



**BARNARD'S**

# LET CHILDREN BE CHILDREN

The Impact of Age Assessments on Children  
Seeking Sanctuary & Asylum in the UK

# CHANGING CHILDHOODS. CHANGING LIVES.

## Let children be children

Barnardo's believes that all children arriving in the UK deserve a warm welcome, including having both their physical and emotional needs met. Children need to be believed, respected and treated with dignity. This helps them rebuild their lives and establish new homes, friendships and communities.

In the year to March 2025:

 **3,707**

There were 109,343 asylum applications made in the UK. Of these, 3% (3,707) came from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.<sup>ii</sup>

**↑45%**

The number of children in local authority care in England who are also unaccompanied asylum-seeking children increased by 45% from 5,100 in 2019 to 7,380 in 2024.<sup>i</sup>

**74%** 

74% of unaccompanied asylum seeking-children claims were granted refugee protection or leave.<sup>iv</sup>

**18%**

Just under one in five (18%) of those arriving seeking sanctuary have been children aged 17 and under.<sup>iii</sup>

### The way we use language

#### Children seeking sanctuary

Barnardo's uses this term to refer to children when referring specifically to children who have crossed borders seeking protection in the UK.

#### Asylum

Asylum is a specific form of protection granted by a country to a person who has fled their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm.

#### Refugee

Refugee status is an internationally recognised protection status recognised under international law and gives a person, including children the right to protection and safety in another country.

#### Unaccompanied asylum-seeking child

A child under the age of 18 who arrives in a country to seek asylum and is not with a parent or legal guardian. There are many reasons that children seek sanctuary in the UK unaccompanied.

# Executive Summary

**Children seeking sanctuary in the UK deserve to be met with compassion, respect and the presumption that children are children. Under the Children Act 1989, all children, regardless of how they arrived in the UK, are entitled to protection, support and safety.<sup>v</sup> This duty applies equally to children who arrive in the UK without a parent or other family member and make an asylum application.**

Many of these children will have experienced substantial trauma and adversity in their home countries, fleeing war, persecution, poverty and often victims of child trafficking and exploitation. They have often travelled alone and have no friends or family to reach out to when they arrive.

At Barnardo's, we see too many children seeking sanctuary, particularly arriving alone, and, in the absence of reliable documentation, being subjected to cursory visual checks that wrongly consign them to adult services. This not only robs them of vital protection and support but also exposes them to the very harms we strive to safeguard them against.

## **This is not a new issue.**

We recognise the seminal work done by members of *the Refugee Migrant Children's Consortium*, particularly the *Helen Bamber Foundation*, *Refugee Council*, *Human for Rights Network* and *ECPAT UK*. They have worked to highlight long-standing and persistent issues related to the safeguarding of children incorrectly assessed as adults and placed in unsuitable and unsafe situations.

With limited official data readily available to draw from, their 2024 report, **Forced Adulthood: The Home Office's Incorrect Determination of Age and How This Leaves Child Refugees at Risk**, highlights that over an eighteen-month period, the Home Office initially classified over 1,300 unaccompanied children as adults. Checks by local authorities later determined that two-thirds of those children were actually under the age of 18.<sup>vi</sup>

Published this year, their follow-up report, **Lost Childhoods: The consequences of flawed age assessments at the UK Border** demonstrates and ongoing problem,

'between January and June 2024, 63 local authorities in England and Scotland received 603 referrals of children wrongly placed in adult accommodation or detention due to flawed Home Office age assessments.'<sup>vii</sup>

**As a result, children are forced to be adults when they are not. They are made to navigate systems designed for adulthood long before they're ready. They are placed in unsafe adult accommodation, become at risk of being trafficked or exploited, suffer from severe mental health issues and are denied education and legal assistance. They are effectively left alone, without a guardian or carer to provide the love and care that every child deserves.**

This routine and systemic misclassification of children is supported by the testimony of many of the children we support across a range of our services. Through the delivery of Barnardo's services to children and young people seeking sanctuary in the UK, including the Home Office funded Independent Child Trafficking Guardian Service (ICTG) in parts of England, the entirety of Wales, and our Independent Guardian Service (IGS) in Northern Ireland, we see firsthand an urgent need to address the systematically dysfunctional process of establishing age for children seeking sanctuary who arrive unaccompanied or without documents.

We recognise that a very small minority of adults may seek to abuse the system by presenting as children, but our experience and the data presented in **Forced Adulthood** clearly show that the paramount focus of the system must be safeguarding children and supporting them to rebuild their lives after traumatic experiences.

Under previous governments, disproportionate emphasis was placed on the hypothetical risks posed by those few adults being accommodated alongside children, rather than on the very real vulnerabilities of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are wrongly consigned to adult settings. We remain concerned about discussions that frame the issue around adults falsely claiming to be children, at the expense of the safeguarding and welfare of these children who are at immediate risk of harm.



Image posed by model.

Notably, while we welcome certain provisions in the government's recent Immigration White Paper on resolving immigration issues for children in care, we are disappointed and concerned to see a commitment to using so-called 'scientific methods' and artificial intelligence (AI) in conducting age assessments.<sup>viii</sup> The British Dental Association, the British Society for Paediatric Endocrinology and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health have all made clear that routine dental or skeletal X-rays should not be used to establish the age of asylum-seeking children due to serious ethical dilemmas and concerns over the reliability of results.<sup>ix</sup>

## 603 children

**'Between January and June 2024, 63 local authorities in England and Scotland received 603 referrals of children wrongly placed in adult accommodation or detention due to flawed Home Office age assessments.'**<sup>vii</sup>





# Barnardo's calls for change

The UK has a long history of providing sanctuary to children, most notably through the Kindertransport, which between December 1938 and September 1939 brought over 10,000 children to safety.

The UK was also one of the original signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The government's Opportunity Mission aims to break the link between a child's background and their future. To meet this ambition, it must fully include refugee and asylum-seeking children. Approximately one in ten children in care are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who have arrived in the UK.<sup>x</sup> They are children in care, with a right to protection under the Children Act 1989. They have experienced trauma, interrupted education and long periods of uncertainty. For unaccompanied children, age assessments can delay or deny access to care, safeguarding and education.

To deliver on the Mission, policies must recognise their specific needs and ensure they are visible in both data and delivery. These children must not be left out of the promise of opportunity.

We urge the government to reconsider its approach and framing when it comes to children and families arriving and building a life in the UK; proposals that are premised on keeping adults from being misidentified as children risk driving vulnerable children to falsely claim adulthood.

# Barnardo's recommends the government:



**1. Commit to ensuring that all children who arrive via irregular routes are treated as children unless and until evidence demonstrates that they are not.** Treating a child as an adult deprives them of the developmental support and structure that they need, including access to education and care, and can put them in danger of harm.

**2. Abolish the legal basis of the usage of so-called scientific methods,** (such as mandatory MRIs, dental exams, and CT scans), to establish age, through the repealing of the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) Sections 52 and 53 of Part 4, through the insertion of new Clauses in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

**3. Abolish the National Age Assessment Board,** and instead, ensure age assessments are carried out by skilled social workers whose practice is trauma-informed and child-centred, rooted in child protection, known as Merton-compliant assessments.<sup>1</sup>

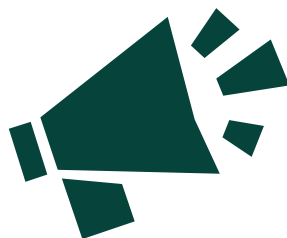
**4. Eradicate the practice of visually assessing age at Port** and ensure that all those claiming to be children, whose ages are disputed, are referred to social workers who are experts in child protection and trauma-informed practice, for further assessment. As part of this commitment, the Home Office should:

- a. Develop and invest in training for staff** on the serious safeguarding risks of using the age assessment framework, and the policy to treat putative children as children, including co-developing training and resources with professionals who have worked with age-disputed children.
- b. Collect and publish complete data sets** on the number of people claiming to be children who border officials have determined to be adults on the basis that they appear 'over 18 years of age', and also on the number who are later determined to be children, either through a local authority or National Age Assessment Board age assessment.

**5. Give individuals the right to appeal against the decision made on their age.** This appeal should be heard through an independent body, separate from the Home Office.

<sup>1</sup> Refers to the legal principles established in the case *B v Merton* (2003), requiring fairness, holistic assessment, and consideration of the child's best interests throughout the process.

# Actions you can take



## 1. We are asking all Peers to register their support and speak in favour of the following amendments before the Report Stage of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

Baroness Lister of Burtersett's amendment

After Clause 48, insert the following new Clause —

**“Age and safeguarding assessments at the port of entry**

- (1) A person who claims to be a child must not be subject to a visual age assessment by Border Force officials solely for immigration control purposes.
- (2) Any such assessment must be conducted as part of a safeguarding determination to identify potential risks and support needs.
- (3) A visual age assessment at the port of entry must not result in the assignment of a specific chronological age to the individual.
- (4) Border Force officials may only determine whether, in their view, the person is a child or an adult.
- (5) Where there is doubt as to whether an individual is a child, the presumption must be that the individual is treated as a child unless and until a comprehensive age assessment is conducted by local authority social workers in accordance with Merton-compliant age assessment procedures.
- (6) The Secretary of State must publish guidance on the implementation of this section, including— 14 Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill (a) the training and qualifications required for officials carrying out safeguarding assessments; (b) mechanisms for independent oversight and review of age determination

decisions; (c) safeguards to ensure that no child is placed at risk as a result of incorrect age assessments at the port of entry.”

### Member's explanatory statement

This amendment seeks to ensure that visual age assessments focus on safeguarding rather than immigration enforcement, remove the Home Office's power to assign a specific age at the border, and strengthen independent oversight and child protection safeguards.

After Clause 48, insert the following new Clause —

**“Age assessments for individuals claiming asylum**

- (1) Age assessments for individuals claiming asylum must be conducted by a qualified local authority social worker.
- (2) Age assessments for individuals claiming asylum must be carried out in accordance with the Association of Directors of Children's Services age assessment guidance or equivalent guidance in the devolved jurisdictions.
- (3) Age assessments for individuals claiming asylum must follow a process that ensures an impartial, multi-agency approach, drawing on a range of relevant expertise, including — but not limited to — professionals from healthcare, education, and child welfare, as necessary to ensure the child's best interests. This must specifically include consultation with —
  - (a) Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs), where appointed, and
  - (b) local authority-appointed advocates.

(4) Scientific methods for assessing age must not be used unless the Secretary of State obtains written approval from the relevant medical, dental, and scientific professional bodies confirming that the method is both ethical and has a high degree of accuracy in determining age.

(5) Any body established to oversee or conduct age assessments for individuals claiming asylum must be operationally independent of the Home Office.”

### Member's explanatory statement

This new Clause aims to ensure that age assessments for individuals claiming asylum are conducted fairly, accurately, and in the best interests of the child. It mandates that assessments be carried out by qualified local authority social workers following recognised guidance and using a multi-agency approach. It restricts the use of scientific methods unless proven ethical and highly accurate, requires consultation with key child welfare professionals, and ensures that any oversight body remains independent of the Home Office.

## 2. We are asking MPs and Peers to ask or table any of the following written or oral questions:

- ☐ 1. To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department **what recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the Home Office's age-assessment process for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children**, and what steps she is taking to ensure that children are treated as children unless evidence proves otherwise.
- ☐ 2. To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department **what recent steps her Department has taken to publish** (a) the number of people claiming to be children who have been assessed as adults on first arrival and (b) the number later found to be children following further assessment.
- ☐ 3. To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department **what recent steps her Department has taken to review the accuracy, ethics, and fairness** of a) scientific methods and b) artificial intelligence tools used to assess the age of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and what if any, child-centred safeguards are in place to protect their welfare.
- ☐ 4. To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department **the total cost, to date, of establishing and operating the National Age Assessment Board** and if she will commit to diverting this expenditure into training social workers in local authorities.

# Further background

**Barnardo’s provides support and well-being services to children who are seeking sanctuary and asylum in the UK, with many of them having been victims of child exploitation and modern slavery.**

Barnardo’s National Counter Trafficking Centre in England and Wales delivers the Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship Service (ICTG), which is underpinned in statute under the Modern Slavery Act, Section 48, providing an independent guardian who acts in the best interests of a child who has been a victim of trafficking and exploitation. From January 2017 to March 2024, the ICTG service received 9,008 referrals for potential child victims of modern slavery. In the year ending March 2024, almost 40 per cent of referrals to the ICTG Service were for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.<sup>xi</sup>

We have also delivered the Independent Guardian Service (IGS) in Northern Ireland, underpinned by the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Since inception, we have supported hundreds of children seeking sanctuary who are unaccompanied or separated from a legal parent or guardian.

We also deliver a number of services that support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care, including specialist foster care and supported accommodation provision.

Across our services, we have supported a significant number of children who have undergone or are challenging an ongoing age dispute intended to determine whether they are children or adults. Many of these children

are traumatised, having experienced and continuing to experience child exploitation and trafficking.

### What is an Age Assessment?

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are entitled to the same legal protections and care standards as any other child under the Children Act 1989. These duties reflect a clear legal and moral obligation to safeguard the well-being of all children, regardless of immigration or asylum status. Age assessments are used to determine whether an individual claiming asylum is under or over the age of 18, a distinction that carries significant implications for the support and protections they receive.

The first, often referred to as a visual or ‘initial’ assessment, typically occurs at the border or shortly after arrival. It is a brief, informal judgment made by immigration officials based on physical appearance and demeanour, and it can result in children being treated as adults from the outset.

The second, more formal process is a ‘full’ age assessment, usually undertaken by local authority social workers using a structured, multi-agency approach. This assessment considers a range of factors, including developmental history, behaviour, and cultural context, and Barnardo’s believes should be trauma-informed, child-centric and Merton-compliant.

## Salim’s<sup>xii</sup> story

**Salim, a 17-year-old child seeking sanctuary and asylum in the UK, phoned Barnardo’s Boloh Helpline<sup>xiii</sup> and asked for help with an ongoing age dispute. He explained that he had been wrongly assessed as a 22-year-old man and had been placed in adults-only ‘ hotel accommodation.**

He disclosed that the situation was extremely distressing; he felt scared and uncomfortable in the hotel and stayed in his room as he did not feel safe around other adult hotel residents.

He was very isolated and wanted to be around children his own age.

He was so unhappy he wanted to run away; he’d been unable to contact his family since he had arrived in the UK, only a few weeks before.

# Full Recommendations for the UK Government

## Recommendation 1

**Commit to ensuring that all children who arrive via irregular routes are treated as children unless and until evidence demonstrates that they are not. Treating a child as an adult deprives them of the developmental support and structure that they need, including access to education and care, and can put them in danger of harm.**

### Systemic and routine misclassification

Salim’s story is not an isolated one. The frequency and extent to which children are misclassified as adults by the Home Office are significant. In their 2025 report Lost Childhoods, the Refugee Migrant Children’s Consortium found that nearly 30% of children referred for age assessment were initially misclassified as adults, often because visual judgements ignored cultural and developmental differences.<sup>xiv</sup>

In their 2024 report, Forced Adulthood: The Home Office’s incorrect determination of age and how this leaves child refugees at risk highlighted that over an eighteen-month period, the Home Office classified over 1,300 unaccompanied children as adults. Checks by local authorities later determined that two-thirds of those children were actually under the age of 18.<sup>xv</sup>

Children and young people are routinely wrongly classified as adults after being visually assessed as ‘significantly over the age of 18’ by Home Office and Border Force staff, often without a justifiable or recorded rationale.

Where we do see examples of rationales provided, we have seen those that establish a child’s age based on claims given to our Guardians or practitioners that the child had, ‘**visible veins in arms**’, a ‘**developed Adam’s apple**’, or that ‘**they spoke to us in Arabic and then said they didn’t speak Arabic**’. None of these are reliable indicators that an individual is over the age of 18.

## Recommendation 2

**Eradicate the practice of visually assessing at Port, and ensure that all those claiming to be children, whose ages are disputed, are referred to social workers who are experts in child protection and trauma-informed practice, for further assessment. As part of this commitment, the Home Office should:**

- a. Develop and invest in training for staff on the serious safeguarding risks of using the age assessment framework, and the policy to treat putative children as children, including co-developing training and resources with professionals who have worked with age-disputed children.
- b. Collect and publish complete data sets on the number of people claiming to be children who border officials have determined to be adults on the basis that they appear ‘over 18 years of age’, and also on the number who are later determined to be children, either through a local authority or National Age Assessment Board age assessment.

### Misrepresentations of the datasets

According to the government statistics, since 2018, approximately 20% of individuals arriving in the UK via irregular means are children.<sup>xvi</sup> The government does not, however, routinely collect data on the number of individuals who are assessed to be adults at initial assessment, or on the number who then are reassessed as children following a Merton-compliant age assessment. The Home Office does not subtract those cases from the existing adult tally, and as a result, the true picture of the number of misclassifications is unknown.

### The damaging effects of age assessments

There have been a number of reports of incidents of violence and sexual assault against children wrongly placed in hotels. ECPAT UK’s Behind Closed Doors Report found that the use of home office hotel accommodation for children seeking asylum was seen to increase the risks of both trafficking and re-trafficking.<sup>xvii</sup>

For those children continually wrongly placed in adult accommodation, the risk is substantial. To date, hundreds of children have been wrongly



assessed as adults by the Home Office, resulting in children being placed in adult accommodation, detained, or even prosecuted.

There are no safeguards in place when a child is living in an adult environment. In contrast, numerous statutory safeguarding procedures exist in children's settings, which are vital for the protection and welfare of children, as outlined in the Children Act 1989.

This is a clear systemic safeguarding failure and one which requires urgent intervention.

Given the vulnerabilities of asylum-seeking and refugee children, the additional trauma that could be caused if a child were to be treated as an adult is substantial and severe. It is crucial that these assessments are child-centred, trauma-informed and based on evidence and best practice.

### Recommendation 3

**Abolition of the legal basis of the usage of so-called scientific methods, (such as mandatory MRIs, dental exams, and CT scans), to establish age, through the repealing of the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) Sections 52 and 53 of Part 4, through the insertion of new Clauses in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.**

#### Abolishing 'so-called' scientific methods

Scientific age-assessment methods involve using dental X-rays, hand-wrist or clavicle imaging, or MRI scans to attempt to estimate a person's chronological age by comparing physical maturity against scientific data. We know from our experience supporting children seeking sanctuary that these are often inaccurate and re-traumatising. Moreover, these methods have been shown to have error margins often exceeding 18 months, making them unreliable for determining whether someone is under 18.<sup>xviii</sup> In addition, the British Dental Association considers non-therapeutic dental X-rays for age assessment to be unethical, and the British Medical Association has raised concerns about obtaining truly informed consent from vulnerable young people.<sup>xix</sup>

There is also no precedent that maintains the accuracy or reliability of the usage of scientific methods, as outlined in UK case law:

***"The determination of an applicant's age is rendered difficult by the absence of any reliable anthropometric test: for someone close to the age of 18, there is no reliable medical or other scientific test to determine whether he or she is over or under 18."**<sup>xx</sup>*

The British Association of Social Workers, supported by paediatricians and dental experts, has publicly urged the Home Office to abandon plans for X-ray or MRI-based age determinations, stating that there is "no evidence that they work better than Merton-compliant social work assessments".<sup>xxi</sup>

### Recommendation 4

**Abolish the National Age Assessment Board, and instead, ensure age assessments are carried out by skilled social workers whose practice is trauma-informed and child-centred, rooted in child protection, known as Merton-compliant assessments.**

### Recommendation 5

**Give individuals the right to appeal against the decision made on their age. This appeal should be heard through an independent body, separate from the Home Office.**

#### The National Age Assessment Board

Barnardo's has also seen repeated patterns of children being negatively impacted by the involvement of the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) when a local authority or the Home Office refers a child to the NAAB for an age assessment.

Judicial reviews have revealed that NAAB-conducted age assessments have been materially flawed. Findings indicate that NAAB relied on sources that were decades old and factually incorrect, including, in at least one case, unreliable references and comparisons such as Gillette's Shaving Company and Forbes Magazine to establish age.<sup>xxii</sup>

## Nour's<sup>xxiv</sup> story

**Nour, a child receiving support from Barnardo's, first presented to the Home Office's Kent Intake Unit. She told us that there were no issues raised about her age when she was assessed by the Border Force staff.**

She was placed in the care of a local authority, where a trained social worker accepted Nour's age as originally stated by her.

However, the Home Office's National Age Assessment Board later contacted the local authority to inform them that there was a dispute regarding Nour's age, which they stated had not been previously communicated at the border due to a clerical error.

Despite having already been assessed by a social worker under the care of the local authority, the National Age Assessment Board proceeded with an additional assessment, which Nour found difficult and re-traumatising.

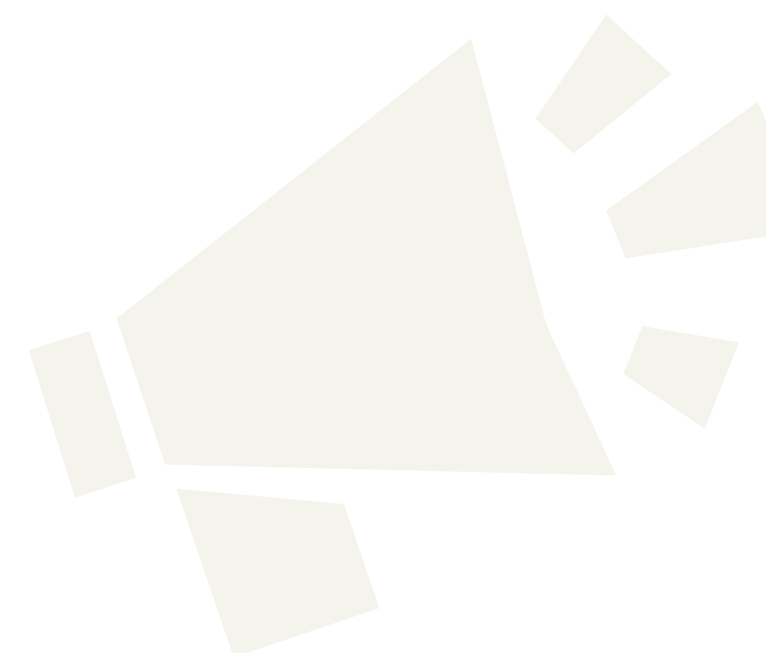
She told us the process of reassessment and disbelief was significant. She was negatively affected and suffered a damaging loss of trust in authorities and a deterioration of her emotional health, and this negatively impacted her trust in other supporting professionals.



The Home Office's own impact assessment, published in October 2023, estimated a total present-value cost of about £20.3 million for establishing and operating the NAAB over a ten-year period. We believe that the National Age Assessment Board funding would be much better directed to social workers within local authorities who are specialists in safeguarding children and are best equipped to carry out independent social work evaluations in line with the national framework for children's social care.

Despite the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 introducing provisions for a right of appeal against age assessment decisions, these have not yet been commenced. In the absence of a formal appeal mechanism, children must rely on judicial review. This is a process that is often inaccessible, slow, and ill-suited to resolving disputes of this nature.

In some cases, we have seen asylum granted to an individual with the local authority has determined that their age was 10 years older than their actual age, shutting them out of youth services and denying them other age-appropriate opportunities.



# References

i Department for Education (2024) Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2024 data <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024>

ii Home Office (2025) Immigration system statistics, year ending March 2025: How many people claim asylum in the UK? <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2025/how-many-people-claim-asylum-in-the-uk>

iii Home Office (2025) Immigration system statistics, year ending March 2025: How many people come to the UK irregularly? <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2025/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-irregularly>

iv Home Office (2025) Immigration system statistics, year ending March 2025: How many people are granted asylum in the UK? <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2025/how-many-people-are-granted-asylum-in-the-uk>

v Children Act (1989), c 41, <http://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>

vi Helen Bamber Foundation, Human Rights for Network and Refugee Council (2024) Forced Adulthood, <https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/Forced%20Adulthood%20joint%20report%20on%20age%20disputes%20-%20January%202024.pdf>

vii Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium (2025) Lost Childhoods: The consequences of flawed age assessments at the UK border <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stay-informed/statistics-and-research/lost-childhoods-the-consequences-of-flawed-age-assessments-at-the-uk-border>

viii Home Office (2025) Restoring control over the immigration system: white paper <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-white-paper>

ix Samuels, A. (2023) Home Office urged to reconsider 'unethical' age assessments for children seeking asylum, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41415-023-6699-3>, British Dental Journal, BSPED (2020) Position Statement on Paediatric Age Assessment <https://www.bsped.org.uk/clinical-resources/position-statements/#link6>

x Department for Education (2024) Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2024 data <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024>

xi Home Office (2024) Annex: Independent child trafficking guardianship statistics, year ending March 2024 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-nrm-and-dtn-statistics-april-to-june-2024/annex-independent-child-trafficking-guardianship-statistics-year-ending-march-2024>

xii Names have been changed for safeguarding purposes.

xiii The Bolah Helpline offers advice, mental health and practical support to asylum seekers across the UK. It ceased operation in March 2025, <https://helpline.barnardos.org.uk/bolah-helpline>

xiv Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium (2025) Lost Childhoods: The consequences of flawed age assessments at the UK border <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stay-informed/statistics-and-research/lost-childhoods-the-consequences-of-flawed-age-assessments-at-the-uk-border>

xv Bamber Foundation, Human Rights for Network and Refugee Council (2024) Forced Adulthood, <https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/Forced%20Adulthood%20joint%20report%20on%20age%20disputes%20-%20January%202024.pdf>

xvi Home Office (2025) Immigration system statistics, year ending March 2025: How many people come to the UK irregularly? <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2025/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-irregularly>

xvii ECPAT UK (2025) Behind Closed Doors <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/behind-closed-doors>

xviii BSPED (2020) Position Statement on Paediatric Age Assessment <https://www.bsped.org.uk/clinical-resources/position-statements/#link6>

xix Samuels, A. (2023) Home Office urged to reconsider 'unethical' age assessments for children seeking asylum, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41415-023-6699-3>, British Dental Journal,

xx R (B) v London Borough of Merton (2003) R (B) v London Borough of Merton <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2003/1689.html>

xxi BASW (2023) Home Office urged to reconsider 'unethical' age assessments for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children <https://basw.co.uk/articles/home-office-urged-reconsider-unethical-age-assessments-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking>

xxii GR v London Borough of Croydon (2023) <https://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKAITUR/2023/JR2022LON001513.html>

xxiii Home Office (2023) Nationality and Borders Bill: Impact Assessment [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652ea072d86b1b00143a514c/NABA\\_Economic\\_Impact\\_Assessment\\_FINAL\\_FOR\\_PUBLICATION\\_-\\_Signed\\_RJenrick\\_17102023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652ea072d86b1b00143a514c/NABA_Economic_Impact_Assessment_FINAL_FOR_PUBLICATION_-_Signed_RJenrick_17102023.pdf)

xxiv The name has been changed for safeguarding purposes.



## About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear – changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to 356,200 children, young people, parents and carers through 760 services and partnerships across the UK.

For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

Barnardo's has a long history of helping children, young people and their families seeking sanctuary in the UK.

We offer a wide range of specialist services, including specialist foster care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, supported accommodations, mental health therapy, trauma-informed support, specialist refugee support services, and running the Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship Service in Wales and parts of England, and the Independent Guardian Service in Northern Ireland.

**Barnardo's is a member of the Refugee Migrant Children's Consortium and a national partner of Refugee Week.**

For more information, please contact:

**Nabil Ali**

Senior Policy Advisor –  
Refugee & Migrant Children

[\*\*public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk\*\*](mailto:public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk)

© Barnardo's, 2025 All rights reserved

No part of this report, including images, may be reproduced or stored on an authorised retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without prior permission of the publisher.

All images are posed by models.  
Names have been changed to protect identities.

**[barnardos.org.uk](https://barnardos.org.uk)**

Barnardo House, Tanners Lane, Barkingside,  
Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG | Tel: 020 8550 8822

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos.216250 and SC037605 25873AM25



**Changing childhoods. Changing lives.**