

Written evidence submitted by the British Red Cross to the Public Bill Committee (BSAIB25)

Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill

Executive summary

The British Red Cross welcomes the government's focus on improving the UK asylum system and its commitment to avoid further loss of life in the Channel.

In particular, we welcome efforts in the bill to increase flexibility when taking biometric information. This will help to ensure that people in need of protection can access safety in the UK as swiftly as possible, while recognising the need to identify they are who they say they are. We would like to see this flexibility extended to other protection efforts, in particular refugee family reunion. **Our submission focuses on the case for extending the changes to include refugee family reunion.**

We also note that the current bill does not address one of the fundamental reasons why people put their lives in the hands of people smugglers, which is that there is no way to apply for asylum without already being in the UK.

The bill mainly focuses on increasing offences for smugglers and traffickers but does not propose any safe routes for people who are fleeing persecution, violence or conflict. This addresses the supply but as people continue to flee and face displacement there will always be the demand.

Safe routes need to form part of the wider solution to reduce the number of people who feel there is no choice to make the dangerous journey to Europe in the first place. Without them, efforts to protect vulnerable people are unlikely to be effective.

Changes to biometric collection

Context of the Bill

Clauses 34-35 of the bill provides welcome provisions on increasing operational flexibility when taking biometric information¹ in situations where the government is facilitating that person's exit.² For example, during an evacuation of emergency situations such as during Operation Pitting of the Afghan evacuation, when the British Embassy shut down.³

This clause will enable people to give their biometric information outside of a visa centre, which normally closes down in situations of conflict or violence. Without those centres people are required to attend the nearest visa centre which could be in another

¹ Biometric information is the taking to physical information such as fingerprints and photographs.

² [Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill: Explanatory notes – Parliament.uk](#)

³ [Military operation established to support the drawdown of British nationals from Afghanistan - GOV.UK](#)

country and often requires people to take very dangerous journeys. This clause will enable the government to authorise people or an organisation to take the biometric information at a location that will be safer and more local to the person needing to provide this biometric information.

While the clause is not limited to only crisis situations it is currently only applicable where the government is facilitating the exit of a person to another country. This limitation means that it will not apply to families reuniting with refugees as once a visa is issued the family makes its own way to the UK. Often when a conflict occurs families become separated as they seek safety. The British Red Cross supports 1,500 families on average a year and witnesses the impact family separation has on mental and physical health of the family.

Refugee family reunion

Refugee family reunion is one of the key safe routes for refugee families to reunite in the UK. In 2024, 19,710 people were granted family reunion visas. **Over half of the visas granted for family reunion are for children.** However, the current family reunion process makes it difficult for families to access the process and apply for refugee family reunion safely.

The current visa process requires families to take multiple journeys to a visa centre to submit their biometric information and then return months later to collect a visa if issued. However, many families, including children, take dangerous journeys to do so, including having to cross borders. It is worth noting that the top five nationalities granted family reunion visas in 2024 were from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan, and Syria. At the time of writing only Iran has a functioning visa centre.

The British Red Cross report Long Road to Reunion⁴, spoke to 100 families (215 people) about their journey which showed:

- **Just under half of the people found the journey difficult.** They stated that they were exposed to risks such as violence (including being shot), being fined or imprisoned and exploited.
- **1 in 5 families said they had to resort to using smugglers to reach the visa centre.** A smuggler may help these families overcome the challenge of crossing borders, but using smugglers also exposes family members to the risk of being kidnapped or trafficked by the smugglers.
- **Just under 60 percent of families were displaced before or during the application process.** Often the process forced families to become displaced as they were unable to return to their homes after taking journeys to the visa centre in neighbouring countries. These families faced additional challenges and vulnerabilities such as discrimination and punishment by authorities due to

⁴ [Helping Refugees Reunite with Family | British Red Cross](#)

their irregular status. This risk escalated by travelling back and forth multiple times to visa centres which are often in the capital city.

Amending Clauses 34-35 to include family reunion

The British Red Cross has long called for the process to be amended to change when the biometrics is collected, at the end of the process when a positive decision in principle is made. This would ensure that families are only required to travel to the visa centre once and knowing they will be issued a visa pending security checks.

The Home Office has issued unsafe journey guidance⁵ that enables families to ask for a decision in principle, but the threshold is very high and many families are unable to access or use this guidance.

Extending the relevant clause to include refugee family reunion would address the issue of 'where' biometrics can be taken. **This would ensure families, including children, were able to provide biometrics outside a visa centre and significantly reduce the risks encountered to reach visa centres.**

For example, when the conflict in Sudan began, the UK Embassy and visa application centre shut down within days. Refugee families were suddenly unable to apply for family reunion as the closest visa centre was Egypt or Ethiopia. Without a functioning government, there were no visas being issued for families to cross to neighbouring countries. Families had no choice but to risk extremely dangerous border crossings.

An amendment enabling the Home Secretary to authorise biometrics to be taken outside a visa centre by an authorised body such as the International Organisation for Migration within Sudan would prevent families from risking their lives to access a key safe route to the UK.

Case Study 1

Recently, the British Red Cross supported an Afghan family to reunite. There is no visa application in Afghanistan so the wife, who was pregnant, was required to apply for a visa to enter Iran and then travel to Tehran to provide her biometric information. Unable to stay in Iran, she travelled back to Afghanistan. As a lone woman, this was a huge risk for her. Months later, she was then heavily pregnant, she was required to travel again to Iran to collect her visa. At this time there was increased tensions between Iran and Israel and it was dangerous for her to travel, especially as a woman. There was no other option other than to travel to the visa centre so the husband (refugee in the UK) travelled to Iran so he could safely take his wife to the visa centre and collect her visa.

⁵ [Biometric enrolment guidance - unsafe journeys](#)

Case Study 2

The British Red Cross supported a 2-year-old Sudanese child, Ahmed, to reunite with their parents in the UK. Ahmed was displaced in Chad due to the conflict in Sudan and was living with his grandmother and seven other younger children under her care. As Ahmed was under 5, he was required to provide only a facial photograph and passport check at the visa centre before his application would be processed. There is no visa application in Chad and the closest one was in Cameroon. The grandmother and child were unable to travel to Cameroon due to the danger in travelling across borders and their inability to meet entry requirements for Cameroon.

We made representation to the Home Office to consider Ahmed's application without attendance at the visa centre. They agreed to this as UNHCR were able to check the identity of the child and his passport. UNHCR also agreed to securely transport Ahmed's passport back and forth to Cameroon to get the visa affixed into the passport.

This case took 11 months for the child to be reunited with their parents because of all the challenges outlined. An amendment to this clause to include family reunion would have reduced the waiting time and ensure all families can get access this application process without requiring interventions and legal support from our services.

Upcoming changes to the visa process

The Home Office will be introducing e-visas, which is the electronic issuing of vignettes towards the end of 2025. This move will further help refugee families who will not need to travel to just pick up a visa. However, these will only be issued for families that have a passport. Many refugee families do not have passports due to the nature in which they fled and so will still be required to attend visa centres.

Future of safe routes

While efforts to tackle organised criminal gangs are welcome, alongside efforts to support displaced people to thrive in host communities overseas, without offering alternative, safe routes, people are likely to continue to seek ever more dangerous methods to seek safety. For example, under the Biden administration the US government took a multi-pronged approach towards irregular migration. They expanded the capacity and reach of current safe routes and created new ones between 2022-2023. These were targeted for nationals from Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela. This was in addition to other restrictive policies and

agreements within the region for returns. By September 2024, the number of people crossing irregularly to the US fell to 54,000 from 302,000 in December 2023.⁶

The current safe routes to the UK for people seeking protection such as resettlement, are very limited or often only available to specific nationalities.

- Resettlement is available to fewer than 1% of refugees worldwide. In 2024, only 734 people were resettled via the UK Resettlement Scheme and Mandate.
- Bespoke relocation schemes, while offering safety at scale, have previously been nationality specific. They are currently only available for people from Ukraine and Afghanistan.

In 2024, the main nationalities crossing the Channel were people from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Vietnam, Eritrea. These are nationalities that are very likely to have a successful claim to asylum.

Without options for safe routes, these people will have little choice but to take a dangerous journey via smugglers. Without safe routes the demand for smugglers will continue and will limit the effectiveness of this legislation in reducing dangerous crossings.

About the British Red Cross

The British Red Cross is the UK's largest independent provider of services and support for refugees and people seeking asylum at every stage of their journey.

As an auxiliary to government, we help public authorities meet the humanitarian needs of people in crisis. This allows us to support, inform and act alongside the government to assist refugees and people seeking asylum, while upholding our fundamental principles as part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

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⁶ [Legal Pathways and Enforcement: What the U.S. Safe.. | migrationpolicy.org](#)