was alone. I didn't have anything to do much. Now... we're taking [the kids] to school every day... we have a park near [the] house, so every day we go to the park. They just love going to the park. And we play cricket with my older son, and we also play some other group entertainment in the park, like volleyball, football."

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

Family reunion is a vital lifeline for refugee families. It is one of the only safe and managed routes left available to women and children in dangerous situations. But its future is uncertain. It has been suspended by the UK Government from September 2025 until Spring 2026, as long-term changes – expected to restrict access to the route – are considered.

These changes could include introducing new financial and language requirements, which risk effectively shutting down this route. Of the arriving spouses that the British Red Cross has supported in its family reunion integration service, 97% would not meet an English language requirement.^{iv} In addition, sponsors – having not been allowed to work while waiting for an asylum decision – would struggle to meet financial requirements.

We are concerned that the negative impacts of separation highlighted by this report – from increasing dangerous journeys and hindering integration, to leaving women and children at a greater risk of violence and exploitation – are likely to be exacerbated if a more restrictive route to family reunion is introduced.

Refugee families face unique challenges: well-evidenced protection needs, an inability to relocate elsewhere and increased difficulty meeting language or financial requirements. These circumstances need to be at the heart of any changes to the system so that refugees have a fair opportunity to rebuild their lives.

The British Red Cross recommends that:

Any considerations about the future design of the refugee family reunion process should be guided by four key principles: **fairness, prioritising need, flexibility, and efficiency.** These principles aim to ensure the route remains accessible to those who need it most – particularly vulnerable children – by making requirements realistically achievable, reducing barriers, and safeguarding protection and integration.

ⁱ Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection) visa route – for spouses whose relationship existed before the sponsor arrived in the UK; children under 18 on the date of application; and children over 18 in exceptional circumstances. See p8 for a more detailed explanation of the visa routes mentioned in this report.

ⁱⁱ Appendix Child Relative (Sponsors with Protection) visa route – for minors under 18 on the date of application who are a close relative to their UK sponsor, such as a sibling, niece, or nephew. See p8 for a more detailed explanation of the visa routes mentioned in this report.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview conducted through an interpreter.

^{iv} Of a proportion of the arriving spouses (n=740) who we supported through our family reunion integration service from 2019 to 2022.

Introduction and context

Refugee family reunion has long been a key route for helping families of those who have already been granted protection to seek safety in the UK. Since 2010, 91% of all visas granted have been for women (35%) and children (56%).^v

The principle of family unity is upheld by the UK's Human Rights Act and is set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises the family as "the natural and fundamental group unit of society", which is "entitled to protection by society and state". The 1951 Refugee Convention, which the UK has ratified, explicitly protects rights acquired by a refugee before they were forced to flee, including the fundamental human right to family life.

Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection) (FRP) of the Immigration Rules is a route specifically for refugees to reunite with immediate family members with whom they had lived before having to flee. This route recognises that families become separated for reasons outside of their control, such as persecution, war, or violence, and can only continue their family life in the UK through family reunion.

Refugees with child relatives abroad, such as siblings, can apply to reunite under the Appendix Child Relative (Sponsors with Protection) (CRP) route. There is also a route for people with settled status and British citizenship seeking to bring over family, known as Appendix Family Members. These routes all have different criteria, which are explained in the following table.

Visa routes

	Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection)	Appendix Child Relative (Sponsors with Protection)	Appendix Family Members
Eligible family members	Pre-existing spouse; children under 18 on the date of application; and children over 18 in exceptional circumstances. ^{vi}	Minors under 18 on the date of application who are a close relative to their UK sponsor, such as a sibling, niece, or nephew. They must prove they have no other family that can care for them, and they have a family relationship to the sponsor.	Spouse; children under 18 on the date of application; parents of children already living in the UK who are under 18 or were under 18 when they were first granted leave; and adults coming to be cared for by a relative.
Financial	No formal income requirements.	Sponsors must provide "adequate" maintenance and accommodation for their family members without relying on public funds.	Sponsors who have not previously accessed this route must meet a minimum salary threshold of £29,000/year.
Visa fees	No formal fees – although applicants must pay for any required documents, tuberculosis (TB) tests, travel to a visa application centre, and travel to the UK.	Applicants must pay an application fee of £424 and an immigration health surcharge of £776 for each year the visa has been granted for. In exceptional circumstances a fee waiver may be granted. ^{viii}	Partners, children and parents must pay an application fee of £1,938. An immigration health surcharge of £776/year for children and £1,035/year for adults must also be paid. In exceptional circumstances a fee waiver may be granted.
	All routes enable people to apply and show they have exceptional circumstances. 'Exceptional circumstances' describes cases where a refusal would contravene their Article 8 rights under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) – the right to private and family life.		

Figures correct at the time of writing

Family reunion applications are not eligible for legal aid in England and Wales. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, where legal aid can be available, it is still challenging for refugees to access support because of a lack of legal aid providers.^{vii}

On 4 September 2025, the Home Office suspended refugee family reunion to new applications until Spring 2026, with plans to bring forward changes before applications are reinstated. Refugee families are now only able to apply under Appendix Family Members. Due to high fees and income thresholds, this route is inaccessible for most refugees.

The suspension comes after an increase in the number of visas being granted for refugee family reunion, which saw 20,817 granted in the year ending June 2025. The reason for this increase is largely because of the government's policy to clear the asylum backlog, which has made more people eligible for family reunion. Clearing the backlog of family reunion cases also contributed to the increase. The backlog of family reunion cases was first created in 2021 by operational restructures and pauses in family reunion decision-making during the Ukraine response at the Home Office.¹

Although no specific restrictions have been confirmed at the time of writing, several possible changes have been suggested. These include additional language and financial requirements as well as long residence requirements, where sponsors would need to have their status for a specified amount of time before qualifying for family reunion.²

The UK Government has indicated that these proposed changes are to ensure fairness across all family migration routes. However, refugees and their families face unique circumstances and dangers that need to be considered:

- Refugee family reunion is distinguishable from other family migration routes because it reunites family units that existed before they were forced to separate.
- The UK is the only option for these families to reunite safely. Refugees have been granted protection status, which recognises they cannot return to their country of nationality and are unable to continue their family life anywhere but the UK.

- Family members abroad are often in dangerous situations themselves. Almost a third (31%) of the refugee families supported by the British Red Cross were in conflict zones, or had been displaced from their home, or both.^{ix}

- Refugees are not allowed to work while waiting for a decision on their asylum claims, making financial requirements very hard to meet.

It is for these reasons that the UK has historically exempted refugees from financial requirements – ensuring they are placed on a fairer footing and preserving a safe, managed route for families to reunite.

As this report will explore, family reunion is a lifeline for many refugees, who told us they cannot start fully rebuilding their lives until they are safely reunited with their loved ones. Family reunion also brings wider benefits to communities, such as helping refugees integrate, find work and contribute to society.

^v This figure was calculated using the figures published from 2010 to 2025. See: Home Office (2025). Immigration system statistics quarterly release. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-statistics-quarterly-release>.

^{vi} Exceptional circumstances considered include: financial and emotional dependency on one or both of the parents; the child not leading an independent life; having no other relatives to provide means of support; and lacking access to support or employment in the country they are living, putting them at risk of destitution if they are left on their own. See: Home Office (2025). Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection). Retrieved from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68b811a0536d629f9c82aa0c/Appendix+Family+Reunion+_Sponsors+with+Protection___1_.pdf.

^{vii} Paragraph 6.2 of the Immigration Rules defines "adequate" in this context as follows: "'Adequate'... in relation to a maintenance and accommodation requirement means that, after income tax, national insurance contributions and housing costs have been deducted, there must be available to the person or family the level of income or funds that would be available to them if the person or family was in receipt of income support." See: Home Office (2025). Immigration Rules. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-introduction>.

^{viii} Refugees in England and Wales can apply for exceptional case funding. There are legal aid deserts across the UK and people are unable to find representation.

^{ix} This is based on an assessment of 130 families the British Red Cross supported from January to September 2024.

Methodology

Method

Research design:

- Two interview guide design workshops were held, involving four VOICES Ambassadors^x, to shape the lived experience interview guides.

Fieldwork with 31 participants, including:

- Fifteen individual interviews and three paired interviews (21 participants in total) with people with lived experience of the Appendix CRP and/or Appendix FRP visa routes.
- Ten individual interviews with sector stakeholders including caseworkers and lawyers from international organisations and charities in the UK and Europe.

Sample

Interviews took place between June and September 2025.

We spoke to 18 participants who had either sponsored a spouse or child through Appendix FRP or been sponsored themselves. We also spoke to three participants who had either sponsored a sibling through Appendix CRP or had been sponsored by an older sibling. One participant sponsored both his children and younger siblings.

The sample included families from Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen. 11 interviews were conducted with the support of an interpreter and as a result some are expressed in the third person.

Most participants had been through the family reunion process in the last five years. A minority had been reunited for longer than five years and were included to provide an insight into the longer term impact of reunification. All participants were living in the UK. All participants were adults at the time of the interview, but some of the applicants were children at the time they were sponsored.

Refugee participant sample breakdown

Sample characteristics		Total
Visa route ^{xi}	Appendix FRP	18
	Appendix CRP	3
Role of participant	Sponsor	12
	Applicant	9
Gender	Men	10
	Women	11

We also spoke to ten sector stakeholders, including lawyers, caseworkers, and project officers with experience of supporting people through the Appendix FRP or Appendix CRP process. Most participants worked for UK-based organisations. One participant was based in Belgium and another in northern France, both of whom worked with unaccompanied children at the border.

Limitations

Given the stress of the family reunion process and the challenging circumstances that many applicants are in, we decided against interviewing people with an in-progress or unsuccessful family reunion application, and we did not interview any minors. The majority of our participants were British Red Cross service users or had been able to access free professional support with their application. These decisions were made for logistical and safeguarding reasons, but we recognise that our participants do not represent the full spectrum of experiences that people applying for refugee family reunion will have. Through the interviews conducted with sector stakeholders we have endeavoured to fill in some of these gaps.

^x The VOICES Network is an independent collective of refugees and people seeking asylum with lived experience of the UK asylum system.

^{xi} One participant had sponsored both a spouse and a sibling, and so is counted under both Appendix CRP and Appendix FRP. Some families had accessed sibling reunion when the visa route was referred to as Appendix CNP, and some when it was referred to as Paragraph 319X.

Separation

“

Nobody's going to stay in their own country if it's unsafe for their kids and family, because at the end of the day, if you're pushed into a corner you're going to fight back, even if you're the weakest person in the world. If you had a bear coming at you with your family and kids, and you can't fight the bear, but if you are pushed in a corner and trying to protect your kids and family, you're going to fight that bear”

Man from Yemen, Appendix FRP applicant



This section explores the reasons for family separation, the risks faced by applicants in their country of origin or while they are displaced in other countries, and the impact of separation. Refugee family reunion offers people – the majority of whom are children or women – a safer way to flee dangerous situations.

Reasons refugees flee

We spoke to refugees who were targeted by authorities or political groups because they were part of civil society movements which protested issues like state violence and corruption. Two Congolese participants were imprisoned for their political activities, and one of them was tortured. An Iraqi activist had his car shot at, his devices confiscated, and friends who were kidnapped. A Sudanese refugee had to flee after he refused to plant false evidence on protestors.

"I was a member of a citizen movement... We were showing what was happening in the country regarding the impunity, killing people, the corruption, and we couldn't see any future of ourselves and our children and the country itself... We started raising our voices, so that's why the... leaders start now chasing anyone who could say anything against the government. So that's why I was forced to leave, because my life was in danger. I escaped the death at several attempts."

Man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Appendix FRP sponsor

We also spoke to two refugees from Iran who had a similar experience after it was discovered they had secretly converted to Christianity. Both refugees feared imprisonment, or even execution. One described the heartbreak of a close friend going missing after their church was discovered and the difficulty of still not knowing what had happened to them.

"My sister's husband realised that I converted to Christianity. So because of the inheritance and some money left from my mum, he started to threaten me. And he was working for [the government] – I was so scared and that's why I had to leave."^{xii}

Woman from Iran, Appendix FRP sponsor

Many of our refugee participants were from countries that have experienced devastating conflict and high levels of displacement in the last decade. They told us about trying to survive bombing every night, escaping the violence of state forces and militia groups, and families becoming scattered across countries and continents.

"It started getting worse, bombing Yemen every night, it was horrifying for our kids. We were living on the highest floor in the building and just waiting for death to come for my kids or myself. Trying to find refuge, I knew where we can. Every night planning where to sleep to make sure that we get at least a secure – if something happened, a bomb hit, trying to protect ourselves, you know, it was just... planning where to sleep in the house was a daily process. And so that's when we decided... the kids were going crazy, waking up in the middle of the night scared with the noise of the bombing, that's when we decided to leave the country."

Man from Yemen, Appendix FRP applicant

Refugee sponsors we spoke to felt traumatised by the events that had led them to leave their country of origin, and many of them had experienced further trauma on their journey to finding safety in the UK. This was particularly apparent for Appendix CRP sponsors, who were often young adults at the time of their application, and had fled when they were still children.

A widespread sentiment among the refugees we spoke to was that they had not wanted to leave their home, but had been forced to flee in search of safety.



“

We never thought about emigrating, really, even studying in the States, I never thought about it. I always wanted to go back home and stay with my family, but it was pushed upon us, you know? And now we're not just seeking it for us, for our own sake, we're just thinking about the safety for our kids."

Man from Yemen, Appendix FRP applicant

Why families become separated

In some cases, the separation was not planned, with families losing each other during conflict or family members having to flee without prior notice:

- One of the Congolese applicants we spoke to was in prison as a result of his political activities at the time his siblings left the country, so could not go with them.
- An Iraqi sponsor and her family had fled to Turkey due to political persecution and threats on their lives. She was in the UK for an academic conference when the family's visa situation in Turkey changed and they were at risk of being sent back to Iraq.
- A Syrian sponsor became separated from his wife and children when he sent them to Iraq for safety, as the family faced persecution in Syria for being Kurdish.

Recent research conducted by the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab and the Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Person's Centre, published in the Towards Safer Journeys report, has shown that families are often separated along migratory routes as well.³ For instance, smugglers sometimes separate migrant women and children from their families to exert control or increase vulnerability. Often it is not feasible for a family to flee together.

Stakeholders told us that the physical toll of the journey is one reason why it is often the men in families who are the first to make the journey to Europe. Women and children are also more vulnerable to the likely harms en route, particularly sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and trafficking.⁴

"Obviously on the boats, it's generally men who come, and when I ask people... they're just like the women would not survive the journey across the Sahara, the working in Libya, and the women who have done these journeys, like [my female client] who was raped, it was awful... Obviously the men have an awful time too, but I think for women you're just so vulnerable."

Caseworker, British Red Cross

These experiences demonstrate that people who apply for family reunification have unique protection needs and that there is a humanitarian imperative to make this accessible.

Impact of separation

Family members are often left at risk of violence, persecution, and destitution

The family members who stay behind are often still in danger, living in precarious circumstances while awaiting a decision on their family reunion application.

"For families it can be a life-or-death situation, I would say, depending on where they are. If it's a country where there is conflict... That might be their only way out of the country, it's literally a life-or-death scenario. Even where it's not a life and death scenario, all the families that we work with are in very, very challenging circumstances."

Lawyer, UK charity

Refugees and sector stakeholders described how applicant family members might be stuck in active conflict zones, at risk of bombardment and direct violence, and dealing with breakdowns in local infrastructure and lack of essential services, such as healthcare.

We also heard about families displaced to other countries or refugee camps, where they were still at risk of violence, faced restrictions on their movement, housing and ability to work or go to school, and struggled to fulfil basic needs. Other applicant family members were in hiding and had to limit their communication.

“

I applied immediately for my family because the situation was critical in Sudan. My children, if they had been one day late, they would have died. Just one day. But they left early in the morning. They left the village at 7.00am. At 10.00am, [the fighters] raided the village. Many people died.”^{xiii}

Man from Sudan, Appendix FRP sponsor

^{xii} Interview conducted through an interpreter.

^{xiii} Interview conducted through an interpreter.

Women and children face danger while waiting to be reunited

Women and children are particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation at all stages of forced migration journeys.⁵

Refugees and sector stakeholders in our interviews discussed the specific gendered risks women face in various countries where their rights are suppressed. Not only did this put women under threat of persecution by the authorities, but it also made it challenging for them to support their families in the absence of their husbands.

“They moved from Syria to Turkey to be a safer place to live, but unfortunately it’s not, because they were all women and in this country it’s really tricky to be a woman, so you are very vulnerable, so when they go to sleep at night, you don’t know what is going to happen. So like there is always fear. The children kidnapping there was in Turkey a lot, and Istanbul at the time. They won’t let their children go outside, so they’re always inside the house. So all this time they stay inside in all day. They never let them go out to have fresh air or go shopping. No, no, it was always this fear of something might happen; kidnapping or killing or abduction.”^{xv}

Woman from Syria, Appendix FRP applicant

Unaccompanied children are especially vulnerable to harm as they lack the support and protection of parents or suitable carers, people they may have lost or become forcibly separated from. Refugees and sector stakeholders described cases of unaccompanied children experiencing destitution, malnutrition, bereavement, unsanitary living conditions, extreme violence, and abuse. Some of these children will have lost their parents and may be relying on older siblings or other relatives in the UK for protection.

“I’m currently representing, I think, overall, I’ve got about eight kids in Gaza... they’re facing daily bombardment, they’ve had multiple bereavements, they’ve witnessed horrific violence. Most of them are suffering from severe malnutrition.”

Lawyer, UK charity

Unaccompanied children have to take on additional responsibilities to fulfil their basic needs and will sometimes be caring for younger siblings as well. They often lack access to healthcare and education. Interview participants described situations of children having to work, often in unsafe and exploitative conditions. One Ethiopian refugee sponsor told us that her 14-year-old brother still has scars from the violence he was subjected to while working in a restaurant in Kenya to support himself and another brother.

“I’ve got five children in Ethiopia, where the oldest is 16 and the youngest is five and they’re all together. Obviously the 16-year-old is doing the role of an adult for the siblings but she doesn’t know how to, what to do if one of the children gets ill, who to go to, how to physically go to a doctor. They’re also at risk in Ethiopia, so it’s difficult for them even to understand where the risk versus gain is... It’s difficult for her to understand if it’s a medical condition that is so serious that it overtakes the risk of going to a doctor.”

Lawyer, international charity

Sector stakeholders also reported cases of children experiencing periods of domestic servitude or exploitation by adults. A young Eritrean refugee sponsor told us that his 12-year-old brother was kidnapped by smugglers and held to ransom for months until the sponsor could gather the funds to pay for his release. Beyond trying to expedite applications, lawyers and caseworkers in the UK have limited means to protect vulnerable children abroad.

“

When you don’t have your husband by your side, you would face a lot of challenges and problems. For example, when I was getting sick, I didn’t have anyone to be on my side in order to go and see a doctor.”^{xvi}

Woman from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP applicant



"I had a client who was in Turkey and was forced to work in a factory. He was [working] 15, 18 hours a day to get free accommodation, which meant a place to sleep on the floor and food to be able to survive until his family reunion application was approved. I had children in Afghanistan who were made... to be domestic workers, so they had to clean the house, get the food, walk two hours a day to go and get water. I haven't had personally any female sexual exploitation cases, but I've had victims of torture and sexual abuse en route."

Lawyer, international charity

Some children abandon trying to access formal and managed family reunion routes because they are too slow and inaccessible. Our interviews revealed many instances where children felt forced to make dangerous journeys through Europe to reunite with their family members in the UK. Upon entering Europe, children continue to be vulnerable to harm and exploitation. Sector stakeholders described the isolation of being an unaccompanied child in a foreign environment, and the difficulties navigating the emotional and practical impacts of racism without the guidance of family. Sector stakeholders working with unaccompanied children in northern France told us about the challenges children have with accessing food and shelter as there are often not enough tents or meals available to all who need them. Most children they meet work informal jobs in the camp economy to support themselves. They often experience violence.⁶

Children carry trauma from their displacement and their journey to and through Europe. There is a lack of mental health support for unaccompanied children along the migratory route, and it can be challenging to persuade children to access it where it does exist. Sector stakeholders also told us they were wary of asking children to open up about their experiences before they were reunited with family and in an emotionally safe place to process the trauma.

"Their inability to deal with the trauma that led them to leave their country of origin because they've not arrived to a safe place yet. I mean it might be physically safe, but emotionally, it's not an emotionally safe place, so the emotional weight of having to deal with the trauma cannot be lifted, or they can't start working on it until they actually feel emotionally safe as well. And that's only with the family member in the UK."

Lawyer, International charity

Given the increased vulnerabilities and dangers they face, it's imperative that unaccompanied children are able to access refugee family reunion quickly as a route to safety. The British Red Cross has forecasted that between September 2025 and April 2026, while family reunion is suspended, at least 6,300 children – 1,500 of whom are unaccompanied – will not be able to reunite with their parent in the UK.^{xvii}

Separation has a huge emotional impact on families

Sponsors and applicants told us how painful it was to be separated, with several disclosing that either they, or a family member, had suffered from mental health difficulties including depression and suicidal ideation as a result. Parents stressed the agony of being away from their children, and how hard it was to know their children were growing up without them. Children, in turn, struggled without the support of the absent parent and did not always understand why the separation was necessary. Research has shown that the separation of child refugees from their families has an adverse impact on their mental health and developmental outcomes such as education, integration, wellbeing and identity.⁷

Due to the applicants' circumstances, it can be difficult to reliably stay in contact and sponsors worry constantly about their family's safety.

“

There is a banalisation of the violence they live... Obvious things that we would be appalled just to hear about.”

Field team leader, French Red Cross

^{xv} Interview conducted through an interpreter.

^{xvi} Interview conducted through an interpreter.

^{xvii} The predicted numbers of family reunion visas for partners and minors was calculated based on Home Office data of visas granted to adults and children each quarter from April 2024 to July 2025. The proportion of unaccompanied minors was calculated using historical proportions of unaccompanied minors supported by the British Red Cross's family reunion travel assistance programme over the past three years.

“

I was always feeling depressed, being separated from the family. I was missing my wife and my kids, so yeah, it was difficult time, because my little daughter, she was turning almost one I think when I left, so I was always thinking that she will grow up without me, and that was very difficult for me, and I was thinking about that, because my love, I wanted to give her love.”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

“I asked [my friend], do you really have children? Because I wanted her to understand how being separated with the children, how you feel as a parent. For me, in my opinion, it was the worst time I’ve ever [had], even when in prison, when I was tortured. That was some pain, it was other pain, compared to the pain I was feeling now. When I was thinking about my children was another pain, which I was asking ‘God, can you just kill me? Can you take me so that I do not feel anymore such pain?’”

Man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Appendix FRP sponsor

Separation can be a barrier to integration for refugees in the UK

Concern for their family’s wellbeing and anxiety about being able to reunite dominates the lives of refugee sponsors. Refugees and sector stakeholders told us it was challenging for sponsors to focus on anything else when they knew their family was in danger, which can make it harder to integrate into life in the UK.

“I was always worried that maybe someone will kidnap my kids, so yeah, I was always thinking about them, about their security, about their living conditions, because they were alone there. I have got family there, but still, when a father is not there, it’s not enough. So yeah, I was worrying about them. All the time I was just thinking about my kids.”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

The mental health burden can make it difficult for refugees to maintain a job, concentrate on education, or make connections in their community. Participants reported that sponsors feel a large weight of responsibility to ensure their family’s safety and reunification. This is often their primary concern, far above their own wellbeing.

“I was studying, I was sent to college, yeah. I’m just going there, but I don’t know what they said ... my mind is still, it’s not, I just think of only just my brother.”

Man from Eritrea, Appendix CRP sponsor

“My husband was... constantly anxious and in a stressed condition, because he used to say that ‘you are in Afghanistan along with my children, so what would happen, what would be the – what the condition would be in the future?’ Whenever I was calling and talking to him, he usually used to tell me that ‘I am sick and I’m not feeling well.’”^{xviii}

Woman from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP applicant

It can be particularly challenging for Appendix CRP sponsors, who are often young adults themselves, newly independent and traumatised by their own experiences of displacement. They are still just learning how to be adults when they take on the responsibility for both their own wellbeing, as well as the administrative and emotional pressure of getting their younger siblings to safety in the UK.

“I had a sponsor that unfortunately, took his own life because he couldn’t – obviously, that wasn’t the only reason – but the weight of having to bring his siblings, and the delay that the system creates, was really terrible on his mental health.”

Lawyer, international charity

“I’ve had a number of clients making quite serious disclosure to me, like suicidal ideation, inability to look after themselves, young people not wanting to get out of bed or do anything or engage with education, and just sort of wanting to give up, because they feel like the immense sense of guilt for being here and having access to all the things that they have access to, where they are worried that their family might not make it to the next day.”

Lawyer, UK charity

In our final section, Impact of reuniting (p22), we look at the other side of this dynamic, showing the ways in which reuniting with family members is a huge catalyst for sponsors’ integration and being able to plan for the future.

^{xviii} Interview conducted through an interpreter.

Visa application:

hidden costs and impacts of delays

There are hidden costs and delays that already exist when families apply under Appendix FRP and Appendix CRP. The hurdles that people have to overcome to submit an application, even under the existing, now suspended, system, include:

- accessing legal advice,
- facing danger to gather evidence, supply biometric information or do medical and DNA tests, and, importantly,
- the significant costs behind all of this.

Our research participants told us about the financial and emotional toll of undertaking the application process and the impact of the long wait for a decision. We found that these elements can sometimes feel insurmountable for applicants – particularly unaccompanied minors – who then feel forced to try and reach the UK through other means, like paying smugglers to cross the Channel in a boat.



Challenges of gathering evidence

Refugee families are required to fulfil specific evidentiary requirements as part of their family reunion application, including providing identity documents such as passports and birth certificates, biometrics, tuberculosis (TB) tests, proof of the relationship between the sponsor and applicant, and proof that any children applying are unable to lead an independent life.

Proving the relationship can be difficult if the family has been separated for a long time, and may require the family to provide DNA evidence, family photos or transcripts of communication, as well as marriage and birth certificates. Many of these documents can be difficult to gather as applicants are often in volatile situations such as conflict zones or have been forcibly displaced. They may have been forced to flee, leaving their belongings behind.

Sponsors and lawyers may struggle to keep in contact with applicants in these circumstances, making it hard to give instructions and receive information. In cases where a sponsor had fled their country due to persecution, refugees told us it was risky for their families to obtain documents like passports.

Meeting criteria and evidence requirements for Appendix CRP cases

The threshold of evidence is generally higher and harder to meet for the Appendix CRP visa, which has additional requirements where the sponsor must prove they can provide maintenance and accommodation for the applicant.

For Appendix CRP sponsors, meeting financial and accommodation requirements can be very difficult. Sector stakeholders explained that in order to do this, sponsors must first navigate the asylum system, then find suitable housing for themselves and their relative, as well as learn enough English to obtain employment and earn money to meet financial requirements. All of this is a lot to achieve for someone who has fled their home country, likely to be traumatised by that experience, and only recently granted status in the UK.

The proposed changes to family reunion may be similar to Appendix CRP cases and may also include English language requirements which could limit families' ability to meet eligibility requirements.

The true cost of family reunion

Legal representation and advice

The majority of the refugees we spoke to as part of this research had received free professional support^{xix} to help with their Appendix FRP or Appendix CRP application, but many refugee families are not able to access this. Sector stakeholders told us that access to legal representation and advice is one of the biggest challenges that refugees face in reuniting with family, particularly in Appendix CRP or more complex Appendix FRP cases. This would be exacerbated with further restrictive criteria on family reunion as more people would need access to legal support to demonstrate exceptional circumstances and apply for fee waivers.

"I think by nature, family reunion is complex. It doesn't pay very well. And so that is why those cases won't be prioritised. So I do think that, in general, refugees are struggling to find representation for family reunion."

Lawyer, UK charity

The fees for private legal representation can reach several thousands of pounds for a family, plus the cost of interpreters, gathering evidence, translation and travel. For many, this can be impossible to meet, especially for people in the situations that most refugees find themselves in. We also heard about private firms that had taken those fees and then submitted incorrect or poorly done applications due to a lack of expertise.

"I emailed many organisations I remember, and even I help the solicitors, so they told me – different people told me different charges even - for one person they were charging £3,000 for the application. And yeah, I got another person, they said, 'we'll charge you £6,000 for the whole family for the asylum application' of course I don't have money. I was not working. It was really difficult

“

We've got children whose fathers were working for the western forces... so it's extremely dangerous for them to go to Kabul. I had a client that preferred to go to Pakistan... and that was extremely difficult and dangerous, but it was less dangerous to go to Pakistan than to go to Kabul

because of her father's history... But yeah, I think it's a massive problem or a massive obstacle to actually – even accessing the right to a family reunion.”

Lawyer, international charity

for me to pay this amount. So yeah, it was very challenging time”.

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

Official and unofficial application costs

Though an application for an Appendix FRP visa carries no formal fees, many of the refugee sponsors and professionals we spoke to highlighted the extra costs associated with the process. In addition to the costs mentioned above for legal representation, families may need to pay for travel to a visa application centre, and DNA or TB testing, travel documents including passports and entry/exit visas, and flights to the UK. These official costs can unfortunately be compounded by unofficial costs including bribes, scams, and informal loans people take out to pay for it all.

For Appendix CRP applications, there is an application fee of £424 and an immigration health surcharge of £776 for each year that a visa is granted for.^{xx,8} This must be paid up front, unless a fee waiver has been granted, which is a complex application to make and typically requires legal advice. This also adds further delay to the process. In addition, applicants may not have access to public funds once they arrive unless they can prove exceptional circumstances, like destitution or imminent risk of destitution.⁹

“I think financially, although the family reunion process at the moment, or the application is free, currently, yeah, there’s a lot of kind of hidden costs to family reunion”.

Caseworker, British Red Cross

“I think it’s just very stressful being told the process is difficult and then on top of that you have to pay loads of money... Which is not going to be given back if it’s refused, to show that your sibling can come and join you in the UK”.

Lawyer, International charity

Reaching a visa centre

Refugees must travel to a visa application centre (VAC) to have their fingerprints and a photograph taken, and specific clinics to obtain a TB test and provide DNA evidence. Having to make these additional journeys poses practical challenges for refugees in conflict zones, particularly for unaccompanied children. Our report *The Long Road to Reunion* details these challenges.¹⁰

Out of the top nationalities granted family reunion visas – Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan, and Syria – only Iran has a VAC. This means many refugees have to make dangerous and costly journeys across conflict zones and borders to reach a VAC in a third country, with no guarantee that their application will be successful.

“Even just to get to Pakistan, it was thousands of pounds for them to cross the border, because they had to pay somebody, it was the only way to do that. And then when they were there, there were issues with the visa centre accepting their biometric because it was an application outside the rules, so the family ended up getting stuck there, having to pay for accommodation, and then having to cross the border again. So basically, the family is now in thousands of pounds of debt just to cross the border and give biometrics. And that is a fairly common scenario I would say, especially where the visa centre in the country of residence is not open or is not accessible.”

Lawyer, UK charity

Even if refugees have an operating VAC in their country, it can still be dangerous for them to travel there. Clinics providing TB and DNA testing can be similarly difficult to access and can charge a lot of money.

“The Home Office expects documents that are extremely difficult for children to get. We are having to do more and more DNA testing – which is expensive by the way, it’s about £600 – and it’s very time-consuming and difficult when the child, for example, is in Afghanistan and it’s even very dangerous for that child to travel to Kabul, for example, on his own to give a sample that then is accepted by the Home Office”

Lawyer, international charity

The logistics of providing biometrics, as well as undertaking TB and DNA testing, are made even more complicated and more dangerous when the applicant is an unaccompanied child. A child must be accompanied to a VAC by an adult, but it can be hard to find an appropriate adult to accompany a child to provide evidence.

^{xx} From the British Red Cross or other charities. See Methodology (p8) for more information on our sample.

^{xx} Figures are correct at time of writing.

"I've had at least three cases in which the Home Office, in which when we finally found someone, an adult that could go with them to the visa application centre, usually because the sponsor paid them to accompany that child, then the Home Office used that as a reason to refuse the application and say, 'Well, there was someone that accompanied him to the visa application centre, so there must be someone that is looking after him or is a guardian.' So even that, we had to make sure that he goes, he or she, goes with someone, but then that could then be used as a reason for refusal by the Home Office."

Lawyer, international charity

Crossing borders to reach the UK

Refugees have to make their own way to the UK after being granted a visa. Along with the significant cost of flights, they may also face visa and accommodation costs in transit countries, and may have to pay bribes or pay smugglers to cross borders.

"At that time, I was not working, so I borrowed some money from relatives and friends back in Afghanistan for the Iran visas. We paid almost 4,500 USD for the Iran visa and also, before that, I applied for the Pakistan visa. That was almost, I think, 1,000 USD for the application"

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

People go into debt and face challenges repaying these costs

Sponsors will do whatever they can to ensure their family's safety. For many, going into debt feels like their only option. They then often have to work multiple jobs, sometimes in exploitative conditions, to pay back their debt. The constant stress or pressure to pay someone back can have negative impacts on mental health and some sponsors are left without enough money to live on themselves. All of these challenges constrain people's ability to integrate.

"I had a sponsor that had to leave the course that he was doing for training because he took up three jobs to be able to pay for the application fees. So obviously that had a massive impact on also his [ability to] improve his financial circumstances long-term for when the child could come and join him."

Lawyer, international charity

Our research shows that the refugee family reunion route is already costly and difficult for families to access. Ensuring that the costs associated with family reunion are manageable will enable better outcomes for all family members – improving integration and decreasing the likelihood of applicants arriving to the UK into destitution and debt.

The impact of delays to family reunion

For many of the refugee participants we spoke to, waiting for a decision on the visa stood out as one of the hardest parts of the application process. People reflected on the difficulty of living in uncertainty and a state of limbo. The target visa processing time for refugee family reunion applications at the time of writing is twelve months.¹¹ This is after the sponsor has likely been on a long journey, having spent many months to years in the asylum system before qualifying to make the application.

While some cases were expedited due to applicants being in extreme danger, we heard about other cases where applicants still had to wait for months in highly volatile conflict zones.

When wait times stretched to a year or more, people reflected on the fact that so much could change during that time, putting a strain on family relationships.

"I think it can lead to breakdowns in relationships like I've said, but also a real distrust between family members of what's actually happening and what they're actually doing for the family, and I think it can impact them on reunion when they finally do get reunion. I think it can have quite an emotional impact in terms of, you know, why have you been in the UK for three years and I'm only just now getting here. So I think even when it's successful, I think it can have an impact on family dynamics."

Lawyer, UK charity

Some people who had dedicated legal support said they were kept updated by their lawyers, but others found the lack of communication from official channels added to their anxiety.

“Waiting was one of the hardest parts, like every day felt uncertain, like we didn’t know what was happening, we didn’t know what was going on.”

Woman from Syria, Appendix FRP applicant

We heard from some sector stakeholders that even when they secured Home Office prioritisation for people in particularly volatile situations, this could still end up taking many months. Caseworkers told us about the difficulty of sometimes having to manage their clients’ expectations in these cases. We heard about an example of a family in Gaza whose case was prioritised but still ended up taking a year, in which time they lost four family members.

Appendix CRP cases typically face longer wait times due to the additional requirements and complexity of the application as well as the fact that many cases go to appeal, often due to overlooked evidence or misapplied legal principles.^{xxi} It commonly takes years for these cases to be resolved: from waiting for an initial decision, being refused, appealing against the decision and then most often getting the visa granted in the end. Although the Home Office does not publish specific appeals data for Appendix CRP, charities supporting applicants report that most appeals are successful.^{xxii} Interviewees also described instances where the Home Office withdrew objections just before hearings, suggesting systemic issues in initial decision-making. The high volume of appeals contributes to unnecessary delays and administrative burden.

For unaccompanied children, this means more time in the precarious and unsafe situations described above. It also means more time spent out of education, or in a state of mental distress where they cannot commit properly to their schooling. This sometimes discourages young people from applying for this visa at all and leaves them feeling forced to make unsafe journeys.

“I think on average, from the lodging of the appeal to the child actually arriving, it is two years, two more years added to the whole process. It’s outrageous because for that child it means two years’ separation from family members, two years living in a shelter with no real education.”

Lawyer, international charity

These delays in processing family reunion applications are compounded by an average waiting time of 50 weeks for an appeal to be heard at the immigration and asylum tribunal.¹²

Wait times and delays have terrible consequences for refugees and their families, straining relationships and both sponsors’ and applicants’ mental health. Further restrictions on family reunion applications – such as income requirements or delaying access to apply for family reunion – would likely mean people wait even longer, worsening the negative impacts experienced and observed by our participants.

Dangerous journeys

Facing long wait times, financial barriers, and the other logistical challenges of Appendix FRP and Appendix CRP applications, some refugee family members feel that making a dangerous journey to the UK is their only option.

Sector stakeholders knew individuals who would have been eligible but did not even attempt a family reunion application for these reasons, and others who made a journey before their case reached a resolution. If the applicant is in an unsafe situation, they often cannot afford to wait.

“There is always the hope, at the beginning when you start working with a family or an applicant child, that the process will be quick, and they’ll get a visa, and they’ll just come. I think, when they slowly realise how long the process is, they will start making alternative plans, very often not telling us.”

Lawyer, UK charity

The longer it takes for a case to be resolved, the greater the risk that somebody feels forced to make a dangerous journey, often in the hands of smugglers or traffickers. This research, and the report Towards Safer Journeys,¹³ suggest that wait times for family reunification can be a major factor in children taking alternative routes.

“We just had a case of a 14-year-old girl... We were very close, and she made the journey from Greece to France and then crossed [the Channel] irregularly. It’s just the timing really, it’s not even how complex it is and the evidence I think, it’s just the delay the whole system has... We have loads of children that unfortunately take that route because the time is too long, how long it takes, the process is too complex.”

Lawyer, international charity

^{xxi} Data obtained through a Freedom of Information Request showed that the government approved only 17% of Appendix CNP applications (now called Appendix CRP) between 12 April and 30 September 2023. See: RAMFEL (2024). Safe Routes to Nowhere: The UK’s Broken Promises on Family Reunion. Retrieved from: https://www.ramfel.org.uk/uploads/1/1/8/6/118604888/240605_ramfel_family_reunion_report_digital.pdf.

^{xxii} In 2024, RAMFEL reported that it had been successful in overturning the decision in all of their appeals since January 2022. See: RAMFEL (2024). Safe Routes to Nowhere: The UK’s Broken Promises on Family Reunion. Retrieved from: [240605_ramfel_family_reunion_report_digital.pdf](https://www.ramfel.org.uk/uploads/1/1/8/6/118604888/240605_ramfel_family_reunion_report_digital.pdf). In 2025, Safe Passage reported that it was successful in the majority of its cases in 2023 and 2024. See: Safe Passage (2025). Written evidence submitted by Safe Passage International (BSAIB30). Retrieved from: <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/59614/documents/6170>.

"It was a sponsor who had fled an abusive relationship, and she was a victim of trafficking, and she wanted to bring her two children here. One was a minor, one was [over 18], but [he] still qualified inside the rules. However, he, or they, ended up having to flee the abuse of the other parent, the ex of the sponsor here. And he went missing for bit during the process and he then turned up in the UK, he had crossed the channel and made the dangerous journey. The family reunion process at the time, there was significant delays, there was the huge asylum backlog and then there was the backlog of family reunion decisions as well... He just decided he needed to flee the abuse."

Caseworker, British Red Cross

Stakeholders working in northern France told us that they struggle to convince unaccompanied children to even attempt the Appendix CRP process because it takes much longer and is also often more costly than a dangerous journey. Often these children have been on the move for a long time, and they are desperate to reach their family in the UK. Considering the prospect of waiting several years and paying thousands of pounds, we were told that many would rather risk a Channel crossing. This is consistent with data from the charity Safe Passage, which reports that between 2023 and 2024, ten of 17 new cases of unaccompanied children in France they were working to reunite with family in the UK went missing after losing faith in the legal process. They are believed to have made a dangerous journey instead.¹⁴

"We usually involve our safeguarding manager to inform the child [about having to go to appeal] because it's extremely distressing to hear, and we are not there, and the family member is not there especially to comfort them. That is the stage where a lot of our clients decide to then travel irregularly because we have to obviously be honest and tell them that the appeal process is likely to take

two years between the lodging of the appeal, which we do basically straight away, and the actual conclusion of the case."

Lawyer, international charity

People are sometimes so desperate they make these journeys against the advice of their family in the UK. Participants told us that sponsors fear for family doing this because they are so traumatised by their own experience of the journey.

During these journeys, people can experience violence, exploitation and malnutrition. It can take months, if not years, to reach a safe place. In interviews we heard first- and second-hand accounts of refugees having to walk days through deserts, endure forced labour and imprisonment, and witness friends, family members, and strangers drown.

"He showed pictures himself, I mean he was emaciated by the end of it. So, you know, he said he went with six people... I think three of them died on the way... And the number of people I know who say their family members have died crossing from Libya."

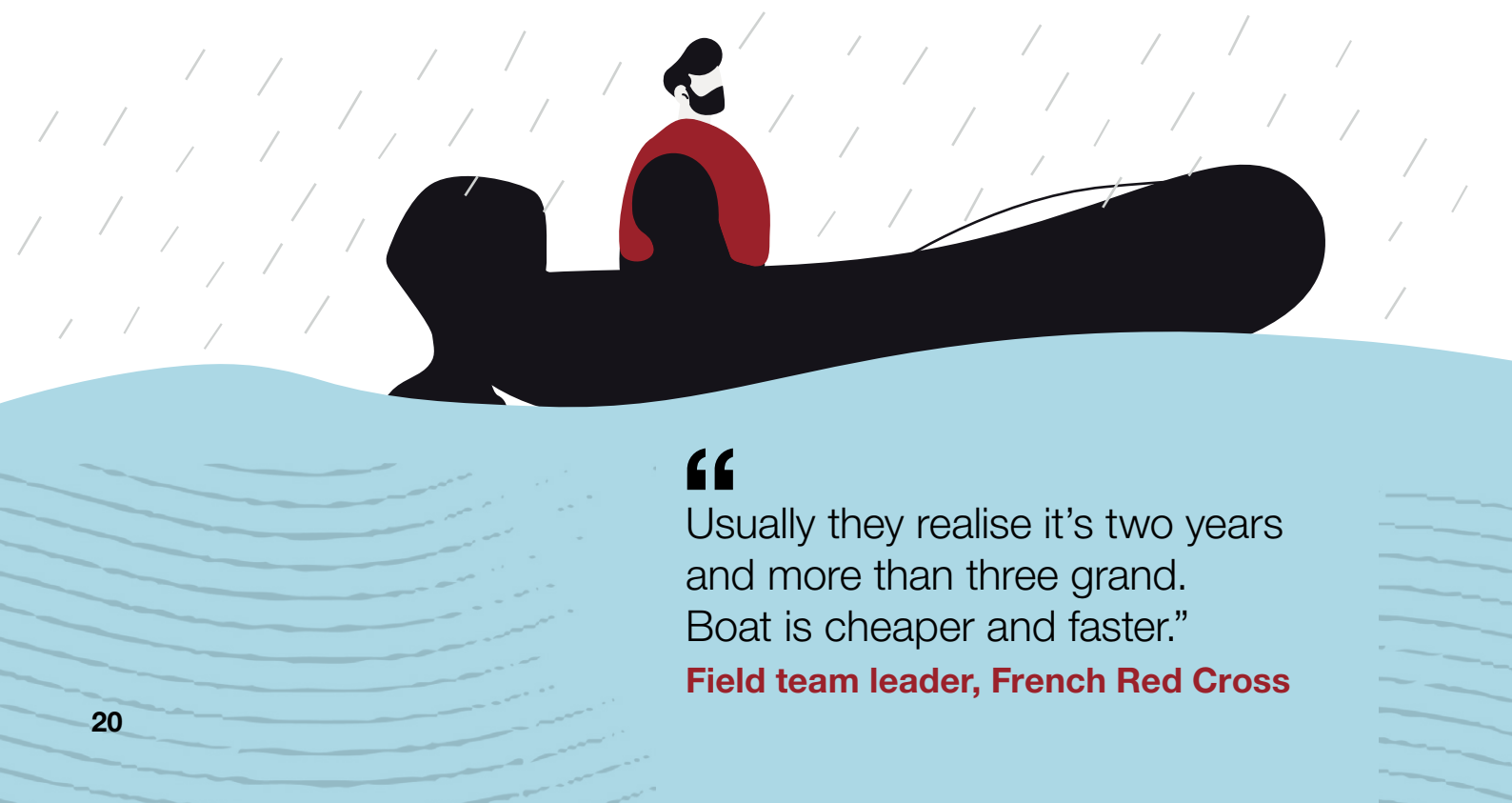
Caseworker, British Red Cross

"We've had a death of a mother of a child while they were travelling together, the boat sank in Greece, and he got saved by the coastguard and his mother died."

Lawyer, UK charity

"There is quite a lot of exploitation that meets, in my opinion, the definition of trafficking. But if they go through Libya to get to Europe obviously they spend time in detention centres there, they're forced to work."

Lawyer, UK charity



“

Usually they realise it's two years and more than three grand. Boat is cheaper and faster.”

Field team leader, French Red Cross

"She's saying the things she saw, and her family, they saw, she's saying that she doesn't think anybody saw anything as horrifying as the images they kept in their memory, so pain after pain, feeling this and feeling misery after misery, but she feels as a survivor. She survived it, but the memories are still haunting."^{xxiii}

Woman from Syria, Appendix FRP applicant

All Appendix CRP applications are for children, and the vast majority of Appendix FRP applications are for women and children abroad. The sector stakeholders we spoke to were in widespread agreement that making these routes more difficult to access will result in more women and children putting themselves through dangerous journeys, leading to more demand for smugglers and traffickers, lifelong trauma, injury, and inevitably, more deaths.

^{xxiii} Interview conducted through an interpreter,

Spotlight on Appendix CRP

Appendix CRP applications are more complex and have more stringent requirements than Appendix FRP applications.

The evidence demonstrates that Appendix CRP is a costly and inefficient use of government and family resources, which unnecessarily puts children in danger. If the proposed changes to Appendix FRP in Spring 2026 are based on similar criteria, they will have similar effects including pushing more vulnerable people into making dangerous journeys.

High financial and accommodation requirements and application fees: There are more financial requirements involved in an Appendix CRP application which are challenging for refugees to meet so soon after they've received status. Our interviews revealed cases of young people having to drop out of their studies and take on multiple jobs to afford the costs.

Difficulties and dangers of obtaining evidence: Appendix CRP applications have more stringent evidentiary requirements, for example, on proving a family relationship, which results in many child applicants having to access DNA testing. This adds even more costs and can mean children are forced to make dangerous journeys to clinics.

Lack of legal support: Appendix CRP applications are more legally complex and time-consuming than Appendix FRP applications, making it challenging for sponsors to find a lawyer with the right expertise and more expensive to access private representation.

Long duration of application: Appendix CRP applications frequently take years to resolve because of the higher eligibility and evidentiary requirements and the fact that most cases go to appeal. This results in:

- An extremely expensive and resource-intensive legal process for the family, their lawyers and the government. Evidence suggests the majority of appeals are successful, which indicates an inefficient use of resource, especially given the significant backlog in the courts system.
- Vulnerable children are left in limbo in dangerous situations while they wait years for a visa to be granted.

Feeling forced into dangerous journeys: These stricter requirements, cost, and time it takes to resolve an Appendix CRP application means that many children feel forced into making a dangerous journey in order to reunite with family.

Impact of reuniting

When families are reunited after enduring extreme difficulty and trauma, it can feel truly transformative – like something that was broken apart has become whole again.



“

An indescribable feeling. An incredible feeling that means good. I feel as if I returned to life. I mean, really, I was finally happy and relieved. Really. I felt life is worth living. I mean, life was terrible before that. I enjoyed feelings of warmth, tenderness, security, no fear, and no worry. I mean, a feeling... Oh God. A beautiful feeling. Thank God.”^{xxiv}

Man from Sudan, Appendix FRP sponsor

“

Everybody came back into order, really united as the stream of the water after a drought, for three years no rain, the stream is no longer there, you can't see it anymore because of the dust... but as soon as the rain falls, the stream makes its own way again towards what it used to be, so everything was falling into place.”

Man from Yemen, Appendix FRP applicant

Our research shone a spotlight on what happens when families are able to come back together – from the moment they hear the visa has been granted, to seeing each other for the first time, and then rebuilding their lives together in the UK. We found reuniting with family improves sponsors' ability to move forward with their lives and integrate in the UK, and that people's ability to access refugee family reunion in a timely way has a crucial role in this.

Finding out the visa was granted is a moment of relief

Finding out that their family reunion visa has been granted is a milestone for many people, an important step on the journey to coming back together. Many people we spoke to said they broke down in tears when they heard the news.

“When the visa was granted I called my wife that the visa is granted. We both cried actually. We both cried because we are so happy, and even she was not believing me. ‘No, I don't believe you. It's not granted.’ I said, ‘No, it's granted. You got your visa.’ Even my kids, when they came to know that we got visas, all just shouted, you know, ‘Yeah!’ They shouted, ‘We got [it].’”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

“I broke into tears in the mall, I went down on my knees, prayed to God. I was so thankful, I started crying on the phone.”

Man from Yemen, Appendix FRP applicant

Caseworkers and lawyers described the relief and joy of their clients when they hear their visas have been granted.

“It's the utter relief, like it's almost like visible. The weight that's been taken off them and you know, just the crying. Just like the amount of overwhelming emotion that they experience when they know that they're finally going to be reunited with their family.”

Lawyer, UK charity

“It's just like pure joy. It's the best part of the job, 100%. We literally had one today where the guy, he screamed on the phone with happiness.”

Caseworker, British Red Cross

Families seeing each other in person again is also intensely emotional

Many people can relate to the feeling of anticipation of greeting a loved one at the airport after time away. For those who've been forcibly displaced and separated from their families by conflict or persecution, the impact of this moment can't be understated. Two of the men we spoke to could recall to the minute how delayed the transport was on the day they were to be reunited – every second counted after months or years of separation.

“The flight was delayed, almost I think an hour and 45 minutes the flight was delayed... I was asking, ‘Is it that door that arrivals? Is that arrival door?’ I was asking different people. I was just thinking, maybe I'm in the wrong direction, wrong side. So yeah, finally they confirm it was the arrival gate...”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

They then described the emotion of seeing each other again, being physically together again.

“So I saw my little son and I just shout at him. He saw me and he just run. He just run and jumped at me, you know, jumped at me and hugged me, and all my kids hugged me, my wife. The whole family.”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

One British Red Cross caseworker recalled a day she escorted two young Syrian girls across the UK to be reunited with their mother and brother.

“...by the end of the day I was very protective over these little girls. And watching them reunite with their mum ... seeing them hold each other was just like ... the little boy was four years old in a little suit and the mum and the girls ... they just held each other, no one moved, I will never forget the stillness of that.”

Caseworker, British Red Cross

The relative safety of the UK is an important foundation for the relief of being back together

For these families, this emotion and relief is not just about being together, but about being together in a safe place. Refugee family reunion has a special significance because of the fact that families are not able to return to their country of origin. Refugee families can only access their right to family life in the UK, where this can be rebuilt, when it has become impossible back home. The idea of having reached safety was a strong theme in our conversations with refugees, and people often made that comparison between the UK and where they had come from.

“I cried with joy... because my children would join me here, and they would come to a safe country where they would be treated respectfully and humanely, a country where they would learn and live a dignified life.”^{xxv}

Man from Sudan, Appendix FRP sponsor

“She’s saying that the place where she came from in Syria, there was no water, no food, no electricity and no safety net, you know, fear, living in fear, but once she came to the UK she feels she is the luckiest woman in the world. She is very lucky to be here. She feels safe. Her children, they are safe.”^{xxvi}

Woman from Syria, Appendix FRP applicant

“Life in UK, life free...Back home, no like this. Back home, when you go 20 kilometres, maybe someone they come in the middle of the road, they’re going to take your car, they’re going to kill you. No like here. Here is safety.”

Man from Syria, Appendix FRP sponsor

We also heard from and about women who were able to live more independent in the UK compared to living in places where their rights were more restricted.

“I mean when [my wife] was in Afghanistan, she was not able to go outside alone. She liked to go outside to do shopping alone ... but she was not able to do it. But here she enjoys. Even when she go out with kids or without kids, she enjoys walking alone or with kids, because nobody disturb her. It’s like life in heaven I can say. Yeah, we don’t have any stress. That’s the thing. It’s an important thing in human life.”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

The impact of reuniting on integration

Having family members back together can cause a major shift in people’s lives. At a foundational level, that relief and feeling of safety means that a significant mental load is lessened. This enables people to think about other aspects of their life, starting to commit further to integration in the UK, and moving forward from the trauma of fleeing and separation towards a positive future.

When we asked about how life had changed by having their family reunited in the UK, many sponsors told us about a transformation to their mental health. With the uncertainty and daily worry about whether their families would make it over gone, many described a feeling of depression lifting.

“I was always feeling kind of depressed, but after they came here, we were reunited, so I’m feeling very happy now. Even my hair, it was a bit whitish before, and my wife and my family saying that “Your hair is black.” It become black again [laughs].”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

“

“I just saw her, I was crying. There was happiness. It was really joyous that I touched her, I said, yeah, it’s you. I looked at her. I said, yeah, thanks to God.”

Man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Appendix FRP sponsor

“

People say it's like they've been living in darkness, and while the family were separated, and then it's just like that feeling of like everyone being together... talking about the family being complete again.”

Project manager, British Red Cross

Family reunion leads to people being able to participate more fully in UK life

Improvements in mental health mean people are more able to integrate through involvement in their education, employment and social life. This can look different for different people, and does not mean that sponsors don't integrate before their families come here. Sector stakeholders told us that while some sponsors find it difficult to begin this process until they know their family is safe, for others the prospect of reuniting with their family is a motivating force to set up their new lives.

“I'm here, I can do anything now, nothing else matters, we're together, we can take on anything.” And that's awesome, especially when we have single mums separated from their children and their children are [now] here. I had a recent one where [a mother] reunited with the teenage son, they'd been separated for years and years, and again the difference of like now she's going to college, she's doing all these things and seems like a different person than before her son came, which is incredible.”

Caseworker, British Red Cross

For parents, having their children with them often means they can engage much more with social and leisure activities. It opens up a completely different experience of their new home, from being alone to building new memories with their children.

“So many things have changed, because before, I was alone. I didn't have anything to do much. Now... we're taking [the kids] to school every day... we have a park near [the] house, so every day we go to the park. They just love going to the park. And we play cricket with my older son, and we also play some other group entertainment in the park, like volleyball, football. Sometimes we go to the other areas, like we go to Newcastle sometimes to see the library. Also we saw many historical places in Sunderland, and also in Newcastle.”

Man from Afghanistan, Appendix FRP sponsor

Having children in school can help parents connect to a new network in the UK by meeting other parents and getting involved in the school community. This also has a positive mental health impact for parents: those we interviewed all spoke positively and with pride about their children being in school in the UK.

“For sponsors who are maybe not so well integrated, having their kids and their spouse and sort of through the school network, I definitely see that as... quite a tangible area of integration.”

Project manager, British Red Cross

“I'm very happy for my children, all of them in the school. They can learn and their education is the most important thing in their life and they are safe, so I'm not worried about them.”

Man from Yemen, Appendix FRP sponsor

^{xxxv} Interview conducted through an interpreter.

^{xxxvi} Interview conducted through an interpreter.

In the case of sponsors for their younger siblings, we heard that the process of bringing a younger sibling becomes their “only focus”. When their sibling arrives, they work hard to facilitate their integration into UK society – a responsibility they take very seriously and which in turn helps them to integrate themselves.

“Once the child arrives, the sponsor is now responsible for that child. So, it’s about making sure that they are also integrating into society. So, I guess it has a knock-on effect on the sponsor as well. All of our sponsors are great at registering children with a GP, with school, following up with mental health services, so that in a way also creates a level of responsibility that they wouldn’t necessarily have had before to integrate that child into society. Which then means that they are more integrated to the UK society.”

Lawyer, international charity

This not only creates better outcomes for individual families but also can contribute positively to community cohesion.

“I can see that positive impact [of family reunion], not just on them but also on society around them, because they are contributing, they are progressing in education, getting skilled jobs, and just very often also giving back to their own community, which is really nice to see, like supporting other young people from the same nationality.”

Lawyer, UK charity

People can imagine the future and move forward, individually and as a family unit

Even though there is often a long and complex road ahead, we heard that when people have their families with them, they are more able to tackle the challenges that come next and start to think about the future in a positive way.

“Now at least I can concentrate on something. Before, I couldn’t concentrate. I was always stressed, feeling anxiety. Just dreaming the bad things are saying ‘What now? The reason of living? So why I can’t kill myself?’ So that was my thoughts before. So now when she came, I said everything is possible. That means there is hope and my children will join me.”

Man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Appendix FRP sponsor

“After I reunited with my dad was like one of the happiest moments we had. Like after distress and the separation, the struggle we were going through, just being together with the family again felt like a huge relief. It felt like life could move forward again just like now we’re like so happy together.”

Woman from Syria, Appendix FRP applicant

In addition to the impacts on individual sponsors, we heard a lot about the strength of the family as a unit after coming back together. Again, the feeling of safety helps families feel more resilient to challenges they may face in the UK. There is a stark difference between processing trauma alone in a new country, to having family support while working through this. Sponsors who were forced to take on single parent responsibilities while navigating a new life and fearing for their partner, are able to share that load again when their partner arrives.

“

I now feel more comfortable, where we share the responsibilities, for example previously when [my son] was in school, I would need to go interview, or meeting, or something, my mind would be with my son, who will pick him up from school, or something, but now I share the responsibility with [my husband]... So yeah we are sharing everything, we are a healthy family, so we are trying together, that's why we are a couple. He calls me partner and I call him partner because we are doing everything together.”

Woman from Iraq, Appendix FRP sponsor

This shows how having family members together is an important building block in moving past trauma. Not only at the individual level due to the relief of knowing their loved ones are safe, but by offering people more of a solid support unit to rely on in what can be a very challenging adaptation to a new life.



Conclusion

Refugee families separate not out of choice but because of war, persecution or violence. As a result, children and women are often left in dangerous and precarious situations and at higher risk of exploitation. When they can finally apply to continue family life, they are already faced with a long, costly and complicated path to reunion. Some families feel that making a dangerous journey is their only option to reach their loved ones in the UK. Meanwhile, refugees in the UK can struggle to integrate in their communities while they are separated from and worried about their families.

We are concerned that the UK Government's proposed changes to family reunion – which could include financial, language or long-residence requirements – will exacerbate these devastating experiences.

Introducing these restrictions risks cutting off this safe and managed route, one of the only routes available to people – largely women and children – left in dangerous places. The British Red Cross has forecasted that between September 2025 and April 2026, at least 4,900 families would be affected by the family reunion suspension. That includes 6,300 children – 1,500 of whom are unaccompanied – who would be unable to reunite with their parent in the UK.^{xxvii}

Most newly granted refugees would not be able to meet any income and accommodation requirements given that they do not have the right to work during their asylum claim, and the average wait for an asylum decision was just over a year in 2024.^{xxviii} Almost all (97%) of the spouses we supported through our family reunion integration service from 2019 to 2022 did not have English language proficiency.

Families belong together. To ensure this vital protection route continues to be accessible to the families who need it, the British Red Cross recommends four key principles to guide the upcoming changes:

1. Fairness.

Any new requirements for family reunion need to recognise the unique nature of why families are forced to separate and the challenges and barriers refugee families face. This can be achieved by:

- Ensuring that any new requirements are realistically achievable for refugee sponsors and their families.
- Coupling any new requirements with measures to help refugee sponsors meet them – for example, by removing barriers to employment through improved English language support and increased recognition of qualifications from abroad.

2. Prioritising need.

This route is overwhelmingly used by children who are often stuck in dangerous situations. Refugee family reunion needs to continue to provide protection and a safe and managed route to the UK for those who need it most. This means, at a minimum, exempting the following groups from any restrictions or fees:

- Unaccompanied children trying to safely reunite with their parents who are already in the UK.
- Families facing serious risks – such as those affected by conflict, persecution, or medical needs.

3. Flexibility.

The visa application process should be reformed to reduce the extra hurdles that refugee families face when applying. This would help prevent destitution and debt upon arrival, ultimately improving integration. This can be achieved by:

- Keeping any costs associated with the visa at an affordable level for refugee families.
- Ensuring requests for documents consider the challenges that people in dangerous situations face gathering these.
- Only requiring families to submit biometrics once a provisional positive decision has been made, reducing the number of journeys families must make.

4. Efficiency.

Prompt decisions that are right the first time are needed to reduce the number of people feeling forced to take dangerous journeys and mitigate the negative impacts of prolonged separation. This can be achieved by:

- Ensuring that refugees are able to access family reunion in a timely way after being granted protection.
- Embedding a consideration of refugees' unique circumstances in criteria so they inform initial decisions, reducing the need for appeals and exceptional circumstance applications.
- Training, upskilling and reviewing Home Office decision makers regularly so that initial decisions are correct, while easing the burden on appeals tribunals which face a growing backlog.

^{xxvii} The predicted numbers of family reunion visas for partners and minors was calculated based on Home Office data of visas granted to adults and children each quarter from April 2024 to July 2025. The proportion of unaccompanied minors was calculated using historical proportions of unaccompanied minors supported by the British Red Cross's family reunion travel assistance programme over the past three years.

^{xxviii} Migration Observatory (2025). The UK's asylum backlog. Retrieved from: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-uks-asylum-backlog/>.

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After I reunited with my dad was like one of the happiest moments we had. Like after distress and the separation, the struggle we were going through, just being together with the family again felt like a huge relief. It felt like life could move forward again just like now we're like so happy together.”

Woman from Syria, Appendix FRP applicant

'I returned to life'

why refugee family reunion
must be protected