

**AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND
GOVERNMENT EVACUATION
AND RESETTLEMENT
SUPPORT FOR THE 2021
AFGHANISTAN CRISIS:
PROJECT FINDINGS**

October 2023

ActionStation
people powered change 

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 

World Vision 

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Background

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, prompting many individuals at risk to seek safety elsewhere. Deeply concerned by the dire human rights situation, a coalition of Aotearoa New Zealand Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and members of the Afghan community joined forces to advocate for increased New Zealand Government assistance for those needing to flee.

In 2022, the coalition acknowledged that the human rights situation in Afghanistan remained critical and that ongoing advocacy was essential. The coalition sought to understand the changing circumstances to inform further advocacy that reflected the insights of people who had recently resettled in Aotearoa from Afghanistan, as well as people working in the sector.

World Vision, ActionStation, and Amnesty International Aotearoa New Zealand commissioned Dr. Evangelia Papoutsaki and Anusha Bhana to conduct a project aimed at engaging with individuals who had resettled in Aotearoa New Zealand from Afghanistan, as well as individuals and organisations involved in the evacuation and resettlement process.

The primary goal of this project was to inform advocacy efforts related to Afghanistan and, more broadly, to enhance the New Zealand Government's responsiveness to humanitarian crises and support for individuals resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand. This document presents key findings and recommendations derived from a series of interviews. This project was a listening exercise, and the purpose of this project is to reflect what was heard.

It is important to note that to ensure privacy, all individual interviewee information has been kept confidential. Additionally, not all ideas and concerns raised during interviews have been included. Instead, the focus has been on grouping key themes.

Resettlement of Afghan nationals to Aotearoa New Zealand

In August 2021, the Taliban accelerated their military campaign as part of their strategy to regain control of Afghanistan. This escalation culminated in the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021.

Simultaneously, many countries commenced withdrawing their forces from Afghanistan. The New Zealand Government agreed a criteria for the evacuation of people from Afghanistan. This criteria included, for example, evacuating people who had worked directly with the New Zealand Defence Force or other agencies.

The Afghan Emergency Resettlement Category provided a humanitarian residence category for people evacuated from Afghanistan. The objective states: “The Afghan Emergency Resettlement Category provides a specific, time-limited humanitarian residence category for citizens of Afghanistan who evacuated from Afghanistan to Aotearoa New Zealand before 12 September 2021, who were granted a Critical Purpose Visitor visa between 15 August 2021 and 12 September 2021 (inclusive), or who were granted a Critical Purpose Visitor visa as they met defined resettlement criteria and who may still travel to and enter New Zealand”.¹

As per the table below, a total of 1,741 Afghan nationals were evacuated from Afghanistan to Aotearoa New Zealand.

It is important to note that the circumstances of evacuation were often traumatic. People had to quickly flee the country, leaving their communities and families behind. We heard there were also challenges for people who left later, including safe houses, questions about who was eligible to come to Aotearoa New Zealand, and the persistent fear of the Taliban. For the purposes of this report and to uphold the safety of its participants, testimonies relating to evacuation are not included.

Total number of Afghan nationals and families who came to Aotearoa New Zealand via the Afghanistan Resettlement Response²

Period	Actual Date Range of Data for Arrival	Individuals	Family Groups
Initial Evacuation: 16–26 August 2021	23–28 August 2021	231	65
Operation Whakahokinga Mai	29 August 2021 – 28 April 2022	1,429	341
Post-Operation Whakahokinga Mai	29 April – 6 September 2022	81	25
TOTAL		1,741	431

¹ New Zealand Immigration (2021) Afghan Emergency Resettlement Category. Available at: <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/opsmanual/76962.htm> (Accessed 19 September 2023).

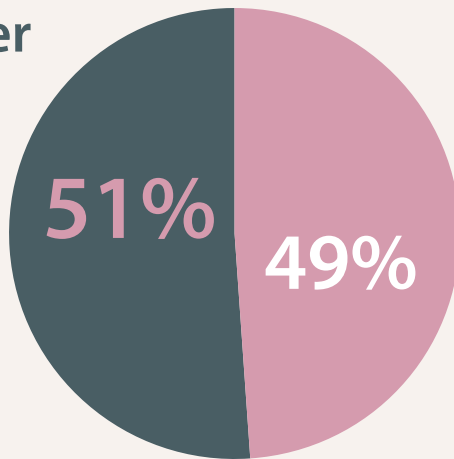
² Data provided by Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), 6 April 2022.

Of the Afghan nationals evacuated to NZ³

1,741
people total

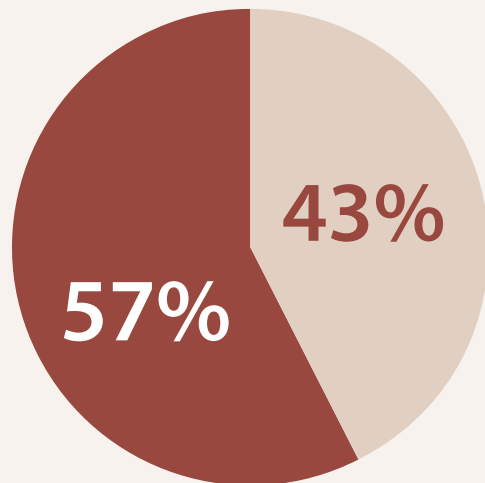
Gender

Male
Female

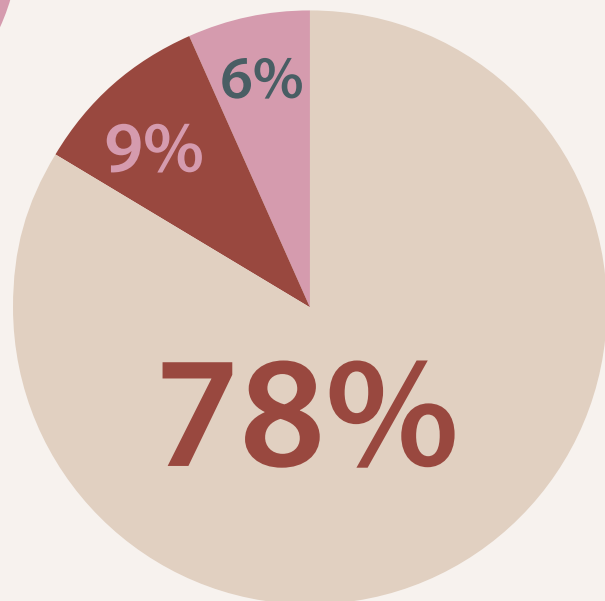


Age

Adults aged 18–40 years (n=1,001)
Children and youth aged under 18 years (n=740)



431
family groups



Resettlement Location

Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland)
Kirikiriroa (Hamilton)
Ōtautahi (Christchurch)

³ Data provided by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), 6 April 2022. Percentages are approximate.

Methodology

This project was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 using a qualitative exploratory research approach. There were 42 participants, including Afghan nationals and key informants. The methodology involved two main steps:

1. Community mapping through engagement with community members and networks.
2. Interviews and focus groups.

Participants included:

- Individuals and organisations involved in the evacuation and resettlement process, including support services and advocacy groups (19 interviews and one focus group);
- Individuals evacuated from Afghanistan to Aotearoa New Zealand following the crisis in August 2021 (10 interviews and two focus groups).

The project's limitations include a constrained time frame and a relatively small sample size, with conversations primarily centred in specific locations. As a result, this project is not intended to provide an exhaustive list of advocacy requests. Instead, it offers insights to support advocacy efforts that can improve the experiences of those resettling for humanitarian reasons in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Key issues raised

1. Comprehensive strategy needed

In interviews for this project, differentiation of support based on pathway was raised – where the services and support people from Afghanistan received differed from what quota refugees had access to. People noted that while the Critical Purpose Visa was the best way to evacuate this group from Afghanistan quickly and safely, the new category also created problems, namely the lack of access to the Family Reunification Support Category.⁴



“...So whenever we approached some agencies [for] support, they were asking ‘if you’re a refugee or not’ and we say they are not refugees, [and they] had some kind of hesitation whether they are eligible for their services. So, they keep asking, sometimes put on hold their application ... So that's why it produced a lot of frustration for the family and also pressure for us.” *(Support service)*

“I think it's understandable that this visa category was used, but really, it's going to create, it has created and will continue to create problems. When people aren't explicitly considered refugees when they're forced migrants, we have special categories created and then the government's trying to be reactive to fix that.” *(Interviewee with sector expertise)*



⁴Last year, the *Safe Start, Fair Future* report*, produced by the Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies and Asylum Seeker Support Trust, looked at how policy settings discriminate against Convention Refugees and people seeking asylum. The report called for equal access to support for Convention Refugees – regardless of how they have come to arrive in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the assurance of appropriate support for people seeking asylum during the refugee status determination process.

*Ferns, M., Stephens, M., Sama, B. N., Maurice, T., Perinpanayagam, U., Stocker, F., Malihi, Z., & Marlowe, J. (2022). 'Safe Start. Fair Future: Refugee Equality'. Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies and Asylum Seeker Support Trust, February. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/content/dam/uaa/education/hattie/docs/Safe%20Start,%20Fair%20Future%20Report.pdf>

2. Orientation

People indicated that orientation programmes needed to be thorough and considered, taking into account the acute trauma and feelings of displacement that people may be going through. Consideration must be given to how and when orientation and information provision sessions take place. For example, some orientation sessions were held at times that were difficult to access for people who had other commitments. It is also important to consider that sharing complex information with people during periods of high stress may make it challenging for them to absorb this information.



“We had some short training in the hotel from the police about human rights, but it was short and in the English language, and the women who are illiterate didn’t get much of what they said.” (Afghan national)

“They also didn’t know a lot about help and things available in New Zealand, like life in New Zealand, which, again, the refugees that come under the quota get all that sort of information at Mangere [Refugee Resettlement Centre]. So, they are behind in those sorts of things... But the biggest thing is that they don’t have the basic English language that they would have if they’ve gone through the Mangere programme and the way of life in New Zealand.” (Support service)

“I could see the fear, the fear of not knowing where to go, where to get support, and also not being able to express themselves because of the language barrier.” (Support service)



3. Access to housing

People reported challenges securing suitable accommodation. People expressed frustration with long stays in hotels, difficulties with social housing waitlists, and challenges accessing private housing.



“It was, for me, one month and a half [in the hotel]. But I think I had the shortest time than other Afghans, because many of them stayed eight or nine months.” *(Afghan national)*

“[Government Department] specifically said don’t put any of those guys on the waitlist for [social housing] because it’s not going to be soon. They just gonna hope and hope and hope and it’s gonna take at least four, five years for them to get a contact from us. Because there’s barely any houses ... it’s not gonna work out for them.” *(Support service)*

“Most of them are tied up to only a one-year tenancy agreement for the housing. In the incoming few months, like maybe July/August, their tenancy expires. And then it’s going to be a struggle for them to find another rental property. One of the main issues is because most of them are on a benefit. As soon as you go to the landlord and you say I have this family and they’re on benefits, they’re like no, no. They are not interested.” *(Community association)*

“When we go to the house, we don’t have anything, like a fridge, washing clothes machine, TV. And then we have to make a list and send it to the case manager, [and] she says, ‘you have to wait’ ... We [can’t] have a car. We want to cycle and they say it’s also expensive, you don’t need a bicycle. They say you can go with [bus] pass.” *(Afghan national)*

“The first house of ours was in [Auckland suburb]. We accepted but [case manager] said he [landlord] didn’t want you cuse you are Afghan people.” *(Afghan national)*



4. English language classes

People reported challenges accessing English language classes, for example due to factors such as a lack of literacy or lack of childcare. We heard that language barriers were particularly difficult for children attending school taught in a foreign language to them.



“Every day he comes home, he says, ‘I don’t want to go to school’. And I say, ‘Why?’ He says, ‘Cuse I don’t have any friends in the school. It’s hard for me because they speak English, and I can’t speak English, and there are lots of problems.” *(Afghan national)*

“Their kids go to school, but they don’t know English and there are no ... bilingual assistants to help them. ... You know, the settlement is not something [like] this is the rental room and you reached the final destination. ... That basic sort of support must be provided for them.” *(Afghan national)*

“...Everything is new. And I have to learn many things. I participate in English classes with online English partners. It’s not good. I don’t learn a lot because ... at the same time I look after my baby.” *(Afghan national)*

“Sometimes I feel weak here because of my language. I cannot speak the language here.” *(Afghan national)*

“Because I am illiterate, I did not realise the bill arriving at my letterbox was to be paid by me, so my benefit was cut as a result, and I had to ask for help to sort it out.” *(Afghan national)*



5. Access to services

Another issue raised was feelings of isolation in the early months and the importance of ensuring access to comprehensive support. The provision of tailored assistance for specific groups is also important, such as for individuals with children or children attempting to acclimate to schools while grappling with a lack of English language proficiency.

We heard that adequate funding and resource to enable support services to meet needs was a key issue.



“A lot of people have a lot of issues with housing, with their benefits, filling [in] form. I think one of the biggest challenges for them was coming to a completely new system that was basically designed for Kiwis, for English-speaking people ... It was one of the biggest realities that these families had to face.” (Support service)

“Women, especially mothers, need more support. Domestic responsibilities often mean that it is more difficult for women/mothers to access resettlement support, such as English classes, health care, and mental health support. Youth (aged 14-24) arriving in New Zealand as part of this group need additional support to adapt to life in New Zealand.” (Support service)

“It’s very difficult for all of us who live in New Zealand ... Nobody is here for help. We don’t have a job ... we don’t know how to go to work, to go shopping, to go to the doctor. You know, a lot of women have very problems here, their children become sick and they don’t know what [to do].” (Afghan national)



6. Mental health support

The need for comprehensive mental health support was a key issue raised. The circumstances of evacuation were often dangerous, very sudden and meant people had to leave many things behind including possessions, work, family and community support. Many people mentioned directly or indirectly how they or people they know struggle with mental health. Women in particular spoke openly about mental distress caused by worrying about family members left behind and the pressure they feel to bring them to safety, as well as depression and frustration when realising that they have lost their social and professional status as professionals.



“My mother has mental health issues because of the pressures that she is facing involving my brothers in Afghanistan. She thinks a lot about my brother certainly. And now her blood pressure is much higher. And she takes medicine all day.” (Afghan national)

“I was really sick in the hotel because [of] the hardship at the airport. I was in a bad mental situation, and nobody came to check about my mental health.” (Afghan national)

“For the first few months we had no option of referring ... so we were having the burden of people saying to us severe mental health risks ... And then we’re trying to support them into a system where people don’t understand the cultural needs, where it was very clunky to get counselling support ... It was very hard.” (Support service)

“Because there’s a lot of issues, loss and grief, trauma issues. Some families left their children behind and there are children who left their parents behind. They have come under very emergency circumstances.” (Support service)



7. Support to study and work

Challenges in securing meaningful employment were noted, with people requesting more opportunities, including integration of their skills with relevant opportunities and employment.



“I applied, near my house there is a tyre changing, they change tyres. When I suggested that I work with you, they asked me, ‘do you have experience?’ I don’t have any experience. So they refuse.... So I went to the petrol station to work here. So they refuse, you don’t have that experience.” *(Afghan national with engineering expertise)*

“[You hear] in the news, New Zealand and Australia need more than 5,000 skilled workers. But right now, we are here, [but] no one gets the job.” *(Afghan national)*

“Everyone has that kind of qualification, like either it’s an electrician or a teacher, or a doctor. ... The New Zealand Government should support them, they should be in the relevant fields to do the certifications and in the meantime, they should provide and facilitate some jobs, or give them some opportunity to work in that sector. So, at least the minimum wage they can afford and they will be still in sectors that they are proficient in.” *(Afghan national)*

“There’s so much knowledge, talent, skills among the group that if they don’t nurture it, if we don’t preserve it, we’re gonna lose it.” *(Support service)*



8. Access to family reunification

The most common request from participants was regarding family reunification. We heard people had left behind immediate or extended family members who they felt were not safe. For example, because of the participant's association with them and their past engagement with forces, and/or the current situation with Taliban restrictions for women and girls and overall human rights restrictions.



"I know there are a lot of records the Taliban have ... that one day it will happen to my brothers, that they asked my brothers either to join the military, the Taliban, or they will take some revenge." (Afghan national)

"I'm happy here because the New Zealand Government saved my life and provided community services here. I'm worried about my husband left behind." (Afghan national)

"The main difference we see is a heightened level of distress around family members who remain in Afghanistan and the hopelessness around not having any pathways for family reunification. It sets this group apart from quota and convention refugees, and creates a sense of unfairness for this group." (Support service)



Recommendations

1. All people who are resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons should have access to quality assistance and support, whether they arrive here as refugees, asylum seekers or on special humanitarian visas.

Regardless of the specific pathway, it is essential that every individual resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons receives quality, comprehensive assistance and support. This should be based on past experiences and reports, including the *Safe Start, Fair Future* report.⁵ This approach acknowledges that every person's journey is unique, but the shared goal is to provide all people with the tools and resources they need to successfully navigate the process of resettlement. This doesn't mean there can't be bespoke programmes. Indeed, effective support must take an intersectional approach and will often require different or tailored services to suit individual needs. However, what's important is that all people resettling for humanitarian reasons have access to important services, such as housing, health care, education and opportunities for employment.

2. An effective crisis evacuation and resettlement model should be established and resourced so that the New Zealand Government can use this when needed to respond to humanitarian crises or an unplanned intake of refugees.

The New Zealand Government should develop and implement an effective evacuation and resettlement model for future humanitarian emergency crises. The model should be developed with people who have lived experience and with relevant community groups. It should be based on the evaluation of existing processes as well as past experiences and reports, such as *Safe Start, Fair Future*.⁶ It should also include partnering with and enabling community groups and people with lived experience to help design, lead and deliver programmes and support. It's important that this work takes an intersectional approach and considers how policies and ability to access a service may impact people differently.

It's also important that individual or family visa application processes are user-friendly, accessible, culturally appropriate and available in multiple languages and dialects, including those spoken by the groups and communities who are most likely to apply for them. Furthermore, any visa application fees should be affordable and realistic, considering the crisis situation potential applicants might be facing. Where possible, fees should be waived as it is foreseeable that applicants may not be able to access their money or cannot afford to pay.

⁵ Ferns, M., Stephens, M., Sama, B. N., Maurice, T., Perinpanayagam, U., Stocker, F., Malihi, Z., & Marlowe, J. (2022). 'Safe Start. Fair Future: Refugee Equality'. Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies and Asylum Seeker Support Trust, February. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/content/dam/uoa/education/hattie/docs/Safe%20Start,%20Fair%20Future%20Report.pdf>

⁶ *ibid*

3. Individuals and families resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons should receive a comprehensive orientation programme soon after their arrival.

This orientation should include an introduction to Aotearoa New Zealand generally, including Te Tiriti o Waitangi and other key political and social features, as well as available support services. There should be multiple opportunities to participate in the orientation programme, especially as some people may struggle to retain information when it is first offered due to a variety of stressors, including trauma and language barriers.

4. Access to family reunification should be offered to individuals and families who resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons.

The government should provide effective access to family reunification to individuals and families who resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand as a result of an international crisis or for humanitarian reasons.

5. Opportunities for further education and career development should be available and accessible for individuals and families who resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons.

The government should work with educational and professional institutions and associations to explore simplifying entry/professional requirements and/or supporting access.

Initial resettlement support should include education and career advice based on an individual's education and professional background. Proactive support should also be provided to help people move into further learning or work, for example, through professional development programmes, paid internship programmes, and funded professional associations memberships.

6. Comprehensive health, mental health and social support should be provided for individuals and families who resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons.

The government should ensure the provision of effective, bespoke, culturally responsive and trauma-informed health, mental health, and social support services during the resettlement process, and offer as much extended support as needed. This support must include access to interpreters of local dialects to assist with appointments and bookings.

Access to cultural diversity training should be provided for health, mental health, support and social work professionals involved in providing support during the resettlement process, and in any provision of extended support.

7. Work with people most impacted when developing policy and responding to crises.

When developing policy, including responding to crises, it is crucial that the government works with people who have lived experience and with organisations who support these people. Their experience is highly valuable and should be considered for future evacuation and resettlement processes.

Acknowledgments

Our heartfelt thanks to all people interviewed for this project, particularly to those who shared their experience of resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand. We truly appreciate your time and generosity in contributing your experiences and insights. We also extend our thanks to Dr. Evangelia Papoutsaki and Anusha Bhana for their dedicated work in bringing this project together. Thank you to Te Noho Kotahitanga marae for offering a welcoming and secure environment for interviews and focus groups.

Appendix: Key findings with recommendations

Key finding	Comprehensive strategy needed		Orientation	Access to housing	English language classes	Access to services & isolation	Mental health support	Support to study & work	Access to family reunification
Recommendation	All people who are resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons should have access to quality assistance and support, whether they arrive here as refugees, asylum seekers or on special humanitarian visas.	An effective crisis evacuation and resettlement model should be established and resourced so that the New Zealand Government can use this when needed to respond to humanitarian crises or an unplanned intake of refugees.	Individuals and families resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons should receive a comprehensive orientation programme soon after their arrival.	Comprehensive health, mental health and social support should be provided for individuals and families who resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons.				Opportunities for further education and career development should be available and accessible for individuals and families who resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons.	Access to family reunification should be offered to individuals and families who resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand for humanitarian reasons.