RESEARCH REPORT / NOVEMBER 2026

Refugee & Migrant Justice

LIVES ON HOLD

Refugee voices on the Immigration and Asylum Bill



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Executive Summary

The UK's asylum system is changing. The Government has introduced a new model of temporary "core protection" status for people. Under this model, people granted refugee status or humanitarian protection receive 30 months' permission to stay, which is renewable if the government determines they continue to need protection. This moves away from the previous 5-year grant of refugee leave, after which a person would be eligible for Indefinite Leave to Remain. In short, refugees now face a far longer and uncertain path to settlement.

Under the proposed model, people who remain on core protection would face a 20-year starting point for settlement, with opportunities to reduce this period through factors such as work, so-called "contribution" and study. However, people who entered the UK irregularly would face an additional 10-year penalty, increasing the starting point to 30 years. This sits alongside the Government's wider plans to extend settlement routes through introducing a so-called "earned settlement model".

The Immigration and Asylum Bill, which is currently passing through Parliament, would introduce further significant changes to the immigration and asylum system, including changes to the appeals system, Article 8 rights, asylum support, modern slavery protections and how refugee status is defined.

Refugee and Migrant Justice is deeply concerned about the direction these reforms are taking the UK in, and we reject the Immigration and Asylum Bill in its entirety.

To understand how these changes could affect people with direct experience of the asylum system, Refugee and Migrant Justice (RMJ) interviewed 15 people during August 2026. Participants included refugees, people currently seeking asylum and one person with humanitarian protection.

Despite varied experiences and views, all 15 participants agreed that the Bill would negatively affect their mental health. All 15 identified the right to work whilst going through the asylum application process as a key solution.



The research found five recurring themes.

1.Prolonged temporary status risks extending uncertainty

Ten of the 15 participants raised concerns about the proposed 20-year route to settlement. For people who have already spent months or years waiting for an asylum decision, the prospect of another two decades without settlement created concerns about family life, housing, employment, education and their ability to plan for the future. Participants described settlement as more than an immigration status. They saw it as a point of stability from which they could build their lives and participate fully in UK society.

2. Repeated “protection reviews” caused serious anxiety

Participants expressed concern about having to repeatedly renew their protection status. They questioned how people would cope with repeatedly demonstrating that they continue to need protection, particularly where their original claim involved trauma, persecution or violence. Participants described repeated Home Office interviews, applications and decisions as a significant source of anxiety.

3. Repayment of asylum support raises questions about fairness

Participants questioned the principle of repaying the cost of asylum support after receiving refugee status. Their concern was not simply the potential size of the debt. They questioned whether it is fair to charge people for support that they could not avoid relying on while they were prevented from working and unable to support themselves.

4.The right to work is central to independence and belonging

All 15 participants supported giving people seeking asylum the right to work. Participants consistently linked employment with independence, contribution and belonging. They wanted to work, pay taxes, develop careers and support their families. Some had professional qualifications or previous employment experience that they could not use while navigating the asylum system.

5.People want a clear route to a settled life

The people who took part in this research did not describe a desire to remain dependent on the state. They described wanting the opportunity to build stable lives. They wanted to work, support their children, establish homes and become part of their communities. They wanted to know that the future they were building would not be taken away after years of uncertainty.

Recognition as a refugee should provide the foundation from which someone can rebuild their life and become part of society. Instead, the Bill’s measures risk keeping people in prolonged uncertainty for years or even decades, hindering their ability to establish themselves and ultimately preventing people from getting on with their lives.

Introduction

Since 30 August 2005, the UK has provided refugees with a 5-year route from refugee protection towards permanent settlement an initial 5-year period of leave to remain. At the end of this 5-year period, if there are no concerns about the person's conduct, they will usually be granted settlement, meaning they can stay in the UK indefinitely, with their status only subject to revocation on criminality/security grounds or if they leave the country for an extended period.

After two decades, the Government is now changing that model.

On 2 March 2026, the Government introduced a new model of temporary protection for refugees.[1] This change sits alongside planned wider settlement changes confirmed in November 2026 by 'A Fairer Pathway to Settlement', otherwise known as the Earned Settlement Model.[2][3] People granted refugee status or humanitarian protection will now receive 30 months' permission to stay at a time, known as "core protection", with their status renewable if the government assesses they continue to need protection.

The Government plans to quadruple the baseline from 5 to 20 years for settlement

Refugees on the "core protection" route will face a 20-year baseline wait for settlement, which will increase to 30 years for those who entered the UK irregularly. Any refugee who entered irregularly and moves onto the new 'Protection Work and Study route' will face at least a 20-year wait.

The Immigration and Asylum Bill 2026 [4]would introduce further significant changes to the immigration and asylum system. The Bill:

- Replaces the existing First-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) with a new Independent Immigration Appeals Authority (IIAA), with cases potentially decided by adjudicators who would not need legal qualifications or specialist immigration and asylum law experience.
- Restricts how courts and tribunals consider Article 8 rights to family life, including in cases involving parents and children.
- Gives the Government new powers to require people granted refugee status to repay the cost of asylum support they received while waiting for their claim to be decided, potentially up to £10,000.
- Introduce changes to the modern slavery system, including provisions that could affect how late disclosures of exploitation are treated and the support available to some survivors.
- Give the Home Secretary powers to replace refugee status with a new category of protection status and determine the rights and entitlements attached to that status. The detail of how this would operate remains uncertain.

RMJ believe policy must account for the reality of people's experiences within the asylum system. People seeking asylum do not enter the system on the same terms as other migrants. Many have fled persecution, conflict, violence or serious threats to their safety. They may then spend months or years waiting for a decision while unable to work, establish secure housing or make long-term plans. They may also be separated from loved ones, who remain stranded overseas and facing extreme danger.



When someone receives refugee status, the need for protection does not disappear, but recognition should provide a foundation for rebuilding their life. The Government's proposals in the Immigration and Asylum Bill fail to take this into account and will make it far harder for refugees to establish themselves in the UK whilst doing nothing to diminish their need for protection.

We wanted to understand asylum seekers and refugees' feelings regarding these proposed changes and in August 2026 completed this research.

Research Rationale and Methodology

Note on timing: *This research was conducted in August 2026, before the Government confirmed in November 2026 that people who entered the UK irregularly would face an additional 10-year penalty on top of the proposed 20-year settlement period. Consequently, participants were asked about a maximum 20-year wait for settlement rather than the longer 30-year period.*

We conducted this research because policy decisions about settlement and asylum support often focus on systems, costs and numbers. These are important but they do not capture what prolonged temporary status means for people trying to rebuild their lives and the impacts these policies can have on wider society. We wanted to hear directly from these people, who all too often are reduced to statistics in debates around asylum policy.

In August 2026, we spoke to 15 people with experience of the asylum system.

8
held refugee status

6
were seeking asylum

1
held humanitarian protection

RMJ interviewed each person, with interviews lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Thirteen participants chose to remain anonymous. Two participants consented to being identified in the research. Seven participants identified as women and eight as men.

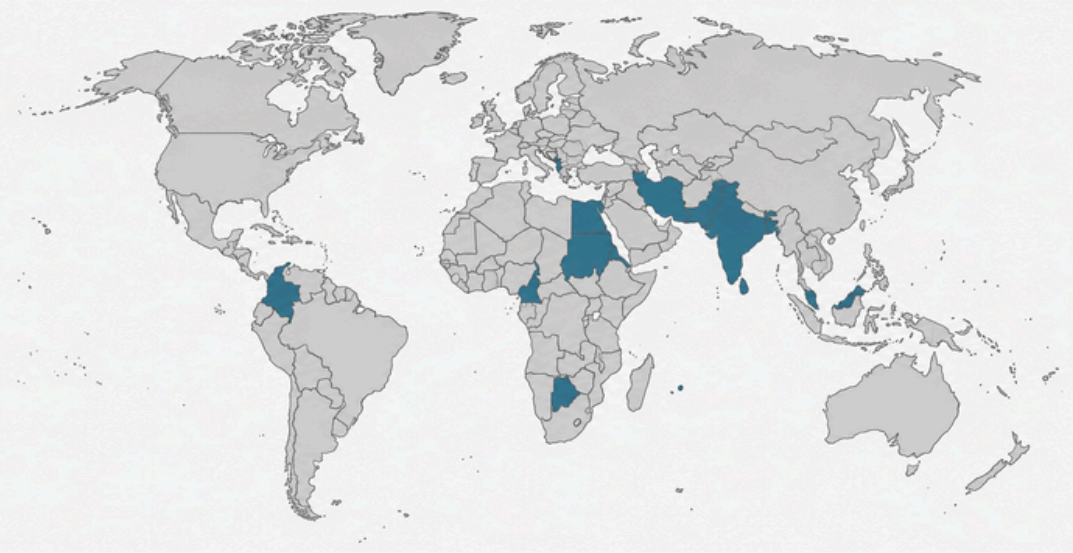
Participants came from a range of countries and backgrounds, with a majority from Middle Eastern and South Asian backgrounds.

This research is qualitative, so its findings are not intended to provide a statistically representative account of all refugees or people seeking asylum in the UK. Instead, the research provides insight into how people with direct experience of the asylum system understand the proposed reforms and the practical consequences they may have.

The research dealt with experiences of persecution, violence, displacement and navigating the asylum system. We therefore took steps to protect participants and respect their choices about how their experiences were used. We use pseudonyms for participants who chose to remain anonymous and have not included personal information that would identify them. We have retained their own words wherever possible.

Meet the participants

The 15 people who participated in this research brought different experiences of the UK asylum system. Please see the visual participant chart below.



Colombia
Cameroon
Iran
Sri Lanka
Sudan
Egypt
Mauritius
Malasya
Eritrea
Pakistan
India
Iran
Botswana
Bangladesh
Albania

People claiming Asylum

Amelie
Amelie is from Mauritius. She fled with her two daughters after the police, the state and other authorities failed to protect her from her abusive former husband and his family.

Amir
Amir is from Iran. He fled in 2023 following persecution by Iranian authorities for teaching students who were prohibited from studying because of their religion.

Arpita
Arpita is from Bangladesh. She arrived in the UK as a student and is a survivor of domestic abuse.

Bojan
Bojan is from Albania. He has a disability following a stroke and came to the UK in 2026 after experiencing discrimination in Albania.

Grace
Grace is from Botswana. She came to the UK in 2023 following a significant change in family circumstances.

Sana
Sana is from India. She fled India following threats of gender-based violence from her community and family.

People with refugee status

Adnan
Adnan is from Sudan. He fled Sudan owing to state-based persecution

Amira
Amira is from Eritrea. She fled from the Eritrean authoritarian regime and was recently reunited with her children in the UK through the now-closed Family Reunion route.

Ernest
Ernest is from Cameroon. He previously worked as a professor in the UK and claimed asylum on the basis of his sexuality. He has lived in the UK for eight years and was granted refugee status in 2026.

Jebat
Jebat is from Malaysia. He fled in 2024 after experiencing persecution linked to his health and sexuality. He was granted refugee status in 2026.

Karim
Karim is from Egypt. He arrived in the UK as a child and was fleeing state-based persecution. He was granted refugee status in 2025.

People with Humanitarian status

José
José is a journalist from Colombia. He claimed asylum in 2024 and received humanitarian protection after fleeing persecution because of his sexuality.

Research key findings

15/15

participants were concerned the Bill would negatively impact on their mental health

15/15

participants supported giving people seeking asylum the right to work

10/15

participants thought a 20 years route to settlement is too long

The interviews identified five interconnected themes.

1. Despite their varied experiences and views, all 15 participants agreed that the Bill would negatively affect their mental health.

2. 5 of 15 participants identified repeated 30-month reviews of their continued need for protection as a significant concern.

3. 5 of 15 participants specifically questioned the fairness of being made to repay asylum support in light of their experiences of asylum accommodation and the ban on them working.

4. All 15 participants supported giving people the right to work whilst going through the asylum process.

5. 10 of 15 participants thought the proposed 20-year route to settlement for people on core protection status was too long.

1.Prolonged temporary status risks extending uncertainty

Worsening mental health

For all 15 participants, mental health was a recurring concern when discussing the proposed reforms. The asylum process can already involve prolonged uncertainty. Participants described waiting for decisions, attending Home Office appointments and repeatedly having to explain experiences of persecution, violence or trauma.

For refugees, the prospect of continuing this uncertainty after the government had already recognised them as needing protection was particularly difficult.

Five of the eight people with refugee status interviewed specifically described the proposed 20-year route as isolating or destabilising.

José, a journalist from Colombia who received humanitarian protection, continues to support people navigating the asylum system. He was concerned that prolonged temporary status could make it harder for people to develop a sense of belonging

> **You would feel isolated because you don't belong to the citizenship.**
>
> José - Colombia - Humanitarian Protection

Amir, a person seeking asylum from Iran, also described the psychological burden created by repeated reviews:

> **Every 2.5 years… every 30 months, the Home Office come to you and ask you and see if you can go back… it will impact them psychologically, they will have no peace**
>
> Amir - Iran - Person seeking asylum

At the point of these interviews, the Government had stated that people who applied for asylum or humanitarian protection on or after 2 March 2026 will be subject to a ‘safe return review’ with reference to the country situation at the date the renewal application is considered.[5] They have since indicated though that everyone currently holding refugee status, but who has not yet acquired settlement, will be moved on to this new system and presumably subject to these same reviews. In any case, participants' concerns demonstrate that the existence of a review itself, with the need to potentially repeat and relive traumatic experiences, can affect people's sense of security.

For people who have already spent years waiting for an asylum decision, temporary protection may not feel like a resolution. It can feel like another period of uncertainty.

Twenty years to settlement

The proposed 20-year route to settlement was one of the strongest concerns raised during the research. Ten of the 15 participants raised concerns about the length of the proposed route. As detailed, the government has since confirmed that refugees who entered irregularly and remain on "Core Protection" will face an even longer 30-year route to settlement.

Under the Government's proposals, people who hold refugee status and remain on core protection would face a 20-year qualifying period before becoming eligible for settlement.

Refugees who entered the UK irregularly will face a 30-year wait for settlement.

People may be able to reduce that period if they switch to the new 'Protection Work and Study route'. However, if they entered irregularly they will still face a minimum 20-year route to settlement.

As detailed, participants who already held refugee or humanitarian protection status were under the impression when interviewed that the proposed changes would not directly affect them as they would still qualify for settlement after 5 years. They were nonetheless still concerned by the uncertainty this change would cause. The government's 2 November 2026 announcement[6] in fact suggests that these participants will be subject to these extended settlement routes, with the changes applied retrospectively to refugees granted the old 5 year grants of leave to remain. These people may therefore overnight see their settlement route sextuple from 5 to 30 years.

Ernest described this as:

> **Permanent temporariness… yes, you've gained some sort of status, but because the goalposts are moving, that sort of status is temporary… I'm almost in my mid-30s, and I'm thinking, will I be able to buy a house and if I do buy a house, where would it be? Where is my future**
>
> Ernest I Cameroon I Refugee

His concern was not simply about an immigration document. It was about whether he could make long-term decisions. Housing, employment, family life and financial planning all become more difficult when people do not know whether their immigration status will remain secure.

For Amelie, who has not yet been granted refugee status, the 20-year route raises fundamental questions about how her daughters can be expected to integrate into British society when the restrictions and financial pressures associated with temporary immigration status may prevent them from participating in everyday childhood experiences, such as school trips.

> **So if I have to wait for 20 years for settlement, I can wait. But for my daughters, sometimes they have to travel with school. How long they will stay like that in this stretch, so it can be kind of isolating.**
>
> Amelie - Mauritius - Person seeking asylum

Amelie's concern demonstrates how temporary status for two decades can affect an entire family, especially children raised, and indeed often born, in the UK.

These are not simply missed opportunities for leisure, but part of the wider process through which children build relationships, develop a sense of belonging and participate in their communities. Rather than providing a clear path to settlement and integration, the 20-year route risks prolonging uncertainty and excluding families from the social life of the communities they call home.

> *If you could tell the Prime Minister one thing about the asylum system, what would you want them to understand?*
>
> **Prime Minister, the new policies put an end to the 1951 agreement… If we examine the new law, point by point, we see that it violates numerous articles of the 1951 convention**
>
> José – Colombia – Humanitarian Protection

2. Repeated “protection reviews” caused serious anxiety

Repeated 30-month reviews

Requiring newly recognised refugees to ‘reprove’ their need for protection every 30 months was identified as a significant barrier to rebuilding your life. Five participants specifically raised concerns about the review process. The 20-year route towards settlement will involve approximately eight reiterations of this process, with 12 reiterations for those on the 30-year route.

Participants were concerned by the type of documents the Home Office might require them to produce for each round of ‘reproving’. Documenting evidence of trauma and violence is a difficult process for those fleeing their homes, but having to repeat this every 30 months brings up new concerns, especially when considering the Home Office’s ‘shifting’ expectations.

Karim described the practical difficulty of producing evidence to demonstrate continuing risk:

> **Everything the Home Office needed, they needed in paper. If they need you to prove that you are still danger, they're going to say ‘bring proof’… Some people cannot prove it, because they don’t have any contact with their families**
>
> Karim – Egypt – Refugee

For some people, the evidence used to establish a protection claim is difficult to obtain in the first place. People may have fled without documents. They may have lost contact with family members. They may be unable to safely contact people in their country of origin.

Participants also questioned how repeated assessments would operate in practice. The concern becomes particularly significant when the original asylum claim involved disclosing trauma.

Amelie described the difficulty of repeatedly discussing her experience of domestic violence:

> **When we are in domestic violence, it's very hard to go back through these things detail by detail. When I'm not talking about it, I forget everything … sometimes I cry, sometimes it's very, very hard to go back through this. Especially for my girls as well.**
>
> Amelie – Mauritius – Person seeking asylum

A protection system should not require people to repeatedly relive traumatic experiences, especially if their account has already been accepted.

Adnan is a refugee who learned English by volunteering in his local community. This experience allowed him to build a deeper connection to UK society. For him, the proposed 30-month renewals were particularly worrying

> **How can I work in the country? How can I study to learn the language? I would have to worry every 30 months. They could decide, okay, you are not our asylum seeker, you are not our refugee. It's something that affects your mental health.**
>
> Adnan – Sudan – Refugee

His comments suggest that refugee status under the new proposals will be a repetitive limbo where refugees are unable to participate in the society around them and instead must repeatedly relive trauma and abuse.

The quality of decision-making matters

Participants also raised concerns about the quality of Home Office decision-making within the asylum system. These concerns are supported by the high rate of successful asylum appeals: around 64% of refused asylum claims are overturned by a judge or the appeal is withdrawn by the Home Office.[7]

Two participants specifically discussed problems with using interpreters at asylum interviews.

Adnan described an experience relayed to him by a friend:

> **In Arabic, there are so many dialects. The interpreter spoke a different dialect. He answered wrong, and they get rejected because they misunderstood.**
>
> Adnan – Sudan – Refugee

These concerns are important in the context of repeated protection reviews. The more frequently people are required to interact with the asylum system, the more important accurate interviewing, interpretation and decision-making become. This is especially so if the Home Office is repeatedly re-interviewing people, and asking them to recount events that occurred years or even decades earlier.

UNHCR's audit of asylum interviews in the UK identified concerns about interpretation. Of 30 interviews observed, 15 involved interpreters having unsolicited exchanges with claimants, including summarising or interpreting responses.[8] This exposes asylum claimants to huge risks about their accounts being mischaracterised, misinterpreted or outright misrepresented

Participants questioned how people could have confidence in a system that they believed did not always recognise or correct its own errors. José described an experience in which a correction to an asylum interview was not made before a refusal was issued.

> **An asylum seeker was trying to clarify some issues that came up during her substantive hearing and she came to me… a correction was requested. But it was never made. The ruling was issued. The denial was issued without the correction, and this is a violation of due process.**
>
> José – Colombia – Humanitarian Protection

For Adnan and José, the new bill posits a deeper risk of worsening the on-going cracks that exist in the asylum decision-making system. The proposal to review protection repeatedly therefore cannot be considered separately from the poor quality of underlying Home Office decision-making system.

Before asking people to repeatedly prove that they need protection, the Government must ensure that the system making those decisions is accurate, fair and capable of correcting its own mistakes. Until this is done, there should be serious concerns about adding many more repeat applications into an already deeply flawed system.

> *If you could tell the Prime Minister one thing about the asylum system, what would you want them to understand?*
>
> **We already come in dying. We've been through so much in the past. I just want to live like a normal person, to have normal things, to have peace.**
>
> Karim – Egypt – Refugee

3. Repayment of asylum support raises questions about fairness

Paying back asylum support

The Bill creates powers allowing the Government to require certain people who have received asylum support to make payments towards its cost after they are granted refugee status. This has been labelled by many as a "refugee tax". On 2 November 2026, the government confirmed that anyone with an asylum support debt that they are required to pay will in fact be ineligible for settlement unless they have repaid this in full or are complying with an agreed repayment plan. [9]

Effectively the government prevents people seeking asylum from working, meaning they must rely on asylum support. They, and will now both make it harder for these same people to establish themselves, by extending settlement routes from 5 to 20 years, whilst simultaneously reducing their income through recouping asylum support payments received years prior.

For the first time, refugees will be forced to repay asylum support they received when prohibited from working and supporting themselves.

The Bill does not itself establish a fixed £10,000 charge. Instead, it gives the Secretary of State power to require payments and provides that regulations will set out matters including how payments are calculated, the circumstances in which payments may be required and how they will be collected.

The state of asylum accommodation

The substandard nature of asylum accommodation has been well documented over an extended period.[10] Despite claims to the contrary by certain politicians, those living in hotels and dispersal accommodation often live in squalid, unhygienic accommodation that does not account for their individual characteristics.

For five participants, the concern was not simply the potential amount of money involved in proposed repayments. It was whether people should be required to pay for a system they had no choice but to rely on.

Leila is an engineer from Iran and a mother of two. She previously lived in asylum accommodation before receiving refugee status. She questioned whether it was fair to make her pay for the support she received:

> **When I was applying for asylum and I was living in the accommodation system, everything was below minimum. Imagine, coming into this kind of debt when you are trying to seek protection. And a debt of that level is unfair more so when considering the level of care and accommodation.**
>
> Leila – Iran – Refugee

José similarly questioned the prospect of combining prolonged temporary status with a financial liability.

> **You face a situation where, when a claim finally comes up for review, you are already dealing with the weight of 10,000 pounds in debt, 20 years of waiting.**
>
> José – Colombia – Humanitarian Protection

Leila and José both felt charging people waiting for asylum decisions for relying on asylum accommodation that is often dilapidated and inadequate was unfair.

Destitution after leaving asylum accommodation

Participants also described the risk of homelessness following the transition out of asylum accommodation upon being granted status. The transition from Home Office support to independent living, otherwise known as the the 'move on period'[11],exposes newly recognised refugees to severe risks of homelessness and destitution.

Currently, people are given just 42 days to leave asylum accommodation after being granted refugee status and permission to work. Having spent months or years waiting for a decision on their claim, they are effectively given just 6 weeks to open a bank account, find work, save a deposit and find somewhere to live. Inevitably, this is simply not possible for the vast majority of newly recognised refugees, meaning when their asylum accommodation is terminated at the end of the 42-day window, they face a very real risk of destitution.

Karim said:

> **When you get your visa, after one month, you have to leave. I know some of my friends who take their visas (refugee permission) and they have to sleep on the streets for a month. They don't have anywhere to go.**
>
> Karim – Egypt – Refugee

Nura made the connection between the right to work, housing and independence:

> **They have to allow the asylum seekers to work. If they get money, obviously they will find places to sleep, and if it's on rent, they will pay. But if they are not allowed and there's no accommodation, where will they live? On the street or on the roads?**
>
> Nura – Pakistan – Refugee

The Government's approach to repayment must therefore be considered alongside the wider transition from asylum support to independent living. A new financial liability could make that transition harder for people who are already struggling to secure housing and employment and may have taken on debt whilst seeking to initially establish themselves and avoid destitution.

> *If you could tell the Prime Minister one thing about the asylum system, what would you want them to understand?*
>
> **For me personally, I am not here to get the benefit of the government, or the police, or anyone else.**
>
> Amelie – Mauritius – Asylum Seeker

4.The right to work is central to independence and belonging

Work, independence and belonging

Over 50% of participants viewed work as crucial to a sense of belonging and being seen as part of regular society. As outlined above, whilst awaiting a decision on their asylum claim, people are generally barred from working. It is only after being granted refugee status that people are afforded the right to work, but this often comes after years in limbo.

All 15 participants supported giving people seeking asylum the right to work while their claims are being processed. They linked work with being able to support themselves and their families, participate in society and feel that they belong. Their accounts challenge the common misconception that people seeking asylum want to rely on state support: participants described wanting the opportunity to earn a living and build a life in the UK.

For José and Sana, the ability to work and pay taxes was part of living a "normal" life and providing stability for their families. José described what many families are seeking:

> **They simply want to legalise their status, pay taxes and provide stability for their families. Speaking honestly, there are many families who seek asylum because it was their last resort in life.**
>
> José – Colombia – Humanitarian Protection

Sana, who is seeking asylum, made the same point directly:

> **I just want to work and pay tax and live a normal life. Doesn't the UK want that?**
>
> Sana – India – Person seeking asylum

Work gives people the means to live independently rather than rely on accommodation and financial support. Ernest, who was able to work as a university professor while his asylum claim was being processed, contrasted his experience with that of most people seeking asylum

> **I was fortunate enough to have the right to work through my asylum process… my experiences show that when people are allowed to support themselves, they do. But for the majority, relying on asylum support, it was an enforced dependency.**
>
> Ernest – Cameroon – Refugee

Amelie, who is seeking asylum and has two daughters, also explained that work would allow her family to secure their own home and live independently:

> **I can work; my daughter can go to school and do some work. So we can pay for our own house, we can live on our own. For me personally, I don't need the benefit of the government. We just want to live freely.**
>
> Amelie – Mauritius – Person seeking asylum

Leila, a trained engineer from Iran, described the frustration of being unable to use her professional experience while waiting for a decision. Her account points to the loss for both the individual and the wider community when people's skills and potential are overlooked:

> **I came in as an engineer. I was in a position to bring significant benefits. Lots of young people coming in here are similar to that. They have potential but if they keep being treated like this, it will go nowhere."**
>
> Leila – Iran – Refugee

These accounts show that the right to work is not only about income. It gives people greater control over their lives, allows them to support their families and creates opportunities to participate in their communities. They also highlight the contradiction in preventing people from working, requiring them to rely on asylum support and now proposing that they repay the cost of that support after receiving protection status.

Barriers to work continue after refugee status is granted

The effects of being unable to work do not necessarily end when a person receives refugee status. Time spent in enforced inactivity and limbo whilst waiting for an asylum decision can interrupt education and career plans, prevent people from developing their skills and leave them having to rebuild their working lives from the beginning.

However, even after receiving the right to work, people exiting the asylum system still encounter problems. Once being granted refugee status, participants explained the stigma associated with being a refugee that can further affect employment opportunities.

Karim arrived in the UK as a child and was granted refugee status in 2025. He described how some people spend years studying or finding a way into work after receiving their status, while struggling to meet their living costs:

> **Some people work at the bar to pay the bills, and for some people, it takes a while. When they get the visa, they start to study for 2, 3 years, and then they work after. Some people take longer, and then they start work. They struggle.**
>
> Karim – Egypt – Refugee

Karim's account illustrates how time spent in limbo delays the next steps in a person's life. People may receive protection status after years in which they could not work or progress their careers and then need further time to gain qualifications or find employment. The result is not simply a gap in employment, but lost time and opportunities to develop skills and establish financial independence.

Vidura's experience suggests that gaining qualifications does not necessarily remove the barriers. Despite graduating from college, he felt that employers viewed refugee status as a disadvantage:

> **Most of the recruiters don't exactly really like the refugee status… maybe with settled status, I would be more stable for them.**
>
> Vidura – Sri Lanka – Refugee

Together, these accounts point to two connected barriers: people lose time and opportunities to develop their skills while their asylum claims are pending, and they may then face negative perceptions from employers once granted refugee status.

The proposed system of 30-month visas and repeated reviews could add another source of uncertainty. Vidura's experience suggests that some employers already associate refugee status with a lack of stability that those with settlement are less likely to encounter. Our own experiences working with people on the existing 10-year route to settlement, where visas are issued on the basis of family/private life, also reflect this reality, especially as people now spend over a year waiting for visa renewal applications to be processed.[12]

Forcing refugees to remain on short-term temporary status for an extra 15 or 25 years will likely exacerbate existing problems. It will lengthen the time people are subjected to stigmatising treatment and make it harder for them to plan or progress their careers. The Government should consider how this prolonged temporary status will affect refugees' access to secure employment, skills development and the opportunity to reach their full potential. In sum, they can't bemoan refugees' integration and contribution but then introduce laws and rules that make integration and contribution unachievable.

> *If you could tell the Prime Minister one thing about the asylum system, what would you want them to understand?*
>
> **Diversity should make the country powerful, more powerful. They should use this in their benefits. To benefit from us refugees, we can help. Currently this is not helping anybody.**
>
> Adnan – Sudan – Refugee

5.People want a clear route to a settled life

Family life

Prolonged temporary status does not just impact the person who holds the immigration status. It also impacts family members of the status holder. Several participants spoke about their children and the effect of uncertainty on family life.

Nura, a mother of four from Pakistan who was granted refugee status in 2022, had been depressed during the time that her asylum application was pending. Nura's legal status, a five-year visa rather than the new 2.5 year visas, provided a sense of security for not only her, but also her children and their future.

> **I feel safe here now, but to be honest, I was in a very deep depression. … if I'm talking about my past, automatically the tears come out and I am shivering. …I feel safe here. I can see a future for my kids here.**
>
> Nura – Pakistan – Refugee

Nura, like the other participants in the study, viewed the prospect of attaining settlement as vital to fully participating in British society. Settlement is a pathway for her children to belong and to have a future for themselves.

For families, settlement provides more than an immigration benefit, it can provide the confidence to plan for the future. Parents can make decisions about housing, education, employment and family life knowing that their ability to remain in the UK is not subject to uncertainty. Adnan highlighted specifically how the uncertainty surrounding repeat visa renewal applications will impact parents:

> **They can't focus on even raising the kids well because they have something to worry about.**
>
> Adnan – Sudan – Refugee

> *f you could tell the Prime Minister one thing about the asylum system, what would you want them to understand?*
>
> **Consider what a fair asylum system looks like. it's a visible finish line.**
>
> Ernest – Cameroon – Refugee

Conclusion

The people who participated in this research have experienced the UK asylum system from different positions. Their circumstances differ, but their concerns about the proposed reforms repeatedly converged.

Refugees do not want to remain in limbo. They just want to get on with their lives.

They want to work, support themselves and their families, feel part of their communities and build secure futures. But the proposed reforms in the Immigration and Asylum Bill and Earned Settlement Model will make that harder.

The Government says its reforms will encourage contribution. The opposite is true. The reforms impose more roadblocks and obstacles to refugees establishing themselves and reaching their potential. The Government cannot make people live with one hand tied behind their back and then complain that they do not contribute enough.

Our research shows that people with refugee status and going through the asylum process are already motivated to contribute. The barrier is not willingness, it is opportunity. The Government's proposed reforms will make things worse.

People cannot establish economic independence while the immigration system prevents them from working. They cannot build long-term security while their immigration status remains temporary for decades on end. They cannot plan confidently for their families while their need for protection and right to belong is constantly reassessed and questioned.

Ultimately, these plans will make life far worse for people living the asylum system. They will hinder peoples' ability to establish themselves and reach their potential, harming their short-term prospects but also their children's longer-term prospects. Nobody benefits from this.

But they also make life far more difficult for the government itself, by creating far more additional work processing repeat protection applications and overcomplicating the requirements for settlement. At a time when the Home Office is already hamstrung by processing delays, the last thing they should be doing is creating unnecessary additional work for themselves.

Recommendations

The Government should focus on making the immigration and asylum system fairer, more efficient and sustainable, rather than introducing additional layers of administration and prolonging insecurity.

The steps the Government should take are:

- **giving people seeking asylum the right to work while their claims are processed;**
- **retaining a five-year route to settlement for refugees and scrapping plans to extend this to 20 or even 30 years; and**
- **improving the quality and capacity of Home Office decision-making so that decisions are made accurately and promptly, thereby reducing unnecessary and expensive appeals and periods of limbo for those stuck in the system.**

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