



THE
BIG
AMBITION

 **CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONER**

THE BIG AMBITION FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN SEEKING ASYLUM
APRIL 2024

The Big Ambition for Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum

"Make the refugees who come from different countries feel welcome to our country." – Girl, 10.

In *The Big Ambition* children were asked what they think the Government should do to make children's lives better. In response to the Big Ambition survey a small number of children identified themselves to be unaccompanied children, however the total number of responses from this group was too few to report on in the survey results.

In the free text responses, some children indicated that they were living in temporary asylum accommodation, including hotels. One boy aged 14 who was living in asylum accommodation told the team *"I think the government should house asylum children, because it is not suitable for children to live in asylum centres/hotels"*.

To make sure the voices of as many unaccompanied children as possible were heard, the team also visited unaccompanied children where they were living to hear about what they wanted to change ahead of the next election. One young person aged 18 told us *"Over the last 3-4 months I have realised that what I want for the future is not what is out there. I want a normal life. I want to have employment, an income, to pay for my needs, to be able to purchase equipment"*.

Reflecting on what he would say to the Prime Minister if he had a chance, a young person said *"not to see the people from the outside, you need to see them from the inside. Outside we might look beautiful but inside we are broken. I was refused asylum because of the country I am from. I am not the country, I'm a guy from Albania. The government needs to be listening and believing"*.

The Commissioner also heard from other children who told the office they wanted refugee children to feel welcome and accepted and feel a sense of belonging.

When asked what would make children's lives better, one young girl aged 12 said *"look after everyone even if they are not from this country like refugees. They should be looked after and not sent away"*.

Children highlighted the importance of supporting children arriving in the UK to access the same opportunities as other children, particularly in education. One adult responding on behalf of an 8-year-old girl said, *"government should give equal rights opportunities to children no matter their immigration status"*. Another adult, on behalf of a 14-year-old boy, wrote, *"assist new immigrant students with their various development and learning needs"*.

What unaccompanied children have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK are highly vulnerable and in need of care and protection from the moment they arrive. Unaccompanied children have often experienced the most extreme forms of trauma and need a safe and stable home that can provide them with consistent love and care.

The Children's Commissioner and her team regularly visit unaccompanied children living in the hotels and reception centres¹, and where they live once in local authority care. Through these visits the Commissioner is able provide direct advocacy to children through the Commissioner's independent advocacy service 'Help at Hand'. Last year, the Help at Hand team supported many unaccompanied children in acute situations to access the help and support they needed, as detailed in the 'Help at Hand Annual Report'.²

The Children's Commissioner has also used her statutory data collection powers to carry out major pieces of work aimed at improving the lives and experiences of children seeking asylum. For example, last year the office looked at looked after children who are not in school, 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, followed the passage of the Illegal Migration Act, and published analysis of Home Office data on the safeguarding of children in contingency hotel accommodation.

It is clear from speaking to these children that they:

- have been let down by those with a statutory duty to safeguard them, and placed in entirely unsuitable accommodation
- are highly vulnerable to continued exploitation and abuse, particularly unaccompanied girls
- are disproportionately receiving unregistered education provision that poses safeguarding risks

¹ There are two reception centres currently in operation and are run by Kent Country Council. They have capacity to accommodate around 40 boys between the ages of 16 and 18. Boys are typically accommodated in these settings soon after they arrive into the UK and before they are transferred to another care placement within another local authority through the National Transfer Scheme.

² Children's Commissioner, *Help at Hand Annual report, 2023*, [Link](#)

- are subject to poor practice when it comes to age assessment
- are not always getting the care they need, and the chance to fully recover from the trauma they have experienced

Instead of establishing a robust system of care and protection for unaccompanied children seeking asylum, last year the government introduced provisions through the Illegal Migration Act that would legitimise the use of inappropriate hotel accommodation as well as removing children the moment they turn 18. Throughout the rapid passage of the Act the Children's Commissioner raised her concerns about the need for a more appropriate safeguarding approach to protect unaccompanied children and support them to thrive.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that for unaccompanied children will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child seeking asylum has access to a stable and loving home.
2. Every child seeking asylum is supported to thrive in education.
3. Every unaccompanied child in need of care and protection is supported from the day they arrive.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child seeking asylum has access to a stable and loving home.

"Who can I ask [for help] when I don't have a support worker? I have no family here. In 3-4 years maybe I can do everything myself. But now I need help. You can't do everything yourself; you need to learn". – Young man, 18.

"Don't move us around so many times. You turn 18 and you don't have a home, you are still moving around. It's hard if you are moved around." – Boy 17.

What is needed to get there:

- **All unaccompanied children are in the care of the local authority from the day they arrive in the country.** To ensure that this happens the powers to accommodate children contained within the Illegal Migration Act must be removed.

"I think the government should house asylum children, because it is not suitable for children to live in asylum centres/hotels" – Boy 14

- **A national foster carer recruitment campaign focusing on placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is launched.** In recognition of unique needs of this highly vulnerable group, The Department for Education and the Home Office should jointly contribute to a ring-fenced funding pot that funds local authorities to establish specialist foster care placements for unaccompanied children.

*"Who can I ask [for help] when I don't have a support worker? I have no family here. In 3-4 years maybe I can do everything myself. But now I need help. You can't do everything yourself; you need to learn"-
Young man, 18.*

- **All homes provide care, not just support.** Currently, 16- and 17-year-olds can be placed in settings which legally only provide support, and not care. Universal care standards, that align regulatory framework across care settings and ensure that every setting caring for a child is legally able to provide care, must be introduced.

*"Make them feel safe, be friendly and give advice. Talk with them, walk with them, eat with them" –
Young man, 18.*

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Reduction in the use of temporary placements e.g., in reception centre style accommodation for unaccompanied children.
 - Increase in unaccompanied children being placed directly in local authority care from the moment they arrive in the UK through the National Transfer Scheme.
 - Increase in the number of specialist foster care placements for unaccompanied children.
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- Through the introduction of universal care standards there is greater consistency across the different models of care that children receive.

Ambition 2: Every child seeking asylum is supported to thrive in education.

"I'm struggling to form sentences. I didn't know any letters at first. I have never been to school in my life, so this is a steep learning curve." – Boy (no age given).

What is needed to get there:

- **Unaccompanied children are on a school roll from the moment they are placed in a local authority** and are supported to integrate into mainstream school where appropriate, with the support from Virtual School Heads. Where mainstream provision is less suitable, local authorities should use their Section 19 powers to provide suitable education for asylum seeking children. Ofsted should examine the education of unaccompanied children and ensure that unaccompanied children are receiving an appropriate education offer that is able to meet their needs.

"I want to learn English and become a teacher." – Young man, 18.

- **Unaccompanied children are given access to high quality English for Speakers of Other Languages programme.** This provision should run alongside a child's education to help them thrive in a mainstream school environment.

"College is nice. I couldn't speak English before I came but now I'm trying to get nice scores." – Young man, 18.

- **Schools support unaccompanied children to integrate.** Children should be supported to integrate into the school environment through activities targeted at building a sense of belonging within the school environment.

"College is going very well. With the passage of time my language is quite good now." – Young man, 18.

- **As soon as reasonably possible local authorities need to be made aware about children seeking asylum arriving in their local area.** It is vital that there is careful planning for the education of unaccompanied children. This would enable local authority teams to plan admissions and support asylum seeking children into school.

"I learn English and Maths. The teachers help me. The teachers are good." – Boy 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Fewer asylum-seeking children are classified as a child missing education.
- There is a reduction in the use of unregistered education provision for unaccompanied children.
- More children seeking asylum are supported to access high quality English language tuition.
- Unaccompanied children engage in school life and extra-curricular activities that help them to develop a greater sense of belonging.

Ambition 3: Every unaccompanied child in need of care and protection is supported from the day they arrive.

"Look after everyone even if they are not from this country like refugees. They should be looked after and not sent away." – Girl, 11.

What is needed to get there:

- **For unaccompanied children and children with their families who are fleeing war and persecution there must be sufficient number of safe and legal routes available.** Unaccompanied children and children with their families, should be excluded from any cap on the number of entrants arriving in the UK via safe and legal routes for humanitarian purposes.

"I have a safe haven here, it's the first thing I was looking for." – Boy, 17.

- **The age assessment process for unaccompanied children must be child-centred, age-appropriate and as non-invasive as possible.** Where a child's age is disputed and they are awaiting a resolution, they must be treated as vulnerable children first and foremost. The office is deeply concerned about the introduction of scientific methods of age assessment, as well as the approach to treat children who refuse to consent to these methods as adults.

"I told them I'm underage but they didn't believe me and put me with the adults. I didn't feel safe there because people were drinking, smoking cigarettes and smoking hashish. They are older than myself." – Boy, 17.

- **Unaccompanied children arriving in the UK must not be removed once they turn 18.** The power in the Illegal Migration Act to remove children when they turn 18 must be removed. Instead children should be supported as care leavers and given the love and stability they need to begin to heal from the trauma they have experienced and thrive in communities and schools across the country.

“Over the last 3-4 months I have realised that what I want for the future is not what is out there. I want a normal life. I want to have employment, an income, to pay for my needs, to be able to purchase equipment”- Young man, 18.

- **Every unaccompanied child arriving into the country has access to timely and appropriate comprehensive health assessments and care.** In November last year the office found that more than 10% of unaccompanied children arriving between 2021 and 2023 noted to have particular ‘vulnerabilities’ were suffering from an infectious illness, including scabies, tuberculosis, diphtheria, monkey pox and Covid-19. Of the children identified with particular vulnerabilities, alarmingly 9% of the notes refer to suicide, self-harm and mental illness. As looked after children under the Children Act 1989, these children are entitled to Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) and regular healthcare reviews. It is vital that an unaccompanied child’s IHA is carried out swiftly after their arrival and addresses the young person’s physical, mental and social wellbeing. Where possible the assessment and necessary investigations should be conducted in a ‘one stop shop’ multidisciplinary clinic. This would improve service accessibility, facilitate a holistic and integrated approach to health and wellbeing, and avoid the child having to retell their often traumatising stories. Once completed, the IHA should set out how children will receive the health care they need and a clear plan for continuity of care should be implemented. Appropriate information sharing mechanism should be in place to reduce disruption to healthcare provision and follow-up in circumstances where young people are moved placement.

“At the beginning I feel just loneliness, it makes me a little stressed but now it’s OK. Still I have it, but on and off you know? I feel the loneliness because I am by myself a lot.” – Boy 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- There are more safe and legal routes available for unaccompanied children and children with their families who are fleeing war and persecution.
 - The age assessment process is informed by the latest available evidence on how to conduct a sensitive and age-appropriate age assessment.
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- There is a reduction in the number of children being wrongly age assessed.
- The number of unaccompanied children who remain in the UK after turning 18.



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