

REPAIR PROJECT

UNITED KINGDOM

LYDIA'S STORY



Lydia Cawthorne-Luff is a British Red Cross Family Reunion Case Worker in Bristol and has been supporting families with applications for the past two years.

"I've been working in this area since 2019: I started volunteering with a local charity supporting refugees in Bath, where I live, and also in Calais, then I started volunteering with the Red Cross in 2021 and joined the REPAIR project full-time in 2022.

Watching the news and seeing and hearing the way the media was talking about refugees, made me realise this was an area I wanted to work in.

Sometimes people approach us asking whether they are eligible for family reunification, and through the assessment we realise they aren't. We have to deliver that news – and it can feel like it is us, or the Red Cross, that is saying no, rather than the authorities.

Quite often there are no alternatives to suggest, and that is hard. Even if we're sharing bad news, at least it is an answer and people are no longer stuck not knowing – but it is very difficult.

Knowing that if people feel all official routes are blocked they may turn to much riskier options to try and be reunited, that's very distressing too.

It's tough, realistically people's only other route to being reunited is citizenship, which takes a very long time, has accommodation and salary requirements, and costs a huge amount. It's basically impossible for the vast majority of people we see.

A wish list of things to make the system better would be very long indeed, but at the top would be speeding up decision-making.

If family members are somewhere unstable, which is likely, their situation can change drastically very quickly. In the UK at the moment, it would be normal for a decision to take nine months – an awful lot can happen in that time. People could lose contact, they might have to find each other again, they could lose documents, people might be forced to move, they could cross into another country.

At the start of the family reunification process, people have to choose which visa centre their documents will be submitted to and collected from. If they are displaced to another country while awaiting a decision, they may never be able to collect their documents, and have to start all over again.

Just preparing the documentation for an application, takes about three months.



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BritishRedCross

To find out more about the achievements and findings of the REPAIR project – read our online report, and access our online toolkit using the QR Codes.



Online Toolkit



Online Report

A lot of challenges arrive all together: people have usually only just been granted refugee status, they're trying to access employment, housing, education, maybe they need to access health support too – they have so many important things to do at once. Being reunited with their family is their priority, but it takes time to collect all the documents, get them translated, and gather all the evidence.

For people from Eritrea, for example, it's often impossible to get documents, for Afghans too. In many countries, birth or marriage certificates just aren't issued in the first place. Even if they did exist, they may have been destroyed or lost when people were forced to flee, and it could be unrealistic, or even dangerous to approach authorities to ask for replacements.

There is no visa centre in Afghanistan, so families have to travel to Pakistan or Iran to apply, and to do that they need to cross the border. To do that they need a passport, which is difficult and expensive to get, they need a visa, and then, having crossed the border and submitted their application, they have to wait for the Home Office to make a decision, which could take nine months.

During the wait they either have to stay in Pakistan or Iran, which can be hard to do legally, or travel back to Afghanistan, but if they do that they need to cross the border again – having got another visa – to collect their documents after a decision is made. Both options are high risk, and extremely costly.

In theory, 'biometric deferral' – where fingerprints and photographs are submitted only after an application is approved – is an option, and should mean only one visit to the visa centre rather than two. This would save a lot of risk and a lot of expense, but the process for 'biometric deferral' is unclear.

Greater understanding of people's circumstances, particularly in relation to applications by parents whose children pass their 18th birthdays during the period of separation, would be another major improvement. Under current rules, children must be under 18 when applications are submitted. We had the case of a family where an application was submitted one week after a child turned 18. The application was rejected. But he was well under 18 when he was

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separated from his mother; the length of time the asylum system takes counts against families because children who were not even teenagers when they were separated might be adults by the time anyone meets the criteria to submit a reunion application.

A process for decisions to be expedited exists but the eligibility is quite unclear, as is how long an expedited case should take to be decided. Most cases we deal with involve people in countries affected by war, in active conflict zones, or other unsafe situations – the risks clearly justify having their cases expedited, especially considering how long most decisions are taking. Having clear criteria for when a request can be expedited, and an explanation and timeline of the process, would be extremely helpful.

Even with all these frustrations, working with families and knowing I am helping bring loved ones together is amazing.

The best day I ever had was accompanying a mother and her two younger children to meet her older two sons off the plane. It had been four years since the whole family had been together. We hired a minivan and were all waiting together at Heathrow for them to arrive.

The mum insisted on buying chocolates to hand out to everybody waiting at the airport, then her sons came through and everyone was crying and hugging. It was such an emotional moment, I'll never forget it.

Seeing them reunited, and now to see the family thriving, to have played a part in that is just incredible.”