

Second Reading briefing

Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill

February 2025

Safe Passage International



Summary

We welcome the parts of this bill which repeal some of the previous government's draconian legislation, but we are concerned by the Government's almost exclusive emphasis on border security and enforcement to reduce irregular travel to the UK. This approach we believe, will not work.

There is no mention of safe routes in this bill, and our experience tells us that providing safe routes by giving people a route to apply for asylum, is the best way to break the smuggling gangs' grip. In particular the UK's current family reunion rules are too restrictive, putting children at risk of taking dangerous journeys just to reach family and safety. In order to save lives and break the business model of criminal gangs, the Government must urgently introduce new safe routes and fix the existing inadequate ones.

Open safe routes to save lives

We welcome the parts of this bill that end the costly and ineffective Rwanda scheme and the repealing of significant portions of the previous Government's Illegal Migration Act. We are particularly pleased to see the ending of the indefinite detention of children and measures that prevented people from having their asylum claims processed.

However, we are concerned about the Government's deterrence approach, borrowing ideas used by the last government. Parts of the bill risk criminalising refugees, including children, by building on an existing list of immigration criminal offences, and the creation of a new offence if someone travels by boat and creates a risk of injury to another person.¹ All our experience and evidence demonstrate that refugees are unaware of policies aiming to deter their attempts to travel to safety, because this does not address why people come here - for family, community, security, and to rebuild their lives.² These measures are therefore not only deeply harmful but are also ineffective in achieving their stated aims.

Uniting refugee families

Critically, there is no mention of safe routes in this bill. Providing safe routes by giving people a route to apply for asylum is the best way to break the smuggling gangs' grip. People risk their lives taking dangerous journeys to reach protection and loved ones when safe routes aren't available.

The current, very limited safe routes that do exist are inaccessible and inadequate, and this is driving irregular journeys.³ For example, the UK's current family reunion rules are too restrictive.⁴ Children outside the UK wanting to join a relative like an aunt, uncle or grandparent in the UK, for example if their own parents are deceased, are forced to use a route which is not easily accessible, with fees up to £5,000 and high income and accommodation requirements imposed on the family member sponsoring the child. According to UNHCR, children are particularly likely to resort to people smuggling when access to family reunion is delayed or at risk.⁵

Before Brexit, at Safe Passage International, we successfully reunited hundreds of unaccompanied children with their families in the UK via the EU's Dublin III process to travel regularly, with only one child abandoning the process and travelling irregularly. Since Brexit,

children have no comparable route to family reunion and can only rely on the UK's extremely slow and restrictive family reunion rules. Under the UK's broken Immigration Rules, from January 2021 to August 2023, more than a quarter of the children we helped to reunite lost faith in the legal process, and we believe travelled to the UK irregularly.

The Ukraine schemes clearly demonstrate how stream-lined, well-resourced and flexible safe routes prevent dangerous journeys, with only one Ukrainian ever having crossed the channel.⁶ However, many other safe routes to the UK have proved inadequate. Afghans were the top nationality group this year crossing the Channel and the Afghan resettlement schemes remain deeply flawed with little over half the 20,000 Afghans the Government committed to resettle having arrived in the UK.⁷ Furthermore, the Government's UK Resettlement Scheme, started in 2019, has seen a 90% reduction in the number of people resettled to the UK.⁸

There is also currently no way to apply for asylum to the UK unless you are physically present in the country. This means that people fleeing war and persecution are reliant on the limited and inadequate schemes available, otherwise having to pay people smugglers and risk their lives. The government should pilot a much-needed safe route in the form of a refugee visa for particular groups of people fleeing war and persecution to travel to the UK for the purposes of claiming asylum. However, refugee visas must not replace the fundamental right to seek asylum or lead to the consideration of asylum claims from abroad. Polling after the 2024 election found that 50% of people backed the introduction of a visa scheme to allow people with strong asylum claims to travel here to claim asylum, with only 16% opposing.⁹

We know the UK can provide safe and accessible routes for people in need of protection. This is an opportunity for the UK Government to save lives and break the business model of criminal gangs, by restoring and expanding safe routes.

Our recommendations

To save lives and break the business model of criminal gangs, the Government must urgently:

- safeguard and extend family reunion rights for refugees
- fix existing inadequate safe route schemes and open new safe routes
- return to commitments on resettlement

About us

Safe Passage International is the leading family reunion charity assisting unaccompanied child refugees in Europe. Our legal teams in the UK, Greece and France provide legal advice and support to refugee children across Europe and beyond who are looking to reunite with family. We support children to access family reunion through the EU's Dublin III Regulation and under the UK's Immigration Rules.

Since we started in 2016, we have supported nearly **3000 children** and their family members to reach safety. We also offer bespoke arrivals and social support to help young people settle into their new communities. Since 2022, we have also been running award-winning crisis response work alongside our regular casework to assist those directly in conflict hit areas; namely Afghanistan and Ukraine, and more recently Gaza and Sudan.

We fight for a more compassionate response for refugees and run national campaigns to advocate for improvements in the system that currently provides no adequate safe routes for people on the move, and often leaves children trapped, alone and in danger.

For further information, please contact: Lucy Gregg, Safe Passage International,
lucy@safepassage.org.uk

¹ In particular – Border Security and Asylum and Immigration Bill, Clause 18 ‘Endangering another during sea crossing to United Kingdom’

² UNHCR (2019) Destination Anywhere <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/media/destination-anywhere>

³ See findings of APPG inquiry on safe routes (2025) <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/APPG-on-Refugees-Report-Safe-Routes-inquiry-February-2025.pdf>

⁴ Families belong together: Fixing the UK’s broken family reunion system (2024)

<https://www.safepassage.org.uk/reports/2024/5/13/families-belong-together-fixing-the-uks-broken-family-reunion-system>

⁵ UNHCR (2019) [Desperate Journeys](#)

⁶ Safe Passage International (2023) Routes to Safety report

<https://www.safepassage.org.uk/reports/2023/10/18/11aviequbblmjyyn5beeh7td20mlbt>

⁷ 12,426 had arrived as of November 2024 - UK Immigration statistics – ‘People offered safe and legal (humanitarian) routes, by route, 2015 to September 2024’ [Asylum and Resettlement Summary tables](#)

⁸ 506 in 2024 as opposed to 5601 in 2019 ‘Resettlement routes (excluding Afghan Schemes)’ [Asylum and Resettlement Summary tables](#)

⁹ British Futures polling: <https://www.britishfuture.org/public-gives-new-government-a-chance-on-immigration-reforms/>