

What are the experiences and outcomes of Afghans resettled in England?

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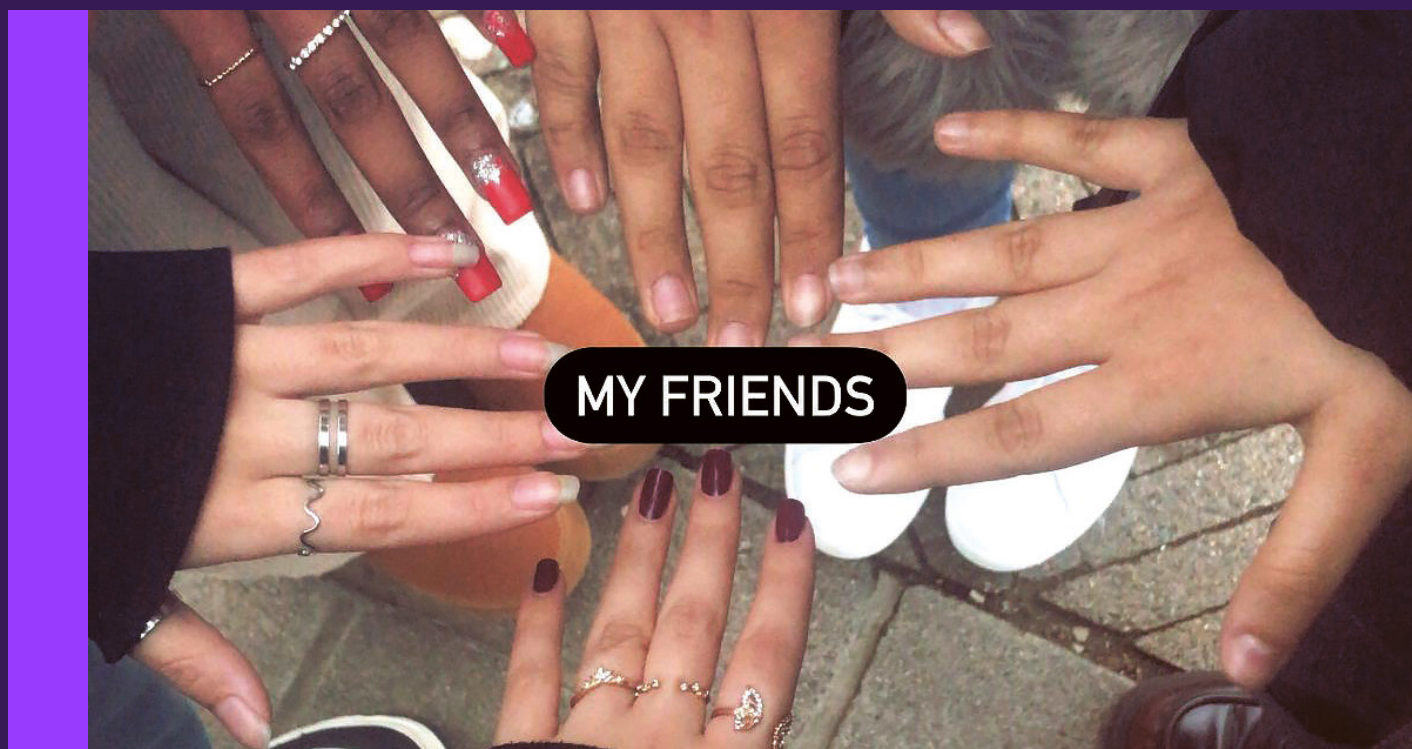
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Photo credits: Youth participants in the project.



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For the full report, and to find more about the project, please visit our project website:
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centre-sociology-education-and-equity/research/afghan-resettlement-england-outcomes-and-experiences>

Executive Summary

Introduction and rationale

From 2001, following 9/11 and the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, British military forces intervened in Afghanistan as part of the NATO-led mission to help remove the Taliban and support the new government in Afghanistan. After UK combat operations ended in 2014, British forces remained in a training and advisory capacity until the final withdrawal in 2021. In unforgettable scenes in August 2021, as the Taliban entered Kabul unopposed, British nationals and Afghans were supported to leave, fleeing the country amid state collapse. Operation Pitting, the UK's largest evacuation in recent history, assisted those people who had been employed by or allied with UK military operations. These included soldiers, interpreters, drivers and others vulnerable through work building a democratic regime, such as women activists, journalists and those belonging to structurally marginalised ethnic and religious groups and LGBTQI+ communities. Many brought family members with them, while others were separated during the chaos of evacuation.

This research examines the experiences and outcomes of some of the nearly 38,000 Afghans who were supported since 2021 under the UK government's organised relocation and resettlement schemes. Operation Warm Welcome saw new arrivals initially accommodated in up to 84 bridging hotels between Summer 2021 and Summer 2023. Operation Lazurite, from Autumn 2023, brought Afghans from Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, accommodating them initially in the military estate in the UK. They were subsequently supported to move on into settled accommodation across cities, towns and villages around the country. The schemes have faced considerable scrutiny due to their spiralling costs, procedural and operational challenges. The National Audit Office (2025, 2026) has analysed some of the fiscal implications of resettlement activity, but this research focuses primarily on the human outcomes rather than financial costs, though costs and resources are inevitably discussed.

Our study aims to foreground the experiences of those who have been undergoing this unique, unfolding provision, presenting insights into Afghans' own experiences and outcomes as they moved out of temporary accommodation, and settled into homes, workplaces, educational institutions and localities. Across different administrations, the UK government has highlighted the possibilities for protection by the British state using safe and legal routes, and the Afghan schemes have represented a significant investment in that approach. As such, a deep understanding of how the schemes have operated, at scale, for those in need, is vital.

The research

The research was conducted from January 2024 to January 2026, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and undertaken by an independent team of university academics, including two Afghan research assistants as well as twenty Afghan peer researchers. It aimed to understand the experiences of those entering via:

- The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), launched in 2021, providing relocation support for those working with the military in Afghanistan. This included members of elite military units, lower ranks, interpreters, mechanics and embassy staff.
- The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) opened in 2022 to support vulnerable Afghans through 3 pathways. These included women and those at risk under Taliban rule, with those under Pathway 2 selected by UNHCR.
- The Afghanistan Response Route (ARR, 2024): established covertly to relocate those who had been put at risk following a major data breach in the MoD in 2022.
- The Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP, 2025), implemented in March 2025 to deal with existing applications. This and all previous schemes above were closed to any new applicants in July 2025, although they remain active for existing cases.

The team employed a mixed methods approach that included:

1. A survey of around 800 newly arriving Afghans across English regions (789 usable responses). This was administered face-to-face, by small, trained teams of Afghan peer researchers in Dari, Pashto or English, in 7 local authorities, in 4 regions, using Local Authority (LA) caseloads as sampling frames.
2. Participatory qualitative research with 75 Afghan men, women and young people, across 4 regions in England, including methods such as walking interviews and photovoice visual research.
3. Qualitative research with 88 stakeholders involved with resettlement across 4 regions (London, the Southeast, the West Midlands and Northwest). This included people working in 30 councils, military sites, commissioned services in civil society, central government and other relevant actors (e.g. school staff, NGOs, healthcare providers). We used both interviews and regional roundtables/focus groups.

Findings

We present findings around participants' outcomes and experiences in the domains of 1) families, young people and education; 2) housing; 3) employment, skills and education; 4) wellbeing, connections and local belonging, and 5) the schemes' operation. Each section ends with recommendations, aimed at government departments including, but not limited to, the Home Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, the Ministry of Defence, Department of Work and Pensions and Department for Education, Local Authorities and civil and voluntary services.



1. Families, young people and education:

Over half of the resettled Afghan population were under 18 when they arrived. Our research with young people shows that schools and colleges, as well as 'third spaces', like sports clubs (particularly so for the young men) are experienced by them as safe spaces to rebuild routines, form social connections and overcome the strains of home life. Young people, especially those arriving during critical GCSE years and in the post-16 phase, however found long periods of temporary accommodation, often without access to full education, particularly disruptive. Many also take on heavy responsibilities for supporting family life, e.g. helping with translations and household administration, in some cases acting as 'young carers' to other family members, in line with Afghan cultural norms. Some experienced discrimination, but this was often subtle and masked, arising where they were a visible minority.

'College means so much to me...for some people, it might not be their happy place, but for me, it is.'

(Arya, student)

'I didn't write anything on the paper and gave them to the examiner. It made me a lot depressed [...] and the GCSE was very hard for me.'

(Ahmad, student)

Our research shows parents are deeply invested in their children's education. However, there was variation in how well parents understood the education system, where 17% of Afghans with children in the survey report that they understand the UK education system 'not well at all', with a further 29.3% saying they do not understand it 'well'. Mothers report much less confidence than fathers in understanding the school system and both genders report limited confidence in helping children with schoolwork.

Education recommendations:

Future resettlement practice should aim to avoid the lost learning experienced by Afghan young people while in temporary accommodation. To improve long term outcomes, there is a need to strengthen parental knowledge about schooling, through multilingual communication, interpretation, and outreach to provide guidance on admissions, transitions and post-16 routes, ideally employing those from resettled populations themselves to help reach parents with limited English skills. Schools and colleges should be resourced to provide specialist teaching and careers advice for those arriving at significant transition points, with opportunities undertaken to share existing good practice between schools with high levels of experience with resettlement populations and those less confident. The diverse needs of resettled populations should be built into the government's *National Youth Strategy*, so that new youth provision outside school actively reaches young people with migration backgrounds, especially young women and girls.

'I told my children: 'I have done what I could to be able to bring my family here. Now your responsibility is to study. Nothing is more important than education for having a good future.'

(Farid, father)

'we were not familiar with how the education system works in the UK.... I had no clue what GCSEs are, what college is, what grades you need, or what UCAS and PTE exams are.'

(Afruz, father)

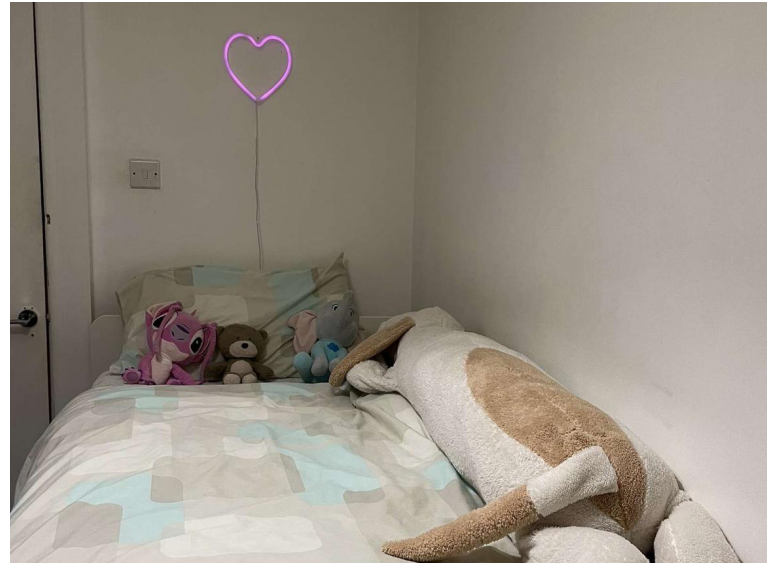
2. Households and housing:

Safety remains one of the most valued outcomes of resettlement; 90% of participants in the survey reported feeling safe in England, with only a minority (6.7%) reporting incidents of discrimination or racism. Most of our research participants reported feeling supported by their LA. In terms of household compositions, Afghan participants in our survey live in families; 60% of our survey respondents had children under the age of 19 living in the household, with only 12% of respondents living alone. The average number of children per household was four, but 25% of respondents had five or more children, and 15% live in accommodation where their family is split across two households.

'We can sleep peacefully in our beds.'
(Zamina, Afghan woman)

'The process was supportive, I am grateful that after going to a temporary place to live, support was good and I'm grateful for it.'
(Nemat, Afghan man)

Almost all the families in the survey were renting; over half of families have lived in two accommodations since arriving in England, and one third have lived in three. Indeed, families navigated significant transience, mobility and issues of housing stability. Most Afghan people felt glad for the safety of their homes. As is also the case for other households in the UK, some were also struggling with conditions such as damp and overcrowding. Coming from a country where it is more common to live in houses than flats, with larger extended families, some Afghans also reported some adjustments and impacts of different housing types on family life and hospitality practices. Our qualitative research suggests that people place their faith in the council to assist them with their next move. Mobility may be due to a wish to be closer to other family, friends or wider community networks, or to move to perceived 'cheaper' areas, albeit this may not be based on accurate information or an understanding of housing costs.



Stakeholders also reported that some Afghans required substantial support to help navigate local housing costs and availability. For multiple reasons explored in Chapter 7, including being unable to easily meet rental conditions (e.g. providing guarantors), some are at higher risk of homelessness. Stakeholders acknowledged the importance of the interaction between housing, family size, employment and school placements, noting that housing Afghans works best in well-connected urban areas.

Housing recommendations

Provision of central government ring-fenced funding for resettlement purposes has been vital to ease housing constraints. However, future provision should learn lessons from the negative effects of long-term, protracted use of temporary accommodation and multiple moves. Housing teams should avoid dispersing households to isolated, rural areas, since this places strain on families managing household logistics of employment and education. However, given ethnic differences and divergent values and lifestyles, Afghans should not necessarily be housed exclusively together. More precise triage information and data sharing would also help inform accurate onward housing decisions.

3. Employment, training and language

The research indicates that resettled Afghans are not all starting from the same position; there is significant diversity in the educational and employment profiles of Afghans, varying by gender, age and social class. Afghan men in our sample had significantly higher levels of education than women: 19% held university degrees compared to 4.4% women, and 10% with Masters, compared to 0.7% women. There is also polarisation across the sample, with one quarter having no formal education; again, this is highly gendered. Around half of respondents reported proficiency in reading and writing English, with men and young people reporting higher levels, but women much less e.g. 25.7% of men read English 'very well' vs 7.9% of women. A majority need an interpreter when dealing with local authorities, albeit women rely more on family members to help access services (46.1% compared to 17.1% of men).

A male breadwinner pattern is common in households, with younger people, and men, more likely to be in employment, education or training. The highest employment rates are among Afghan men aged 25–34 (64%) and 35–44 (48%). Many Afghans however, experience significant de-skilling in England, where former doctors or judges are working in food delivery or in warehouses, negatively impacting their wellbeing and financial stability. While some Afghan women in the sample were working, stakeholders explained that for some families, the 'adult worker' welfare model in British society, based on an expectation that both partners work, is unfamiliar. However, where only one parent works in a couple, risks of poverty are much higher; thus, benefit caps affected some (particularly larger) Afghan families, placing them in financial precarity.

'we're a big family, so we have like turns if we're buying something expensive....this week, I'll buy stuff.... then the next week, she'll buy stuff [sister], and then the next week, my brother will'.

(Arya, student)

Nearly half of the respondents were attending English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Women facing transport and childcare constraints were more likely to attend local and community-based classes and to learn from their children; because of these factors, they have less access to formal ESOL provision than men.

Recommendations for employment, training and language:

Tailored vocational training programmes and careers advice are needed to enable Afghans to convert and/or acquire qualifications and find appropriate jobs. Where local authorities have commissioned specialist input or bespoke advice on the interaction of welfare and work, this is beneficial. Central government funding should be provided at previous levels for ESOL teaching, and where needed, extend beyond a 3-year period to encourage integration. Local authorities should be supported to share practice around how to increase engagement with ESOL, especially among women. We recommend employing Afghans themselves in designing solutions for employment, education, welfare and health



4. Wellbeing, connections and local belonging:

Participants frequently emphasised their feelings of safety and stability following resettlement in the UK, citing these as significant factors in their well-being. Many Afghans also expressed a sense of determination and resilience and were motivated to succeed. More than two-thirds (76%) of Afghans in the survey report good, very good or excellent health, albeit with women and older people reporting worse health. Wellbeing indicators showed mixed results: using a recognised scale capturing how they felt over recent weeks, 22.1% reported feeling relaxed 'all the time', 21.2% feeling they were dealing with problems well and 32.3% reporting frequently feeling close to others 'all the time'. At the same time, 20.2% of the survey respondents did not feel relaxed 'at all' or 'rarely' over past few weeks, 17.6% responded that they did not feel they have been dealing with problems well and 32.3% reported feeling close to other people 'rarely or not at all'.

'When we arrived in the UK, I felt real peace.'

(Haroon, Afghan man)

'The house is different; the people are different. The rule, everything is different.'

(Gulshan, Afghan woman)

'My problem is shops, expensive, no halal shops....no Aldi or Lidl.'

(Nazanin, Afghan woman)

Survey respondents also demonstrated a considerable variation in terms of their sense of belonging to the area. Many Afghans reported a sense of belonging to their area (64.2%), including 45.6% feeling 'somewhat' connected and 18.6% 'very much' connected. However, many participants had only limited social connections in their localities: 24.2% had made new acquaintances, but nearly 70% had made only a few or no new acquaintances. When it comes to emotional support, the majority reported having at least one person to confide in, but this varies: 41.3% have only one person, and 16.3% have more than three.

Our qualitative research indicated that while resettlement offers a general sense of relief from life-threatening risk, rebuilding lives in an entirely foreign setting can present challenges over a longer term. Displacement and cultural adjustments, family separation across continents, and concerns for family in other places, including Afghanistan, are major challenges, while the data breaches impacted trust in

the government. Limited local networks, language barriers, financial precarity from low skilled employment and housing insecurity can also lead to mental health challenges, including among young people. Sometimes, these could be left untreated due to cultural stigma, reluctance to seek professional help and expectations for resilience.

'The one day that we came here, they [Taliban] came to knock on our door and they said, 'where is your dad?'... My brothers...just moved their house, and like went to another city. They keep changing the house right now [...] My mum is like always thinking about them, stressing about them. She's really worried about them all the time.'

(Baset, student)

'I need to look after persons like my sisters, younger sisters, my mum and keep their mood up.'

(Ahmad, student)

Recommendations for wellbeing, connections and local belonging:

Health and mental health services should share practice and invest in culturally informed mental health provision, which our research indicates can be creatively delivered by Afghans themselves. This should include practical and emotional support to help people manage cultural change. Local authorities and MHCLG should work to improve communication with wider communities around the experiences of Afghans and why they have been resettled. The government has an obligation to rebuild trust with Afghans affected by the Ministry of Defence data breaches, particularly those who worked alongside British forces in Afghanistan. This requires open and transparent communication clarifying the government's responsibilities towards all individuals and family members whose personal data was exposed, and an urgent commitment to ensure that eligible applicants are relocated as soon as possible.

5. Scheme coordination:

Stakeholders regarded schemes as well-funded and necessary, with expertise and learning gained among LA and service-providers. However, stakeholders were critical of the speed of policy change, limited and delayed communication, what they see as cuts in current funding and the arbitrary nature of the support provided to Afghans depending on route of arrival. Afghans and stakeholders alike highlight the cumulative and compounding nature of challenges: housing isolation can limit social networks and make attending employment or classes hard, especially when juggling logistics of multiple school placements for children. A holistic approach is needed to understand the compounding challenges. As support is wound down, some families remain vulnerable, especially once their 3-year integration support period passes.

'It has been subject to so much bolt on and change [...] everything just takes such a long time to catch up.'

(Council resettlement team leader)

'We sort of cringe at some of the things you did or didn't do [but] training has caught up and people have just learned through exposure.'

(Healthcare provider)



Recommendations for resettlement work:

The government needs to set out a clear and long-term vision for resettlement. Community sponsorship has become the preferred approach, but this should not replace LA-led resettlement, which brings its own distinct benefits and must remain a central part of the overall offer. We note that the schemes have played a crucial role in supporting early integration, especially by helping families move from transitional accommodation into homes, which gives them greater autonomy. Cross-government departments should undertake a formal review of their work on resettlement to build on the progress made by local authorities, partner organisations and civil society in supporting newcomers to settle. The scaffolding they provide can lead to longer-term benefits as families, and particularly younger family members thrive. Finally, new arrivals would benefit from continuing cultural orientation prior to, and upon arrival by relevant agencies to give them a realistic and practical understanding of life in the UK. Messaging should communicate realistic and reasonable expectations of what resettlement will look like, including information about different areas of the country, housing types and the education system.

'The only way we will guarantee our licence to operate in the future is if the world sees very visibly that we will stand with those who stood with us.'

(Stakeholder)

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