

Race, Equality and Human Rights Network

8th December 2025, Online

Meeting Notes



Restoring Order and Control: Statement on the UK Government's Asylum and Returns Policy

- **Date:** Monday, 8 December 2025
- **Venue:** Online via Zoom
- **Organiser:** BEMIS Scotland
- **Facilitator:** Charlotte Thomas (BEMIS)
- **Note Taker:** Dr. Justina Obaoye-Ajala (BEMIS)

Panellists

- **Harry Ingram** (Senior Policy Manager for Asylum Policy at the UK Home Office)
- **Jason Buultjens** (Deputy Director for Asylum Policy at the UK Home Office)
- **Dr. Sylvie Da Lomba** (Reader at The University of Strathclyde Law School)
- **Debbie McCall** (Deputy Director – Refugee, Resettlement and Asylum Division – Scottish Government)
- **Dr. Eman Hani** (Chief Executive Director at Central Scotland Regional Equality Council)
- **Andrew Sirel** (Legal Director and Partner at JustRight Scotland)
- **Mhairi Love** (Policy and Public Affairs Manager at Scottish Refugee Council)

Event Summary Report

This report presents a consolidated account of discussions held on the UK Government's proposed Asylum and Returns Policy, as examined through the lens of race equality, human rights, community cohesion, and international legal obligations. The event brought together representatives from the UK Government, the Scottish Government, civil society organisations, and advocacy groups, offering a broad range of perspectives on the intent, implications, and concerns surrounding the proposed reforms.

1. Opening and Context Setting

Welcome Remarks

Danny Boyle, Executive Director of BEMIS Scotland, formally opened the session. He introduced the Race Equality and Human Rights Network (REHRN) and emphasised its role in addressing systemic race equality and human rights issues across Scotland.

Danny underscored that the UK Government's proposed asylum and returns policy would have significant and far-reaching implications for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, particularly in relation to community cohesion, protection standards, and human rights compliance.

2. UK Government Perspective

Harry Ingram (Senior Policy Manager for Asylum Policy at the UK Home Office)

Jason Buultjens (Deputy Director for Asylum Policy at the UK Home Office)

Policy Intent and Development

Harry Ingram, speaking in his capacity as a senior UK civil servant, stressed the importance of the discussion while clarifying the limitations of his role, particularly in responding to politically framed questions.

He explained that the UK Government has published a Statement of Intent and of policy direction. As such, the proposals are still under development and subject to further design and implementation processes.

The policy direction reflects the UK Government's stated intention to:

- Reduce arrivals and increase removals and returns
- Make the asylum system fairer, faster, and more efficient
- Address longstanding backlogs within the asylum system
- Respond to evolving global displacement dynamics
- Restore integrity and public confidence in the system
- Maintain compliance with international obligations
- Improve sustainability and cost-effectiveness

A fundamental reform of the UK's refugee protection system is proposed, with a stated aim of reducing arrivals, increase removals and returns and shifting individuals towards safe and legal routes rather than irregular migration pathways.

Asylum, Protection, and Integration Framework

Access to Protection

Jason Buultjens then outlined the UK's protection framework, emphasising that the asylum system is intended to:

- Provide protection to individuals with genuine protection needs
- Prevent misuse of the system for economic migration purposes
- Distinguish asylum from illegal migration within a regulated visa and migration management system

The guiding principle remains, as described, that protection must and will remain accessible to those in need.

Recalibration of the System

It was stated that the UK Government believes that the UK asylum rules were created at a different time and now the system was, in some circumstances, being abused by those who are less vulnerable.

He stated that the proposed reforms aim to "reset" the system by:

- Maintaining protection while controlling costs
- Improving efficiency and compliance
- Enhancing enforcement mechanisms under the Immigration Acts, including expanded right-to-work checks and digital identity systems

Refugee Status, Rights, and Conditionality

Under the Refugee Convention, refugee status in the UK currently confers access to:

- Automatic family reunion
- Broader welfare and support benefits

It was emphasised that the intention of reform is not to diminish rights, but to recalibrate the system in comparison with other European countries.

However, key changes proposed include:

- Conditional support, particularly for individuals who have breached immigration rules or broken the law
- A contribution mechanism, whereby individuals receiving financial support from abroad, or who own expensive assets may be required to contribute towards the cost of their support.
- Increased prioritisation of returns and removals, especially for individuals whose asylum claims have been refused and whose countries of origin are deemed safe

Returns, Enforcement, and International Cooperation

The Home Office stated they intend to strengthen returns and removals by:

- Prioritising cases involving those who no longer qualify for protection
- Enhancing diplomatic engagement with countries of origin to secure cooperation on travel documentation and returns
- Applying visa measures where cooperation is lacking, with specific reference to countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Namibia

An independent body is proposed to:

- Accelerate decision-making
- Reduce delays
- Support voluntary return processes where claims are rejected

Modern Slavery and Human Rights Considerations

Reforms relating to interpretation of Articles 3 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights were discussed, particularly in the context of modern slavery and private and family life.

The UK Government position stressed the need for an orderly and effective system, including reforms to settlement processes. However, multiple participants expressed concern that such reforms risk undermining humane protections.

3. Q&A with Home Office Representatives

Key Issues Raised by Attendees During Questions and Discussion

Backlogs and System Capacity

Concerns were raised about:

- Persistent backlogs within the Home Office and appeals mechanism
- Whether the UK Government has the operational capacity to deliver the proposed reforms effectively
- It was noted that asylum decision-making must remain case-specific, recognising situations such as applicants from countries with acute human rights crises (e.g. North Korea).
- The reforms mention a new appeals mechanism and reviews of status every 30 months – but what are the plans to resource the home office, do they have capacity to do this?

The Proposed ‘Recalibration’ of the Asylum System

- Some attendees asked:

What data or evidence there was to support UK Government claims that the UK asylum system is being abused by those who are less vulnerable- there was not a response to this.

Use of Punishment in Cases of Criminal Offense

Participants Highlighted

- The lack of justification for punishment given criminal punishments are outlined in devolved Scots Law guidance.

Community Cohesion and Public Perception

Participants highlighted:

- The harmful impact of conflating asylum with illegal migration
- The negative effects of prolonged hotel accommodation on community cohesion
- The role of mainstream media, social media and politicians’ language in shaping hostile public narratives
- The UK’s obligations as a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention

Racism and Data

Questions were raised regarding:

- The availability of racially disaggregated data on racism and hate incidents
- Police data collection on racially motivated crime
- Recent incidents, including protests and cases such as the Cladhan Hotel, illustrating rising tensions in the UK around asylum and race.

4. Scottish Government Perspective

Debbie McCall (Deputy Director – Refugee, Resettlement and Asylum Division – Scottish Government)

Scottish Government Position

Debbie McCall articulated the Scottish Government’s perspective, emphasising that:

- Scotland has a long-standing tradition of welcoming refugees and migrants
- Migrants make significant economic, social, and cultural contributions
- The proposals risk creating fear, insecurity, and long-term uncertainty for migrant communities

- An effective asylum system should be fair and clear. She added that the proposed reforms could have serious implications for Scotland's healthcare system, housing services, social justice, and community integration.
- There are concerns about the erosion of permanent residence pathways and the impact on long-term integration
- Although asylum is a reserved matter, the policy has significant wider implications for devolved services and competencies.

The Scottish Government reiterated the UK's obligations under international law and called for meaningful collaboration between the UK and Scottish Governments in shaping policy.

5. Panel: Civil Society and Advocacy Perspectives

Legal Routes

Dr Sylvie Da Lomba, Mhairi Love, Andy Sirel and Dr Eman Hani raised critical concerns, including:

- Legal routes exist but remain insufficient and inaccessible – the UK asylum paradox: you must enter the UK to claim asylum legally, yet there are no safe and legal routes to enter.
- Speakers raised concerns about what the proposed new safe and legal routes will look like in practice and whether they will be in line with international law.
- Reducing arrivals risks reducing protection rather than improving system integrity.
- The move to suspend family reunion will have the opposite effect of improving outcomes for settlement – how can people integrate and settle in communities with no chance of being reunited with family?

Right to Work and 20 Year Route to Settlement

Speakers highlighted:

- The continued denial or restriction of the right to work exacerbates poverty, dependency, and marginalisation – many highlighted that in their work providing direct service provision to asylum seekers, they have never met anyone who does not want to work therefore why is the UK Government looking to weaponize the right to work?
- Temporary and prolonged statuses prevent people from building stable lives
- Long waiting periods (stated in the reforms as up to 20 years) have devastating personal and social impacts on individuals – agreement that making people wait this length of time is inhumane.

Language, Narrative, and Responsibility

Speakers highlighted the:

- Manipulation of terms such as “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” “deserving,” and “vulnerable”
- There was an agreed concern at the portrayal by the Home Office Representative of refugees as recipients of ‘golden tickets’.
- Responsibility of politicians and media to avoid stigmatising language
- Resemblance of the policy to the Windrush Scandal and Hostile Environment Policies of past UK governments.

Structural and Human Rights Concerns

Key overarching concerns included:

- The paradox of the UK asylum system: individuals must be present in the UK to claim asylum, yet lack lawful routes to enter for that purpose
- The risk that reforms reflect past “hostile environment” policies
- Evidence of institutional racism and its impact on wider migrant communities
- Potential incompatibility of proposed reforms with international refugee and human rights law, particularly Articles 3 and 8 of the ECHR

In conclusion, the discussion underscored a fundamental tension between migration control objectives and human rights protection obligations. While the UK Government asserts that reforms aim to create a fairer, faster, and more sustainable system, significant concerns remain regarding:

- Human rights compliance
- Community cohesion
- Racial equality
- Long-term integration outcomes

From the Scottish Government and civil society perspective, there is a strong call for policies that prioritise protection, dignity, and international legal obligations, and for Scotland to continue serving as an example of inclusive, rights-based migration governance.

6. Closing and Next Steps

Charlotte Thomas (BEMIS)

Charlotte thanked the speakers and participants for their valuable contributions. She noted that the discussions had been extremely insightful and acknowledged that we have only begun to explore the complexities of this topic and its implications for

those seeking asylum in Scotland and organisations who support. Charlotte emphasised that this session should serve as an introductory conversation, opening the door to broader and deeper engagement.

Looking ahead, Charlotte expressed the hope of inviting a UK Government minister to Scotland for a roundtable discussion. This would allow for a more detailed exploration of the issues raised, including wider community cohesion concerns, and help Scotland build constructive relationships with UK ministers around these issues.

Charlotte encouraged participants to share any unanswered questions by sending them directly to her. These will be included in the meeting notes and may inform future discussions with the UK Government.

The meeting was then brought to a close.

7. Points Sent by Members Post-Meeting for Use in Follow-Up Meetings

- The UK Government statement should make reference to the right of all migrants to protection under the law against Hate crime, regardless of status.
- So much of the messaging has been negative and designed to assuage the “concerns” of the far right. Underlining what is fact under the law will go some way to redressing the balance.
- One of the fastest growing subsets of our population is that of second-generation immigrants. Has there been serious consideration on how do these statements and policies affect them and the acculturative tasks?
- What is meant, specifically, by the stated intention to give voluntary and community sector organisations a greater role in resettlement through named sponsorship, and how will this be funded and achieved?
- Political debates have empowered hate crime on media platforms and public places.
- The government says it wants to restore order, but how will temporary protection and institutional accommodation foster integration, language learning, and community cohesion? How does requiring refugees to renew their status every 30 months for up to 20 years align with the UK’s commitment to equality and human rights?
- What safeguards are in place to protect children, survivors of trafficking, and other vulnerable individuals from being unlawfully removed or harmed through the returns policy?
- It implies to a return to a more desirable condition of control and structure. The Question is whose desires, who are being controlled and who will benefit?
- It will be important for the statement to make reference to rights of migrants. In particular the protection of the law available to all regardless of status to be protected against Hate Crime.
- What mental-health provisions will be expanded to address the increased trauma and instability caused by longer uncertainty and temporary status?