

SAFE ROUTES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG REFUGEES

OUR RESPONSE TO THE NEW PLAN FOR IMMIGRATION

*A joint report by the young people of Safe Passage,
Hummingbird Project and Kent Refugee Action Network*



■ Who are we	03
■ New Plan for Immigration: Our Response	04
■ Our Key Recommendations	06
■ “We had no choice”: Our Journeys to the UK	07
■ “Sanctuary, Support and Safety”: The need for more safe routes to the UK	09
Family Reunion	10
A safe route for unaccompanied children from Europe	14
Global resettlement scheme	16
■ Positive contribution of refugees to the UK	18
■ Conclusion	23

WHO ARE WE?

We are Young Leaders. We come from three groups led by young refugees and asylum-seekers: The KRAN Youth Forum, Hummingbird Young Leaders and Safe Passage Young Leaders.

Together, we are a group of 26 young people from different backgrounds working together for a better future for young refugees and asylum seekers.

We are a community of people with experience of migration and the asylum system, brought together by humanity, and we are working to protect and defend human rights.

We are a voice for the voiceless. We have high hopes that together we can make a change.



NEW PLAN FOR IMMIGRATION: OUR RESPONSE

We have read the Government's New Plan for Immigration and want to respond to it as part of the engagement and consultation process.

Through this report, our aim is to highlight the struggle that we go through as refugees and asylum-seekers. We want to show you why people are having to take these dangerous journeys and explain that very often, we have no choice.

We are here to show you the real issues that people go through and to tell our story. We want to communicate our pain, our struggle and our experience, to help you understand. We hope that through reading this report, you will understand the need to give more refugees safe routes to safety and that you will act now.

It is our firm belief that the New Plan for Immigration does not benefit the Government or British society any more than it benefits refugees themselves. We think this plan, with its two-tiered system for asylum, would not help refugees. We are concerned that the plan would deny rights and protection to people based on how they arrive in the UK and goes against human rights and

international law. Importantly, we do not think this plan will reduce the number of people coming to the UK via dangerous routes to seek asylum.

Nobody chooses to flee their home, to leave behind what they have built and their family, to the unknown. People fleeing war and persecution need to reach safety, their families and communities, through any way possible.

But often, we cannot access the few safe and legal routes that exist. In the first section of this report, we share the struggle many of us have gone through to reach safety. We would choose to take safe routes if we could, to avoid taking dangerous and painful journeys. But these routes are often closed to us.

Almost all routes to the UK that were open to children and young people are now closed, as we will highlight in section 2. After the UK's exit from the European Union, the Dublin Regulation for family reunification is no longer available for children to access, and the UK's immigration rules for family reunion are much more restrictive.



Furthermore, the only route for unaccompanied children from Europe, the Dubs Scheme, has also closed. Many of us know from personal experience how vital these routes were. We do not know what we would have done without them.

This lack of safe routes explains the desperate attempt we see at the UK's sea borders, where young people like us risk their lives to reach their family here. On the way, countless adults and children have lost their lives. Speaking from experience, we know that asylum seekers will stop at nothing to be safe and with their family. The unnecessary loss of life on UK shores can be avoided by creating a system that helps young people access safe routes to sanctuary.

The need for family reunion and the right to asylum is a humanitarian issue. However, refugees' contribution to British society should also be highlighted. Refugees make a massive cultural, economic and social contribution to the UK. We help in every sector, and we keep this country going.

The UK has a proud history of accepting refugees from different countries, especially children, and recognises the value of family and safety. The Government must take this opportunity to live up to its legacy and global reputation by offering more refugees safe routes to sanctuary.



“I came through the Syrian resettlement scheme and my life has significantly changed. I found sanctuary, support and safety when I arrived. But when I look at the other young refugees who risked their lives to find a place that they feel safe in, I know that it’s not fair for them. They deserve better treatment and a better life. It is not a crime to seek asylum or refuge in the UK.”

Osama, Youth Ambassador

OUR KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that the Government needs to make fundamental changes in policy to ensure that people fleeing war and persecution can access safe routes to sanctuary. Through a series of group workshops and discussions, we have worked together to agree on the following list of eight recommendations. We are calling for the Government to:

1. **Act fast to save lives, by providing more safe routes to sanctuary for refugees.**
2. **Offer the same protection to people fleeing war and persecution regardless of how they travelled to the UK.**
3. **Agree a deal with the EU to strengthen family reunion. The UK should work closely with countries in the EU to ensure the process is faster and smoother.**
4. **Make urgent changes to refugee family reunion under the UK's Immigration Rules*.**
5. **Ensure that all refugees have the right to be reunited with their family members, no matter how they entered the UK.**
6. **Expand the proposed resettlement scheme to other countries beyond the Middle East, including Africa and Europe.**
7. **Introduce a new route to the UK specifically for unaccompanied children from Europe.**
8. **Listen to those directly affected before taking decisions that have an impact on so many lives. We invite them to meet with us and others with lived experience of these issues to discuss our recommendations in more detail.**

As Iranian novelist Dina Nayeri said, “It is the duty of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks.”

**More detailed recommendations on family reunion can be found on Page 13.*

“WE HAD NO CHOICE”

Our journeys to the UK

Imagine this: you are a child, away from your home and the culture you grew up with. You have had to flee unspeakable dangers and then you experience a painful and dangerous journey, with the constant threat of violence or starvation. After all this, trying to settle in a new environment by yourself is challenging enough, but that could be simplified by having family or a supportive community beside you. All you want is to be in a place where you feel safe and protected.

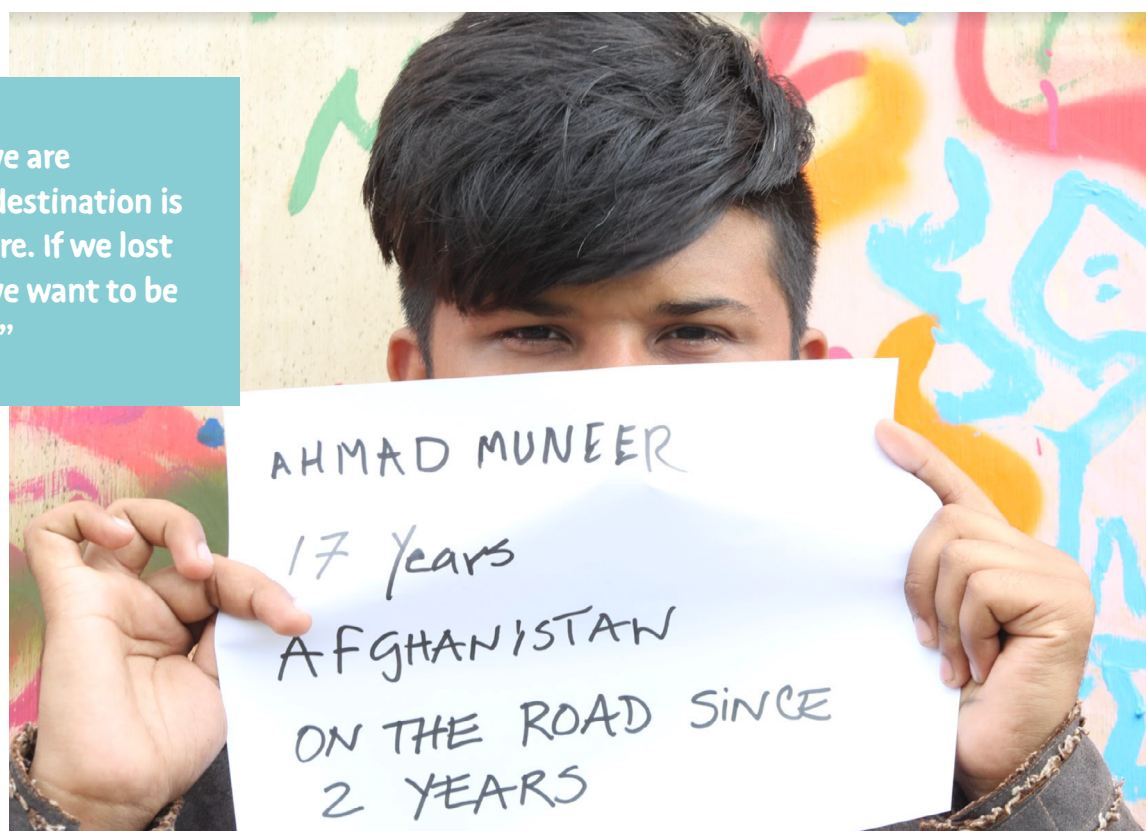
We are all young people who had to leave home in search of safety and protection. **We were all obligated to leave our homes; it was not a matter of choice.**

Some of us were victims of war and conflict, some of persecution due to ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religious belief. Many of us suffered from unfavourable practices such as child labour, forced marriage or being forced into the military.

All of us left our countries of origin in search of a safe haven. Sometimes we did not know where we would end up; we just kept going until we found a safe place. Many of us had family in the UK and were trying to join them, or were trying to reach friends and neighbours from back home. We wanted to be somewhere where we could be part of a community that shared our language and culture.

We all took these journeys, looking for a safe and better life.

“The main reason that we are choosing the UK as our destination is that we have families here. If we lost our family back home, we want to be with the ones we’ve got.”



“STRUGGLE, STRUGGLE, STRUGGLE”

What we experience on our journeys

Hunger and starvation. Harsh weather elements. Violence, rape, and death. Becoming homeless. Being detained. Police brutality and racism. Exploitation from smugglers, kidnappers and thieves. Struggle, struggle, struggle.

These are just some of the challenges that we as a group have experienced on our journeys to reach safety. Our journeys are often dangerous, painful and gruesome. We struggle to survive and live in constant fear.

We are often at the mercy of people smugglers.

They take advantage of young people and sometimes abuse us. The smugglers can be very scary; they threaten us, we have to do everything they say or they will leave us in danger or hurt us. As we have no idea what is happening or what other options are open to us, we have no choice but to do what they say.

Although the smugglers are dangerous and untrustworthy, we often have to go with them because there are no safe routes available to us.

“Smugglers try to steal your money and do not worry about your life. But we do not have any other choice. We can’t reach our families without paying the smugglers to help. The legal routes are closed to us.”



Safe routes to sanctuary

We believe that if there were more safe routes to come to the UK, the majority of young people seeking sanctuary would take them rather than risk their lives at the hands of smugglers and traffickers.

Crucially, these routes need to be quicker and easier to access. It is not acceptable for us to have to wait years in a camp, hungry and alone, for our

applications to be processed. We are escaping war and our lives are in danger. We cannot wait in our homeland, or in the nightmare of a refugee camp with no privacy and no humanity. We have no choice but to leave. Safe routes should be open to all vulnerable young people, wherever they are in the world.

“SANCTUARY, SUPPORT AND SAFETY”:

The need for more safe routes to the UK

In the previous pages, we have explained why people fleeing war and persecution often have to take dangerous journeys to seek safety. We have shown that often, **people have no choice**. Many of us writing this report had no choice. This is because many refugees are in fact being pushed away from safe routes - almost all the routes to the UK that existed before have now closed.

The Government's new plan talks about the importance of providing safe and legal routes for those fleeing conflict and persecution, but only plans to provide one very limited resettlement scheme. **Only 0.08% of refugees globally are selected for resettlement***, and the Government's plans aren't guaranteed to even offer sanctuary to them.

In September 2015, the toddler Alan Kurdi was found dead after drowning trying to reach Europe. Such loss of life should not be necessary. As health expert and human rights activist Widad Akreyi says, “You have a chance to save lives, if you don't take it, you may regret it, like you did with Alan Kurdi”.

In this section we will share our experiences and recommendations on three areas for improvement: family reunion, protection for unaccompanied children in Europe, and global resettlement.

**In 2020 the UN recorded 26million refugees globally, 22,770 refugees were resettled. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2021/1/600e79ea4/refugee-resettlement-record-low-2020-unhcr-calls-states-offer-places-save.html>*

FAMILY REUNION

One route that children in Europe accessed to join their families in the UK was the Dublin Regulation for family reunion. Many of us writing this report accessed this EU scheme. We were able to reunite with our close relatives and did not have to risk our lives to reach them. However, due to the UK's exit from the European Union, that law has gone, and no alternative route is available at the moment.

The UK immigration rules for refugee family reunion are much stricter than the Dublin Regulation, so fewer families can be reunited together. Only 5% of the children Safe Passage International works with would be likely to qualify to join their family members under the immigration rules. Applicants face many barriers such as strict criteria linked to the status and relation of the family sponsor, high evidential thresholds and an application fee.



“I feel stronger and happier when I get a hug from my mum after a long and a stressful day at college. I feel guilty because I am able to get that love from my mum, whereas my brothers are not because they are in a different country.”

Nouran, A-level student studying Politics and Law.

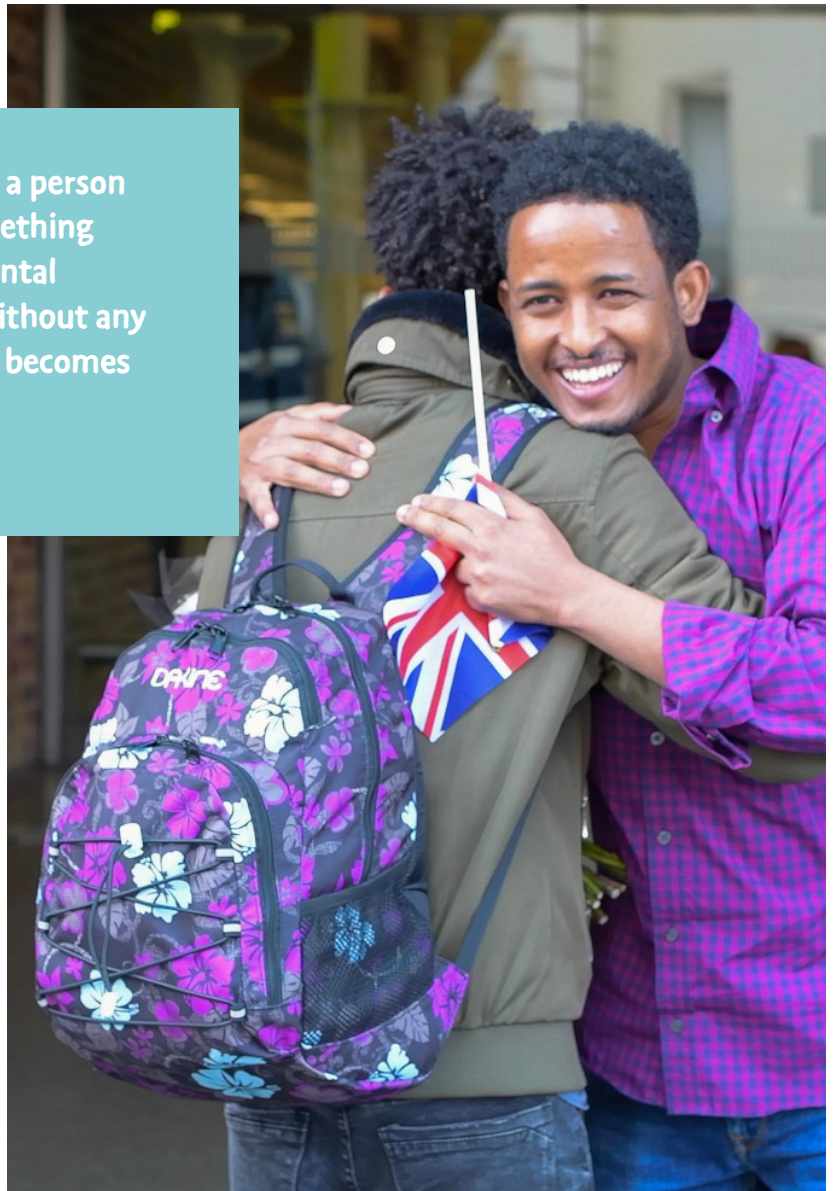
WHAT FAMILY MEANS TO US

“A person without a family is a lost soul, a person without a family lacks belonging to something greater other than oneself, improved mental health, affection and encouragement. Without any part of your family with you, everything becomes challenging.”

Tekle, engineering student

Family is the basis of life. When we are with our family, no matter where we are, we feel happier, safer and stronger. Having a family by our side is essential, whether to celebrate in good times or receive support in tough times of our life. Life is more bearable with them.

Families also help us do our best in education and employment because of the encouragement we receive, and help us keep in contact with our culture even in a different country. They speak our language, they are someone to guide us through life



“I accessed the Dublin Regulation to reunite with my younger brother. The impact is real because I was able to observe the difference on me and my brother. It is almost as though we have a little part of our family here. He is happier, I’m relieved because he can be supported at any time by me here. Being alone in different countries is challenging but here I can support him with the smallest things and make him settle more comfortably.”

Tekle, engineering student

CURRENT BARRIERS TO ACCESSING REFUGEE FAMILY REUNION

Based on our own experiences, group conversations and research, we have identified the following as key issues for family reunion under the UK immigration rules:

- 1. The process for family reunion is too slow.**
Many of us had to wait for many months if not years to be reunited with our families, left in limbo without a home. This was an awful experience to go through and any future family reunion scheme must ensure this does not happen.
- 2. The rules about which relatives can apply for refugee family reunion are too restrictive.** Many of us have relatives around the world that cannot join us here through the UK's current immigration rules. We miss them and think about them all the time. Some of us joined our aunts and uncles in the UK under the Dublin Regulation, and for most of us this would no longer be possible.
- 3. The rules about who can apply based on status are too restrictive.** Some of us joined relatives in the UK under the Dublin Regulation who did not have refugee status. For example, some were British Citizens. Under the current refugee family reunion rules, we would not be able to join them.
- 4. There are too many practical barriers to the application process.** We know this from personal experience. We know how hard it can be to travel from refugee camps to Visa Application Centres in the cities- it is often impossible. We have experienced how complicated and confusing the process is.
- 5. Many of us cannot afford the legal costs.** Some of us are trying to bring family members to the UK so we can fully rebuild our lives together. However most of us cannot afford the legal fees and are currently unable to access legal aid which would give us access to legal support and advice.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFUGEE FAMILY REUNION

To help resolve these issues, we present the following recommendations for family reunion. We are calling for the Government to:

- 1. Ensure that all refugees can access full family reunion rights, no matter how they entered the UK.**
- 2. Make urgent changes to family reunion under the UK's Immigration Rules:**
 - Expand the rules so that relatives other than children can join their families, such as siblings, nieces, nephews and grandchildren.
 - Expand the rules so that people who are British Citizens and those with indefinite leave to remain can bring their families here.
 - Make the application process clearer, safer and more accessible. Unaccompanied children should not have to take dangerous journeys to Visa Application Centres far away.
 - Provide legal aid for all refugee family reunion cases.
- 3. Agree a deal with the EU to secure new rights for refugee family reunion to the UK. The UK should work closely with countries in the EU to ensure that the process is faster and smoother.**

A SAFE ROUTE FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN FROM EUROPE

“Imagine a child in a camp in Greece who is unable to reach safety. They are at risk of being exploited by traffickers and smugglers. Let’s avoid that and provide safe routes!”

Nouran, A-level student studying politics and law.

Right now across Europe there are children sleeping rough on the streets or in refugee camps. According to UNICEF, there are at least 10,000 unaccompanied and separated children in Europe who need care and protection*.

Many of us have had direct experience of what it is like to be alone and without care in Europe. In a camp, you feel isolated, exposed and unprotected. You don’t get any moral support from your family. You feel lonely in the camps because you are new to the country and that can affect your mental health. Life in a camp is not a life - it is a true tragedy. It is a nightmare, with no privacy, no care and no humanity.

We recommend a new safe route to sanctuary in the UK for unaccompanied children currently in Europe

This should include those without family links to the UK. The Government must ensure that children and young people like us are taken to a safe place and do not have to cross dangerous waters or walk in treacherous conditions to reach safety.

**<https://www.unicef.org/media/87571/file/2021-HAC-Refugee-and-migrant-crisis-Europe.pdf>.*

A previous scheme, known as the Dubs scheme, helped unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in precarious conditions across Europe reach safety in the UK. Some of us were fortunate enough to come to the UK through the Dubs scheme. Accessing this scheme changed our lives forever. After being in a camp or on the streets where we felt lonely and isolated, we came to a place where we felt safe. A place with a supportive community, where we could play football with friends and go to school just like anyone else. The Dubs scheme has now closed, after only 480 unaccompanied children were brought to safety.



“I was fortunate enough to access the Dubs scheme to travel safely to the UK. Since I arrived in the UK, I have studied hard. I am at college doing sports and I want to become a fitness trainer. Now the Government has said they will not continue resettlement for unaccompanied children from Europe. This makes me feel sad, to think of all those children, homeless with no other option.”

Muste, student and aspiring fitness trainer

BUT ISN'T EUROPE SAFE?

The Government often says that European countries such as France and Greece are safe and that young people can stay there instead of coming to the UK. Many of us know from personal experience that often this is not the case.

The countries many of us have come through, such as France and Italy, do not provide adequate support to children seeking asylum. We have been targeted by drug dealers or traffickers, or experienced police brutality even though we have done nothing wrong. In other European countries, many of us have become homeless, been beaten by police, gone without food, got sick and been arrested. Refugees are cramped into a place with no family or support, where they just want to find any country that will look after them. Furthermore, many children in Europe are trying to join their

families in the UK, or live with communities that share their culture and language.

By limiting safe routes, the UK is also not taking its share of the responsibility to provide sanctuary to refugees in Europe, compared to other countries such as Germany, Greece, and Italy. For example, Greece currently has more refugees than anywhere else in Europe: 121,000, including 45,000 children, 4,400 who are unaccompanied*.

We want the UK government to do its bit for children in need and help reunite people with their relatives and communities in the UK. The UK should demonstrate global leadership and share this responsibility; if it does this, we will see how much we would benefit from it as a country.

[*https://www.unicef.org/media/87571/file/2021-HAC-Refugee-and-migrant-crisis-Europe.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/87571/file/2021-HAC-Refugee-and-migrant-crisis-Europe.pdf)

GLOBAL RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

Some of us benefited from accessing the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, a scheme that the UK launched to bring Syrian refugees to the UK. The new resettlement scheme proposed in the plan is positive but it does not mention how many people will access it. The Government should set an ambitious target for the number of refugees that will come through the scheme. The VPRS is something we can be proud of as a country, and many of us writing this report were fortunate enough to access it. But the scheme was limited only to the Middle East and North Africa region. Lots of people fleeing war and persecution were not so fortunate and were not eligible for previous resettlement schemes.

Many of us have personal connections to places like Ethiopia, Congo and other parts of Africa where people are in extreme danger. Furthermore, as demonstrated above, many of us have experienced first hand how dangerous being homeless or living in a refugee camp in Europe can be. However, these regions were not included in the previous resettlement scheme. A 2020 report by UNHCR shows that in 2021, the parts of the world estimated to be in greatest need of resettlement are Africa and Europe, followed by the Middle East region (1).

Figure 1

PROJECTED GLOBAL RESETTLEMENT NEEDS FOR 2021

REGION OF ASYLUM	TOTAL PROJECTED RESETTLEMENT NEEDS*	
	cases	persons
Africa	166,592	616,958
Asia & the Pacific	29,034	99,470
Europe	107,500	423,600
MENA	84,564	275,981
The Americas	15,597	29,374
Grand Total	403,287	1,445,383

**including multi-year planning*

<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unhcr-projected-global-resettlement-needs-2021#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20UNHCR%20estimates%20that,be%20in%20need%20of%20resettlement>

Based on these facts and our own experience, we recommend that the Government expand their proposed resettlement scheme to other parts of the world, including Africa and Europe.

The Government should also work to make the scheme is accessible and remove barriers for people to access. Many of us have friends who were unable to access resettlement schemes, because they simply did not have the information, resources or logistical ability to access them. For example a friend of one us could not travel to the correct embassy and was unable to access a scheme she otherwise would have been eligible for. Sometimes, we simply do not know such schemes exist.



“I’m not really too informed on how we came to the UK to be honest. I know we did take a legal route but it was after our visas expired I think or maybe they were about to expire. My mum was the one who took it all on her shoulders, although she didn’t even know what routes were available at first until we were in the process ourselves.”

Damilola, aspiring medic

POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION OF REFUGEES TO THE UK

As refugees, we make a massive cultural, economic and social contribution to the UK. We help in every sector, taking roles such as doctors, nurses and bus drivers to name just a few. We help keep this country going. Importantly, over the past year during the pandemic, we have seen many refugees working as key workers for the NHS and in other roles. Refugees contribute to medical care in the UK and support many vulnerable people through care and social work.



Many inspirational public figures were refugees who made the UK their home. These include Lord Alf Dubs, scientist Sir Hans Krebs, Olympic Gold Medalist Sir Mo Farah, and businessman Michael Marks. According to the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA)*, as of 2015:

- 18 refugees had received a Nobel laureate prize.
- 16 refugees had received knighthoods.
- 71 Fellows or Foreign Members of the Royal Society were refugees.
- 50 Fellows or Corresponding Fellows of the British Academy were refugees.
- In the year 2015, more than 1,000 medically qualified refugees were working for the NHS in the UK.

“In the media we hear constantly and in great volume how we as refugees are nothing but trouble, a burden to society and so on. It’s almost forgotten that we are human and deserve a decent and dignified life like anybody else.”

Tekle, engineering student



**<http://refugeeweek.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/HistoryofContributions.pdf>*

The skills that refugees come with to the UK are invaluable. The UK benefits from the education of refugees - we get trained in other places, then come to the UK to work with our qualifications. For example, it costs £2,500 to allow a refugee doctor to practice in the UK. It costs £250,000 to train a doctor from scratch*. That's a big difference!

Welcoming refugees to the UK is a win-win - it allows people to live in a safe place and build a better life, but they are also helping keep the economy going and work in essential jobs, and this benefits everyone.

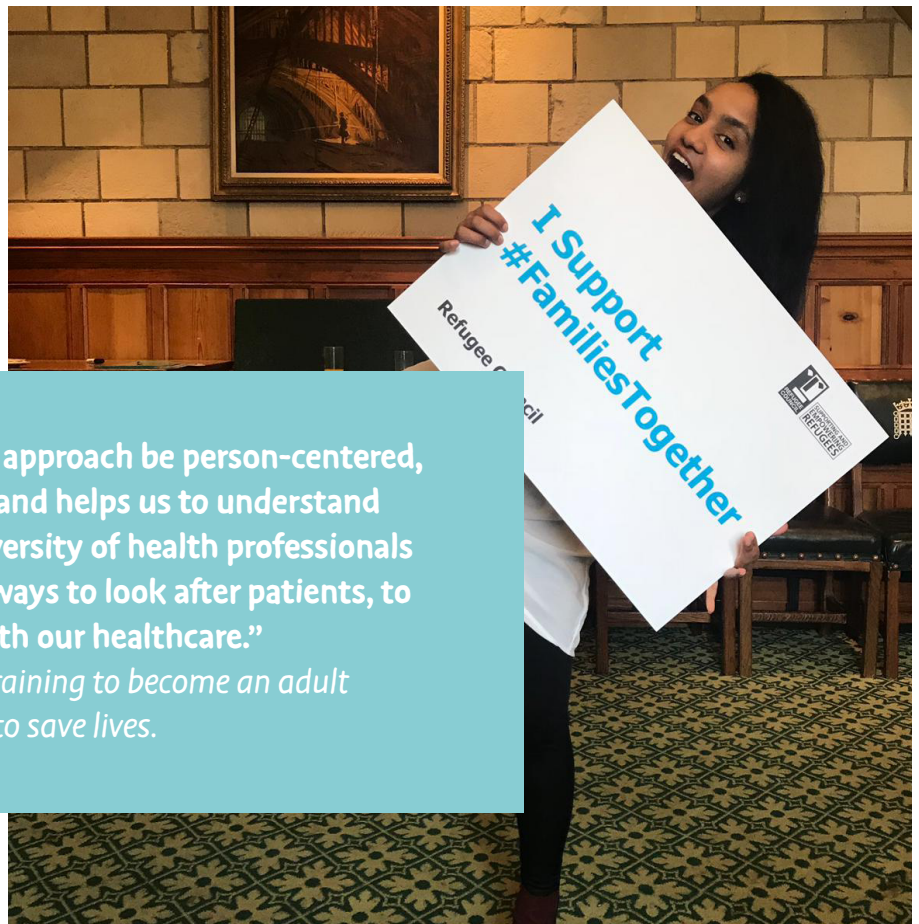
“I came to the UK when I was in year 8, I didn't speak a word in English and now I am fluent! I did my GCSEs and am now doing A levels. I am an active Safe Passage Young Leader and have volunteered in many different ways to help society. I am looking forward to going to university to study Law and Politics. I want to be a judge to make fair decisions and a politician to fight for human rights and fight for a better world for us and the next generation to live in, a world that is fair and without racism or crime.”

Nouran is an A level student studying law and politics



WE CONTRIBUTE TO THE UK IN ALL SORTS OF WAYS!

- Working - the authors of this report have experience working in construction, carework, healthcare, hospitality and engineering (to name just a few examples!)
- Setting up small businesses - many businesses are owned by people from refugee backgrounds, including some of the people writing this report!
- Supporting the economy in other ways, such as renting houses and paying taxes
- Introducing new cultures through foods and fashion
- Volunteering
- Campaigning and making positive change



“Diversity in healthcare helps the approach be person-centered, it is wider and more empowering and helps us to understand the needs of our patients. This diversity of health professionals helps us to think about different ways to look after patients, to be more reflective and creative with our healthcare.”

Rishan is a Nursing student. She is training to become an adult nurse, to help people get better and to save lives.

CONCLUSION

In this report we have shared our stories and our experiences with you. We have shown that when people are fleeing war and persecution, we need access to a safe route to reach our families and communities somewhere safe. If we do not have access to one, we have to take a dangerous journey instead, because we have no choice but to leave the danger behind.

We have explained the problem with the current lack of safe routes to the UK and what we need to do to address this. We have shared our recommendations on how to improve family reunion and shown why we need a new safe route for children from Europe. We have also explained why global resettlement to the UK needs to be truly global. And finally, we have celebrated everything that refugees bring to this country.

We contribute to society in so many ways, bringing culture and innovation and strengthening the economy.

As we highlighted in our recommendations at the start of this report, it is vital that decision makers listen to those directly affected before taking decisions that have an impact on so many lives. We hope that this report has shed light on the experiences that we as refugees go through, and will help those reading it to walk a day in our shoes.

This is just the beginning. Prime Minister and Home Secretary - we would love to sit down with you to share our expert experience and tell you what we think you should do.

We look forward to hearing from you and can't wait to continue the conversation.

We would like to thank all the young people of Safe Passage, KRAN and Hummingbird who have shared their experience and expertise in writing this report. We are:

Abdullah, Construction worker

Amani, College student, cook and youth forum member

Bashir, College student and Youth Ambassador

Damilola, Aspiring medic

Daniel, Business management student

Danilo Garcia, College student

Farouk, Aspiring barrister

Grmalem, College student and youth forum member

Heba, College student and youth forum member

Joel, Social sciences student

Laura, Adult nursing student

Martina, Doctor and G7 Youth Forum Member representing health

Michael, Politics and international relations student

Mohamad Aljaseem, Parliamentary Award Winner, public speaker and campaigner

Mohammed, College student and youth forum member

Muste, College student and aspiring fitness trainer

Naqeeb, Parliamentary Award winner, co-founder of Worthing Ping and Safe Passage Trustee

Nouran, A-level Politics and Law student

Obaida, College student and youth forum member

Osama, College student and Youth Ambassador

Percy, Science and Engineering student, educational youtuber

Rishan, Adult nursing student and Youth Ambassador

Sayeed Omran, Construction student

Shueib, College student and cricket player

Tekle, Engineering student

Yasmin, A-Level student, studying religious education

