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To: All MPs and Peers

Dear Colleague

AFGHAN CITIZENS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

The United Kingdom has a proud history of providing a safe haven for those who are in need of protection. We are working across Government to help the people of Afghanistan who worked side by side with us, their families and other vulnerable people whom we resettle over the coming years to recover from their trauma and build a new life here

The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

The UK has played a leading role in times of humanitarian crisis: since 2015, we have resettled more people than any other European country. In that great tradition, this will be one of the most comprehensive resettlement schemes the UK has established.

The Prime Minister has announced we will resettle up to 20,000 people at risk, with 5,000 in the first year – this is a key part of the UK's response to the situation in Afghanistan. This is in addition to those brought to the UK under the Afghanistan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and is in line with the New Plan for Immigration commitment to expand legal and safe routes for those requiring protection in the UK.

Eligibility and identification

The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) will prioritise:

- those who have contributed to UK objectives and efforts in Afghanistan;
- those who have stood up for values, such as democracy, women's rights and freedom of speech, rule of law (for example, judges, women's rights activists, academics, journalists); and
- vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT people).

We must, however, temper our ambition with realism. There will be many more people wishing to come to the UK under the scheme than there are places. Accordingly, eligible people will be prioritised and referred for resettlement in the UK in one of three ways.

The first to be resettled under the ACRS will be those who arrived in the UK under the evacuation programme of Operation Pitting because they were considered to be at particular risk – for example, women’s rights activists, prosecutors and journalists. People who were notified by the UK government that they had been called forward or specifically authorised for evacuation, but were not able to board flights, will also be offered a place under the scheme if they subsequently come to the UK. We are working urgently with neighbouring countries to ensure that at-risk Afghans have options for safe passage.

Second, the Government will work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to identify and resettle refugees who have fled Afghanistan, replicating the approach the UK has taken in response to the conflict in Syria, and complementing the UK Resettlement Scheme which resettles refugees from across the world. UNHCR has the global mandate to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees. UNHCR has expertise in the field and will refer refugees based on assessments of protection need. We will work with UNHCR and partners in the region to prioritise those in need of protection, such as women and girls at risk, and ethnic, religious and LGBT minority groups at risk. We will start this process as soon as possible following ongoing consultations with UNHCR.

Third, the Government will work with international partners and NGOs in the region to implement a referral process for those inside Afghanistan, (when and where safe passage can be arranged) and for those who have recently fled to other countries in the region. This element will seek to ensure we provide protection for members of Afghan civil society who supported the UK and international community effort in Afghanistan. This category may include human and women’s rights activists, academics, prosecutors and others at risk. We will need some time to work through the details of this process, which depends on the situation in Afghanistan.

Further details on eligibility

The ACRS will be focused on those affected by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, and while the majority of people resettled will be Afghan nationals, family members (spouses, partners, children under 18 or other families members in exceptional circumstances) who are nationals of other countries will be eligible to be resettled through the scheme.

Unaccompanied children may be offered resettlement where it is determined that resettlement to the UK is in their best interests and they have been identified as eligible for the scheme. This is an assessment that will be made with expert partners. Where a child is unaccompanied it may be in the child’s best interest to remain in the region, where they are more likely to be reunited with family.

All individuals will be security screened as part of the process. Individuals who have committed war crimes, crimes against humanity, terrorism or other serious crimes will not be eligible.

Those resettled through the ACRS will receive indefinite leave to remain in the UK and will be able to apply for British citizenship after five years under existing rules. As with all our resettlement schemes, those resettled will be expected to comply with UK laws. Anyone convicted of a criminal offence in the UK will be liable to have their leave to remain revoked.

Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

Since the first ARAP flight on 22 June, we have relocated around 7,000 locally Employed Staff and their family members both before and during Operation Pitting. This is in addition to 1,400 former staff and families we have relocated since 2013.

The ARAP scheme remains open to eligible applicants. The ARAP scheme predominately covers those that were employed (directly or in certain special cases via contractors) by HMG to deliver defence and security outcomes. They are viewed as one of the cohorts most at risk. They are able to apply for the scheme both from inside and outside Afghanistan. The Defence Secretary has instructed his defence sections in embassies to support the process.

The eligibility criteria, and a link to the online application form and contact details is available at

<http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-relocations-and-assistance-policy-information-and-guidance>

Please bear in mind when dealing with individuals contacting your office directly that not all may be who they claim to be and could be using the contact to elicit knowledge of a particular person or process. It is for that reason the Defence Secretary recommends the safest route is via the official channels and you should signpost applicants that way. As the Government set out a fortnight ago, those who are eligible under ARAP will be given indefinite leave to remain. It enables those relocated under ARAP to access to certain roles not available to those with limited leave, for example in the police, defence and security sectors.

Those already in the UK with limited leave under the ARAP, granted prior to 2 September 2021, can apply for indefinite leave to remain at any time during their period of limited leave. These applications are free. The changes will enable those here under ARAP to be able to apply for British citizenship after five years under existing rules.

We will contact all those who have recently arrived under ARAP to discuss their entitlements and ensure they obtain the right status.

Integration support for ARAP and ACRS

I am working closely with my Ministerial colleagues across Government and with civil society, including Afghans already established here, to welcome and include our new citizens from Afghanistan. All those brought to the UK under ARAP and ACRS will have the right to work, access to education and healthcare and recourse to public funds.

The Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government are amending legislation to ensure that those arriving as a result of the situation in Afghanistan can access benefits, social housing and homelessness support immediately.

These legislative changes will make families eligible for a roof over their head immediately, giving them the stability they need to start their lives in the UK. By accessing vital healthcare, education, employment and accommodation we can help families fully integrate into society. These regulations will be reviewed in the financial year 2022/23 to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

For local authorities, we will match the tariff for the successful Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) to provide a complete package covering healthcare, education and integration support costs. A three-year tariff will be provided to volunteering local authorities for ACRS and ARAP, enabling more funding in those crucial early years to support resettled Afghan citizens to integrate into British society and become self-sufficient more quickly. Local authorities across the whole of the UK who participate in the scheme will receive the same tariff per capita.

I warmly welcome the commitments already made by many local authorities and encourage all councils to participate in welcoming these at-risk Afghan citizens into our communities. Please encourage your local councils to take part in this national effort.

The DWP will also offer individual tailored support to all new arrivals to help them become self-sufficient more quickly and is setting up surgeries across the country to help new arrivals with benefits and employment questions.

Our new residents will receive comprehensive integration support as they start their new lives in the UK. A package of support to acclimatise to the UK, learn English and find work, will enable rapid self-sufficiency and social integration in UK communities.

This national effort depends not just on national and local government but on communities and civil society too. The Home Office will continue to work with the private, voluntary and community sectors to welcome and integrate our new friends. As part of this, we have created a portal where people, organisations and businesses can register offers of support to refugees, Afghan citizens and others brought to the UK. This could include volunteering, offers of employment or to provide professional skills pro bono, including helping those arriving deal with trauma, or offering donations of mobile phones, mobile credit or data, laptops, access to training, clothes and toys. This will complement the housing portal which has been set up to collect offers of additional housing support.

We will also be extending the Home Office Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) so that friends and neighbours, charities and faith groups can come together to support a family through the ACRS. We will make it easier and quicker for community groups to become sponsors so that more people can play a direct role in the warm welcome we will extend to these new members of our communities.

Other cohorts

The Home Office has published a policy statement providing further detail on other cohorts of Afghan nationals and family members and routes within the immigration system. I trust that this policy statement will be useful to your offices and your constituents. The statement can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghanistan-resettlement-and-immigration-policy-statement>.

I will undertake regular engagement with Members and endeavour to keep the House updated on developments.

In the meantime, the Government's portal for refugees, Afghan citizens and others can be found at www.gov.uk/help-refugees

The Housing portal can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghanistan-housing-portal-offers-of-support

We are all proud, rightly, of the generosity, kindness and compassion shown by our constituents towards Afghan people in recent weeks. I look forward to your support in harnessing that commitment as we begin to deliver what is one of the world's most ambitious resettlement schemes in response to the situation in Afghanistan.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading 'Victoria Atkins' in a cursive script.

Victoria Atkins MP