

Protect Refugee Children

Wherever in the world conflict breaks out, children face human rights violations. They endure violence and separation from family members. They lose access to education, healthcare and the support of their communities. All too often they face bleak and uncertain futures. That trauma does not end at Europe's shores.

The plight of Europe's lone children

Europol estimates that 10,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are now missing in Europe.¹ This figure from January is likely to be a conservative estimate, with the true number of lost children much higher and rising with every passing day.

Unaccompanied children arriving in European countries face suspicion and disbelief. Even when they are correctly identified, they *"may be accommodated in inappropriate, squalid facilities, amounting in effect to detention"*.² UNICEF reports that most of these children are lucky to get one meal a day. Their mental and physical health is put at risk as they go without adequate medical care. Their childhoods are put on hold without decent, regular schooling and they face debt slavery and forced criminal activity.³

Worse still, sexual violence – including rape and forced prostitution – is "a constant threat".⁴ Doctors working for Save the Children in Italy report that 50% of the children they treat have a sexually transmitted infection.⁵

The latest census of 'the jungle' in Calais by Help Refugees reveals the number of unaccompanied children there has risen significantly in recent months, reaching 608 – the youngest of whom is just eight.⁶

¹ EU Committee, *Children in Crisis: Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the EU*, paragraph 3.

² EU Committee, *Children in Crisis: Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the EU*, paragraph 3.

³ UNICEF, *Neither Safe nor Sound: Unaccompanied children on the coastline of the English Channel and the North Sea*.

⁴ UNICEF, *Neither Safe nor Sound: Unaccompanied children on the coastline of the English Channel and the North Sea*, see, e.g. p. 11, p. 20.

⁵ EU Committee, *Children in Crisis: Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the EU*, paragraph 24.

⁶ Help Refugees, *New Calais census released – 761 children in Calais 'Jungle', 80% on their own*.

See more at: <http://www.helprefugees.org.uk/2016/07/21/new-calais-census-released-761-children-in-calais-jungle-80-on-their-own/#sthash.OOabgoAY.dpuf>.

These children, all eligible for resettlement here, are currently languishing in appalling conditions just 20 miles from our coast. The Mayor of Calais has said the northern part of the camp will soon be evicted.⁷ It is estimated that 425 of those children will be displaced. The last eviction left 129 unaccompanied minors unaccounted for.

Children are vanishing into a nightmare of exploitation, slavery and sexual abuse. Resettlement in the UK offers protection from the most brutal and degrading treatment and will save lives.

The Dubs scheme for unaccompanied refugee children in Europe

Liberty welcomed the Government's commitment, in May this year, to create a scheme proposed by Lord Alf Dubs, himself a child of the Kindertransport, to bring stranded refugee children in Europe to safety in the UK. This is in addition to existing schemes for children and their families in the Middle East and North Africa and the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme.

But no children have yet been brought to this country under the scheme. In its *Children in Crisis* report, Parliament's EU Committee deplored the "*continuing reluctance of the UK Government to show solidarity with its European partners in helping to relocate such children*" and "*the failure by EU Member States, including the United Kingdom, to take urgent action following the announcement of Europol's latest figures*".⁸

Caring for children in the UK

Liberty worked with Lord Dubs on an amendment to the Children and Social Work Bill designed to press the Government to explain the steps it will take to ensure unaccompanied children receive the protection and support they need, wherever in the country they are placed. Whilst the government has committed to an enhanced daily rate of funding for each child, concern has been expressed by the Local Government Association and others that this will not be enough to cover a full package of care and support.

In addition to the funding provided for each child, funding for infrastructure and the development of services is urgently required. The Fostering Network, for example, has made clear that its services are under pressure from local authority cuts. Some 9,070 foster carers are currently needed across the UK, 7,600 in England, to provide homes for "hard to place"

⁷ See e.g. the Independent, *Calais Jungle refugee camp will be completely demolished 'very soon', says mayor*, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/calais-jungle-refugee-camp-demolition-mayor-natacha-bouchart-a7134426.html>.

⁸ EU Committee, *Children in Crisis: Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the EU*, paragraph 92 and 13.

children, including unaccompanied asylum seekers.⁹ The Network has asked central Government to fund local authorities to undertake the ongoing recruitment, training and support of foster carers.

Parliament's EU Committee further drew attention to the lack of adequate mental health facilities in the UK for traumatised children arriving in the UK from conflict zones.¹⁰ Legal advice must be actively promoted if the welfare of children is to be effectively protected. Legal interventions may be necessary to allow a child to regularise his or her immigration status, secure access to special educational needs support, seek redress where he or she has been a victim of crime, such as human trafficking, and to secure protection in multiple other areas of life.

As Lord Dubs pointed out during Parliament's consideration of the Children and Social Work Bill: *"There is a great willingness on the part of local authorities ... They are willing and anxious to help"*.¹¹ Central government must also play its part in ensuring that councils can meet their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Councillors in support of the Dubs scheme

If there was ever an issue on which our Government cannot be allowed to drag its heels, it is the plight of lone refugee children. The welcome and support we give these lone, vulnerable children could bring some urgently-needed compassion to bear on a society battling a rising tide of discrimination.

Liberty and Help Refugees [are calling on local councillors to sign our statement](#) confirming their support for the Dubs scheme - and calling on central Government to deliver funding for the necessary regional infrastructure to properly provide new arrivals.

When the UK signed up to the Refugee Convention 65 years ago, it was an affirmation and recognition of common humanity – a demonstration of our willingness to share responsibility to protect fellow humans in the most desperate need of sanctuary. Working together, local and central Government can offer a future to children in desperate need.

⁹ The Fostering Network, Over 9,000 more fostering households urgently needed during 2016, <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/media-release-news/2016/over-9000-more-fostering-households-urgently-needed-during-2016>.

¹⁰ EU Committee, *Children in Crisis: Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the EU*, paragraph 173.

¹¹ Lords Hansard, 11th July, Column 64.