

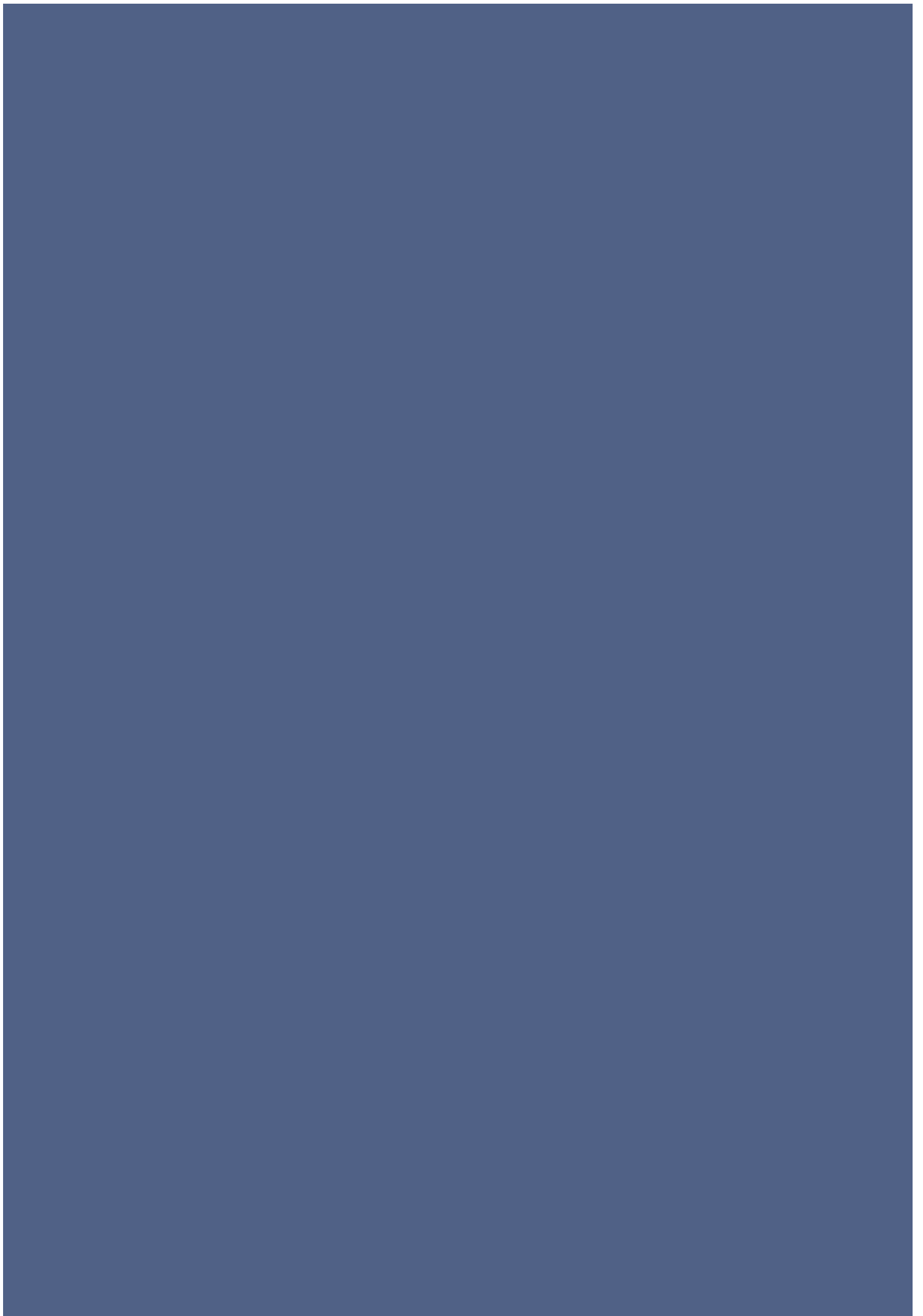
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# Safe and Secure Routes: Refugee Visa- to-Travel Proposal





# **Safe and Secure Routes: Refugee Visa-to-Travel Proposal**

## Executive Summary

In 2024, at least 78 people died trying to cross the English Channel, making it the deadliest year on record. This is more than the total number of deaths between 2019 and 2023. A third of these deaths were of children, including a four-month-old baby from Iraq who died on October 17, 2024.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) notes that at least 225 people have lost their lives attempting to cross since 2018.

These are not just numbers. In every moment of policy making, it is imperative that we remember these lives as the individual, cherished people they were. For every death, or person missing, there is a family profoundly affected by their loss.

It is in honour of these lives, and with the spirit of stopping future tragedies, that this paper is written.

We can all agree on one thing – the deaths at our border must stop. As must the continued exploitation of desperate people with no alternative but to risk their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, in dangerous crossings.

Research from the UNHCR, shows that “the majority of men, women and children who cross the Channel in small boats are likely to be recognised as needing protection as a result of an asylum claim and allowed to remain in the UK.” We must act then to honour our responsibilities towards people wanting to use their humanitarian right to claim asylum here.

Over the last decade different policies have been introduced under the banner of reducing these crossings. These so-called deterrents include the Illegal Migration Act, the Safety of Rwanda Act, and the proposed Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill – which includes increased policing of the border, and criminalisation of refugees.

None of these policies have worked.

On the ground in Northern France, Care4Calais and other NGOs have witnessed first-hand the human fall-out of such increased policing. Violence and harassment have led to panic and increased risk-taking by those wishing to claim asylum in the UK. This in turn, has led to an increase in deaths, including those of children.

One initiative stands alone in its success at removing numbers from those risking their lives – and that is the Ukrainian Visa Scheme. Due to the speedy online implementation of this safe route, there has been no single reported incident of a Ukrainian refugee crossing the Channel in a small boat, or a Ukrainian refugee drowning.

It is the Ukrainian Scheme, and the positive template it can provide, which is a building block in this paper’s proposal for a **Safe Routes Visa-to-travel**.

The present reality is that, aside from nationality specific, highly restricted schemes, there are NO safe and ‘legal’ routes for people to use.

It is disappointing therefore, that the present UK Government has made no moves to seriously consider such safe routes.

### **FOI re: Government research into safe routes since coming to power**

‘Thank you for your email of Jan 2025, in which you ask whether the Home Office has commissioned any reports or analysis on safe routes to claim asylum in the last year. Your request has been handled as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

I am able to disclose the following information:

**The Home Office has not commissioned any reports or analysis on safe routes to claim asylum in the last year.’**

### **Therefore, this paper’s key proposals are:**

- Analysis, trial and implementation of a Safe Routes Visa-to-Travel Scheme, to allow refugees to enter the UK safely and begin their asylum claim.
- Greater investment in the Home Office – to ensure staff in the department have the time, space and resources to properly determine visa-to-travel requests; free from political pressure and interference.
- Immigration detention centre reform, so refugees are helped rather than punished; and to provide a working environment wherein staff can produce better outcomes and a supportive environment for refugees.

**New Risks**

UK-funded security measures, including the constant cycle of aggressive police evictions of the informal camps in Calais and Dunkirk, do nothing to deter people from wanting to claim asylum in the UK. They only force people to take more risks to do so.

The introduction of increased policing and militarisation of the borders in France has led to increased risks, including people having to leave from new embarkation points further down the coastline leading to longer journeys, and on increasingly overcrowded vessels.

**Table 2: Average number of people per boat, year ending June 2019 to year ending June 2024**

Data from the Ministry of Defence

Year ending					
June 2019	June 2020	June 2021	June 2022	June 2023	June 2024
<b>Average number of people per boat</b>					
10	13	16	32	44	51

The smuggling gangs, which the Government claims are the target of their schemes, simply would not exist if safe routes were introduced. Safe routes could destroy the smugglers’ business model overnight, but only if the Government moves with boldness and addresses the issue head on without distraction from right-wing influences.

**Safe and ‘legal’ routes – do they exist?**

Under international law, claiming asylum is not illegal. Anyone has the right to apply for asylum in a country that has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, and can stay in that country until their claim has been assessed.

Some politicians and elements of the media repeatedly urge those people crossing by small boats to use safe routes instead. This suggests that such safe alternatives exist. But for most, they don’t. Existing schemes are extremely narrow in their scope or beset by unworkable processes.

For example, the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme, to provide passage for Afghan military personnel who fought alongside allied forces, requires a direct contract to be produced. Sworn statements from UK and US military to the legitimacy of the claim do NOT suffice – leaving thousands of men and their families in hiding, and their lives in immediate danger.

**Refugee Family Reunion** is one safe route for people seeking asylum to use. It is a safe way for someone who has already been granted refugee status in the UK to be joined by their family. Since 2018, 29,000 people have

safely come to the UK under this scheme, 90% being women and children.

But the scheme has a rigid definition of family, and the UK is the only country in Europe (other than Switzerland) that does not allow unaccompanied refugee children to bring their parents to the UK under family reunion rules.

However, ‘restrictive and inflexible application rules and definitions of “family members” are not the only barriers to applying for family reunion. The UK also imposes stringent bureaucratic and evidentiary requirements, which many people cannot meet despite clearly satisfying the Government’s own defined family reunion rules.’ [www.ramfel.org.uk](http://www.ramfel.org.uk)

Another scheme is **Refugee Resettlement**, whereby the UNHCR identifies refugees in need of resettlement and submit these candidates to the UK Government, which decides which cases to accept. If a case is accepted, the people are safely transferred to the UK, where they are given support from local councils and charities.

For most people wanting to claim asylum, **this process is not available**, as the numbers resettled globally are minimal. In fact less than 1% of refugees are resettled.

There are also the current **schemes made available to people from Hong Kong and Ukraine** which involve issuing visas. The sponsorship scheme allows people living in the UK to sponsor a named Ukrainian national or family to come to live in the UK with them, providing they have suitable accommodation to offer.

**Why aren’t other people deserving of similar fair treatment?**

Although thousands of refugees miss out on specific schemes to bring them to the UK due to eligibility criteria, this does not mean they are ineligible for protection under the Refugee Convention.

The previous Government launched specific and time-limited schemes in reaction to world events, for specific nationalities, such as Afghans, Ukrainians and Hong Kong residents, and we welcome these schemes. **But there are many other countries where war and repressive regimes are causing large numbers of people to flee. Why are there no similar visas for these people?**

We note and welcome the changes made by the Labour Government (such as the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) for Afghan families) and invite the Government to expand the schemes – to continue to address the shortcomings of existing routes so they will function for purpose. But these limited schemes are of no help to the majority, and this must also be addressed.

## Safe and Secure Routes: Refugee Visa-to-Travel Proposal

**Important lessons from the sheer amount of applications for the above schemes, (even if ultimately unsuccessful) is that they demonstrate the desire of people to arrive under safe and secure conditions – Where official options are available, they are utilised.**

If there was a safe route by which people could enter the UK and claim asylum, it is difficult to see why tens of thousands of people would make the dangerous journey in small boats. **But at present, there is no system in place that allows a person seeking asylum – other than the nationality-specific schemes that have already been mentioned – to apply for a visa to enter the UK to subsequently make an asylum claim on arrival.**

There is evidence, via the Ukrainian scheme, that safe passage works: no Ukrainians have crossed on small boats or drowned in the Channel, and no Ukrainians have paid people smugglers because **when safe and secure routes exist, people use them.**

### Deterrence and Responsibilities

**An important distinction should be made between deterring people from making dangerous journeys and deterring people from claiming asylum in the UK.**

We share the Government's aim to stop life-threatening journeys, but this must not translate as a deterrence to asylum being made - which is an international human right.

In 2023, the UK received around **67,337 asylum applications**, accounting for **approximately 8% of all asylum applications in Europe**. By comparison, European Union countries collectively processed hundreds of thousands of applications. Germany, France, Spain, and Italy handled about 70% of Europe's total asylum claims, with Germany alone receiving over **127,000** applications.  
[House of Commons Library](#)

Germany remains the top destination, receiving about 28% of asylum applications, France accounts for around 15%, Spain receives about 14%, and Italy takes in approximately 12%.  
[European Commission](#)

It is a common misconception that 'all' refugees want to come to the UK; in fact, most do stay in other countries.

The most common reasons for travelling onwards to the UK are family and community ties; and language. People with those ties are already coming to the UK. People do not choose to flee their dangerous home countries or go to a different country, because of UK Government policy. The fact is that most refugees who come to Europe do not try to come to the UK – they claim asylum elsewhere and would continue to do so.

### Safe and Secure

If people were applying for visas to travel to the UK, the Government would have **visibility in respect of who is arriving** and when.

The positives of this – planning, and increased speed of processing applications.

For those who are ultimately **unsuccessful** in their application for the visa-to-travel, there would of course be the possibility that they would still consider the dangerous journey. However, it should be remembered that 98% of those who cross on small boats claim asylum on arrival – the incentive to cross is the hope of a safe life in freedom. If the visa is denied that possibility is removed. It is one thing to risk your life for the hope of a safe future, quite another to risk it for a life of permanent precarity.

In 2023, around 90% of people who crossed the English Channel to the UK in small boats claimed asylum upon arrival. According to UK Government statistics, a significant majority of those arriving in this manner applied for asylum shortly after landing, reflecting the high proportion of people who make such dangerous crossings as a last resort to seek refuge.

The UK's Home Office reported that these people primarily originated from countries facing significant conflict or persecution, such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Sudan.

It follows that 90% of those crossing on small boats would transition over to the new safe and legal route. By removing 90% of the people smugglers' business, their operation would be transformed from a multi-million-pound enterprise to a small and insignificant activity. Far more importantly, lives would be saved.

### Practical matters

In December 2021, a group of MPs tabled an amendment to the nationality and borders bill that sought to include the provision of humanitarian visas for refugees based in France wanting to enter the UK.

One of the major barriers to this proposal, and others like it in the past, is the extreme **resistance on the part of France to anything that might cause a build-up of refugees** in or around Calais, and the resulting questions about their living conditions.

The experience with Ukrainian refugees once more suggests a solution. Very quickly after the introduction of the Ukrainian visas, the system switched to an online system, via which, visas could be applied for from anywhere in Europe. The UK has an existing network of visa centres across Europe which can be visited if people have difficulties, for example with documentation. This is why there has not been a build-up of Ukrainian refugees in Calais.

**The more concerning and the real practical issue would be the potential for the visas to be declined as a means to prevent people from getting to the UK** to make an asylum application in the first place. In this case, we would quickly return to the position of many people in Calais crossing over in small boats.

**The visa system will only work if there is a real will from the Government for it to do so.** The incentive would be the fact that there would be **political capital** to be gained from halting small boat crossings where none before had, decrease pressure on HM Coastguard and RNLI, but primarily the moral incentive must be **saving lives and our international obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention.**

**The will of the Government is crucial for the success of safe routes.** Without a strong commitment from Government, these suggested frameworks risk being inadequate, leaving refugees vulnerable to exploitation and danger once more. **A proactive Government stance not only legitimises safe routes but also promotes a culture of acceptance and responsibility within society and the decision-making workforce.**

Financial investment in infrastructure, rather than misplaced expensive ‘deterrents,’ is essential — such as transit facilities, information centres, and humanitarian aid services. Additionally, open collaboration with local NGOs and international organisations would amplify the effectiveness and create a comprehensive network of support.

A Government that actively champions safe routes can help shape a narrative that emphasises compassion, human rights, and the benefits of diversity. This can mitigate xenophobia and hostility, fostering a more welcoming environment for refugees. In contrast, a lack of Government commitment can lead to fear-mongering and resistance to refugee assistance, further complicating community development and safety. **Thus, the Government’s role is not just operational; it is fundamentally about shaping the societal context in which refugees seek refuge.**

A related issue that should be addressed is the current excessive and unnecessary costs of the UK asylum system, which have been estimated at £5 million a day for keeping people in hotels[33]. We welcome the stated commitment to speed up the processing of outstanding claims, and secondly, speed up the processing of new claims. The vast majority of people claiming asylum have legitimate claims which are granted. With status, people can work, support themselves and pay taxes, but most importantly rebuild their lives in safety.

**The fact that under this proposal the HO would hold information on people arriving, through their visa applications, means that the asylum process should**

**be even more efficient. Planning with regards to entry numbers and subsequent accommodation would occur, and the whole asylum process therefore benefits.**

### **Investment in Home Office**

For the Home Office to effectively process asylum claims, deal with backlogs and handle the Channel crossings crisis, it needs more resources, not less. Building on the commitments by the new Government to address the backlogs is key. We welcome the ongoing recruitment in asylum casework processing, and the diverting of resources and staff – employed by the previous Government to enact the failed and discredited Rwanda scheme – towards addressing this, too.

Staff who deal with asylum applications want what is best for those who use the system, and it is a system they have valuable knowledge of, and experience in. This expertise should be utilised by Government, campaigners and policymakers when discussing the solutions needed to ensure safe routes for refugees. The integrity of the system at all levels and stages is crucial to ensuring the system is fair and humane.

### **How a Safe and Secure Routes: Refugee Visa-to-Travel system would work**

As is currently the case for asylum screening processes, an online screening process would be required for the visas to be issued only to those who have a viable asylum claim. Online screening would mean there would be no need for processing centres in France and consequently no build-up of refugees in northern France.

A **Safe Routes Visa-to-Travel** would enable a qualifying person to travel safely to the UK so that they could claim asylum on arrival. They would then go through the normal UK asylum process, meaning that if it were ultimately determined that they were ineligible for asylum, they would not be allowed to stay in the UK.

A person would qualify if:

- They are in the EU;
- They are not an EU national or a national of Liechtenstein, Norway or Switzerland; and
- They have a viable claim for asylum in the UK.

There would be no fee for the application and legal aid would be available for any appeal.

The visa would be applied for online and, if successful, the applicant would be sent an electronic letter they could use to enter the UK. Necessary documents and bio data would be uploaded with the application or, if this is not possible, the applicant could visit a visa centre located across Europe. On arrival in the UK, they would be required to provide biometric data.

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People seeking safety would claim asylum under the normal asylum process – meaning that if they are not recognised as refugees through Refugee Status Determination, their asylum claim would be refused.

The scheme differs from the humanitarian visa schemes due to the main intention of the **Safe Routes Visa-to-Travel** Scheme being to get an applicant to the UK safely, and they would then enter the normal asylum process on arrival in the UK. A humanitarian visa scheme application process involves greater processing and screening.

### Immigration Detention

This paper refers to this issue because under the proposed **Refugee Visa-to-Travel** Scheme, people seeking asylum will enter the application process in the normal way. It is therefore possible that an applicant entering the UK may at some point enter an immigration detention centre.

This paper notes with disappointment the Government announcement to open two new centres, we are clear that this does not represent the fair and humane approach needed, nor is it a cost-effective option.

A person seeking asylum can be detained during different stages of their asylum application process. For those who are detained, the procedure they are engaged in is an administrative one, not a criminal one, as they have not committed any crimes.

In the UK, there are around 24,000 people detained every year, at several sites across the country, some of which are operated by private companies. The UK is the only country in Europe that places no time limit on how long someone can be held in immigration detention. There is also a significant cost to immigration detention, with data available showing that the cost per person per year was £34,514.

Several organisations have been critical of the immigration detention system, with arguments that people are treated as criminals and often detained for long periods, to the detriment of their physical and mental health.

This paper seeks to highlight the alternatives proposed to the current system. “It is cheaper, more humane and more effective to uphold the liberty of migrants while their cases are progressing and to provide them with casework support in the community”. This ensures that those entering this country to flee persecution and harm are not subjected to further distressing treatment in the UK asylum system.

While this paper focuses on the specific issue of safe routes for refugees, the issue of community-based support for all people seeking asylum has relevance. The support discussed above should include all those who enter the

asylum process, not just as an alternative for those who are held in detention centres. Investment in these services should be seen as an interim measure to solve the problems associated with the asylum process, such as the negative impact on people’s mental health, poor quality and high-cost accommodation and isolation from society.

The quickest and most effective way to solve these problems, as has been referenced earlier in this paper, is the fast and efficient processing of claims. The sooner a decision can be made on a claim, the less time and money is being spent on temporary housing and other costs, and the sooner refugees can begin to rebuild their lives.

### Conclusion

There is an urgent need for the creation of safe and secure routes for refugees.

The Safe Routes Visa-to-Travel Scheme seeks to overcome the main hurdle faced by those wanting to seek asylum, which is getting to the UK to start their claim. Refugees who have to make incredibly dangerous journeys from their home country should not be faced with further life-threatening obstacles to requesting protection in the UK.

With more people crossing than ever before, a Safe Routes Visa-to-Travel Scheme could:

- Save lives.
- Drastically reduce the number of people making the dangerous journey in small boats and lorries.
- Break the model of people smugglers.
- Provide control and visibility over who is entering from Europe.
- Address our humanitarian obligations.

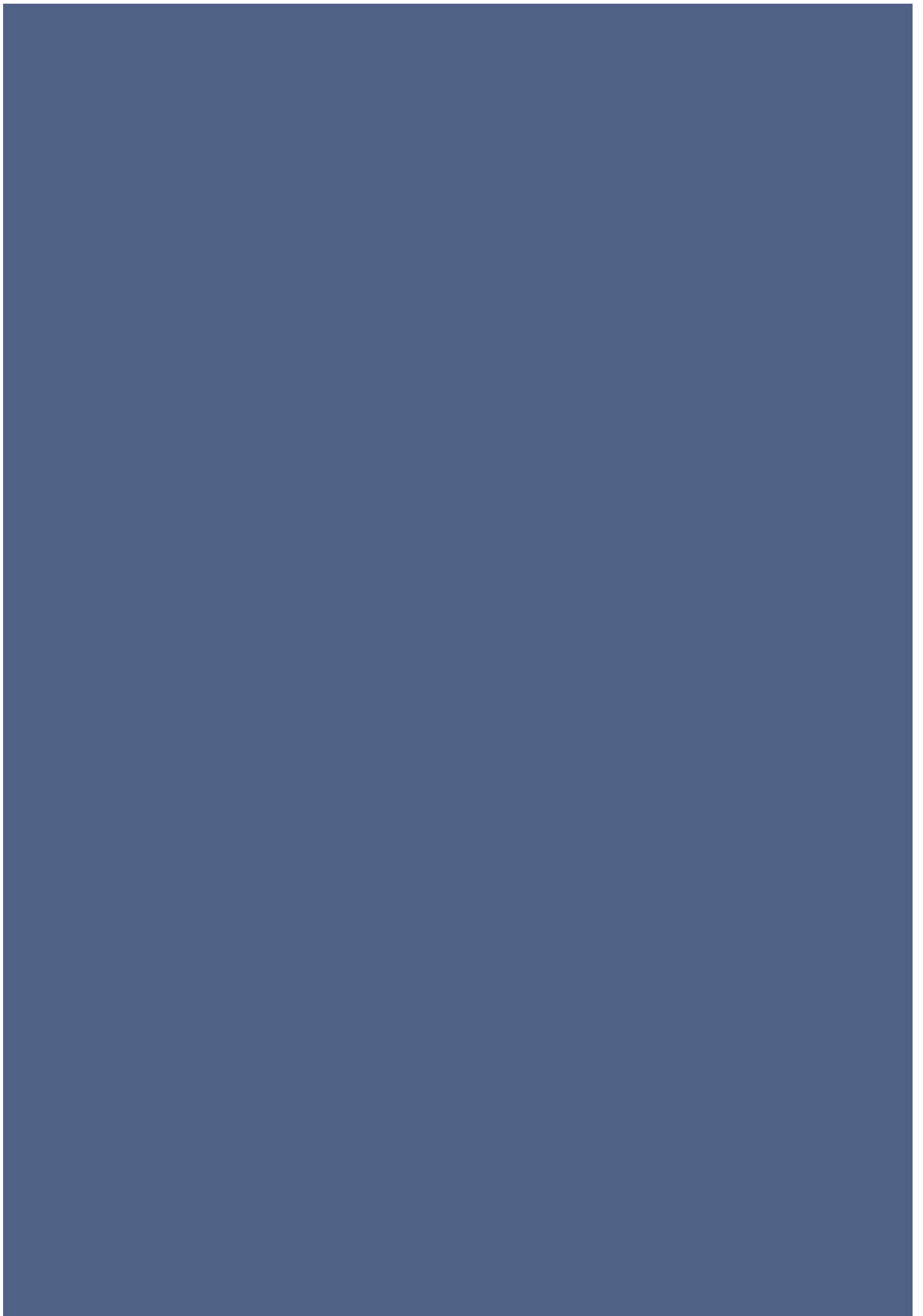
Any proposals, including Border Security Command measures, will fail unless accompanied by safe routes. The fastest way to erase the business model of life-destroying smugglers, is to remove the need for them.

And the only way to reduce the heartbreaking waste of precious lives in our Channel, is to provide safe and secure routes for those coming here seeking refuge.

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