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Robert Halfon MP
Chair
Education Select Committee
House of Commons
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18 June 2019

Dear Robert,

We are writing to update Parliament on the progress made to deliver the commitments in the Safeguarding Strategy for unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children, published on 1 November 2017.

The Strategy set out the Government's ambitious and comprehensive vision for the care of unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children. It is designed to address the specific challenges faced by these children. Whilst there is still more to do, we are proud of the progress we have so far made in delivering on those commitments and for the positive impact they are having on the lives of unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children. We are grateful to the ongoing support of stakeholders and frontline agencies who continue to ensure we are able to deliver on our shared objectives.

Improving the care of unaccompanied children

Through the Refugee Council, we have delivered on our commitment to provide 1,000 training places for foster carers and support workers who care for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). Feedback has been very positive: participants report that they feel the training has increased their confidence, knowledge and skills to build strong trusting bonds with these children. These skills, in turn, are enabling carers to identify when a child is at risk of going missing to be onward trafficked, of being exploited for economic, sexual, and criminal gain or of being exposed to radicalisation. Additionally, we are developing resources to support the recruitment of both additional foster carers and hosts of supported lodgings in order to increase placement capacity for unaccompanied children.

The Strategy recognised the wider issues in the fostering system that the increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children has highlighted, such as how local authorities undertake their duties in sufficiency planning, commissioning practices and the support foster carers receive. We also know such issues and are not restricted to unaccompanied children.

In July 2018, the Government published *Fostering Better Outcomes* – its response to Sir Martin Narey’s independent review of fostering, and in response to the Education Select Committee’s inquiry into fostering. The Government is implementing those commitments that focus on embedding a better foster care system that is driven by children’s needs and views, so that children have rich and stable experiences of being in foster care.

The Home Office has now concluded the review of UASC Funding. As a result of this, the Home Office has removed the age differential and legacy rates and uplifted the lower rates to £114 per UASC per day – this represents a 61% increase to the lowest rate that is currently paid. This applies to care provided from 1 April 2019 onwards. The decision to increase these rates reflects the incredibly valuable work local authorities undertake with vulnerable UASC, and the Home Office commitment to supporting this.

The review also considered a wider set of issues that affect UASC and local authorities, and work has already begun to take forward a range of activity which will benefit local authorities. This includes providing funding for family assessments prior to the arrival of children through the Dublin III Regulation and streamlining the payments process to make it easier for local authorities to claim the UASC grant.

Supporting professionals working with children and young people

The Government published revised statutory guidance for local authorities and other agencies looking after unaccompanied children in November 2017, in parallel with the Strategy. Importantly, the revised guidance is now being implemented to address safeguarding concerns for all unaccompanied migrant children and is no longer limited to just asylum seeking children.

When unaccompanied children turn 18, they become subject to three potential immigration outcomes. They may be granted asylum, refused and required to leave the UK or be permitted to stay while they continue to wait for a decision. We are making progress on developing good practice resources for social workers and personal advisers on this “triple pathway planning” so unaccompanied children are prepared for all potential immigration decisions once they reach 18. The Department for Education has commissioned the No Recourse to Public Funds Network (NRPFN) to produce the resources and we expect them to be available later in the year.

In addition, we have 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 where they require support from their social worker. These resources are now being tested more broadly with social workers and key organisations.

Information and advice for children and families

It is vitally important unaccompanied children are provided with clearer information so they can better understand the immigration and asylum process and public services in the UK to help them adapt to their new environment.

We committed to ensuring children receive clear and accurate information in a simpler format, and 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.

We are nearing completion of working with NGOs and experienced local authorities to develop information which can be given to children about what it means to be a looked after child and we expect the resources to be made available this summer.

Protection and safeguarding

DfE and Home Office officials have worked together 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. UASC going missing very quickly from local authorities can be a result of re-trafficking. Whilst there is an existing body of good practice guidance on how to keep children safe in the early stages of being looked after, we were concerned to find some local authorities were unfamiliar with it. We have therefore been working to promote this through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) and ADCS (Association of Directors of Children's Services) networks and the children's sub-group of the National Asylum Stakeholders Forum.

The Strategy included a specific commitment to pilot a standardised process for police officers when they first encounter an unaccompanied child who has entered the UK. This pilot was implemented by Hertfordshire Police, commencing on 1 August 2017, and the findings show it has successfully reduced the number of children who go missing because it focuses on building trust between the child and the UK authorities. The Home Office is continuing to support and encourage police forces to implement the first encounters process, which has been implemented by twelve forces to date.

Reviewing processes for children in Europe

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. While we remain in the EU, we continue to implement the Dublin Regulation.

As part of the Sandhurst Treaty signed between the UK and France in January 2018, £3.6 million from the overall £45.5 million funding commitment was specifically allocated to fund the development of initiatives to support the transfers of eligible children to the UK, including training for those working with unaccompanied children, family tracing and targeted information campaigns. This full package of £3.6 million was paid to the French Government at the end of 2018, and the UK and France continue to collaborate to implement the agreed programme of work to ensure comprehensive support and accurate information is provided to all migrants in France.

The Government has committed to continuing to have a close relationship with the EU on asylum matters following our exit from the EU, including practical co-operation on issues relating to unaccompanied children. Section 17 of the EU Withdrawal Act 2018 requires the Government to seek to negotiate a reciprocal agreement with the EU under which an unaccompanied child who has made an application for international protection in an EU Member State may, if it is in their best interests, come to the UK to join a qualifying relative, and vice versa.

Furthermore, the Government committed to revising the family and friends care statutory guidance for local authorities to explicitly address the needs of children and families reunited under the Dublin Regulation. On 10 May 2018, we launched the public consultation on the draft revised guidance. The consultation closed on 4 July 2018 and we received responses from a wide range of NGOs and local authorities. We are carefully considering the complex issues that were raised in the consultation and we are using this feedback to shape the final version of the guidance.

Research on the experience of children and families reunited under the Dublin regulation was commissioned in autumn 2018 and is due to complete next year.

Implementation and measuring progress

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 currently 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 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 a UASC 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.

The Government has fulfilled its commitment to publish data on the numbers of children transferred from elsewhere in the EU to the UK:

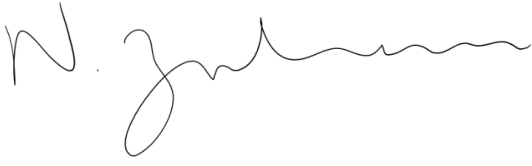
- In November 2017, we published data on unaccompanied children transferred from Calais under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 and to reunite with eligible family in the UK. The data can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transfers-of-children-to-the-uk-from-the-calais-operation-november-2017>.
- In November 2017, we published data on the number of children transferred within the UK under the National Transfer Scheme. We will continue to publish quarterly updates.
- In February 2018, we commenced annual publication of data on individuals transferred from Europe to the UK Under the Dublin III Regulation, including UASC. The latest data can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2018/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to#dublin-regulation>
- Data for all of those transferred under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 will be published once the scheme is delivered.

The Strategy included a commitment to report to the UK Children’s Commissioners on progress against delivery of the commitments until delivery is complete. DfE and the Home Office wrote to the Children’s Commissioner in May and December 2018, providing detailed updates and copies of those letters were placed in the House libraries.

The overarching principle of acting in the best interests of the child has been at the heart of our approach in developing this Strategy and continues to be the focus in delivering its commitments. We trust this letter sets out the progress that the Government has made towards the commitments in the Safeguarding Strategy.

We are providing the same update to the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Nadhim Zahawi in black ink.

Nadhim Zahawi MP

**Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for
Children and Families**

Handwritten signature of Caroline Nokes in blue ink.

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP

Minister of State for Immigration