Global Background

By the end of 2020, 82.4 million people across the world had been forced to leave their homes because of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations. The world’s forcibly displaced population has never been larger.

Only a small minority of refugees arrive in the world’s developed countries. The great majority of refugees live in the countries of the Global South and close to their countries of origin. The number of new refugees fleeing to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea has significantly declined since 2015. Just under 60,000 refugees made the dangerous journey between January and August 2021. But across Europe many hundreds of thousands of refugees are stranded and in limbo, living in unacceptable conditions in different European countries with their futures, resettlement plans and legal status unclear.

Being forced to flee tears families apart and makes family reunion an urgent humanitarian priority. In 2020 children made up 42% of the world’s displaced people but only 30% of the world’s population and 69,010 children made new asylum claims in Europe during the first six months of 2020 alone. All children have their right to family life guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, yet this is far from being universally respected.

The number of people claiming asylum in the UK is low compared with other countries and is declining. The UK had 26,903 asylum claims in the year up to March 2021 compared with just over 76,000 in Germany, a number which is also declining. Around two thirds of the people claiming asylum in the UK will finally be granted refugee status.

Between January and June 2021, it is estimated that 3,500 people made the dangerous journey to the UK across the English Channel in small boats following more than 8,000 arriving by this route during 2020. This is less than one third of the total number of people who claimed asylum in the UK in 2020. The increasing use made of the highly dangerous cross-Channel sea route is a direct consequence of other routes, for example the Channel Tunnel, being made more difficult.

At the time of writing, it is unclear what the effects of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 will be on both resettlement programmes and movements of refugees by land and sea. However, many refugee organisations in the UK began immediately preparing for a larger number of new arrivals and launched campaigns calling for for more generous resettlement programmes.
Conditions at the overcrowded and in sanitary Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece. In September 2020 the camp was destroyed by fire, leaving almost 13,000 residents without shelter.
Photo: Giorgos Moutafis/Oxfam, November 2018

The UK

The UK sees a relatively small number of asylum applications compared with other European countries and countries in the Global South. Britain hosts fewer than 1% of the world’s refugees – a figure which is declining and is dwarfed by the numbers of refugees hosted in developing countries such as Uganda and Lebanon.

However, despite being a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the UK government places severe restrictions upon people who wish to claim asylum other than the small numbers admitted under UN resettlement schemes. These restrictions are challenged by a vibrant grassroots campaign movement. This movement and the issues it campaigns on is summarised below.

People may only claim asylum once on British soil: This forces people, including children, seeking asylum to undertake dangerous journeys to reach the UK, eg: hidden on lorries or on small boats crossing the English Channel. See [https://www.safepassage.org.uk/](https://www.safepassage.org.uk/)

People who claim asylum in the UK are prohibited from working while their claims are processed. This takes many months or even longer. People seeking asylum are required to live in allocated accommodation and are given a weekly asylum support grant of £39.63 per week to cover all their expenses other than shelter, a totally inadequate sum for dignified life. See [https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/](https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/)

People in the asylum system may be arbitrarily detained in ‘prison-like’ conditions without a trial or time limit for their release. See [https://detention.org.uk/](https://detention.org.uk/)

People finally granted refugee status to settle in the UK are limited in their right to sponsor family members to join them. For example, unaccompanied children may not be reunited with their parents. This is one factor which forces families to make the dangerous Channel crossing together. See [https://familiestogether.uk/](https://familiestogether.uk/)
Campaigning for refugee rights

Campaigning for refugee rights is fast moving and covers multiple overlapping issues. There are many campaign groups and service providers grouped together in several broad coalitions. These are summarised above, and also at the end of this document.

Campaign demands are frequently reactive, depending on the circumstances at any particular time, the legislative context and the prevailing government policy. For example, events in Afghanistan during August 2021 are already re-shaping refugee rights campaigning in the UK.

For reasons of simplicity this resource concentrates on the Families Together campaign. The Coronavirus pandemic has made us all value family more than ever before, and everyone has experienced the pain and uncertainty of being separated from loved ones. Therefore, the campaign is relevant and easily understood.

However young people may wish to research and participate in the other campaigns or devise their own.

Schools campaigning during the COVID-19 pandemic

We appreciate that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed unique restrictions on the everyday life of schools and the campaign activities young people undertake. We also believe that campaigning and civic engagement during the pandemic are good for young people’s (and adults’) wellbeing and sense of empowerment. However, campaigning should always be safe and carried out according to the COVID-19 regulations and advice in place at the time. Therefore,

- The materials in this pack are suitable for classroom use, blended learning or home learning with minimal adaptation depending on the circumstances.
- The activities may be completed face-to-face in school or online and returned to school.
- We encourage young people to meet their MPs as MP meetings are an important element of civic education and youth empowerment. However face-to-face meetings with MPs and public visits to Parliament are restricted while COVID-19 regulations remain in place. Therefore, as an alternative, we suggest writing to MPs and, where possible, arranging online meetings.

Using the resources with refugee students

These resources may be upsetting and distressing for refugee students and others personally affected by the issues raised. Therefore, please consider carefully in advance how you share them with your students.
The Families Together Campaign

The Families Together campaign has three simple demands
1. Child refugees in the UK must have the right to sponsor their close family to join them in the UK.
2. The definition of who qualifies as ‘family’ is expanded so that young people who have turned 18 and elderly parents can live in safety with their families.
3. Legal aid is reintroduced for refugees, so they have the support they need to navigate the complicated process of applying for family reunion.

The action guide for this resource provides three actions for young people and schools to organise their own Families Together message campaign.

Step 1. Learn and be well informed about Families Together
Step 2. Collect Families Together messages from your school to hand in to your MP
Step 3. Send the completed messages to your MP and ask for their support.

There is a postcard template for writing messages. Alternatively, you may use any convenient format.

Ideally, we hope young people will meet their MP face-to-face. However, this is difficult during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, young people should write to their MPs and/or arrange to meet on a virtual platform. Many MPs have been holding their Friday constituency surgery meetings online. Visit your MP’s website for more information.

The postcard template asks young people to write their first name and the name of their school. As messages will be sent to MPs, please check this is consistent with your school’s safeguarding and data policies and amend the action accordingly if required.

It is important to reach out to their MPs with their messages or post them with a covering letter. MP letter templates are included with this resource as guidelines to invite your MP to meet (online or offline) and request follow up action.
The Families Together Coalition

Oxfam is part of Families Together, a coalition of organisations campaigning together for refugee family reunification. See http://families­together.uk for more information. Coalition members with national school’s programmes include Amnesty International, the British Red Cross and the Refugee Council. However, there are many other organisations with local and regional programmes. Where possible, make your campaigning even more powerful by joining together with partner organisations.

Members of the Families Together Coalition:


This resource focuses on the Families Together campaign as we believe the right to family life is easily relatable and relevant for young people. However young people could explore and participate in the parallel campaigns listed on the next page.

In particular the Together With Refugees ‘orange heart’ schools campaign and becoming a School of Sanctuary are alternative and complementary activities to Families Together
MORE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Refugee campaign organisations and coalitions
Families Together: https://familiestogether.uk/
Together With Refugees: https://togetherwithrefugees.org.uk/
Lift The Ban: https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/
These Walls Must Fall: https://detention.org.uk/
Safe Passage: https://www.safeassage.org.uk/
Europe Must Act/Cities Must Act: https://www.europemustact.org/
City of Sanctuary [Schools of Sanctuary]: https://schools.cityofsanctuary.org/resources
The Refugee Council: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/

Information about refugees
Data about refugees quickly goes out of date. The following sources help teachers to access the latest available data. The UNHCR’s ‘Global Trends’ report is published in June every year and summarises global data for the previous year. Oxfam’s ‘Stand with Refugees’ resource contains a range of teaching ideas and the ‘Teaching Controversial Issues’ guide suggests how challenging topics can be approached sensitively and thoughtfully in the classroom.

https://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020

https://uni.cf/2YquYi7

https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html

http://uni.cf/2viuTqb

https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/

https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/stand-with-refugees

https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/teaching-controversial-issues

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