



Refugee Action's campaign to reunite refugee families

The Issue

- Many refugees living in Britain have been separated from their loved ones by war and conflict. At Refugee Action we know that the support of family is vital in helping refugees to rebuild their lives successfully and empowering them to better integrate within British communities. That is that is why we are campaigning for changes to the UK's restrictive family reunion regulations
- The UK's current refugee family reunion rules ignore the often complex relationships that affect families torn apart by war – for example, an older sibling caring for their younger brother or sister when their parents have died
- The UK currently has very restrictive rules to determine how refugees can bring their loved ones to live with them in Britain. These rules can and must be changed so that more families, who have been torn apart by conflict, can safely reach Britain and rebuild their lives together as a family
- As we are seeing played out on our television screens and in the papers every day, there is currently a desperate lack of safe and legal routes for refugees to seek protection. This means refugees are forced to risk their lives by making treacherous journeys, often in the hands of people-traffickers, in a desperate attempt to reach their loved ones in Britain
- Refugee Action is calling for the UK government to expand the rules so that more family members are eligible to be reunited with their loved ones, including dependent relatives, such as siblings, grandchildren, parents, and children over the age of 18



Your questions answered:

Q: Why is Refugee Action running this campaign and what do you hope to achieve?

A: The UK's current refugee family reunion rules are very restrictive. They exclude the complex relationships of dependency that affect families torn apart by war – for example, people caring for their orphaned young siblings or unaccompanied children separated from their parents.

This means refugees who have reached safety can find it almost impossible to bring their dependent family members to join them here in the UK.

Refugee Action believes that changing these rules will allow refugees to rebuild their lives more successfully, empowering them to better integrate within British communities with support of their loved ones.

It also means that people currently overseas, who might otherwise have been forced to make treacherous journeys - risking their lives in the hope of reaching their loved ones - would instead have a safe and legal route through changes to the UK's approach to family reunion.

Q: What is currently wrong with the UK's refugee family reunion process?

A: Currently, due to a variety of sometimes complex policies and practices, family reunion is all too often a fraught process for refugees living in the UK. Unfortunately the criteria for family reunion are narrowly drawn and making an application is often unnecessarily complex and lengthy. Too often this results in applications failing, or not being made in the first place, for families who can and should be reunited in the UK. It can also lead to relatives being forced to make dangerous journeys to reach their loved ones in the UK

Q: What needs to change?

A: Refugee Action believes that existing UK government policy, guidance, and practice relating to refugee family reunion must be improved. We recommend action in the following four key areas:

- **Widen the eligibility criteria**

The eligibility criteria for refugee family reunion should be expanded to recognise all relationships where there is dependency of applicants upon the sponsor - including children over 18; parents; grandparents; grandchildren; and siblings. In addition, child refugees should be permitted to reunite with their families.

- **Simplify evidence requirements**

The government should develop a single, comprehensive evidence list of what is normally required for refugee family reunion applications. For families unable to produce this evidence through no fault of their own, the government should allow alternative forms of evidence to be considered

- **Offer additional means to submit evidence**

The government should ensure that applicants are not exposed to risk by offering alternative means or locations for submitting required information, where circumstances mean that using established routes is either dangerous or impossible.

- **Ensure provision of good quality legal advice**

Legal aid should be fully, or at least partially, reintroduced for refugee family reunion cases; and the greater provision of specialist, affordable advice should be permitted.

Q: How many people do you estimate would benefit from changes to refugee family reunion?

The changes we're calling for would certainly lead to an increase in the number of people entitled to come to the UK to be reunited with their family. This would be welcome, and is necessary - through our work with refugees, we know that many remain separated from close family members, because the many hurdles and complexities within family reunion mean their application is denied or their case is never completed.



Great Britain has a long, proud history of offering new lives to women, men and children who are fleeing war and persecution. Today, we are experiencing the biggest movement of people in Europe since Second World War. Now more than ever it is urgent and necessary for the UK to step up and play its part in addressing the refugee crisis – and we believe enabling refugee families to be together is a key way the government can do so.

The UK hosts relatively few refugees compared to many of our neighbours; and any increase in numbers as a result of these changes would clearly be proportionate to the number of refugees already in the UK. One thing is certain - each case will transform the lives of the family members involved. Also, many of these family members will have protection needs themselves, so as well as boosting refugees' wellbeing and integration, increasing family reunion also means people can reach their loved ones in UK without having to make dangerous journeys.

The way the government presents family reunion statistics means it's impossible to estimate a precise figure - we would welcome clarification from the government on these figures.

Q: A UK judge recently ruled that three Syrian children and one dependent adult in Calais should be reunited with their families in the UK – what is your position on this?

A: Under current EU regulations - known as "Dublin III"- refugees in the UK should be able to reunite with family members stranded in other European countries; however, this rarely happens in practice. This ruling highlighted some of the inadequacies of Dublin III which, in this case, meant vulnerable refugees were left to languish in the squalid make-shift camps of the so-called Calais 'Jungle', resulting in severe psychological trauma and distress.

Refugee Action therefore warmly welcomes this ground-breaking judgement, which clearly demonstrates the woeful inadequacies of the existing procedures to reunite families through the Dublin III regulations.

We call on the government to act now on its moral and legal obligations to swiftly reunite refugees in similar situations with their families here in the UK.



Q: What are the implications of this ruling for your campaign?

A: While the ruling highlighted the limitations of current EU regulations and, in particular, the length of time it takes for asylum applications to be processed; its implications are limited to asylum seekers within Europe who have family here in the UK.

Significantly, Refugee Action's campaign to change current family reunion rules could potentially help people elsewhere – like Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon – reunite with their families in the UK, without having to risk their lives making treacherous journeys across the Mediterranean.

Q: The UK government has already pledged to take in 20,000 Syrian refugees – aren't we already doing enough?

A: Refugee Action has warmly welcomed the Prime Minister's pledge to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees as well its leading role in providing vital humanitarian assistance to refugees who have fled to Syria's neighbouring countries within the region.

However, we are in the midst of the biggest refugee crisis since the beginning of the Second World War, and we believe the government can and must be do more to address this crisis and help some of the world's most vulnerable people who – through no fault of their own - are fleeing the horrors of persecution and conflict.

At Refugee Action, we believe that everyone – British, Syrian, Eritrean, Sudanese – has the right to a family life. By changing current policy, guidance and practice relating to refugee family reunion, the government could provide a much-needed life-line to those forced to risk their lives in the hope of reuniting with their loved ones here in the UK.