

Government reforms intimidation scheme to relocate more Afghan staff under threat

The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy will be introduced next year to reflect the changing situation in Afghanistan. It will offer relocation to current and former employees such as embassy support staff, those in political or counter-terrorism roles, or cultural advisors who could face threats related to their occupation.

The move follows the recent expansion of a separate scheme to relocate Afghan interpreters in recognition of the government's gratitude for their service.

Under the new scheme, anyone facing imminent risk such as intimidation or threat to life will be offered priority relocation regardless of their employment status, rank or role, or length of time served.

This could see hundreds of brave locally employed staff and their families come to the UK.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

Nobody's life should be put at risk because they supported the UK Government to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan.

As the situation in the region evolves, it is only right we do more to protect local citizens who stood shoulder to shoulder with our armed forces.

As a former soldier I know the bond between the brothers who fight by our side. These Afghans stood by us and risked their lives to make a better country. We owe them a debt and I am proud that the Home Secretary and I can finally close this chapter and thank them for their service.

The new intimidation scheme will be administered by a specialist team based in Kabul, the Intimidation Investigations Unit, which was set up to assist and support local staff who are threatened as a result of their work with the UK. The UK is the only nation with such a permanent expert team.

The scheme will operate under a tiered approach, with high risk local staff who face imminent threat to be relocated urgently. Local staff who are in the public eye and who could be at risk as the security situation evolves will be relocated to the UK on a routine basis, and those not eligible to move will be offered other support such as security advice and relocation within Afghanistan.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

We owe an immense debt of gratitude to the brave individuals who have worked side by side with our Armed Forces in Afghanistan.

I am proud that through this new scheme we can provide further support and sanctuary to these courageous men and women.

The Afghan Relocations and Assistance scheme will run alongside the existing Ex-Gratia Scheme, which offers relocation to the UK for Afghan interpreters who served a minimum of 12 months on the frontline before resigning or being made redundant.

The Ex-Gratia Scheme was established in recognition of the UK Government's gratitude for the service of Afghan interpreters, rather than any risk they may face.

It will run until November 2022, at which point the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy will be the single track route for relocation.

To date, over 1,400 Afghans and their families have relocated to the UK under the Ex-Gratia scheme, while hundreds more received funding for education and training.

Legislation for the new scheme will be introduced in April through changes to the Home Office Immigration Rules.

The Ministry of Defence and the Home Office will continue to seek ways to go further to support this cohort and others who have supported the British Armed Forces.

[UK and Turkey sign trade deal](#)

- The UK and Turkey secure trade agreement in major win for UK automotive, manufacturing and steel industries.
- Today's deal supports a trading partnership worth £18.6 billion last year.
- The agreement lays the groundwork for a more ambitious UK Turkey trade relationship in the future.

The UK-Turkey Free Trade Agreement was signed today as International Trade Secretary Liz Truss and Turkey's Minister for Trade, Ruhsar Pekcan, met on a video call.

The deal will secure existing preferential tariffs for the 7,600 UK businesses that exported goods to Turkey in 2019, ensuring the continued

tariff-free flow of goods and protecting vital UK-Turkey supply chains in the automotive and manufacturing sectors.

Both countries have also committed to working towards a more ambitious free trade agreement in the future, which will go further than the existing deal and will be tailored to the UK economy.

Today's agreement will ensure preferential trading terms for UK businesses that exported more than £1bn worth of machinery, and iron and steel exports worth £575m, to Turkey in 2019.

It also ensures UK businesses can continue to import under preferential tariffs, compared with no agreement. This supports UK importers of textiles, where the annual increase in estimated duties would have been around £102m under WTO terms. Tariffs applied to UK imports of washing machines and televisions will remain at 0%, compared to up to 2% and 14% respectively under WTO terms.

Vital UK-Turkey supply chains will also be protected for automotive manufacturers, such as Ford, which employs 7,500 people in the UK. Car parts are imported from the UK to Turkey to assemble the Ford Transit range of vehicles, a third of which are then exported to the UK. In 2019, UK car exports to Turkey were worth £174m.

In under two years we have now reached agreement with 62 countries – and the European Union – to cover £885 billion of UK trade.

This is unprecedented, with no other country ever negotiating so many trade deals simultaneously. The Government's ambition is to secure free trade agreements with countries that cover 80% of UK trade within three years.

"Today's deal covers trade worth more than £18 billion, delivers vital certainty for business and supports thousands of jobs across the UK in the manufacturing, automotive and steel industries.

"It paves the way for a new, more ambitious deal with Turkey in the near future, and is part of our plan to put the UK at the centre of a network of modern agreements with dynamic economies. More trade and investment will drive economic growth across our United Kingdom and help us build back stronger from Covid."

"Ford welcomes the announcement today of a trade agreement between the UK and Turkey, and the speed with which it has been concluded underscores its importance to the economic prosperity of both countries.

"As Europe's leading commercial vehicle brand, Ford's Dagenham engine manufacturing facility in east London exports much of its diesel engine production to our Ford Otosan joint venture in Turkey where the engines are fitted into Ford Transit vehicles, many of which are then exported from Turkey to the UK.

"Given that Ford and Ford Otosan business constitutes more than 10 per cent of the total trade volume between the UK and Turkey, this trade agreement is

extremely significant for us and will help to secure jobs in both countries.”

“This agreement will maintain bilateral trade worth over £18bn and will shore up key supply chains across many industries after a year of disruption.

“Turkey’s customs union with the EU made a trade deal with the UK complicated, but the pace at which the deal has been finalised following the negotiated EU deal shows the strength and depth of the relationship.

“Businesses and government must now look to growth, creating the trading relationships which will build a competitive, dynamic and progressive future economy.”

2,700 tax returns sent in on Christmas Day

The Self Assessment deadline is on 31 January 2021. Customers can complete their tax returns online ahead of the deadline at a time that suits them. Every year, HMRC sees thousands of customers using the festive period to get their documents in order and complete the task.

On Christmas Day, the peak time for completing tax returns was 14:00 to 14:59, with more than 200 customers pressing send on their online form.

Once Self Assessment customers have completed their 2019 to 2020 tax return, and know how much tax is owed, they can set up their own payment plan to help spread the cost of their tax liabilities, up to the value of £30,000. They can use the self-serve Time to Pay facility to set up monthly direct debits online. Interest will be applied to any outstanding balance from 1 February 2021.

To find out if they are eligible, customers can [visit GOV.UK to find out more about the service](#).

Karl Khan, HMRC’s Interim Director General for Customer Services, said:

Online Self Assessment means customers can do their tax returns at any time, day or night – even on Christmas Day if they want to.

We’re here to help customers get their tax right, and there’s support available 24/7 like help sheets, webinars and YouTube videos. Search ‘Self Assessment’ on GOV.UK to find out more.

In total, 31,400 customers completed their 2019 to 2020 tax returns between 24 and 26 December:

- Christmas Eve: 20,200 tax returns were filed – the peak time for filing was 11:00 to 11:59 when 2,892 returns were received
- Christmas Day: 2,700 tax returns were filed – the peak time for filing was 14:00 to 14:59 when 214 returns were received
- Boxing Day: 8,500 tax returns were filed – the peak time for filing was 15:00 to 15:59 when 858 returns were received

Be aware of copycat HMRC websites and phishing scams. Customers should always type in the full online address www.gov.uk/hmrc to get the correct link for their Self Assessment tax return online securely and free of charge. They also need to be alert if someone calls, emails or texts claiming to be from HMRC, saying that they can claim financial help, are due a tax refund or owe tax. It might be a scam.

Check GOV.UK for information on how to:

Further information

The comparative data for the 2018 to 2019 tax year is:

- Christmas Eve: 22,000 tax returns filed, with 3,612 filing between 11:00 to 11:59
- Christmas Day: 3,000 tax returns filed, with 245 filing between 12:00 to 12:59
- Boxing Day: 9,200 tax returns filed, with 946 filing between 12:00 to 12:59

Full guidance on Self Assessment is available at: www.gov.uk/selfassessment

Help and support is available to customers completing their Self Assessment tax return. A list of available resources can be found:

If a customer's Self Assessment debts are over £30,000, or they need longer than 12 months to pay their debt in full, they may still be able to set up a Time to Pay arrangement by calling the Self Assessment Payment Helpline on 0300 200 3822.

To protect against identity fraud customers must verify their identity when accessing HMRC's online services. They must have 2 sources of information including:

- credit reference agency data
- tax credits
- P60/payslip
- UK Passport

Follow the National Cyber Security Centre's 6 essential steps to keep yourself and your business secure online by visiting CyberAware.gov.uk.

Military to support the testing of thousands of secondary school and college students in England

The personnel are on standby to support secondary schools and colleges across England to roll out COVID-19 testing to students and staff as the new term begins in January.

The armed forces deployment across England builds on successful school testing pilots conducted in November and December. Personnel supported thousands of tests being carried out at pilot schools, demonstrating the value of lateral flow devices rapidly testing students in a school environment.

1,500 UK Armed Forces personnel are being made available to support the Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care to ensure that students and staff can return as safely as possible to secondary schools and colleges across England.

The majority of personnel will form local response teams, providing support and phone advice to institutions needing guidance on the testing process and set-up of the testing facilities.

This will be done predominantly through webinars and individual meetings, but teams will also be on standby to deploy at short notice to provide in-person support to resolve any issues in the situations where testing would otherwise not be able to go ahead. Schools and colleges will shortly be provided with further information on how to request additional support if needed.

A small team of planners is embedded in the Department for Health and Social care who are supporting the Department for Education to help coordinate the support. The majority of personnel will be on task from this week as they start to conduct training.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

The UK Armed Forces are stepping up once again this holiday. This week I have authorised over a thousand Armed Forces personnel to assist schools returning after the Christmas break.

They'll share considerable experience of testing across the country

and the successful school pilots conducted this autumn.

We are grateful for the professionalism and commitment they and our colleagues in teaching are showing to get students back into the classroom and on with their education.

Every secondary school and college in England is being offered testing, with £78 million funding for schools and colleges to support this offer.

As well as additional funding, the government will provide schools and colleges with the kit they need and have introduced a staggered return at the start of term.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

It is a true cross-government effort to make sure secondary schools and colleges have the support, guidance, materials and funding they need to offer rapid testing to their staff and students from the start of term.

I am grateful to the armed forces personnel, and all the school and college staff, leaders and volunteers working to put testing in place. This will help break chains of transmission, fight the virus, and help deliver the national priority of keeping education open for all.

Students will be expected to swab themselves in the vast majority of cases, under the supervision of a school staff member or volunteer who has been trained for the role. Teachers are not expected to take a role in the testing process.

This support is being provided through the Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) process. There are currently around 2914 personnel committed to 55 tasks to support other government departments and civil authorities with the response to coronavirus. This includes support with community testing across the UK, the provision of ambulance drivers in Wales and testing support for hauliers in Kent.

[Jenrick calls for community](#)

togetherness to combat loneliness

The government has announced a £7.5 million funding package to help tackle loneliness over the winter period, supporting sectors that are well known for bringing people and communities together such as the arts, libraries, charities and radio.

With millions of people now under the new Tier 4 COVID-19 restrictions due to the spread of a new variant, Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick has thanked those who are continuing to spread festive cheer and tackling loneliness, while urging us all to look out for our neighbours.

Two schemes have been highlighted as going that extra mile:

- Poole Housing Partnership which established a call service for older and vulnerable residents to enjoy regular chats with friendly volunteers.
- Your Homes Newcastle was also praised for delivering homemade Christmas meals to their older residents to spread the festive cheer.

These are just two examples of vital work by housing associations to tackle the social effects of COVID-19 across England since the government launched its 'Charter for Social Housing Residents' last month.

These landmark reforms will improve the lives of residents by giving them a much greater voice and more power to hold landlords to account, and help them to establish strong networks to combat social isolation and loneliness.

Communities Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

None of us have ever known a Christmas like this. While we may have had smaller and quieter Christmases than normal, for some people this Christmas will have been especially hard – and very lonely. That's why I'm encouraging people to find other ways to reach out virtually and help combat loneliness – by picking up the phone or writing a letter, for example.

Let's all do what we can to connect with our older neighbours – in a Covid-secure way – so they feel less alone and know how valuable they are to their communities at this difficult time.

The charity Age UK estimates that there are approximately 1.4 million chronically lonely older people in England.

The government has been working to tackle loneliness during the pandemic. Over £24 million of the £750 million charity funding package has gone directly towards reducing loneliness, and a further £45 million to organisations supporting people with their mental health.

In June the government relaunched its long-running campaign, Let's Talk

Loneliness. If you're lonely or looking to help others, there is lots of helpful advice and support on the [Let's Talk Loneliness website](#).

The government has also announced it will launch a new campaign to highlight the Charter for Social Housing Residents in February 2021. The campaign will highlight what the changes will mean for residents and how they can access support.

Poole Housing Partnership

Poole Housing Partnership (PHP) has been working to support their residents through the pandemic.

They put in place a call service in which vulnerable residents received regular phone calls to check in on their wellbeing and signpost them to supporting agencies such as the council volunteer service or onto the NHS.

One resident named Chris asked whether they could call other people rather than just receiving a call from PHP. Other residents agreed it was a great idea and that it would hopefully lead to new friendships. PHP now has 25 befrienders who each call between 5 to 10 people a week, and the numbers keep growing.

PHP has a long-standing relationship with Fareshare which operates out of 13 PHP hubs across Poole. Run by residents for residents, Fareshare ran a café service that had to close last March due to social distancing requirements.

With support from PHP to source equipment, the Fareshare service transformed itself into a food delivery service and has been creating food parcels and meals for over 150 households each week. PHP residents cook the food and PHP staff and other residents deliver it to those who normally attended the café service or to those we had been identified on the calls as in need.

This has gone some way to tackling loneliness with residents increasingly involved in leading or supporting the food services.

Your Homes Newcastle

Food Nation, a food charity based in Newcastle, applied to YHN's Community Investment Fund to deliver group cooking sessions to help bring people together who were socially isolated so they could spend time in company and develop new skills.

The pandemic meant that couldn't go ahead in person, so their volunteers are cooking meals themselves and delivering them along with a socially distanced chat.

Additionally, one of YHN's Board member's children and their classmates wanted to write cards for older people who might not receive one otherwise. The Board member contacted YHN's housing manager, Helen, and her staff identified double the number of people to the cards available.

Helen contacted her daughter's school, and her class made cards for the

remaining half. YHN staff are going to support the older people to write thank you letters to the children, as they don't often have people to write to either.