

# Britain: government targets child asylum seekers

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Under the guise of “more compassionate treatment for children,” the Home Office Border and Immigration Agency is tightening up procedures to forcibly remove an extremely vulnerable group of children to their countries of origin.

Proposals outlined in its document, *“Better Outcomes: The Way Forward Improving the Care for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children [UASC],”* are the outcome of a period of consultation with key agencies such as children’s charities, health and Local Authorities. In spite of concerns raised by these organisations, the Home Office seems determined to step up the persecution of these vulnerable children in order to satisfy its policy objective of scapegoating asylum seekers and refugees for all of society’s ills.

Currently, approximately 3,000 children a year arrive in Britain seeking asylum. Many come from war-torn areas, including Iraq and Afghanistan. They travel long journeys to arrive in Britain, are often beaten on the way, and do not know where they are going to end up.

The proposals are a fundamental reform of the way UASC are supported and managed. Currently, their rights are safeguarded by existing children’s legislation, which treats an unaccompanied child under the age of 18 the same as a Looked After Child—with the appropriate Local Authority having a duty of care until they are at least 18 years old and often beyond. UASC are currently given exceptional leave to remain (ELR) until they reach this age.

One of the proposals is for the responsibility for funding UASC care leavers currently carried out by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to move to the Home Office, thus increasing the economic pressure on UASC to return to their country of origin or “disappear.”

The Home Office claims this will make it easier “to

safeguard children at the same time as managing the immigration system effectively.” It is concerned that too many young people disappear when their claim to remain is refused once they are 18.

The new proposals seek to centralise the dispersal of UASC, who often arrive at the key airports and ports in the South-East of England, and send them for care in regional centres in designated Local Authorities. Alongside this will be a more rigorous approach to age assessment that is currently carried out by each Local Authority. A child will be screened at a unit before being sent to one of the Local Authorities. One of the most contentious aspects of this proposal is the use of dental records in determining age, which has not been ruled out.

On the basis that this will keep children safe from harm, the Home Office also argues for better procedures for identifying and supporting UASC who are victims of trafficking. The document uses the issue of trafficking to tighten up legislation by arguing that “we need to recognise as a rule the needs of children are best served by being with their families.” Not once does the document pose the question as to why families would risk sending their children across to the other side of the world if they did not face profound problems and hardships.

The document assumes that the children who arrive unaccompanied do so in an “organised fashion.” Some are brought as “relatives” and then left somewhere where they know they will be cared for. Others travel in the backs of lorries, not knowing which countries they are travelling through and losing siblings on the way. For many of these children, contact with families cannot be maintained due to the precarious nature of their personal circumstances.

This point was underscored by Donna Covey, chief

executive of the Refugee Council, who said, “We’re pleased the Home Office has recognised that it needs to improve the way they safeguard and protect these children. However, we have serious concerns about some of the proposals outlined, and we oppose government plans to forcibly return children to their country of origin. The government should not try to force any child to return against their wishes where their safety and welfare cannot be guaranteed.”

Covet continued, “Any way forward has to reflect the experiences of these children; some are trafficked, some have been politically active, some have been the victims of violence, including torture and sexual violence. These are not children who come here seeking a better life, with their families waiting for them in peaceful homes. Many of them are children from war zones.

“While we recognise age assessment procedures need to be improved, it is clear from the consultation responses and subsequent work that x-rays are not going to be the answer. We hope that further consultation will lead to this idea being dropped altogether.”

Syd Bolton from the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture said in response to the proposals, “Children’s experiences of torture and serious harm take time and expertise to explore and explain. They need to come to terms with their traumatic pasts whilst at the same time struggling in their present lives with a complex and often inadequate legal and welfare situation.

“The only way in which tortured and seriously harmed children and young people have any chance to recover psychologically is through care systems and decision-making processes which emphasise their long term welfare and best interests, not an approach which fits with a hard line immigration control message.”

Recent research by the children’s charity Barnardo’s has found that an estimated 100,000 vulnerable children are condemned to a childhood of poverty, uncertainty and fear after being caught up in a UK asylum backlog that may not be cleared until 2011. This appalling situation is being cynically used by the government and the Home Office to introduce legislation that will intensify the inhuman practices already being carried out against the most vulnerable sections of society.



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