DEMOS

## **SETTLING IN** AN ASSESSMENT OF OPERATION NEW HOPE'S SUPPORT FOR AFGHANS WHO WORKED WITH THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES

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Any errors and omissions remain our own.

Nick Tyrone

May 2022

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Operation New Hope is an MOD initiative that was launched in August of 2021, in the shadow of the worsening Taliban offensive and the Kabul air lift. It was designed to facilitate the ARAP (Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy) scheme, established in 2020, to aid Afghans who had worked with British armed forces in Afghanistan, usually as interpreters, to resettle in the United Kingdom.

It was set up with the best of intentions, on a wave of public support, and has certainly done some good for Afghan arrivals to the UK. Yet the system is still failing too many people.

This paper covers the discussions and conclusions reached at two events: an online roundtable held on March 22, 2022, and a one day workshop convened at the Demos Whitehall office on May 11, 2022. Both events had healthy attendance involving key individuals from throughout the sector. They were attended by those at the forefront of Operation New Hope, working directly with the MOD, such as the Royal British Legion, RFEA (Regular Forces Employment Agency) and Help for Heroes; also in attendance were more grassroots organisations, such as the Sulha Alliance, JobOppo and the Refugee Employment Network, people working on the ground with Afghan arrivals.

Together, we identified several solutions to the worst of challenges of the schemes, and managed from there to come to some policy recommendations. They include:

- Skills based training either inside of the hotels where the newly arrived Afghans live or extremely close by is needed in order to get people off to the best possible start toward finding meaningful employment in the UK.
- We have to create qualifications that will be recognisable to UK employers for those on the ARAP scheme.

• There should be local hubs, run by councils, in each city where there are significant numbers of Afghan arrivals. In these hubs, there should be easy-to-use reference cards, giving over a range of information that will be required by ARAP participants.

The MOD could help greatly by funding an equivalence qualification for those on the ARAP scheme. It could also facilitate two working groups: one on English language and how it pertains to Afghans and one to overcome the issues around security concerns. Job fairs could be extremely helpful in the pursuit of getting more Afghans into meaningful employment.

As the two events demonstrated, there are both huge challenges around making Operation New Hope work, as well huge potential to improve it. More work should be done to understand the issues better, as well as working on what has been learned so far.

# BACKGROUND

On December 29th, 2020, the Defence Secretary and Home Secretary jointly announced the start of ARAP, the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy. The scheme promised more help for Afghans employed by the British armed forces while they were stationed in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2014. This group had become the target of Taliban violence. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said expanding the scheme was "the honourable thing to do".

Then, in August 2021 the new Taliban offensive started, violence spread across the country and those who had worked with the British became a renewed target. There was an urgent humanitarian need to evacuate these people, and growing domestic pressure in the UK to do so. To that end, the MOD launched Operation New Hope, partly to aid the newly necessary - and in danger of becoming overburdened - ARAP scheme.

Operation New Hope is an MOD initiative involving three charities - Royal British Legion who are doing the needs assessments amongst the ARAP community; Help for Heroes provides mental health support for those on the scheme; RFEA, The Forces Employment Charity, is looking at the employment side of things as in, how to actually get Afghans into work. This is what the practical structure of Operation New Hope looks like - MOD funds training, education, housing and vocational support via trusted partners.

However, the support doesn't seem to be trickling through to the Afghans on the ground in the way that is required. Too many people stay in the hotels for too long; many are stuck in jobs for which they are unsuited, or still looking for any work at all. With this in mind, Demos ran a roundtable event and then a one day workshop, bringing together as many stakeholders as possible, to try and solve these issues, in partnership with the Sulha Alliance, a small grassroots organisation dedicated to helping those in the ARAP scheme through the process, and Capita.

# **KEY LESSONS** THE ROUNDTABLE ON MARCH 22, 2022

On the morning of Tuesday, March 22, 2022 over 20 people met online to discuss issues surrounding Operation New Hope and how it was affecting those on the ARAP scheme. It included representatives from Royal British Legion, the RFEA, Help for Heroes, as well as grassroots organisations such as Sulha, JobOppo, and the Refugee Employment Network. We were also joined by two Afghans currently on the ARAP scheme.

The two main points we took from the from roundtable were:

- There is not enough guidance provided for applicants through the process and beyond.
- This has made the technical problems the Afghans have in accessing employment even sharper

Participants discussed the background to the current situation: Before ARAP, there was an ex-gratia scheme which was strict and narrow. When the Government announced the ARAP scheme at the end of 2020, the idea was that it was designed to be more generous - although the wording looked suspiciously as restrictive as the ex-gratia scheme. ARAP, after being launched in April 2021, has unfortunately been slow and restrictive thus far.

A lot of Afghans on the ARAP scheme are in fact dual nationals or at least have a British passport. Many of these British passport holders returned to Afghanistan in August 2021 to bring their families to the UK on evacuation flights with their one passport during what became known as Operation Pitting. Around 1,000 were ARAP principles, evacuated along with 5,000 family members. There was confusion about who is and is not eligible under the ARAP scheme.

Once in the UK, Afghan nationals and their families have faced different challenges. There are specific blockers preventing people from gaining better employment outcomes on the scheme. One is security concerns - whether the person on the ARAP scheme can be deemed safe to work in certain sectors due to worries around who has been made eligible for the scheme in the first place - which clearly needs to be addressed one way or another. This is a complex issue with no easy answers, yet is the key to solving many of the issues keeping Afghan arrivals from better employment outcomes.

Another issue is connecting the charities working with the MOD to the households which need the support. The MOD works directly with a handful of organisations - Royal British Legion, the RFEA (Regular Forces Employment Agency) and Help for Heroes. At present there is a disconnect between these organisations and the grassroots groups that work with Afghans on a day to day basis, in particular, those newly arrived from Afghanistan.

We heard from two former British army interpreters about their experience of the scheme, Burhan and Sharif. Their main points were:

- Most of those on the ARAP scheme are educated and have degrees, but the education systems are so different. This makes it difficult for UK employers to assess skill sets. Their sometimes very high level skills are not being recognised.
- There is not enough guidance given to support those on the scheme about how life in the UK actually works in practice. People feel lost in our

systems.

• Some of the problems simply shouldn't exist by the terms of the scheme itself. For instance, one of the interpreters had a visa that was due to expire, and didn't have indefinite leave to remain so wasn't able to start work. They were still waiting for the indefinite leave to remain card at the time of the event. These glitches in the system affect people extremely negatively.

The groups working directly with the MOD on the ARAP scheme spoke about how it works and their experience of it.

## **ROYAL BRITISH LEGION MAIN POINTS:**

- Financial and data support comes from the MOD's "Defence Afghan Relocations and Resettlement Team". The RBL examine the dataset collected from 'op custom house' to assess whether an individual or household has what's considered a direct UK defence connection. The question here is, were the applicants directly engaged with a British unit fighting or training patrols alongside them, something which determines the level of initial support.
- Roughly 500 households were eligible under the scheme, as far as the RBL was aware. However, RBL has only received 121 households through this scheme so far. They are worried about this gap in uptake and are working on solutions to the problem - but some of this is systemic in nature.
- How RBL supports these households: email the head of household and tell them they'll be in touch about support. RBL Contacts Centre Team will speak with the family and undertake a basic needs assessment to see what their key needs are.
- All of this rests on getting a good flow of data about households from the MOD.
- RBL also provides grants/financial support for things like clothing for work.

### RFEA, THE FORCES EMPLOYMENT CHARITY, RELATED POINTS:

•

- RFEA supports families referred to them by the UK MOD. They provide welfare support, health and wellbeing, and employment support.
- There are three categories of support: career assessment progress, courses to sharpen

transferable skills, channelling these employers' support to provide Afghans with better job opportunities.

• RFEA provides lifelong support irrespective of ARAP individuals rank or length and service.

Some of the wider points covered at the roundtable:

- Afghan interpreters have become responsible for wider family members back in Afghanistan and this needs to be taken into account more widely. Instead of viewing the Afghans here on the scheme as single men as is often the case we need to imagine the host of dependents those on the ARAP scheme are usually supporting.
- There is unfortunately a "postcode lottery" of support: unevenness in the level of casework support provided to ARAP individuals. It depends on how experienced and committed caseworkers are in any given area.
- Some ARAP individuals have pre-existing ties with UK communities and this offers opportunities that should be exploited more.
- ARAP individuals often have 'letters of appreciation' from former employers. However, it's difficult to find them jobs if these references are not recent. Participants in the scheme wanted more support to educate employers on this.
- Jobcentres are focused on short-term solutions. Thus, many of the ARAP participants are put into jobs that are not sustainable in the long-term because they are not suited to those vocations, while they would be much better placed in a job that fits their skill set.
- The jobs they recommend are also not reflective of the qualifications and education ARAP individuals have. Sometimes that has led to unemployment - the worst possible outcome.
- Specific barriers to accessing university: ARAP individuals do have access to student finance and there will be some scholarships available. However, these scholarships are time limited; lack of access to the right information, particularly on how to achieve their desired careers; people may have started or completed a degree previously so they might not be able to access student finance for this reason.
- Government announced they would give 300 scholarships to Afghan students. It is not clear whether they have been used. Participants wanted more accountability on the Government to deliver these scholarships.

- There needs to be more guidance for ARAP individuals on how to access higher education. There's a lot of interest but not much knowledge on where to start.
- Bridging hotels present a lot of issues which aren't currently being addressed. There is very little for people to do in these hotels, so there should be resources used to help people develop their knowledge and skills while there.
- Relationships are critical in terms of engaging employers. You can't just stick a job on a notice board and hope it will work out.
- We need to work on busting myths and changing perceptions among employers. Employers might be tempted to get refugees (because of Brexit and labour shortages) to "stack shelves" when they are overqualified for this type of work.

The thoughts and reflections gained at the roundtable set us up for the one day workshop.

## **KEY LESSONS** THE ONE-DAY WORKSHOP, MAY 11TH

A group of around 20 people, many of them who were present at the roundtable on March 22nd, but with others joining us for the first time, met to discuss lessons from the March event and more importantly, to decide on some practical next steps. We had representatives this time from Gulab Sorkh and British Future, as well as a contribution from Johnny Mercer MP at the start of the day. The idea was to try and put together a game plan for how to solve the problems facing the ARAP scheme.

The day started with an open session in which the findings of the March roundtable were discussed. These were the main points raised:

- There are some groups of ARAP individuals in the UK with high social capital, meaning they have a high degree of employable skills, mixed with military experience which would be valuable in many UK contexts. Employability rates for refugees in the UK are low, although for those with high social capital this should be higher. However, there are still barriers - even if you're an interpreter and can speak English well, there can still be language barriers to employment in the UK as sometimes the written English skills can be lower than the ability to speak the language well conversationally.
- There are systemic barriers so we need systemic fixes to remove these barriers - these barriers include the need for employment references, DBS checks, things that can be difficult for newly arrived Afghans to pass.

- We don't want people to be channelled into only certain types of employment that makes it difficult to move into another type of employment. Some financial investment in the immediate is needed so people can "stand on their feet". There are also lessons from the past (e.g Hong Kong resettlement scheme).
- The language skills of interpreters can be used to help a broader group of people who have resettled. Many highly skilled and capable Afghans are being turned down for jobs because their experience doesn't translate to what a UK role would require e.g. masters degree. Work with employers so they can understand the value those under ARAP can provide - this will help to "soften the landing".

After this wide-ranging discussion, we formed three different groups to discuss the question: What are the major issues affecting the most effective possible rollout of ARAP/Operation New Hope in relation to access to employment and education?

## **GROUP 1**

- To be employment ready there are so many things that need to be in place for those on the ARAP scheme. Some of them have fluent English for example, but can't write in English.
- Think of the employers perspective do they have programmes to understand the value ARAP

individuals bring? What is their understanding about the ARAP community - they might not have formal qualifications (like many veterans don't) - but have a lot of bankable skills. We should liken the ARAP community to veterans to make employers understand that they still have valuable skills.

- Different skills in the ARAP community some in the community might not have good spoken English, while all of the interpreters will.
- ESOL assessment this pigeonholes people into a very low-level, just because someone can't write english well doesn't mean they are at a low-level. They may still be able to speak the language with great proficiency.
- Case management simply signposting to jobs is not enough, people need "hold-handing" and continuous case management in preparing for interviews and throughout employment.

## **GROUP 2**

- Qualifications and work experience of those individuals on the ARAP scheme are often not familiar to UK employers.
- More knowledge of local job seeking networks is needed among the ARAP community. Trust is key here.
- There are tensions between work first or language first (or even housing first). What is the foundational issue that will affect resettlement? It's language. Universal fluency as a goal in the next 5 years should be promoted.
- Create jobs for men and women. Use Afghans with better English to help those with lower-level skills.
- Scholarships currently only provide enough for an individual, not a family, which limits the ability to take them up.

## **GROUP 3**

- There are many obstacles: DBS and security checks to name two. Would it be possible for third-sector organisations to certify or provide certificates proving previous employment?
- Awareness raising is needed. Some ARAP individuals don't think to submit a letter of appreciation, but need to raise awareness of the importance of doing this.

- Recognition of qualifications is a major challenge.
- Housing: if there's no stability in people's lives then it is difficult to get them into education employment.
- We don't use women's capabilities to a good enough extent. Because of the way the ARAP scheme works, taking interpreters who because of the social climate in Afghanistan will all be men, we are losing sight of how much the Afghan women who come over with their husbands have to contribute to UK life. Many of them will have employable skills, but this is being missed.

The second question of the day for the groups to tackle was: how can the different groups with a stake in the ARAP scheme work together better?

GROUP 1	<ul> <li>There needs to be much more acknowledgement throughout the sector of the experience grassroots organisations bring.</li> <li>We need there to be collaboration even when there's</li> </ul>	The
	overlap of interests - not all organisations will have the capacity to deal with everything.	cove solu othe pose
	<ul> <li>Beyond all of that, we need an understanding of the power of the collective. What we can achieve together as a group is so powerful if we could agree on an agenda and way of working together effectively.</li> </ul>	GI
GROUP 2	<ul> <li>Smaller organisations are always having to "prove why they are in the room" which wastes a lot of time.</li> </ul>	
	<ul> <li>There might be small organisations who are used to helping migrants but aren't aware of the specific issue of interpreters.</li> </ul>	
	<ul> <li>More representation from Afghan groups themselves is key - important to have people with lived experience.</li> </ul>	
	• We need more capacity for smaller organisations, better understanding of how to leverage more funding.	
	<ul> <li>Partnership, combining resources would help Afghans, monthly meetings to share challenges</li> </ul>	GI
	<ul> <li>We are not recognising Afghan resettlement as a long-term process is a problem - short- termism is a huge issue for the sector.</li> </ul>	

GROUP 3	• We need to communicate better and use opportunities to share good practice.
	<ul> <li>We need more concrete proposals - job fairs as an opportunity to collaborate and have "sidebar" discussions.</li> </ul>

There was a third and final breakout session, which covered the question: How do we present the solutions to the current issues to the MOD - and other key audiences - in the most efficient manner possible?

• We need to communicate better what we want from the MOD. The
following are great examples of the things we need to ask for.
• Skills-based training in hotels could be a great way to get people into work - the longer people are in these facilities, the more they become complacent and start to lack motivation, and training in hotels could help with this.
<ul> <li>Basic checks from the Home Office could be used as a sort of stick to ensure "there are no excuses being made".</li> </ul>
• We need to connect people in the ARAP scheme with support as soon as possible.
<ul> <li>Education is also needed for the people delivering the support.</li> </ul>
• This is not necessarily a request to MOD but worth talking about: the idea of expanding the relationship Sulha has with Help for Heroes, of finding ways to take those who should be eligible for Hope support but are not being trickled down to the MOD.

GROUP 2	<ul> <li>How grassroots organisations can find people who should be eligible for the scheme who are not currently taking part. There is an ARAP community that we know of and want to make available, there needs to be better understanding of who is available under Operation New Hope.</li> <li>We could use the government's help to tap into employers who will take people on risk, as this bypasses a lot of the education issues (i.e. not having formal UK recognised qualifications).</li> </ul>
GROUP 3	<ul> <li>The wider sector should come to an agreement with the MOD about what are the areas where they can't actually do it themselves but can advocate for others to do important tasks.</li> <li>At some point we need to recognise risks, but also that not doing anything risks that it all goes wrong and damages MOD reputation.</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>The MOD could find a way of providing evidence of peoples status that can be shared; fund equivalent qualifications e.g. someone can pay for a certificate to show that their qualifications are worth the same as UK qualifications. The MOD could fund this; they could establish an English Language working group - aim of establishing universal fluency amongst the ARAP community under 5 years; help sponsor ARAP job fairs.</li> <li>The MOD could actually communicate opportunities in the broader sense regularly and easily to the wider sector.</li> </ul>

# LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Operation New Hope was set up with the best of intentions and has certainly done some good for Afghan arrivals. Yet the system is still failing too many people. There are those within the ARAP scheme who are unsure of status; others are stuck in the hotels, unable to find housing until they have a job; still others who cannot find a job until they get housing. Highly qualified people are being barred from employment by an inflexible understanding of their qualifications. They are trapped in a cycle which needs to be broken by those who work on this on an everyday basis, both at the top of the chain in the Ministry of Defence and on the ground.

We managed to discover several solutions to the worst of the problems in the two events we held, and from there to develop some policy conclusions.

Skills based training either inside of the hotels where the newly arrived Afghans live or extremely close by is needed in order to get people off to the best possible start toward finding meaningful employment in the UK. We are wasting the time spent when new arrivals from Afghanistan are in the hotels, when we could be much better preparing them for life and employment in the UK. This will have the added benefit of making sure everyone who can work is doing so - by providing the opportunities, we then remove excuses for failure all around.

We need more training for those delivering the services to Afghans. There remain large cultural gaps that go unfilled, creating even more difficulties in terms of delivering for those on the ARAP scheme. A good example is the issue around taking loans that needs to be considered when dealing with those on the ARAP scheme - unless there is training that fills in these cultural gaps, they will remain.

We have to create qualifications that will be recognisable to UK employers for those on the ARAP scheme. At present, we have people with high skills levels unable to prove this in order to get fulfilling work. This should become part of Operation New Hope itself.

There should be local hubs, run by councils, in each city where there are Afghan arrivals. In these hubs, there should be easy to use reference cards, giving over a range of information that will be required by ARAP participants.

The MOD could consider expanding the group they work with on ARAP to include smaller grassroots organisations. There is a gap between those funding the services for Operation New Hope and those on the ground working day to day with new arrivals. Added to this, senior armed forces personnel lobby the MOD on behalf of those on the ARAP scheme to help plug the gaps - perhaps get the MOD to share the list of employers willing to employ those off of the ARAP scheme with the wider community looking to get Afghans into employment (with the permission of the employers involved, of course)? Additionally, the MOD should fund an equivalence qualification for those on the ARAP scheme. There should also be an English language working group with limited MOD involvement as well as a working group on security issues surrounding those on the ARAP scheme, to try and resolve as many of the complex issues involved as possible.

There is a need for job fairs to put together willing employers and Afghans. We cannot simply stick jobs up on a notice board and hope ARAP scheme participants notice them. There needs to be a way to quickly and efficiently communicate opportunities on the ground with grassroots organisations working directly with Afghans.

There is a lack of clarity around how the MOD intersects with other departments, namely the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions, on Operation New Hope matters which should be clarified.

The welcome guide for new arrivals to the UK needs to be updated and everyone who arrives into the country should definitely receive the welcome guide, which isn't happening now. This seems like a small issue, but resolving it effectively could make a huge difference to Afghans coming to the UK for the first time.

As the two events demonstrated, there are both huge challenges around making Operation New Hope work, as well as potential solutions that can solve a great deal of the issues as they stand. More work should be done understanding the issues better as well as working on what has been learned so far.

## **APPENDIX 1** THE GROUP ATTENDING THE ONE DAY WORKSHOP ALIGNED AROUND THE FOLLOWING 20 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Skills based training either inside of the hotels where the newly arrived Afghans live or extremely close by is needed in order to get people off to the best possible start toward finding meaningful employment in the UK.
- 2. This will have the added benefit of making sure everyone who can work is doing so.
- **3.** We need more training for those delivering the services to Afghans.
- 4. We have to create qualifications that will be recognisable to UK employers for those on the ARAP scheme.
- 5. There should be local hubs, run by councils, in each relevant city.
- 6. In these hubs, there should be easy to use reference cards.
- **7.** The MOD could consider expanding the group they work with on ARAP to include smaller grassroots organisations.
- 8. Could senior armed forces personnel lobby the MOD on behalf of those on the ARAP scheme?
- 9. The MOD could share the list of employers willing to employ those off of the ARAP scheme with the wider community looking to get Afghans into employment (with the permission of the employers involved, of course).

- **10.** Identify gaps in the current arrangement to understand who does what and why.
- **11.** How do we better share the existing information between groups in the sector? This needs to be worked out.
- **12.** The MOD should fund an equivalence qualification for those on the ARAP scheme.
- **13.** There should be an English language working group with limited MOD involvement.
- **14.** We need job fairs to put together willing employers and Afghans.
- **15.** There needs to be a way to quickly and efficiently communicate opportunities on the ground with grassroots organisations working directly with Afghans.
- 16. There is a lack of clarity around how the MOD intersects with other departments, namely the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions, on Operation New Hope matters which should be clarified.
- **17.** The welcome guide for new arrivals to the UK needs to be updated.
- Everyone who arrives into the country should definitely receive the welcome guide, which isn't happening now.

- **19.** There needs to be a working group on security issues surrounding those on the ARAP scheme, to try and resolve as many of the complex issues involved as possible.
- **20.** There is an issue around taking loans that needs to be considered when dealing with those on the ARAP scheme.

If these recommendations are implemented, the outcomes for Afghans both already in the UK and arriving here in the years to come will be much better in terms of employment, education, housing and all round quality of life.

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# DEMOS

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