

Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Dear Anne,

Safety and welfare of British children in Syria

Thank you for your letter of 11 March about the safety and welfare of British children who have become involved in the conflict in Syria. Please accept our sincere apologies that it has taken until now for you to receive a response.

The Government's priority is the safety and security of the UK and the people who live here. Since 2011, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has advised against all travel to Syria. British nationals in Syria should leave by any practical means. All services of the British Embassy in Damascus are suspended.

With regards to your first question, there is no age limitation on depriving an individual of citizenship if it is conducive to the public good to do so. However, any decisions to deprive individuals of their citizenship are based on all available evidence and not taken lightly. Cases need to be considered on their individual merits balancing the rights of the individual against the threat they may pose to individuals and communities in the UK.

On your second point, the Government recognises that there may be British children in Internally Displaced Persons camps in Syria, who because of their age, are innocent victims of the conflict. However, we have not been made aware of any UK citizens currently located in refugee camps in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey. We therefore have no current plans to make an overall assessment of numbers.

Regarding your third point, whilst we do not underestimate the tragic situation that young children are facing in Syria, the process of providing any assistance is extremely complex. However, as I (Foreign Secretary) stated in Parliament recently, where we become aware of British unaccompanied or orphaned children or if British children are able to seek consular assistance, then we will work with the local and UK authorities to facilitate their return if feasible, subject to national security concerns. We look at all

evidence to determine the child's nationality and will examine every single case where we are asked for consular assistance, but this process is far from straightforward.

The UK Government has no legal obligation to provide consular assistance, which is provided at the Foreign Secretary's discretion. Nor do we have a duty of care to British nationals, including minors, by virtue of them being overseas.

Finally, we can confirm that a small number of families with young children have returned from Syria, via third countries. Children returning from Syria are likely to have been exposed to the conflict, indoctrination, to have experienced severe trauma, and in some circumstances pose national security concerns that need to be carefully managed. A range of specialised support – some of which is funded directly by the Home Office – will be offered to address many concerns ranging from safeguarding to national security. Our support will be tailored to the needs of each individual child. These experts work with the local authority's multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (which may or may not be constituted as a Channel panel, depending on the circumstances), and all decisions regarding the child's welfare are taken on a case by case basis.

Local authorities and the police can use existing safeguarding powers to protect returning children, support their welfare and reintegration back into UK society, and minimise any threat they could pose within schools and to their local community. We work closely with local authorities to assist them with this.

Yours ever,



Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP

**Secretary of State for Foreign and
Commonwealth Affairs and
First Secretary of State**



Rt Hon Priti Patel MP

Home Secretary