



Craig Whittaker MP

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Refugee Family Reunion

Thank you for contacting me about refugee family reunion.

I am glad that there already is a comprehensive framework for refugees and their families to be safely reunited in the UK. The present refugee family reunion policy allows immediate family members of those granted protection in the UK to reunite with them here. The family provisions in the immigration rules provide for relatives with protection in the UK to sponsor children when there are serious and compelling circumstances.

The policy is also clear that where an application fails under the rules, the Government will consider whether there are exceptional reasons to grant leave outside the rules. In addition, refugees with family members in the UK may be eligible for resettlement under the Mandate and Gateway Scheme.

The family reunion policy is designed to provide a safe and legal route for close, dependent family members to join their refugee family in the UK. This avoids the need for family members to make dangerous journeys in order to seek protection. I am immensely proud that under the existing family reunion policy, over 24,000 family reunion visas have been granted over the last five years. It is crucial that our efforts are concentrated on ensuring that existing resettlement schemes are used to full effect, and that the current rules work properly and effectively. This way we can help those who need it most.

The UK has been at the forefront of the international response to this crisis, committing £2.46 billion in aid and providing nearly 25 million food rations and over 9.5 million relief packages since 2012.

Of equal importance has been the support we have provided to refugees fleeing the crisis. We are already half way towards our commitment to resettle 20,000 people through the vulnerable person's resettlement scheme and have also committed to resettle a further 3,000 people through the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme.

There are good reasons why we are prioritising these resettlement routes to support the most vulnerable people, such as those who are stuck in refugee camps in Jordan or Lebanon. They provide safe and legal routes for individuals and families fleeing war and persecution to get to the UK. Those who - with all good intention - try to promote and encourage alternative pathways to the UK could be putting the very people they are trying to help in danger.

In October 2017 the Lord Chancellor announced the start of a review of legal aid reforms, which will include an assessment of the changes to the scope of legal aid for immigration cases, and will report later in 2018. Legal aid was removed for family reunion applications in

England and Wales in 2013 by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) on the basis that such applications were straightforward to prepare.

The Government is reflecting on the thoughtful debate around this complex issue. It will be following the passage of the Private Member's Bill closely and will continue productive discussions in this area. While I have always been clear that I support the principle of family unity, I also believe that we must not create perverse incentives whereby members of families, particularly children, travel away from their families and risk dangerous journeys in the hope that relatives can join them later. The Government's priority has been that we must target resources on those who need protection, are living in conflict zones, or have formed family units which have then been broken up by the need to flee from danger.

Local authorities across the UK are doing a fantastic job supporting the thousands of people we are providing protection to. It has been estimated by the National Audit Office that we will spend £1,112 million on the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme between September 2015 and 2019/20. We want to be able to spend this money on those who need it the most.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Craig Whittaker', with a small 'M' at the end.

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