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Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London

07 January 2019

Anne Longfield
Children's Commissioner for England
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
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Dear Anne,

Following our last update in May, we are writing to update you on the progress made on the commitments in the Safeguarding Strategy for unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children that the Government published on 1 November 2017. Since we last wrote, we are pleased to report that the Government has continued to work closely with stakeholders and frontline agencies to deliver on our commitments. We are copying this letter to the Children's Commissioners in each of the devolved administrations.

Supporting professionals working with children and young people

In the Strategy, we committed to sharing good practice resources for social workers and personal advisers on "triple pathway planning" to prepare unaccompanied children for all possible eventualities when they cease to be looked after children at the age of 18. We understand that this can be a period of uncertainty for the young person, as it is linked to their asylum decision. However, we also recognise that planning with three potential outcomes in mind can be challenging for social workers and personal advisers. In our last letter to you, we updated that we had grant funded the London Borough of Islington and the No Recourse to Public Funds Network (NRPFN) to develop guidance and toolkit resources for social workers and personal advisers. Since then, the NRPFN has been researching current good practice "triple pathway planning" practices in local authorities, as well as working with key partners to discuss feedback from care leavers. They have also held a number of workshops around England to share information about this project with local authorities and key project partners. The resources are progressing and NRPFN will make them available as soon as they are ready.

In addition, DfE has been working with experienced social workers in local authorities and some NGOs to develop draft training resources which set out the key points in an unaccompanied child's journey when he or she requires support from his or her social worker. These resources are now being tested more broadly with social workers and key organisations, and we will share these with you in the near future.

Improving the care of unaccompanied children

In the Strategy, we committed to providing 1,000 training places for foster carers and support workers who care for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The purpose of this training is to provide carers with heightened confidence, knowledge and skills to build strong trusting bonds with these children. We know that building trust is key to reducing the risk of these children going missing from their care placements and being trafficked onwards for sexual, economic and other forms of exploitation and harmful influence including the risk of being radicalised. We have now commissioned the Refugee Council to deliver this training across England and training is underway across the country.

We have started developing myth-busting resources to support recruitment of foster carers for unaccompanied children in partnership with a number of local authorities, which have been grant funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government through the Controlling Migration Fund to increase fostering capacity.

In July, the DfE was delighted to publish the Government's response to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into fostering and the Foster Care in England report, produced by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers. 'Fostering Better Outcomes' has offered us an opportunity to set out our policy vision and to commence working on some priority actions in fostering policy. We have commenced work on identifying potential online or digital solutions to some of the most critical problems in fostering including foster carer sufficiency, capacity and recruitment, skills and training. We are also developing plans for our 'Fostering Trailblazers' who will help us shape services by sharing best practice and testing new and innovative approaches.

Our primary driver is ensuring a more child-focussed system. In developing our response, we consulted with young people to test our ideas. We want to continue to do this, and appreciate your insight and the information your office produces in helping us to make children and young people living in foster care heard.

We recognise that the level of Home Office funding available for local authorities to care for unaccompanied asylum seeking children remains an issue and that is why it is currently under review. The Home Office hopes to conclude the review soon, but there will be some tough choices to be made in the context of wider fiscal pressures. Until the outcome of the review is announced, the current funding rates remain in force. We are, however, continuing to take forward a number of other matters raised during the course of the review. This includes work to examine the Home Office payments process, consider issues around former unaccompanied asylum seeking children care leavers and training for social workers on the asylum system. These

should all be looked at alongside funding to provide long-term and sustainable solutions.

Information and advice for children and families

In the Strategy, we committed to ensuring that children receive clear and accurate information in a simpler format. The aim is to provide them with clearer information so that they can better understand the immigration and asylum process and public services in the UK and help them adapt to their new environment.

The Home Office has consulted with a range of internal and external partners to develop two separate leaflets for unaccompanied children who claim asylum in the UK. The first one will be given to children at the point they claim asylum, whilst the second leaflet provides further details about the asylum process and will be available online. Draft leaflets have been produced and will be available in due course.

Protection and safeguarding

In our last letter to you, we updated that DfE officials had worked closely with the Home Office to undertake “deep dive” visits to local authorities with high numbers of missing unaccompanied children to understand and identify key risk factors and effective local responses. A key risk factor is where unaccompanied asylum seeking children go missing very quickly from local authorities due to re-trafficking. There is an existing body of good practice guidance on how to keep children safe in the early stages of being looked after, however we found that some local authorities were unfamiliar with it. We have therefore been working to promote this through the NTS and ADCS networks and the children’s sub-group of the National Asylum Stakeholders Forum.

The Strategy included a commitment to pilot a standardised process for police officers when they first encounter an unaccompanied child who has entered the UK. The First Encounter pilot was successfully implemented by Hertfordshire Police. Commencing on 1 August 2017, it initially ran for three months and was subsequently incorporated into the force’s business as usual procedures. The process aims to ensure that unaccompanied children found in the UK are appropriately safeguarded by ensuring that the child’s welfare is paramount. The First Encounters process has successfully reduced the number of children who go missing, as it is designed to help build trust between the child and the UK authorities, and therefore reduces the likelihood of them subsequently running away. It is now available to all forces nationally, and to date 12 forces have begun implementing the process.

Reviewing processes for children in Europe

In the Strategy, the Government committed to continuing to overcome barriers to the timely and efficient operation of the Dublin Regulation, working with key NGOs and EU partners.

Following the signing of the Sandhurst Treaty in January 2018, officials within the French and UK Governments have been working collaboratively to understand how the £3.6 million Dublin Development Fund can be used most effectively. Under the terms of the Treaty, an Asylum Liaison Officer has been deployed in France to facilitate this cooperation. We are confident that the agreed programme of work will improve access to the Dublin process and ensure comprehensive support and accurate information is provided to vulnerable migrants. We are now in the process of transferring these funds and will continue to work with the French Government to implement this work.

Conducting family assessments to support the reunification of families under the Dublin Regulation is a relatively new area of activity for local authorities. In the Strategy, the Government committed to providing clear guidance for local authorities involved in the process, which we are addressing by revising the family and friends care statutory guidance in close consultation with local authorities and NGOs. On 10 May 2018, we launched a public consultation on the proposed revised guidance. The consultation closed on 4 July. We received a wide range of responses from NGOs and local authorities and we are currently conducting a thorough analysis and cross-Government consideration of the complex issues raised.

We want to provide the right future support for children and families reunited under the Dublin Regulation by learning from the experiences of children and families, and of local authorities engaging with them, to date. We have now commissioned IFF Research to undertake quantitative and qualitative research with children and families and local authorities to capture evidence of needs, challenges and good practice.

Implementation and measuring success

The Strategy included a commitment to evaluate existing immigration schemes to understand the effectiveness of different local delivery models at facilitating integration and opportunities for future improvement and to apply learning to resettlement and transfer schemes.

The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) are being evaluated through a programme of quantitative data work and qualitative research with refugees and key delivery partners. A key focus of this work is examining the integration progress according to a range of key measures and what can be done to improve this. Some elements of the evaluation will be specific to children whose interests are considered within the Safeguarding Strategy – for example, exploring the different ways in which local authorities and community sponsors are supporting child refugees.

As part of the evaluation, the Home Office is regularly sharing integration outcome data on a confidential basis with all Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships (RSMPs), which also have an unaccompanied asylum seeking children function. Sharing this data is enabling them to understand and learn about the progress and

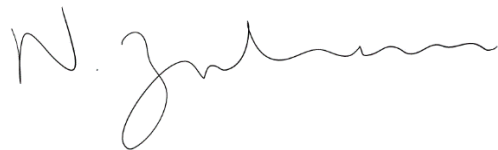
issues faced by resettled child refugees in their region, and whether these have wider applicability.

A copy of this letter will be placed in the House libraries, and we trust that it demonstrates the progress that the Government has made towards the commitments in the Safeguarding Strategy. We would be very happy for officials to share with your office further information about any of the activity described above; please let us know if this would be helpful.

We are very grateful for the valuable contribution towards these goals from key stakeholders, including the ongoing support of the Children's Commissioners in all four nations and from frontline professionals and practitioners. We are grateful for your ongoing commitment to supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children. We look forward to your continued support in progressing these commitments.

Handwritten signature of Caroline Nokes in blue ink.

Caroline Nokes MP
Minister of State for Immigration

Handwritten signature of Nadhim Zahawi in blue ink.

Nadhim Zahawi MP
**Parliamentary Under Secretary of
State for Children and Families**