

*“I have been fighting for 13 years,  
I got my status but now I don’t feel safe.”*

## The impact on mental health of the government’s asylum reforms

### Introduction

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is a specialist clinical and human rights charity that works with survivors of trafficking, torture and other forms of extreme human cruelty. Our work alongside survivors shows us that, with early and appropriate care and support, they build the strength to move on with their lives. Our multidisciplinary and clinical team provides a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries; specialist programmes of therapeutic care; a medical advisory service; a counter-trafficking programme; housing and welfare advice; legal protection advice; and community integration services. Many of those we support at HBF are eventually recognised as refugees or granted humanitarian protection, discretionary leave, or temporary permission to stay for confirmed victims of trafficking.

Recognised refugees are currently granted ‘refugee status’ with five years of ‘leave to remain’ (permission to be in the UK), after which they can apply for permanent status (indefinite leave to remain). In November 2025, the UK government announced that it plans to replace this system with a new ‘core protection status’,<sup>1</sup> with refugees given leave to remain for just two and a half years, after which their situation is reviewed to see whether protection is still needed. Refugees would also have to wait up 20 years – renewing their ‘core protection’ status eight times - before they can apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR). If they move on to a new ‘Protection Work and Study’ route they can ‘earn’ settlement more quickly. This links to wider immigration proposals under which people will have to demonstrate some form of ‘contribution’ to society before being eligible for ILR.<sup>2</sup>

This briefing brings together existing academic research on the impact of short-term leave and long routes to settlement of people seeking protection with the views of survivors supported by HBF of the impact these proposals will have on them and other refugees. It shows the significant negative impact that the creation of prolonged insecurity will have on both mental health and social integration. Stability and security are essential for refugees to recover from trauma. Refugees and survivors of trafficking who live under the constant threat of losing their status or are repeatedly forced to re-engage with an adversarial and/or complex immigration process can

<sup>1</sup> Home Office. (2025). [Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government’s asylum and returns policy](#).

<sup>2</sup> Home Office. (2025). [Restoring control over the immigration system: white paper](#)

experience worsening symptoms of anxiety, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Quadrupling the period in which refugees must wait before they can get long-term permission to stay in the UK will increase the risk of destitution, exacerbate trauma, and prevent them from being able to rebuild their lives.

Refugees have often fled violence, persecution, or traumatic loss; a sense of stability is crucial for their subsequent recovery. When individuals are repeatedly required to re-prove their need for protection, they are kept in a constant state of anxiety about their future, which can exacerbate symptoms of PTSD, depression, and chronic stress. Instead of being able to focus on rebuilding their lives, their attention is continually pulled back to the fear of losing their right to stay.

This insecurity also disrupts key aspects of daily life that support psychological wellbeing, such as stable housing, employment, and long-term relationships. Employers and landlords may be reluctant to offer opportunities to people whose legal status appears temporary, making it harder for refugees to achieve financial security or plan for the future. Without the ability to settle or invest emotionally in their communities, refugees can experience isolation and hopelessness. These stressors compound over time, particularly when the pathway to permanent settlement stretches so far ahead that it feels unattainable.

This briefing was a collaborative effort and was co-written by the Helen Bamber Foundation Co-Production Team, a mixed team of researchers with lived-experience of seeking asylum in the UK and researchers with learnt/academic experience, who are working together across the full cycle of a research project, exploring the impact of the government's proposed 'earned settlement' policies. Researchers include: Ana & Mishka Consultancy (A&M Consultancy), Ciara Regan, Cornelius Katona, Ella Weldon, Sueda Coskun, Syeda Tazrin and Sylvie Copley. Clients from the Helen Bamber Foundation also shared their perspectives on the impact of these policy changes and their words are included throughout the briefing.

## Proposed changes to leave and settlement for refugees

The Labour government's 2025 asylum reforms announcements - set out in the policy paper '*Restoring Order and Control*'<sup>3</sup> - propose a significant move away from permanent protection for refugees, toward a system of 'core protection' that is temporary, probationary, and continuously reviewable. This represents potentially the most significant reshaping of the UK asylum architecture in decades.

Historically, people recognised as refugees were granted permanent settlement immediately (pre-2005). This shifted in 2005 to a five-year route to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR),<sup>4</sup> with an 'active review' to determine continuing need for protection at the five-year point.<sup>5</sup> The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 introduced a 'two-tier' system of refugee status, whereby certain refugees (those deemed to have entered 'illegally') were only granted two and a half years leave to remain,<sup>6</sup> and would only be eligible for permanent settlement under the standard 10-year-long residency route (this two-tier system was introduced and then 'paused' in July 2023).<sup>7</sup>

The reforms announced in November 2025 would further restrict leave to remain, proposing grants of two and a half-years' leave to *all* those granted refugee status, renewed following 'safe return' reviews which require refugees to re-prove their need for protection repeatedly, and a route to settlement of up to 20 years. Currently, settlement requirements for refugees are being considered as part of a wider consultation on 'earned' settlement for migrants based on their 'contribution' to the UK. The Home Office's defined contribution criteria includes stable employment, English language proficiency, volunteering, no benefit claims and no criminal record.<sup>8</sup>

The UK's proposed shift to an 'earned settlement' or 'contribution-based' model aligns with broader international trends towards conditional citizenship<sup>9</sup> and the shift towards shorter grants aligns with broader trends in the Global North towards protection for refugees being considered as temporary rather than permanent.<sup>10</sup> In particular, Denmark's restrictive approach to refugee settlement is consistently referenced as a model and source of inspiration for the new UK policy. Yet, Denmark's "paradigm shift" has been shown to have caused "legal and human uncertainty" for refugees,<sup>11</sup> and a context of chronic instability, extended limbo, 'hyper-precarity' and hyper-vigilance).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Home Office. (2025). [Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government's asylum and returns policy](#).

<sup>4</sup> Home Office. (2005). [Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration](#).

<sup>5</sup> Freemovement. (2017). [Safe return reviews and Home Office policy on settlement for refugees](#)

<sup>6</sup> Home Office. (2021). [Nationality and Borders Act 2022](#)

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jenrick (2023). [Illegal Migration Update](#)

<sup>8</sup> Home Office. (2025). [A Fairer Pathway to Settlement: statement and accompanying consultation on earned settlement](#); Home Office. (2025). [Changes to UK visa and settlement rules after the 2025 immigration white paper](#)

<sup>9</sup> Joppke, C. (2021). [Earned citizenship](#). *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 62(1), 1-35.

<sup>10</sup> Schultz, J. (2020). [An end to asylum?: Temporary protection and the erosion of refugee status](#). In *Waiting and the temporalities of irregular migration* (pp. 170-185). Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> Vedsted-Hansen, J. (2022). [Refugees as future returnees? Anatomy of the 'paradigm shift'towards temporary protection in Denmark](#). CMI Report.

<sup>12</sup> Kusk, M. L. (2023). [I Can't Create a Future with a Temporary Permit](#). *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(4), 1-19; Shapiro, D., & Jørgensen, R. E. (2021). [Are we going to stay refugees?](#). *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 11(2), 172-187.

While the 1951 Refugee Convention,<sup>13</sup> to which the UK is a party, does not specifically include a right to permanent residence or citizenship for refugees, Article 34 of the Convention calls on States as far as possible to facilitate the integration and naturalisation of refugees and "*in particular make every effort to expedite naturalisation proceedings*". As UNHCR has warned, "an excessively long period of residence before becoming eligible to settle and access naturalisation proceedings would be at variance with Article 34".<sup>14</sup> UNHCR has also made clear that a quicker route to settlement for refugees is "objectively justified" because they lack the protection of their country of origin and citizenship rights. Furthermore, the 1951 Refugee Convention also outlines refugees' rights to gainful employment, welfare, housing, education and social security – all of which, as outlined below, is harder to achieve with a system of temporary protection and long routes to settlement. As outlined by the Supreme Court (then the House of Lords):

*"the spirit behind the Convention is one of treating refugees humanely, as people having a recognised place in the legitimate world, not as beings who can exist only on the margins... provisions is to ensure that refugees enjoy a measure of dignity."*<sup>15</sup>

## The impact of proposed changes to refugee protection and settlement

### 1. Prolonged uncertainty harms mental health and recovery

It is well documented in research that people seeking asylum face precarious and uncertain circumstances whilst awaiting decisions on their claims, which have profound impacts on their mental health).<sup>16</sup> Prolonged uncertainty, resulting from the insecurity of their immigration status and lengthy nature of the asylum process, has been consistently associated with a host of poor mental health outcomes - including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation and worsening of pre-existing mental health illnesses. Other factors which can contribute to uncertainty and poor mental health include the ambiguity surrounding asylum procedures, lack of updates or clear timelines, and prolonged family separation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> UN General Assembly, [1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, 28 July 1951

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR. (2025). [Observations on Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the UK government's asylum and returns policy](#)

<sup>15</sup> [R v Asfaw](#) [2008] UKHL 31 (at [§94]) per Lord Roger

<sup>16</sup> Shahzad, A., Katona, C., & Glover, N. (2025). [The psychological impact of spending a prolonged time awaiting asylum](#). *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 16(1), 2506189; Côté-Olijnyk, M., Perry, J. C., Paré, M. È., & Kronick, R. (2024). [The mental health of migrants living in limbo: A mixed-methods systematic review with meta-analysis](#). *Psychiatry Research*, 337, 115931.

<sup>17</sup> Shahzad, A., Katona, C., & Glover, N. (2025). [The psychological impact of spending a prolonged time awaiting asylum](#). *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 16(1), 2506189; Esaiasson, P., Lajevardi, N., & Sohlberg, J. (2022). [Reject, limbo, and accept: the effect of migration decisions on asylum seekers](#). *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(15), 3469-3483.

The concept of 'limbo'<sup>18</sup> captures this experience; people seeking asylum remain in extended periods of temporal and spatial uncertainty, whilst awaiting secure legal status, preventing them from predicting or planning their future life trajectories.<sup>19</sup> During this time, people seeking asylum have reported feeling like semi-citizens, with their lives put on hold while they wait for a decision that might come at any second but can also take years.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, their resultant ongoing anxiety leads to constant worry and stalls engagement in activities that would otherwise lead to a sense of security<sup>21</sup> and can lead to diminished self-worth.

Under the new policies of short-term leave and increasing the qualifying period for settled status, even after years of waiting for an asylum decision, those with recognised refugee status will remain in a state of perpetual uncertainty and permanent temporariness, potentially having to renew their status eight times before they can live in the UK permanently. HBF clients shared with us their feelings after hearing about the proposed changes:

*“When I see things on tiktok/facebook, it makes me feel scared... I don’t feel like I am in a free country. I have been fighting for 13 years, I got my status but now I don’t feel safe.”*

*“I feel like I am not part of this country anymore... You don’t feel like you are in a safe place anymore.”*

There is increasing evidence that prolonged uncertainty in general is an important driver of poor mental health.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the adverse mental health impact of living in limbo may be particularly important for young people. In qualitative studies carried out across Europe, children and young people seeking protection expressed their inability to plan their future due to long waits for status.<sup>23</sup> A repeated reapplication pathway echoes the protracted periods of asylum-seeking and awaiting decisions that are postulated to undermine psychological security.<sup>24</sup>

*“I understand that the UK has to change immigration rules, but I have been through so much... I tried to commit suicide in the detention centre... I thought now I can live a normal life... but now this, it is hard for me to think about what will happen.”*

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<sup>18</sup> Esaiasson, P., Lajevardi, N., & Sohlberg, J. (2022). [Reject, limbo, and accept: the effect of migration decisions on asylum seekers](#). *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(15), 3469-3483.

<sup>19</sup> Haas, B. M. (2021). [“Asylum is the most powerful medicine”: navigating therapeutic interventions in Limbo](#). *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 45(2), 193-217

<sup>20</sup> Cortvriend, A. (2020). [Coping with Vulnerability: The Limbo Created by the UK Asylum System](#). *International Journal for Crime Justice and Social Democracy*, 9(3), 61-74.

<sup>21</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). (2018) [Life in Limbo - MSF's psychosocial support for asylum seekers in Sweden](#).

<sup>22</sup> Kienzler, H., Massazza, A., Kuykendall, R., Tamimi, N., Hammoudeh, W., & Giacaman, R. (2025). [Uncertainty and mental health: A qualitative scoping review](#). *SSM-Qualitative Research in Health*, 7, 100521.

<sup>23</sup> Allsopp, J., Chase, E., & Mitchell, M. (2015). [The tactics of time and status: young people's experiences of building futures while subject to immigration control in Britain](#). *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 28(2), 163-182; Kohli, R. K., & Kaukko, M. (2018). [The management of time and waiting by unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls in Finland](#). *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 31(4), 488-506; We Belong (2020). [We Belong Mental Health Check](#).

<sup>24</sup> Griffiths, M. (2013). [Frenzied, decelerating and suspended: The temporal uncertainties of failed asylum seekers and immigration detainees](#). COMPAS Working Paper No. 105 University of Oxford, 2013

*“This is really a nightmare for me... It is another kind of torture for me.”*

*“In my body, I feel stressful all the time... I have itches all over my body but it is from stress.”*

## 2. Temporary protection or short-term leave is often inadequate to restore wellbeing

Short-term leave has been shown to be inadequate for restoring wellbeing for refugees in other countries. In Australia, research<sup>25</sup> found that despite similar levels of pre-migration trauma, refugees with temporary visas scored significantly higher on psychiatric symptom measures (PTSD, anxiety, depression) compared to those with permanent protection, even after controlling for other established risk factors. In keeping with this, other research<sup>26</sup> found that moving from insecure to permanent visa status was associated with reduced depressive symptoms, fewer social difficulties, and less immigration-related fear. As well as the impact of protracted uncertainty and a sense of limbo, temporary status is associated with other post-migration difficulties such as social isolation and housing difficulties, which may drive much of the excess stress and related mental health issues.

*“I couldn’t sleep... I was having a panic attack... I cannot breathe and my heart is beating extremely fast.”*

*“Trauma therapy cannot work when someone is living in fear of their immigration status.”*

A qualitative study in Denmark,<sup>27</sup> found that refugees with temporary permits felt unable to build a future, with insecurity affecting every aspect of their lives. Participants expressed how the need to continually renew temporary permits, without a meaningful sense of progress toward permanent protection and with looming fear of removal from the country, keeps refugees in a chronic cycle of uncertainty and hypervigilance and undermines any sense of safety or protection. Such prolonged uncertainty, therefore represents not a discrete phase but the starting point for life in a host country. With the introduction of temporary refugee permits, uncertainty will become the defining condition of refugees' lives in the UK, even years after being granted asylum.

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<sup>25</sup> Momartin, S., Steel, Z., Coello, M., Aroche, J., Silove, D. M., & Brooks, R. (2006). [A comparison of the mental health of refugees with temporary versus permanent protection visas](#). *Medical Journal of Australia*, 185(7), 357-361.

<sup>26</sup> Nickerson, A., Byrow, Y., O'Donnell, M., Bryant, R. A., Mau, V., McMahon, T., ... & Liddell, B. J. (2023). [The mental health effects of changing from insecure to secure visas for refugees](#). *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 57(11), 1486-1495.

<sup>27</sup> Kusk, M. L. (2023). [I Can't Create a Future with a Temporary Permit](#). *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(4), 1-19.

### 3. Legal limbo undermines integration, economic participation, social inclusion

The profound uncertainty created by temporary refugee permits and lengthy, insecure routes to settlement will significantly undermine refugees' ability to build sustainable livelihoods and form meaningful relationships. Prolonged asylum system limbo already places refugees at a disadvantage in working towards integration. A 2017 study conducted in France found that individuals awaiting permanent status are up to 10% less likely to form positive relationships with host country nationals than those with permanent status.<sup>28</sup> The anxiety of waiting puts great stress on refugees' relationships, with effects in the long term.

The lack of stability and unpredictability of the future have been shown to contribute to demotivation and emotional exhaustion.<sup>29</sup> The experience of precarity becomes "hyper-realised", permeating everyday life and becoming an omnipresent reality, limiting refugees' capacity to pursue integrative activities such as education or training, even where this is formally permitted.<sup>30</sup>

*"For the 13 years I was here... I have tried to integrate and calm myself down but again there is another thing coming to do."*

Even after refugees are given permission to work, the previous instability associated with temporary status continues to disadvantage their participation in the labour market. The cumulative effects of waiting are substantial; one longitudinal study in Sweden found that each additional year spent awaiting legal recognition reduces the probability of employment by 4-5 percentage points.<sup>31</sup> This in turn reduces the ability of such refugees to become productive and contribute positively in their host country.

Under the new asylum policies, even the granting of refugee status will no longer provide certainty or security and is likely to undermine refugees' motivation and ability to pursue education or build a long-term career. They risk keeping refugees in lower-skilled positions, underemployed relative to their qualifications, because investing in further education or career advancement would not be reasonable without the security of permanent residency. Employers may also be reluctant to hire refugees, given their temporary status and the need for their frequent reviews every two and a half years. Refugees in the UK have until now been able to access student loans based on their five-year secure stay. However, new policies could undermine this eligibility, particularly affecting thousands of young people.

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<sup>28</sup> Havrylchyk, O., & Ukrayinchuk, N. (2017). [The impact of limbo on the socio-economic integration of refugees in France. ifo DICE Report](#), 15(3), 11-15.

<sup>29</sup> Esaiasson, P., Lajevardi, N., & Sohlberg, J. (2022). [Reject, limbo, and accept: the effect of migration decisions on asylum seekers](#). *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(15), 3469-3483.

<sup>30</sup> Haas, B. M. (2017). [Citizens-in-waiting, deportees-in-waiting: Power, temporality, and suffering in the US asylum system](#). *Ethos*, 45(1), 75-97; Kusk, M. L. (2023). [I Can't Create a Future with a Temporary Permit](#). *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(4), 1-19.

<sup>31</sup> Hainmueller, J., Hangartner, D. & Lawrence, D., 2016. [When lives are put on hold: Lengthy asylum processes decrease employment among refugees](#). *Science Advances*, 2(8), p.1

*“I have filled and made the application for the small business loan but now I have lost my hope... I have to start again”*

Indeed, evidence from Denmark indicates that temporary refugee protection, and the constant threat of status review, prevents refugees from building long-term futures and significantly undermines their ability to pursue education or invest in meaningful careers.<sup>32</sup> Rather than incentivising integration, research has shown that tightening settlement rules in Denmark have in fact reduced refugees' employment levels, as overly strict and unattainable requirements discourage those already struggling.<sup>33</sup>

*“2.5 years will remove people from society so how are they meant to socially ‘integrate’. It is dividing us from society.”*

The impacts of permanent temporariness will also be felt by children, with parents unable to build a stable family life, or plan their child's long-term education. HBF clients have also shared fears about the material consequences of temporary, short-term protection, due to continually having to pay for repeated renewals costs, visa fees, NHS surcharges and solicitor fees.

As highlighted by the UNHCR in its response to the UK's recent asylum policy announcements,<sup>34</sup> these changes seriously risk undermining integration outcomes. Rather than focusing on creating integrated communities in the UK, these restrictive policies divide people and may create a second-class group with constant insecurity and limited prospects.<sup>35</sup>

*“I feel like I am not part of this country anymore... You don't feel like you are part of the United Kingdom anymore.”*

*“The government, by these policies, are making the gap wider between migrants and society and dividing citizens and refugees.”*

### **Implications for 'earned settlement' and 'contribution'**

At the same time as making it harder for refugees to build a life in the UK, integrate, and access secure employment, under the government's proposals refugees would need to 'earn' their right to protection by demonstrating 'contribution' to society. Although the details are yet to be finalised, the proposed 'earned settlement' model would condition access to permanent protection on

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<sup>32</sup> Kusk, M. L. (2023). [I Can't Create a Future with a Temporary Permit](#). *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(4), 1-19; Shapiro, D., & Jørgensen, R. E. (2021). [Are we going to stay refugees?](#). *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 11(2), 172-187.

<sup>33</sup> Arendt, J. N., Dustmann, C., & Ku, H. (2025). [Permanent residency and refugee immigrants' skill investment](#). *Journal of Labor Economics*, 43(2), 293-318.

<sup>34</sup> UNHCR (2025). [UNHCR Observations on Restoring Order and Control: A Statement on the UK Government's Asylum and Returns Policy](#).

<sup>35</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2025) [A paradigm shift in asylum and immigration policy](#).

completely new additional factors<sup>36</sup> such as English language proficiency, stable employment, and not claiming benefits - all requirements that the new reforms themselves make significantly harder to achieve.

*“If they want us to contribute, they need to give us some opportunity... if you want to open a business it is impossible at the moment because you don’t have a reference, you don’t have money etc.”*

This draws parallels with the Danish context, in which refugees must sign up to an 'Integration Programme' and meet a points-based scheme, including employment, language proficiency, civic engagement, and 'active citizenship' tests, in order to be able to apply for permanent residence after eight years of legal residency<sup>37</sup> Qualitative research on refugees' experiences of this Integration Programme demonstrates that the pressure to conform causes emotional distress, exhaustion, and a sense of exploitation.<sup>38</sup>

HBF specialises in supporting people who experience severe symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety, among other health issues, as a result of the trauma they have been subjected to. Among our clients, a very significant number live with physical and/or psychological conditions which severely impact their day-to-day life, rendering them disabled under the Equality Act 2010. We support a great number of clients who are unable to work due to the impact of their mental (and physical) health symptoms, which have often arisen in the context of the violence they have been subjected to. Within this, we frequently support survivors to apply for disability/health-related benefits, including within Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment. We also work with many people whose disability and/or health conditions impact their ability to take up employment but who are not awarded disability/health related benefits, and so exemption criteria based upon receipt of public funds will inevitably still exclude people who are unable to work due to disability/health conditions. Extending the settlement period and linking it to economic 'worthiness' penalises people for having long-term health conditions or disabilities, and for the lasting impacts of trauma and abuse inflicted upon them.

Many of our clients struggle with profound feelings of shame and guilt, among others, as result of the abuse they have been subjected to. We frequently see people who feel that they must work in order to show their commitment to the UK - *“I feel pressure to work or study just to prove I deserve*

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<sup>36</sup> Under the current system, refugees need to meet the requirements set out in the Immigration Rules at [Appendix Settlement Protection](#) and in Home Office ["Settlement for people on a protection route: Version 5.0"](#) Guidance . These include that the refugee: has spent a continuous period in the UK for five years with refugee status; has made a valid application and applied before their refugee leave expires; meets the 'suitability requirements' (these mainly concern criminal history) and has not had their refugee status revoked or renounced. The Home Office will also review whether the reasons someone was granted refugee status still exist (for example, if there has been a significant change in someone's home country, the Home Office may find that the risk to them has ceased to exist). If the person does not meet all of the requirements for settlement but has still established that they are entitled to refugee status, they will be granted another period of leave as a refugee.

<sup>37</sup> Refugees Welcome, Denmark. [Permanent Residence](#).

<sup>38</sup> Shapiro, D., & Jørgensen, R. E. (2021). [Are we going to stay refugees?](#) *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 11(2), 172-187.

"settlement" - but who, on starting employment, are unable to continue due to the impact of prolonged and violent trauma on their mental and physical health. These feelings are likely to be compounded by policies that imply that their right to safety must be continually justified and measured in economic terms. Making a person's right to remain in the UK long-term conditional on continued demonstrations of worthiness, via 'compliance' with income-, productivity- or moral-related criteria, will deepen such feelings.

*"Recovery needs stability, housing and long-term support. Migrants can't contribute to society or country if the government put too many barriers."*

We know that evidence-based treatment provided when a person is ready and safe to engage in therapy can help these symptoms to reduce. However, forcing people into twenty years of limbo for having fled to safety and needing to apply for disability benefits in order to afford food and electricity does nothing to support people who are disabled and/or have long-term health conditions to feel safe and therefore able to 'integrate' in the UK with dignity.

Treating settlement as something to be earned reframes protection as privilege rather than obligation, and risks entrenching inequality by tying fundamental rights to performance criteria that refugees—because of trauma, displacement and structural barriers—are often least able to meet. A rights-based approach recognises that settlement is a foundation for integration, not a prize for achieving it.

HBF clients shared fears that the pressure to meet the proposed leave to remain conditions would increase their vulnerability to exploitation, particularly for those who have already survived exploitation.

Linking access to protection to narrow definitions of 'worthiness' or 'productivity' ignores the lived realities of people seeking sanctuary in the UK. Such an approach not only undermines our moral and legal obligations to protect those fleeing war, torture, and persecution, but also risks penalising individuals for their vulnerabilities, disabilities, or hardships.

*"You are a convict and you are in immigration bail with conditions without committing any crimes."*

Even for those refugees able to work, study, and learn the language, these efforts may take years or even decades to be recognised and their contributions might go unacknowledged. Requiring refugees to "earn" their sense of belonging in the UK and having their existing contributions not recognised risks detaching refugees from their communities and undermining integration. As Michala Clante Bendixen, head of the refugee advisory group Refugees Welcome Denmark, said, the 20-year path waiting for secure immigration status will make refugees "feel like they are second-class citizens forever."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bendixen, M. C. (2025). Quoted in Edwards, C. ['Denmark's hardline immigration laws have caught Britain's eye. Here's why, CNN](#), 19 November.

*“I really want to be a successful person... to contribute to this country... I have done my best for this country.”*

## The impact of proposals on refugees currently living in the UK

The impact of the Home Secretary's announcement has already been felt widely at HBF. Since 'Restoring Order and Control' was published, our Reception and Referrals Teams have seen a significant amount of enquiries relating to it. People have contacted us in abject fear of any possibility of return. This has included a number of enquiries requesting medico-legal reports, with people speculating that there might now be a greater risk to them and seeing whether they should secure further evidence showing their need for safety. Understandably, one of the main questions people have asked is "will any of this apply to me?" or "will I be returned home?" These are both questions to which we do not have an answer and are not currently able to provide any reassurances. Most enquirers were refugees who have already gone through the robust and difficult process of seeking asylum but now have a new fear of return. Worst of all, as any plan for implementation has yet to form, their futures remain uncertain.

*“I respect the British values and it makes me so proud. But this is far away from the British values. It makes you feel like you are not human.”*

## Conclusion

Both the research evidence, survivors' views and our collective clinical experience indicate that the government's new measures will not deter people seeking safety from coming to the UK but will instead significantly harm the mental health and social integration of those recognised as needing protection in this country. These are men, women, children and families who have fled war, conflict, torture, trafficking, persecution and extreme cruelty. At a point when they most need safety and security, they will be left in a state of ongoing limbo and anxiety about being removed from the country, even once they have been recognised as refugees, and made to wait for over twenty years before they can settle here. The creation of a two-tier system with opportunities for earlier settlement only for those in work and study will discriminate against the most vulnerable.

Stability and permanence should not be rewards but prerequisites for rebuilding a life: they enable people to recover, to work, study, form relationships, contribute to their communities, and plan for the future without fear. Settlement should be a foundation for integration, not a prize for achieving it. The very premise of refugee protection is that people are forced to flee, after experiencing persecution and violence, and cannot reasonably be expected to meet additional behavioural or economic tests to secure basic safety. Making settlement conditional prolongs insecurity and harms mental health, undermines integration, and delays recovery from trauma.