

Quick Guide to Unaccompanied Minors

At the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, nearly 90,000 unaccompanied children sought asylum in Europe, fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East and Africa to reach a place of safety. According to EU data, 13 per cent of the applicants were younger than 14, travelling without their parents to the EU. More than 90 per cent of the minors travelling without a parent or guardian were boys and over half of them were between 16 and 17 years old. Half of the total were Afghan minors, while the second largest group were Syrians. Sweden received the most applications from unaccompanied minors, at 35,250, followed by Germany, Hungary and Austria. In 2016 just 3,175 unaccompanied minors reached the UK.

Since then it has become more difficult to reach Europe, as countries reinforce their borders and push back boats in the Mediterranean. Despite those difficulties, and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK received 3,775 asylum applications from separated children in 2019.

There have been repeated calls for the UK government to accept children from the camps in Northern France who have relatives in the UK. Initially the government refused to consider taking any direct from Europe. Then, after considerable pressure and the tabling of the Dubs Amendment in parliament, it said it would take up to 3,000 from the camps in Calais and Dunkirk. The process was so slow and cumbersome that only 350 had been brought to the UK by February 2017, at which point the government announced that the Dubs scheme would be abandoned. By then the Jungle in Calais had been bulldozed, and all the remaining residents dispersed across France. Europol estimated that at least 10,000 child refugees went missing after arriving in Europe. It is feared many have become victims of exploitation by criminal gangs, including human traffickers who force them into prostitution, child labour and the drugs trade. The *Independent* newspaper has an excellent link to the launch of the [Dubs Amendment](#) and its subsequent history.

If those arriving in the UK are deemed by the Home Office to be under the age of 18, they will be in the care of the local authority where they are placed. The local authority has a duty to support them until the age of 18 irrespective of their immigration status. The burden falls heavily on Kent County Council, as many UASCs come into the UK through ports like Dover and Folkestone. Often the Home Office disputes their age, sometimes disregarding independent age assessments. Those under 16 will generally be placed in foster care. If you are interested in fostering one of the many asylum-seeking children who need a good home, check out the [Fostering Network](#).

As with adults, unaccompanied minors have to endure asylum interviews to determine whether they have a right to stay in the UK. Most are granted temporary leave to remain for three years or until they reach 17½, by which time a decision on their claim may well have been made. At age 18 some will be granted indefinite leave to remain. Others will have their temporary leave extended pending a decision. If their claim is refused, they will no longer be eligible for any form of benefits, and will be liable to be detained in an Immigration Removal Centre or removed from the country – if the Home Office can obtain travel documents for them, which is often not the case. If the documents cannot be obtained, they will be left destitute in the UK.

The difficulties that these vulnerable young people face is highlighted by the 2015 report by the Children's Society, [Not Just a Temporary Fix](#). An earlier report from the office of the Children's Commissioner, [What's Going to Happen Tomorrow?](#), raises many concerns about our treatment of unaccompanied minors.

[Safe Passage](#), a project of Citizens UK, has been lobbying hard for the UK to take allow unaccompanied minors to join family members in the UK. By the summer of 2018 there had been some concessions by the UK government, but the major concerns had not been addressed. Then the pandemic meant that all family reunion routes were suspended in 2019. Up to date facts and figures for unaccompanied minors in the UK can be found on the Refugee Council website's [Children's Section](#).

Legislation around safe routes and family reunion is complex, and as of January 2022 there are no safe routes for UASCs or indeed any refugees except those on resettlement programmes. Amnesty International has produced an [excellent guide](#) that explains the system as simply as possible.