

# **Policy Analysis of the UK's 2025 Refugee Family Reunion Halt and Its Implications**

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### **Executive summary**

In September 2025, the UK government introduced a “temporary” suspension of new applications under the Refugee Family Reunion (RFR) route in response to administrative pressure and rising asylum costs (Cornwall Council, 2025). This brief evaluates the suspension’s legal, administrative, and humanitarian implications using public health research, migration data, and comparative European practice.

This analysis finds that although the suspension may relieve short-term administrative pressures, it carries substantial risks and shifts away from family unity being a core element of refugee protection. These impacted refugee mental health, integration outcomes, and increased legal vulnerability under domestic and international human-rights law. The brief concludes that suspending refugee family reunion is a policy choice rather than an operational necessity.

### **Introduction**

On 4 September 2025, the UK government introduced a temporary suspension of new applications under the Refugee Family Reunion (RFR) route as part of wider asylum and immigration reforms. Applications submitted after 15:00 BST on that date are no longer accepted, while cases sent before the deadline, including those under appeal, continue to be processed under the existing rules in force prior to the suspension (Cornwall Council, 2025). The policy was introduced as part of wider asylum and immigration reforms, with the Minister of State at the Home Office justifying the temporary pause by reference to immediate and “unsustainable pressures on local authorities and public services”, particularly linked to the timing and housing impacts of refugee family reunion arrivals (Lord Hanson of Flint, 2025).

Although described as temporary, the suspension of Appendix Family Reunion has been implemented pending review, with no end date specified in the Immigration Rules (Home Office, 2026). In the interim, refugees seeking to reunite with close family members may apply under standard family migration routes such as Appendix FM. However, these routes impose financial and administrative

requirements, including income and language thresholds, which have been widely identified as difficult for newly recognised refugees to meet (Jorgensen, 2025).

As the policy was newly implemented, this brief evaluates whether the suspension is proportionate to its stated aims and whether it is likely to produce more harm than benefit. It argues that pausing a dedicated humanitarian route represents a significant departure from the principle of family unity, long recognised as central to refugee protection. By shifting refugee families into standard migration pathways, the policy raises procedural thresholds that effectively exclude many of the people the RFR route was designed to protect.

Evidence from migration studies consistently shows that prolonged family separation can have significant social and economic consequences, including lower employment rates and slower integration into host societies (Jorgensen, N., & Walsh, P. W., 2025). NGO research highlights the psychological and emotional toll of separation, reporting increased anxiety and stress among individuals unable to reunite with their families (British Red Cross, 2025). From this perspective, the suspension could hinder its own efficiency goals by potentially increasing future social and health costs.

From a legal standpoint, the policy raises concerns under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and relevant principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all of which protect the right to family life (Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 2021; UNHCR, 2025). The absence of individualised assessment and the indefinite nature of the pause increase the risk of disproportionate interference with these rights and may cause significant distress for affected individuals, particularly children and vulnerable family members (EHRC, 2021; UNHCR, 2025). International guidance emphasises that states have a legal responsibility to provide policies towards timely and dignified family reunification, and prolonged separation can hinder both the right to family life and the well-being of refugees (UNHCR, 2025).

Supported by UK and European comparative data, this brief examines the legal basis of the suspension, its impacts on refugee wellbeing and integration, and its policy implications. It concludes by proposing targeted reforms that could better connect administrative objectives with fundamental rights and governance effectiveness.

## **Policy context and evolution**

### ***Legal and administrative meaning of the suspension***

The government amended Appendix FM, the standard family migration route, to allow partners and children of people with protection status to apply. Appendix FM is primarily designed for general migration rather than humanitarian protection and sets requirements such as financial thresholds, English-language ability, and housing criteria (Home Office, 2025b). These requirements can present significant challenges for refugees and others with protection status, who may lack documentation, have fled conflict, or face difficulties in meeting the standard evidence criteria. As the guidance notes, evidence may be missing or unobtainable due to circumstances such as fleeing persecution, losing documents during displacement, or the absence of functioning administrative authorities in the country of origin (Home Office, 2025b).

### ***Historical evolution of UK family reunion policy***

#### **2015-2020: Pre-Brexit family migration**

Between 2015 and 2020, the UK's family migration system included routes for refugees and other migrants to join family members in the UK. Refugee family reunion allowed close relatives of those granted asylum or humanitarian protection to enter the UK, with over 90% of family members being women and children (Jorgensen, N., & Walsh, P. W., 2025). Outside of refugee cases, family unification visas allowed partners and children of British or settled residents to migrate to the UK. These domestic family reunion routes formed the main legal pathways for family migration during this period.

#### **2021-2023: The New Plan for Immigration**

The Home Office's New Plan for Immigration changed family reunion policy toward stricter eligibility requirements and migration management rather than being an automatic humanitarian entitlement. In particular, the April 2024 increase in the Minimum Income Requirement means many UK residents are now unable to sponsor partners unless they meet higher income thresholds (Jorgensen, N., & Walsh, P. W., 2025), reflecting tighter control of family migration.

## 2024-2025: Backlogs and deterrence framing

By early 2025, the UK asylum system faced a significant backlog, with tens of thousands of cases still unresolved showing ongoing inefficiencies in processing claims (Sandford, 2025). At the same time, family reunion was increasingly discussed by policymakers as a potential pull factor, although evidence of its influence on migration decisions among refugees remains limited. Proposals to introduce stricter requirements for alternative family migration routes, such as income and language thresholds, indicated a broader policy approach aimed at reducing pressures on public services (Home Office, 2025a).

### *Policy rationale and critiques*

#### Government rationale:

1. The Home Office argues that pausing refugee family reunion (RFR) applications allows resources to be redirected toward clearing asylum backlogs and easing strain on local authorities, while also aligning the family migration system across migrant categories to reduce public service pressures and manage public expenditure (Home Office, 2025a).
2. The suspension was justified in part by concerns that the route could be exploited by smuggling networks (ITV News, 2025). Implicit in this policy is the assumption that limiting legal family routes may reduce incentives for irregular migration.

#### Critiques from NGOs and experts:

NGOs and humanitarian organisations have criticized the UK government's suspension and proposed tightening of refugee family reunion. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) emphasizes that family unity is both a legal obligation and a practical necessity in refugee protection. States have a responsibility to ensure refugees can safely reunite with their families, providing managed and regular routes that protect individuals from harm (UNHCR, 2025). UNHCR also exemplifies practical barriers to family reunion, including requirements for biometrics, and stresses that procedures must be flexible and fast, taking into account refugees' limited resources and precarious circumstances (UNHCR, 2024). The agency warns that restricting legal pathways for family reunification can compel refugees to undertake irregular and dangerous journeys, often exposing them to exploitation and life-threatening risks (UNHCR, 2025).

## **Wellbeing, integration and public health effects**

### ***Psychological and emotional health impacts***

The *Safe, Not Settled* study, conducted by Migration Yorkshire in partnership with the Refugee Council and Oxfam, explored the experiences of 44 refugee families in the UK. The study found that anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges were common, and that these were often linked to uncertainty over whether family reunification would occur (Refugee Council, & Oxfam, 2018). For many families, the absence of loved ones impedes their ability to focus on integration activities, such as learning English, while feelings of guilt and worry about relatives' wellbeing worsened psychological distress. The study also highlighted that when family reunion was eventually achieved, it accelerated integration and eased settlement for newly arriving family members.

The British Red Cross highlights that between September 2025 and April 2026, around 4,900 families, including 6,300 children, 1,500 of whom are unaccompanied, could remain separated, exposing them to significant emotional distress and, in some cases, life-threatening situations (British Red Cross, 2025). The charity emphasizes that family reunification is essential for the wellbeing and integration of refugees, and warns that stricter conditions may worsen harm to already vulnerable individuals (British Red Cross, 2025).

The UNHCR (2025) report on *Refugee Family Reunion: Why it Matters* explains that effective reunification procedures help refugees heal from trauma, reduce the need to rely on unsafe migration routes, and provide stability for resettled families. The UNHCR Executive Committee has consistently recognized family unity as a fundamental right and has called on states to establish mechanisms that protect and maintain the unity of refugee families (UNHCR, 2023).

### ***Social and economic integration***

Family networks provide childcare, emotional support, housing stability, and informal economic assistance. Refugees without family support often struggle to engage in employment, education, community life, and are more likely to require ongoing support from local authorities.

In contrast, family reunion is associated with improved wellbeing, as migrants who settle with their families are more likely to achieve economic stability and positively contribute to

communities (Jorgensen, N., & Walsh, P. W., 2025). Data points to higher employment rates and lower reliance on public assistance. By diverting applicants into Appendix FM, the suspension disproportionately affects those with limited income and language skills, precisely the refugees who benefit most from family support during early settlement.

### ***Public health and legal coherence***

Prolonged separation from caregivers can put children at risk of developing toxic stress, which happens when their bodies remain in a constant state of stress due to a lack of supportive adults. (Nelson et al., 2020). This stress response can disrupt the development of multiple organ systems, including the cardiovascular, metabolic, and immune systems, increasing the likelihood of long-term physical health problems. In addition, children exposed to such adversity are at higher risk of mental health challenges, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and behavioral difficulties, which may increase demand on mental health services, particularly in communities where resources are already limited.

Under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, any interference with family life must be justified and necessarily proportionate (Desmond, 2018, p. 5-6). In migration contexts, the European Court of Human Rights assesses whether applicants have actual family life and whether any interference is reasonable; failure to consider the individual circumstances of a family, including its structure or dependency relationships, can raise serious proportionality concerns and expose policies to legal challenge (Desmond, 2018, p. 48-59). While international refugee law does not mandate specific family reunion quotas, it recognises family unity as a fundamental protection principle, as affirmed by the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2025). UNHCR's UK office has emphasised the importance of flexible procedures that take into account refugees' limited capacity to meet standard migration requirements, ensuring safe and timely family reunification (UNHCR, 2024).

## **Strengths, risks, and trade-offs of the suspension**

### ***Policy strengths***

- The pause may temporarily ease processing pressures, allowing the Home Office to address existing backlogs.
- The suspension creates an opportunity to review family migration rules, aiming for a fairer, more transparent system that supports family unity (Cornwall Council, 2025).
- Aligning refugee routes with general migration rules helps ensure long-term sustainability for the system.

### ***Policy risks***

- Prolonged family separation can cause lasting psychological and emotional harm, hindering the long-term goals of safety and resettlement.
- Reduced family support may negatively impact integration and increase reliance on welfare services.
- Any short-term administrative savings could be outweighed by higher long-term costs to health and social services.
- The suspension risks legal challenges on human rights grounds, particularly if refugee families argue that individual assessments were skipped.

### ***Comparative context***

Germany demonstrates how migration policy design can be tailored to balance integration needs with humanitarian considerations. The 2016 Integration Act includes measures such as assigning places of residence to avoid over-concentration of refugees, waiving labor market priority checks for certain groups, and offering integration classes with flexible attendance rules. These policies illustrate that procedural responses can be targeted to support refugees' integration, rather than applying rigid, uniform rules (Gesley, 2016)

In the Netherlands, courts intervened to uphold access to family reunification against administrative restrictions. In February 2023, the Dutch Council of State ruled that linking family-reunion visas to the sponsor's housing situation was unlawful. The government subsequently removed the condition, ensuring that refugees could obtain visas for their family

members without having to first secure housing, addressing the temporary barrier that had slowed reunification amid a housing shortage (Van der Burg, 2023).

These cases show that while some states may temporarily restrict family reunification during periods of migration pressure, they include exceptions or legal safeguards that maintain access to family unity, offering a more balanced alternative to the UK's suspension.

### **Policy recommendations**

To balance administrative concerns with humanitarian obligations, this brief recommends:

- Reinstating humanitarian exemptions with clear criteria based on vulnerability, dependency, and child welfare (aligned with UNHCR 2024 guidance on family reunification)
- Integrating wellbeing metrics using psychosocial assessments to guide proportionality decisions and referrals; strengthening government coordination by establishing a Refugee Family Unity Taskforce across the Home Office, DHSC, and local authorities
- Streamlining procedural barriers by reducing financial and language requirements and enabling flexible biometric submissions via accredited third parties where UK visa centres are unavailable (UNHCR, 2024)
- Publishing transparent processing timelines to enhance predictability and public confidence
- Preparing family migration reform using the 2025 review to design a sustainable system balancing capacity, protection, and integration outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

The 2025 suspension of the Refugee Family Reunion route represents a significant move in UK asylum policy. While being a temporary administrative measure, it rather points to a broader move toward deterrence-oriented governance. Evidence from public health, migration studies, and international law suggests that the human and long-term costs of family separation outweigh short-term efficiency goals.

The government's commitment to review is an opportunity not merely to pause but to reassess. By adopting targeted exemptions, integrating wellbeing considerations, and reforming procedures, the UK can pursue an approach that is both administratively effective and consistent with its legal and moral obligations.

In doing so, the UK would demonstrate that migration governance can be firm without unintentionally being harmful, and efficient without abandoning family unity as the core of refugee protection.

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